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REVIEW ESSAY

Self-Making and Self-"Unmaking": Defining Success in the US

Self-Made: The Stories That Forged an American Myth. *By Pamela Walker Laird*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2025. 360 pp. Hardback, $32.95. ISBN 978-1-108-83389-9.
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In *Self-Made*, Pamela Walker Laird builds upon her previous work on social capital and networking to historicize the concept of "self-made" in American business, politics, and culture. Part intellectual history, part history of American capitalism, this book chronicles the changing understandings of this concept from the mid-seventeenth century through 2020. Laird draws on an encyclopedic array of published and unpublished sources, including speeches, fiction, and editorials, to unearth a surprising narrative of how this concept of "self-made" came to justify the accumulation of power and wealth over support of the common good. She argues that capitalists were at the forefront of efforts to control this narrative, their efforts gaining momentum through the middle decades of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, the concept of "self-made" was not only used to justify wealth accumulation devoid of responsibilities to others, but it also allowed elites to render structural inequalities increasingly invisible, and blame the poor for their "self-made failure," i.e., not working hard enough to pull themselves up by their own "bootstraps" and become millionaires too.

Eleven chapters present this sweeping intellectual history, beginning with Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan ethos, and ending with President Donald J. Trump and twenty-first-century populism. Moving chronologically through her story, Laird traces the origins of our modern concept of self-making to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideals of self-improvement. The Puritans were skeptical of wealth accumulation, only accepting personal gain when accompanied by self-improvement that was designed to benefit the community as a whole. Intellectuals such as Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and later, Benjamin Franklin, attempted to balance working toward the common good and individual material advancement.

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They and others argued that individuals bore responsibility for self-improvement, in order to contribute to the common good and serve others. When undertaken with these goals in mind, some accumulation of material wealth was allowable.

The book spends most of its time tracing the development of notions of self-made success and self-made failure through the nineteenth century. By the first few decades of the nineteenth century, electoral politics began to incentivize creating stories of self-made success. Eschewing older social hierarchies based on birthright status, Americans in the Early Republic upheld the ideal of self-improvement to further the common good as a measure of an individual's worth. With the rise of individualism came a growing willingness to attribute inequality to an individual's supposed flaws. Privileging individual merit and determination toward self-improvement also meant downplaying supports and privileges that catapulted some individuals to wealth and fame. Andrew Jackson, Daniel Boone, and David Crockett (whom, Laird explains, never went by "Davy") eschewed inheritances and family connections in favor of carefully constructed stories about individual hard work, determination, and good old American pluck. Doing so helped make these politicians more relatable to the newly expanded white male electorate, the majority of whom were working-class farmers and laborers. While Jackson framed himself as an impoverished orphan, Laird reminds us that he'd grown up around prosperity, attended an elite private academy, and inherited a large sum of money at 15. Deliberately hiding these facts to fashion himself a self-made landowner and war hero, Jackson's story helped to give rise to the myth of universal opportunity in the United States.

But, Laird notes, negotiations and contested definitions of self-making persisted along the way. In the antebellum years, for example, an early association of the phrase "self-made" with alcoholism challenged business advocates' use of the term to refer to financial and political success. Tensions persisted between those who advocated serving the common good, and those who increasingly felt it allowable to simply serve oneself. Through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, electoral politics, romanticism, and the Second Great Awakening provided intellectual foundations which later linked self-making to Social Darwinism and the rhetoric of Gilded Age industrialists. Greater cultural emphasis on individualism validated "fortune building" and "power seeking," particularly among men (p. 103). After the Civil War, businessmen became a new type of hero, offering elites access to cultural and political authority by justifying the concentration of wealth and privilege in the hands of a few lucky capitalists. For industrialists such as Thomas Mellon, Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Clay Frick, one's financial worth increasingly became the rubric by which to measure social value, personal merits, and masculine virtue, while civic responsibility was considered an undue burden. As Laird demonstrates,

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the intellectual arguments that praised such capitalists were also used in judgement-filled diatribes against labor unionists and the "shiftless" working classes, whose objections to 18-hr work shifts, sub-standard wages, and hazardous working conditions only revealed their apparent laziness (p. 177).

A myriad of counterarguments emerged between 1870 and World War II, which Laird frames around the concept of "self-help," an ideal that emphasized self-improvement with the end goal of collective unity. Labor activists, African American leaders, mutual aid societies, immigrant groups, and farmers' cooperatives such as the Grange all promoted collectivization and self-help. But business elites often fired back, attempting to prevent collective action—at first under the guise of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890), and later, by attacking the principles and laws underlying New Deal policies. A militant defense of self-making coalesced in the 1930s, as conservatives built narratives that accused New Deal reformers of infringing on American freedoms and opportunities for individuals (p. 207). Laird explains how business elites reimagined Horatio Alger's stories through the lens of rugged individualism. Though his fictional tales were intended to remind readers of the importance of character, Alger's work became central to an imagined past where self-making defined American life. In so doing, they also reworked the concept of "bringing yourself up by the bootstraps"—an older, nineteenth-century idiom that originally referenced the folly and awkwardness of such an activity—resurrecting the phrase to valorize self-making without aid from others (p. 209).

Since the 1930s, opponents of the welfare and regulatory state have continually emphasized self-making as central to the American way of life. Their arguments have stressed how regulatory and welfare programs interfere with an individual's opportunity for self-improvement, hindering self-making by encouraging dependence. For mid-century advocates such as Norman Vincent Peale, "positive thinking" was the only solution the working classes needed to achieve advancement (p. 225). As the twentieth century progressed, policymakers latched onto these notions of individual opportunity, freedom, responsibility, and self-making, dismantling New Deal social welfare programs. Progressive tax codes, they argued, unfairly "punished" the wealthy for their self-made success (p. 234). From Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon through Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, Laird traces how these capitalist ideas of self-making have permeated American public policy since the 1970s to justify deregulation, reduced welfare benefits, and trickle-down economics under the guise of encouraging individual responsibility and restoring opportunities for advancement (p. 247).

It's hard to do justice to a book of this scope and depth. Laird historicizes the concept of "self-made" over nearly 400 years of American history,

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synthesizing religious, political, economic, and social ideas together in a well-organized and very readable narrative. There are many worthwhile vignettes that cover a wide range of individuals—too many to enumerate here—as well as their accomplishments, their writings, and their contributions to American political and economic discourse. Throughout the book, Laird weaves together familiar stories—Andrew Jackson's populism, for example, or Carnegie's "Gospel" of wealth—with other less-familiar tales, particularly those of women: including Eliza Jumel, Dorothea Dix, and Madame C. J. Walker. Whereas men like Jackson and Carnegie were praised for their self-making, women whose lives took similar trajectories were denied the same praises because "self-made" implies "self-made men." Readers might be surprised to learn that other writers' ideas were surreptitiously coopted to serve the goals of self-making, despite the original authors' goals, including Benjamin Franklin and Horatio Alger. The novelist Michael Young coined the term "meritocracy" in 1958 as a satirical look at a dystopian world where inequality of opportunity had fostered a myth of human equality. Almost immediately, the term became popular among conservatives, in a bizarre twist that fanatically celebrated individualism and seemingly justified tearing down New Deal social welfare programs (p. 230). Readers of the *BHR* may note that some familiar concepts take a back seat in this book—such as Social Darwinism, neoliberalism, and Anti-Communist sentiments—though knowledgeable readers will recognize the connection points and through-lines in the absence of direct discussion from Laird. Many of these topics are well-covered in the existing literature, and interested readers need only look to Laird's extensive footnotes for inspiration. Finally, while Laird's focus is decidedly American, it productively prompts some important questions for future research about the international dimensions of this story. For example, how have religious and cultural ideas prompted visions of economic success worldwide? Have other rapidly developing economies, as the US in the Early Republic, germinated ideas of "self-made" success? How might these compare with the American case? Many communities across the world share concepts of working to improve the common good, but have other countries or regions experienced similar shifts away from this concept, and in what ways?

In these ways, *Self-Made* adds fruitful contributions to our understandings of the development of American Capitalism, especially in how the market, as a concept, has been mobilized to help define a person's economic independence or dependence, and the role of government regulation (or lack thereof) in manifesting opportunities for economic success *Self-Made* complements scholarship by Edward Balleisen and Scott Sandage, by illuminating another dimension of cultural and economic definitions of failure throughout American

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history, especially as they relate to conceptualizations of the self.[1] The book also reminds us of the importance of works, such as Naomi Lamoreaux's *Insider Lending: Banks, Personal Connections, and Economic Development in Industrial New England* (1994) and Judy Hilkey's *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (1997), by demonstrating how social and economic networks provided elites with the financial, political, and cultural authority they desired. Other readers will see parallels between Laird's discussion of self-striving and definitions of independence in the work of Brian Luskey; in debates about government intervention and individual opportunities in Richard John's work on political economy; and in conservative redefinitions of independence and the role of the government in Elizabeth Tandy Shermer's *Sunbelt Capitalism* (2013).[2] Laird's chief contribution, however, lies in her framing of our now-economic concept of "self-made success" as originating from religious and cultural ideas, particularly those surrounding self-improvement and the betterment of the common good. A close reading of the cultural dimensions of economic and intellectual discourse is a hallmark of Laird's methodological approach, and one which will surely appeal to a wide variety of historians.

Thus, Pamela Walker Laird has written a provocative synthesis for scholars and students of business history and the History of American Capitalism, demonstrating how key concepts have evolved in some familiar—and yet surprising—ways from the very beginning. *Self-Made* will most likely appeal to readers interested in intellectual history and business/economic history, though the scope of the book surely offers a bit of something for students of all periods of American history. Its readability is a virtue, and its dense source materials make it an excellent reference, especially for graduate students and established scholars. Ultimately, Laird shows that the intellectual currents underpinning the icon of the "self-made man" are fundamental to the very fabric of American society, especially in the tensions that have persisted around notions of the common good, self-improvement, poverty, hard work, and material success. *Self-Made* is thus not just a history of an intellectual idea, or of an idea central to American capitalism, but rather, it presents the history of an idea central to definitions of what it has meant to be an American, from the very beginning.

[1] Edward Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, 2001). Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

[2] Brian P. Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2010); Richard John, *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer's *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013).

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