



Why the U.S. Must Become an ‘Aspirational’ Society Once Again

When a society feels that the solution for poverty is for the poor to have the opportunity to become rich through hard work and self-improvement, you have an aspirational society. The United States could be classified by this term once upon a time, but in more recent years it has morphed into an envious society instead.

Current aspirational societies include Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland, and Chile.

By contrast, France is a society consumed by envy. In France, it is all too common for neighbors to call authorities out of envy claiming their neighbor isn't paying taxes because they installed a swimming pool or bought an expensive car. This envy stems from a mentality that the economy is a finite pie and inequality results if someone gets a bigger slice of the economic pie. What many miss, however, is that the economy is not a finite pie, but thousands of pies, with inventors and entrepreneurs making new pies as they innovate, while obsolete pies fade away.

Unfortunately, envy saps happiness and satisfaction, robbing the individual of the ability to enjoy and be grateful for good fortune. This state of mind not only harms the envier, but those toward whom the envy is directed.

But envy has been made into a virtue by politicians, who recognize it as a way of gaining power and control over unsuspecting populations. Rather than focusing on improving themselves, the envious believe their path to happiness is tied to the fate of those they envy. In essence, their happiness will be increased if they can pull others down, an attitude which runs counter to a prosperous society and hinders social progress.

Speaking on this subject, scholar Tony Esolen notes:

“Now if we set aside our politically correct egalitarianism—that anti-politics of universal envy—we may see why the hatred of another’s good not only hurts the community, but destroys the very foundation upon which a community must be built. That is because we are plainly not endowed with the same fortune, talents, health, and industry. And we should give thanks to God for that inequality, since He it is who has willed it.”

Aspirational societies realize that having equal opportunity for everyone to succeed through hard work, thus enabling the poor to get rich, is encouraged when governments provide a supporting legal, structural, and institutional framework. Common threads in current, upwardly mobile societies are small government, low taxes, few government regulations, rule of law, sound money, business efficiency, and free trade. Aspirational societies respond to inequality by working toward remedying that which is lacking in the individual rather than attempting to seize from others or through destructive revolution.

That the U.S. has some semblance of an aspirational society can be seen in an article, “The Vice of Envy,” by author Rod Dreher. In it, Dreher shares how a Parisian friend immigrated to the U.S. out of frustration. He explained that the culture of envy was terribly destructive in France. He was labeled as a tax cheat because he drove a nice car. France so destroyed his incentive to work, that he came to America and built a successful business, consequently providing employment to many.

But while his business was thriving in America, France was experiencing riots over retirement age and the length of the work week. Given that French workers get 24 paid vacation days versus 10 in the U.S., it's not hard to see why Dreher's Parisian friend jumped ship and headed to the U.S. to start a business.

Such an action was not necessarily fair or unjust, either. There is a false assumption that justice requires equality in all things. But as Dreher points out, egalitarianism can offend greatly against justice and become a disaster for all. A just society is one in which there is unavoidably some measure of inequality. Thus, true “social justice” should consist not in egalitarianism, but in working to see people justly rewarded for their labors, the very thing which aspirational societies do well.

If America drifted back toward such an aspirational society, would we see less bickering and more prosperity amongst its citizens?