Introduction

Challenging the Myth of Self-Made Success

Oliver Cromwell was a stern, Puritan dictator from the seventeenth century, and Kylie Jenner is a twenty-first-century pop culture princess and lipstick mogul. They could not be more different, yet they have in common that they've been tagged with the provocative and powerful label "self-made." Their stories book-end the history of how that identity, once considered a mark of sin, was forged into a destructive accolade.

To begin at the end, *Forbes* magazine announced in early 2019 that 21-year-old Kylie Jenner was the "youngest-ever self-made billionaire." Even before Jenner's coronation, the magazine had featured her on its August 2018 cover for an issue on "America's Women Billionaires." A considerable uproar followed, not about whether or not the "self-made" label was a compliment – everyone agreed on that point – but about whether or not Jenner, who grew up in a high-profile family of celebrities, deserved it. How could the daughter of Olympic champion Bruce (now Caitlyn) Jenner and celebrity queen Kris Kardashian be self-made? For more than two decades, Kris Kardashian had brilliantly cultivated the family's fortunes and celebrity, and Kylie Jenner grew up on reality television, as millions watched and fantasized about *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. As the youngest member of a family of glamorous celebrities and entrepreneurs, she has a mind-boggling public profile and vast connections. Building on what she calls her "platform," she has cleverly exploited her star status on social media, posting countless selfies for almost 200 million social media followers, beguiling money from them as an "influencer." "Welcome to the era of extreme fame leverage," read the 2018 cover. A *Forbes* defender even referred to her as the "first selfie-made billionaire"![1]

The popular culture controversy over Jenner's trophy underscored values that have developed and evolved along with America's capitalist culture, including the modern belief that being self-made is both possible and a positive attribute, as well as the now-common assumption that making a lot of money is enough to qualify someone as self-made. There are other routes, such as political or moral leadership, but nothing now does the trick as crisply as does piling up a lot of money. But this was not always so. For instance, the hero of the popular

Figure 0.1 Oliver Cromwell's armies conquered England, Ireland, and Scotland, forming the Commonwealth, which he ruled from 1653 to 1658. He always strenuously rejected accusations that he had risen from humble origins, and he intended this portrait by Robert Walker, circa 1649, to show that he was a gentleman and fit to lead. Identifying himself as what we now call "self-made" would have been blasphemous and foolhardy, risking both his soul and the social capital on which his success relied. (National Portrait Gallery in London / Photo by Robert Alexander via Getty Images)

1843 novel *Allen Lucas: The Self-Made Man* applied his hard-won education to serve his family and small-town community. In contrast, his ambitious schoolmate became a powerful and wealthy politician, only to suffer a lonely decline. Likewise, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1872 *Lives and Deeds of Our Self-Made Men* praises "some of the leading public men of our times" for the "frugality, strict temperance, self-reliance and indomitable industry" that made them models for "the

Figure 0.2 In contrast to Oliver Cromwell, almost four centuries later Kylie Jenner embraced the identity of self-made billionaire, with which *Forbes* crowned her in 2019. She declared that she "worked hard" and, thereby, had earned her fortune on her own, despite her enormous advantages. This 2015 photo in Las Vegas, Nevada, shows her in action as a "selfie-made billionaire." (Kevin Mazur / BMA2015 / WireImage via Getty Images)

young men of America." Not one of the nineteen men she portrayed was known for his wealth.[2]

"I work really hard," Kylie Jenner firmly responded to her critics to justify her acclaim. She recognized that work is a fundamental criterion for claiming to be self-made, whether for celebrities or anyone else. But, what *is* "work"? Is money the measure of how hard someone works? When Jenner was interviewed about her new stature in 2019, she described her marketing efforts this way: "I popped up at a few stores, I did my usual social media – I did what I usually do, and it just worked."[3] Does it make sense to equate the well-remunerated work that celebrities do posing with their fans for selfies, facing stage lights, or sitting through hours of make-up sessions with cleaning other people's houses, slaughtering cattle, or extracting coal from the earth? Or, in the realm of non-physical labor, how should we compare financiers' machinations with data-enterers' monotonies? A long list of comparisons like this presents a challenge for those who explain self-made success by heralding someone's "work ethic," but who don't take into account the range of workers' opportunities, conditions, and rewards.

Turning now to the beginning of this story four centuries earlier, Oliver Cromwell, in stark contrast to Jenner, believed that he had nothing to gain and everything to lose – including his soul – if he or his contemporaries judged his remarkable successes to be self-made, that is, to be of his own making. And yet, unlike Jenner, he did indeed rise out of the modest ranks of England's rural gentry in the seventeenth century with astounding rapidity in political and military circles. He led revolutionary armies that never lost a battle on their way to defeating and beheading King Charles I and forming the short-lived Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Cromwell then ruled with the misleadingly benign title of Lord Protector of the Commonwealth from December 1653 until he died in 1658. Rather than take credit for his extraordinary rise to power, however, Cromwell vehemently rejected his foes' accusations of worldly ambition and accepted no credit for his feats. In a one-and-a-half-hour speech to Parliament in 1654, he made his case repeatedly: "I called not myself to this place; of that, God is witness." Instead, the "Lord's providence . . . will give occasion for the ordering of things for the best interest of the people."[4]

Cromwell and his contemporaries in both Old and New England assumed that the individual ambition that underlies worldly gain is selfish and dangerous. At the time, there was no favorable phrase for "self-made success," and words linked to "self" typically carried negative, even sinful, associations, such as "self-seeking," "self-ambition," and "self-pride." In that light, a "conscientious" Protestant minister condemned those who beheaded Charles I, including Cromwell, as "the supreme, self-made authority."[5] Still close to medieval traditions, the English typically avowed that success on one's own was impossible. Worse, attempting it disrupted communities as well as God's order. Supernatural and social forces determined successes and failures.

To proclaim himself publicly as self-made and to feel personal pride in his achievements, Cromwell would have had to defy those powerful forces and the proper balance of individual ambition and community obligations. He shared the prevailing deep faith in providential authority, according to which God governs all human actions and their outcomes. A brother-in-law marveled after an important victory that God "alone is the Lord of Hosts; . . . it is himselfe that hath raised you up amongst men, and hath called you to high imployments."[6] This highest of praises recognized godliness and service, not personal achievement. Such providentialism also protected Cromwell and his allies against the sinfulness of regicide, they believed, although their foes sensed more profane forces at play. Whether for good or evil, genuine fears of damnation and worldly censure prevented the assertion of self-agency – the belief that human beings can determine their own fates – even if they could not prevent ambition itself.

A self-made label also would have unwisely spurned the earthly social networks on which all political actors have always relied. Cromwell's family had once been prominent and still had valuable political connections that he nurtured alongside his Puritan networks; both had propelled the civil revolution that created his opportunities. Moreover, both publicly and privately, he boasted of his loyalty to those networks and of his status within them rather than independence from them. He, therefore, insisted, early in his 1654 Parliamentary speech, "I was by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height, nor yet in obscurity."[7] He had to avoid the political and social costs of portraying his rise as from too low a rank to command respect. In short, there was more danger than glory in a grand and self-made rise to power.

This comparison of beliefs about self-agency challenges claims that the meanings of "self-made success" are eternal verities. To understand how we got from attitudes of the seventeenth century to those of the twentieth, we will look across these four centuries at how the myth of self-made success was entangled with many different beliefs and actions, all within changing contexts. Daniel T. Rodgers explained that the joint evolution of the work ethic and its economic context "took shape together as values and practice fused and collided, quarreled with and reinforced one another, in an inextricably tangled relationship." Because the strands in the history of every important idea are tangled, simple stories inevitably mislead.[8] Yet, simplicity and directness maximize stories' persuasiveness. More effective than complex narratives, myths are simple tales that can align individuals' identities with collective identities, individuals' ambitions with group ambitions, and individuals' values with group values.[9] Truly, one of the reasons for the impact of the modern myth of self-made success is that it became a frame for overly simple stories that filter out the intricacies of people's real lives.

Those simple stories also filter out most people. They focus on a narrow foreground – a particular "hero" or heroic type. Everyone else is either an enemy to be conquered or an underling to be slighted, even when their work makes all heroes' triumphs possible. Of course, all of the people working in the background have their own stories, but they rarely reach or appeal to dominant groups. This book recovers some of those narratives to challenge the myth of self-made success and to highlight alternatives to the dominant stories. These can help us reimagine the dynamics between individuals and communities beyond the judgmental terms of self-made success, according to which successful individuals owe nothing and everyone else deserves nothing.

To challenge the myth of self-made success, this book looks to its long history and to the people who conjured its simplistic stories. This meant tracking four centuries of storytelling about the idea of self-agency from its days as a sin against God and community through its evolution into a dominant narrative, one driven by ambitions

of many sorts. Because the people who could most successfully compete for cultural authority in the mainstream have belonged to its dominant groups, they are the book's protagonists. Therefore, this is *mostly* a history of how people who dominated the mainstream – especially elite White Protestant males – created, shaped, and exploited ideas about self-making to advocate for themselves and their allies. Although marginalized groups have contested dominant ideologies, this book's purpose is to expose what's behind the myth and the storytellers who built it. Those historical actors are not the whole nation, but their myths have swayed it powerfully.[10]

Simple, persuasive mythology to the contrary, self-made success is impossible. We live and act in a profoundly interconnected world, and our professional lives, like so much else, depend on social capital and our access to many other types of resources, as well as how diligently we work.[11] Given that reality, how did ideas about self-making evolve into a myth that people can and should succeed on their own? Like all evolutionary processes, this one has been competitive, and the prize is cultural authority, which frames what we accept as realistic and ethical. In turn, cultural authority confers the trust and social esteem on which political authority and power depend. Through this evolution, notions about self-making became a shared framework to explain what people experience and how they judge themselves and others. Like any ideology, the myth's rise has depended on its usefulness to persuade and motivate, which has never hinged on its alignment with reality.[12]

Myths have histories, and the myth of self-made success has a surprising and hotly contested one that runs through the nation's history. The concept has attracted a wide range of meanings and uses along the way, which we will watch evolve over the centuries rather than try to pin to a single definition. Those changes call into question today's taken-for-granted uses of the concept, which have had, and continue to have, very real consequences for how we think about who deserves respect, what obligations we owe to our communities, and what ambitions we should encourage.

The concept of "self-made" has been elastic, but, whether positive or negative, its uses always judge. Throughout the nineteenth century, the phrase "self-made" often continued to carry negative meanings. It was common, for example, to see temperance advocates refer to "self-made maniacs" whose alcoholism destroyed themselves and others. A cluster of diatribes in the political arena condemned the "pure, the select, the self-made, bloated patriots."[13] And, of course, until recent decades, "nouveau riche" was not praise but a reference to people with "new" money who had yet to learn appropriate social graces. That sense is long gone as tycoons now pridefully brandish their casual attire and sometimes crude behavior.

By the middle of the nineteenth century references to "self-made" were increasingly positive, but often not what we'd expect today. A newspaper placed

an 1843 tribute to "a *self-made man* in every sense of the word" in a way that would seem odd today. It praised the "self-made" Reverend John A. MacMannen for "the remarkable strength of mind and the integrity which have borne him triumphantly through so many privations and difficulties" – standard fare for an esteemed preacher. Directly below that article, however, a single sentence read "The death of John Jacob Astor, for several years past regarded as the wealthiest man in the United States, is announced in the New York papers."[14] The contrast of Astor's scant notice with abundant praise for the now-obscure reverend is startling today. Astor conformed to our current understandings of "self-made": he rose to riches out of obscure origins, yet did not then qualify as "self-made" while the reverend did.

Moreover, when the title of self-made success in a positive sense first moved away from religious and community leaders, electoral politics incentivized applying it to men with political ambitions. When early nineteenth-century fables of self-making began to describe political figures, they increasingly made use of motifs such as the "solitary oak" and "noble eagle." Describing a hero as a loner tells a simple story because it hides from view the forest of people who make that heroism possible: the wives, servants, free and enslaved laborers, displaced peoples, and the impoverished. Andrew Jackson, for example, was often described with those two phrases, as in "the noble eagle perches in silence on the remotest mountain peak."[15] Such narratives make invisible the people in heroes' armies and households, as well as those among their political and financial supporters. Other people often appear as the objects of heroism: as rescued, conquered, or controlled. Nothing but a hero's raw abilities and grim determination affect his success in such over-simplified but powerful renderings. Only the drama of headwinds that challenge heroes, not the advantages of tailwinds, appear in laudatory stories of self-making that are grossly inadequate to explain lives' outcomes.[16] In other words, it's human nature to take credit for our successes and to blame bad luck for our failures, while, conversely, blaming others for their failures and luck for their successes.

Storytellers have forged the myth of self-made success in two senses, both constructing and counterfeiting identities and measures of worth in order to advance their own and others' ambitions. We will follow as the concept of self-making evolved into the myth through the stories of people, many famous but not all. Familiar names include Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, and Horatio Alger, Jr. Franklin starred in the early transition, as he did in so many stories of America's founding. However, his role was not the tale of self-aggrandizement attributed to him after he could no longer speak for himself. He never considered himself "self-made." His grandson William Temple Franklin rewrote his memoirs in 1818 into the form we remember now, doing an injustice to Benjamin's

intentions, but pushing the notion of self-making into ambition's service. Late in that century, Carnegie needed no publicist to claim for himself the rights and privileges of the self-made, the "fittest," which he did in his 1889 essay "Wealth." Although Alger wrote more than one hundred stories to encourage children and adults to take responsibility for their lives, he also emphasized their responsibilities to their communities. He never advocated for self-making, but opponents of the New Deal reshaped his legacy in the 1930s as if he had. Advocates for an individualist ethos have recruited historical figures – Franklin and Alger foremost among them – contradicting what those iconic Americans in fact said and did.

Although no single ideal of ambition and success has ever fully triumphed, over centuries a simple, elegant, and powerful storyline emerged that increasingly attributed agency to individuals and minimized their debts and responsibilities to their communities. Along the way, it has also served those who want to minimize collective obligations to others who lack adequate "merit" by their lights. Two centuries ago, this storyline began to acquire its own symbolic phrases – "bootstraps," "rags-to-riches," "rugged individualism," and so on. It has since acquired support from powerful people and institutions who champion simple, one-dimensional stories dominated by a notion of individualistic, self-made success that legitimates and, thereby, exacerbates inequalities. Those stories also denigrate people whose conditions constrain their potential, adding especially to the burdens of women and people of color. In fact, their ambitions are sometimes still maligned as dangerous threats to fantasies about a proper social order. In modern individualist tales a claimant to self-made success owes no one. Charitable generosity is appreciated, but not obligatory. Conversely, a culture that exalts self-made success also condemns failure as entirely self-made. "Losers" are readily dismissed as unworthy, compounding their frustrations and despair.

Challenging the myth of self-made success does not in the least dispute that we adults must take responsibility for our own actions. We can, also, rightly take pleasure and pride in our accomplishments, especially those hard-won. Yet, we are all "mutually-made," to apply Judith McGaw's insightful phrase. Honest life stories, therefore, present a balance of individual effort and support to explain their paths.[17] Challenging the myth only requires that we not succumb to the arrogant belief that we achieve alone and, therefore, owe no one. Likewise, challenging the myth reminds us to appreciate our tailwinds and others' headwinds – our advantages and others' disadvantages.

The powerful myth of self-made success has had enormous costs, and, in our own moment, the tragedies confront us daily. Its false assumptions and real harms have, therefore, received considerable attention of late.[18] This book adds to those critiques by tracking the myth's historical origins and contingencies to reveal that there is nothing intuitive, inherent, stable, or natural about the idea, nothing that

sits at the American core. Nor are the harms that its use legitimates inevitable. As inequality grows, we would do well to recall the best elements of America's more complex, socially oriented narratives, the neglected stories of mutual self-improvement, connection, and community obligations. The history that follows can help us avoid being blinded by the brilliant simplicity and power of bootstraps, the terrible elegance of a myth that pretends that we live –that we succeed or fail – in a vacuum.

1

A New World of Ambition and Judgment

For centuries, medieval tradition had exalted poverty, communal obligations, and otherworldly goals, but in the seventeenth century new perspectives and challenges from the Renaissance and Reformation inspired worldly ambitions among Europeans – and sometimes rewarded them. A flood of new opportunities, such as commercialization and explorers' adventures, and new pressures, such as mounting poverty and vagrancy in England, threatened communities and traditions and together inspired economic and cultural innovation. In this context, English adventurers in the early seventeenth century who sought their fortunes in Virginia often foreshadowed individualism. Their failures to recognize mutual dependencies and obligations were famously catastrophic. In contrast, many migrants seeking to prosper in New England held traditional duties dear, especially duties to God and community, even as they carved out paths into the unknown.

To understand the emerging ways of thinking about self-made fates among the early English colonists to North America, we can focus on the lives, worries, and circumstances of Captain John Smith (1580–1631), an explorer and extraordinary promoter of himself and New World colonization, and Robert Keayne (1595–1656), a prosperous merchant in Boston's first decades. Neither shunned worldly ambitions as they helped to build England's earliest North American colonies, and each aggressively sought material success and esteem through incessant work. In the language of their day, they were both adventurers, which meant that they took risks in pursuit of gain. Today, we remember Smith as an adventurer of the swashbuckling sort, most famous because the Algonquian princess Pocahontas rescued him from her father's ire in Virginia. Keayne was an adventurer in a now obsolete sense of that word – he took investment risks, such as financing New England colonies. Like Smith, he advocated for advancing England by building colonies of hardworking families, prosperous farmers, fishermen, artisans, and merchants.

Smith and Keayne illustrate the concerns and goals of two prominent, well-informed, but very different men among the earliest English travelers to North America. They participated in an early stage of shaping the criteria by which