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Editors' Note

What makes the United States distinctive? We like to think of ourselves as guided more than most countries by a commitment to core principles (democracy, liberty, equal opportunity) that are then expressed in our institutions and practices. Although there may be some conceit in the claim that we are *especially* principled, what arguably makes us distinctive is our willingness to continually reinvent ourselves to better realize our principles and commitments. We have no patience for those who are mindlessly wedded to existing institutions; instead, our institutions should be understood as mere vehicles, and insofar as they aren't working for us we are willing, indeed anxious, to reform them. The purpose of this issue of *Pathways* is to ask whether we are again approaching one of these moments of American reinvention.

There have, of course, been many such moments in our history. The institution of slavery was, for example, shed when it could no longer be reconciled with our egalitarian commitments (without gainsaying the equally important point that non-ideological forces were also at work). Some 70 years later, the New Deal was born amidst the Great Depression, and likewise amidst the rhetoric of generating for all citizens a "more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth" (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Democratic nomination address, 1932). In the 1950s, our racially segregated school system came to be understood as inconsistent with a substantive and meaningful commitment to equal opportunity, and it too began to be dismantled. In each of these cases, economic or non-economic crises were important precipitants of the reforms, yet our ideological commitments surely informed how we responded to those crises and the types of reforms we considered.

We are confronting now another crisis, another opportunity to examine our shortcomings and attempt to better realize our principles and commitments. The question we thus posed to our contributors was how we might go about realizing our commitment to equalizing opportunity and to providing everyone with a pathway to full participation in U.S. society. In particular, we suggested that now might be an opportunity to look to other countries to cull for reforms that work, the idea being that U.S. policymakers haven't shopped as widely for new or innovative approaches as they might.

The resulting issue provides, if we may brag (another U.S. trait!), a package of startlingly smart and thoughtful reflections. In the first piece, Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel argue for a Danish-style system of "flexicurity," one that combines flexibility and security in a 21st-century labor market. While Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel look to "Old Europe," Jacob Hacker looks north, to Canada, to understand how "winner-take-all" inequality can be tamed and made palatable. By contrast, Martin Ravallion, Director of Research at the World Bank, looks to the developing world to explore how one can at once provide economic stimulus and take on problems of long-term poverty. Finally, Ray Boshara, Vice President of the New America Foundation, examines asset-building programs from around the world and draws key lessons for the United States from his tour.

The United States has long understood itself as a special country with special (i.e., "exceptional") institutions and has accordingly been more insular than most late industrial countries on matters of poverty policy. If we are suggesting here some slight relaxation of our characteristic insularity, it is only because of our yet stronger commitment to that most American of principles, the commitment to do whatever it takes to get it done. This commitment, if taken seriously, suggests we would do well to study widely and take note of what works and what doesn't throughout the world.

—David Grusky & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors