

Those lazy jobless

By Paul Krugman

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Last week John Boehner, the speaker of the House, explained to an audience at the American Enterprise Institute what's holding back employment in America: laziness. People, he said, have "this idea" that "I really don't have to work. I don't really want to do this. I think I'd rather just sit around." Holy 47 percent, Batman!

It's hardly the first time a prominent conservative has said something along these lines. Ever since a financial crisis plunged us into recession it has been a nonstop refrain on the right that the unemployed aren't trying hard enough, that they are taking it easy thanks to generous unemployment benefits, which are constantly characterized as "paying people not to work." And the urge to blame the victims of a depressed economy has proved impervious to logic and evidence.

But it's still amazing — and revealing — to hear this line being repeated now. For the blame-the-victim crowd has gotten everything it wanted: Benefits, especially for the long-term unemployed, have been slashed or eliminated. So now we have rants against the bums on welfare when they aren't bums — they never were — and there's no welfare. Why?

First things first: I don't know how many people realize just how successful the campaign against any kind of relief for those who can't find jobs has been. But it's a striking picture. The job market has improved lately, but there are still almost three million Americans who have been out of work for more than six months, the usual maximum duration of unemployment insurance. That's nearly three times the pre-recession total. Yet extended benefits for the long-term unemployed have been eliminated — and in some states the duration of benefits has been slashed even further.

The result is that most of the unemployed have been cut off. Only 26 percent of jobless Americans are receiving any kind of unemployment benefit, the lowest level in many decades. The total value of unemployment benefits is less than 0.25 percent of G.D.P., half what it was in 2003, when the unemployment rate was roughly the same as it is now. It's not hyperbole to say that America has abandoned its out-of-work citizens.

Strange to say, this outbreak of anti-compassionate conservatism hasn't produced a job surge. In fact, the whole proposition that cruelty is the key to prosperity hasn't been faring too well lately. Last week Nathan Deal, the Republican governor of Georgia, complained that many states with Republican governors have seen a rise in unemployment and suggested that the feds were cooking the books. But maybe the right's preferred policies don't work?

That is, however, a topic for another column. My question for today is instead one of psychology and politics: Why is there so much animus against the unemployed, such a strong conviction that they're getting away with something, at a time when they're actually being treated with unprecedented harshness?

Now, as anyone who has studied British policy during the Irish famine knows, self-righteous cruelty toward the victims of disaster, especially when the disaster goes on for an extended period, is common in history. Still, Republicans haven't always been like this. In the 1930s they denounced the New Deal and called for free-market solutions — but when Alf Landon accepted the 1936 presidential nomination, he also emphasized the "plain duty" of "caring for the unemployed until

recovery is attained.” Can you imagine hearing anything similar from today’s G.O.P.?

Is it race? That’s always a hypothesis worth considering in American politics. It’s true that most of the unemployed are white, and they make up an even larger share of those receiving unemployment benefits. But conservatives may not know this, treating the unemployed as part of a vaguely defined, dark-skinned crowd of “takers.”

My guess, however, is that it’s mainly about the closed information loop of the modern right. In a nation where the Republican base gets what it thinks are facts from Fox News and Rush Limbaugh, where the party’s elite gets what it imagines to be policy analysis from the American Enterprise Institute or the Heritage

Foundation, the right lives in its own intellectual universe, aware of neither the reality of unemployment nor what life is like for the jobless. You might think that personal experience — almost everyone has acquaintances or relatives who can’t find work — would still break through, but apparently not.

Whatever the explanation, Mr. Boehner was clearly saying what he and everyone around him really thinks, what they say to each other when they don’t expect others to hear. Some conservatives have been trying to reinvent their image, professing sympathy for the less fortunate. But what their party really believes is that if you’re poor or unemployed, it’s your own fault.