

What Liberals Get Wrong About Work

Unfettered markets and a rampant culture of meritocracy have eroded the rewards and dignity of work for most Americans. It's time for a new ethic of "contributive justice."



Story by Michael J. Sandel

SEPTEMBER 2, 2020 | IDEAS

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

AT THE HEART of the populist resentments that roil American politics are grievances about work. Those grievances are about more than job losses and stagnant wages, though. "Work" is both economic and cultural. The

people left behind by globalization haven't just struggled while others prospered; they sense that the work they do is no longer a source of social recognition.

From the end of World War II until the 1970s, it was possible for those without a college degree to find a good job that enabled them to support a family and lead a comfortable, middle-class life. That is far more difficult today. Over the past four decades, the earnings difference between high-school and college graduates—what economists call the “college premium”—has doubled.

Globalization brought rich rewards to the well credentialed—the winners of the meritocratic race. It did nothing for most workers. Productivity increased, but working people reaped a smaller and smaller share of what they produced. Although per capita income in the U.S. has increased 85 percent since 1979, white men without a four-year college degree make less now, in real terms, than they did then.

The meritocratic age has also inflicted a more insidious injury: eroding the dignity of work. The valorization of those who score well on standardized tests and go on to college or university implicitly disparages those without such credentials. It tells them that the work they do, less valued by the market than the work of professionals, is a lesser contribution to the common good.

This way of thinking about who deserves what is the result of two related tendencies. One is the meritocratic sorting that, in recent decades, has made a four-year college degree an almost indispensable condition of opportunity and success. The other is the neoliberal, market-oriented version of globalization embraced by mainstream parties of the center-right and center-left since the 1980s. Even as globalization produced massive inequality, these two outlooks—the meritocratic and the neoliberal—undermined the dignity of work, fueling resentment of elites among working people, along with a political backlash.

Michael Young, who coined the term *meritocracy* in the late 1950s—and who used it as a pejorative—observed four decades later: “It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.”

[Read: The economist who would fix the American dream]

Working-class men without a college degree voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in 2016. Their attraction to his politics of grievance suggests that they were angered by more than economic hardship. One of the reasons mainstream analysts and politicians were shocked by Trump's election is that they were oblivious to the culture of elite condescension. This culture is a consequence, in large part, of the meritocratic sorting project and the inequality brought about by market-driven globalization, but it finds expression throughout American life. The working-class fathers on television sitcoms, such as Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* and Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons*, are mostly buffoons—ineffectual and dumb. Joan Williams, a professor at Hastings College of Law, in San Francisco, has pointed a finger at what she calls “class cluelessness” among progressives. In a 2016 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild gave voice to working-class discontent: “You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored.”



Archive Photos / Getty

ANY SERIOUS RESPONSE to working-class frustrations must combat condescension and credentialist prejudice. It must also put the dignity of work at the center of the political agenda. Thinking through the meaning of work would force Americans to confront moral and political questions that we otherwise evade: What counts as a contribution to the common good? What do we owe to one another as citizens?

[*Read: [Why the myth of meritocracy hurts kids of color](#)*]

Debating the dignity of work requires us to ask whether market wages offer a true measure of the social value of various jobs. According to a consumerist conception of the common good, the answer is yes, they do. This conception, familiar among economic-policy makers, defines the common good as the sum of everyone's preferences and interests. In this view, we achieve the common good by maximizing consumer welfare, typically by maximizing economic growth. If the common good is simply a matter of satisfying consumer preferences, then market wages are a good measure of who has contributed what. Those who make the most money have presumably made the most valuable contribution, by producing goods and services that consumers want.

But this is not the only approach to the common good. What might be called a civic conception rejects this consumerist notion. According to this view, the common good is not simply about adding up preferences or maximizing consumer welfare. Nor can it be achieved through economic activity alone. It requires reflecting critically on our preferences, and deliberating with our fellow citizens about how to bring about a just and good society.

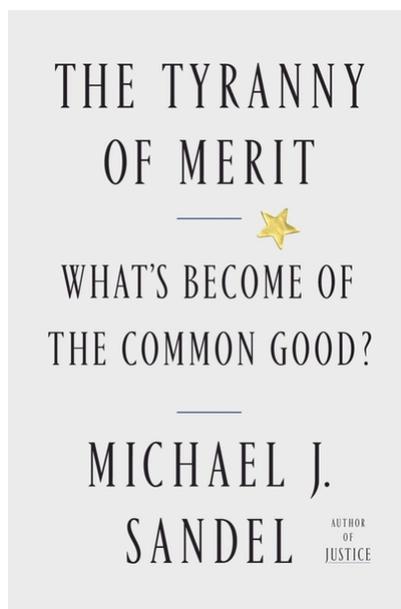
The civic conception also suggests a particular way of thinking about work: specifically, that the most important role we play in the economy is not as consumers but as producers. It is as producers that we develop and deploy our abilities to provide goods and services that fulfill the needs of our fellow citizens and win social esteem. The true value of our contribution cannot be measured by the wage we receive; it depends instead on the moral and civic importance of the ends our efforts serve.

Consider the two careers of Walter White, the high-school-chemistry teacher turned meth mogul in the television series *Breaking Bad*. When White

abandoned the classroom to apply his skills to making a highly prized version of methamphetamine, he earned far more than the modest pay he'd received as a teacher. But this does not mean that cooking meth is a more valuable contribution to society than teaching high school. Who contributes most to the common good cannot be determined by the market; it requires a moral judgment that democratic citizens must debate and decide. The coronavirus pandemic has likely changed the way many Americans feel about whose contributions matter most. But those “essential workers” on whom we depend are among the least-well-paid members of society.

[*Madeline Leung Coleman: Essential Workers Are Being Treated as Expendable*]

The idea that economic policy is ultimately for the sake of consumption is so ingrained that we struggle to think our way beyond it. “Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production,” Adam Smith declared in *The Wealth of Nations*. John Maynard Keynes echoed Smith. Most contemporary economists agree. But an older tradition of moral and political thought held otherwise. Aristotle argued that human flourishing depends on realizing our nature through the cultivation and exercise of our abilities. The American republican tradition taught that certain occupations—first agriculture, then artisan labor, then free labor broadly understood—nurture the virtues that equip citizens for self-rule.



FSG

In the 20th century, the producer ethic of the republican tradition gradually gave way to consumerist notions of freedom, and to a political economy of economic growth. But the idea that work draws citizens together in a web of contribution and mutual recognition did not disappear. Martin Luther King Jr. invoked it when he spoke to striking sanitation workers in 1968, hours before he was assassinated. “The person who picks up our garbage is, in the final analysis, as significant as the physician,” King said, “for if he doesn’t do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity.”

The idea that we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good, and win the esteem of our fellow citizens for doing so, runs from Aristotle to MLK to Catholic social teaching. In this conception, we aspire above all to be needed by those with whom we share a common life. The dignity of work consists in exercising our abilities to answer such needs.

A political economy concerned only with the size and allocation of GDP undermines the dignity of work and makes for an impoverished civic life. Robert F. Kennedy, campaigning for the presidency in 1968, understood this: “Fellowship, community, shared patriotism—these essential values of our civilization do not come from just buying and consuming goods together.” They come instead, he went on, from the kind of work that allows a person to say, “I helped to build this country. I am a participant in its great public ventures.”

Few politicians speak that way today. Progressives have largely abandoned the politics of community, patriotism, and the dignity of work, offering instead the rhetoric of rising. To those who worried about stagnant wages, outsourcing, inequality, and losing their jobs to immigrants and robots, governing elites offered bracing advice: Go to college. Equip yourself to compete and win in the global economy. What you earn will depend on what you learn. You can make it if you try.

This was an idealism suited to a meritocratic, market-driven age. It flattered the winners and insulted the losers. By 2016, its time was up.



Hulton Archive / Getty

ON THE SURFACE, the dignity of work is hardly a controversial idea. No one speaks against it. It is invoked rhetorically to support standard political positions. On the right, some have cited the dignity of work as an argument for cutting welfare, positing that this would make life harder for the idle and wean them from dependence. Sonny Perdue, Donald Trump’s secretary of agriculture, made the connection explicit, claiming that the reduction of access to food stamps “restores the dignity of work to a sizable segment of our population.” For their part, liberals have responded to a single-minded focus on maximizing GDP by promoting a greater measure of *distributive* justice—fairer, fuller access to the fruits of economic growth.

But what many workers want even more is a greater measure of *contributive* justice—an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that goes with producing what others need and value.

In our deeply polarized time, when large numbers of working people feel ignored and unappreciated, when we desperately need sources of social cohesion and

solidarity, a more robust affirmation of the dignity of work might seem likely to find its way into mainstream political argument. But this has not been the case.

A political agenda that took contributive justice seriously would raise uncomfortable questions for liberals and conservatives alike. It would challenge a premise that proponents of market-based globalization widely share—that market outcomes reflect the true social value of people’s contributions. An agenda that took contributive justice seriously would require public debate about what counts as truly valuable contributions to the common good and where market verdicts miss the mark. This wouldn't be an easy conversation—the common good is contestable. But a renewed debate about the dignity of work would disrupt our partisan complacencies and morally invigorate our public discourse. Right now, as pandemic shutdowns shine a light on the once-“unseen” essential workers everywhere, is the moment to have such a debate.

Consider, as illustrations, two versions of a political agenda focused on the dignity of work—one conservative, the other progressive—and the need to challenge market outcomes to affirm it. The first comes from a policy adviser to Republican Mitt Romney during his 2012 presidential run. In his book *The Once and Future Worker*, Oren Cass offers a series of proposals aimed at the grievances Trump tapped into but failed to address. Cass argues that supporting the dignity of work in the United States requires Republicans to give up their orthodox embrace of free markets. Rather than push corporate tax cuts and unfettered free trade in hopes of boosting GDP, Republicans should focus on policies that enable workers to find jobs that pay well enough to support strong families and communities. This matters more for a good society, Cass maintains, than economic growth.

One of the policies he proposes is a wage subsidy for low-income workers—hardly standard Republican fare. The idea is that the government would provide a supplementary payment for each hour worked by a low-wage employee, based on a target hourly wage. The wage subsidy is, in a way, the opposite of a payroll tax. Rather than deduct a certain amount of each worker’s earnings, the government would add a certain amount. The mechanism here may be distributive, but the rationale for it is anchored firmly in the idea of contributive justice.

Such anchoring was made explicit in the wage-subsidy proposal enacted by a number of European countries when the coronavirus pandemic required them to shut down their economies. Rather than offer unemployment insurance to workers who lost their jobs, as the U.S. government did, Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands covered 75 to 90 percent of wages for companies that did not lay off workers. This enabled employers to keep workers on their payroll and sent a very clear signal affirming the value of workers and the dignity of work. The U.S. approach may have made up for some amount of lost wages, but that was it.



Hulton-Deutsch Collection / Getty

A second approach to renewing the dignity of work, more likely to resonate with political progressives, would highlight the rising role of finance. In the United States, the financial industry's share of GDP has nearly tripled since the 1950s.

In 2008, it claimed more than 30 percent of corporate profits. Its employees make 70 percent more than comparably qualified workers in other industries. This would not be a problem if all this financial activity were productive—if it increased the economy's ability to produce valuable goods and services. But that's not the case. Adair Turner, the chair of Britain's Financial Services Authority, has estimated that, in advanced economies such as the U.S. and the U.K., only 15 percent of financial flows go into new productive enterprises rather than into speculation on existing assets or fancy derivatives. The rise of finance offers perhaps the clearest example in a modern economy of the gap between what the market rewards and what actually contributes to the common good.

The financial crisis of 2008 brought the industry dramatically to the public's attention. The resulting debate was mainly about the terms of the taxpayer bailout and how to reform Wall Street. It largely ignored the moral and civic implications of modern finance. A political agenda that recognizes the dignity of work would use the tax system to reconfigure the economy of esteem by discouraging speculation and honoring productive labor. A radical way of doing so would be to lower or even eliminate the payroll tax and to raise revenue by instead taxing consumption, wealth, and financial transactions. A modest step in this direction would be to reduce the payroll tax and make up the lost revenue with a financial-transactions tax on high-speed trading, which contributes little of value to the real economy.

Again, the mechanism is distributive, but the rationale and message is contributive. Taxation is not only a way of raising revenue; it is also a way of expressing a society's values. The moral aspect of tax policy is familiar. We commonly argue about the fairness of taxation—whether this or that tax will fall more heavily on the rich or the poor. But the expressive dimension of taxation goes beyond debates about fairness, to the moral judgments societies make about which activities are worthy of honor and recognition, and which ones should be discouraged.

These proposals I've cited are not solutions in themselves, but illustrations of what it would mean to shift our debate about work to a contributive ethic, one that views work as an arena of social recognition. Renewing the dignity of work requires that we contend with the moral questions underlying our economic

arrangements: not only what kinds of work are worthy of recognition and esteem but also what we owe one another as citizens. The two are connected. We cannot determine what counts as a contribution worth affirming without deliberating about the purposes and ends of our common life. And we cannot deliberate about common purposes and ends without seeing ourselves as members of a community to which we are indebted. This sense of indebtedness would enable us to say “We are all in this together”—not as a ritual incantation in times of crisis but as a principle that informs our everyday lives.

This article is excerpted from Michael Sandel's new book, The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?