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April 10, 2023

A Shifting Public Ethos: Advocacy for a Robust Living Wage and the Path Towards Community  
Flourishing

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## Abstract

# A Shifting Public Ethos: Advocacy for a Robust Living Wage and the Path Towards Community Flourishing

By Lara J. Drinan Yeganeh

In this thesis, I examine the conditions that would make for a robust and dignified life for the American worker. I identify the values of security, agency, fulfillment, fairness against a backdrop of decent living and working conditions based on the ideals listed in the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). I explain how the "status quo" of labor in America fails to meet the ideals of the UDHR of both moral and material dignity. Instead, I propose a two-pronged approach to meliorate the issue proposing an ethos shift and a robust living wage that seeks to amend the conditions of both the American worker and American society. Ultimately, I show how the betterment of both the individual and the community is beneficial for community flourishing and American democracy.

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**Introduction:**

In Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, a group of strikers who would come to be known for their picket-line chant made the striking claim: “We want bread, but we want roses, too!”<sup>1</sup> This phrase may seem frivolous, but upon further examination, the meaning is profound. For what the Bread and Roses strikers in Massachusetts petitioned was something more than the bare minimum. Without a doubt, people of all walks of life would like the ability to eat and have a roof over their heads, but what is so often ignored is what makes life enjoyable and livable. The French called this *joie de vivre* —the joy of living—and we Americans call it the pursuit of happiness. In other words, it is not a novel idea that in addition to basic necessities, we must consider what else people morally deserve as human beings. Most evidently, human beings must not live emotionally and physically draining lives to have their basic needs covered. Treating people with dignity entails more than simply food and shelter. Humans are also entitled to a more robust and fulfilling life. Notions of common good and community flourishing have the potential to move from lofty ideals to recognized realities.

In a just American society, people are entitled to lead a dignified life, but contemporary society falls short of meeting this standard. For Americans to secure their dignity and human needs, they must be paid a living wage, and the collective American ethos must shift to uphold community flourishing and individual well-being. These two standards have not been met and in fact have deteriorated over the last half a century. People are bound to their work in such a way that deprives them of their dignity and their humanity. Americans should work and be productive through their labor, yet such an expectation becomes hard to fulfill if and when workers are

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<sup>1</sup> William Cahn, *Lawrence, 1912: the Bread and Roses Strike*, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980), 9.



plagued by material insecurities, such as needing to access food and shelter. To address this labor paradox within American society, I affirm the ideals of security, agency, fulfillment, fairness, and decent living conditions as necessary and just guarantees of Western liberal democracy. For these ideals to be realized, I advocate for a broad and robust concept of a living wage as one but far from the only step that can be taken towards the betterment of the common good and the quality of American life. People should not have to “work to death” nor “live to work” to live a dignified and humane life. To avoid this, we should introduce a robust living-with-dignity wage to the American labor arena. Political rhetoric and public discourse often affirm that Americans believe we deserve more than basic rights. To an extent, this thesis serves as both a reminder of what we have affirmed and as an encouragement towards the pursuit of more comprehensive rights. The collective signing of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) displays the obligation across countries and to a country’s own citizens. As I will introduce in in Chapter I and develop further in Chapter III, people not only have an obligation to themselves, but also to one another. The individual certainly has an obligation to personal success; society should provide a standard of living and being that entails dignified conditions. Perhaps some disagree with the initial premise of the UDHR, and I encourage the proposal of an alternative towards the betterment of society. For now, the UDHR serves as an exemplar of international agreement and cooperation for global society’s benefit.

The living wage is a concept that is based on the right to live a more stable, secure, humane, and dignified life. This approach implies that people deserve more than basic subsistence, but instead deserve a more comprehensive view of humanity. In sum, American society must collectively shift its ethos from hyper-individualism—valuing solely personal success and profit—to community—the idea of communal good and flourishing—to benefit

working people and society more broadly. This thesis considers not only the obligations we have to ourselves but also the obligations we have to one another.

To improve the quality of society overall, we must improve the conditions of the most struggling. However, improving the conditions of the most struggling is not solely sufficient to improve the quality of American life and further the spread of dignity within American work. Raising the standards of the quality of life of the lowest strata of the population is not an isolated action but will have ripple effects in the quality of American democracy and community, making society more unified and cohesive. A more cohesive society can focus its energy on the continual advancement of democracy as opposed to ensuring that its populace can physically survive. However, the basic conditions of human survival must first be met either in accordance or before society attempts the tackling of larger problems. These larger problems cannot be tackled without first ameliorating the conditions of the impoverished. In this project, I will outline the fundamentals of labor in the United States, identify the tangible and intangible problems with labor as it has developed in American history and propose a twofold solution to remedy the current unacceptable conditions of labor in America, which entails policy change and a value shift towards a community ethos. A reevaluation of American policy and American ethos is necessary to approach the ideals of both material and moral dignity.

Chapter I serves to outline key principles of the UDHR that I use as the foundation for my argument in addition to the fundamentals of a “good life” and community flourishing. These are, as already mentioned, security, agency, fulfillment, fairness, and decent living conditions. These values traverse one another to comprise the dignity of the American worker.

In Chapter II, I identify both policy and value changes that have harmed the quality of life of the American worker both at work and in life more generally. The status quo of American

labor is characterized by low wages, uncertainty, and an inability to plan for the future. A hyper-fixation on the “bottom line” and a prioritization of high pay for high-level employees threatens the well-being of the American worker. I explain the consequences of the era of neoliberal reform and globalization for the worker. For the purposes of this paper, I define the worker to encompass broadly Americans who serve as employees in some capacity. The problems facing those of low socioeconomic standing are in some ways alike and in some ways different from those of more wealth. Conditions of poverty or economic insecurity are among some of the conditions the American worker faces in society. Politicians have acknowledged these issues for decades. In his 1992 acceptance speech for the Democratic Party’s Presidential Nomination, Bill Clinton declared:

People are working harder than ever, spending less time with their children, working nights and weekends at their jobs instead of going to PTA and Little League or Scouts. And their incomes are still going down. Their taxes are still going up. And the costs of health care, housing and education are going through the roof.<sup>2</sup>

Clinton appeals to the American most generally. He does not address the CEO or the celebrity; he addresses average American workers and their families. Most importantly, he addresses the issues the American worker faces. However, Clinton identifies “high-wage, high-skill jobs” as the solution.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that is part of the solution, but it is incomplete.

While conditions of economic poverty certainly characterize workers of the lowest income bracket, I suggest that the American worker broadly suffers from conditions of poor moral treatment. The dignity of both the high- and low-paid American worker is susceptible to

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Clinton, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York” (speech, New York, July 16, 1992), Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/220260>.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton. *Preface to the Presidency: Selected Speeches of Bill Clinton, 1974-1992*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996.

threat. Through a dual approach focusing on both policies and values, I propose values that would result in the alleviation of conditions of both economic concerns and poor moral treatment for the American worker. I call for both a change in both policy and ethos. On the policy end, the implementation of robust living wage is one particularly efficient and enticing proposal but is not alone. Importantly, the specific policies are not the focus of this paper. I wish to identify necessary conditions for policy changes to be effective, but I do not wish to make claims about the implementation or merit of a specific policy. In terms of ethos, I call for a shift in focus of public ethos from individualism to common good. The American culture of hope and democracy following World War I has been lost. The worker of the immediate post-war and interwar years had serious economic mobility. The American middle class solidified and expanded. The worker felt economic mobility largely for the first time in the 1950s, notably around the time during which union membership peaked.<sup>4</sup> Workers saw themselves as free agents, and both economic and labor structures allowed them to act as such. However, changing policies and cultural values have led workers to be more disenfranchised than ever before in recent history. The dangers of commercialism have seeped into every aspect of the life of the worker.

Chapter III evaluates how a change in policy and ethos would allow the American worker to reaffirm their dignity. A reaffirmation of dignity through a focus on equality, agency, security, and decent working conditions ensures the well-being of society and ultimately the health of American democracy. All members of society can maintain their human dignity and agency so that society can foster not only individual but also community flourishing. The question of exactly what a living wage or a “new minimum wage” must be is an empirical question as is the

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<sup>4</sup> Randy Hodson, *Dignity at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

question of what exactly a comfortable existence might look like. I propose only possible necessary conditions for what a proposed policy seeking to improve the conditions of the American worker would entail. I suggest that the implementation of a living wage could contribute towards better conditions and a “good life,” something that all Americans deserve.

## **Chapter I. Principles**

This chapter lays out the basic normative principles underlying my proposal for a wage that allows workers to live a dignified life. I locate these principles in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Given that 193 nations, including the United States, are signatories of the document, I can use it as a basis for adjudicating whether or not the U.S. and other signatories are living up to their commitments and what it would mean for them to do so on the very concrete matter of work. Fundamentally, as I argue here, it would mean acknowledging and realizing the integral values of human life and well-being that allow one to live with dignity. As I will explain, these include identify security, agency, fulfillment, fairness, and decent working conditions. I argue that striving for the ideals of the UDHR will result in an improvement of the conditions of the worker.

### **Dignity According to the UDHR**

Before I either explain what is wrong about the status or condition of the American worker or propose any solutions to ameliorate the destitute conditions of this group, I propose integral values for individual well-being that collectively result in a prosperous common good. I identify security, agency, fulfillment, fairness, and decent working conditions as fundamental values of American society. These values have been affirmed both in political rhetoric and most explicitly iterated in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), of which the United States is a signatory. Among the varying conceptions of dignity, I find the United Nations' definition of dignity as the most apt definition to use throughout my thesis. In addition to what is outlined in the UDHR, I define dignity as a combination of external and internal constructions. I offer a robust interpretation of dignity that includes both a self-reflection

on one's own condition and an objective external evaluation of one's conditions. Security, or in a loose sense, life insurance is a fundamental of human life. People must have some assurance that if they lose their job or must miss work for some reason that they will nonetheless be able to provide food and shelter for themselves and their families. Agency is crucial to the human condition. Choice or agency in this regard means the free choice of employment and the free mobility from one place of employment to another. Agency also goes in accordance with capacity to build the tools for success in life. Third, dignity as fulfillment addresses the sense of purpose an individual may find from work or from life more generally. Lastly, I specifically define fairness to encompass the idea of the government's obligation to treat all its citizens equally. These four values must be considered against the backdrop of decent working and living conditions. The latter material conditions are inextricably linked to the four moral conditions that I outline.

One proposed material guarantor of these values is the concept of a living wage. A living wage, as different from the current legal minimum wage as it has developed from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's initial conception in 1938, provides a comfortable living standard for Americans. A living wage ensures that if an individual works a full-time job, they must be able to afford both basic life necessities and a degree of comfort. In this chapter, I seek to define the conditions of a dignified human existence: security, agency, fulfillment, fairness, and decent conditions.

The UDHR proposed the values and ideals of dignity, security, agency, fulfillment, and equality. When the United States signed onto the UDHR, we agreed to uphold and strive for its standard. In a sense, this commitment to strive for the UDHR makes it an ideal; something that is not yet the reality, but which one day has the possibility to be realized. While the United States

committed to the UDHR in 1948, it has failed to uphold the values articulated in the declaration to the severe detriment of the American worker. Though the UDHR may be viewed as an ideal, it is nonetheless an ideal for which American society can strive. As I will explore in Chapter II, thus far, American culture and policy has fallen short of the ideal.

The discourse on human rights first began gaining traction in the twentieth century particularly following and in response to the events of World War II. Many of the rights outlined in the UDHR in 1948 not only form the basis of international law but also introduce the concept of dignity to international law. As a condition of membership, the 193 countries of the United Nations, including the United States, committed to the declaration of the UDHR, suggesting that all countries found value in affirming human dignity as a universal right. Most clearly, Article One of the UDHR states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”<sup>5</sup> With regard for labor and the worker, the UDHR states “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions or work, and to protection against unemployment.”<sup>6</sup> Workers are entitled not only to fair physical working conditions but also to a freedom of where and how much to work. For the worker, the UDHR expanded rights from simply guaranteeing fair pay and the right to take breaks to the right to unionize and the right for free choice of employment.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the worker becomes an agent of his or her own path.

The UDHR establishes a global baseline for dignity and rights for all people. While not international law itself, the UDHR forms the widespread basis for international law. The UDHR is a declaration of the way the world should be. The declaration intends to rouse and inspire the

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Declaration on Human Rights 1948 Article 1.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Declaration on Human Rights 1948 Article 23.1.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Declaration on Human Rights 1948 Article 23.1-2.



international community to pursue a collective effort towards a more dignified and just world. Article 3 the UDHR is an affirmation of the rights central to human dignity: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.” Though critics of the UDHR suggest it did not go far enough nor include the necessary voices, the UDHR nonetheless represents an important ideal of expanding human rights to include not simply physical rights and bodily autonomy but also intangible rights such as security and agency.

### **Security**

The first necessary condition for human dignity is security. People have a right to possess a sense of security and stability in their lives. American workers must have enough of a degree of stability and security so that they do not fear constant job loss. Security generally means the ability to cover expenses such as cost of housing, food, healthcare, childcare, and transportation needs.<sup>8</sup> This form of security is mainly short-term security. In other words, people must not fear lack of basic subsistence due to imminent and prolonged threat of job loss. Furthermore, the necessary ability to cover both basic necessities and emergencies does not approach the ability to earn any amount of “disposable income,” or financially prepare for the future which for some scholars is nearly as important for dignity as security.<sup>9</sup> A broader conception of security as it relates to dignity suggests a limited working ideal, some disposable income, and more than satisfaction of

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<sup>8</sup> “A Calculation of the Living Wage,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 12, 2022, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/99-a-calculation-of-the-living-wage>.

<sup>9</sup> Disposable income, defined as the ability to cover additional expenses beyond the bare minimum such as to account for leisure time or personal enjoyment or hobbies. Disposable income is a contentious idea with proponents arguing for the right to spend outside basic subsistence while critics argue that any form of disposable income spending must be an earned luxury.

the bare level of needs. This broader ideal of security may entail freeing up resources for “savings, investment, and the purchase of capital assets... that build wealth and ensure long-term financial stability and security.”<sup>10</sup> This long-term conception of security may seem like a luxury, but I assert that it is a standard of living for which we can strive. Namely, both short- and long-term security are ideals for which American society can aim to achieve.

## Agency

A report issue by President Harry S. Truman’s President’s Commission on Civil Rights issued in 1946 that: “A man's right to an equal chance to utilize fully his skills and knowledge is essential.”<sup>11</sup> Most indicatively, the right to fully utilize skill and knowledge is agency. Agency is a comprehensive term often considered with notions of free will, meaning, and moral responsibility. Philosophers have discussed the term for centuries, and many believe that there is no one explicit definition for agency. Here, I seek to explain how agency is relevant for reaffirming dignity at work. Most directly, agency is relevant in the context of skill acquisition, education, and choice.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, President Obama said that middle-class economics “means that every American has to have the tools to get ahead in a fast-paced, constantly changing global economy.”<sup>13</sup> Given the necessary tools and conditions, agency requires the individual to have the

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<sup>10</sup> “A Calculation of the Living Wage,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 12, 2022, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/99-a-calculation-of-the-living-wage>.

<sup>11</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights*, The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/to-secure-these-rights#58>.

<sup>12</sup> Anneli Eteläpelto, Katja Vähäsantanen, Päivi Hökkä, and Susanna Paloniemi. “What Is Agency? Conceptualizing Professional Agency at Work.” *Educational research review* 10 (2013): 62.

<sup>13</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Middle Class Economics” (speech, Birmingham, Alabama, March 26, 2015), the White House, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/26/remarks-president-middle-class-economics> (accessed March 24, 2023).

opportunity and freedom to act accordingly mainly in their own interest. In this sense, agency is a behavioral concept; people must act within a context of conditions. Individual agency as it relates to work is crucial for the individual's satisfaction and sense of self.<sup>14</sup>

At work, professional agency is an interaction between conditions and responses within the workplace setting. Simply speaking, this can amount to discussions between colleagues and supervisors. Positive reports of agency at work have been correlated to increased positive associations at work including creativity, well-being, motivation, and happiness.<sup>15</sup> These values are not only crucial for dignity but for a general positive human experience. With these conceptions in mind, agency can be construed in part as an individual's responsibility to oneself provided they have the necessary tools to exercise their agency. The relationship between agency and decent conditions begins to clarify how both decent immaterial and material conditions are necessary for human well-being. People must have the ability both mentally and physically to make good decisions for themselves.

## **Fulfillment**

Closely linked to agency is the third quality of a dignified life: a sense of personal fulfillment from life and from work. Fulfillment or meaning generally comprises the idea that the “meaning in work is not fully determined by working conditions.”<sup>16</sup> Marx disputes that work in a

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<sup>14</sup> David P. Levine, *Poverty Work and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Welzel and Inglehart, Ronald. “Agency, Values, and Well-Being: A Human Development Model,” *Soc Indic Res* 97, 62 (2010).

<sup>16</sup> Jesper Isaksen, “Constructing Meaning Despite the Drudgery of Repetitive Work,” *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 40, no. 3 (2000): 84.

capitalist system has any potentially to be fulfilling, scoffing at the “freedom of labour.”<sup>17</sup> He believes that work can only be free and fulfilling if the worker is not only in control of their body but of the means of production, practically impossible within a capitalistic system. Hegel, on the other hand, asks if there is a specific kind of work that is conducive to individual freedom.<sup>18</sup> I find Hegel’s perspective more conducive to a broad conception of fulfillment and dignity. One aspect of fulfilling work is the connection between work and the individual’s ability to form an identity. In part, this type of fulfillment comes from the ability to choose an occupation within one’s skillset and ability. A second aspect of fulfilling work is broader. For an individual to feel fulfilled with regards for their occupation, it is not necessary for their job to be the direct cause of their fulfillment. If an individual’s occupation simply allows them to find a sense of fulfillment in another aspect of life, this condition can be satisfied. If the occupation does not directly thwart an individual’s ability to be fulfilled in life, it can be a neutral player on the path to material and moral dignity. Another way of thinking about fulfillment is that once an individual reaches a certain degree of fulfillment in an occupation, that individual can complement the rest of their fulfillment from external sources. Fulfillment need not solely come from an occupation but perhaps might come from creativity in other aspects of life.<sup>19</sup>

## **Fairness**

Fourth, for people to have dignity others must treat them fairly. As it relates directly to work, the “others” might include managers, lawmakers and politicians, or coworkers. However,

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital* (Chicago: William S. Hein & Company, 1952), 185.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 128-129.

<sup>19</sup> David P. Levine, *Poverty Work and Freedom*, 67.

fairness must also be considered in life more generally. John Rawls suggests with his Two Principles of Justice as Fairness that (1) each person is equally entitled to basic liberties and that (2) inequalities can only exist if they persist despite conditions of fair equality of opportunity and that they most benefit the most disadvantaged members of society.<sup>20</sup> To address the latter, Rawls contends that neither a classless nor a universally impoverished society is not the best way to achieve equal moral equality. With this, he seeks to improve the conditions of those with the least to make society more equitable. I expand on Rawls here by arguing that improving the conditions of those with the least as well as those with the “next to least,” in other words the American middle class is necessary. As for the first principle, Rawls’ First Principle is a request for full participation within a society. Inequalities can and do exist in society. It is merely crucial that they exist despite fair equality of opportunity. For instance, it is not the case that for fairness to be satisfied, all members of a society hold the same occupation, nor must it be true that everyone is equally wealthy. Any modern conception of justice consists of the notion of fairness.

The legal scholar Ronald Dworkin states:

The claim that someone has a right to a minimum level of welfare, for example, can easily be understood as the claim that it is wrong for government to maintain an economic system under which certain individuals or families or groups fall below minimum welfare even if that economic system produces higher average utility (greater overall collective welfare) than any other system.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, our legal and political systems operate under the assumption that people will be treated fairly. If members of a society consent to be governed without the pretense of political fairness, they would be agreeing to be a politically unequal member of that society. Societies and governments would collapse if they did not promise justice as fairness. American

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<sup>20</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, E. Kelly (ed.), (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 165.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1977) 367.

democracy is predicated on this notion that fairness and freedom are pinnacle rights. The Preamble to the United States Constitution calls for people to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”<sup>22</sup> The writers of the Constitution and politicians following them have consistently established and reestablished the values of fairness in hand with other crucial values. Fairness, as the fourth value I discuss, bookends the first three values: agency, security, and fulfillment in the way that it includes most directly the way people should treat one another.

### **Decent Living and Working Conditions**

Lastly, working and living with dignity entails leisure time, rest time, and time away from work. The immaterial values of security, agency, fulfillment, and fairness make little headway towards a more dignified existence if people cannot most basically subsist. Our obligation to one another as members of society is to ensure that people need work seventy hours a week to have their physiological needs fulfilled. As Americans, we are entitled to a certain standard of living.<sup>23</sup> It is undeniable that people may work for different reasons. Some workers work more than the standard forty-hour workweek due to passion or interest. The issue lies with those individuals who are forced to work more than the standard full-time rate solely to make enough to subsist. When workers must put in extra hours only so that they can ensure enough food or to cover a rent payment, they sacrifice their leisure time in order to ensure their human existence. Living and working conditions must allow people the ability secure dignity, and conditions of work must not strip a worker of his or her dignity. Decent living and working

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<sup>22</sup> United States Constitution, Preamble.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, it should be the case that all human beings are entitled to a certain standard of living. For the purposes of this thesis and my focus on the American worker, I will restrict my comments to the conditions of American work and life.

conditions ensure that people can pursue passions other than their occupation. Leisure and rest time is necessary for human well-being and dignity.

## **Dignity**

Human dignity is a broad concept with intersecting definitions and interpretations. In the moral sense, an individual's dignity is comprised of both an internal sense of dignity and a social, externally extrapolated sense of dignity. The UDHR conception of dignity including the values of security, agency, fulfillment, and fairness complement more robust notions of dignity. Activities at work or in other social organizations contribute to the social conception of dignity. The external sense of dignity is a response and reaction to one's social condition. The internal sense of dignity comes with a consideration of security, agency, fulfillment, and equality. These definitions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are closely connected, for the individual is a social creature and spends much of their time interacting with other people. Scholars of humanity and human dignity argue that our self-respect, including the way that others see us, is central to the way we view ourselves.<sup>24</sup> Dignity in one manner is the way we value our personal condition and ourselves. In another manner, dignity is an extrapolated response to the way others see us.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In part, we form our identities by differentiating ourselves from the "other." Largely, our connections to our community are how we construct our sense of self. In the context of team membership, George Herbert Mead argues that "what [a person] does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response." In social settings, people take signals, respond to, and form their sense of self from other people. The organized society or social group gives rise to the "generalized other," or the way that people are seen by others. People do not construct their sense of self-worth solely internally. In some regards, this construction can be viewed as neutral or even positively contributing to society; however, in the context of the workplace the "generalized other" is largely harmful. Workers begin to compare themselves not only to their coworkers. Comparison is worsened and aggravated when the worker compares himself to the individual who owns the company or enterprise for which he works.

<sup>25</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 30.

We evaluate our social standing, our class, our compared success to other people to create our sense of personal dignity. Sometimes people can feel they are dignified even if their perceived economic conditions may not indicate economic success. Low paid workers may still feel a sense of dignity. High paid workers may feel an incredible loss of self if unfulfilled at work or in life. Sometimes ameliorating dire economic conditions alone is not sufficient to prevent erosion of dignity.<sup>26</sup> Philosophers generally agree that personal dignity cannot be diminished; however, scholars agree that an individual's sense of dignity can be externally threatened and violated.<sup>27</sup>

This latter more important conflict regarding dignity is the conflict between an individual's sense of dignity and the external threat towards it. This conflict creates for tension and resentment for the American worker. There is a conflict between what the worker feels and believes he or she holds in terms of dignity and the way they may be treated at work. I consider dignity as a larger part of the discourse of human well-being. Dignity is crucial for the well-being of the worker.<sup>28</sup> While society's overemphasis on work leads the worker to conflate his sense of worth to their work to a point at which the work becomes the worker and dignity suffers as a result, workers can also positively find a sense of dignity from their work. In this chapter, I identify five positive sub-principles of dignity that must be satisfied for a beneficial relationship between work and worker.

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<sup>26</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 198.

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, (ed. Allen W. Wood), *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New Haven, Yale University Press: 2002), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Sayer, "Dignity at Work: Broadening the Agenda." *Organization* 14, no.4 (2007): 576.



## A Living-With-Dignity Wage

In the United States, we have affirmed the right to lead dignified and humane lives time and time again. The most prominent example we can identify is the United States' signing on to the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. By signing on, the U.S. accepted the commitment to pursue dignity, justice, and respect on behalf of its people. We can subsequently ask how that dignity might be pursued and how it might manifest, but the question of whether people deserve to lead dignified lives has already been answered. To put it another way, if we begin with the premise that workers deserve to lead dignified and humane lives, then we need to take up the matter of wages, not just what one gets per hour but overall the monetary and societal provisions for a dignified life. This would be more than the minimum wage, which as I will discuss in the next chapter, fails to provide the most basic conditions. It would also be more than the common understanding of a living wage. It would be what we could call a "living-with-dignity wage."

The manifestation living wage is perhaps the pinnacle of worker's rights in America. Most fundamentally, it suggests that the minimum, in this case the non-uniform, bare minimum, is not enough to provide working Americans with the tools to lead dignified lives. Even the so-called "Father of Capitalism" Adam Smith stated "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."<sup>29</sup> A more robust concept of a living wage suggests that individuals and their families deserve to be treated with dignity and are entitled to some rights as workers.<sup>30</sup> Definitions and specifics of a living wage

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<sup>29</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Werner and Ming Lim, "The Ethics of the Living Wage: A Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Business Ethics* 137, no. 3 (2016): 434.

vary depending on region in question. Some consider a living wage the amount necessary for the recipient to live without reliance on government programs while others more general call for a living wage as defined by the standards of the community.<sup>31</sup> Generally, advocates consider the concept of the living wage to provide for a humanely comfortable standard of living. When a living wage is actualized, it becomes the new minimum wage. In some cases, which I will develop at the end of Chapter III, a living wage actually exceeds the legal minimum wage. In this sense, the living wage and the minimum wage are in dialogue with one another, and the goal is for the minimum wage to never fall below the living wage, though the opposite could in fact be true.

The existing concept of the minimum wage fosters the detrimental idea that humans only deserve the bare minimum. Because wages have remained low while cost of living has not, the minimum wage cannot account for a decent standard of living. Researchers at the Economic Policy Institute found that “From 1973 to 2013, hourly compensation of a typical (production/nonsupervisory) worker rose just 9 percent while productivity increased 74 percent.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, worker production and output drastically increased while wages remained flat. The minimum wage is the most explicit example of wages remaining flat. The minimum wage is essentially a legal conception defined as the “minimum pay per hours to which workers are legally entitled.”<sup>33</sup> It varies substantially from a conception of a living wage, which generally entails a broader response to people’s needs. Rather than simply establishing a “wage

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<sup>31</sup> Donald Stabile, *The Living Wage: Lessons from the History of Economic Thought*. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, and Josh Bivens, “Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts” Economic Policy Institute, January 2015, <https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Werner and Ming Lim, “The Ethics of the Living Wage: A Review and Research Agenda,” 434.

floor,” as the minimum wage does, a living wage considers living standards and community norms, often resulting in a higher wage. A living wage, in many ways, is a call to reestablish the minimum wage at a higher rate. In another manner, a society with a living wage seeks to prevent individuals and families from slipping into poverty. Since the minimum wage is a legal concept, the living wage or the “new” minimum wage must be codified into law, which essentially raises the wage floor to prevent conditions of poverty. The living-with-dignity wage is but one proposed step towards an improved common good and community flourishing.

## **Chapter II. The status quo**

Having laid out the general normative principles that are necessary for working towards a dignified life for American workers, this chapter turns to the reality of conditions for working people. First, I will give a brief history of changes in working conditions over the past decades and then I will next describe what these changes have meant for dignity, security, agency, fulfillment, and equality. This will prepare us to develop, in the next chapter, a new public ethos for a dignified living wage.

### **Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The current state of affairs for the working class in America is dire. The American working class, broadly speaking, is subject to poor working conditions and loss of dignity. While more well-off workers generally experience better material working conditions, the lack of both material and moral dignity—once a problem relegated to certain occupations and economic classes of society—now appears more common than not. Workers from many industries are overworked and underpaid. Firms and companies continue to prioritize profit and productivity to the detriment of workers' well-being and humanity. A series of policies in accordance with a set of political and social practices have led to desperate conditions for the American working class. There have always been people who have worked in conditions lacking dignity, but present conditions show a more widespread loss of dignity than before. We can point to the 1980s as a turning point for the consistent decline of workers' conditions and well-being that persists to the present day. This dangerous set of policy changes and cultural shifts culminating in the 1980s positioned the worker's demise and languish in the following decades. Neoliberal policy including widespread privatization of healthcare and higher education, among other resources,

positioned the American worker either to take on massive amounts of debt or to abandon the pursuit of a degree—and more opportune future—entirely.

The issues with education stem largely from the industrialization of the American economy to require a more skilled workforce and the privatization of higher education which made becoming more skilled a more difficult task. In 1940, about 75 percent of the U.S. population never completed high school, but by 1960 that figure was around 59 percent and, ultimately, by 2007 around 14 percent.<sup>34</sup> While free options for K-12 education lasted, options for free or low-cost higher education which teach the skills necessary to compete in the post-industrialization economy diminished. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (1944) implemented by President Roosevelt, commonly known as the “GI Bill,” does not guarantee former military members the educational or financial support that it once did.<sup>35</sup> For others, the cost of higher education likewise has exponentially risen. To make matters worse, a college degree is as necessary as ever to compete in the labor market. While only about 15 percent of the “silent generation,” those born from 1928-1945, earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, among millennials that figure nears 40 percent.<sup>36</sup> The population, and therefore the workforce, is becoming more educated. However, this is not the case for the population across the socioeconomic scale. It is no wonder, then, that people from more well-off families complete

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<sup>34</sup> Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz, “The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper Middle Class,” Brookings Institute, April 2008. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/04\\_demographics\\_teixeira.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/04_demographics_teixeira.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> National Archives, “Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944),” modified May, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act>.

<sup>36</sup> “Millennial Life: How Young Adulthood Today Compares with Prior Generations,” February 14, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/14/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations-2>.

four-year degrees at higher rates than those from less well-off families. Researchers estimate that “By the age of twenty-four, 82.4 percent of individuals from families in the top income quartile had completed a bachelor’s degree, whereas among students from families in the bottom income quartile, only 8.3 percent had completed a bachelor’s degree.”<sup>37</sup> As degrees became more expensive, they also became more necessary for long-term economic stability and success.

The most well-off also have the tools to propel long-term financial success for themselves and their children. Less well-off and less educated and skilled workers are already at a disadvantage for financial well-being. Researchers find that “Between 1979 and 2005, the average real hourly wage for those with a college degree went up 22 percent and for those with advanced degrees, 28 percent;” for those without higher education, average wages rose merely 3 percent.<sup>38</sup> This reality positioned the American worker of middle and low income for long-term poor financial conditions. Either they must take on massive debt to pay for an education or their options for career path or career growth would be limited.

The shift to industrialization is only part of the explanation for the changing conditions of economics and education in America. “Degraded” or “downgraded” work provides additional explanations for widening economic inequality and threats to the livelihood of the worker.<sup>39</sup> Instead of simply regarding the problem as the diminishing need for skilled labor, we must also consider the problem with the quality of the work that has replaced skilled labor and its damaging impression of the worker’s well-being. Low-wage service jobs of the late twentieth

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas G. Mortensen, “Family Income and Educational Attainment, 1970 to 2009,” *Postsecondary Edu. Opportunity 2* (Nov. 2010), quoted in Joseph Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, 205.

<sup>38</sup> Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz, “The Decline of the White Working Class,” 392.

<sup>39</sup> Marc Doussard, “Introduction: The Boom in Poorly Paid and Precarious Jobs,” 3.

and twenty-first centuries differ from the low-wage jobs of the modern era more broadly. The massive growth of the service industry entails a significant shift from a production driven economy to a service driven economy.<sup>40</sup> Some wrongly argue that the growth of the service industry benefitted the American worker, though it appears more likely that the growth of low-wage service industry jobs in fact exacerbated existing inequalities.

In accordance with one another, the policy changes provided the framework to devalue the worker while the American mindset of individualism and corporatism encouraged a profit-driven and disillusioned public ethos. The status quo of work in the United States is characterized by generally unsatisfactory working conditions for the working class. This material threat to dignity remains widespread and is focused mainly on the working class. However, the moral threat to dignity has proliferated since the 1980s and is not as limited to economic class. A widespread lack in human dignity illustrated by a lack of dignity, security, agency, fulfillment, and fairness within a framework of unsatisfactory working conditions harms the well-being of the American worker. This threat to dignity typically manifests in two forms: the material threat and the moral threat. The material threat to dignity is most evident through an analysis of the conditions of the worker. The worker's inability to meet basic physiological needs such as paying for rent or groceries represents a blatant lack of dignified conditions. Classical theorists often term this problem a lack of subsistence generally understood to be a threat to physical survival.<sup>41</sup> While threats to subsistence tend to be focused on those workers paid the least, the moral threat to dignity is prevalent across the pay scale.

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<sup>40</sup> Marc Doussard, "Introduction: The Boom in Poorly Paid and Precarious Jobs," 9.

<sup>41</sup> David P. Levine, Rizvi, *Poverty Work and Freedom*, 1.

## Defining the Worker

To define the ‘worker’ whom I will discuss in this chapter, I will rely on two distinctions: the unskilled or “low-skilled” laborer, which we can define as requiring no education past a high school education, and the “skilled” laborer, defined as requiring either more education or more training past the high-school level.<sup>42</sup> However, before I explore this idea, I wish to explain why this distinction is problematic. Skilled laborers typically undergo more training before entering the workforce, and they are subsequently higher paid.<sup>43</sup> High-skilled individuals may be wage-laborers but often experience greater labor mobility due to the demand for their skillset.<sup>44</sup> Historically, most labor unions constituted skilled laborers. This constructed a difficult situation for the low-skilled laborer to navigate. Those without “high-level” skills already suffer a disadvantage within the labor market for their skills generally earn lower wages and their jobs are generally more unstable and more insecure; however, the so-called low-skilled workers have historically been excluded from organized labor groups which would serve to benefit their conditions.<sup>45</sup>

To be specific, the distinction between unskilled and skilled labor can be made by evaluating the practical difference and implication of each line of work. Those in unskilled occupations are most susceptible to low wages, dependence on overtime, and unguaranteed

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<sup>42</sup> Nan L. Maxwell, *Working Life: The Labor Market for Workers in Low-Skilled Jobs* Kalamazoo, Mich: W.E. Upjohn Institute, (2006): 3.

<sup>43</sup> Wages for skilled labor also tend to be significantly higher than wages for low-skilled labor. Examining wage-laborer in general, low-skilled workers earn approximately half as much on average as do high-skilled individuals.

<sup>44</sup> Maxwell, *Working Life*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Labor may be classified into high, medium, or low levels of general skills and training. We can classify labor into such categories for the purpose of this paper, but it is also necessary to determine why labor has been thus classified. Modern society has deemphasized the value of “unskilled” occupations, but unskilled occupations are the bedrock of society. Thus, due to limited access of skill acquisition, two classes of people are typically responsible low-skilled work: youth and the poor. See Maxwell (2006).



regular hours—conditions that lead to “living to work.” Mechanisms that the unskilled labor force utilized in previous eras such as the power of unionization and the strong trade union are significantly weaker and less influential than they were in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>46</sup> The history of the union is nonlinear. In the late nineteenth century, skilled workers unionized but also excluded unskilled workers from the labor rights discourse. Skilled workers could barter with their skills which were valuable and thus could be commodified. Skilled workers had leverage because of their inherent skills. Unskilled workers could not claim the same. Valued skills often were time consuming to learn and replacing skilled workers was expensive. Therefore, when mechanization and industrialization shifted the breakdown of types of skills within the industry to rely on unskilled labor more heavily, unskilled laborers comprised most of the workforce but still did not have “skill” to barter with that the skilled workers possessed. In some manner, changing means of production brought unskilled labor and skilled laborers closer together in goals and demands.<sup>47</sup> Scholars agree that a certain skillset including an understanding of the industry and of the machinery and the ability to work with others persists throughout the shift to industrialization.<sup>48</sup> The shift specifically transformed the role of unskilled labor. Eliminating or reducing the amount of skilled labor in the marketplace makes workers easier to train and easier to replace. Industrialization and mechanization replaced what would have been years of training as a carpenter or artisan, for instance. The advantages and disadvantages of development are numerous and complicated, and I do not seek to develop these

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<sup>46</sup> William English Walling. *The New Unionism: The Problem of the Unskilled Worker*. Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1904. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Walling. *The New Unionism*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Walling. *The New Unionism*, 13.

stances in this paper. The important note is the development has led to changing conditions for the worker and a need to respond to these new conditions.

### **Threats to Dignity**

Many American workers are subject to conditions of insecurity and calamity. There are significant ramifications to individual dignity and worth caused by the emphasis placed on work in modern society. Realistically, “dignity depends not only on words but on deeds and material conditions.”<sup>49</sup> To begin with threats to dignity in relation to wage-labor, the fundamental problem arises when the standard full-time labor times the standard wage is insufficient to provide for basic living expenses. Basic living expenses generally include groceries, transportation, housing expenses, and nominal incidentals. People with full-time jobs must be able to afford these basic expenses comfortably. Within the workplace, we compare ourselves to our colleagues and lose our sense of worth in the process. Someone is always further in the trajectory of their career or more highly positioned within the company. We work towards the position of another rather than to a self-determined point of stability or subsistence. Though a moderate dose of competition can be tolerable, as it may motivate us to work harder or progress further in our career, we must ask: to what end?

The threats to dignity, agency, humanity, and life most severely affect the so-called “low-skilled” worker, a distinction I will explore in this chapter, mainly due to the implications on economic well-being. A loss in dignity in both the moral and material sense tangible thwarts the low-skilled worker’s ability to construct an economically secure and stable life. Economic

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<sup>49</sup> Sayer, “Dignity at Work,” 576.

immobility may impede their financial capabilities such as their ability to purchase a house or send their children to college. In most dire situations, low-skilled, low-paid workers may live “paycheck to paycheck.” In a sense, the low-skilled worker is unable to participate fully in the labor market.<sup>50</sup> The lack of equal opportunity and limitations on full social participation for the low-skilled worker deprives that individual of his or her dignity, agency, and humanity as a person.<sup>51</sup> However, the moral consequences of threatened dignity affect the American workforce more broadly.

Another prominent threat to the humanity of the worker in consumerist society is society’s mistake of equating a person’s subsistence solely to their labor. Suggesting that a worker’s right to live be contingent on their work is highly damaging to our notion of what makes a person human. If people must work to subsist, society opens itself to the belief that access to food, shelter, and good health depends on how much they can or cannot contribute to society’s economic force. On one hand, this raises concerns for those who cannot work including people with disabilities and retired individuals. There are other social solutions that work well for tackling these specific issues which address a different root issue. The key issue here is the population that works at least one job, and likely at least two, yet still cannot afford rent, food, or healthcare and certainly cannot think about future planning.

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<sup>50</sup> Maxwell, *Working Life*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> T. M. Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 44.

## Loss of Dignity

There are two kinds of dignity loss at work. The first type comes with the unwilling need to work beyond the norm to make ends meet. The average American worker already spends one third of their waking hours at work.<sup>52</sup> Historically, a forty-hour-week has been considered the standard, but many American workers must exceed this to ensure basic survival. Working beyond the norm implies working more than the full-time week either in the form of overtime within one job or working a second job because the income from the standard full-time rate of one job does not suffice to cover basic living expenses. In twenty-first century America, many people spend most of their waking hours at work. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor reports that in 2021, the average working individual spent 8.5 hours a day at work on a workday.<sup>53</sup> Researchers estimate that the average worker spends nearly 100,000 hours at work over the course of their lifetime.<sup>54</sup> Most full-time workers work forty or more hours weekly; for many this figure exceeds sixty or seventy hours. The average American worker already works longer than their counterparts do in comparable countries. Working-age American reportedly work an average of 40 hours a week for 48 weeks of the year while their German counterparts work 35 hours a week for only 44 weeks.<sup>55</sup> Evidently, the American worker is already familiar with working “excessively,” which I define to be more than fifty hours a week. This distinction becomes important when evaluating decent working conditions.

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<sup>52</sup> Maxwell, *Working Life*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, *American Time Use Survey—2021 Results*, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.: Department of Labor, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf> (accessed March 26, 2023).

<sup>54</sup> Jessica Pryce-Jones, *Happiness at Work: Maximizing Your Psychological Capital for Success*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Brookings Institute, “Women’s work boosts middle-class incomes but creates a family time squeeze that needs to be eased,” May 2020.

<https://www.brookings.edu/essay/womens-work-boosts-middle-class-incomes-but-creates-a-family-time-squeeze-that-needs-to-be-eased/>

I do not wish to argue that the law or company regulations must bar people from working overtime to earn money for a special expense or something of the sort. The issue is that people must not rely on overtime pay as the only means by which to survive. People should not require overtime work, often which is not guaranteed, to ensure meeting payments for basic expenses. People should also not feel compelled to accept overtime work particularly at the expense of a high quality of life outside of work. For example, a General Motors factory line worker Linda, a single-mother, experienced mixed feelings towards overtime work saying “working Friday was a mixed blessing. It paid time-and-a-half, but meant another whole shift doing the monotonous and repetitive work she hated.”<sup>56</sup> Another source examines young women in Russia, which affirms the belief that people do not like “monotonous” work.<sup>57</sup> Some scholars cite the global rise of neoliberalism and its promises for creating the culture that stresses only individual not communal success.<sup>58</sup> Instead, I argue that people should be able to subsist on a standard full-time salary and should only accept overtime when they wish.

The second kind of dignity loss is slightly more complex and rests heavily on psychology. This second type originates in poor workplace conditions in which workers feel that they must overextend themselves, unwillingly, to succeed at work. The key distinction between the two types is that the former heavily affects lower paid wage labor whereas the latter

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<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey S. Rothstein, *When Good Jobs Go Bad: Globalization, De-Unionization, and Declining Job Quality in the North American Auto Industry*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Charlie Walker, “‘I Don’t Really Like Tedious, Monotonous Work’: Working-Class Young Women, Service Sector Employment and Social Mobility in Contemporary Russia.” *Sociology* (Oxford) 49, no. 1 (2015): 108

<sup>58</sup> Though the focus of this paper is the American labor systems, its flaws, and its future, I cannot argue that the flaws of labor are American alone. In Russia as in the United States, the shift of the post-socialization period towards individualization has brought about particularly difficult conditions for the Russian working class due to the existing monotony and the lack of dignity that the workers experience.

predominately affects salaried work.<sup>59</sup> The issue with this distinction is that typically salaried work deals with higher trained, more professional employees. Sometimes called a threat to one's cultural survival, lack of moral dignity has grown prevalent across the American workforce. To make matters worse, a harmful American ethos coupled with dire physical concerns positions the American worker for poor material and moral conditions throughout life. The following four values comprise the notion of dignity that I use throughout this thesis. Here, I show how the lack of each value contributes to the threat to and potential loss of dignity for the American worker.

### **Insecurity and Precarity**

The current condition of the American laborer is characterized by an excessive degree of precarity and instability more than ever before. Long working hours in insecure employment while barely making ends meet is not a secure human existence. Americans often work multiple jobs or more hours than the traditional 40-hour workweek simply to afford rent, food, and necessities. This concern for sustenance alone does not even approach a more long-term sense of security such as the ability to cover long-term medical expenses or other future financial planning. Common understanding of precarity entails the condition of insecure work resulting from a system in which labor markets are deregulated.<sup>60</sup> Conditions of precarity necessitate the inability to plan and the subjection to unofficial or ambiguous employment. Precarity can mean anything from being unable to secure the next meal on the table to being unsure if the next rent payment will go through. These conditions, due both to an expansion of neoliberal labor policies

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<sup>59</sup> In salaried positions, the longer people work typically does not equate to more money earned. However, in salaried positions workers often spend time outside their normal hours working to make ends meet.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Walsh, "Precarity." *ELT journal* 73, no. 4 (2019): 459.

and a shift in the American system of values to prioritize individual success and wealth over the common good, harm the American worker. A series of neoliberal labor policies implementation in the United States in the 1980s led to the significant increase in the growth of temporary, part-time and “self-employment” job contracts.”<sup>61</sup> The very nature of the neoliberal emphasis on market competitiveness creates the perfect conditions for precarity as it relates to employment. The proceeding policies placed more weight on companies or firms’ well-being and economic success than on employment security and ultimately worker dignity and well-being.

The nature of temporary employment notably has some benefits. It can result in flexible working hours, independence, and entrepreneurship.<sup>62</sup> However, much of the decision-making focuses on the perceived benefits or lack thereof of independent contractors’ benefits to the firm or company.<sup>63</sup> The decision of whether to bring on independent contractors is framed in language of advantages or disadvantages to the company both in terms of profit and company morale. However, increasingly scholarship suggests that language of “self-employment” and independent contractorship has instead harmed a great deal of American workers. Rather than considering the implications of independent contractorship to the firm, we must instead consider the consequences to the worker. Across different types of informal labor such as the gig worker or the independent contractor, the defining characteristic is the worker’s lack of security. What is known as “labor market informality,” the kind of labor which cannot be taxed, cannot be regulated, and does not entitle workers to any kind of social security or worker’s compensation

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<sup>61</sup> Francesco di Bernardo, “The Impossibility of Precarity,” *Radical Philosophy* 198, no. 198 (2016), 7.

<sup>62</sup> Patrick J. Kaufmann, “Franchising and the Choice of Self-Employment.” *Journal of Business Venturing* 14, no. 4 (1999): 346.

<sup>63</sup> Rodney L. Caughron and Justin Fargher, “Independent Contractor and Employee Status: What Every Employer in Sport and Recreation Should Know,” *Journal of Legal Aspects of Sport* 14, no. 1 (2004): 48.

in the case of injury, largely provided the support for American industrial and agricultural growth throughout the twentieth century and through the present day.<sup>64</sup> Labor market informality allowed American businesses and corporations to financially thrive, for the workforce possessed no bargaining power or leverage nor any significant workers' rights to improve their conditions. This lack of bargaining power is a fundamental feature of the condition of precarity.

A particularly blatant case of lack of leverage is visible in a study of the day laborer. Many of the issues that I have identified which pertain to the general unskilled wage-laborer who is a contracted employee are exemplified further by the day laborer's experience.<sup>65</sup> In the case of day laborers, those who agree to informal work contracts often consisting of hard, physical work, the lack of a formal agreement forces the day laborer to resign himself to exploitation, harsh working conditions, little to no breaks, and no medical care if something were to go wrong. Rather than entertaining the idea that the day laborer may turn to other occupations or professions, we should ask how to improve this system. The day laborer scenario may seem niche, but the number of day laborers who work is staggering. Estimates suggest that more than 120,000 day laborers across the country either search for or perform informal work daily.<sup>66</sup> One story published in 2002 retells the story of an injured day worker whose uninsured employer refuses to pay for medical support. The employer, aware of the legal status of the day laborer, refuses to compensate him quoting "I know that you are illegal and I have a good lawyer."<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Haanwinckel and Rodrigo R. Soares, "Workforce Composition, Productivity, and Labor Regulations in a Compensating Differentials Theory of Informality," *The Review of Economic Studies* 88, no. 6 (2021): 2970.

<sup>65</sup> Marc Doussard, "Introduction: The Boom in Poorly Paid and Precarious Jobs," x.

<sup>66</sup> Maria Ramirez Uribe, "When Staying Home Is Not an Option: Day Laborers Lean on Nonprofits As Work Diminishes," WFAE News Radio, Charlotte, NC: WFAE, January 22, 2021, <https://www.wfae.org/business/2021-01-22/when-staying-home-is-not-an-option-day-laborers-lean-on-nonprofits-as-work-diminishes>.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas Walter Philippe Bourgois, H. Margarita Loinaz, and Dean Schillinger, "Social Context of Work Injury Among Undocumented Day Laborers in San Francisco," *Journal of General Internal Medicine: JGIM* 17, no. 3 (2002): 221.



contractor offers him his job back with no compensation, and the day laborer, while offended at the offer, is unable to find another job, and reluctantly returns to work there. Instability and insecurity are predominant issues within the contractor-homeowner-day laborer relationship. The fact that the bottom line drives this arrangement so far that workers are expected to work without rest or a guaranteed end-of-day wage is astounding. The day laborer has a lot to gain from a restructuring of the system—one in which their hours or wage for that day is guaranteed and one in which even workers not under contract are still entitled to the same benefits that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guarantees.<sup>68</sup> The work remains grueling, and the day laborer continues to endure tough working conditions. Yet, a societal shift in considering undignified work as a workplace-centered issue with potential workplace-centered solutions lays a promising path forward for a more equitable society. Rather than regard the issue of the worker as one that can only be solved through social services, we must consider how the workplace can be changed to achieve better working conditions and a livable wage for those who work. Social services remain an integral and useful component of social flourishing, but they must not be the only solution.

We must encourage the system of labor to value employees' well-being in accordance with valuing a profit. The paradox that day-laborer faces—that if he completes his work too quickly, he will not receive the full day's wages but if he completes the work too slowly, he will not be asked to return—can be remedied by guaranteeing a wage for the day's work no matter how long it takes. That way, the day-laborer is encouraged to produce a high-quality product within a reasonable window of time without fear of losing wages. The contractor in turn should

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<sup>68</sup> "OSHA Worker Rights and Protections," Occupational Safety and Health Administration, n.d., <https://www.osha.gov/workers>.

benefit, for the overall work product should be of a higher standard. This exchange is only one example demonstrating how valuing the worker's dignity can benefit society at large. The worker is more satisfied because he can expect a day's worth of wages, the contractor can expect a more carefully produced work product which he or she can stand behind, and the owner can expect a higher quality and more durable product with fewer needs for repair in the future. The entirety of the issues with day-labor cannot be solved with only one solution. I only seek to exemplify how valuing the well-being and dignity of the worker is not an isolated incident but can cause sweeping system-wide improvements.

### **Lack of Agency**

A lack of agency directly threatens the well-being of the American worker. As the UNDHR states, workers must have free choice of employment which we can also broadly interpret to mean free mobility of employment. The worker must not be so tightly bound to their place of employment that they are unable to leave if they so choose. The worker must have the freedom to choose between more than one place of work. Karl Marx argues that work requires the suppression of the will which is indisputable; however, nearly every other aspect of life requires the same.<sup>69</sup> If humans did not suppress some of their will at certain points in life, society would stagnate in the state of nature.<sup>70</sup> Suppression of the will entirely is not the problem. Rather, the problem arises when the human will is so suppressed that the individual feels on the whole drained, desperate, and alienated. It is possible for modern-day occupations to give

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<sup>69</sup> For Marx, work is how humans constitute themselves in the world. There are significant human needs in the world that people must secure to survive. Marx critiques an overreliance on work for subsistence, arguing that the capitalist system promulgates the connection of the worker to their work due to the reliance on wage labor.

<sup>70</sup> See Locke *Second Treatise on Government* and the idea of the Social Contract.

enough of a degree of agency to the worker for those conditions to be generally avoided. Of course, that is easier said than done, particularly in a capitalist system. Marx, often misunderstood and misinterpreted, makes solid points related to labor and freedom namely that “the instrument of labour becomes the means of enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing the labourer.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, when labor takes over the life of an individual, it becomes unfree. It may seem impossible to identify the point at which work is free or vice versa. This is a question that I will expand upon in Chapter III; however, the short answer is that where the line falls is an individual-level question. If an individual expresses a lack of agency perhaps that is answer enough to examine the worker’s conditions further.

The main problem occurs when the individual’s agency is so reduced that they feel they have no choice but to work jobs which do not even satisfy their basic needs of subsistence. The laborer becomes alienated through their work, for not only is their labor not free, but the products of their labor are not theirs to enjoy nor disseminate. By showing up to work, supposedly “consenting” to the terms of the labor, the worker seemingly exercises agency. However, external factors such as job availability, personal need, mobility issues, and expertise, restricts agency even in non-evident manners. The worker becomes so connected to their work that all other forms of human life and existence, “of activity or of enjoyment” disappears. No longer does the worker enjoy the products of their labor nor their physical pursuit of work but rather they are tied to their labor in a draining, inhumane manner. The worker cannot fulfill their personal obligation to themselves because they do not have the adequate skills or education necessary to do so.

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<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 329.

## Dissatisfaction

The current state of fulfillment for the American worker is generally poor. Workers report low levels of satisfaction, recognition, and esteem throughout their careers. Fulfillment can also be thought of in terms of purpose. The consulting firm McKinsey and Company quotes in a report: “Help your employees find purpose—or watch them leave.”<sup>72</sup> Clearly, industry leaders recognize the importance of purpose, and they also recognize that employees should have the ability to act if their employers’ actions fail to meet their needs. McKinsey’s report found that 70 percent of workers reported work as defining their sense of purpose.<sup>73</sup> Purpose and fulfillment are linked in the sense that if an individual feels their sense of purpose is not met, they are more likely to feel unfulfilled. To be sure, employees feel purpose from other aspects of life as well, but the self-reported high amount of purpose due to work explains why fulfillment is crucial to the worker’s well-being and dignity. McKinsey also terms the “purpose hierarchy gap” in their report which suggests that there is a disparity between the purpose and fulfillment felt by executives and by employees. The report finds that 85 percent of executives and upper-level management feel fulfilled at work while only 15 percent of frontline managers and frontline employees agreed.<sup>74</sup> The consequences of this discrepancy are widespread for the dignity of work.

In another sense, dissatisfaction harms workplace engagement and employee retention. Less satisfied employees are more likely to change jobs more quickly and are less likely to

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<sup>72</sup> “Help Your Employees Find Purpose or Watch them Leave,” McKinsey and Company, April 5, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/help-your-employees-find-purpose-or-watch-them-leave>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

remain invested and loyal to their place of employment, thereby affecting business concerns.<sup>75</sup> For that matter, employees should not be loyal to a place of employment that treats them poorly and is not meeting their needs. Of course, the goal is for that not to be the case. In the worst situations, lack of satisfaction results in burnout as seen with the Great Resignation of 2020-2021. Researchers at MIT's Sloan School of Management find that more than 40% of all employees considered leaving their jobs at the beginning of 2021.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, the report found that the effects of the Great Resignation appeared constant across what they term "blue-collar" and "white-collar" jobs, thereby contributing to the idea that loss of dignity does not discriminate against one type of worker. In terms of company-specific examples, the data indicates that faster and more unexpected rates of quitting are correlated with less healthy company culture. The researchers found that "Workers are 3.8 times more likely to leave Tesla than Ford... and more than twice as likely to quit JetBlue than Southwest Airlines," contributing to the idea that similar companies on paper can result in drastically different worker experiences.<sup>77</sup> Ironically enough, the report mentions job insecurity and instability as a main contributor to employee turnover. Subsequently, it is evident that fulfillment and purpose are crucial for not only company performance but also for worker wellbeing and dignity.

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<sup>75</sup> John P. Meriac, Kara E. Rasmussen, and Jo Pang, "Work Ethic and Grit: Explaining Responses to Dissatisfaction at Work." *Personality and Individual Differences* 203 (2023): 1.

<sup>76</sup> Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 63, no. 2 (2022): 1.

<sup>77</sup> Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 63, no. 2 (2022): 2.

## Lack of Fairness

The fourth condition that is not being met by the status quo of work in the United States is fairness on behalf of the worker. In terms of unfairness, I directly mean the lack of fair treatment for the worker on behalf of both employer and government. Let us recall Rawls' Two Principles of Justice as Fairness: (1) people are entitled to basic liberties and (2) social and economic inequality must exist despite conditions of fair equality of opportunity, and inequalities are to benefit the most disadvantaged members of the populace the most.<sup>78</sup> To expand on the ways the status quo of American work is undignified and unfair. Not all people are entitled to basic liberties, and existent inequalities benefit the wealthiest, not the poorest members of society. Income inequality in the United States is exorbitant. Out of the 195 countries in the world, the United States is the 47<sup>th</sup> most unequal in terms of income.<sup>79</sup> Set side by side to counterparts the United Kingdom (94), Spain (105), Japan (116), and Germany (126), the United States pales in comparison. Until 1999, the middle 40 percent of Americans held more wealth than the top 1 percent; however, from the turn of the century onwards the opposite was true.<sup>80</sup> Individual-level economic inequality makes for vastly unequal qualities of life. Moreover, macroeconomic inequality renders institutional fairness impossible.<sup>81</sup> In one aspect, lack of fairness is evident in the lack of a livable wage. A living wage, which seeks to raise the economic conditions of the lowest paid, would satisfy Rawls' Principles of Fairness. However, the concept of the minimum wage—a prominent form of inequality—benefits the most

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<sup>78</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 165.

<sup>79</sup> "Gini Index," The World Bank, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>.

<sup>80</sup> "Income inequality, USA, 1820-2021," World Inequality Database, 2021, <https://wid.world/country/usa>, (accessed March 24, 2023).

<sup>81</sup> Andrew Sayer, "Class, Moral Worth and Recognition," *Sociology*, 39, no. 5 (2005): 94, 957.

disadvantaged members of society the least. Some companies and employers keep wages low — to a minimum—to benefit those with the most. The status quo of work in America does not affirm conditions of fairness.

### **Lack of Decent Living and Working Conditions**

Strictly speaking, decent working conditions have empirically improved in the United States since its conception. The federal minimum wage, 8-hour workday, and mandatory paid overtime are some of the improvements of working life since the pre-industrial revolution era.<sup>82</sup> Particularly since the early twentieth century with the rise of industrialization, activists, politicians, and lawmakers affirmed workers' rights and decent working conditions in advocacy and codification of rights in law. This is no coincidence. American industrialization called for the need for more concrete workers' rights. Activists and politicians recognized that an effort must be made to create enduring conditions for human dignity despite changes to industry and the economy. However, while general working conditions have improved in some material ways, an analysis of the status quo of working conditions indicates that a generally positive advancement of conditions has generally slowed to the detriment of the worker's dignity. Inadequate conditions fall into two main categories: living conditions and working conditions.

A central component of decent working conditions is the idea of a just and fair wage. The status quo fails to meet the concept of a just and fair wage, for many American full-time workers still struggle to basically survive with the current federal minimum wage. The present concept of the minimum wage as it stands is undignified because it forces people to overwork, to live

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<sup>82</sup> Sidney Fine, "The Eight-Hour Day Movement in the United States, 1888-1891," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 40, no. 3 (1953): 442.

financially unstable and insecure lives, and to sacrifice their bodily autonomy in the hopes of survival. In short, it is far too low to provide for decent living. A minimum wage is not a living wage.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the American minimum wage violates the UDHR's affirmation that "everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each state, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality."<sup>84</sup> The Declaration continues to state that everyone who works has the right to ensure his or her own and his or her family's existence "worthy of human dignity."<sup>85</sup> A respectable and dignified existence includes a more robust conception of a living wage. It must include not only the ability to physically survive but also the ability and opportunity to develop physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual human faculties."<sup>86</sup> American workers should have the ability to lead robust and comfortable lives. With the values of agency, fulfillment, security, equality, and decent working conditions in mind, we can compare these ideals to the status quo of work in America and find that the status quo fails to meet the ideals of the UDHR. Perhaps more importantly, the UDHR also indicates that a free development of personality is an ideal for which to strive. I interpret this to mean the ideal of a more robust and fulfilled life, a concept for which I argue throughout this thesis.

The result of the absence of a livable wage is the creation of a group termed the "working poor." This group is the extreme of those working low skill jobs for low pay—the working

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<sup>83</sup> Andrea Werner and Ming Lim, "The Ethics of the Living Wage: A Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Business Ethics* 137, no. 3 (2016): 433.

<sup>84</sup> United Nations Declaration on Human Rights 1948 Article 22.

<sup>85</sup> United Nations Declaration on Human Rights 1948 Article 23.3.

<sup>86</sup> John A Ryan, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* (New York: Macmillan, 1912): 44.



class—and other individuals who live in conditions of poverty. In one sense, this is a result of exceeding the previously defined standard workweek, particularly due to necessity. If people must work longer than the standard workweek and for wages that do not ensure ability to basically subsist, they are essentially the working poor. In the United States, the poverty line for an individual, falls at \$12,880, for a couple rests at \$17,420, and for a family of four falls at \$26,500.<sup>87</sup> These numbers do not tell the full story, nor do they allow for a reasonable quality of life. Many people making above the poverty line live in conditions which mimic poverty.

Some economists and politicians have introduced the metric of the living wage to account for the difference between poverty and living standard. Whereas the minimum wage represents the poverty level, a living wage represents a higher standard. In 2022, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created a living wage calculation tool that finds that the federal minimum wage not only fails to approach a living wage but that the discrepancy between the two metrics is astronomical.<sup>88</sup> The researchers found that the living wage in the United States is \$24.16 per hour, or just more than \$100,000 per year for a family of four in 2021. The distinction between a living wage and a minimum wage is necessary to affirm the necessity of valuing the well-being and dignity of the worker. Someone who works full time and still does not make enough to live cannot be expected to regard their life as dignified. Taking this example to an extreme, the City of San Jose, California has an estimated living wage of \$149,014 per year (2022); however, taking its \$16.20 into consideration, a minimum wage

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<sup>87</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, *U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines Used to Determine Financial Eligibility for Certain Federal Programs*, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines/prior-hhs-poverty-guidelines-federal-register-references/2021-poverty-guidelines> (accessed March 28, 2023).

<sup>88</sup> “A Calculation of the Living Wage,” Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 12, 2022, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/99-a-calculation-of-the-living-wage> (accessed February 22, 2023).

worker brings in about a \$33,696 pretax income annually. Minimum wage workers in San Jose can either choose to live in a less expensive though distant city to cut living costs, though in that case they would likely be forced to spend less time with their family and spend hours a week in commute, or they may choose to work multiple minimum wage jobs or overtime to make basic ends meet. In extreme cases, both options may be necessary to basically survive.

Low incomes are the most obvious part of the problem with current working conditions. The median American household income in 2021 for a family hit approximately \$91,162, significantly below the national living wage estimate of \$100,000, though this is likely a generous estimate.<sup>89</sup> When examining groups more specifically, the Census reports that the median incomes of Black and Hispanic families fell at \$48,297 and \$47,620, respectively.<sup>90</sup> The minimum wage does not approach living wage metrics, and the discrepancy between the two measures is large. The vast number of people making at, or around minimum wage are positioned to suffer in many aspects of quality of life and well-being.

In terms of poor living conditions, the American worker is subject to unnecessary extremes due to the status quo of work in America. Commutes are long, and time spent at home with family and friends diminishes. The term “super-commuter” has been introduced to describe those commuting more than 90 minutes in one direction for work.<sup>91</sup> These super-commutes have been linked to poorer physical and mental health conditions including screening higher for

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<sup>89</sup> Census Bureau, *Income in the United States: 2021*, Jessica Semega and Melissa Kollar, P60-276, United States Department of Commerce, September 2022, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2022/demo/p60-276.pdf> (accessed March 11, 2023).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Kara E. MacLeod, Brian L. Cole, and Charles Musselwhite. “Commuting to Work Post-Pandemic: Opportunities for Health?” *Journal of Transport & Health* 25 (2022): 101381.

depression and greater susceptibility for obesity.<sup>92</sup> Of course, longer commute times also limit time available for sleep, physical activity, and food preparation, among other activities generally linked to better well-being. The well-being of American workers is jeopardized when they are forced to live a distance from work because they cannot afford to live closer. Of course, some people choose to live at a distance for a variety of other factors such as school district or physical space; this is not the problem at hand here. The problem is when the lack of a livable wage strips individuals from the choice of where to live, within reason. These problems do not even begin to address the negative social consequences created when people work in a community in which they do not reside. In short, the consequences of a long commute are perpetual and widespread.

Society overall is harmed by the poor living and working conditions of the American worker. Low wages and low incomes obviously directly affect those subjected to those conditions, but the consequences are widespread. The existence of the working poor is good for no one. Efforts towards social cohesion are jeopardized while resentment grows.<sup>93</sup> Rather than “playing at disruption,” the American working poor mounts real concerns and dissatisfaction for their conditions.<sup>94</sup> They grow detached from political and social participation partially intentionally and partially not. Aside from real materials which the working poor faces, the main consequence of this social withdrawal is the fracturing of American society. The discontentment and frustration of the working poor—and for that matter the worker in general—due to the loss of dignity, agency, fulfillment, and security has sweeping ramifications for all Americans. We

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid; Lawrence D. Frank, Martin A. Andresen, and Thomas L. Schmid. "Obesity Relationships with Community Design, Physical Activity, and Spent in Cars." *American journal of Preventive Medicine* 27, no. 2 (2004): 87.

<sup>93</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor: Toward a New Worker's Movement*, (London: Verso, 2014), 29.

<sup>94</sup> Aronowitz, *The Death and Life of American Labor*, 37.

can measure these values against the conditions of the American worker. Ultimately, we will find that these conditions are not being met to the detriment of the worker. A minimum wage does not meet these values, so instead the proposal of a robust living wage which I will further develop in Chapter III comes closer to doing so.

## **Market Changes**

Widespread economic policy changes that ramped up in the last half of the twentieth century resulted in the birth of globalization. Globalization is fundamentally intended to be a process of progress, though “global forces... have also increased government repression and undermined working people’s civil liberties.”<sup>95</sup> It is also unclear who specifically is intended to be the beneficiary of globalization. Workers in other countries who could be paid less than the American worker for the same work allowed work and production to be easily outsourced at a much cheaper rate, and resultantly, the American worker faced either job loss or salary cuts. By expanding labor and production markets, policies of globalization harmed the well-being and dignity of the American worker. Globalization and its complementary process neoliberalism is the one of the most significant threats to the dignity of the worker. Neoliberal policy changes have led in part to the commercialization of nearly everything in modern American society including our time, our bodies, and our politics.

The domestic market has itself undergone changes during the course of the twentieth century. The transformation to a winner-take-all market system has threatened the dignity of the

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<sup>95</sup> Randi Storch, *Working Hard for the American Dream: Workers and Their Unions, World War I to the Present*, (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 2013), 4.

American worker. This idea has merit, especially when considered in conjunction with the era of corporate takeovers. In markets fostering such restructurings and other winner-take-all setups, “rewards tend to be highly concentrated in the hands of a few top performers.”<sup>96</sup> This is evident throughout the modern economic system. As mentioned previously, CEOs make “twenty times the average compensation of workers in those firms.”<sup>97</sup> This is a conservative estimate. Other sources suggest that in 2014, American CEOs, on average, made over 300 times as much as a “typical employee.”<sup>98</sup> In this sense, the company executives are the winners in the market, pointing out that where there are winners there must also be losers. Stockholders and company owners likewise stand to make huge profits from consolidations and mergers where the hourly worker does not. The high pay and large discrepancy between the company executive and the average employee is a manifestation of the winner-take-all market. This theory is directly linked to structural changes in American policy which have been enacted during the last half a century.<sup>99</sup>

For workers generally, incomes did not keep pace with the rising cost of education. As education grew more expensive, income levels generally stagnated.<sup>100</sup> Of course, the category in which this is not the case is for the college educated. Median annual earnings among college-educated workers grew over the last half a century but still could not keep pace with the rising

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<sup>96</sup> Robert Frank, *Success and Luck* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 46.

<sup>97</sup> T.M. Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 8.

<sup>98</sup> Isabel V. Sawhill, *Forgotten Americans: An Economic Agenda for a Divided Nation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 141.

<sup>99</sup> Isabel V. Sawhill, *Forgotten Americans*, 141.

<sup>100</sup> Isabel V. Sawhill and Katherine Guyot, “Women’s work boosts middle-class incomes but creates a family time squeeze that needs to be eased,” Brookings Institute, May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/womens-work-boosts-middle-class-incomes-but-creates-a-family-time-squeeze-that-needs-to-be-eased/>.

cost of higher education.<sup>101</sup> In an occupational context, in 1940 about 32 percent of the US workforce held professional jobs while by 2006 that figure grew to almost 60 percent.<sup>102</sup> Americans were becoming more professional but were finding it more difficult to do so. Competition for skilled, high-paying positions grew stiff. Incomes continue to stagnate, education costs continue to rise, and degrees continue to grow common, giving the worker with a difficult reality to navigate.

### **De-Unionization**

De-unionization is but one of a variety of changes which occurred during the last half a century. Though most Americans still view labor unions favorably, overall rates of public support for activity and membership of labor unions have decreased. The union question shifted from: Does a worker wish to unionize to *if* a worker is allowed to unionize.<sup>103</sup> In the twentieth century, people held membership of union organizations and community groups like churches and synagogues at much higher rates than they do today.<sup>104</sup> Not only has participation in unions fallen since peak union membership in the 1950s, but public support for unions has also diminished though is still viewed favorably. In the mid-1950s, union membership peaked with slightly more than one third of American workers claiming membership.<sup>105</sup> The Bureau of Labor

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<sup>101</sup> “Millennial life: How young adulthood today compares with prior generations,” Pew Research Center, February 14, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/14/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations-2/>

<sup>102</sup> Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz, “The Decline of the White Working Class,” 391.

<sup>103</sup> Drew DeSilver, “10 Facts about American Workers,” Pew Research Center, August 29, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/29/facts-about-american-workers/>.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> “Labor Unions,” National Museum of American History, n.d., <https://americanhistory.si.edu/american-enterprise-exhibition/consumer-era/labor-unions>.

Statistics reports that, as of 1983, 20.1 percent of laborers claimed membership to a union whereas in 2021 only 10.3 percent of wage and salary workers claimed membership to a union.<sup>106</sup>

The problem is not that Americans no longer work the jobs which traditionally would be unionized. Instead, other factors have forced the collapse of the union. To examine why union membership has declined so significantly, we can examine the structure of companies and corporations, the shifting labor market, and social change taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. The consequences of this transformation contribute to the detriment of the well-being of the worker. Labor historians suggest that the era of corporate takeovers and “hostile takeovers” has pushed firm and company leaders to consider their businesses solely as a bottom line.<sup>107</sup> Consolidation often resulted in layoffs and factory or office shutdowns, often affecting employees most directly. A byproduct of the union collapse was the employee subjection to conditions of insecurity and precarity under rapidly changing conditions. To make matters worse, this subjection could occur while internally within a company, but might result in complete unemployment after a large merger or acquisition.

The worker further suffered from the shift to a greater reliance on skilled labor and the shift towards privatized education, in part due to the changing structure and order of the unions and their ultimate loss in social, political, and economic power. The common right to education shifted from choosing perhaps between a couple local options to more than just a few when

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<sup>106</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members Summary*, United States Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.: Department of Labor, January 19, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> (accessed February 20, 2023).

<sup>107</sup> Lawrence G. Flood and John Russo, “Corporate Restructuring,” in *Unions and Public Policy: The New Economy, Law, and Democratic Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 56.

education began to privatize. Unions historically relied on the bargaining power of skilled laborers. The value of their skills allowed trade workers to use their skills as leverage in fighting for fairer working conditions, as they were not as expendable as unskilled laborers. Upon the shift to a greater reliance on unskilled labor, the worker lost much of their leverage and bargaining power that historically they would have been able to utilize to their advantage. Some scholars argue that unskilled labor is crucial to “new unionism,” the modern replacement for traditional unions.<sup>108</sup> Previously, where workers’ union power largely rested on how much bartering power they could galvanize with their skillset, the contemporary unskilled worker may have found a new home in new unionism in which adequate training is the focus of the agenda. A crucial aspect of new unionism is the correlation between self-reported worker fulfillment and more requisite training, in other words: education. However, call for a more educated workforce is not without critics. Many believe that people should not be required to spend years in school to make a living wage. To develop these ideas further, I will address education’s role towards the betterment of the American worker in Chapter III.

While some twentieth century historians regard the economic changes as distinct from the social changes of the latter half of the century, they are in fact closely linked. As women, the LGBTQ community, and minority groups fought for more rights, they found the union the most effective way to achieve rights in the workplace.<sup>109</sup> It goes without saying that these groups faced immense pushback from less progressive actors. It was almost as if it the civil rights developments and the economic rights developments were too much for social and fiscal

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<sup>108</sup> William English Walling. *The New Unionism: The Problem of the Unskilled Worker*, (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1904) 13.

<sup>109</sup> Storch, *Working Hard*, 129.



conservatives to handle at once. The 1970s and 1980s saw the feminist and civil rights movements gaining traction. It then becomes clearer what future President Ronald Reagan and his successors saw themselves responding to. As very real economic and structural changes took shape, social issues and relations likewise contributed to that very structural change.

There are other factors which make the collapse of the union more difficult to prescribe. Self-employment, for instance, is on the rise in America, meaning that those individuals do not have a traditional union of which to claim membership. Another more complicated tension is between workers who may in fact want to claim union membership and a government or corporation who fights against it. The collapse of unions is not solely the result of the actions of individual American workers and the individualist mindset. Instead, the collapse can more accurately be pointed to as the result of a changing mindset which devalues the well-being of the individual, but which also strangely is threatened by the power of a community.

### **Common Good?**

To understand how the changing American economy and ethos negatively affected the life of the worker, we can turn to the resurgence and corruption of American individualism as one source of the problem. By the mid-to-late twentieth century, American consumerism triumphed over common good. Democratic philosopher Cornel West outlines how “the fundamentalism of the market puts a premium on the activities of buying and selling, consuming and taking, promoting and advertising, and devalues community, compassionate charity, and improvement of the general quality of life.”<sup>110</sup> Company owners kept wages low and profits

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<sup>110</sup> Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 5.

high. Conservative politicians like Ronald Reagan urged Americans to prioritize themselves and their families. Cynics such as West suggest that “the dangerous dogma of free-market fundamentalism turns our attention away from schools to prisons, from workers’ conditions to profit margins, from health clinics to high-tech facial surgeries, from civic associations to pornographic Internet sites, and from children’s care to strip clubs.”<sup>111</sup> Strangely enough, Americans, even who volunteered, attended church in high numbers, and valued other kinds of social associations grew increasingly averse to the idea of collectivism.<sup>112</sup> Philanthropic ventures – through religious groups, college Greek organizations, and National Charity leagues – remained prolific at least in name. People clearly wished to appear as if they cared about the well-being of others, but direct and impactful results seemed farfetched. True compassion and empathy for others – beyond one’s immediate family—grew more and more distant. Some cultural theorists argue that American culture is inherently individualistic, but contrary to common discourse American society has not always acted this way. Certainly, the American frontier mentality and the fixation on individual rights has always been a defining feature of American social, political, and economic culture. However, historically the tension between these values and the American common good has been balanced by progressives and other social activists.

Proponents of the worker on occasion found themselves active in American politics making real progress for the worker. Nonetheless, as the twentieth century progressed, community values eroded at the behest of American individualism. Clinton’s 1990 speech critiqued that Americans spent more time working than attending baseball games or school

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<sup>111</sup> West, *Democracy Matters*, 4-5.

<sup>112</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?*, 75.

events. The political rhetoric reinforces the notion that politicians recognized growing dissatisfaction. Thus the question becomes what, if anything, they can do about the recognized issues. Yet, as the free market expanded over the course of the century, politicians responded not to their middle-class constituents but to company shareholders.

While the blame for the negative ethos and policy changes typically falls on the political right, they are not alone to blame. As discussed previously, neoconservatism ideology retained a large role in the breakdown of the American common good; however, the American Left cannot escape all responsibility.<sup>113</sup> For the first time in the 1960s, the policies of the American New Left deemphasized support of unions and the American worker due to anti-labor legal and policy decisions made in previous decades.<sup>114</sup> Striving to break from the labels of class politics, the New Left focused itself on other issues. Resultantly, labor politics lost much of the support the Old Left had given in the previous half a century. This is all to say that some politicians remained committed to the fight of the worker, other dangerous ideology began to gain footing as the second half of the twentieth century progressed.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty concedes that a series of policy failures and a shift in values has positioned America poorly to serve its people well. In an almost premonitory sense, Rorty writes in *Achieving our Country*:

[M]embers of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will realize that suburban white-collar workers — themselves desperately afraid of being downsized — are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The term Left is broadly used to describe American progressive and liberal parties, often those who traditionally would have advocated on behalf of the poor.

<sup>114</sup> Barry Eidlin, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 195.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 89-90.

Rorty suggests that both skilled and unskilled members of society will grow dissatisfied with their condition and refuse solutions for the betterment of society—particularly democracy.

He warns that if the country continues progresses as it has been:

At that point, something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. . . . Once the strongman takes office, no one can predict what will happen.<sup>116</sup>

It becomes clear how allowing for a dignified existence for the population most broadly also benefits American democracy. Political and social initiatives of the last half a century have focused on remedying issues of what Rorty calls the “cultural Left.”<sup>117</sup> Without dismissing those real concerns, Rorty suggests that the emphasis on the issues of the cultural Left have left the American worker disregarded. Rather than focusing on working people, those who have been humiliated and left undignified by the sweeping policy changes of the late twentieth century, the “cultural Left” focuses on those humiliated for other reasons.

Even more worrisome, the status quo compels actors on all sides of the issue to grow cynical about their social standing and ultimately about their individual future and their country’s future. People begin to grow apathetic and disengaged. Any progress or effort towards a collective betterment is lost. If anything, people focus their attention solely at their individual well-being, but notions of common good and national pride are lost. Not only do the “Left” and “Right” disagree, but factions within each party also degenerate. Rather than growing more cohesive to fight for a generally better society, people focus on identifying differences and disagreements.

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<sup>116</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 90.

<sup>117</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 78.

## Rugged Individualism

While certainly important, individual rights and liberties suffocated notions of common good or community flourishing. As the negative ideologies spread, the needs of the American middle class—food, healthcare, education—began to take second priority to corporations’ business needs. The phrase “rugged individualism,” coined by President Herbert Hoover in a 1928 campaign speech, encompasses a dangerous ideology which continues to pose a threat to the collective well-being of American society. Most precisely, rugged individualism describes the emphasis placed on the individual in social, political, and economic terms.<sup>118</sup> Hoover states that the American system was built on “self-government,” and “decentralized local responsibility.”<sup>119</sup> Hoover uses carefully worded and persuasive linguistics to make his case to the American people. His speech echoes with words of liberty and freedom, ideals to which no American would deny. Yet, he usurps these ideals in the name of rugged individualism. Rather than allowing liberty to remain an independent ideal – one that a society can collectively possess—Hoover implied that only an individualistic society can be liberated and free. It is no surprise that Hoover was a great supporter of the Bill of Rights.<sup>120</sup> Rugged individualism belabors the merits of individualism to a fault. Certainly, individualism can be beneficial in some cases; however excessive individualism poses a threat to the American worker and American society more broadly. Hoover urged Americans to consider socialism as antithetically American. In part due to Hoover’s anti-socialism, the American public ethos gradually grew more narrow-minded and individualistic during the course of the twentieth century.

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<sup>118</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Hoover, Herbert. 2017. “Hoover’s Rugged Individualism Speech.” *Hoover’s Rugged Individualism Speech*, August, 149.

<sup>120</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?* 41.

Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson believed that rugged individualism had left millions of people behind economically and approached the problem by controversially expanding government support. The debate on the appropriate size of the role of government is not new nor original. Proponents and opponents of this debate have argued mainly throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries over what role the American government intends to fill. Throughout the last century, policies and opinions on the size of government have ebbed and flowed. Although large-scale legislation like FDR's New Deal and his lasting popularity suggested that the American public viewed his collectivism policies favorably and Johnson's Great Society further suggested that Americans could be stronger together, other peaks of popularity as evident with Ronald Reagan suggest that desire for American individualism was alive and well in the 1980s.<sup>121</sup>

Rugged individualism is not necessarily a new idea. The philosopher John Locke, who is credited with some of the foundational political theory of the United States albeit he originated from the Scottish Enlightenment, believed that the individual both came first and is the central unit from which all other theory should begin.<sup>122</sup> There is some merit to Locke's initial preference for the individual. Rugged individualism is not entirely dangerous. In contrast to many of the political regimes of the modern era, rugged individualism urges Americans to take their lives and destinies into their own hands.<sup>123</sup> This mentality also fosters notions of independence and self-sufficiency—values I affirm throughout this and earlier chapters. Largely, American individualism can be viewed as both a result to many of the fundamental qualities of

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<sup>121</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?* 75.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

the founding of the United States and as a response to the perceived failures of European social, political, and economic systems.<sup>124</sup> Simply put, Americans value their individualism as a self-possessed unique trait, and many Americans pride themselves on their individualism. In many ways, individualism again is not entirely negative. The idea of the American Dream, for instance, suggests that an individual possesses the capability to create a successful, self-determined path. Rugged individualism, however, threatens some of the fundamentals of individualism such as hard work and overemphasizes the importance of the individual so much so that the community suffers.<sup>125</sup> The question here is if the American mindset has the capacity to change.

### **A Bad Mentality**

Some scholars suggest that American mentality displays some positive signs of a wish for equality and community. Isabel V. Sawhill and Richard V. Reeves suggest that part of the obsession with the middle class is because Americans resist both “aristocratic leisure class and a welfare-dependent underclass.”<sup>126</sup> Perhaps then the burden must be placed both on the people but also on the government. Oddly enough, for years both Republican and Democratic politicians repeatedly call for the reestablishment of the American middle class. In 2012, the official Republican Party Platform recognized that “Many Americans have experienced the burden of lost jobs, lost homes, and lost hopes” and that “our middle class has felt that burden most

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<sup>124</sup> Herbert Hoover, “Hoover’s Rugged Individualism Speech,” *Hoover’s Rugged Individualism Speech*, August, 149.

<sup>125</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> Richard V. Reeves and Isabel V. Sawhill. “A New Contract with the Middle Class,” Brookings Institute, September 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/a-new-contract-with-the-middle-class-introduction/>.

acutely.”<sup>127</sup> The first prong of their platform is explicitly titled “Restoring the American Dream: Rebuilding the Economy and Creating Jobs,” and throughout the platform language of freedom and the entrepreneurial spirit ring loudly. At one point, the platform suggests that:

Prosperity is the product of self-discipline, work, savings, and investment by individual Americans, but it is not an end in itself. Prosperity provides the means by which individuals and families can maintain their independence from government, raise their children by their own values, practice their faith, and build communities of self-reliant neighbors.<sup>128</sup>

Republicans in 2012 both affirmed the importance of self-sufficiency and self-reliance among other less sound rhetoric. The platform has some merit; the call for an urgent solution to amend the condition of the middle class is sensible. Crucially, the platform acknowledges the burden facing the American middle class, so why does progress seem so far-fetched? Perhaps politicians on the other side do not agree.

At least on the face of the issue, this would seem to be incorrect. Democrats, like Republicans, affirm the importance of the American middle class frequently and loudly. When it was the party of President Roosevelt, it could more aptly call itself the party of the American worker and of the middle class, but the modern Democratic Party nonetheless addresses the middle class regularly. Throughout his campaign and the first two years of his presidency, now-President Joseph Biden regularly referenced the importance of the middle class. In a 2019 campaign speech, he suggested that “The middle class is getting killed. The middle class is

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<sup>127</sup> Republican National Convention (2012: Tampa, Florida). Platform of the Republican Party, 2012. Tampa, FL: Issued by the Republican National Committee, 2012.

<sup>128</sup> Democratic Presidential Debate, “CNN Live Event/Special,” December 19, 2019. CNN.com <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1912/19/se.01.html>



getting crushed. And the working class has no way up as a consequence of that.”<sup>129</sup> At the same debate Senator Elizabeth Warren stated that “[The people] want what it takes to be part of America's middle class. Everybody deserves a living wage in this country.” Yet, over time the Democratic Party has likewise fallen for the allure of credentialism, political maneuvering, and an elitist mentality. Where Roosevelt and Johnson’s policies were directly centered on the middle class, the modern-day Democratic Party merely pays them lip service. In terms of representation, the Democratic Party does not do much better than the Republican Party with representing the American middle class. Both party platforms appear to address the worker yet little progress has been made.

Ultimately, however, party platforms and political speeches are relatively inoperative. American society has a responsibility to value and advocate for one another, but little change is possible without ultimate government or legal intervention. Thus, lawmakers and policymakers must have the well-being of Americans first and foremost in mind. Members of the community must value the common good and well-being of others—not only themselves. This is precisely why Sawhill and Reeves suggest a pragmatic, pluralist approach to the melioration of the working class complete with partnership between society and government, which I will explore in the next chapter.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Democratic Presidential Debate, “CNN Live Event/Special,” December 19, 2019. CNN.com <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1912/19/se.01.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Richard V. Reeves and Isabel V. Sawhill. “A New Contract with the Middle Class,” Brookings Institute, September 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/a-new-contract-with-the-middle-class-introduction/>.

## Legal Challenges

Where political speeches are relatively inoperative, legislative changes are the opposite. In fact, the role the courts play in the shaping of economic and labor policy must not be overlooked. Ultimately, as much as politicians can call for policy change as much as they would like, if legislators do not enact pro-worker laws and if the judiciary does not affirm their legal standing, little progress will be made. The solutions which have been attempted by other countries and even some American cities at some point went through legislative avenues. To be sure, the necessary ethos change still stands; however, concrete policy change is equally necessary. As the relationship between campaign spending and political success solidified in the early twentieth century, unions and the public found it impossible to compete with corporations' ability to spend. The collective bargaining power of these groups diminished over time partly due to obstructions in the court and legal systems. In 1934, Congress enacted the Federal Corrupt Practices Act which sounds effective in theory but provided little material change due to the corporate ability to skirt its regulations.<sup>131</sup> In a second attempt, Congress revised the Act in 1971 with the Federal Election Campaign Act to make it more difficult for corporations to evade disclosing financial information. However, tangible change was difficult and slow. In 1976, the Burger Court held in *Buckley v. Valeo* that limits on campaign expenditure could not be restricted, further making difficult the power which small unions and public interest groups could exercise while up against large corporations.<sup>132</sup> Court cases towards end of the twentieth century

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<sup>131</sup> Rachel Reed, "Unions' extension into politics was necessary — and contributed to their decline, says Harvard Law expert," Harvard Law Today, March 16, 2023, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/unions-extension-into-politics-was-necessary-and-contributed-to-their-decline-says-harvard-law-expert/>.

<sup>132</sup> *Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

and start of the twenty-first such as *Federal Election Commission (FEC) v. National Conservative Political Action Committee* (1984), *Randall v. Sorrell* (2006), *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), and *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2014) continued this trend.<sup>133</sup> In short, to the detriment of the average American worker and the groups supporting them, the trend of the court in the last half a century has been to heavily side with corporate interests. By allowing corporations to grow in scope and weight, the courts have silenced both the individual American's and the unions' political and legal voices. A harmful mentality, market changes and corporate restructuring, and legal challenges created a system in which the worker finds it exceedingly difficult to claim a stake in their own well-being.

### **Looking to the Future**

It is evident that the worker faces barriers big and small on a path towards better conditions. Current working conditions in America threaten the fulfillment, agency, security, and equality of many American workers. For those in so-called favorable financial conditions, perhaps economic precarity is not so prevalent and perhaps the living and working material conditions are better; however, threats to the moral sense of dignity remain. This negative ethos threatens the well-being of the American worker. Feelings of discontentment, distrust of institutions, and anxiety are common across the workforce and society generally.<sup>134</sup> Those with

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<sup>133</sup> *FEC v. NCPAC*, 470 U.S. 480 (1985).  
*Randall v. Sorrell*, 548 U.S. 230 (2006).  
*Citizens United v. FEC*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).  
*McCutcheon v. FEC*, 572 U.S. 185 (2014).

<sup>134</sup> Célia Belin and David Dollar, "What's driving populism's rise on both sides of the Atlantic?" Brookings Institute, January 21, 2020, Podcast. <https://www.brookings.edu/podcast-episode/whats-driving-populisms-rise-on-both-sides-of-the-atlantic/>.

the least suffer the most from these sentiments, and the tangible implications are most evident in their lives. Globalization and industrialization are certainly part of the issue, as is the individualist mindset which follows from those economic conditions; however, the public response to these conditions is equally worrisome. If Americans are not willing to rely on the system and on their political leaders and their community to advocate on their behalf, progress will be slow. To be sure, people must not be convinced to rely on those who do not support them. The change necessary here is for the American ethos to shift from the negative mentality and practices mentioned throughout this chapter towards the valuing of one another at all ends of the economic spectrum. In Chapter III, I strive to outline the requisite conditions for the new public ethos to take shape. What must change from the negative mindset in Chapter II for the American common good to flourish and American democracy to thrive?

### **III. The New Public Ethos**

Bill Clinton said that Americans have “always believed in two things- that tomorrow can be better than today and that every one of us has a personal moral responsibility to make it so.”<sup>135</sup> With the values of dignity and well-being in mind and with the knowledge of the status quo of the American worker, we can now begin to analyze and evaluate possible remedies to both the moral and material loss of dignity. While I do not seek to lay out definitive public policy proposals nor propose overly broad theory, I instead attempt to define the conditions which would in effect allow a society and its workers to thrive. In this chapter, I seek to bridge the principles of Chapter I with the status quo of Chapter II by examining the circumstances of the ideal society. Chapter III will end with the expansive implications for the common good and society well-being for American democracy.

#### **Dignity**

The prerequisites for dignity, agency, security, fulfillment, equality, and good working conditions, must be met under any policy or proposal seeking to ameliorate the dire conditions of the American worker. Although American ethos has become a sort of “money culture” rooted in individualism and selfishness, pragmatic theory suggests that this is only the “way it is” not the way it must be. The new public ethos—a values shift away from consumerism towards a collective public good—is possible if certain requirements are fulfilled. The conditions of the poorest and most impoverished individuals can be improved directly through an implementation

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<sup>135</sup> William J. Clinton, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination.”

of a living wage. The American middle-class can be recreated if, as a society, we seek to drastically reduce the number of individuals living at or near the poverty line. Economic measures alone are insufficient to combat the dignity loss of the American worker. The solution that I propose is twofold. In one sense, we must call for a material change. Intentional and direct policy changes affecting union reestablishment, labor law reevaluation, and graduated income tax revision should be a priority. Workplace regulations which make strides towards a more livable workplace environment can serve to establish and reinforce worker's rights.

A second and perhaps more difficult approach calls for a major shift of public ethos towards valuing the well-being of the worker. A shifting approach of the entire labor ecosystem to value the worker and his or her well-being in accordance with societal well-being is necessary to improve expansive labor conditions, for laws and regulations alone are insufficient. Together, this bifurcated approach both affirms and strengthens the path towards a more equitable, worker-centered society while fostering broader community well-being. To restructure our ethos, policy makers and company leaders must care for their employees. As a community, we must realign our values so that we strive to care for and act on behalf of more than only ourselves. Our ethos must be structured so that our compassion and empathy are expansive and beyond our immediate friends and family. Members of a thriving society must be able to care for a distant person who is a member of their community, no matter if they themselves would not directly benefit from doing so. We must then ask how and if we can ameliorate this inequality which poses such a severe threat to the well-being and humanity of a large sector of the American populace. Some scholars suggest the argument for "more skills" essentially contending that building skills – both professional and trade – will increase a worker's overall condition. We can focus on restructuring American labor, social, and economic policies to attain a better quality of life for

the worker in conjunction with an American ethos shift towards valuing the worker—both low and high skilled—as an integral part of American society and community.

### **Security**

Reestablishing a sense of security is one way through which the dignity of the worker can be reaffirmed. Responsible workers who show up to their jobs day after day must not think that the job suddenly will disappear. Of course, there are situations in which positions must be eliminated or rearranged; however, the elimination has grown so widespread and seemingly arbitrary that nearly all workers—from the so-called most skilled to the least—fear losing their jobs. For the worker to reaffirm their dignity, conditions of security and stability must be reestablished. One solution which is not new is the reestablishment of the unions. Unions gave workers a sense of stability and security due to their strength in numbers. Collective bargaining and protesting through means of the union did not as directly threaten the standing of any one worker. Security is necessary for the following conditions of agency, fulfillment, and fair treatment. People must be most fundamentally secure with their position before seeking long-term values for a better quality of life.

### **Agency**

Agency perhaps can be thought of as the ability to pursue one's desired goals. For this pursuit, both necessary conditions and individual and societal actions are necessary. Certainly, the structure must be in place to allow for the conditions needed for agency to be realized. This is why I have spent time discussing economic systems and market structure, for these directly

affect the worker's agency. In turn, it becomes important to ask what individual and societal actions can contribute to a fostering of individual agency.

Among the broad conceptions of agency, a particular change which would help the American worker reclaim their agency is access to education. Agency, as outlined in Chapter I, can be thought of as the exercise of the free will. However, that will cannot be exercised without the tools necessary to do so. Agency plays a large role in the first principle of Sawhill and Reeves' *A New Contract with the Middle Class*: partnership.<sup>136</sup> They suggest two free years of college education in exchange for one year of national service. Other policy makers suggest a program under which students given a free public higher education would be contractually obligated to repay the cost of their education contingent on future earnings.<sup>137</sup> Still others believe that opportunities should be created for financial success without a need for higher education.<sup>138</sup> In other words, that more entry-level positions should be created for hard-working and "good" workers including those without a college degree. Without worrying too much about the minutiae of any policy, the principle at play here is the ability for the American worker to build the requisite skillset for economic success and dignity later in life. Such a policy is strong in its qualities of community-building and patriotism. People contribute to the common good yet also build personal skills which they can use after their service is completed.

There are also tangible ways in which agency can be fostered at work. Creativity and variation in task are two potential ways to achieve agency. Reconciling business needs with

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<sup>136</sup> Richard V. Reeves and Isabel V. Sawhill. "A New Contract with the Middle Class," Brookings Institute, September 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/a-new-contract-with-the-middle-class-introduction/>.

<sup>137</sup> Oregon Laws Ch. 700 (H.B. 3472), See Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, 209.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Murray, "Narrowing the New Class Divide," Op-Ed, N.Y. Times, March 7, 2012, <https://www.aei.org/articles/narrowing-the-new-class-divide/>.



employee flexibility helps agency thrive.<sup>139</sup> Of course, it would be unrealistic to suggest that employees have complete free reign whenever they wish; there is a reason structure exists. However, a degree of flexibility and willingness to adapt on the part of the employer is equally necessary. Perhaps this means the option for employees to rotate within a firm before they choose which department to permanently join. Again, the crucial part of this choice is that it rests both on employer and employee. I do not wish to suggest that employees must have freedom for endless free movement, but it is possible for a middle ground to be held where placement is a dialogue between employer and employee, thereby fostering moral agency.

### **Fulfillment**

While some argue that work is wholly dissatisfying and without gratification, I argue that work has the potential to be rewarding and productive. In the modern era, it is easy to ignore the fact that work can be fulfilling, but scholars argue that some work holds a productive value for workers.<sup>140</sup> Work can be productive not only in output or figures on the bottom line but rather in terms of satisfaction and gratification. Though perhaps overlooked, work can be fulfilling and perhaps even emancipatory.<sup>141</sup> In short, many people enjoy their work, and this need not be a problem. As a society we should strive to position as much of our workforce as possible to be fulfilled in their place of occupation. Multiple factors can affect the extent to which a worker feels fulfillment or satisfaction. In fact, many people enjoy their work and find satisfaction and

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<sup>139</sup> Eteläpelto et. Al., “What Is Agency?,” 47.

<sup>140</sup> Keith Breen, 2007 “Work and Emancipatory Practice: Towards a Recovery of Human Beings’ Productive Capacities,” *Res Publica*, 13: 382.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 382.

pride from their careers. The notion of gleaning satisfaction or meaning from work is not a novel idea. Tracing back to Aristotelian ethics, Aristotle's notion of *techne* suggests that work has the potential to be both fulfilling and a human virtue.<sup>142</sup> Individuals have the potential to become skilled or even excellent at a given craft. In one sense we can consider this a consequence of the fact that people enjoy success and performing tasks at which they are good. This expertise is not only beneficial to society but beneficial to the satisfaction of the individual.<sup>143</sup> The other Aristotelian notion of *ergon*, under which humans can develop a specific function, can ultimately lead to a robust sense of happiness or *eudaimonia*.<sup>144</sup> This latter notion has been addressed by sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers among others. One theory by the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow suggests that fulfillment is part of the highest tier of the "hierarchy of needs."<sup>145</sup> For Maslow, fulfillment, creativity, and personal growth comprise the self-actualization tier, the final goal of human existence. As with Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, Maslow views human happiness as an ideal for which to strive. This ideal should be striven for in the sense that Maslow views it. Physiological needs and safety come first; however, I argue that self-actualization needs should not fall far behind. The implementation of a robust living wage is one step towards ensuring that human faculties and virtues can be developed.

Eliminating the working poor suggests reestablishing the middle class. In turn, reestablishing the middle class suggests both combating economic inequality and changing society's conception of equality. To address the latter, worker people must feel that they can contribute to society and the common good. Economic promises or actualities are insufficient to

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<sup>142</sup> Tom P. S. Angier, *Technē in Aristotle's Ethics: Crafting the Moral Life* (London: Continuum, 2012), 122-123.

<sup>143</sup> Angier, *Technē in Aristotle's Ethics*, 15.

<sup>144</sup> Angier, *Technē in Aristotle's Ethics*, 59.

<sup>145</sup> Stephen Fineman, *Work: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

establish the dignity of work. Instead, the worker must be active members of society with a real and present role. The worker must not simply be the recipient of a welfare check or a stipend. Instead, there must be a shift in public ethos – across society as a whole – to value the worker. The worker must value itself and the upper classes must also value them, as equals, not inferiors. Just as with all members of society, the worker seeks recognition, opportunity, and esteem.<sup>146</sup>

### **Call for Fair and Equal Treatment**

In 2015 President Barack Obama stated: “So it’s been a long, hard road. But thanks to the hard work of the American people, America is coming back. So the question now is, where do we go from here? Do we accept an economy where just a few people do really, really well? Or are we going to keep building an economy that generates opportunity for everybody who’s willing to work?”<sup>147</sup> It would be naïve to argue for a labor-less society in which people can live without contributing in some manner or another to society. Labor has been the foundation of society for centuries and is in fact necessary for a successful society. The act of labor allows human society to produce and to be highly productive. Most do not deny that there is some necessary relationship between productivity and wages, though defining “productivity” proves to be challenging.<sup>148</sup> For instance, some claim that high level of pay for executives leads to increased high-level executive productivity.<sup>149</sup> These theorists suggest that executive level

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<sup>146</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 206.

<sup>147</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Middle Class Economics” (speech, Birmingham, Alabama, March 26, 2015), the White House, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/26/remarks-president-middle-class-economics>.

<sup>148</sup> Sawhill, *Forgotten Americans*, 10; Patchen Markell. *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>149</sup> Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 117.

jobs merit a higher pay, for the work that executives produce is of a higher caliber and can only be produced by the most experienced and able professional. Critics of this opinion argue that while certain professions may merit a higher pay and while certain positions in a company must be compensated more highly, the difference in merit is over-represented in the extreme wage inequality between chief executive and lowest paid employee. Other theorists in support of significantly higher pay for executives suggest that executives exert a greater effort and make a greater sacrifice and thus deserve higher pay.<sup>150</sup> Perhaps different pay is justified for different work, but the pay disparity is so great in America that it cannot possibly be justified by different work. “In 1965 the average compensation of executives in the 350 largest firms in the U.S. was twenty times the average compensation of workers in those firms. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this ratio grew rapidly, and reached a high of 376 to 1 in 2000. In 2014 it was still 303 to 1.”<sup>151</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, American policies and culture contributed to an astronomical gap between the rich and the poor.

One obvious and pervasive issue with vast income inequality is that it is incompatible with the obvious effort and sacrifice that the worker makes in their blue-collar or lower-skilled occupations. Society tends to view pay as relational to some value, and vast income inequality appears to suggest that people are vastly unequal. Critics of the argument that CEOs sacrifice more or are more valuable and thus should be paid more argue that the measure value has been erroneous. To achieve just pay for just work and equality more broadly, the notions of sacrifice and value must be more carefully considered and must include the sacrifices made by the worker

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<sup>150</sup> Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 127.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

by bringing them to a similar level of justice as the rest of society.<sup>152</sup> Critics further dispute that any reality of higher or more advanced skills does not equate to such as large pay discrepancy. Sandel, for one, argues that “it is a mistake to assume that the market value of this or that job is the measure of its contribution to the common good.”<sup>153</sup>

One previously proposed solution, egalitarianism, suggests that inequality is largely harmful and that to improve society we should strive for social and economic equality. Egalitarianism can be thought of as objecting to any kind of inequality, which though appealing in theory is not practical nor implementable.<sup>154</sup> Inequality exists in nearly all aspects of life from exam grades to company salaries. Some forms of inequality might even be useful or necessary for society to function as it does. My argument does not seek to debate the merits of inequality or equality in society more broadly. I argue that striving to eliminate inequality to improve the conditions of work in America is not the most efficient solution. To be sure, economic inequality critically harms the poor and the lowest-paid worker. However, rather than trying to eradicate inequality, which is an ambitious and perhaps impossible task, we should aim to reduce the disparity between rich and poor. In theory, complete egalitarianism has its merits; however, in practice in America today egalitarianism is not the most optimal solution for ameliorating the conditions of the worker. Instead, a new take, called prioritarianism, will serve America’s workforce most directly.

Prioritarianism, the theory of improving the conditions of the poor rather than simply the disparity between rich and poor, is most directly practical for improving the conditions of the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>153</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 184.

<sup>154</sup> Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 1.

worker.<sup>155</sup> In fact, I argue that prioritarianism achieves both: improving the conditions of the poor will generally reduce the disparity between rich and poor. In a Rawlsian sense, the difference between prioritarianism and egalitarianism is precisely the specific goal which is being prioritized. If we were to argue that simply reducing the gap between rich and poor is sufficient to improve the conditions of the working and the working poor, we could simply suggest taxes on society save the extreme poor to make nearly everyone less wealthy. This solution is not beneficial nor ideal. To improve the conditions of the workforce, we should not seek to reduce everyone's conditions solely towards the goal of reducing inequality. Instead, prioritarianism suggests that if we first improve the conditions of the worker—through both physical and metaphysical means—then we may improve society more generally and subsequently narrow the gap between poor and rich without worsening any one individual's current condition.

In terms of solutions, some scholars argue that unionization is the only way for workers to carry democratic principles into the workplace and working life while still making a living.<sup>156</sup> Unionization predominantly works because of its collective nature. If one worker acts alone, his or her collective bargaining power is miniscule in comparison to a group of workers. It is the combined power of the group which makes unionization so effective. The language of union-related bills frequently contains language suggesting a strong collectivism.<sup>157</sup> Unionization thus is a non-individualistic action and one that relies on the value of community well-being. Ultimately, unionization is perhaps part of the solution, but I argue that it is incomplete by itself.

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<sup>155</sup> Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?*, 3.

<sup>156</sup> Randi Storch, *Working Hard for the American Dream*, 6.

<sup>157</sup> Ruth O'Brien, *Workers' Paradox*, 139.

In any proposed solution, the employee must exist at the center of the discussion on workplace inequality and worker well-being. Placing the worker at the center of the discourse on workplace economics should not disregard or exclude the benefit of the employer.

Historically, certain kinds and levels of work were more economically valuable and were thus compensated as such. I challenge the notion that wage-labor or so-called low-skill labor is so worthless that those holding those positions cannot be paid a living wage. Thus, I do not argue for the absence of work nor for a push away from “hard work.” Rather, I argue that American society must reevaluate what work it considers valuable and shift compensation—both material and moral—accordingly.

### **A Solution of Pluralism**

In this regard, the solution must be pluralist in both goals and values. Not everyone in society will have the same expectations for the future and not everyone will have the same opportunities to advance in life. Even if higher education is made less expensive and wages are made higher, still not all people will have access to the same opportunities in life. The key point here is (1) to make attempts for structural changes which affect Americans such as barriers to education and (2) to materially provide for people who may have been limited—historically or otherwise—in terms of opportunity. The structural changes may entail reducing the cost of education or other forms of training, thereby reducing the barriers which people face to create a decent career for themselves. Crucially, the important note here is that there are differences between people in terms of what they consider goals and what is necessary to achieve those goals. People must not only be allowed to voice their conception of personal good, but others must understand that every member of society may have an entirely different desired life path.

Notably, people generally want and deserve the values which run through this thesis: agency, security, fulfillment, dignity, and a decent quality of life. The values are not specifics, and this is intentional. These values may look different for different people, but the values themselves remain consistent simply due to the condition of being a human. With that in mind, people must make their notion of good and well-being known and public, for except for some universals that we all value as human beings, people can value different things over others. In this sense, workers must take action when they feel that their standards are not being met. Perhaps this entails an anonymous reporting form in all places of employment or perhaps this manifests similarly to the already-existent OSHA “complaint line” with which the agency collects workplace-related health and safety complaints.<sup>158</sup> To address the need to provide for those with the least, this aspect of the solution is linked primarily to Rawls’ difference principle and to T. M. Scanlon’s congruent notion of prioritarianism. In essence, the solution must account for the worst-off members of society but must not exclude any American worker from its scope. Directly providing from the least well-off—in both the material and moral sense—can indirectly provide for others in society. Within this solution of plurality, is it highly likely that the specific solution for any one individual, employee, employer, company, or firm look different. The solution is not a one-size-fits-all approach, nor is any solution guaranteed to work.

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<sup>158</sup> “File a Complaint,” Occupational Safety and Health Administration, United States Department of Labor, n.d., <https://www.osha.gov/workers/file-complaint>.



## Reestablishing Dignified Conditions

Establishing conditions of dignity is no easy task. As previously mentioned, the task of reestablishing conditions for dignity does entail one set of prescribed conditions. Perhaps defending one's dignity means "to resist infringements of dignity and to insist on being treated with respect."<sup>159</sup> It may be that the specifics of a dignified life differs from person to person. Nonetheless, there are conditions which generally may be considered to apply to a dignified life. The current societal conception of success has stripped the worker of their dignity, so to reestablish dignity we must instead establish conditions for the worker to feel their contribution to the common good.<sup>160</sup> This is no easy task. Scholars argue that working "with dignity" and treating others with dignity requires effort.<sup>161</sup> Establishing conditions of dignity more broadly likewise requires effort. Working with dignity is not simply something that can be prescribed on paper. There must be a collective effort to treat one another with dignity. American society must shift its values to prioritize collective well-being and flourishing over simply turning a profit. American public ethos must encompass empathy and compassion not only for our close friends, family, and neighbors but also for those to whom we have no relation. The need for a compassionate public ethos is consistent with the notion that humans are social creatures. It would be unrealistic to imagine a society in which each individual works alone in a mountainside dwelling. Marx himself envisioned social labor as a form of "individual emancipation."<sup>162</sup> A fair and just labor system has the potential to be rewarding and fulfilling. Crucially, work must be

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<sup>159</sup> Randy Hodson, *Dignity at Work*, 4.

<sup>160</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

<sup>161</sup> Randy Hodson, *Dignity at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>162</sup> Keith Breen, "Work and Emancipatory Practice: Towards a Recovery of Human Beings' Productive Capacities," *Res Publica*, 13: (2007), 383.

social for Marx's human emancipation to hold true. However, both modern work and the modern American mindset is overly individualistic. In part due to commercialization and selfishness, work has become adversely isolating. People no longer care for one another's success and well-being. Instead, personal success—often relating to one's financial and economic conditions—takes precedent. Consequently, those with the most may nonetheless be satisfied with the status quo of work while those with the least remain frustrated. We must search for and identify a viable alternative, so that the worker may secure his dignity and live a humane life.

Success is not individual. It serves the common good to have more widespread dignity across all segments of the population. Our mindset around dignity must be to value and appreciate the work that other people perform, no matter the economic value which is tied to that occupation. More basic than that, our mindset around dignity must not link someone's worthiness for dignity to their occupation. Treating someone with dignity is not merely satisfying an individual's material conditions. Instead, treating someone with dignity must satisfy a moral obligation to one another and must fulfill a societal obligation of values on behalf of the individual. Employers must view their employees with higher status than they presently do. Employers and owners must also learn to treat employees with dignity and worth, thereby valuing their workers. Employees must receive recognition for their performance at work. Paying people a decent wage is necessary for dignity but not sufficient for the well-being of the worker. In one sense, I suggest that the problem is created by employers and companies who wish to increase their margins of profit at the expense of wage-laborers or low paid salaried employees. By regarding the issue as both industry-wide and industry-generated, we can begin to identify possible solutions to improve the quality of life of the worker and in turn to benefit society more generally. Fundamentally, employers and company leaders must collectively shift their thinking

from a sole focus on the bottom line to a more expansive focus on both profit and general well-being.

### **Common Good and Community Flourishing**

The scholar Michael J. Sandel suggests that “any serious response to working-class frustrations must combat the elite condescension and credentialist prejudice that have become rife in the public culture.”<sup>163</sup> In short, all members of a community must view themselves as members of the community. In the new public ethos, community is both a value and a vehicle towards a flourishing society and human well-being. To combat the loss of dignity of the worker, it is, in part, the responsibility of the upper classes to cease viewing themselves as exceptionally valuable or qualified. The American upper class, in this case the company owners and shareholders, must not view themselves as above their employees in status or ability. For the worker to reclaim its dignity, the burden falls in part on the elite class.<sup>164</sup> The elite class must reconsider why it considers itself special or elite: Is it skill? Contribution to society? In the Aristotelian sense, a narrow conception of the human good implies the cultivation of human virtues.<sup>165</sup> Some workers have successfully cultivated their skills while others have not perhaps due to time, effort, or ability. However other scholars suggest a reconsideration of the good: that not all workers have the chance to cultivate special skills and become “excellent,” and instead some workers must perform more monotonous or routine tasks which are no less “good” than

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<sup>163</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 205.

<sup>164</sup> The term elite generally means those with vastly disproportionate control or access over resources. See Khan (2012).

<sup>165</sup> Ron Beadle and Kelvin Knight, “Virtue and Meaningful Work,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2012): 436.

specialized ones.<sup>166</sup> To this I pose the question: What does the owning class have that the so-called “working class” does not? More skill? More ability? Or simply the opportunity to rise into those more selective roles. Sandel asks: “What counts as a valuable contribution to the common good, and what do we owe one another as citizens?”<sup>167</sup> For what we owe one another as citizens, we can turn to the foremost proponent of social ethics and social obligation.

In other words, the status quo has the potential to change. Pragmatic theory reinforces this idea by suggesting that change is gradual and incremental. Perhaps changing the status quo surrounding the dignity of work needs to be first called to action by an individual or a small group noticing that the status quo is not working properly for society. This in fact is not a foreign idea; so activists in the twenty first century call for economic and social change on a regular basis. The American Democratic and Republican parties both claim to be the “party of the worker.”<sup>168</sup> Small change can increase in scale. What starts with an individual or small group can shift towards ensuring the well-being of human and societal development.

A public shift away from neoliberalism and neoconservatism where all people could benefit from one another and from society would likely result in more prosperous condition for the worker. Through the implementation of different kinds of social changes society could produce a different kind of public ethos one in which the common good and our obligations to one another are prioritized over simple profits. Shifting away from neoliberalism is also healthy for American democracy. The so-called “anarchy of the market” produces ungovernable individuals and a non-cohesive society with divergent priorities.<sup>169</sup> It is thus

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<sup>166</sup> Isaksen “Constructing Meaning Despite the Drudgery of Repetitive Work,” 103.

<sup>167</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 205.

<sup>168</sup> Ruy Teixeira and Alan Abramowitz, “The Decline of the White Working Class,” 396, 402.

<sup>169</sup> David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82.

understandable why significant pressure from the progressive movement urged the American ethos to turn away from individualism. Progressives argued that individualism resulted in those with resources and money striving to keep it to themselves largely to the detriment of the worker. Some progressives also noted that individualism is antithetical to general societal well-being. Prominent theorist of democracy Iris Marion Young suggests that “the model of deliberative democracy offers a useful beginning for criticizing exclusion and offering a vision of the meaning of inclusion.”<sup>170</sup> The common good means not only adequate inclusion in matters of welfare and well-being, but it also includes adequate opportunity for political participation.

Other social theorists like Jane Addams, who calls for a “higher civic and social life,” parallel much of Young’s philosophy. Addams suggests that individual ethics has no places in an interconnected world, reinforcing the notion that ethics, morality, and society are interconnected and must be treated as such. People are limited in outlook and perspective by their experience, but no one should dictate their experience as more important than another’s. People must first understand that different people have different experiences in the world, then people in society can pursue a process of inclusive decision making.” According to Addams, the collective decision-making process is a social obligation where we must consider what sorts of things we need to accomplish for our collective goals to be met. Addams’ process focused ethics: A fundamental first step to achieving this process is the collective education of society, for people cannot advocate for themselves nor reach informed decisions as contributing members of society if they are not adequately educated. As an added benefit, an educated society is more able to

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<sup>170</sup> Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 37.

exercise free choice and is more able to resist indoctrination and conformity: namely the values of democracy. Addams compels us to ask not only if we simply care for our families, and ourselves but also if we have “visit[ed] the poor, the criminal, the sick, and... the hungry.”<sup>171</sup> We must care not only for those who are proximal to our lives – our parents, spouses, and children— but those who are not. Calling for civic responsibility, Addams implore us to care about others in society even if we are not sure precisely to whom we direct our attention. Instead, she suggests, “we must all turn out for one another,” in a display of compassion and empathy across society.<sup>172</sup> Civic responsibility not only benefits individualism who may need the support of others, but it is also pursuant towards the democratic life. Philosophers have toyed with the idea of civic responsibility and obligation for centuries. Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative is in some ways ground zero for just implementation of community policies and practices. Kant, states that society should only implement and impose policies that would be accepted by a community of rational actors.<sup>173</sup> People would only accept policies that they would accept in full awareness. This idea is not contradictory to the earlier commentary on the benefit of common good to democracy. Pursuing mutually acceptable policies also concurs with the issue that people— in this case the worker—would not rationally accept policies and principles contradictory to their interests. Taken a step further, society more generally should not theoretically enact policies contradictory to its interests. John Rawls contends that members of a cooperative society would choose principles of distribution without knowing their places in society, if those policies were mutually beneficial to society as a whole.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 1.

<sup>172</sup> Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 31.

<sup>174</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 170.

Naturally following from the idea of common good is the idea of community flourishing. Richard Rorty calls for Americans to take pride in their country. In his words, we must “achieve our country” by striving for what is possible and great about the future, not to dwell on the past. In Rorty’s words, “national pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement.”<sup>175</sup> We must have an appropriate amount of pride—too much or too little and we subject ourselves to negative conditions for democracy. Pride’s crucial benefit is its motivating quality. We must pride our country so that we care enough to improve it. There would be no point trying to improve our country if we did not take pride in our country and envision the possibilities that our country of the future could achieve. Without discounting the struggles that the cultural Left seeks to combat, let us take Rorty’s advice that to “achieve” our country we must direct our focus to the plight of the worker. Policy and ethos must be directed towards remedying these issues, and the rest is likely to follow. Perhaps the work that American politicians and activists employed in the early to mid-twentieth century has been eroded, but Rorty urges the American people to persevere and persist towards hope and democracy.

Always more can be done, but we must not forget or look disdainfully on the progress that has already been achieved. In this sense, Rorty is hopeful that achieving our country is a work in progress and one for which to strive continuously. To ground this theory, we must believe that while conditions of the worker are presently undignified and unjust, they need not always be that way. Nor should we seek to replicate the past by striving to reproduce past conditions of American working life. Rorty reviews various policy shifts of the late twentieth

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<sup>175</sup> Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 3.

century as the demise of the worker.<sup>176</sup> Rather than focusing on the stigma of the worker or why labor unions collapsed, he suggests that focusing on what he calls the “saving remnant” of the worker, which entails a variety of people fighting for labor rights of the worker.<sup>177</sup> Rorty posits that instead of fixating on the ways policy failed the American worker under a specific administration, we must consider the reality of the present and the possibility of the future. This is what I have striven to emphasize in this thesis: that the worker suffers unduly under present conditions, yet these conditions can be improved.

Rorty, Young, Addams, Sandel and others like them were preeminent philosophers who thought deeply about questions of equality and social well-being, among other issues. However, concern for these issues is not for philosophers alone. President Roosevelt’s response to President Hoover’s rugged individualism called for a two-prong approach: (1) “central planning and expert administration by the federal government” and (2) the substitution of the “forgotten man” for the rugged individual.<sup>178</sup> Roosevelt’s New Deal and President Johnson’s Great Society illustrate Americans have the capacity to reimagine society as a unit of collective flourishing. The two presidents did not call for a complete replacement of the American social, political, and economic systems, but encouraged Americans to think of themselves both as individuals and as part of a group. The restructuring of the public ethos prioritizes the value of community and common good. Historians sometimes discuss the New Deal in terms of the “promise of full economic citizenship,” suggesting that economic rights would soon take center-stage in national

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>178</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?*, 42.



politics.<sup>179</sup> Other policy like President John F. Kennedy's executive order 10925 and President Johnson's executive order 11246 likewise sought to reinforce worker's rights as the civil rights movement waged on.<sup>180</sup> As mentioned in Chapter II, it would be naïve to argue for the potential separation of social and economic issues. However, it also becomes evident why change appears so difficult and slow.

Critics of Roosevelt's and others so-called big government suggest that such solutions over-rely on and over-utilize the Federal government. However, proper implementation backed by expert research and implemented by honest and moral government actors is the best solution. To be sure, careful and deliberate implementation is crucial. Much of the criticism from those opposed to government regulation fear once regulation starts that it will not stop.<sup>181</sup> What initially seems like a valid concern proves to be unsound. Regulation and for that matter lawmaking in general in the United States is painstakingly slow. Thus, this solution is mainly as efficient and as fair as possible. In an ideal democracy, the government works for and serves all its citizens equally.

These latter changes are moral in nature. For the conditions of the worker to improve, society must shift its ethos to value not only work but also the worker. The values of human dignity, agency, equality, and fulfillment must be installed into the daily discussion of the worker's well-being and success. Taken to apply on a community scale, these values contribute to broader principles such as community flourishing and common good. Three distinct parties have a role in the new public ethos and community flourishing: the American government, the

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<sup>179</sup> Storch, *Working Hard*, 130.

<sup>180</sup> Storch, *Working Hard*, 130.

<sup>181</sup> Davenport and Lloyd, *Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive?*, 42.

employers, and the members of the community most broadly. Policy changes are largely the responsibility of the government and employers. Laws and company practices must be significantly reevaluated to the benefit of the American worker. The other side of the issue is the collective mentality for which the public more broadly must strive. While policy and law-making is largely in the hands of bureaucrats with a degree of necessary public input, the collective value shift is the responsibility of all. Perhaps, as Bill Clinton said, the president “ought to be a powerful force for progress.” Alternatively, perhaps progress will be born in local activists much like the leader-less Occupy Wall Street movement. Progress can start small and grow. It is unrealistic to think that Americans off all walks will wake up in the morning holders of this new ethos for which I advocate. Instead, it is more likely that an ethos can start in a few people in a few cities and grow over time. President Ronald Reagan, who generally criticized Roosevelt’s New Deal and policies like it, interestingly stated that “The character of the American people is our country’s most precious asset.”<sup>182</sup> Both the political left and right has commended the character of the American people, but is this the right thing to do?

People will need to be active. As John Dewey implores in his call for democracy: “Growth is not something done to [the people]; it is something they do.”<sup>183</sup> Civic engagement, inquiry, and communication are necessary for democracy, and this new public ethos fits well into Dewey’s account of democracy. His conception of democracy is broad and expansive. Many

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<sup>182</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Foundation Luncheon of the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago” (speech, Chicago, Illinois, May 10, 1982), Reagan Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-annual-foundation-luncheon-ymca-metropolitan-chicago-illinois>.

<sup>183</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Macmillan: New York, 1914), 50.

actions, not just voting and campaigning, should be considered sufficiently political.<sup>184</sup> In fact, merely voting is insufficient for the broader pursuit of democracy. This is precisely why Dewey examines the “Democratic Way of Life.”<sup>185</sup> Dewey’s philosophy displays a deep care for inequalities and social well-being. He sought to take direct, intentional action to meliorate the concerns of Americans.

Some Deweyans may raise the concern that the philosophy of this thesis appears values-oriented rather than the preferred inquiry-oriented method. I do not dispute that I have mentioned values throughout; however, the values of this thesis are pluralistic in nature. Agency or security does not look the same for any one individual nor does what I have termed decent living and working conditions. While I include values in this thesis, they are not exclusive of one another nor of additional values which an individual or community may hold, provided that said values do not threaten the well-being of individuals or of the community. In this sense, a Deweyan philosophy supports a shift away from a hyper-individual focus and a hyper-fixation on money and business towards a public ethos which lends attention to the well-being of all members of society and society itself.

### **A Solution in Effect**

With all these directions and calls to action in mind, I must lastly consider where a solution has been attempted in practice. Rather than seek to isolate any one of the values for which I have deemed necessary for an improvement of the American life, I instead will identify

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<sup>184</sup> Robin Weiss, “Arendt and the American Pragmatists: Her Debate with Dewey and Some American Strains in Her Thought,” *Philosophical Topics* 39, no. 2 (2011): 186.

<sup>185</sup> John Dewey, *Creative Democracy: The Task before Us*, (Columbus, Ohio: American Education Press, 1939).

other countries in which overall happiness is comparatively greater to the United States and show how the sufficient conditions for a dignified life have been more closely met. The World Happiness Report measures happiness using six factors: social support, income, health, freedom, generosity, and absence of corruption. The Report itself considers happiness together with “measuring and advancing well-being,” the central focus of this thesis.<sup>186</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Nordic countries of Finland, Denmark, and Iceland claim the top three spots, respectively.<sup>187</sup> In short, people in these countries self-report greater happiness and well-being. Researchers from each cite strong community bonds such as trust and interdependence as a predominant factor for happiness.<sup>188</sup> The Republic of Ireland also enacted policy which encompasses the theory of a living wage. The Irish National Minimum Wage Act of 2000 set up a reevaluation process every year which adjusts the minimum wage according to living standards and cost of living.<sup>189</sup> In short, countries with more ample resources serve their citizens better and experience greater well-being.

A living wage has directly been implemented in some countries globally and even in some American cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. For these cities which have sought to enact a “living wage,” the process entails raising the wage floor of the existing minimum wage in that city or municipality to a higher level. New York City enacted their version of a Living Wage Law, known formally as the Fair Wages for New Yorkers Act, in

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<sup>186</sup>“Happiest Countries Prove Resilient Despite Overlapping Crises.” World Happiness Report. March 20, 2023. <https://worldhappiness.report/news/happiest-countries-prove-resilient-despite-overlapping-crises/>.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Christian Bjørnskov, *Happiness in the Nordic World*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.

<sup>189</sup> “The History of the Minimum Wage in Ireland,” Irish Government, January 9, 2020, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9463f6-historic-nmw-rates/>.

2012.<sup>190</sup> The Law works in conjunction with minimum wage law by providing an estimate for where the minimum wage would need to rest to meet a living wage standard. Interestingly, there is a note on the New Living Wage Rate Announcement for the Executive Order which reads “*As of December 31, 2018, the New York State Minimum Wage exceeds the Living Wage Rate. Accordingly, the applicable Minimum Wage is set as the Living Wage Rate.*” What this note explains in short is that sometimes the legal minimum wage may exceed the concept of a living wage, and this can be a positive thing. To reiterate, the crucial component of this concept is that the minimum wage does not fall below the living wage.

The implementation in those cities is not without criticism. When the city of Chicago sought to pass a “Living Wage Act” in 2006, the Democratic mayor Richard M. Daley vetoed the measure amid concern that retailers such as Walmart and Target would close operations within city limits.<sup>191</sup> Other critics urge that a living wage will push employers—particularly small businesses—out of work. The necessary response here is that small businesses should be treated differently from large corporations. While multi-million- and billion-dollar corporations should be able to cover a living wage, small businesses may not be able to. Without mandating any specific policy, perhaps small businesses should be given a tax credit to enable them to pay their employees a living wage. Small businesses and entrepreneurs should not be suffocated for the desire to pay their employees a living wage. It is a societal obligation to allow those businesses to thrive while still enabling a worker to live a dignified life.

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<sup>190</sup> “Living Wage Law,” New York City Consumer and Worker Protection, n.d.  
<https://www.nyc.gov/site/dca/about/living-wage-law.page>.

<sup>191</sup> Deanna Bellandi, “Chicago Council Passes 'Living Wage' Act,” July 27, 2006,  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/27/AR2006072700197.html>.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, European countries including Ireland and Denmark created incentives to send workers home on leave rather than completely firing them.<sup>192</sup> In this exceptional time, the governments paid employers to keep employees on the payroll rather than directly paying employees or people more generally. This approach benefitted businesses from perspective of efficiency and streamlining processes, as employers did not have to go through the process of firing then re-hiring all employees, as many American employers had to do.<sup>193</sup> It also served to benefit employers who could enable workers to retain their dignity as workers and ensured that the people receiving unemployment payments were in fact the unemployed, addressing some of the concerns which pandemic assistance in the United States faced. American politicians and lawmakers have already implemented many improvements to address the working conditions in the United States which were initially considered incompatible with employer concerns, but history and data have shown that employers can survive despite restrictions such as the minimum wage or laws against child labor.

The bottom line is that given the dire status quo, advocating for a living wage is worth a try. The living wage is not a guarantee to solve any problem, yet there are signs of success in other countries that should encourage us to make a united attempt.

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<sup>192</sup> “This is how Europe is helping companies and workers as the coronavirus crisis deepens,” World Economic Forum, March 16, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/covid-19-quarantine-sick-pay/>.

<sup>193</sup> Peter S. Goodman, Patricia Cohen, and Rachel Chaundler, “European Workers Draw Paychecks. American Workers Scrounge for Food,” The New York Times, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/business/economy/europe-us-jobless-coronavirus.html>.

## **Conclusion: How Everything Comes Together**

This thesis can most aptly be described as an argument that, given the status quo of work in America's failure to meet our ideals of a just and dignified life, a concerted effort to meliorate the conditions in both a moral and material sense is worth the effort. This thesis is not an argument for the elimination of a capitalist economic system nor a push for a shift towards a communist economic structure. It is possible to seek a more equitable society loosely within the existing economic structure. It may even be most advantageous for today's worker to advocate for their rights within this broader system. It is possible for society to raise the standard of living for the people with the least without shifting to a system of complete communism or even egalitarianism. Raising the standards of those with the least in turn raises the standard of society as a whole. In other words, "a rising tide lifts all boats." Proposed solutions of communism, communitarianism, or a simply social safety net are inadequate to solve the issues that the American working-class face. Rather than address the problem in a two-pronged manner as I have done, these approaches tend to focus only on economic condition. These approaches have failed and generally will fail in the future because they do not solve the moral loss of dignity that the American worker faces.

Calling for a collapse of the American economic system is likewise counterproductive, for not only does it not leave those with the least generally worse off but it would in fact make those with simply a decent amount off worse off. Ronald Dworkin suggests that the market can be a means of resource distribution; we do not have to dismantle the entire market to achieve

greater equality.<sup>194</sup> With proper regulations and goals in place, the market can support a just wage.<sup>195</sup>

Some readers may be skeptical of this argument for a few reasons. Let me end by addressing three areas which appear vulnerable to criticism but which, if evaluated more deeply, are not. One argument against what I have proposed is surely to come from the American conservatives following the school of Reagan and Hoover; that the American must work hard and “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” to be successful. That “big government” and social safety nets discourage hard work and sacrifice. I do not dispute that individual drive and ethic is valuable nor do I dispute that the American worker must work hard, but there is a middle ground. The status quo indicates that even those working hard cannot basically subsist. Rather than telling the worker to work harder, providing the tools for the worker to succeed is most effective. This is why I have not focused on social services or a universal basic income—at least for the purposes of this paper—but rather focused on an improvement of work. A living wage, if effective, in fact encourages independence from some social programs. In an ideal world, a worker paid a living wage would be able to rely less on government-funded programs in the social-safety-net sense and more on their personal economic situation. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, a living wage is not a standalone solution; hard work and a living wage will not solve the problems of the American worker. There are social, economic, and political concerns on both a domestic and international level which must be considered.

Another concern is that businesses and firms cannot keep pace with a mandate for a living wage. As exemplified by Chicago’s difficulty in adopting a living wage in 2006, business

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<sup>194</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1977), 97.

<sup>195</sup> Joseph Heath, “On the Very Idea of a Just Wage,” *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, 11(2018): 4.



concerns are real and can prove to be excellent stalemates in the effort towards a more dignified existence. Part of the reason Chicago's proposal failed was because businesses found it easy to skirt the wage mandates by simply operating businesses just outside city limits. This issue is worth trying to solve by enacting the living wage at a federal level, thereby making it more difficult to avoid adoption. Other solutions to avoid the concern of businesses is to perhaps make employers responsible for paying a living wage only if they employ more than a certain number of employees or those companies and firms who make a certain profit threshold annually. The specifics of those thresholds are up for economic analysis; however, the important idea is that we should consider the value of implementing policies such as these.

A third concern is that this solution is too idealistic—that American big business will never voluntarily give up wealth or profits. I recognize that calling for them to do so is a tall task. However, there are citable instances in which unlikely progress has been made. Many of the practices we consider “normal” today would have been considered strange 50 years ago. Wealth inequality was at a low 50 years ago; it is now at a high. The United States has greater income inequality than any other democracy in the more-developed world.<sup>196</sup> A solution starts small and grows larger has the potential to work. At the very least, considering that as a possibility is better than saying that the status quo will never change. In this sense, we are not able to solve entirely the problems facing the American worker and even America more generally; however, we can simply do better than we have been doing. At the very least, empirical evidence suggests that a guided and intentional effort is worth an attempt. In the moral regard, we owe it to ourselves and to each other to make an effort. To think otherwise is cynical in a particularly un-American way.

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<sup>196</sup> Jill Lepore, “Richer and Poorer,” *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2015, [newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/16/richer-and-poorer](http://newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/16/richer-and-poorer).

Rorty calls for us to “achieve our country” which means that we must have both the desire to act and the belief that change is possible.

Once again, I remind readers that a pluralism of values and goals is necessary for progress in this arena. Any proposed solution to improve the general quality of life of Americans should be an effort of harmony. One small effort is good and works to an extent, but an ultimate broader effort where people come together makes for a more effective solution. However, the efforts outlined in this thesis are better than no effort at all. We cannot be sure that a living wage would improve conditions, but data indicates that it is a solution worth considering. A living wage is also not the final goal of societal well-being; it is merely one proposed step towards the betterment of society. Perhaps in the future alternative policies are shown to have more merit and effect than a living wage, which certainly would be a favorable problem to have.

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