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MEN IN CRISIS: CLASS, DESPAIR, AND POLITICS

Can Manufacturing Revive Men's Search for Meaning?

By Bryan Gentry
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Editor's note: Following is the fourth in a series of articles focusing on modern men and the social crisis that has resulted in many men succumbing to despair. Gannon University Professor Jeff Bloodworth is coordinating the monthly series, which includes several writers.

America may sit on the cusp of golden-age industrial renewal or the brink of economic serfdom. It depends on who you ask.

In an April CNBC interview, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick praised the development of more factory jobs, saying:

> It's time to train people not to do the jobs of the past, but to do the great jobs of the future. … This is the new model where you work in these kind of plants for the rest of your life and your kids work here and your grandkids work here. … They are going to be trained as technicians and they're going to have the new industrial revolution. … We're going to go back to the society we knew.[1]

The interview drew quick criticism from people who disagreed with Lutnick's vision of multi-generational families working side-by-side, repairing robot arms and air conditioning systems. One critical writer called Lutnick's suggestion "a disturbing plan to bring back serfdom in full force."[2] *Reason* editor Liz Wolfe

suggested we are supposed to escape these factories, not pine after them. "Possibly the best thing about America is the upward mobility that allows many families to, over generations and with hard work, graduate from … more tedious forms of labor" in factories and on farms, she wrote.[3]

This criticism underscores long-running pessimism about the worth of manufacturing jobs and the likelihood of a manufacturing renaissance in the United States. After Barack Obama and Mitt Romney sparred over their plans to support American manufacturing in 2012, NPR's *Planet Money* show claimed that these jobs were never coming back[4]. By 2016, when Donald Trump pitched his vision for restoring manufacturing jobs, Obama was singing *Planet Money's* tune, declaring, "The days when you … can now walk into a plant and suddenly there's going to be a job for you for 30 years or 40 years, that's just not going to be there for our kids."[5] Most analyses of men's plight today, including Richard Reeves' book "Of Boys and Men," point to a need for men to abandon hope for manufacturing jobs and migrate toward jobs in health and education.

We can and should debate what the "great jobs of the future" might be but having that debate requires that we understand why Lutnick's vision — and the MAGA attitude toward manufacturing in general — resonates with many people, especially the working-class men whose political support powers the movement behind Trump's populist economics.[6] It seems that Lutnick's critics, and manufacturing pessimists, miss the point.

It's easy to look down on manufacturing jobs and other forms of manual labor. Almost 90 years ago, Charlie Chaplin got pulled through a set of factory gears in his film "Modern Times," giving every generation since then the perception of machines consuming humanity. Many factory workers describe their jobs as noisy, smelly, low-paid, easily automated, and dull.[7] A survey commissioned by the Cato Institute found that although 80% of Americans believe the country would benefit from more manufacturing jobs, only 25% believed they personally would be better off at a factory.[8]

However, another way of reading the Cato Institute's poll is to recognize the demand for factory jobs. Consider that 25% of Americans — not a majority but not a trivial number — who are unemployed or working in a job other than manufacturing think they would be better off in a factory. And yet some people seem content to have public policy ignore that cry.

People working in the knowledge economy seem to consider factory jobs to be low-wage, meaningless labor beneath the dignity of Americans and, therefore, not worth saving, not worth bringing back. From this perspective, the loss of manufacturing jobs may even be a sign of progress, but this overlooks the significance of those jobs for the individuals who depended on them. As a

newspaper reporter in Virginia years ago, I asked an economic development official about the region's growing unemployment rate. He told me he wasn't concerned because the vanishing jobs paid $18 an hour or less. But because I was earning about $12 an hour at that time, I can tell you what a low-wage job meant to someone who had one: everything.

It's fine to celebrate the fact that Americans can "graduate" from manual labor jobs into higher paying, more intellectually rich careers, but recall that many former manufacturing employees were not invited to that graduation. More than 1.1 million manufacturing and construction workers were unemployed in April 2025, not counting "discouraged workers" who don't count as unemployed because they gave up looking for work. Many communities hollowed out by the loss of manufacturing jobs have been plagued by addiction and overdose challenges,[9] with men leading the way in deaths of despair.

In addition to a paycheck, however small, a job also provides psychological benefits. Lutnick's critics seem to write off these jobs as meaningless, slave-like work. But it's possible that these jobs could satisfy a craving for meaning in day-to-day life for working-class men.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist who developed the concept of meaning-centered therapy, identified work as a key ingredient in the human quest for meaning. A day job, a creative hobby, or a family responsibility provides a sense of purpose that fills the void created by a day with nothing to do. "A man who could not see the end of his 'provisional existence' was not able to aim at an ultimate goal in life," he wrote. "He ceased living for the future."[10] He counted an unemployed worker as one with a provisional existence because "he cannot live for the future or aim at a goal."[11] During the global economic crisis of the 1930s, Frankl noticed that he could pull unemployed young men out of deep depression by assigning them to volunteer in community programs. "They had a meaning to fulfill, even without getting one cent, and the depression was gone!"[12]

Although factory jobs don't have a reputation for engaging, meaningful work, they provide some psychological benefits. One benefit is a daily routine prescribing when to show up, when to work, when to take a break, and what to do with one's time. The psychologist Marie Jahoda called this "time structure," a latent or often-unnoticed benefit of a job. Two Belgian psychologists expanding on Jahoda's work remarked, "Having a job imposes a structure in people's life… A job also creates the opportunity to be active and to achieve collective and personal goals."[13] Frankl also noted that unemployed workers "suffer from a peculiar sort of deformed time—inner time."[14]

Further research shows that even people with more menial, repetitive jobs find meaning in their work and opportunities for transcendence — in connection with

something larger than themselves. A garbage collector told MIT researchers about a deep sense of pride he got at the "tipping point" each day when he dumped a load of recycling into a compactor. "This was the time he could see how his work contributed to creating a clean environment for his grandchildren and for future generations," researchers wrote.[15]

In the same study, stonemasons said carving identifying marks into stones made them feel part of a historical moment that future masons might study. This example calls to mind the parable of three masons all doing the same jobs, but with different mindsets. The first simply cut stone to earn a living, the second focused on perfecting his craft, but the third was building a cathedral to his god. "The very menial work of stonecutting becomes part of a far larger undertaking, a spiritual as well as a physical construction," former Harvard President Drew Faust said of that parable.[16]

Manual labor jobs might be anathema to knowledge workers, but they provide a sense of fulfillment for people who are wired to work with their hands. Biff Loman in Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" rejected his father's dream of a business career after catching a glimpse of the sky through the window in a high-rise office building, remembering how much he enjoyed being a farmhand. "What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself," he asks his father, "when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!"[17]

Those who decry Lutnik's romantic view of futuristic factories have a point. Many people have wanted to escape factory work, especially in dangerous fields more common a hundred years ago than in modern factories. It is not a perfect career, and we should not want people to be slotted into a factory job simply because their grandfathers worked there.

We can and should debate what the great jobs of the future will be. Perhaps they involve maintaining robots in a high-tech factory, or perhaps they involve health care, teaching, coding, conservation, or public works. We also can debate what policies will best bring these jobs to fruition: tariffs, free trade, or government-sponsored programs. But one certain fact is that thousands of former manufacturing workers need those new jobs to exist. It is not enough to celebrate some people's success at graduating to new jobs and leaving behind those who did not.

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