

Why the Elites Look Down on Manual Labor

Since the \$15 minimum wage has become a major policy proposal in America, many politicians feel that certain forms of work are undignified.

This became a controversial talking point when Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez declared that New Yorkers [deserve](#) “dignified jobs” after a deal to build a second Amazon headquarters in Queens fell through. In another [incident](#), the congresswoman was aghast at how several people, some which were homeless, were paid to wait in line for lobbyists who wanted spots to get in first at a hearing. She expressed her [astonishment](#) that this was “a normal practice and people don’t bat an eye.”

For an elected official who claims to be fighting for the common person, this kind of outlook reeks of elitism. It completely ignores that people must find ways to make ends meet. That sometimes means taking on “undignified” jobs. In fact, these “undignified” jobs are often beneficial when considering the alternatives. For the homeless, this could mean the difference between holding a steady job or starving in the cold.

Work is a Stepping Stone for Many Success Stories

When we think about it, “undignified” work is American as apple pie. Industrial magnates like Andrew Carnegie started out working in a [textile mill](#) making \$1.20 a week. Such working conditions would elicit responses of shock and horror from intellectual elites these days. Back then, when there was actual labor freedom, this was how people got their feet wet

in the workforce.

During the Gilded Age, social mobility was almost a given thanks to the government's relatively hands-off approach in the economy. There was no [income taxation](#), no [federal regulatory maze](#), and no [central banking](#) apparatus to create distortions in the economy and impede people's ability to work.

Like the Carnegie case, a good portion of American success stories were wrapped in modesty. Some of America's most successful entrepreneurs started out working in many so-called "dead-end" jobs. What we forget is that these jobs provided a solid foundation for these entrepreneurs to move forward.

Many forms of basic jobs lie in the small business sector, which to be fair, has been largely downplayed by commentators across the political spectrum. As Ryan McMaken illustrates, small businesses give workers valuable labor experience while also providing social benefits. Sadly, the same culprit – government – gets in the way of small business development. McMaken [expands](#):

At the same time, governments at all levels relentlessly hand down ever more regulations and mandates to businesses of all sizes. Yet it is small firms who suffer the most because they have less access to financing, equity, and resources needed to cope with mounting regulatory requirements. Licensing and labor regulations create more pitfalls for small business owners to fall into while locking many potential business owners out of industries entirely, unless they comply with arbitrary "training" or certification mandates.

Mises Understood the Elite's

Disdain for “Dirty Work”

Given how much the economy has shifted in the West towards more service-oriented, white-collar work, it is automatically assumed that white-collar work is the only path to take. Thus, public policy should be designed to accommodate that. However, thanks to the rise of personalities like Mike Rowe and his series *Dirty Jobs*, there has been somewhat of a resurgence of work that is usually frowned upon by political elites. In fact, some individuals have been able to carve out lucrative niches in these fields. And that ruffles the feathers of many political commentators, which Mises even [observed](#) decades ago in *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*:

Besides being harassed by the general hatred of capitalism common to most people, the white collar worker labors under two special afflictions peculiar to his own category.

Sitting behind a desk and committing words and figures to paper, he is prone to overrate the significance of his work. Like the boss, he writes and reads what other fellows have put on paper and talks directly or over the telephone with other people. Full of conceit, he imagines himself to belong to the enterprise's managing elite and compares his own tasks with those of his boss. As a “worker by brain” he looks arrogantly down upon the manual worker whose hands are calloused and soiled.

Contrary to popular belief, certain individuals have struck it rich in fields like plumbing and welding by using the knowledge they learned as average workers and then applying it in the entrepreneurial realm. This obviously generates fury among certain white-collar workers which Mises also touched upon:

It makes him furious to notice that many of these manual laborers get higher pay and are more respected than he

himself. What a shame, he thinks, that capitalism does not appraise his “intellectual” work according to its “true” value and fondles the simple drudgery of the “uneducated.”

Mike Rowe correctly [notes](#) that Americans have become fanatically obsessed with the degree to white-collar work pipeline which often involves individuals racking up considerable amounts of debt to later work in fields that they don't like. Bear in mind, this inflated cost of education is no coincidence. It is the product of misguided government subsidies in the [student loan industry](#) and [accreditation standards](#) that protect schools from competition.

The State is Still the Main Culprit

Despite talking heads' claims of the changing nature of politics, certain themes have not changed. The [managerial state](#) remains intact.

Nevertheless, we should always remind the working class that their “undignified” work should be celebrated. Often times, many of the economic struggles they face can be blamed on government intrusions in the marketplace. After all, the American story is filled with countless cases of individuals starting out at humble jobs to later go on to do bigger things. The key factor in those cases was that the state was small enough to allow people to freely progress according to their efforts and not have to worry about being stuck in a career plateau.

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