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# The Struggle for Meaningful Work

Kent Klitgaard



The processes by which industrial society has increased humanity's material well-being have produced well-documented side effects, from environmental degradation to social disruption to vast income inequality. Less attention has been given to another unfortunate consequence: the degradation of the quality and conditions of human labor. The broad challenge before us is to create an environmentally and socially sustainable future that provides decent, meaningful work for all. Such meaningful work is about more than just economic sufficiency; to be truly meaningful, work must enable people to unite their heads, their hands, and their hearts. Craft labor and caring labor, two embodiments of this definition, have both been threatened by contemporary economic and technological forces. Ultimately, countering these trends and guaranteeing meaningful work for all depends on a broader societal transition rooted in the embrace of post-materialist values.

The degradation of the environment and the degradation of work share a common root in the logic of capital accumulation.

## Introduction

Ample scientific evidence now shows that humanity is encroaching upon the planetary boundaries that define the safe operating space for the Earth system. Mounting carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, along with destabilizing climate change it induces, is perhaps the most far-reaching of these risks. Mass extinction, resource depletion, and a host of other environmental crises likewise loom, while the political response remains feeble.

Mirroring the trajectory towards a degraded biosphere, labor conditions have also deteriorated. In developed countries, wages have stagnated for decades, and high unemployment and poverty persist, even years after the financial crisis. Young people, including those with college degrees, face limited prospects for finding the steady, well-paid jobs with adequate benefits that were common a generation ago. This deficit of opportunity is particularly prevalent in the peripheral nations of Europe, such as Greece and Spain, where the imposition of fiscal austerity has stifled their economies. In the developing world, many countries remain besieged by food and water shortages, inadequate employment opportunities, a swelling informal sector, and seemingly endless war. With the struggle to obtain any work at all dominating people's lives, questions of the meaning and quality of work—and, more broadly, the quality of life—recede into the background.

These seemingly different phenomena—the degradation of the environment and the degradation of work—share a common root in the logic of capital accumulation. Successful businesses need to generate profits (not just products) and then reinvest the surplus. To accomplish this, businesses must cut costs and expand operations, producing an ever-expanding array of goods and services, as well as the consumer markets to absorb them. The need to control the details of the labor process in order to decrease labor costs leads to the degradation of work; the constant need to produce, sell, and consume more strains the environment.

As a result of this dynamic, economic growth has been a double-edged sword. Although it has led to environmental stress and widening inequality, it has also been the historical foundation for stable employment. Persuading people to live within nature's limits will be difficult so long as their livelihoods depend upon ever-greater levels of production and consumption. Sustainability advocates must offer working people an alternative framework for steady, decent work, or risk seeing their efforts prove futile.

Work is central to all people's well-being, not just those in the affluent Global North.

However, reliability of employment is not the only problem. Many people, affluent and poor, lead hectic and harried lives, struggling at jobs devoid of meaning and often socially and environmentally counterproductive (such as weapons manufacture, fossil fuel extraction, or financial speculation) in order to command a paycheck. In a sustainable society, work should be meaningful as well as steady and productive. Meaningful work allows people to unite their heads, their hands, and their hearts. People should have a say in the design of what they make or do, a variety of challenging tasks, and the opportunity for self-direction. Unfortunately, the logic of capital accumulation has created work that is much the opposite—routine, without mental exercise, let alone purpose or joy—all in the name of producing more goods and services at ever-lower cost.

In an environmentally compromised world, seeking happiness by means of conspicuous consumption is no longer a viable approach. Meaningful work must be at the heart of any vision for a sustainable future.

### Defining Meaningful Work

Since the 1990s, the International Labor Organization has been at the forefront of codifying a concept of “decent work” into international policy. Its Decent Work Program promotes jobs, skills, and well-being; calls for social dialogue and respect for workers; and advocates for the extension of social protection for all.<sup>1</sup> The ILO, which was founded shortly after World War I, understands that exploitative labor relations are a primary cause of hostility and unrest, and recognizes that work is central to all people's well-being, not just those in the affluent countries of the Global North. Work can provide self-esteem and pave the way for social and economic advancement while strengthening communities and individuals. For work to be considered decent, then, it must be steady and provide a livable income. Workers should be able to organize, express their concerns at the workplace, and participate in decisions that affect their quality of life. Decent work should provide equal opportunity and respect for all people, notably women, the disabled, and the young.

The ILO's program is a good starting point. It addresses labor from a global perspective and creates structures for data collection and implementation at the national level. However, few of the ILO's objectives have been met in rich nations, let alone in the Global South.

The field of positive psychology offers deeper insights into what gives work meaning. Positive psychologists have shown that the business-as-usual approach of increasing material wealth while ignoring human needs leads to increased selfishness, social

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conflict, and despair.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they stress the importance of mastery and “flow” (the pursuit of an optimal experiential state), pointing out that happiness must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended. Our best moments are not ones of mere pleasure, or satisfying basic biological needs or social expectations, but those of accomplishment when we push beyond our apparent limits.

Achieving mastery and flow takes focus, repetition, and concentration. Success comes from an acceptance of mistakes and the transcendence of setbacks. The control over consciousness needed to achieve these productive states requires investing physical and emotional energy in challenging activities that lead to personal improvement and discovery. Craft work and caring labor are powerful sources of flow, but the capitalist focus on efficiency and hierarchy has put both at risk.

### Craft Labor

Craft work embodies the essence of meaningful work. Craft workers are guided by an ethos of doing a good job for its own sake and strive to understand the entirety of a process.<sup>3</sup> The work itself is a source of satisfaction, with feedback provided through eyes, ears, and hands. Craft is not limited to manufacturing: the ethic of craftsmanship can guide work of all kinds, from child care to scientific research, from the smallest community to the largest planetary systems.

Craftsmanship is not just about mastering a set of techniques. More fundamentally, it is about the unity of conception and execution. Routine plays an essential role in craftsmanship; rather than inspiring boredom, it leads the craft worker to a better understanding of the complexities of her work. Technique is not just rote, mechanical practice, but a source and a consequence of feeling fully and thinking deeply. Indeed, mastery of any complex skill takes up to 10,000 hours of repetition and practice.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the well-trained craft worker can control her own process of work, and often the pace as well.

Craft work allows one to be guided by curiosity and to learn from ambiguity. Craft workers need not fear making mistakes, as correcting those mistakes leads to a deeper level of understanding. They build skills when they take detours and proceed irregularly, moving beyond technique to a sense of overall purpose.

To the industrialists of the nineteenth century (and today), the autonomy afforded the craft worker was a barrier to increased profits and higher productivity. The managerial push for efficiency transformed the work process, separating conception and execution and leaving the decisions once performed by craft workers to

## The simplification and degradation of work has proceeded apace in the computer era.

managers. Changes in technology developed as much to control recalcitrant skilled workers as to improve technical efficiency. Through technological advancements, much of the brain work involved in craft labor has been built into the programming of machines, leaving less to the discretion of workers themselves. This erosion of relative worker independence leads to more products containing fewer labor hours being sold for lower prices. The consumer's desire for cheap goods has replaced the pride of craftsmanship as the source of satisfaction in the popular imagination and in the canons of economic theory.

The simplification and degradation of work has proceeded apace in the computer era. Digital devices are generally assembled by low-wage labor in poor countries. High incomes accrue to those who develop the new products and use them to solve abstract and difficult problems; those who simply use computers as part of routine work have not shared in the bounty. The coming of the electronic cash register not only sped up the work of the cashier, who is now evaluated on the basis of scans per minute, but also virtually eliminated the job of the inventory clerk as the computerized register now sends records of sales directly to a centralized warehouse. Electronic devices allow customers to do what workers were once paid to do, with self-checkout and e-banking two increasingly ubiquitous examples.<sup>5</sup>

Digital technologies also reduce worker autonomy through new forms of surveillance. An example of the future of work can be seen in the transformation of package delivery. A United Parcel Service delivery truck is now a rolling set of monitors that track a driver's every movement and the time he takes to complete it—from the very moment he buckles his seatbelt. One fewer minute per driver per day adds up to \$45 million dollars in new profits for the company.<sup>6</sup>

The future of technological innovation, however, remains contested. New technologies could, in theory, improve both the environment and working conditions for millions, but not if the motivating force for technological change remains the expansion of market share and the reduction of labor costs. Although technology has advanced greatly over the last century, the capital accumulation process that underlies and drives technological change still demands ever-less worker decision-making power and autonomy and ever-more managerial control.

### Caring Labor

All craft labor entails caring. Shoddy workmanship, for example, is an indicator of indifference, the antithesis of the craft ethos. Yet there is a vital place in a truly human society for the work of caring for others, such as those with physical and mental illnesses, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly.<sup>7</sup>

## Behind the invisible hand of an exchange economy beats an invisible heart.

Few activities provide as deep emotional satisfaction as care does, even though hardly every moment of it is pleasurable (e.g., caring for a sick child in the middle of the night or worrying that your child may grow up to be a conspicuously-consuming libertarian). The provision of care brings stress and often demands sacrifices of sleep, income, recreation, and career advancement (especially for women). It requires a great deal of experimentation and learning by doing, sacrificing today for a better outcome in the future. Caring labor embodies the essence of craft work. It is thus no surprise that Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot included parenting in his *Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Arts and Crafts*.<sup>8</sup>

Caring and domestic labor are a crucial part of any economic system. Behind the invisible hand of an exchange economy beats an invisible heart.<sup>9</sup> Such social norms as honesty and trust are produced and maintained in a caring environment along with the basic skills known today as human capital. Without caring labor, society would have difficulty functioning because institutions like the market that reward selfish behavior produce selfish behavior. The market, however, rarely rewards care provision at a level remotely commensurate to its contribution to society.

The distribution of care labor is highly unequal, falling disproportionately on women. Reasons range from the assumption that women are naturally more altruistic to the belief that they have greater biological investments in care, having carried and fed children. But the gender specialization of labor is not a result of nature—it is a historically and socially embedded process. One of the important goals of a Great Transition will be to figure out how to create a new set of social and economic arrangements that reduce hierarchy and reward selfless and caring behavior while expanding opportunities for women around the world.

Although caring labor is often unpaid, it has been increasingly relegated to the market in recent years. When paid, the craft of caring is often undermined by stress, understaffing, underfunding, and an inability to deliver quality service. These forces are at play even when care provisioning is reasonably well compensated as in professions such as teaching, nursing, or social work. Salaries may be higher, but understaffing remains chronic, hours long, and budget cuts ever-present. Nurses, for example, are constantly pressured to complete their work within a narrow time frame, even as their patient loads grow. In some cases, they have to spend more time filling out routine documentation than actually caring for patients.<sup>10</sup> The craft skills of listening and teaching are treated as expendable or unworthy of compensation.

## The Future of Work

Will the historical patterns and trends that have degraded work continue, or will work in the future be fundamentally different? The answer depends on whether the scope of positive change rises to a Great Transition. If we simply stepped off the treadmill of consumption without changing the underlying labor process, unemployment would undoubtedly rise, perhaps significantly, and pressure to cut labor costs would intensify. In order to delink the provision of decent work from economic growth, we need a fundamentally reorganized world economy, one that values care and craftsmanship, and replaces quantity with quality.

Achieving this transition depends not only on structural and individual change, but also on productivity technologies that can reduce aggregate work hours, thus freeing more time for meaningful leisure. Technological innovation has always carried this promise, but it has been too infrequently realized. On the one hand, better technologies were oriented towards higher profits rather than secure jobs and shorter weeks. On the other hand, the promotion of consumerism increased socially necessary labor time.

As such, increased leisure combined with post-consumerist lifestyles would play a central role in a sustainable world. John Maynard Keynes recognized this over 80 years ago, and many other economists have since.<sup>11</sup> Fundamental social change will be required to humanize and ecologize technology. Mild tweaks of the conventional world will not suffice.

Developing meaningful work, therefore, must be part of a broader transcendence of aspirations for boundless material consumption and an embrace of a culture of ample sufficiency. Fortunately, studies have shown little connection between increased material consumption and happiness once basic needs are met. Steady and secure work in which people can unite conception and execution offers far greater degrees of happiness and well-being. Reinvigorating craftsmanship and care, in both ethos and practice, is a vital step toward valuing the earth for its own sake and for the sake of future generations. Craft is about care. A truly human society would be based upon care—for the planet, for the objects of our labor, and for each other. A Great Transition to a sustainable and just future will build into its foundation the existential need for caring on which everything possible in civilization hinges.

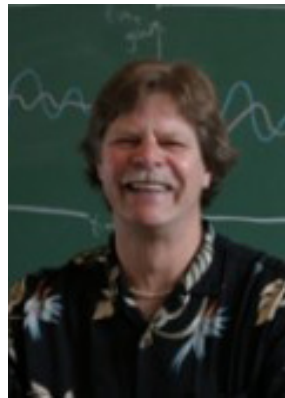
A truly human society would be based upon care—for the planet, for the objects of our labor, and for each other.

## Endnotes

1. See <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/program/dwcp/>.
2. See Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (January 2000): 5–14. See also Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).
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5. James K. Galbraith, *The End of Normal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
6. Jessica Bruder, "These Workers Have a New Demand: Stop Watching Us," *The Nation*, May 27, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/these-workers-have-new-demand-stop-watching-us/>.
7. Nancy Folbre, *For Love or Money: Care Provision in the United States* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2012).
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11. John Maynard Keynes. "The Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren," *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Macmillan, 1931; New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963). See also Juliet Schor, *Plenitude* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Jamil Jonna and John Bellamy Foster, "Beyond the Degradation of Labor," *Monthly Review* 66, no. 5 (October 2014): 1–23. For a technical analysis on why it is possible to create a world where all enjoy an decent standard of living with much shorter work weeks, see Paul Raskin, Christi Electris, and Richard Rosen, "The Century Ahead: Searching for Sustainability," *Sustainability* 2 (2010): 2037.

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## About the Author



Kent Klitgaard is a Professor of Economics at Wells College in Aurora, New York. He teaches a wide array of courses ranging from ecological economics, political economy, globalization, and energy and the economy, as well as a first-year seminar on Sustainability and the State of the World. He is the co-author of *Energy and the Wealth of Nations*, along with Charles Hall, and has been published in *Sustainability*, *Ecological Economics*, *Conservation Biology*, and the *International Journal of Transdisciplinary Research*. He received his PhD from the University of New Hampshire in 1987. In addition to teaching and writing, he has also worked as a carpenter, a cabinet-maker, and a union organizer.

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