

IDEAS

Workism Is Making Americans Miserable

For the college-educated elite, work has morphed into a religious identity—promising transcendence and community, but failing to deliver.

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IN HIS 1930 ESSAY “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted a 15-hour workweek in the 21st century, creating the equivalent of a five-day weekend. “For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem,” Keynes wrote, “how to occupy the leisure.”

This became a popular view. In a 1957 [article](#) in *The New York Times*, the writer Erik Barnouw predicted that, as work became easier, our identity would be defined by our hobbies, or our family life. “The increasingly automatic nature of many jobs, coupled with the shortening work week [leads] an increasing number of workers to look not to work but to leisure for satisfaction, meaning, expression,” he wrote.

These post-work predictions weren't entirely wrong. By some counts, Americans work much less than they used to. The average work year has shrunk by more than 200 hours. But those figures don't tell the whole story. Rich, college-educated people—especially men—work more than they did many decades ago. They are reared from their teenage years to make their passion their career and, if they don't have a calling, told not to yield until they find one.

[*Read: “Find your passion” is awful advice*]

The economists of the early 20th century did not foresee that work might evolve from a means of material production to a means of identity production. They failed to anticipate that, for the poor and middle class, work would remain a necessity; but for the college-educated elite, it would morph into a kind of religion, promising identity, transcendence, and community. Call it workism.

1. THE GOSPEL OF WORK

The decline of traditional faith in America has coincided with an explosion of new atheisms. Some people worship beauty, some worship political identities, and others worship their children. But everybody worships something. And workism is among the most potent of the new religions competing for congregants.

What is workism? It is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose; and the belief that any policy to promote human welfare must *always* encourage more work.

Homo industrious is not new to the American landscape. The American dream—that hoary mythology that hard work always guarantees upward mobility—has for more than a century made the U.S. obsessed with material success and the exhaustive striving required to earn it.

No large country in the world as productive as the United States averages more hours of work a year. And the gap between the U.S. and other countries is growing. Between 1950 and 2012, annual hours worked per employee fell by about 40 percent in Germany and the Netherlands—but by only 10 percent in the United States. Americans “work longer hours, have shorter vacations, get less in unemployment, disability, and retirement benefits, and retire later, than people in

comparably rich societies,” wrote Samuel P. Huntington in his 2005 book *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*.

One group has led the widening of the workist gap: rich men.

In 1980, the highest-earning men actually worked fewer hours per week than middle-class and low-income men, according to a survey by the Minneapolis Fed. But that’s changed. By 2005, the richest 10 percent of married men had the *longest* average workweek. In that same time, college-educated men reduced their leisure time more than any other group. Today, it is fair to say that elite American men have transformed themselves into the world’s premier workaholics, toiling longer hours than both poorer men in the U.S. and rich men in similarly rich countries.

This shift defies economic logic—and economic history. The rich have always worked less than the poor, because they could afford to. The landed gentry of preindustrial Europe dined, danced, and gossiped, while serfs toiled without end. In the early 20th century, rich Americans used their ample downtime to buy weekly movie tickets and dabble in sports. Today’s rich American men can afford vastly more downtime. But they have used their wealth to buy the strangest of prizes: more work!

[*Read: Why do Americans work so much?*]

Perhaps long hours are part of an arms race for status and income among the moneyed elite. Or maybe the logic here isn’t economic at all. It’s emotional—even spiritual. The best-educated and highest-earning Americans, who can have whatever they want, have chosen the office for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays: It’s where they feel most themselves. “For many of today’s rich there is no such thing as ‘leisure’; in the classic sense—work is their play,” the economist Robert Frank wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*. “Building wealth to them is a creative process, and the closest thing they have to fun.”

Workism may have started with rich men, but the ethos is spreading—across gender and age. In a 2018 paper on elite universities, researchers found that for women, the most important benefit of attending a selective college isn’t higher wages, but more hours at the office. In other words, our elite institutions are minting coed workists. What’s more, in a recent Pew Research report on the epidemic of youth anxiety, 95 percent of teens said “having a job or career they

enjoy” would be “extremely or very important” to them as an adult. This ranked higher than any other priority, including “helping other people who are in need” (81 percent) or getting married (47 percent). Finding meaning at work beats family and kindness as the top ambition of today’s young people.

Work Is the New God



Even as Americans worship workism, its leaders consecrate it from the marble daises of Congress and enshrine it in law. Most advanced countries give new parents paid leave; but the United States guarantees no such thing. Many advanced countries ease the burden of parenthood with national policies; but U.S. public spending on child care and early education is near the bottom of international rankings. In most advanced countries, citizens are guaranteed access to health care by their government; but the majority of insured Americans get health care through—where else?—their workplace. Automation and AI may soon threaten the labor force, but America’s welfare system has become more work-based in the past 20 years. In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which replaced much of the existing welfare system with programs that made benefits contingent on the recipient’s employment.

The religion of work isn’t just a cultist feature of America’s elite. It’s also the law.

HERE'S A FAIR question: Is there anything wrong with hard, even obsessive, work?

Humankind has not yet invented itself out of labor. Machine intelligence isn't ready to run the world's factories, or care for the sick. In every advanced economy, most prime-age people who can work *do*—and in poorer countries, the average workweek is even longer than in the United States. Without work, including nonsalaried labor like raising a child, most people tend to feel miserable. Some evidence suggests that long-term unemployment is even more wrenching than losing a loved one, since the absence of an engaging distraction removes the very thing that tends to provide solace to mourners in the first place.

There is nothing wrong with work, when work must be done. And there is no question that an elite obsession with meaningful work will produce a handful of winners who hit the workist lottery: busy, rich, and deeply fulfilled. But a culture that funnels its dreams of self-actualization into salaried jobs is setting itself up for collective anxiety, mass disappointment, and inevitable burnout.

In the past century, the American conception of work has shifted from *jobs* to *careers* to *callings*—from necessity to status to meaning. In an agrarian or early-manufacturing economy, where tens of millions of people perform similar routinized tasks, there are no delusions about the higher purpose of, say, planting corn or screwing bolts: It's just a job.

[*Read: When "love what you do" pushes women to quit*]

The rise of the professional class and corporate bureaucracies in the early 20th century created the modern journey of a career, a narrative arc bending toward a set of precious initials: VP, SVP, CEO. The upshot is that for today's workists, anything short of finding one's vocational soul mate means a wasted life.

"We've created this idea that the meaning of life should be found in work," says Oren Cass, the author of the book *The Once and Future Worker*. "We tell young people that their work should be their passion. 'Don't give up until you find a job that you love!' we say. 'You should be changing the world!' we tell them. That is the message in commencement addresses, in pop culture, and frankly, in media, including *The Atlantic*."

But our desks were never meant to be our altars. The modern labor force evolved to serve the needs of consumers and capitalists, not to satisfy tens of millions of people seeking transcendence at the office. It's hard to self-actualize on the job if you're a cashier—one of the most common occupations in the U.S.—and even the best white-collar roles have long periods of stasis, boredom, or busywork. This mismatch between expectations and reality is a recipe for severe disappointment, if not outright misery, and it might explain why rates of depression and anxiety in the U.S. are “substantially higher” than they were in the 1980s, according to [a 2014 study](#).

One of the benefits of being an observant Christian, Muslim, or Zoroastrian is that these God-fearing worshippers put their faith in an intangible and unfalsifiable force of goodness. But work is tangible, and success is often falsified. To make either the centerpiece of one's life is to place one's esteem in the mercurial hands of the market. To be a workist is to worship a god with firing power.

2. THE MILLENNIAL WORKIST

The Millennial generation—born in the past two decades of the 20th century—came of age in the roaring 1990s, when workism coursed through the veins of American society. On the West Coast, the modern tech sector emerged, minting millionaires who combined utopian dreams with a do-what-you-love ethos. On the East Coast, President Clinton grabbed the neoliberal baton from Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush and signed laws that made work the nucleus of welfare policy.

As Anne Helen Petersen wrote in a viral [essay](#) on “Millennial burnout” for *BuzzFeed News*—building on ideas Malcolm Harris addressed in his book, *Kids These Days*—Millennials were honed in these decades into machines of self-optimization. They passed through a childhood of extracurricular overachievement and checked every box of the success sequence, only to have the economy blow up their dreams.

[[Read: Millennial burnout is being televised](#)]

While it's inadvisable to paint 85 million people with the same brush, it's fair to say that American Millennials have been collectively defined by two external traumas. The first is student debt. Millennials are the most educated generation ever, a distinction that should have made them rich and secure. But rising educational

attainment has come at a steep price. Since 2007, outstanding student debt has grown by almost \$1 trillion, roughly tripling in just 12 years. And since the economy cratered in 2008, average wages for young graduates have stagnated—making it even harder to pay off loans.

The second external trauma of the Millennial generation has been the disturbance of social media, which has amplified the pressure to craft an image of success—for oneself, for one's friends and colleagues, and even for one's parents. But literally *visualizing* career success can be difficult in a services and information economy. Blue-collar jobs produce tangible products, like coal, steel rods, and houses. The output of white-collar work—algorithms, consulting projects, programmatic advertising campaigns—is more shapeless and often quite invisible. It's not glib to say that the whiter the collar, the more invisible the product.

Since the physical world leaves few traces of achievement, today's workers turn to social media to make manifest their accomplishments. Many of them spend hours crafting a separate reality of stress-free smiles, postcard vistas, and Edison-lightbulbed working spaces. "The social media feed [is] evidence of the fruits of hard, rewarding labor and the labor itself," Petersen writes.

Among Millennial workers, it seems, overwork and "burnout" are outwardly celebrated (even if, one suspects, they're inwardly mourned). In a recent *New York Times* essay, "Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?," the reporter Erin Griffith pays a visit to the co-working space WeWork, where the pillows urge DO WHAT YOU LOVE, and the neon signs implore workers to HUSTLE HARDER. These dicta resonate with young workers. As several studies show, Millennials are meaning junkies at work. "Like all employees," one Gallup survey concluded, "millennials care about their income. But for this generation, a job is about more than a paycheck, it's about a purpose."

The problem with this gospel—*Your dream job is out there, so never stop hustling*—is that it's a blueprint for spiritual and physical exhaustion. Long hours don't make anybody more productive or creative; they make people stressed, tired and bitter. But the overwork myths survive "because they justify the extreme wealth created for a small group of elite techies," Griffith writes.

[Read: Millennials in search of a different kind of career]

There is something slyly dystopian about an economic system that has convinced the most indebted generation in American history to put purpose over paycheck. Indeed, if you were designing a *Black Mirror* labor force that encouraged overwork without higher wages, what might you do? Perhaps you'd persuade educated young people that income comes second; that no job is just a job; and that the only real reward from work is the ineffable glow of purpose. It is a diabolical game that creates a prize so tantalizing yet rare that almost nobody wins, but everybody feels obligated to play forever.

3. TIME FOR HAPPINESS

This is the right time for a confession. I am the very thing that I am criticizing.

I am devoted to my job. I feel most myself when I am fulfilled by my work—including the work of writing an essay about work. My sense of identity is so bound up in my job, my sense of accomplishment, and my feeling of productivity that bouts of writer's block can send me into an existential funk that can spill over into every part of my life. And I know enough writers, tech workers, marketers, artists, and entrepreneurs to know that my affliction is common, especially within a certain tranche of the white-collar workforce.

Some workists, moreover, seem deeply fulfilled. These happy few tend to be intrinsically motivated; they don't need to share daily evidence of their accomplishments. But maintaining the purity of internal motivations is harder in a world where social media and mass media are so adamant about externalizing all markers of success. There's *Forbes'* list of this, and *Fortune'*s list of that; and every Twitter and Facebook and LinkedIn profile is conspicuously marked with the metrics of accomplishment—followers, friends, viewers, retweets—that inject all communication with the features of competition. It may be getting harder each year for purely motivated and sincerely happy workers to opt out of the tournament of labor swirling around them.

Workism offers a perilous trade-off. On the one hand, Americans' high regard for hard work may be responsible for its special place in world history and its reputation as the global capital of start-up success. A culture that worships the pursuit of extreme success will likely produce some of it. But extreme success is a falsifiable god, which rejects the vast majority of its worshippers. Our jobs were never meant to shoulder the burdens of a faith, and they are buckling under the

weight. A staggering 87 percent of employees are not engaged at their job, according to Gallup. That number is rising by the year.

One solution to this epidemic of disengagement would be to make work less awful. But maybe the better prescription is to make work less *central*.

This can start with public policy. There is new enthusiasm for universal policies—like universal basic income, parental leave, subsidized child care, and a child allowance—which would make long working hours less necessary for all Americans. These changes alone might not be enough to reduce Americans' devotion to work for work's sake, since it's the rich who are most devoted. But they would spare the vast majority of the public from the pathological workaholism that grips today's elites, and perhaps create a bottom-up movement to displace work as the centerpiece of the secular American identity.

On a deeper level, Americans have forgotten an old-fashioned goal of working: It's about buying free time. The vast majority of workers are happier when they spend more hours with family, friends, and partners, according to research conducted by Ashley Whillans, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School. In one study, she concluded that the happiest young workers were those who said around the time of their college graduation that they preferred careers that gave them time away from the office to focus on their relationships and their hobbies.

How quaint that sounds. But it's the same perspective that inspired the economist John Maynard Keynes to predict in 1930 that Americans would eventually have five-day weekends, rather than five-day weeks. It is the belief—the faith, even—that work is not life's product, but its currency. What we choose to buy with it is the ultimate project of living.

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