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Out of Work: The Tragedy of "Un-Working" Men

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Nicholas Eberstadt, *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis* (Templeton Press, 2016).

Today's received wisdom holds that the United States is now at or near "full employment." An alternative view would hold that, by not-so-distant historic standards, the nation today is short of full employment by nearly 10 million male workers (to say nothing of the additional current "jobs deficit" for women). Unlike the dead soldiers in Roman antiquity, our decimated men still live and walk among us, though in an existence without productive economic purpose. We might say those many millions of men without work constitute a sort of invisible army, ghost soldiers lost in an overlooked, modern-day depression. (31)

Prior to the end of the nineteenth century, the journalist Jacob Riis published a series of articles (later turned into a book) titled *How the Other Half Lives* utilizing the recent innovation of photography to depict the lives of the working poor in New York City. Through this groundbreaking work of photojournalism and social commentary, Riis exposed the abhorrent living conditions in New York City's swollen tenements (the population density of which was more than double that of today's most crowded slums in India or Bangladesh). Life in the tenements was horrid; a squalid existence of severe overcrowding, exploitative child labor, drunkenness, and disease. Through Riis' work, the forgotten men, women, and children of the tenements were finally made visible and deemed worthy of sympathy as the question was posed to polite Manhattanites: what kind of society are we to allow (and, in many cases, profit from) such wholesale exploitation and degradation? Due to the role of tenements in fueling the cycle of poverty, this was seen as a major moral crisis facing society, a silent destroyer of families and the prospect of upward mobility. Thus, the reform movement began in earnest to elevate the lives of the working poor through ensuring basic housing improvements by bringing fresh air, clean water, and sunlight to the tenements. An intrepid journalist and the thoroughly human response generated by his photographs changed the world.

Today we tend to think that discoveries such as Riis' can no longer be made, as innovation at the subatomic and cosmic extremes clouds our ability or willingness to see what is in plain sight. Our culture is inundated by numbers and statistics. Everything seems to be neatly categorized and measured, perhaps especially in the fields of finance and economics. But do these numbers portray reality? First published in September of 2016, the thought-provoking treatise *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis* by Nicholas Eberstadt (the esteemed political economist at the American Enterprise Institute) challenges the rose-tinted perspective on the economy with his expert use of data sets and analytical observation and is a fitting 21st-century successor to *How The Other Half Lives*.

Eberstadt's discovery, gleaned through extensive data analysis, is sobering: the work rate for prime-age American males (defined between 25–54 years of age) in 2015 was lower than during several years of the Great Depression and has been steadily falling for fifty years. It is precisely this continuing expansion of “un-working” able-bodied men that portends a unique economic, social, and moral crisis for American society. Similar to Riis, Eberstadt phrases the situation not only in economic but social and moral terms. What does it mean for American society that an increasing number of men are growing incapable of providing for themselves (and others) and have become dependent upon their wives or girlfriends, their parents, or government aid? Eberstadt considers this “male flight from work” as running counter not only to the natural role of man as breadwinner but also the American ethos of self-reliance.

How has this happened? On a daily basis we are met with overly optimistic views of the economy as US stock indices reach new all-time highs (the once-lampooned Dow 20k has become reality!). The Federal Reserve, economists, and financial media have repeatedly touted historically low unemployment rates. Yet, as Mark Twain once quipped: “Facts are stubborn things, but statistics are pliable.”

As Eberstadt aptly describes, we are living in strange economic times as wealth, output, and employment are moving in a divergent manner. Normally, one would expect these three indicators to move largely in lockstep. Simply put, wealth has continued to grow for wealth-holders (explaining the optimism among Wall Street and financial media) while there has been a marked decrease in work for workers (a factor fueling the response to the “populist” messaging of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump). Utilizing government employment figures, Eberstadt shows that the labor force participation rate (LFPR) for American men twenty and older has fallen from 85.8% in 1948 to 68.2% in 2015. Of course, this metric includes some challenges at both ends of the distribution, as many more young men attend college now than in 1948 and men are living longer than they did seventy years ago. This is precisely why special attention is paid to analyzing employment trends in the segment of the population that has always had the highest level of workforce participation—men between twenty-five and fifty-four years of age. In 1948, one in twenty “prime-age” men was out of the work force, whereas in 2015, one in six “prime-age” men was out of the work force. This serves as a telling reminder that data (unemployment rates showing near-full employment levels) can obscure reality.

Much of this change can be viewed through a shift in attitude toward the nature of work. Historically, there were two categories for “nonfarm working-age American males”: working a paid job or being unemployed. Absent the protection of a safety net, fear of unemployment was the primary source of dread for men. Though not an altogether perfect analogy, think George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Today, the categorization of employment has expanded to three groups: employed, unemployed but seeking work, and neither working nor seeking work. It is this last category (men who tellingly would also be excluded from the official unemployment rate) that is of primary concern for Eberstadt: “A life without work (or the search for work) has become a viable option for today's prime-age male—and ever-greater numbers of them seem to be choosing this option” (38). As a point of comparison between 1948 and 1965, there was roughly one prime-age man out of work but looking for a job for each man who was altogether out of the work force. As of 2015, this balance has shifted to a 3:1 ratio of un-working prime-age men for each unemployed man looking for work.

As Eberstadt shows by comparing LFPR among men throughout 23 advanced nations, this is a distinctly American phenomenon without a strong correlation in other advanced economies. The question arises: who exactly are these men? In one of the most compelling sections of the book, Eberstadt examines the demographic characteristics of these prime-age men who have left the workforce.

In sum, an American man ages twenty-five to fifty-four was more likely to be an un-worker in 2015 if he (1) had no more than a high school diploma; (2) was not married and had no children or children who lived elsewhere; (3) was not an immigrant; or (4) was African American. (64)

This is a strikingly clear synopsis of the research. Of particular interest to Eberstadt are the two categories that show volition (i.e., the willingness to marry [cf. category 2] and the decision to move to the United States [cf. category 3]). Men in these two categories, Eberstadt points out, are characterized by the aspirations they hold for the future, as well as by the priorities and values they hold dear. Regardless of race or educational status, married men with children work more than their never-married counterparts. Similarly, regardless of race or ethnicity, prime-age immigrant men work more than their native-born counterparts. Seeing as many of these immigrant men arrived in the U.S. with limited English skills and without a high-school diploma (which might inhibit employment), Eberstadt draws the conclusion that “one determinant to being in the U.S. workforce today seems to be wanting to be there in the first place” (76). So if a man isn’t working and isn’t looking for work, what is he doing?

For centuries, philosophers, theologians, and social scientists have contemplated the distinction between leisure (the basis of culture as per Josef Pieper) and idleness as defined by the cardinal sin of *acedia*. Modernity tends to blur the difference between spending time in a way that elevates the individual and society and a way which is unproductive and/or harmful. By utilizing various research conducted by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor statistics annual American Time Use survey, Eberstadt is able to show how prime-age men not in the labor force (NILF), unemployed men, employed men, and employed women spend their time. What comes to fore is that prime-age NILF men with their free-time dividend of over 2000 hours/year spend no more time assisting with household care than employed women and less time than unemployed men. Out of the four groups, these men spend the least amount of time in religious and volunteer activities—despite the much greater amount of free time they possess. Instead, this time is spent engaging in “personal care” which includes sleeping and grooming, and most notably, a huge amount of time spent in “socializing, relaxing, and leisure.” Especially telling is the fact that prime-age NILF men watch nearly five-and-a-half hours of television and movies each day which far surpasses all of the other sub-categories and is a full two hours per day more than unemployed men. Seeing as NILF men are much more likely to use illicit drugs and visit gambling establishments, while less likely to attend religious services, read the newspaper, or vote in a presidential election, the parallel of entertainment media to the *soma* of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* is unavoidable and deeply troubling. It is a crisis for the individual, the family, and society at-large.

The macroeconomic changes which can be deemed responsible for this male flight from work in the United States are varied. Increasingly, the influence of innovation, automation, and globalization is seen causing a fundamental shift in the nature of work. The large-scale incarceration of men—especially black men following the “war on crime”—unquestionably plays a major role, given not only the time each prisoner spends in jail but also the scarlet letter of a previous conviction that marks him when attempting to re-enter the labor market. Interestingly, Eberstadt also references a rapid increase in disability and social welfare claims which is perceived as inhibiting gainful employment. As Eberstadt makes clear, his intent is to create awareness of this crisis and open the discussion rather than providing all of the possible solutions. Without question, this book and the subsequent surprise victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election has led to an increased awareness of the plight of these “forgotten men.” The social reformers of Riis’ era clearly understood the effect that housing had on the individual and the family. One can only hope that we can be as wise to value the many benefits that work provides for men and society and develop the economy accordingly. The tenements

are long gone but the challenge to develop virtue and character remains.

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