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"Good Enough" - The American Way

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by Christopher Lasch

Long before there was a Bill of Rights, the Protestant ethic gave a distinctive shape and direction to the American character. It is fitting that the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights should prompt reflections on the past and future of theAmerican people, since the constitutional guarantee of basic political freedoms has had such a lasting effect on American institutions. But America already had a national identity by the time it achieved independence and established a national government, and this identity was formed in no small part by the culture of early Protestantism, specifically by the work ethic that was so deeply engrained in Protestant culture. Much more than the alleged erosion of the Bill of Rights, it is the erosion of the work ethic that ought to make us uneasy about America's future.

Liberals have exaggerated the extent to which the Bill of Rights has been endangered by recent judicial decisions — for instance, by decisions designed to facilitate the apprehension and prosecution of criminals, to place limits on obscene speech, or to limit women's right to an abortion. No doubt the price of liberty, as always, is eternal vigilance; and it would be foolish to ignore the danger confronting American society at the end of the twentieth century. The degradation of work is far more pervasive in its effects. When people can no longer find satisfaction and self-respect in their work, they are incapable of discharging the obligations either of citizenship

or of parenthood. They become consumers of goods and experience, living for the moment, drifting from one novelty to the next, depending on drugs or some other form of addiction to get them through the day.

The point is not that Americans have become lazy and unproductive. They still put in long hours; they sign up for overtime; many of them take a second job in order to make ends meet. In business and the professions, a willingness to work evenings and weekends is the price of rapid advancement. Ambitious executives, lawyers, and doctors are expected to sacrifice their families and their leisure to their careers. In the working class, family life likewise takes second place to the job. Wives have to work, whether they want to or not; children are turned over to professional caretakers or left to fend for themselves. Only the under-class is unemployed — not by choice but because there is no work to be had. There is no lack of willing workers in America; what is missing is the kind of work that confers dignity and self-respect, a sense of vocation. Without that, work becomes a means to something else — wealth, social status, or sheer survival.

But if work is dominated by the acquisitive impulse, how can we speak of the decline of the Protestant ethic? It might be argued, on the contrary, that the Protestant ethic still drives us much too hard. According to some commentators, America is a nation of "workaholics"; what Americans need is a vacation. They need to learn how to enjoy life instead of forcing themselves relentlessly to earn, to achieve, to excel. That they work so hard shows that they remain Puritans at heart. They need instead to cultivate the unpuritanical art of leisure — to loaf and invite their souls, as Walt Whitman put it.

This way of thinking misconstrues the import of early Protestantism. Thanks to Max Weber, Calvinism is often seen as having sanctioned the "spirit of capitalism." By teaching that wealth was the visible sign of salvation, Calvinists licensed acquisitiveness: such is the celebrated Weber thesis in a nutshell. The facts of the

matter are considerably more complex. Calvinists objected to the Catholic glorification of monasticism, and they invested worldly occupations with moral meaning and dignity; but they did not celebrate money-making, nor did they equate worldly success with godliness. They emphasized the duty to work in "callings" that were useful to one's neighbors. They insisted that "every calling, whereby God will be dishonored; every calling whereby none but the lusts of men are nourished . . is to be rejected." It was God himself, after all, who "called" men and women to occupations suitable to their abilities, by means of which they could add to the stock of useful arts and useful knowledge. But useful work in itself was by no means enough to assure salvation. The Calvinist doctrine of the calling has to be seen in the context of the distinction between faith and works. "Justification by faith alone" meant that salvation could not be considered as the reward for good works. Unless they were the product of faith, good works would always prove meaningless. Not only did Calvinists refuse to equate worldly success with wealth, they rejected even disinterested service to the community as the definition of a godly life. Trust in God took priority over everything else. This trust would unavoidably express itself in the devoted pursuit of a calling, as well as in other ways; but if it was missing, no amount of determined, self-punishing labor would make up for its absence.

Unless we understand the moral significance invested in work, by Americans nurtured in the Protestant ethic, we will find it impossible to appreciate the wisdom behind the belief — so widely shared during the formative period of American history — that democracy depended on the widest possible distribution of property ownership. It is well known that property qualifications for voting were not removed in all the states of the Union until the middle of the nineteenth century. The effect of these qualifications, we are often told, was to disfranchise a large segment of the population. Indeed this was the deliberate intent, according to some commentators. Those who advocated the elimination of property restrictions,

however, argued that they were unnecessary precisely because property was so widely distributed. In countries like England, they pointed out, land was monopolized by the rich, while the "great bulk of the population" was poor. When property was concentrated in the hands of the few and threatened by the many, it made sense to restrict voting rights to the propertied classes. In the United States, where property was "infinitely divided," the danger of a popular attack on property, in the words of one spokesman for universal manhood suffrage, had "ceased to exist." Even laborers expected "soon to become freeholders." According to Martin Van Buren, who argued for removal of property qualifications in the New York constitutional convention of 1821, those excluded under the existing restrictions were themselves freeholders or householders, at the very least — "men who have wives and children to protect and support . . . and . . . everything but the mere dust on which they trod to bind them to the country."

Proprietorship, as Americans understood it, tended to elicit qualities essential to democratic citizenship — initiative, self-reliance, foresight, independence of mind. Wage labor, on the other hand, bred habits of servility and dependence. Working for wages could not be considered a calling in the true sense of the word. In the nineteenth-century mind, the idea of a calling was closely associated with a "competence" — a word with rich moral overtones. A competence referred to the livelihood conferred by property but also to the skills required to maintain it. The term carried the additional implication that those skills were best exercised on a small scale, in the management of a farm, shop, or business that would provide for the needs of an ordinary family, not in vast enterprises employing large numbers of operatives and laborers. It was in a society of small producers — farmers, artisans, tradesmen — that work was most likely to be thought of as a calling, as opposed to a means of getting rich or (on the other hand) of merely staying alive.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, American society, at

least in the Northern states, still bore some resemblance to the ideal of universal proprietorship. After the Civil War, however, it became increasingly difficult to deny the existence of a wage-earning class or to pretend that every wage-earner was a potential artisan, shopkeeper, or capitalist. The glaring contradiction between the prevailing ideology and the emergence of a proletarian class could be papered over only by the fiction that wage labor was a merely temporary condition, a single step on a ladder of advancement that most individuals could reasonably expect to climb. Even when Americans came to accept the wage system as an indispensable feature of capitalism, they continued to comfort themselves with the thought that no one had to occupy the condition of a wage earner indefinitely—that each successive wave of immigrants, starting at the bottom, would eventually climb the ladder of success into the proprietary class. When the "new immigration" of the 1880s and 1890s cast doubt on this agreeable assumption, that became an argument for imposing severe restrictions on immigration from the Orient and from southern and eastern Europe. Permanent status as wage workers — the newcomers' probable fate — could simply not be reconciled with the American dream as conventionally understood.

This dream was shared even by those who bitterly condemned the new industrial order. Organizations like the Knights of Labor and the Populist party subscribed to the principle that property ownership and the personal independence it conferred were essential preconditions of democratic citizenship. Radicals differed from conservatives chiefly in their willingness to admit that the proprietary ideal no longer had much relation to reality. Eugene Debs, the socialist leader, pointed out that social conditions no longer resembled the conditions of an earlier day, when the working man could expect "to run a little shop of his own." Unlike twentieth-century socialists, Debs did not condemn the dream of a "little shop of his own" as a regressive, contemptibly petty-bourgeois ambition. Nineteenth-century radicals were not ashamed of their petty-

bourgeois origins. They took it for granted, in the words of a spokesman for the shoemakers' union, the Knights of St. Crispin, that "in proportion as a man becomes his own capitalist, in the same degree does he become independent" of the law of supply and demand. "Men working for wages," on the other hand, were no better than slaves; wages were the "bonds of serfdom." The question facing the labor movement was simple: "how all men can become their own capitalist." The answer, according to the shoemaker, was equally simple: "cooperation."

In the twentieth century, the labor movement has come to accept the wage system as an unalterable fact of life, confining itself to demands for higher wages and better working conditions. The nineteenth-century labor movement, however — thanks in large part to its Protestant background — still believed that work was more than a means of earning a wage. Artisans still regarded their craft as a calling. They recognized that the craft system transferred control over the organization of work from the craftsman to the capitalist, with a corresponding loss of the worker's initiative and independence. Under the leadership of the Knights of Labor, workers therefore attempted to replace the wage system with a cooperative scheme of production under which workers would collectively exercise the kind of control they had formerly exercised as individuals. Only by reasserting their responsibility over the management of property, they argued, could workers regain their self-respect.

Agrarian populists sought to do for the farmer what the Knights of Labor were doing for the worker. By organizing cooperatives, they tried to make farmers independent of the large creditors who were extending their control over agriculture, foreclosing mortgages, and forcing farmers into the ranks of agricultural laborers. Unfortunately the discovery that cooperatives could not succeed without state support came too late to enable workers and farmers to make common cause. The Knights of Labor gave way to the more conservative American Federation of Labor, and the Populists

suffered a shattering series of defeats in the 1890s, as a result of which the consolidation of corporate control forced small farmers off the land in ever-increasing numbers. The proposition that farming was a "way of life," not just a business, still has rhetorical appeal even in our own day; but in fact farming has become a very big business indeed. The small farmer, like the small craftsman or entrepreneur, has become a vanishing species. Agriculture and industry alike are dominated by giant corporations employing unskilled labor — in the case of agriculture, migrant labor that makes up the most degraded section of the working class.

Capitalism, in theory, represents the triumph of private property. In reality, the modern corporation eliminates the individual capitalist and transfers control of industry from stock-holders to salaried executives who manage other people's money. Large stockholders may have the last word, but they no longer exercise any responsibility for running the enterprise; their interest extends no further than the famous bottom line. The separation of ownership and control has deprived property ownership, even in the business world, of the last shred of moral significance. The classic rationale for proprietorship was that those who work for themselves take their callings more seriously than those who merely work for a wage or salary. But property ownership confers moral benefits only when there is a direct connection between ownership and control—when property owners exercise responsibility and take the consequences of their own mistakes. In the modern corporation, ownership and responsibility are no longer vested in the same individuals, and both are so widely diffused, moreover, that it is almost impossible to hold anyone accountable for corporate decisions. From a moral point of view, the corporation is best described as a system of organized irresponsibility.

The collectivization of property and the elimination of small producers have undermined any sense of vocation. "Callings" have become "jobs" or "careers." The hope that people can find moral significance in their work has been further weakened by the

capitalist economy's growing reliance on the production of waste. Formerly the bad effects of corporate capitalism could be excused on the grounds that the system at least satisfied people's material needs more efficiently than any other system. Efficiency, however, is no longer the hallmark of American capitalism. American industry used to pride itself on the production of solid, durable goods. Now it produces goods and services that people do not really need — goods and services, moreover, that are designed to wear out or to lose their appeal after a short time and to be replaced by newer models. Deliberately contrived changes in fashion promote rapid turnover, not only in the women's fashion industry but throughout the corporate economy. Technological "improvements" serve the same purpose in a culture that equates progress with a never-ending sequence of technological innovations. Sometimes these innovations undeniably lead to greater efficiency, but efficiency is more and more incidental to their happy effect of making older models obsolete. Technological obsolescence creates new demand and thus promotes economic growth — a pattern most clearly exemplified by the defense industry, the mainstay of the American economy ever since the Second World War. At one time, defense spending no doubt served the useful purpose of deterrence, but it soon took on a life of its own, subsidizing a vast economy of destruction that cannot be dismantled even when there is no longer any military justification for its existence. Nothing better dramatizes the role of waste in the American economy than the maintenance of an oversized arsenal that answers to no conceivable military need.

The decline of small-scale production, the elimination of the small producer, and the rise of a corporate economy based on the generation of waste have had devastating effects on the American character. One way to measure those effects, as I have argued here, is to examine the deterioration of the work ethic and its replacement by an ethic of immediate gratification. Thirty years ago, the anthropologist Jules Henry noted in his study of American culture, *Culture against Man*, that Americans no longer aspired to do the best

possible work but were satisfied with work that was "good enough" to get by. The passage of time has confirmed the accuracy of this observation. We are all familiar with the accumulating evidence of American incompetence: cars that roll off the assembly line only to be recalled for manufacturing defects, bridges and buildings that collapse because they were never properly inspected, tankers that run aground because the captain's mind was not on his job. No doubt the decay of our cities, the collapse of public transportation, the ineptitude of public officials, the abysmal quality of our newspapers and magazines, and the mindlessness of American television cannot be attributed simply to a crisis of competence. If airplanes go down in flames, it is not because mechanics no longer know how to repair them but because airlines find it more profitable to keep the planes in constant use. Economic pressures — in this case, pressures created by the misguided policy of governmental deregulation—consistently force businesses to cut corners and to settle for sloppy work. But these pressures cannot be clearly distinguished from the cultural climate they tend to foster, a climate of cynicism and indifference that leads, in turn, to an accelerating insistence on immediate returns at the expense of long-term health, safety, and welfare. The process of American decline has a deadly circularity: a wasteful economy, together with the decline of proprietorship and the separation of ownership from responsibility, breeds a cynical attitude toward work, which reinforces the demand for compensatory pleasures most of which have no staying power and are quickly discarded. People who take no pride or pleasure in their work depend on new toys to keep them going — new cars, new household appliances, new clothes, the latest hit tunes, trips to the latest theme park, vacations in the latest undiscovered resort. The demand for novelty supports the economy of waste, and the recognition that most of the available jobs are geared to the production of waste makes it that much more difficult for people to take their jobs seriously.

The worst effect of all this is to make it difficult for young people

to grow up with enthusiasm and conviction. When the prospects of useful employment are so poor, young people become prematurely cynical and jaded. Their naive idealism, which longs for the chance to make something of themselves, has nothing to look forward to. Many of them cannot look forward to work of any sort, much less to honorable and self-respecting work; so they turn to sex, drugs, and crime. A few of them become over-achievers, in the hope of making it big. Most are content merely to get by: they stay in school, meet the minimal requirements, and hope to land a job that will not demand too much of them. Hardly any of these young people retain the ardor that used to be associated with youth. Spiritually, they are already burned out, early casualties of the American way, the ethic of "good enough."

Needless to say, this burned-out generation does not bode well for America's future.