



## A Life Worthwhile

The dignity that comes with a job is more important than the salary.

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On the question of economic justice, political debate tends to swing between two poles. The Left wants to reduce economic differences based on the notion of distributive justice, while the Right emphasizes social mobility based on equality of opportunity. A plumber today might not be just an ordinary employee, but actually, with the right career moves, the boss of a plumbing company. Does the plumber, however—or for that matter the builder, elderly care worker, or shelf-stacker—need to move into a higher social class for their job to be seen as worthwhile? There is work that needs to be done and that is valuable to us all.

We should move our focus from today's one-sided emphasis on redistributive justice versus social mobility. Instead, we should talk about *contributive justice*—that is, the individual's right to contribute to the common good based on their skills and abilities. For this to happen, our perception of what constitutes a contribution must change. Any salaried job that adheres to national workplace norms should be regarded as valuable and worthwhile.

To grasp the reasoning behind this statement, a shift is required. Let me illustrate what I mean by taking a closer look at the challenges facing my own native country Sweden.

In the Spring of 2022, [8.2 percent](#) of the labor force were unemployed in Sweden. Among foreign-born people from the Middle East and Africa, unemployment is about [30 percent](#). After 13 years in Sweden, only half of those born abroad achieve a very modest level of economic self-sufficiency. For foreign-born people from Africa and the Middle East, the proportion is under 40 percent. This is demonstrated in [a 2020 report](#) by the Swedish Entrepreneurship Forum, where the most recent data are from 2016. Since then, net immigration to Sweden has been close to half a million, and most of those who came here during those years are from countries whose citizens are proving particularly difficult to integrate.

Despite high unemployment and rapid population growth among people of working age, in many localities it is hard to find suitable labor in many sectors. The main solution proposed for this problem is always the same: education. This is often made with reference to the lack of programmers, doctors, systems analysts and other highly educated professionals, which has long created political pressure to expand the higher education sector. In the autumn of 2021, 273,000 people—two full cohorts—were admitted to universities and colleges in Sweden. In total, 450,000 people, or four full-time cohorts, are currently enrolled in university-level education.

### **Education and status**

Of course, continued prosperity demands high-quality tertiary education. But this is not what our education looks like today. Bloated university admissions, for which a large proportion of the courses are of low quality, are hardly the solution. In addition, most jobs do not require extensive education or training. The 20 most common occupations among women cover [almost half](#) of all female employees; in

less than one-in-five of these jobs is higher education required. For the equivalent occupations among men, only [one-in-four](#) requires tertiary study.

Nor is it obvious that things will be different in the future. Tasks that must be performed on site, such as social care, healthcare, and maintaining the physical environment, are difficult to automate and cannot be moved to low-cost countries. The integration of IT into more and more jobs means that a general knowledge of IT—which virtually all Swedish young people have already—means that many future jobs will not require extensive education. Often you will be able to learn these jobs quickly, so long as you have the right character traits, such as self-discipline, social skills, motivation, a good work ethic, perseverance, reliability, and emotional stability.

The challenges and contradictions that arise from extensive social exclusion, and the demands for change that follow from rapid technological development, are politically very difficult to handle.

Sweden's former prime minister Stefan Löfven (October 2014–November 2021) often justified political decisions by referring to “the equal value of all people.” Indirectly, he was referring to the Biblical idea of man created in the image of God, who thereby becomes the ultimate guarantor of each person's unique and inviolable value. At the same time, human beings are reputation-seeking or status-oriented, and our societies are hierarchically organized. Our complex society needs to function. This inevitably creates differences in income and living conditions, and these differences are growing. In many countries and industries, this is mainly because globalization leads to outsourcing and downward pressure on wages. In Sweden, extensive immigration from poorer countries is the most important factor behind growing income differentials.

How, then, should politicians deal with the tension between sweeping declarations about the equal value of all human beings and the growing differences in income, status, wealth, and standards of living?

It is common for politicians on the Left to point to differences in outcomes and label them as “unfair”—something that needs to be fixed. This has an undesirable side-effect: an emphasis on economic outcomes as the basis for equality actually undermines the notion that everyone has equal value. Politicians on the Right, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of mobility between the classes—even if you start out further down the status hierarchy, you should be able to raise your status through hard work and self-improvement. Sweden’s Moderates, for example, talk about creating a society where people are “on the move.”

While the public debate goes on, reality creeps in in the form of growing social exclusion. Most jobs do not require credentials in the form of demanding university diplomas, but there is still a shortage of labor.

Social change also takes place when higher education is raised in debate as an ideal and a necessity. The status of jobs that do not require extensive education falls even further. This can be seen not least in the fact that young people would rather incur large debts to get a university degree and then work as a bank clerk or in customer support for SEK 27,000 a month, than train as an electrician or plumber with a salary of as much as SEK 45,000. This illustrates that a job’s reputation weighs very heavily, and that significant wage premiums are required in a welfare state such as Sweden to persuade young people to choose occupations with a low status, even when the educational requirements are low.

During the past quarter-century, the rich countries of Western Europe have managed this equation by becoming heavily dependent on people from the former Eastern Europe and guest workers from East Asia for jobs in maintenance, forestry, agriculture, and home food deliveries. It is hard to see how this can go on indefinitely. On one hand there is popular opposition, and on the other, developments at home are making it less attractive to become a guest worker in one of today’s richer EU countries.

Both left- and right-wing governments naturally use their powers to impose their own solutions to social exclusion and outcome differences. For left-wing governments, it is common to use taxes and subsidies to force a more equal distribution of disposable income and housing. This inevitably leads to weakened incentives for gainful employment and self-improvement, which in turn, albeit with some delay, leads to increased exclusion.

Right-wing governments tend to apologize for the fact that there are jobs with lower status, but they hold out the prospect of class mobility and promise to increase these opportunities. But the truth is that most people are not mobile between the classes; they have a job further down the status ladder throughout their working lives. When there is no class mobility and you describe jobs further down the status hierarchy as something to “move away” from, it creates dissatisfaction among those who do not move on. Sympathy with those who have remained “further down” also falls; they have not moved on, they have not made the required effort, they have chosen to stay there, and they deserve their fate. They had the opportunity, but they did not take it. The rhetoric weakens the sense of unity and cohesion between the bottom and the top.

Both the left- and right-wing strategies are affected by the fact that status weighs heavier than money, which means that increasingly higher wage premiums are required for low-reputation jobs, or that more and more guest workers are required to perform them at a reasonable cost. Both strategies involve focusing on the citizen's *relative* position. But for someone to improve their relative position, it must deteriorate for someone else. Research has shown that the negative experience of having one's position deteriorate is much stronger than the positive experience of it improving. The net outcome therefore does not necessarily lead to increased political support, something that the Conservative government in Britain has become aware of since the Brexit vote.

## What is justice?

The simplest measure of justice is *distributive justice*, that is, outcomes should be as equal as possible, regardless of how they are achieved. Here, however, the problem is that resources obtained through redistribution do not confer the same status and self-respect as those earned through work. And as we have already noted, status and self-esteem outweigh financial reward (especially in a wealthy society).

This finding brings us to the concept of *contributive justice*, introduced by the American philosopher Michael J. Sandel in his book [\*The Tyranny of Merit\*](#). This entails all people having the opportunity to contribute to society through productive work, which in turn confers social recognition and respect by producing what other people need and value.

Ronald Reagan understood the value of contributive justice. In his inaugural speech in January 1981, he highlighted everyday “heroes”:

Our concern must be for a special interest group that has been too long neglected. It knows no sectional boundaries or ethnic and racial divisions, and it crosses political party lines. It is made up of men and women who raise our food, patrol our streets, man our mines and factories, teach our children, keep our homes, and heal us when we are sick—professionals, industrialists, shopkeepers, clerks, cabbies, and truck drivers. They are, in short, “We the people,” this breed called Americans.

Robert Kennedy understood it too. In a speech a few months before he was murdered, he put it this way: “We need jobs, dignified employment at decent pay; the kind of employment that lets a man say to his community, to his family, to his country, and most important to himself—‘I helped to build this country. I am a participant in its greatest public venture. I am a human being.’”

People’s pursuit of dignity, status, and self-respect means that the main task of politics is to ensure that all citizens can contribute to managing and developing

their society. This means not least that any job with terms of employment and a working environment that comply with Swedish norms is a good job that provides a route to dignity and out of social exclusion. Instead, many important jobs are labelled low status and carried out by economic migrants. Workers who already live in Sweden must be trained and supervised to do these jobs. If, for example, it is not possible to persuade those with citizenship or permanent residency to deliver ready-made food for a salary, then it means simply that there is no market for such services.

### **Dignity and self-respect**

A key issue for the centre-right governments of 2006–14 was the so-called *work line* (*arbetslinjen*). The [objective of these measures](#) was that “it should pay to work, and more people should be given the opportunity to support themselves through their own work. ... Through the proposals that the government has included in this Budget, it will become more beneficial for people to work. It will be more beneficial than today to go from handouts to work and self-sufficiency.” The weakness of the work line was that it was essentially justified by economic arguments: everyone must work, pay taxes, and contribute to welfare. But perhaps the most important aspect of the work line was the moral one—that it brings about contributive justice: all people should have the right to contribute to building society, to become an “agent of society,” and thereby gain status and respect. But then it is necessary that the perception of what constitutes a worthwhile and valuable contribution must also change.

The political discussion is often about how differences in outcomes are said to be caused by differences in environmental factors that must be corrected. It is of course important to create the best possible conditions for everyone, but the public sector is failing in this respect more and more often. The discussion is less often about how we should deal with differences that cannot be corrected through political measures, precisely because people have different talents and preferences.

This emphasis contributes to undermining the notion of the equal value of all. The implicit message is that those with higher intellectual abilities are more valuable, and that it is the task of the political elite to eradicate the environmental factors that give rise to differences so that everyone again becomes equally valued.

Perhaps the problem lies partly in how Article 1 of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights was translated into Swedish. The English original—“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”—has become in Swedish: “All people are born free and equal in *worth* and rights.” The Swedish translation becomes problematic because worth is something relative that allows comparison, while dignity is absolute, incomparable, unconditional, inviolable, and belongs to everyone. All human beings thus have human dignity, and in this respect, we are all equal. It is therefore a moral duty to respect human dignity. As the organizational researcher Ingemund Hägg has shown, Sweden seems to be unique in talking about worth instead of dignity.

The Swedish translation of the rest of Article 1, on the other hand, is unproblematic. It reads: “They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of community.” I understand this to mean that people should work together for the public good rather than prioritize their narrow self-interest. If this can be achieved, the foundation has been laid for a high-trust society that enables effective cooperation at low cost to solve complex tasks within the framework of well-functioning companies, authorities, and civil society organizations.

Effective cooperation requires structure. Power and authority must be distributed in some way, and the benefit will be greatest if they are distributed meritocratically—that is, to those who have the greatest ability to contribute to the group’s success.

In a [2021 essay](#) for *Quillette*, I argued that people have an inherent ability, naturally and voluntarily, to bestow influence and authority on the person or people who have the greatest ability to contribute to the group’s success. Those who receive



power and authority from the group concerned also receive a large part of their compensation in the form of status, i.e. in non-pecuniary form, which reduces the income gap. As Adrian Wooldridge points out in his 2021 book [\*The Aristocracy of Talent\*](#), maintaining such a system requires “a wise meritocracy,” that those entrusted with positions of power must remain humble and feel responsible for the common good. It is important to avoid meritocracy developing into an entrenched aristocracy that lives a life far removed from those they rule over—the very system that Michael Sandel critiques.

Nor can such a wise meritocracy survive unless those without the ability or motivation to advance to higher levels in the hierarchy are offered paths to dignity and self-realization. This is about upgrading our view of vocational education and practical skills, while at the same time toning down the current focus on academic studies as the path to success, status, and self-respect. Moreover, most people have a completely different path to dignity and what they perceive as a worthwhile life: forming and taking good care of a family, spending time with friends, and being able to say that you support yourself and those you are responsible for by holding down a respectable and socially valuable job. That is precisely the value of work.



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