

(How Social Democracy Liberated Europeans From) How Capitalism Exploits Americans

If Americans Work So Hard, Why Do They Only Get Poorer?

Last time I saw David Brooks, he was trundling down Fifth Avenue in front of Bergdorf Goodman before me. My partner giggled. I rolled my eyes. Yes, really. When you view the world from the pretty, bustling, gilded corner of Fifth and Fifty Ninth...my friends, you tend to end up seeing the world a little upside-down. Hence, recently, David Brooks penned a truly odious column. Tell me what else is new, you say, gentle reader. This one, though contains a particularly pernicious myth. Americans are poor, he effectively argued, because they don't work hard enough. It's the kind of myth America's weird elites who live in bubbles of elite privilege love.

There's just one problem with the idea that Americans aren't all rich because they don't work hard enough. It's not true. In fact, it's so untrue that it's an absurd idea to even begin to have.

Americans work the longest hours — by a very, very long way — of any rich country. They work so hard, it's almost ludicrous. And yet their lives have only gotten worse, and their society has collapsed.

In every single Western European country — France, Holland, Germany, etcetera — people work far less than Americans. How much less? Well, Americans work — so the data says — something

between 40 and 45 hours a week, whereas Europeans tend to work between 30 and 35. So imagine working ten less hours a week. Would it make a difference to your life? A pretty big one? I'd imagine so. That's ten more hours to spend with your kids, just relaxing, on that next degree...or just sleeping and recovering.

But the story hardly even begins there. Americans don't just work 40 to 45 hours a week. Sure, that's what the "data" says. But the data in this case is a poor representation of reality. More and more, Americans hold "multiple jobs." The numbers say that only 5% of Americans work second jobs — but again, that's a poor representation of reality. Most second jobs aren't really "jobs", so they don't show up in the data. If you're moonlighting as an Uber driver or at Taskrabbit or so forth, that doesn't count as a "second job", precisely because these platforms have been effective at convincing regulators they're not really "employers." But that doesn't change the fact that you're...working. A better number comes from Gallup. How many people did they find work "multiple jobs", counting the gig economy? Wait for it, the number's kind of shocking.

About 40% of Americans work more than one job. Wait — what? Does that sound like a rich country to you? But because those "jobs" aren't jobs the way we measure our economy, the hours we work in them aren't counted, either. So nobody really knows how many hours Americans actually work. But the number is far, far higher than 40 to 45 hours per week. How much it is, probably? Well, glance at reality.

Do you know anyone in America who leaves the office at 5pm? Or gets there at 9:30pm? If you're European, sure — and you know plenty of people who take hour long lunch breaks, too. But if you're American, to arrive at 9 and leave at 5 is a joke...you'd be fired for it instantly, more or less. Americans work plenty of hours

for their employers off the books — and then they moonlight at second jobs in the gig economy, technological or otherwise, which are off the books of the larger economy. I'd say that all told, the average American is probably working easily 60–65 hours per week.

If you doubt that, just tally it with your own experience. I don't know anyone — anyone — in an American job who works less than that, if I count the time accurately. In fact, if I'm precise — and I count time working during a commute, sending emails in bed, answering phone calls during the weekend...the tally only goes up. If I count the fact that Europeans enjoy generous vacations — six weeks isn't unheard of — the tally goes way, way, way up.

But here's the kicker. If you add the fact that most Americans now never retire — who can afford to — while Europeans retire at the ripe old age of 62, maybe...then Americans work so much longer and harder than Europeans the comparison becomes almost absurd. How much more does *twenty years* of extra work add up to, anyways?

Now, here's the point.

If we think about it with any vague degree of accuracy, Americans work something like at least *twice as long and hard* over their lifetimes as Europeans. Isn't that astounding to you? It is to me. Europeans are the one enjoy working lives that are so much better than Americans, Americans scarcely have any inkling. They can arrive at sane hours, and leave at saner ones. They can take time off for lunch — and then spend time with their families. To ask them to work weekends is crossing a line. But all that's completely normal in America. In Europe, it'd be called...exploitation and abuse. Which is what it is — but I'll come back to that.

So what do Americans get for all their hard work? Do they get better lives than Europeans? LOL — sadly, no. They get much, much worse lives. Europeans are happier, richer, saner, and healthier. Americans live shorter lives — every single year. They're unhappy and angry and stressed out and depressed. And maybe worst of all — they're poorer, too. European incomes rose for decades — but America's have stagnated for *fifty years* now.

All that hard work has added up to less than nothing for Americans. They're not better off in any way. That's the brutal truth. Think about it. The average American is going to live a worse life than their grandparents — what else does that statement mean? It's why Americans are so angry, resentful, and frustrated. So much so they turned to a hateful demagogue for feelings of safety and protection from a collapsing society.

So why do Americans work so long and hard...if they get nothing in return for it? The answer's pretty simple: they have to. In real terms, they've gotten dramatically poorer over the last few decades. Basic costs have skyrocketed — education, healthcare, food, housing, finance — by *thousands* of percent. Yes, really. Educating a kid didn't cost more than a house in the 1970s. Falling ill wasn't something that bankrupted half of Americans in the 1980s. Those are recent developments.

Hence, the average American now dies in debt. And lives in debt. And their debt is often passed onto their families. **What do people who can't make ends meet do? They have two choices: they must work longer and harder, or go into debt. Americans are doing both.** That is how extreme and ruinous their plight has gotten. Let me put that another way.

Despite working twice as long and hard as Europeans, Americans live poorer lives in every respect you can

think of. There is no dimensions — not one — from happiness to longevity to health to wealth — in which America is a more successful society than Europe. It is a much poorer one in every way.

All that's because where America chose capitalism as the sole force in its economy and society, Europe chose social democracy. Americans have no unions left, almost, to guarantee them raises and rights. They have no power to force their bosses to ever pay them a penny more. They have no power to force corporations not to charge them more. They have no power, really, at all, in economic terms. Americans are just proles for a capitalist machine. The French, on the other hand, have been on a nationwide strike for a month, so that nobody messes with their state-guaranteed pensions. See the difference?

What do you think capitalism's going to do, if it can get away with it? And by capitalism, I don't mean some humble small biz owner, some entrepreneur — I mean capital, mega capital, Goldman, McKinsey, Bezos, etc. Capitalism, if it can, is going to do three things. **One, pay you less. Two, charge you more. Three, make you work harder.** That is exactly what happened to Americans. Capitalism forced them to a) earn less, forever while b) charging them so much more that it became tragicomical while c) working them so much harder it became absurd.

In other words — as a wise man once said — capitalism is exploiting Americans. The textbook definition of exploitation is simply that you don't receive a fair share of what you produce. What's fair? I don't know — but I think we can all agree that insulin costing about half of the average monthly income, or education costing more than a home, or healthcare that asks for

your life savings...all while your income never rises, no matter how long or hard you work...*isn't*. Do you see my point?

Let me put that another way. **What's a "fair share of what you produce"? Well, in America, capital takes about half of the economy. Is that fair?** That half of what everyone who works for a living produces is siphoned off in the form of interest and dividends and share prices? If you think that's fair, then you must think medieval tribute was fair, too — fifty percent is usually exactly what "lords" and "barons" asked for from peasants, too.

So while capitalism has exploited American — right down into newfound poverty — social democracy liberated Europeans. From what? From being exploited by capitalism, in exactly the way Americans are. It liberated them so much that — funnily, cutely, almost — they find American levels of exploitation literally — literally — incomprehensible. As in, when you tell them about it, they don't know how to begin to believe it.

When I tell Europeans, for example, that Americans really do pay the price of a house for an operation, or sacrifice their life savings for healthcare, or that education costs more than a fleet of cars...or that Americans work until 9pm and arrive at 6am, yet can't make ends meet...or that their incomes haven't risen in fifty years...they literally can't process it. Their bewildered question is: "But how can anyone afford to live like that? That can't be true!" The answer that Americans know all too well is: "Go into debt, forever — and probably die young."

Meanwhile, Americans can't process how much better European life is. Americans don't understand that Europeans *don't* pay bizarrely, absurdly huge amounts for...the basic things of life...that life gets better, as incomes rise, and working hours go down. That

you just walk down the street and...get healthcare. That if you want an education...you get a summer job, maybe, and pay for most of it. That if you want to retire...don't worry, mostly, it's taken care of. That you can work less than your grandparents...and have a vastly better life. That's literally incomprehensible to Americans — who've never experienced such a thing, because capitalism's all they've ever known, seen, been told about.

What really made the difference between European prosperity and American poverty? In a social democracy, people are paid more fairly — capital doesn't take half of what everyone produces — and because they're paid more fairly, they have more to invest and reinvest in one another. Translation: if you're earning more, and spending less, you have more to put towards things like expansive public healthcare, education, transport, media, and so on — all the things Europe is renowned for. Americans can't invest in those things — they can't make ends meet themselves, so what's left to give anyone else investment with?

Keep that virtuous cycle of a fairly redistributed economic surplus reinvested in public goods going that for about one human lifetime...and there's a Big Bang of human progress. That is the secret of Europe's astonishing, beautiful, improbable miracle it: reinvested a social surplus that was distributed fairly in the first place, in public goods, over and over again. Things like high speed trains and good media and healthcare and retirement and childcare and elderly care and universities. **Over just one human lifetime that recipe yielded humanity's highest living standards, ever, period.**

Of course, please don't make the mistake of thinking I'm saying Europe's perfect. It's not. It's leaders are forgetting this very lesson, even as we speak. And yet that is the point.

The European Miracle is something that every single child on planet earth should be taught in preschool. And it should be contrasted with America's spectacular plunge into poverty, insecurity, destitution — and the hate, violence, and authoritarianism such heart-stopping anxiety and fear breeds. The European Miracle is one of the greatest achievements in human history, period. And yet American seem unable to even begin to learn it at all. Because when all there is in a society is capitalism — who's going to teach people about what might liberate them from it?

That, my friends, is the tragedy inside the tragedy.

Umair
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