

The End of the Middle Class as We Know It

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By Marie Cocco

This is how it ends. Or at least, this is how the latest, sad chapter in a story that has been ending for three decades is written.

If Chrysler survives, it will be in partnership with the Italian automaker Fiat, an odd pairing for any number of reasons. If General Motors survives, it will be only because the government effectively took it over, ousted its management—and cleared the way for thousands upon thousands of workers to lose their jobs and the hard-won benefits that once made them symbols of a robust American middle class.

They are now icons of its decline.

What is ending is not only a time when the American auto industry was a colossus in the domestic and world economies. What is ending is any genuine chance that the majority of American workers—most of whom do not acquire the pedigrees we've come to consider as the gate passes to personal prosperity—can attain anything resembling the middle-class life the generation entering adulthood during World War II achieved.

The consequences for this country are grave. Yet somehow, we do not consider this an emergency. It is only treated as a crisis now because the rest of the economy is in crisis. Wall Street and big banks, despite being at the root of the turmoil, still manage to rule.

The cool calculation with which President Barack Obama signaled that he was willing to let automakers go bankrupt but would not contemplate the failure of big financial institutions is one marker of his first 100 days in office. If he manages to rescue the auto industry, the callous double standard will be forgotten and forgiven.

What should not be forgiven is the three decades of public and political indifference about those whose life paths and prospects do not include college. Despite decades of national effort to make higher education more accessible, only about a quarter of Americans 25 and older now hold a bachelor's degree, according to the Census Bureau.

The work force breaks down into four segments, roughly evenly divided, according to Harry J. Holzer, a Georgetown University public policy professor who specializes in studying the labor pool. A quarter drop out of high school, another fourth earn high school diplomas, another fourth get some further education but not a college degree, and the top quarter earn bachelor's

degrees or higher.

“We have really let go of career and technical education in the United States,” says Holzer, a former chief economist at the U.S. Labor Department. “There are millions of kids on their way to prison who could have been electricians and plumbers. We all wrapped our heads around this idea that only if you go to college and get a B.A. are you a success. As a society, we demeaned people who worked with their hands.”

Republicans took the view that anyone can make it if only he tries and ignored the tsunami of global economic change that drowned old assumptions and became a riptide pulling down the wages and job prospects of average workers. Democrats, particularly liberals, denied the reality that some students aren’t equipped for or interested in college, and came to view vocational education as a form of unacceptable “tracking” with racial implications.

So what, now, is the policy—of either party—toward the three-quarters of Americans who remain unlikely to get a four-year college degree?

For as long as I can remember, politicians have decried the decline of American manufacturing and the good jobs that went with it. In the 1980s, Democrats warned that we must not become “a nation of hamburger flippers.” The lament more recently has taken form as a complaint about the Wal-Mart economy, a place where the giant discounter thrives in part because it helps to drive wages down—and in turn, low-wage workers become a growing pool of customers.

Holzer advocates direct policies to link skills training with economic sectors that are expected to grow—such as health care—to create a pool of what he calls “middle skilled” workers. Though this is being done in some states, no integrated, national policy that would effectively accomplish this match has been developed.

Instead we lurch from campaign to campaign, using plants as backdrops and hardy blue-collar workers as extras in a scene that keeps repeating itself until, perhaps, there are no such workers left.

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