

Healthy Factories, Anxious Workers

Or, Why Lou Dobbs is Wrong

by *Edward Gresser*

The machine will always be cheaper than the man.
—Albert Einstein, 1921

Arriving in New York for a lecture tour early in 1921, Albert Einstein found a trade debate as emotional as today's. The World War I peace agreements had revived transatlantic trade—and, with a demobilization and brutal recession cutting factory payrolls by nearly one-quarter, had given President Warren G. Harding the chills. Fearing for America's "industrial eminence," Harding argued in his Inaugural address that high U.S. wages meant American factories could not meet low-wage European and Asian competition without new tariffs.

A puzzled Einstein disagreed. He believed high wages made Americans respond to competitive challenges through continuous technical innovations, new assembly processes, and substitution of automated production for human workers. All helped make the country innovative and successful. He summed up his view with an aphorism, translated in brief above and more precisely as "once the machine is sufficiently developed, it becomes cheaper in the end than the cheapest labor."¹

Introduction: The Anxious Worker

Nearly a century later, American workers are anxious again and with good reason. Between the end of 2000 and the middle of 2003, with the U.S. in recession and the Chinese industrial boom accelerating, American factories shed 3 million workers—

more than one-sixth of the American manufacturing workforce. Since then, despite the return of growth and low unemployment, they have added no workers back.

The shift of 3 million men and women out of factory work would be traumatic at any time. It is even more so with the Internet—using dozens of newly launched

“One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.”

—John Stuart Mill

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communications satellites and a million miles of freshly-laid fiber-optic cable steadily turning services businesses once only tangentially involved in the global economy not only into global exporters, but also into competitors with the new knowledge economies of India, the Philippines, and other nations.

This experience, of course, is not unique to the United States. All countries must grapple with the rise of new economic powers and the intrusions of the Internet. But the stress may be more acute here than in Europe and Japan, because there are more extensive national safety nets in those countries. Dislocated German, Swedish, or Japanese workers need not fear loss of health insurance or pension guarantees. Nor, with extensive access to free universities, need their families fear losing the chance to send a teenager to college. In some European countries, larger and differently focused trade union movements bolster government programs with extensive unemployment benefits and job training and placement services.

Americans have no national health care system, no wage insurance, no pension

guarantees beyond Social Security, and only modest supports for college. Thus the loss of a job in the United States can be a fall from a cliff. Living standards can suddenly drop, health insurance can go, and 401(k) contributions can end. A family may be forced to send a high-school graduate to work rather than school. So, even with unemployment rates low by historical standards, and several years of strong economic growth, the American public has ample reason for anxiety.

In such an environment, it should not be surprising to see Harding’s ideas return to fashion.

Newly elected Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) warns of the mass “movement of U.S. industries and U.S. jobs to low-wage countries;” while CNN journalist Lou Dobbs talks about the “destruction of America’s manufacturing base;” and long-shot Republican presidential candidate Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) echoes both. Intellectuals like William Greider and Jeff Faux back them up with gloomy books and statistics. All agree that the United States is “deindustrializing” as its businesses face

impossible competition from large, low-cost countries. They suggest essentially the same remedy—trade restrictions of various kinds to ease competition—that Harding and his successors, Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, convinced the America of the 1920s to adopt. The only difference is that while the trade skeptics of that era were business-minded conservatives, most of their modern heirs tilt left.

Like Harding then, populists now get the diagnosis wrong, and suggest medicines that will make it worse. A closer look finds that the United States is not losing its industrial eminence today any more than it was in 1921. To the contrary, American factories are proving Einstein right and Harding wrong once again. As they adopt new technologies to save costs, their productivity is rising, their exports are soaring, and their share of world manufacturing remains strong. Trade restriction would damage rather than help them, by raising input costs and depriving them of overseas markets—just as America's housing boom fades and the need for export markets is greatest.

But though populists are wrong about the cause of contemporary worker anxiety, they are often right about the symptoms. American industry is evolving very quickly, and its very success is eroding old sources of security for workers—not only job security, but the confidence of families in their own health insurance and pensions, and their children's college prospects. The resulting anxiety is well-founded, and requires a systematic response—through radical change in public policy, the trade union movement, and the postwar social contract.

We need to address these anxieties with public policies. But those policies must be grounded in an accurate diagnosis of the problem that is causing them—and policies based on misdiagnoses are more likely to make the problem worse than to fix it.

The Chinese Challenge; The American Response

The real story begins with a look at China's economic surge. The Chinese industrial boom has created not only a powerful engine for global growth, but also a colossal competitive rival to the rich world's industries. The Internet and the global telecom network are meanwhile "globalizing" new swathes of services industries—and these changes in the world economy are logical.

China's emergence as one of the world's three or four great industrial centers reflects the opening of its market, the construction of superb coastal infrastructure, and the flood of investment arriving daily from its wealthy Asian neighbors: Each year, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore together invest more in mainland Chinese manufacturing facilities than American firms invest in China, India, and all other developing countries combined. Meanwhile, the replacement of the world's copper cable network with fiber-optics and communications satellites has driven the price of international phone calls and data transfer toward zero—the average international call cost 53 cents a minute in 2000, and now barely a dime—allowing businesses to experiment with simultaneous overseas operations and low-cost provision of services.

All this comes with powerful benefits. It is spurring the fastest global growth in decades, providing extremely low-cost manufactured goods and services to America's middle-class and poor, and raising wages and creating jobs in American natural resource industries. But the changes are also intimidating, and not simply in a psychological way. The sudden eruption of powerful, low-cost competition prompts many Americans—even as they happily buy cheap clothes, TV sets, and cars—to wonder whether America can continue to lead in a

vastly changed world economy, and whether their own jobs are secure.

As it could have in the 1920s (and as it did in the 1980s and 1990s), American industry is evolving to succeed in a different world. The response of American manufacturing to the challenge illustrates the dilemma public policy now faces. American factories, contrary to much speculation, are meeting their new competitors with remarkable success. Manufacturing production in the United States is growing fast. Factories all over the country—in Alabama, Washington, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and dozens of other states—are enjoying an export boom unrivalled in their modern history. And statistics show that American factory industry holds a strong and steady place in the U.S. economy, and in the world manufacturing economy as well.

But the success has a price. American factories are meeting their competitive challenge by substituting the machine for the man—or, to be more precise, by substituting an army of robots and computers for 3 million human workers. Meanwhile, businesses that are not shedding workers—and many of those that are—seem to be pulling back from decades-old commitments to provide health care and pensions as they search for efficiency. The shift has been sudden and wrenching, and it is not over yet. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that factory employment will fall by another 5 percent in the next decade—or 700,000 jobs—and services industries too will be adjusting to a different sort of world.

In sum, fears of “deindustrialization” at the hands of China and India are not coming true. American industry is strong, and adjusting to competition in the only way it can. Attempts to solve stress by blocking trade liberalization are probably pointless—the experience of industries that produce clothes, shoes, textiles, watches, costume jewelry, and so forth, where tariffs have been preserved and remain very high—is testament to their ineffectiveness. New trade

barriers, by raising the prices of industrial inputs and lowering consumer buying power, would make matters worse rather than better. But worker stresses and anxieties are real and well-founded. They need to be met with a new sort of social contract—one that changes government policies, strengthens adjustment, reshapes health and pension policies, and finds a new role for trade unions—to patch the safety net where it has ripped and restore the public’s confidence in its future.

The Healthy U.S. Factories

American manufacturing is only a part of the general story, but it illustrates the national trends perfectly because the forces reshaping it are so powerful and the trends at work are so rapid.

Contrary to common perception, America is not losing manufacturing. In fact, as Table 1 shows, American factories produce more goods than ever before and account, in real terms, for a steady share of the U.S. economy. In 2005, they pumped out more than \$1.5 trillion worth of goods: semiconductor chips, textile fabrics, airplanes, medical equipment, environmental

Table 1. U.S. GDP and Manufacturing Production, 1990-2005

(trillions of real 2000 dollars)

Year	1990	1995	2000	2005
U.S. GDP	\$7.112	\$8.032	\$9.817	\$11.048
Manufacturing value added	\$0.917	\$1.096	\$1.426	\$1.523
Manufacturing as % of GDP	12.9%	13.6%	14.5%	13.8%

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Real Value-Added By Industry,” at http://www.bea.gov/industry/gpotables/gpo_action.cfm.

technologies, scientific instruments, and more. In real dollars, this is nearly 50 percent more than they produced in 1992, the year before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was enacted—and it is a noticeably larger share of real-dollar U.S. GDP.²

As Table 2 shows, U.S. factories are holding their ground in the world economy, too. In contrast to European and Japanese manufacturing, whose shares of world manufacturing have fallen since 1990, the American share of world manufacturing has remained almost constant. In 1993, the United States produced a bit more than one-fifth of world manufacturing output; by 2000 and

Table 2. U.S. Manufacturing

	1993	2000	2005
U.S.	21.4%	21.2%	21.1%
China	3.5%	5.1%	8.0%
Japan	22.4%	20.1%	19.0%
EU-27	29.3%	29.4%	26.5%
Other	22.4%	24.2%	25.4%

Sources: UN Industrial Development Organization, “Share in Regional and World MVA,” at <http://www.unido.org/data/country/stats/>.

2005, it was down a bit as China’s industrial economy grew, but remained essentially stable.

How can this be, if stores and showrooms are full of foreign-made clothes, appliances, and cars? To an extent, it is because foreign-brand goods are more and more frequently made in America. In 2005, as American manufacturers invested \$39 billion in

overseas plants, foreign manufacturers invested \$52 billion here.³ In the first nine months of 2006 (the most recent data available), the trend continued, with American manufacturers investing \$39 billion in overseas operations, while foreigners invested \$48 billion in the United States. Europe, Canada, and Japan are the big sources of this investment, and the best-known examples are the cars made in the South by German and Japanese automobile companies. But China’s Hai’er brand now

Table 3. Foreign Direct Investment
(billions of dollars of capital outflows)

	2005	Jan.-Sept. 2006
By U.S. manufacturers abroad	\$39 billion	\$39 billion
By foreign manufacturers in U.S.	\$52 billion	\$48 billion

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis direct investment data, at <http://www.bea.gov/nea/di/home/directinv.htm>.

makes refrigerators in South Carolina, and Chinese firms are likely to increase their U.S. presence as time passes.

Perhaps even more important, American manufacturing companies are holding their share of the world economy because they export so much of their production. Having dipped sharply in 2001 and 2002 after the technology sector crash, America’s manufacturing exports are now soaring. The likely \$100 billion in export growth for 2006 will be the largest jump in history and, in percentage terms, the fastest rate of growth in decades. One factor is a somewhat lower dollar value; another is high demand in

China, where U.S. factories will raise exports by one-third. But China is not alone. As Table 4 shows, Germany, Canada, the UK, Mexico, Brazil, India, and the Middle East are also buying American-made goods at a very strong pace.

Table 4. U.S. Manufacturing Exports, 1990-2006

(billions of current dollars)

Year	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006
Exports	\$304	\$474	\$670	\$754	\$860

Source: U.S. International Trade Commission Dataweb, *dataweb.usitc.gov*; data for 2006 annualized based on available statistics for January-November.

Toward the Automated Factory

In this context, fear that the United States is “losing manufacturing,” or “deindustrializing,” is unfounded. But the fact that Lou Dobbs is wrong does not mean his ideological opposite numbers at the *Wall Street Journal* are right. The anxiety of workers, and the public more generally, is not unjustified at all.

American factories have met low-wage competition, as Einstein predicted in 1921 — and, incidentally, as Alexander Hamilton predicted in the 1790s, in a discussion of low-wage European competition — by replacing men and women with machines. Between 2001 and 2003, American manufacturing employment plunged by 3 million, from 17.2 to 14.2 million workers. The machine remaining cheaper than the man, few if any have been hired back.

The trend toward automated and computerized factories, of course, is not new. America’s manufacturing employment peaked in absolute terms during the late 1970s at 19.3 million. Like employment in farming,

mining, fishing, and forestry, it has been falling relative to total private-sector employment ever since the 1950s. But the sharp drop in this decade has little recent precedent. A ruthless if necessary response to low-cost competition, it is the portent of the workerless factory of the future: overseen by a few experts as it pumps out sophisticated low-cost goods to the world.

The Sophisticated American Public

Such a rapid transition would be traumatic at any time. It is all the more traumatic now because the evolution of manufacturing has a rough analogue in the services sector. The Internet is transforming finance, professional services, business consultancies, tax preparation, and the like into international industries whose workers earn by exporting but also compete against the world.

It is no surprise to find the public alarmed and fearful for jobs and middle-class living standards. But the public is also sophisticated and not much given to simplistic responses. A Pew Center survey of public opinion on trade, dating to mid-2004, finds the people intuitively well aware of the implications of rising international competition, but also quite able to appreciate the benefits.⁴ Asked whether free trade agreements like NAFTA and the WTO help the United States as a whole, a strong plurality of 47 percent to 34 percent agreed that they do. They are right to agree. Since the most recent round of American market opening in the mid-1990s, trade liberalization has helped raise GDP growth and cut inflation, and has coincided with both a long-term fall in unemployment and the reversal of the 20-year drop between 1973 and 1992 in real wage rates.

But asked about the effects of these agreements on family finances, however, a

Table 5. U.S. Manufacturing Exports to Five Big Markets, 2005-2006

Year		2005	2006	Change by Dollars	Change by Percent
World		\$754 billion	\$860 billion	\$106 billion	14.1%
China		\$31.0 billion	\$40.5 billion	\$9.5 billion	31%
	<i>Semiconductors</i>	<i>\$3.4 billion</i>	<i>\$6.2 billion</i>	<i>\$2.8 billion</i>	<i>84%</i>
	<i>Airplanes</i>	<i>\$3.8</i>	<i>\$5.2</i>	<i>\$1.4 billion</i>	<i>38%</i>
	<i>Yarn/fabrics</i>	<i>\$290 million</i>	<i>\$410 million</i>	<i>\$120 million</i>	<i>33%</i>
	<i>Envirotech</i>	<i>\$1.8</i>	<i>\$2.2</i>	<i>\$400 million</i>	<i>20%</i>
U.K.		\$32.7 billion	\$38.6 billion	\$5.9 billion	18.1%
Germany		\$30.5 billion	\$36.2 billion	\$5.7 billion	18.9%
Brazil		\$13.8 billion	\$17.4 billion	\$3.6 billion	26.1%
India		\$6.7 billion	\$8.6 billion	\$1.9 billion	27.7%

Source U.S. International Trade Commission Dataweb, *dataweb.usitc.gov*; data for 2006 annualized based on available statistics for January-November.

smaller plurality (41 to 34 percent) viewed them as more threatening than helpful. Here the public may overstate the implications of trade agreements *per se*, as international competition is intensifying regardless of government trade policies. People might also miss the very powerful consumer benefits of trade and technology in their personal finances. But they are not wrong to believe that risks are rising, to demand a better response from the political system, and to conclude that in the absence of such a response, the price of change may be very high.

Toward A New Social Contract

No effective response to this new world can be simple. But the problems government

policymakers must address—not by themselves, but together with the private sector, unions, and non-profits—are clear.

The United States is neither deindustrializing, nor losing its basic industries, nor losing ground in the world. There is no need to respond by protecting companies from trade competition. Nor is there any obvious benefit in doing so. America's existing trade barriers in textiles, clothes, shoes, watches, bicycles, silverware, costume jewelry, and so forth are self-evidently ineffective. Higher trade barriers on technologies and industrial goods, meanwhile, would simply raise the costs of the industrial inputs—information technologies, metals, natural resources, etc.—and reduce the competitiveness of their manufacturing-industry buyers. This would be all the more troubling, since the late-2006 slowdown in American real estate and

construction means American manufacturers need to rely more heavily on opening foreign markets in 2007.

There is a very good case for better “competitiveness” policies to assist in the response. These policies should, however, focus on improving the provision of public goods—such as financial stability and health, infrastructure, education, basic scientific research, and immigration policies that bring skilled workers and scientists to the United States—rather than activism on behalf of particular companies or industries.

The accompanying social challenge is considerably larger. It is to create a new social contract—organized not so much around job security as a concept of “family security”—for workers and their families.

In the post-World War II social contract, Americans relied on large businesses to serve as the principal providers of health benefits and pensions, used unions as negotiating agents in wage and benefit talks with these firms, and allowed the state to limit its role to education supports and special programs to ensure health care for the very poor and the elderly but little else. This system worked as long as companies could afford to provide permanent employment and high benefits without incurring crippling expenses, and as long as workers expected to spend most of their careers at a single company. In such an

environment, a middle-class worker could envision a relatively stable income and the ability to plan for retirement and for education expenses as children mature.

This social contract is now obsolete and needs to be rewritten. Government will probably need a significantly larger role, closing the breaches through some mix of government programs, tax incentives for businesses, tax credits and vouchers for individuals, direct spending, and perhaps wage insurance. This would at least ensure that individuals need not fear a sudden and sickening plunge in living standards as they move from one job and company to the next. Earlier PPI papers have offered some proposals toward this end, including “Raising Our Game: A National Competition Strategy,” “Fixing America’s Health Care System: A Progressive Plan to Cover Everyone and Restrain Costs,” and “Five Steps to Reform Student Financial Aid.” Democratic Leadership Council publications—the American Dream Initiative; *The Plan*, by Rep. Rahm Emanuel and Bruce Reed; *Winning America’s Future*—as well as Gene Sperling’s recent book *The Pro-Growth Progressive*, provide a remarkably broad and comprehensive array of policy options.⁵

Trade unions, whose role in the private-sector economy has been slowly declining since the 1950s, also have an opportunity to reclaim a major role.

Table 6. Private-Sector Employment and Manufacturing Employment
(in millions of jobs)

Year	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006
Private-Sector jobs	90.7 million	98.7 million	111.7 million	112.5 million	114.2 million
Manufacturing jobs	16.4 million	17.2 million	17.2 million	14.2 million	14.2 million
Manufacturing as %	18.1%	17.4%	15.4%	12.6%	12.4%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Hourly Earnings Survey

One of the mysteries of the modern economy is why unions, during a period of high worker anxiety and job growth, have been losing members. The answer must be that the service they traditionally provide—negotiating with large employers on behalf of a pool of long-term employees—is less relevant than it was a few decades ago, now that the truly powerful hopes of workers are for portable health insurance and pensions, job placement opportunities, and ways to ensure that career transitions do not threaten a family’s ability to make mortgage and tuition payments. A shift away from this role—toward a new one of ‘career protection,’ in which unions help serve as guarantors of health care and pension coverage for workers in transition, and/or offer job placement services and skill development—might be very attractive to the mobile but nervous 21st century worker. It has proven so, in fact, in the Scandinavian countries whose economies are highly open to trade, and whose unions are the healthiest in the world.

Conclusion

Eighty years ago, the response of the Harding administration to international competition was to begin a decade-long retreat from the global economy. Culminating during the Hoover administration, this retreat had most lamentable consequences.

In the 21st century we can do much better. Our statistics, and our understanding of the forces of economic and technological evolution, are much more sophisticated than those of our great-grandparents. We do not need an Einstein to tell us that American

industry remains strong and that—especially if the national government can improve its education, science, and financial policies—the country can meet its challenge. We do, however, need to accept two things.

One is that strengthening foreign competition is real, it emerges from logical changes in technology and economic policy, and it does not at bottom reflect anything “unfair.” Of course we can and should enforce trade laws and agreements, and there are many trade issues to raise in our relationships with China and India. But this will neither slow change nor make competition easier to meet. China is fundamentally good at making things, and India is using its open society and global links to succeed for good reason. Both have raised their game considerably. Americans need to accept that the world is changing and do the same.

The other is that Americans are nervous and anxious for good reasons. Facing a stunningly fast reshaping of factory work, and a shift in the services world that may loom even larger, they are right to worry and also right to be skeptical of easy solutions and proposals to stop inevitable change. Their need is for painstaking creation of new policies for national competitiveness, a different and better national safety net, and new sorts of worker associations for security—altogether, a new social contract that can replace one whose time has past, and provide America’s 21st-century workers and middle class with the confidence that their future is as bright as the nation’s.

Endnotes

¹ From *Berliner Tagblatt*, July 7, 1921. Reprinted in Einstein, Albert, *Ideas and Opinions*, Crown Publishers, 1982, pg. 5. The full passage is quite interesting, as Einstein compares the United States with Europe, China, and India: “The high price of labor [in the United States] was the stimulus which evoked the marvelous development of technical devices and methods of work. The opposite extreme is illustrated by over-populated China and India, where the low price of labor has stood in the way of the development of the machinery. Europe is halfway between the two. Once the machine is sufficiently developed, it becomes cheaper in the end than the cheapest labor.”

²This is a complex calculation. The prices of manufacturing goods are falling, while the prices of health care and education are rising. Deflation in IT goods is especially dramatic, with prices falling about two-thirds since 1995; the prices of cars, paper products and clothes have also dropped substantially. The prices of health care, education and real estate, meanwhile, have risen. (See BEA’s “Chain-Type Price Index for Value-Added By Industry” table, at http://www.bea.gov/bea/industry/gpotables/gpo_action.cfm. A nominal-dollar calculation therefore shows manufacturing apparently dropping as a share of GDP, while constant-dollar calculations show the sector’s continuing strength. This is true in both the United States and the world generally; the World Bank’s annual World Development Indicators 2006, Table 4.2, shows the nominal share of manufacturing falling from 22 percent to 18 percent of world GDP, and from 19 percent to 15 percent of US GDP.

³ Bureau of Economic Analysis, Foreign Direct Investment statistical series (capital outflows and inflows), <http://www.bea.gov/bea/dil/home/directinv.htm>.

⁴ Pew Research Center for People and the Press, “Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven By 9/11 and Iraq,” August 18, 2004, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=868>; see “Detailed Demographic Tables,” pp. 46-47, for breakdowns of attitudes toward trade agreements by income, age, race/ethnicity, gender, geography, education, etc. <http://people-press.org/reports/tables/222.pdf>.

⁵ Gresser, Edward, Paul Weinstein Jr., and Will Marshall, *Raising Our Game: A National Competition Strategy*, Progressive Policy Institute, June 29, 2006, <http://www.ppionline.org/>; Kendall, David, *Fixing America’s Health Care System*, Progressive Policy Institute, September 22, 2005, <http://www.ppionline.org/>; Hauptman, Art, *Five Steps to Reform Student Financial Aid*, Progressive Policy Institute, February 28, 2005, <http://www.ppionline.org/>; Clinton, Hillary, *American Dream Initiative*, Democratic Leadership Council, July 24, 2006, <http://www.dlc.org/>; Freedman, Thomas Z., Nick Gossen, and Ed Gerrish, *Winning America’s Future*, Democratic Leadership Council, July 27, 2006, <http://www.dlc.org/>.

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