Translated Text by Andrew Ross

The Mental Labor Problem

In the winter of 1998–99, a musicians' union known as Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) achieved a notable victory. They organized the part-time jazz instructors at the Mannes College of Music, part of New School University, and succeeded in securing a union contract for them. This was a big deal because among these seventy adjunct faculty were some legendary jazz artists – people like Chico Hamilton (a famous bandleader) and seasoned virtuosos such as Benny Powell and Jimmy Owens, who had played with the Count Basie and Duke Ellington orchestras. These respected musicians had been working year-to-year for very low pay, with no health benefits or retirement plan. Tired of this situation, they turned to one of the oldest arts-and-entertainment unions for help. With support from community leaders and elected officials, the union pushed the New School to officially recognize the faculty's right to bargain (through the National Labor Relations Board). As a result of the campaign, the jazz instructors won their first contract. On the very same day the musicians' contract was signed, the New School administration also extended pension and benefit offers to three thousand other adjunct instructors who were not unionized. Clearly, the school wanted to **prevent** further union organizing by keeping those other adjuncts content. In doing so, however, the New School proved an old labor saying true: "justice for one is justice for all." In other words, one group of workers winning fairness pressured the employer to offer better conditions to everyone in similar positions.

This union drive, called **"Justice for Jazz Artists,"** was a relatively small event in the grand scheme of academia. Yet its symbolism resonated far beyond the New School. The name deliberately echoed the Service Employees International Union's famous **"Justice for Janitors"** campaign of the early 1990s, linking the jazz teachers' struggle to a broader movement for workers' rights. In this first-ever effort by the AFM to represent musicians *as teachers* (rather than performers), the union adopted what its lead organizer described to me as a "real, large-scale corporate campaign." In plain terms, they fought not just in back rooms but in the arena of public opinion – rallying public support and media attention to shame the institution into doing right by its instructors. The organizer's pride was evident: this kind of robust organizing was new for the union's local chapter, which had been invigorated by the recent (1996) leadership change at the top of the national AFL-CIO. The campaign tapped into the public's sense of fairness by highlighting a glaring injustice: beloved jazz greats, who had given so much to culture, were being denied basic respect and fair pay as educators.

The plight of the jazz faculty shone a spotlight on a larger pattern of inequity. Of all artists, jazz musicians have one of the most celebrated reputations across social classes – their work is praised and admired widely – yet their personal earnings have been among the most blatantly undercut. The new union contract at New School helped remedy the local union's long-standing neglect of jazz players in New York City, ensuring these musicians were no longer taken for granted. It also put New School University's progressive reputation to the test. The New School has a history of portraying itself as a socially conscious, forward-thinking institution. But not long before the union fight, the school had been in the news for student protests over the lack of faculty diversity, tarnishing that progressive image. Now, the administration's response to the jazz instructors' campaign became another measure of the school's true values. The outcome – offering benefits to all adjuncts – suggested the school was feeling pressure to live up to its ideals.

Just as importantly, the campaign challenged stereotypes about who **adjunct professors** are. The image of an adjunct instructor is often a young Ph.D. graduate, "fresh-faced" and at the start of their career, slogging through low-paid teaching gigs on the way to a hoped-for secure job. In this case, however, many adjuncts were neither young nor new to their fields – they were veteran artists well into their careers. Seeing highly accomplished, older African American jazz musicians struggling for a living wage as faculty made it clear that the adjunct crisis isn't just a passing phase for newbies in academia. It's a systemic issue affecting even the most seasoned and celebrated professionals. In other words, the problem of underpaid academic labor spans across age, race, and experience levels.

By examining this episode, we start to see a broader transformation in the workforce. It appears that creative and intellectual workers – people like artists, musicians, and scholars – are gradually being moved from the margins of the economy and pulled into more central roles **on terms that aren't in their favor**. In the past, artists might have lived on the fringes of the market (in bohemian communities or the "Ivory Tower" of academia), relatively removed from mainstream economic life. Now, they are being **recruited into the core of economic production**, but often in precarious, **exploited positions**. In fact, the very qualities traditionally associated with artists and independent scholars – being unattached, adaptable, driven by passion rather than money – have become exactly the qualities desired in the modern **"postindustrial"** worker. The ideal new knowledge worker is flexible, self-motivated, and willing to adjust to changing circumstances, much like the archetype of the free-spirited artist. This sounds positive, but it has a dark side: it can enable new forms of labor exploitation. Talented people are invited into the heart of industries on the promise of doing meaningful, creative work, but then they find that this work comes with low pay, insecurity, and an expectation that they **should** accept these conditions for the sake of passion or idealism.

All of this raises a pressing question: **What economic forces have brought about this new situation?** How did we get to a point where doing what you love often means getting paid so little for it? In the sections that follow, we will explore two key explanations researchers have offered for this **"mental labor problem."** The first is what we might call **the cultural discount** – essentially, the idea that people willingly **discount** (lower) the price of their own labor because they love the work they do. The second is known as **the cost disease** – a structural economic condition that makes certain kinds of creative and knowledge work chronically underfunded. After examining these two perspectives, we will turn to how this problem manifests in the realm of higher education and other knowledge industries, and consider what it all means for our values and for the politics of labor today.

The Cost of Idle Curiosity

Let us step back about a century to consider how earlier educators and thinkers might view these developments. Imagine the reaction of the New School's original founders in 1919 – prominent Progressive-era intellectuals like Charles Beard, Herbert Croly, Wesley Clair Mitchell, James Harvey Robinson, Thorstein Veblen, and John Dewey – if they could see the modern landscape of academic labor. These early 20th-century scholars strongly believed in expanding education to working people (the New School was even affiliated with the Workers Education Bureau of America). Yet, paradoxically, the idea of college faculty unionizing on an industrial model would likely have appalled them. To those Progressive-era academics, the notion of professors organizing like factory workers would have been as distasteful as the bloated growth of university administration we see today. In their eyes, a university was meant to be a special kind of place, removed from the crass demands of industry or government control. They founded the New School largely **in protest** against the way traditional universities had been subordinated to outside agendas during World

War I. (Columbia University, for example, had gone so far as to reorganize its departments into quasi-military units – the Medical Corps, the Legal Corps, the Language Corps, and so on – and even fired two faculty members for being "anti-war.") Offended by such incursions on intellectual independence, the New School's founders wanted an institution where scholars could pursue knowledge freely, without having to answer to college presidents, trustees, or politicians.

One of the most eloquent voices of that era was economist and social critic **Thorstein Veblen**, who wrote *The Higher Learning in America* (1918) as a scathing commentary on the influence of business interests in universities. Veblen argued that the true ideal of a university should be the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake – what he famously termed **"idle curiosity."** By this he meant a kind of disinterested, open-ended inquiry driven by curiosity and intellectual passion, not by the quest for practical utility or profit. For Veblen, any attempt to treat knowledge as a **"merchantable commodity"** – something to be bought and sold for gain – was nothing less than a desecration of the scholarly calling. In plain terms, turning education or research into a product for sale betrayed the higher purpose of learning. Veblen's critique was rooted in a broader Progressive disgust for both corporate trusts and wasteful capitalist practices, combined with the traditional scholar's disdain for narrowly vocational training.

Another contemporary, psychologist **James McKeen Cattell** (one of the professors Columbia dismissed during the war for his outspoken views), echoed similar concerns. In a book titled *University Control*, Cattell surveyed academics nationwide about the growing power of university administrators. He vividly described professors as being caught between "the Scylla of presidential autocracy and the Charybdis of faculty and trustee incompetence." This classical metaphor (Scylla and Charybdis being monsters that threaten from both sides) captured how faculty felt squeezed between domineering college presidents on one hand and meddling boards or ineffective faculty governance on the other. Both Veblen and Cattell, in their own ways, were warning that the rise of bureaucracy and business-like management in universities was fundamentally at odds with the independence of scholarly work.

In the ideal vision of these early New School founders and their peers, a university would be a self-governing community of scholars devoted to **learning for the pure joy of learning**. Education was not supposed to be about serving corporate needs or state agendas, nor about making money. In fact, when the New School was launched, it was conceived (perhaps naively) without a traditional president, board of trustees, or heavy bureaucracy – a deliberate attempt to avoid the power structures that they felt corrupted academic life. The **"idle curiosity"** ideal meant that scholars and teachers would follow their intellectual interests wherever they led, without worrying about whether it was immediately useful or profitable. This was a noble ideal of academic freedom and intellectual integrity.

However, as inspiring as that vision was, it existed uneasily alongside economic reality. The founders could not entirely escape the influence of money and administration in the long run (the New School, like any institution, would eventually need structure and funding). More to the point, the Progressive-era aversion to crass commercialism in education did not anticipate a future where the **passion for knowledge itself** could become a tool for exploitation. The irony today is that the very notion of dedication to learning "for its own sake" – once held up as the opposite of doing something for money – can be used by employers as a rationale to **pay people less** for intellectual and creative work. To understand how we got from that old ideal to our present situation, we need to look at two ways of explaining the modern **"mental labor"** problem. The first explanation focuses on the motives and mindset of the workers themselves (a cultural and ethical perspective), and the second on the economic structure of the industries they work in.

The Cultural Discount

One way to explain why so many talented people end up working for low wages in arts, culture, and education is what we can call **the cultural discount**. This term refers to the tendency of people to accept a "discount" on their own pay because they are motivated by love of the work or by a commitment to a cause. In plainer language, many artists, writers, musicians, and even academics are willing to work for less money than they might earn elsewhere **because** they find their work personally rewarding, creative, or socially meaningful. Employers have long recognized this fact and, whether consciously or not, taken advantage of it. The challenge for those who manage cultural and knowledge industries has often been: **How do we maintain a steady supply of skilled workers who are willing to** underprice **their labor out of passion or idealism?** The answer, historically, is that there is a large pool of such workers – people who will gladly write, teach, make art, or play music for a pittance, because for them the work is its own reward.

This **"labor of love"** phenomenon has deep roots. Labor that is freely or cheaply given in service of a higher ideal has always been the informal economic backbone of political, cultural, and educational activities in the nonprofit and public-interest sectors. Think of volunteers at museums, interns at literary magazines, or grassroots political organizers – countless people donate their time and accept minimal pay for the sake of art, knowledge, community, or social change. There is genuine **pleasure and fulfillment** to be found in such selfless work. In fact, the parts of our world that we cherish precisely *because* they are not driven by pure profit – charities, civic organizations, the arts, education – simply **could not exist** without armies of people willing to labor for free or for very little. This kind of **"volunteer" or discounted labor** has been seen as noble, even necessary, in those contexts.

The problem arises when this ethos of disinterested, underpaid work **moves from the margins to the center** of profit-driven industries. In recent years, we have seen exactly that happen. Sectors that are now central to the economy – what some call the "knowledge industries" or creative industries – increasingly rely on workers who are doing what they love and therefore are prepared to tolerate low pay and precarious conditions. In other words, companies have found that they can build a business model on the **cultural discount principle**: the promise of meaningful, mentally gratifying work becomes the carrot that justifies paying people less. We can see this in fields like digital content creation, media, design, and even tech startups – jobs that are seen as cool or intellectually satisfying often come with long hours, unstable contracts, or modest wages, because there's an expectation that "at least you get to do what you're passionate about."

This trend forces us to rethink some of our basic values and advice. Educators and mentors (myself included) often encourage young people to **"follow their passion"** or to choose careers that contribute to the public interest or express their creativity, rather than just chasing a paycheck. That sounds like high-minded advice. But in a labor environment dominated by corporate, profit-oriented models, such idealism can be **manipulated**. If a new graduate is willing to take an unpaid internship at a magazine because she loves writing, or a Ph.D. is willing to adjunct for low pay because he loves teaching, employers can use that willingness to keep labor costs down. What started as a **principle of service** – the idea that work should be meaningful and socially valuable – can end up **serving the interests of cost-cutting managers**. Put bluntly, if enough people are eager to do intellectually or artistically satisfying work for peanuts, then those in charge have little incentive to offer better pay or stable jobs.

An example of cultural discounting can be seen in the arts world we discussed earlier. Jazz musicians, acclaimed by audiences and revered as cultural icons, spent decades accepting very little pay. Why? Partly

because they were passionate about their music and derived non-monetary satisfaction from it – the **joy of performing** or the artistic prestige. Employers (whether clubs, record labels, or, in the New School case, a university) could count on that passion. It created a labor market where extremely skilled people worked for love, not money – which sounds romantic until you consider the **livelihoods** of those people. The New School jazz faculty's union victory was significant precisely because it pushed back against that long-held cultural discount. It demanded that even if the work is done out of love, it still **deserves fair compensation**.

The **cultural discount** perspective thus puts the spotlight on the workers' own willingness to undervalue their labor. It explains the mental labor problem as, in part, a cultural mindset: a kind of **self-exploitation** driven by idealism. However, this is only one side of the coin. There is another, more structural economic explanation – known as **the cost disease** – that complements this view. Where the cultural discount focuses on the supply of willing low-paid labor, the cost disease focuses on the economic demand and financial constraints in cultural and knowledge fields that make it hard to pay people well even if you wanted to. Let's explore that next.

The Cost Disease

A second major explanation for why cultural and knowledge workers often earn so little is an economic phenomenon that researchers call **"the cost disease."** This term was coined by economists (notably William Baumol and William Bowen) who studied the performing arts in the 1960s. They observed something peculiar: in many artistic and educational activities, it takes **just as much human effort to produce the service as it did decades ago**, but meanwhile the cost of employing people keeps rising. For example, it takes a full string quartet to play a Beethoven piece now just as it did in 1820 – you can't exactly **streamline** that without losing the essence of the performance. By contrast, in a factory making widgets, technological advances might allow you to double output with the same number of workers (or fewer) over time. In economic terms, industries like manufacturing experience **productivity growth** – they get more efficient and thus can pay workers more while still lowering the cost per product. But in labor-intensive fields like live music performance, teaching, or healthcare, productivity doesn't increase at the same rate (a teacher can still only teach so many students in a class, a musician can only play one concert at a time, etc.).

The "cost disease" model points out that as wages in the broader economy rise (thanks to productivity gains in other sectors), sectors with low productivity growth face a dilemma. To keep talented workers, they have to **pay competitive salaries**, but because those workers aren't producing more *units* of service than before, the **cost per unit** of, say, a concert or a class keeps going up. For instance, if orchestral musicians get annual pay increases to meet the rising cost of living, the expense of staging a concert increases year after year, even though the concert is not any longer or better in terms of labor input than it was before. This is why the cost disease famously predicts that the price of live performances (or college tuition, or hospital services) will tend to rise faster than the general inflation rate. In plain English: it just keeps getting more expensive to support activities that can't easily be made more efficient.

Back in the mid-20th century, this realization actually helped build the case for public subsidies for the arts and education. Baumol and Bowen's findings provided empirical support for government and philanthropic funding: if the arts are inherently prone to running deficits due to the cost disease, then outside funding is needed to keep theaters, orchestras, and arts programs alive without pricing them astronomically high. Indeed, many countries (and private foundations) embraced this logic and increased support for the arts, treating them a bit like public goods that shouldn't be left purely to market forces. In the U.S., this thinking contributed to the establishment of organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts – the idea was

to buffer cultural institutions from market pressures that would otherwise either drive up prices or drive down artists' wages (or both).

However, over time, public support for the arts and education has often been stagnant or cut, especially under market-driven, austere economic policies. The result? Many organizations in these fields are back to facing the cost crunch. According to the cost disease theory, they have a few options: **raise prices** (which, for a university, means higher tuition; for a museum or orchestra, higher ticket prices or fees), **find new efficiencies or technologies** to boost productivity, or – and here is the kicker – **hold down labor costs**, intentionally or unintentionally. Often it's some combination of all three. We've certainly seen colleges raise tuition dramatically over the years, and arts organizations try to innovate with technology (like digital performances, online courses, etc.). But a large part of the adjustment has been to keep labor costs low wherever possible. And here is where the cost disease intersects with the cultural discount: cutting labor costs is "easier" in fields where the workers are predisposed to accept lower pay.

Think of it this way: the cost disease creates **financial pressure** – a gap between what it costs to maintain quality cultural/educational services and what people are able or willing to pay for those services. Something has to give to bridge that gap. In an era of limited public subsidy, often the thing that gives is worker compensation. Now, if those workers also happen to **love their jobs** enough to continue despite low pay (the cultural discount), the system finds a grim equilibrium. The show goes on, the classes are taught, the services are provided – and they remain affordable or profitable to the institution – largely because the workers effectively **subsidize the product with their low-paid or even unpaid labor**.

To illustrate, consider higher education. Professors and instructors provide an immensely valuable service, but the traditional model (small classes, lots of faculty time per student) is expensive. Universities under budget pressures face a choice: either secure a lot more funding (through state aid, endowment, tuition hikes) or find ways to **deliver education cheaper**. In recent decades, the solution has often been: hire armies of part-time adjunct instructors with Ph.D.s who will teach for a few thousand dollars a course and no benefits – essentially poverty wages given their qualifications. Why could universities get away with this? Partly because there is an oversupply of qualified academics who desperately want to teach and do research – they're passionate about their fields and have been told that a scholarly career is the pinnacle of achievement. So they accept positions that pay, in many cases, less than a fast-food job when calculated hourly, just to stay in the game. Here we see the cultural discount (the willingness of academics to work for peanuts out of devotion to scholarship) dovetailing perfectly with the cost disease pressure (the university's need to cut labor costs to cope with financial limits).

In summary, the **cost disease** explanation reminds us that the economic structure of creative and knowledge industries often makes it hard to pay workers well. It's not just a matter of personal willingness or moral failing; even if no one wanted to exploit anybody, there's a built-in challenge: how do you reward labor in fields that don't experience productivity boosts? Unfortunately, one common answer has been to rely on the **intrinsic motivation** of those workers as a kind of workaround. This brings us to the current reality in many knowledge industries, especially academia, where passionate workers meet neoliberal, cost-cutting institutions – and the outcome is what we might bluntly call a **volunteer low-wage workforce**.

A Volunteer Low-Wage Army?

Nowhere is the convergence of these trends more evident than in higher education itself. Starting in the 1990s, universities began to adopt aggressive cost-cutting and profit-driven strategies often associated with

the corporate world. This period saw what some call the **corporatization of academia**: practices like outsourcing, downsizing of full-time staff, **“deskilling”** of work, and a shift to flexible, temporary employment contracts. Long-held traditions such as tenure (a guarantee of permanent employment for professors), academic freedom, and faculty self-governance came under threat. A full-time, tenure-track teaching job – once the standard career goal for a Ph.D. – rapidly turned into a rare privilege. Instead, colleges and universities increasingly ran on **adjunct instructors and part-time lecturers** who were hired course by course, semester by semester, with few or no benefits and often very low pay. In a remarkably short span, higher education became one of the most advanced examples of a precarious “gig” labor market among professional fields.

Why did the **low-wage revolution** sweep through universities so quickly? Several conditions made academic labor especially ripe for discounting. First, there's that very **“willingness”** we discussed: scholars often carry a sense of personal vocation. Whether as graduate students or as newly minted Ph.D.s, many academics internalize the idea that it is a privilege to pursue knowledge and teach others – so much so that they’ll accept lower wages for the chance to do so. It's akin to the ethos of artists or performers who might “suffer for their art.” In academia, a common sentiment (sometimes half-jokingly) is, **“we’re not in it for the money.”** This attitude, noble as it is, unfortunately makes it easier for universities to justify paying poorly. Unlike law or medicine, where lengthy training is later rewarded with high salaries, the academic track expects a sacrifice of earnings for the love of the field, and it has increasingly **exploited that expectation**.

University administrators, consciously or not, took advantage of this dynamic. They discovered they could maintain a **“reserve army”** of highly educated people eager to work in academia, and use them to staff courses at a fraction of what a full professor would cost. In classic labor economics, employers often keep a pool of unemployed or underemployed workers to depress wages (because desperate job seekers will accept less). Higher education found something even more insidious: a pool of **underemployed Ph.D.s and scholars who were almost volunteering their labor**, driven by passion and hope rather than just desperation. I call this a **“volunteer low-wage army.”**

Now, let’s be clear: adjunct and part-time professors don’t actually **want** to be underpaid, with no health insurance and no job security. Many are, in fact, fighting back – unionizing, holding protests, and demanding better treatment. Recent years have seen adjunct unions winning modest raises and benefits at some colleges. However, organizing this workforce is notoriously difficult. These instructors are often transient (hopping from campus to campus to piece together a living), isolated, and fearful of being replaced if they speak up. It's a contingent workforce by design, which makes collective action challenging.

Why use the term **“volunteer”** then? It’s certainly not to blame the victims or suggest they happily choose exploitation. Rather, it highlights the **perverse outcome** of a certain academic culture. Aspiring scholars are essentially **trained to accept** non-monetary rewards – things like intellectual satisfaction, prestige of being a professor, or the identity of being a thinker – **in lieu of adequate pay**. Over time, working for long hours for very little pay becomes normalized as part of the academic vocation. In the most twisted version of this logic, being underpaid even gets reframed as a badge of honor: proof of one’s pure devotion to knowledge and teaching. (If you were really mercenary, the thinking goes, you’d be out in industry making money; the fact that you stay in academia despite the low pay shows you are truly committed to the life of the mind.) This mentality doesn’t come from nowhere – it’s a vestige of the old **“amateur-scholar” ideal**, where the pursuit of truth was seen as incompatible with monetary gain. But it has been **repurposed in a modern corporate context** to keep a workforce docile and cheap.

Consider, for contrast, other learned professions like law or medicine. They have periods of low-paid apprenticeship (law clerks, medical residents), but those are temporary and understood as stepping stones to well-compensated careers. Academia turned the exception into the rule: for a huge percentage of scholars, the "temporary" training jobs just became the job, with no prosperous phase ever arriving. It's as if the medical field kept nearly all doctors as perpetual residents with no attending positions. No other profession relies so heavily on the **self-sacrifice of its credentialed members**.

This **adjunctification** of academia was accelerated by conscious administrative choices. Universities in the 90s and beyond actively decided to hire more part-timers and fewer tenure-track faculty, often citing budget constraints or the need for flexibility. They maintained, essentially, an oversupply of qualified educators relative to the number of stable jobs – which allowed them to set low wages. It's not unlike an employer ensuring there's a line of people out the door willing to take any opening; it keeps those inside hesitant to demand more. In economic downturns, this only got worse: newly minted Ph.D.s found no secure jobs and swelled the adjunct ranks, grateful just to stay academically employed in some fashion.

To make matters more complicated, many academics internalized not just a willingness to accept hardship, but a **taboo against "tainting" intellectual work with money concerns.** Talking about fair pay or unionizing could be seen as unscholarly or crass in some circles – after all, weren't professors above mere monetary motivations? This attitude played right into the hands of cost-cutting administrators.

By the late 1990s, some adjunct instructors began to rebel against these conditions, just as the New School jazz faculty did. They started forming unions, bargaining units, and advocating for change. For example, part-time faculty at various universities – including some big victories at public colleges and even private ones like NYU – managed to negotiate contracts that gave them raises and benefits. These were important steps, but they often met stiff resistance. A contingent workforce is hard to organize because individuals can be easily not rehired, and new eager candidates are always available. Still, the very fact that adjuncts and other academic laborers began organizing signaled that the **"volunteer army"** was becoming self-aware and pushing back.

Even as these movements continue, the overarching system remains: a vast underpaid workforce in academia that functions much like an **unofficial subsidy** to the higher education system. Universities could not run (at least not in their current form and scale) without this pool of cheap labor. It props up the system in much the same way that volunteer labor props up nonprofit sectors.

Let's connect this back to the big picture. What we see in academia is just one instance of a wider phenomenon in the knowledge economy. Whether it's writers vying for unpaid online publication, interns grinding long hours for a shot at a media job, or game developers pulling all-nighters fueled by passion for their craft, the pattern is similar: **people's love for their work is being leveraged to extract economic value from them, with only scant reward in return**.

So, what is to be done about this "mental labor problem"? It's a tricky question that provokes a lot of anxiety. After all, we **want** people to love their work and to pursue higher ideals than money. The world is richer for all the art, research, and care that people give beyond the call of a paycheck. The problem lies not with the individuals or their passions, but with how our economy is structured around those passions. Right now, that structure is one of **systemic imbalance**: an economy that encourages extensive education and training, promises that knowledge is the ticket to prosperity, yet cannot provide enough decently paid, secure jobs for all the highly educated, passionate people it produces. We've essentially created a high-

skilled workforce on the premise of a “knowledge society,” but many of those skills are being underutilized or undervalued in practice.

Educational institutions are complicit in this disconnect. From high school onward, people are told that the key to a good life in the new economy is education, education, education. And indeed, education has become almost a mandatory passport to any stable economic security. Yet, we witness the paradox of **Ph.D.s driving taxis or waiting tables**, and college adjuncts qualifying for food stamps. Meanwhile, many jobs in the growing service sector require little more than basic literacy and a friendly smile, offering no ladder of advancement no matter how educated you are. The promise of education isn’t matching up with reality, leaving a lot of overqualified and underpaid workers.

It’s crucial to note that this **oversupply of educated labor** isn’t just a natural accident – it serves a function in the economy. The **expectations** raised by the mantra “get a degree and you’ll get ahead” help regulate labor markets. In fields of mental work (like academia, media, tech), the **hope** of landing meaningful, fulfilling work keeps a lot of aspirants motivated, even if they have to endure years of precarious, low-paid positions. This, in turn, maintains a large pool of labor willing to accept those conditions, which helps keep wages down and workers in line. In economic terms, the sheer prospect of “doing what you love” acts as a disciplinary mechanism. It maintains a **degraded labor market** in which a lucky few might eventually secure stable, well-paid roles (those are the stories of success that keep others hanging on), but many others will linger in insecurity. The floor of wages in these core creative and knowledge sectors remains low, partly because it’s propped up by the dreams and dedication of the workforce itself.

So, how do we move forward? Recognizing the problem is a start. We have to remember, **first and foremost**, that the core issue is not individual laziness or poor choices – it’s how the economy is organized. We’ve been restructuring into a polarized system of haves and have-nots even among the educated, and that’s not the fault of the people who simply want to engage in meaningful work. It’s a structural problem: a mismatch between our socio-economic promises and the realities of the labor market. The **education system** is now caught in the middle. It keeps turning out knowledge workers and encouraging high aspirations, while the economy only offers so many slots for secure, well-paid jobs of that kind. The rest are left scrambling, often clinging to the edges of their dream careers.

Addressing this will likely require more than just telling individuals to be more “realistic” or to stop following their passion. It calls for modernizing our approach to labor politics and educational values. This could mean strengthening labor rights and unions in knowledge sectors, so that love for the work cannot be abused as easily. It could mean public policies that better fund the arts, education, and research, treating them as public goods rather than luxuries – so that organizations aren’t forced to exploit workers to balance budgets. It might also involve a cultural shift in how we value different kinds of work, ensuring that caring or creative professions earn a livelihood one can raise a family on.

At the very least, we need to have an honest conversation with students and aspiring professionals about these realities. Encouraging idealism must be coupled with fighting for an economy where idealism isn’t a liability. The **“mental labor problem”** – this uneasy intersection of passion and exploitation – is a call to rethink some of our bedrock values about work and worth. As we navigate a knowledge-based society, we have to decide: will we allow **“doing what you love”** to become an excuse for inequality, or can we align our economic structures to genuinely honor and reward the mental and creative labor that enriches all of our lives? The answer to that question will shape the future of work for generations to come.
