

Nussbaum's work will likely seem cursory and overly broad. A lot of the book deals with brief, high-level overviews of ideas and concepts as opposed to rigorous academic debate.

But while Nussbaum's work may lack focus at times, her holistic approach does yield novel ideas. She has written a highly readable and accessible work that is an excellent overview of Stoic ideals of cosmopolitanism and the impact it had on Enlightenment thinkers. While Nussbaum disagrees with the Stoic position, she shows an immense knowledge of each thinker she discusses, including not only their philosophical opinions but also how their personal life influenced their worldview. The policies Nussbaum puts forward are not radically new, but they are cautiously realistic. Overall, Nussbaum is not attempting to give a detailed answer as to how to tackle the international issues at hand. Instead, she is constructing a framework for policymakers to apply. Nussbaum's capabilities approach provides a challenging framework for libertarians to move beyond a solely rights-oriented focus to include a vision of a flourishing life both at home and abroad.

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The American Dream Is Not Dead (But Populism Could Kill It)

Michael R. Strain

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Capitalism's populist critics, on both left and right, have got their critique backward—not only are earnings and economic opportunity not evaporating, as they claim, but their own recommended “industrial policy” fixes would bring the working class to the ruin they claim to be combating. That is a central theme in *The American Dream Is Not Dead (But Populism Could Kill It)* by Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Strain assembles a strong collection of statistics to disprove the catastrophist narrative about wage stagnation and teases apart some complex issues with the statistics cited by leading populist critics. The very success of his numerical counterargument, however, suggests that hard data will likely have a disappointingly small impact on a movement that is ultimately more about values and emotions than numbers.

The top populist economic critique of market economics—one that has recently gained ascendance on the political right—is that wages for the average American worker have stagnated or declined over the last several decades. Strain’s analysis finds that “typical workers” have seen an inflation-adjusted increase of 34 percent in purchasing power over the last 30 years, which he writes “is not reasonably described as stagnant growth.” He provides similar rebuttals to other populist claims about earnings for the lowest-paid Americans and supposed recent skyrocketing of income inequality. Real incomes of the bottom quintile increased 66 percent from 1990 to 2016. Meanwhile, inequality rose in earlier decades but actually *decreased* by 7 percent from 2007 to 2016.

The persuasiveness of these figures, of course, depends on Strain’s analysis of the underlying data. He is in something of a bind when it comes to explaining the details, as his book is meant to be a short and accessible summary and not a detailed academic treatise. He does a good job of threading this needle, though, walking readers through important aspects of his method, including correcting several decades of income data for changes in household size, accounting for tax and transfer payment changes in addition to wage and salary income, and using personal consumption expenditures (CPE) rather than the consumer price index (CPI) to adjust for inflation.

All of those detailed calculations and explanations are a credit to Strain’s erudition and expertise, but I doubt they will convince many of his antagonists, including some very prominent and influential economists. This book includes a fascinating rebuttal section, in which Strain’s arguments get critiqued, within the text of his own book, by *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, from the left, and Ethics and Public Policy Center Senior Fellow Henry Olsen, from the right. Dionne interestingly insists that we look back well before 1990 in making trend comparisons. It makes for a lively exchange, but ultimately Strain’s arguments are targeted far more at populist conservatives than the conventional center-left critiques that Dionne represents. Thus, it is Olsen’s response that is more telling.

Olsen’s rebuttal is less a refutation and more of a pivot. He concedes that Strain “does an excellent job of disproving the common tropes of American economic decline,” but then insists that does not mean Strain “refutes the conservative populist argument.” Olsen cites the decades-long decline of labor force participation rates for “prime-age” men (25- to 54-year olds), a topic treated at great length

by other researchers, including Strain's AEI colleague Nicholas Eberstadt in his 2016 book *Men Without Work*. Olsen suggests that the closing of manufacturing facilities during previous recessions left certain groups of able-bodied men permanently unemployed, "despite the overall trend of rising wages and opportunity." Yet, this is exactly the point that Strain makes repeatedly. Despite there being subgroups of economically disadvantaged people across America and through the decades, the fundamental system is sound; we should not be "confusing pockets of real struggle in American life with the broader canvas of the American experience."

Olsen's rebuttal—like many other populist conservative critiques—includes many hints that the populist position has more to do with positioning, social attitudes, and other cultural anxieties rather than actual economic hardship. Olsen insists that conservative populism "has an audience" and constitutes "a viable argument," but skirts around the question of whether its complaints are generally valid and correct. Even when it comes to the core critique at issue of whether national policymakers have somehow unfairly disadvantaged working-class men, Olsen suggests that many of the under- and unemployed men in the 21st century lack "the interpersonal skills or educational background" for today's job market or "the intellectual capacity to succeed in higher education programs." These things are supposed to be the fault of international trade and capital markets?

We see the populist critique coming in wide of the data even more dramatically in the high-profile comments of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), whom Strain quotes in Chapter 2, "Today's Message: The Dream Is Dead." Strain excerpts Rubio's December 2018 essay in *The Atlantic*, but the senator's populist sentiments are probably more well-known from his November 2019 speech at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. In it, Rubio says that millions of people have been "unable to find dignified work and [are] feeling forgotten, ignored, and left behind." He describes running for president in 2016, saying that the people he talked to on the campaign trail felt "anxious, even angry at those they blamed for ignoring them, disrespecting them, and leaving them behind." And he decries American workers losing their jobs to offshoring and being "told to go back to school, learn to code, and leave their extended family and community behind and get a job in the 'new economy.'"

But isn't learning new job skills and potentially moving to places with more economic opportunity exactly what we should expect

from people who have lost their jobs? Why is it such an unbearable insult to suggest that a working-class man, of all things, learn to write software code? Rubio isn't lamenting a lack of government programs that facilitate retraining—he's suggesting that's it's a grievous insult to even suggest such a thing. His Catholic University speech is extremely thin on examples of actual privation and economic suffering and suffused with the language of honor culture and wounded pride. Unfortunately, Michael Strain's incisive analysis of recent economic trends is likely powerless to turn aside such a series of complaints.

I should mention the perhaps inauspicious timing of the book's debut. *The American Dream Is Not Dead* was released at the end of February 2020, just as people in the United States were beginning to worry about the spread of the novel coronavirus that was first detected in southern China. In the weeks that followed, financial markets and short-term employment saw massive and unpredictable changes, with many economic observers predicting a severe recession for most of the rest of 2020. That will certainly put at least a short-term damper on the good economic news, especially the employment numbers.

Ultimately, however, I suspect Strain's analysis and the discontent it confronts will remain relevant long after the Covid-19 pandemic subsides. Populist discontent with big business and market-driven economic policy is nothing new. Despite the tendency of political analysts to describe anti-corporate populism, especially from the right, as a recent permutation of the Trump era, it has been a recurrent feature through much of American history, present across the political spectrum.

Ross Perot's 1992 presidential campaign, for example, was pure economic populism, including his infamous prediction that adopting the North American Free Trade Agreement would produce a "giant sucking sound" at the nation's southern border as middle-class manufacturing jobs get pulled down to Mexico. Detroit's auto workers have been complaining about supposedly unfair imports from Asia since the 1970s. The late American progressive journalist William Greider wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* in 1982 titled "The UAW Fights for Survival," with the zeitgeist-capturing subtitle "Must America play the good-natured wimp in the name of free trade while Japan gets the jobs and the money?" Substitute China in 2020 for Japan in 1982 and that's pure MAGA (Make America Great Again) rhetoric. And, of

course, Patrick Buchanan, who worked in the White House for both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, has been railing against free trade for decades. Critiques of market economics and big business that cite working-class angst will likely be around for a long time.

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The Case for Nationalism: How It Made Us Powerful, United, and Free

Rich Lowry

New York: Broadside, 2019, 293 pp.

The newest intellectual trend on the American right is building a coherent ideology around the policies and rhetoric of President Donald J. Trump. Conservatives have experience with this. In the 1990s, the moral majority reigned supreme. During the Bush II years, right-wingers adopted a hawkish neoconservatism. Beginning with the Great Recession, right-wingers ditched the neoconservatism and adopted rhetorically moderate free-market libertarianism. Then Trump took over the Republican Party with his anti-trade, pro-entitlement, anti-immigration, and “Make America Great Again” ideology—also known as nationalism.

Thus, many conservatives are seeking to put some intellectual heft behind nationalism as they did with their earlier ideological flings. *National Review* editor Rich Lowry steps up with his new book *The Case for Nationalism: How It Made Us Powerful, United, and Free*. His book is the latest addition to a growing literature that attempts to put ideological meat on the skeletal nationalistic rhetoric of President Trump.

Lowry begins by defining nationalism as love of one’s national culture, language, history, institutions, holidays, and everything good in a nation. According to Lowry, nationalism doesn’t promote hatred of foreigners or other cultures, but it is an expression of love for your fellow co-nationals based on those common traits. Lowry correctly claims that nationalism is a natural ideology that has been with humans for a while, expressed in most countries and governments throughout time.

For Lowry, even though nationalism is natural and has existed throughout human civilization, government policy plays an important