



David Brooks Wonders Why Men Can't Find Jobs: Comedy Ensues

By: Matt Taibbi – July 16, 2013

From a David Brooks column in *The New York Times* this morning:

In 1954, 96 percent of American men between 25 and 54 years old worked. Today, 80 percent do. One-fifth of men in their prime working ages are out of the labor force.

Brooks' point piece turns out to be a popular column topic among conservative writers: *Why aren't people working?* The twist in this one is that it's a gender-based thesis. Brooks got hold of some stats showing that men are having more trouble recovering the jobs lost in the recent recession than women. He cites a Floyd Norris column from this weekend, "Gender Gaps Appear as Employment Recovers From Recession," which provides all the relevant numbers.

Norris's piece actually offered a simple explanation for the gender gap. The jobs that are coming back, he says, are in the health care sector, where women hold four out of every five jobs. In fact, if you read Norris's piece carefully, you learn that women are actually losing ground in non-health-care related industries like manufacturing and financial services, that men are getting jobs back in those fields at a better rate than women. But, again, there's been more recovery in the health care sector for whatever reason, hence the stats.

Brooks takes all this data and decides that the real issue here is that men are not adaptable and can't bring themselves to make the changes needed to find work. He weaves an elaborate analogy involving the John Wayne movie *The Seachers*, which I guess is about the end of the cowboy era and how the rugged, violent men who tamed the West had trouble fitting in to the cushy, civilized world they helped create. (What David Brooks knows about any of this is anyone's guess). Brooks writes about Wayne's Ethan Edwards character as the hero who has made himself obsolete. "Once the western towns have been pacified," he notes, "there's no need for his capacity for violence, nor his righteous fury."

There's a famous scene in the film where Edwards brings an abducted girl home after a seven-year quest but, being the obsolete brute that he is, is unable to cross the threshold into her civilized home upon his return. To Brooks, this somehow is a metaphor for the men of modern times, who are unable to "cross the threshold into the new economy."

Anyone who's ever been unemployed knows that statistics like the ones Norris cites have everything to do with what kinds of jobs are available, and very little to do with the

willingness of the population to work. Pretty much everyone who doesn't have a job will do just about anything short of organ donation to get a job. If you've got kids and you can't make rent, nobody needs to help you cross any freaking threshold into any new age. If it doesn't involve sucking on someone else's body parts, you'll do it.

Not according to Brooks, who thinks there's another explanation:

But, surely, there has been some ineffable shift in the definition of dignity. Many men were raised with a certain image of male dignity, which emphasized autonomy, reticence, ruggedness, invulnerability and the competitive virtues. Now, thanks to a communications economy, they find themselves in a world that values expressiveness, interpersonal ease, vulnerability and the cooperative virtues.

Surely, part of the situation is that many men simply do not want to put themselves in positions they find humiliating. A high school student doesn't want to persist in a school where he feels looked down on. A guy in his 50s doesn't want to find work in a place where he'll be told what to do by savvy young things.

Hmm. Men don't want to be put in positions they find humiliating? How many men out there today are working as telemarketers? As collections agents? How many grown men are working in fast-food restaurants, getting yelled at by people like Brooks when they put the wrong McNugget sauce in the take-out bag?

And as for those 50-year-olds not wanting to work in a place where he'll be told what to do by savvy young things – it's the other way around. Usually, the savvy young things are turning down the older guy. If Brooks thinks there are 50-year-old men out there with families, people maybe facing foreclosure, who *turn down* jobs because they don't want to take orders from "savvy young things," he's crazy. All jobs involve taking humiliating orders from bosses and everyone who's ever had a job knows that. If you need a job badly enough, you'll take a job offered by Hermann Goering, Hannibal Lecter, Naomi Campbell, anyone.

It's not just Brooks. These days you can't throw a rock without hitting some muddle-headed affluent white dude who spends his nights stroking his multiple chins and pondering the question of the lazy poor, convinced as he is that there are plenty of jobs and the problem is that prideful or uncommitted or historically anachronistic (that's Brooks' take) folks just won't suck it up and take them.

Earlier this year, for instance, when Yale and Penn started suing their graduates for failing to pay back their student loans, *Bloomberg* asked a Cato Institute fellow named Neal McCluskey for comment. He replied:

You could take a job at Subway or wherever to pay the bills and that's something you need to do if you have agreed in taking a loan to pay it back . . . It seems like basic responsibility to me.

First of all, if you need to take a job at Subway after getting a degree from Yale, that's pathetic and 100 percent on Yale, not on the kid who mortgaged his future to pay for a Yale education. Secondly, it's pretty obvious Neal McCluskey has never tried to live on a Subway salary. He should probably give that a shot and see how much money is left over

at the end of every month to pay off his Perkins loan. He'd be hooking in Union Station within a month.

It's amazing how many educated people really believe that the unemployed just don't like to work. I remember seeing Jon Voight, of all people, reading one of his infamous letters on Mike Huckabee's show, talking about the "very poor and needy, who live to be taken care of," who have been fed "poison" by our president, giving them the idea that they're "entitled to take from the wealthy, who have lived and worked in a democracy."

Here's a guy lucky enough to have a job in a fantasy-land business where people hurl money at him round the clock for a few hours of work a day, who somehow finds the time to work himself into creepily genuine anger towards a group of people who have to fight to get jobs cleaning toilets or working fry-o-lators. Talk about a guy who needs a new hobby, or a puppy, something!

Remember that scene in *American Psycho* where Christian Bale stabs Reg E. Cathey's homeless "Al" character? The part where he's like, "Get a job, Al – you've got a negative attitude, that's what's holding you back!" Fellas, Msrs. Brooks and Voight, that was *satire*. About the last thing the millions of broke Americans out there need is someone like you telling them their problem is that they need a more positive attitude. Actually their problem is much more simple: not enough jobs. Really, that's pretty much it. It's not a mystery.