Essential Jobs, Inequality, and “Dirty Work”: A Book Talk with Eyal Press – Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

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Description

The pandemic has heightened many organizations’ focus on job quality: now is the time to shift focus from fixing workers to fixing work. Companies are facing pressure to improve factors that contribute to job quality including wages, benefits, workplace safety, racial and gender equity, and opportunities to learn and grow. But often overlooked is the content of the work—how does what we do align with who we think we are? In his new book, “Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America,” Eyal Press explores the toll of moral injuries at work, highlighting the working conditions of jobs that typically go unseen and raising disquieting questions about our society and its dependence on these jobs. For anyone concerned about job quality, “Dirty Work” is essential reading. We hope you enjoy this conversation with the author.

Learn more about this event at as.pn/dirtywork.

Speakers

Eyal Press

Journalist and Author, “Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America”

Eyal Press is a writer and journalist who contributes to The New Yorker, The New York Times, and other publications. Since the spring of 2021, he is also a sociologist with a PhD from New York University. He grew up in Buffalo, which served as the backdrop of his first book, “Absolute Convictions” (2006). His second book, “Beautiful Souls” (2012), examined the nature of moral courage through the stories of individuals who risked their careers, and sometimes their lives, to defy unjust orders. A New York Times editors’ choice, the book has been translated into numerous languages and selected as the common read at several universities, including Penn State and his alma mater, Brown University. His most recent book, “Dirty Work” (2021), examines the morally troubling jobs that society tacitly condones and the hidden class of workers who do them. A recipient of the James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism, he has received an Andrew Carnegie fellowship, a Cullman Center fellowship at the New York Public Library, and a Puffin Foundation fellowship at Type Media Center.

Maureen Conway (Moderator)

Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as vice president at the Aspen Institute and as executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity.

About

The Economic Opportunities Program's Opportunity in America discussion series has moved to an all-virtual format as we all do what we can to slow the spread of COVID-19. But the conversations about the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the US and implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country remain vitally important. We hope you will participate as we bring our discussions to you in virtual formats, and we look forward to your feedback.

We are grateful to Prudential Financial, Walmart.org, the Surdna Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of this series.

The Economic Opportunities Program advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. Follow us on social media and join our mailing list to stay up-to-date on publications, blog posts, events, and other announcements.

Transcript

Maureen Conway (00:00)

Good afternoon and welcome everybody. My name is Maureen Conway. I'm a vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of our Economic Opportunities Program and I'm thrilled to welcome you today to our conversation with Eyal Press, author of "Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America." This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program's ongoing Opportunity in America discussion series, in which we explore the changing landscape of opportunity across the United States, the implications for individuals, families and communities and ideas for change.

We're very grateful to Prudential Financial, Walmart.org, the Surdna Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of our Opportunity in America discussion series. Thanks very much to everybody for joining today. If it's your first time joining us, we do record and put all of our events on our website, so you can find all of our previous Opportunity in America discussion events as well as our Working in America discussion events and our Reinventing Low Wage Work discussion events on our website. It's as.pn/eopevents.

And one of the themes that we've actually returned to time and again over these now more than eight years of having various discussions across these different series is the theme of job quality. And in particular, the quality of jobs that people who are less privileged and less powerful in our society often find themselves in. Often these are jobs that are held by women, by workers of color, by immigrants and by younger workers. And as we've been talking about job quality, we frequently talk about job quality in terms of a lot of the more tangible measures of job quality such as wages and benefits and working

conditions, health and safety at work, paid time off and schedules, a lot of those elements of job quality.

But what I really appreciate about Eyal's book is that it really looks at the content of work, the moral terrain of work, what happens to working people when there, for some reason, feel compelled to do work in which they feel compromised and really thinks about how does that affect their wellbeing, their emotional wellbeing, their spiritual wellbeing and even their physical wellbeing. And I think the book adds depth to the conversation, the part of job quality we've been having a conversation about that focuses on worker voice, on the issues of power and control and agency and the ability to one's working conditions and how that really plays a pretty central role in determining job quality.

And at the same time, I think the book also broadens the frame for thinking about the responsibility for conditions of work, away from sort of just a specific worker or a specific employer and broadens it more to thinking about how this work is part and parcel of our society and what does that mean for where responsibility rests? So it's a fantastic book. I think it offers a lot of food for thought for anybody who's interested in issues of equity, job, quality opportunity. Here it is. This is the book. Go get it. Read it. Listen to it. I listen to it. I like it and I like my books in audible form, but I'm really thrilled, so thanks, Eyal, for joining us today and look forward to discussing this.

But before we start, of course, we need to go over our logistics just quickly. So everybody, all of our attendees are muted today, but we welcome your questions. Please do ask questions. We'll try to get you as many as we can in the Q&A tab, in the Slido box. Please put your questions there and we'll try to keep track and get you as many as we can. We also encourage ... I know a lot of people on today's conversation also work in this space and we really encourage you to share work that you're doing that relates to the topic we're talking about, so please share your ideas, resources and the ideas tab. That's also in the Slido Box. We'd love to hear from you about what's going on for you.

And then we very much appreciate your feedback. There's a third tab, the polls tab, there's a very quick survey there. Please do fill it out before you go. We'd love to take your feedback and try to always improve our events. We also encourage you to tweet about our events. The hashtag is talk opportunity. If you have any tech issues during the event, please do email us at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org. As I mentioned, the webinar is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on our website. And finally close captions, to be honest, we've been struggling a little bit with our closed captions. We want our events to be as successful as possible. I hope they work today.

They will be closed captions in the recording. So apologies on that and work continues to make that more effective. And now let me briefly introduce Eyal Press. Eyal press is a writer and journalist who contributes to The New Yorker, The New York Times and other publications since the spring of 2021. He's also a sociologist with a PhD from NYU. Congratulations on that. Thank you. Eyal's author of two previous books absolute convictions, my father, a city in the conflict that divided America and beautiful souls, the courage and conscience of ordinary people in extraordinary times. So Eyal's experience in exploring this intersection of public debate and personal conviction, I'm really thrilled that you've joined us today. Thank you so much.

So there, I'm all done. With all of that, let's just start and hear from you. And maybe just to start, you could talk about the title of your book. You call it Dirty Work. So maybe you could tell us what you mean by that and a little bit about what drew you to write about this.

Eyal Press (06:36)

Sure. Thank you so much, Maureen, and thank you to the Aspen Institute and thank you to everyone who is tuning in today. I wish we could all be in a room together and have an in-person conversation.

That would really energize all of us, but this is the next best thing and I'm thrilled to have this opportunity. So Dirty Work, I think it's important to explain the title because it's obviously a well-known colloquial expression. And I think, when people hear that expression, they usually think of work that is physically dirtying like maybe hauling garbage from the street. And I have a different definition and meaning of dirty work in the book.

When I use the term, it refers to morally troubling activities that society depends on and tacitly condones, but generally doesn't want to hear or too much about. So it's both the moral dimension that is different when I talk about dirty work, but it's also the societal dimension that this is work that plays a very important role in sustaining certain practices, policies, aspects of the American lifestyle, but that we generally don't see or hear too much about. And I didn't formulate that concept on my own. I draw this concept of dirty work from a sociologist named Everett Hughes which is actually where the narrative of the book begins. And Hughes was, he taught at the University of Chicago, but after World War II, he spent a semester teaching in Germany, in postwar Germany.

And when he went back to Germany, he had been there in the early '30s. Of course, he was going back to the country where Nazism had taken place. And most of the people he knew, professors and intellectuals and artists were not open supporters of the Nazi party. They were people he was really curious to talk to to find out, "What happened and how did you stay in this place and maintain a sense of just not feel solidly by all of this?" So he goes back and he starts asking people about what happened under the Nazis and what the people he knew tell him is, "We're ashamed of what took place here. This is a horrible, horrible thing," which is exactly what you'd expect, the class of people I'm talking about to say.

But then as he, as they went on talking, they would say, "But you know, the Jews, they really were a problem. It's not that what the Nazis did was right, but something had to be done to settle this problem." And Hughes keeps hearing this, on the one hand, "We're shamed," on the other hand, "This was a problem. And the Jews were taking all the good jobs and they were gathered in these ghettos," and out of this, he formulates this idea of dirty work. The essay that he wrote is actually called Good People and Dirty Work. And the good people in that title, as you can imagine, are these folks he knew, these well-intentioned cosmopolitan people. The dirty work is what the Nazis did.

And what he says in this essay is, "We would like to think of these two things as separate, but they aren't. The dirty work wasn't done by rogue actors. It was done by agents of society who were taking care of a problem that was just hidden from view. And it's not that the good people would have approved of the details of what we is happening, but at some level they just washed their hands of it." And to me, the most interesting thing about the essay is that it is not addressed to Germans. It is not actually and Hughes was very explicit about this. He said in correspondence later, "I wrote this, this essay as a warning to my fellow North Americans to make us aware of the dangers in our own midst, to make us aware that this dynamic between good people and dirty work between the people who want to think of themselves as good people, but actually tolerate these things."

This exists in every society and it exists obviously in much more subtle and gray forms in a place like the United States, but he talked about racial violence. He talked about private lynchings. This was in the '50s and early '60s. He actually talked about prisons, all kinds of things that maybe we pushed to the side and don't want to hear too much about. And I was really fascinated by this concept because the two main things I've written about throughout my career are on the one hand issues of social justice, writ large inequality, human rights, racism and inequities in our society on the other. The second one is, as you mentioned in your introduction issues of personal conscience, what happens to an individual when, what they're asked to do goes against what their conscience is telling them, the private voice.

And this book is a fusion of those two things because I'm looking at work as you said, work that in America qualifies as dirty work. It is prevalent. It is in our society for a reason, but we don't hear or see

too much about it and inequality plays a very important role in why we don't hear too much, which I can say more about.

Maureen Conway (12:40)

Good. I, I'm going to ask you to say more about because I think also maybe you could say a little bit more about this idea of moral injury because I think that's an important point for people to understand as they think about the stories you recount in the book.

Eyal Press (13:00)

Absolutely.

Maureen Conway (13:01)

You can talk about that a little bit.

Eyal Press (13:02)

Sure. So moral injury is a really central idea in this book and it has really come quite prominent in conversations in and among veterans of America's recent corps, some of whom felt that the term PTSD, the concept of PTSD, particularly the idea of suffering a brain injury and this fear response to a near death experience that it didn't really match what they were feeling and what they were really feeling when they came back from Afghanistan or Iraq was a sense of inner conflict about moral questions, things they had seen and things they had witnessed, things they might have participated in unwittingly that ended up really going against the core beliefs and values.

And so this conversation, this term takes on a currency in the military. And I draw on that term, not only in the section of the book about people in the drone program, which is of course directly about issues of war and involvement in acts that might cause some inner conflict to the conscience, but much more broadly. There's a section of the book on people who work in prisons. Of course, we have the largest prison system in the world and I make a strong case that that work, the work of being a guard, but also the work of being a mental health aide that you are exposed to moral hazards in that job, that make term moral injury relevant.

I also think it's relevant to some of the other forms of work I looked at including work in slaughterhouses. So I think that we've had a conversation about this term within the context of war, but I would love if it's migrated out and we started talking about, and in fact, during the pandemic, we did start seeing the term come up for frontline medical workers who were having to make wrenching moral decisions that afterwards haunted them and that weighed on them and that's really moral injury is.

Maureen Conway (15:15)

And now I'm going to maybe get a little bit to the inequality piece and I think, you know, one of the themes that's going to be familiar to this audience is that for many of the individuals whose stories you tell in the book, there's this question of choice, right? And they took jobs, so they choose to take these jobs, right? But I think there's a lot of times, it's like, "How much of a choice did they have?" Often these were maybe the best jobs that were available to them, best in an economic sense. They were the best

paid. They were the only ones that were going to help them keep a roof over their head or something, but I think that there's also ... So there's a sense of inequality in that in terms of who really has choice and who doesn't, but I think there's also this ...

I'm just curious how you think about this issue of choice in equality, who's actually making a choice because I think there's also a sense that ... And maybe you could also talk about Harriet's story a little bit in grounding this because I think hers is an interesting one where she thinks maybe she'll be able to do some good and she doesn't really have a full picture. Is she really choosing? Does she have a full picture of what that job is when she chooses to take it in different choice points along the way? So maybe you could sort of reflect on that a little bit.

Eyal Press (16:42)

Absolutely. So I should say I don't think we can really understand dirty work without thinking about issues of class, without thinking about issues of race, without thinking about the immigration system and the role that immigrants play in doing certain jobs in America, all of those questions, those issues are explored in these stories and if we start with Harriet's, Harriet Kryzkowski is the first main story in the book. and she is someone who is living in Florida at the time. Her husband is unemployed. It's post-recession after the 2008 financial crash which hit Florida very hard.

She needs a job. They've got two kids. Her husband is out of work. She ends up taking a job at this prison, the Dade Correctional Institution and she works there as a mental health aide. She's not earning a lot. She's getting $12 an hour. She, as you say, thinks, "Maybe I'll do some good here," because she is interested in helping survivors of trauma and people who are in difficult situations and certainly the incarcerated people at Dade in the mental health ward qualify as such. Well, what she quickly discovers as she starts working there, first of all, she starts hearing of abuse from the men in the ward or some of whom tell her that their meals are not being given to them.

She also witnesses verbal and physical abuse and she's not sure what to do because she herself depends on the guards as mental health aides in prisons all do in fact for her own safety, for her own protection, right? They buzz her through the security doors that she goes through. They stand and sit in the sessions that she does with groups of guys, so they're in the wreck yard with her. Well, when she challenges ... There's one point where she isn't allowed into the wreck yard on a couple of Sundays in a row. And the wreck yard is the place where the inmates are getting fresh air and exercise. It's upsetting.

So she raises this in an email with a supervisor, and lo and behold, what follows is retaliation. The guards start disappearing when she's in the wreck yard, leaving her there alone. They start leaving her alone in her group sessions. And so she sent this message, "Don't challenge us. Don't go against us," and that's all background to the real drama that I talked about in the book because unfortunately the abuses, she learns about get much more serious and she learns that some of the mentally ill inmates, the prisoners at Dade are being locked in a scalding shower as punishment. And one prisoner in particular, Darren Rainey, dies in that shower.

And I won't go into all the details of the death, but suffice to say, Harriet is horrified by this. She can't believe it at first, but when she realizes from the nurses that it really did happen, she feels, on the one hand, this impulse to report it. On the other hand, she's afraid, she doesn't want to lose her job and so she doesn't say anything. And in fact, none of the mental health staff at the prison say anything. And the reason I tell this story is, again, to get into these issues of choice and how much choice do you really have on this job to be a moral agent to do, to follow what you think, medical ethics because it's very clear, mental health aides in prisons are told, "You need to report violations of medical ethics," but how do you do that in a context where you're afraid? And by the way, jails and prisons are the largest mental health institutions in our society.

So far from an isolated case, this is actually an instance where a form of dirty work is really troubling and causing us as a society to put a lot of people in these situations.

Maureen Conway (21:04)

So I have so many follow-up questions to this, but one is I think I'm interested in ... So this is one of several stories and you cover several different industries. I guess I'm curious, how did you choose these stories? How did you think about which stories are really going to help me understand and then communicate what I'm learning about the nature of this work across the United States? I'm just wondering, did you have specific industries and you were looking for people? How did you think about that?

Eyal Press (21:39)

So I thought about it in terms of it's fundamental to my definition of dirty work that it is, as I said, work that society depends on and tacitly condones but doesn't want to hear too much about. And I thought of it in terms of two different kinds of work. On the one hand there is ... We've talked about prisons and I mentioned that there's a section of the book on the drone program. These are government functions. These are things that the state does. And so to some extent, it's not too hard to make the case that these things are done with some level of a public mandate.

Now it may be that, a lot of people, again to go back to the good people, have told the details of certainly what happened to Harriet, they'd say, "No, that's wrong. We shouldn't be doing that, but the fact is we don't hear those details. We don't hear those stories so often. So on one level, I wanted to look at public jobs, public functions that really do stray into this territory of dirty work. On the other hand, I wanted to look at jobs that have no government role, either in the private sector, but what is the relationship to the rest of us? Well, we are the consumers. The society. So if we think about the kill floors of industrial slaughterhouses, why are the conditions, which I write about there? And what I mean by that is why have the line speeds gotten faster and faster?

Why have the injury rates gotten more and more severe in terms of repetitive strain and bodily, but also to the dignity of the workers on the lines? And why is the workforce increasingly drawn on undocumented immigrants, refugees in a lot of places that I write about these were jobs that native-born Americans had done, but no longer did. In some cases they were jobs that frankly, the more affluent white people in the community did not do and African American residents with fewer choices and opportunities did do in, in larger numbers. So why is that?

Well, it's because we love our meat plentiful, cheap, fast food, abundant and it's also produced under these socially invisible conditions. It's very rarely on the nightly news. You don't see cameras going into the slaughterhouses. You rarely hear from the workers, even though they've been dubbed essential workers recently. So I thought that looking at types of work that are connected to our choices as consumers is equally important.

Maureen Conway (24:29)

And I'm just wondering, I don't know when you started working on the book and what the timeline is. So maybe you could tell us because I have two questions related to the essential workers thing. One is I'm just curious, in terms of pandemic conditions, how that influenced your interviewing abilities and how you were able to understand these different workplaces or access them and what barriers you faced there and then and then just also this conversation around essential workers and how you feel like this intersects with this conversation, how this is maybe a little bit different than this conversation. So I'm just curious your reflections on those two things.

Eyal Press (25:16)

Sure. Well, I should say I conducted my interviews almost entirely before the pandemic. I did do some interviews just afterwards as I was hitting the stretch run of the writing, of course reframing some things in light of the pandemic, but fortunately, it was pre-pandemic, the reporting. So I met in person with all of these workers. Now what's so interesting to me. And again, I'm going to talk about the immigrants I interview and this poultry slaughterhouse in Texas. These were mostly women from Mexico, immigrants from Mexico, who in some cases had papers and in some cases did not and what's striking to me is how afraid they were to identify themselves and to come to forward.

In fact, I spent time at another slaughter house before the one in Texas where I thought I had a story and I thought I would ground the book, but no workers there would talk to me, even though I had a lot of contacts. They wouldn't even talk to me anonymously. And the reason they wouldn't talk to me is because these ice raids at meat packing plants had been happening under the Trump administration and it sent a chill through the industry and of course these are very vulnerable populations of workers. They can not only lose their jobs but potentially be deported.

And it's fascinating to me that that's what I saw and I spent all this time reporting on that. And then after March of 2020, I saw that they were being called essential workers, the same people, same exact people suddenly essential workers. And in fact, Trump invokes the National Defense Production Act to ensure that the lines aren't slowed down. And to me, that was just a real crystallization of in a way the hypocrisy we have around this concept of essential work.

Sure, it's essential when we have the cameras there and there's an opportunity to carry favor with workers at the Republican National Convention. There were a bunch of essential workers brought in, not from slaughterhouses, by the way. So it's a good photo op and it's a nice phrase for politicians to use, but do we really treat them as essential or do we treat them as expendable? And certainly in the case of these workers in the slaughter houses in meat packing, I think it was the latter. They were asked to go back to work, ordered actually, even though no social distancing measures had been taken or very cursory ones. There were a lot of deaths. There were tens of thousands who fell ill.

And I write about all this to make us think about whether, when we say essential workers, do we really mean it? Do we think that this is essential, and therefore, we should care about the dignity and welfare of the people involved or is it just a phrase?

Maureen Conway (28:26)

Great. I see we do have a couple questions from the audience and I love to encourage our audience to ask questions. So we'll go ahead and share their questions. So the first question is, "The book seems to have similar themes to Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem. Were you influenced by Arendt at all? And if yes, how do you think you grow upon or build upon her work?

Eyal Press (28:53)

It's a great question. That book is so important to me. Actually, I don't know if this person read the review of Dirty Work in The New York Times, but one of the things the reviewer picked up on was precisely that. And so I am the grandson of Holocaust survivors and I've thought a lot about the banality of evil which is the famous ... For those who don't know that book, it's a book in which that phrase, the banality of evil, was coined and it's basically about the idea that evil is often done not with evil intent but through, "I'm just following orders," robotic. The machinery is just turning and people get caught up in these systems. And I think that that's such a powerful and important concept

And again, we have to think about less extreme examples. She was obviously talking about the worst example, Nazi Germany, a genocide, but I think about that and I think about it in Dirty Work in terms of the people I write about, Harriet for example, who I was just talking about. They're caught up in a larger system and the system is what we have to think about. The individual matters. The individual choices certainly are important. They can make a difference, but if we really want to address why this evil is happening, and it is evil at this particular prison, we have to think systemically because conditions were there, unfortunately to allow that job and then to put people on the frontlines where they only have bad choices, "Should I quit or should I stay? Should I report this and risk being retaliated against?" and that's just not a good situation. So very influenced by that book.

Maureen Conway (30:52)

Great. So we have another good question, I think, and it relates, I think, to how you opened is, "Do you think dirty work is a part of all cultures or do you think there are certain conditions and cultures that allow it? How should people think about the role of different cultures and allowing it to grow?"

Eyal Press (31:12)

I talked a little bit about that in the book. I think it is a part of all societies. I don't think you'd be hard pressed to find a society where what I describe as dirty work isn't happening in some form, but I think that the really important message, one of the really important messages of the book is that it's not fixed in stone, right? It really is dependent on what citizens are willing to have done in their name, on how aware or not aware we are of what's being done in our name and how much we mobilize around these things. And so in a society like India in the past, at least there were forms of work, there were casts literally that were assigned, jobs that were considered disreputable And those people in turn were considered, they were actually called untouchables.

We don't have that here, but I do think that one of the really important aspects of dirty work in America is that it is not randomly distributed that it takes place. If we think of slaughterhouses or prisons, they are located in poorer parts of the country. So you have a form of regional inequality that shapes where this work takes place. And in turn, the work itself falls more to high school graduates as opposed to people with advanced degrees, women, people of color, people with fewer choices and opportunity. And I think that that enables us as a society, certainly enables the elites of society to think less about it and in a sense to wash their hands of it and leave other people to do the dirty work.

Maureen Conway (33:15)

Great. This is wonderful. The audience is now doing my work for me. And I think this is a good question and I think just to build on this a little bit, "What do you consider society's obligation to people who conduct dirty work?" And you did I think interact a little bit with unions some in the book and I think it's a good question, thinking about what are the different organizations, unions, worker centers or others that can help workers build a little bit more agency and have built the ability to influence their working conditions. I'm just wondering if you have some reflections on that question.

Eyal Press (33:54)

I think that's hugely important. In the first example I talked about, I interviewed a guy named Kenneth Applebaum who was the head of the mental health prison system in Massachusetts. And he said to me, "If elite psychiatrists were sent into places like the Dade Correctional Institution and put in positions as Harriet was, this would be a topic you'd see discussed at the annual meetings. It would be center stage.

And instead," as he told me, "it's barely noticed. You barely get any discussion of this. And that's because it's not the elite psychiatrists who do it. It's the people on the lower runs. It's the folks like Harriet."

And so organizations where this is happening absolutely have a role to play and, and a responsibility. Unions as well. Now, the fact of the matter is we're in a place in our society, I think, where on the one hand, there's this new union activity and a lot of organizing that's going on, which is ...

Maureen Conway (35:09)

Probably striking-

Eyal Press (35:09)

... really striking. Absolutely. On the other hand, historically, the percentage of the labor force that belongs to unions is extremely low. And beyond that, we have to ask about, "Is it a strong union or is it a union that is just hanging on?" And in the poultry plant that I wrote about, there actually is a union, but none of the workers I interviewed belonged to because they didn't feel it actually advocated for them. And that isn't entirely the fault of the union. It's a historical trend. It relates as I mapped out in the book, to the weakening of meat packing unions as the industry really made a concerted effort to start using, basically getting lower wages and more exploitative conditions. So it's really complicated, but those organizations are hugely important to all of this.

Maureen Conway (36:09)

That's great. I think that issue of there's a union, but they don't belong to it, I think it speaks to the systemic nature, right? So why are these institutions weaken, how these things all get interrelated? So we have a number of other questions here. I think there's one that is talking about bystanders and this idea of bystanders who don't act and this conflict between survival instincts. And I think this is what we started with versus our values, right? And I think it relates a little bit to the next question that there's also the double conflict of people of color having to do the dirty work that negatively impacts other people of color. And so you have not just your individual survival instincts, but you have your group survival instincts versus your exigencies to turn on your group. Anyway, I'm just curious if you'd reflect on those issues.

Eyal Press (37:20)

Let me reflect a little on the second question, the issue of people of color having to do Dirty Work that disproportionately impacts other people of color negatively. I talk about that very openly in the section of the book on prison guards because here is an occupation where back in the 1950s was all white in places like Florida and Georgia and elsewhere and today much more diversity, very, very large growth of the percentage of the workforce that is now black or Latino, but note when that happened, it happened during the age of mass incarceration. So what a terrible irony that is. The communities that are suffering most from mass incarceration are given the opportunity to essentially lock up their own.

And I interviewed a black prison guard in Florida who talked about this and also talked frankly about the fact that we talked about the moral injuries of potentially seeing incarcerated people being mistreated and abused. Well, what he was hearing from some of the guys in the prison is, "You're an Uncle Tom. You're a traitor. How could you be abandoning your community in working in a profession like this?" I think as a society that is a real indictment of us as a society, that instead of creating better job opportunities and addressing whether mass incarceration is actually a just policy, we've ended up in

a sense outsourcing it and delegating it to the very communities that are being impacted disproportionately.

If you want, I can say a little about the human instinct, personal risk thing, which is just that I really think that, I hope, one reason people can relate to the stories in the book is that I don't think any of us have had job. I can certainly say for myself where you don't come to these moments where you have a choice, "Should I do the convenient thing or should I do what I think is right here? If I do what I think is right, it might really cost me something. If I do the convenient thing, how am I going to sleep? How am I going to live with myself?" I think that happens to everybody, no matter what kind of job you have.

But I think that in the stories I'm telling about describing the book, if we think about that very universal dilemma and then you add to it, the pressure of it's a low-wage job, but you really need it and you're under pressure to keep it because you don't have better choices and you have to support your family or yourself or you're going to lose everything you have. That really heightens and twists the playing field in ways that I think should make us all think twice before we just judge the people who are doing this work. We have to think about the social conditions, the social structure within which it's occurring.

Maureen Conway (41:02)

Great. I love this next question because it gets into, "So what do we do?" The question is, "I appreciate the detail with which you described the actual labor working conditions and indemnities involved in dirty work. In addition to both like yours, what more can we do to make dirty work more visible and better understood, especially to people who aren't looking and I think this starts to move us towards? What do we do?" I would add a little bit too, what do we do to make it more visible and what do we do to make it less dirty?

Eyal Press (41:38)

I think those are two separate things and they're both really important. And by the way, I've been asked and I think it's right, that I think that, you know, we might have a conversation where we start saying, "Okay, what of this work is so dirty, so troubling that we don't want it to exist at all. And I think that's true of some of the things I write about. I think, as a society, we want to ask, "Do we really want jails and prisons to be our largest mental health institutions or is there something inherently wrong with that? And if there's something inherently wrong with it, we have to address that."

There are other things, maybe the meat and poultry industry is a good example. I don't think as a society, we're at a place where people are going to say, "Let's just stop it." Let's all vegetarians tomorrow. Maybe in 10 years, maybe when meat substitutes are different. Right now, that's probably not realistic, but there, it's about the conditions. It's about, "Okay, if we have this, why is it happening in the way it is?" And again, just to talk about that poultry slaughterhouse, you had women working on the lines there who weren't allowed bathroom breaks and this was not an isolated meat packing plant. This is a problem in the industry. They were being yelled at and the lines are moving so quickly and it's such a focus that literally, women cried telling me they would go to work with an extra pair of pants and that's just wrong.

And I don't think that people who eat meat would say it's okay, but again, the problem is the socially invisible conditions. The fact that we don't talk about it. I think that in terms of what we can do about it, it starts with awareness. I think everything starts with awareness and that's probably why I became a journalist and a writer. I think that there's power in stories and stories are every bit as powerful as policies because they dramatize what it means for a person's life to be caught in this situation. So I think it starts with awareness, but I think after that, also we have to think collectively.

Because as I say in the book at various points, it's, I wouldn't say, easy, but one way you can think about dirty work is, "Okay, there's a lot of dirty work in the meat industry. Therefore I'm only going to buy the meat that's labeled a certain way so that I'm not participating. I'm not complicit in it. Humanely raised, no antibiotics," whatever other labels you want to make yourself feel you're not really abetting that. That's a great impulse and it's very powerful if it starts to spread, but on an individual basis, it's not going to do much. It only will change much if it becomes collective, if a lot of people are doing this. And let's say those people start to say, "Well, I see that these labels say humanely raised chickens. What about humanely treated workers?" which you never see on the labels, right? So I think that that thinking structurally and collectively is really the key to this.

Maureen Conway (45:22)

That's great. So one, there was, and I'm forgetting the legislative, there was actually a legislative effort in California to start trying to label products with the kinds of working conditions, people that were employed. It didn't go forward this time, but maybe it comes back and goes forward. I thought it was really interesting and innovative idea. So that was ...

Eyal Press (45:42)

Fascinating.

Maureen Conway (45:43)

... out there. It's cool. So hopefully, we start to actually do something about that. So that was just a little sidenote there. So let me see, I think there's two questions here. One is about senior assisted living facilities and one is about childcare and daycare work. "Do we see this as dirty work, even though it's vitally important and is disproportionately black and brown women who perform this work for poverty wages?" I'm wondering how you see this work relate to the dirty work and how you maybe see it also as different.

Eyal Press (46:24)

Great question. So I should say my book is not a comprehensive account. There are forms of what I would call dirty work that I don't write about much or I just touch on it, but in terms of the assisted living situation, I'd have to think about it more, but the core thing about dirty work when I ... There's one point in the book where I list four conditions and the first one is that this work causes substantial social harm either to other people or to non-human animals and the environment. And, you know, one can make the case that that kind of work is at least in theory, the opposite, right? It's supposed to not be causing harm. It's supposed to be causing to alleviate suffering and to help people.

Now, of course, you could say the same thing about the mental health aide in the prison, but I would say that the conditions there are such that it's inherently troubling. Is it inherently troubling in this country, the assisted living conditions? Certainly, the work conditions I've read about suggest that it's veering towards that, that instead of this being a real rewarding and noble form of work, it's a job of last resort. It's a job that is forgotten about and devalued in some fundamental way. And that's a second part of my definition, which is that it not only causes harm to others or to the environment, it causes harm to the people who do it.to their dignity, to their sense of self-worth, to their ethical beliefs. So I'd have to think about it a little more. That's a really good question.

Maureen Conway (48:27)

I think there's a question about whether you see people with disabilities. "Did you run into people with disabilities, if they're more likely to be forced to take dirty jobs or if you see them being targeted in some way as well?"

Eyal Press (48:47)

Not something I addressed in the book, but it's a really interesting question.

Maureen Conway (48:53)

It is an interesting question. I do think that there's a lot of interesting questions about people with disabilities and the way they're able to participate in work or the kinds of work they're able to participate in. So I appreciate that question. That is worth thinking about. Let's see. There are a couple other questions here. One about ... Lots of questions here and I see we're coming up on time, so I was just like, "Ask them all."

Eyal Press (49:26)

Let me say one thing about the disability thing just that struck me as I thought about that. Some of this work actually causes disabilities. I'm thinking in particular of the slaughterhouse and this repetitive work. The women were breaking down, shoulder injury, a wrist injury, just a physical injury that wasn't labeled a disability, but what happens is after a certain amount of time, they start to wonder, "Would anyone else ever hire me because I can't do the heavy lifting, I can't do these other things?" And they felt trapped in these roles. It was really tragic just to think about that. In some of these plants, by the way, there's a 100% turnover every year. That's the level of injury we're talking about. So anyway-

Maureen Conway (50:22)

So I listened to you talk about this in line speeds and the injuries in these plants and I'm thinking about this question here, "What policy recommendations do you have for addressing systemic issues that create environments of, 'Dirty work unions are important, but they're in decline in the US'? So what are other policies do you think could be effective?" And thinking about that in terms of ... And I don't know how much you visited these plants, but perhaps more than inspectors do.

Eyal Press (50:55)

Well, yeah. I should say something there about OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration because they do and can inspect workplaces for degrading conditions, injurious conditions, conditions that are threatening, but unfortunately, the budget of OSHA is tiny relatively speaking when you think about the number of work workplaces there are in this country. And what I learned is that very often the company gets a heads up. So it's like, "Oh, the line speeds are terrible. Women aren't being allowed bathroom breaks. Oh, OSHA's coming in two weeks. Slow everything down. It looked fine."

And this is actually an issue in how I reported this book. I felt very much that if I went into these places through the front door, as journalists think of it, you get a picture, you get a story, but it's a filtered story.

It's cleaned up and sanitized and that's not the story I wanted. So I felt I had to get it other way. And as people who read the book will see, these are very difficult industries to ... They're not very transparent and so this is a real problem. As a society, we should be talking about this. How does concealment of certain forms of labor almost ensure that there will be exploitation and mistreatment and things that pass unnoticed that go on?

Maureen Conway (52:38)

And I want to actually turn a question back to the audience a little bit and say, if you have ideas on policy recommendations, please share them in our ideas tab. I know some of you have a lot more policy expertise and would love to hear your ideas on sort of policy approaches to addressing this. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about that front door, other door question because a lot of people in our audience do work where they work directly with workers and they're trying to understand what the real story is. So I'm just wondering, I guess I have two things, one, do you have any just thoughts about how to have those conversations so you have a better picture of what might be having in a workplace in our societies?

You're right. It's easier for people to talk to the company representative and they'll say, "Well, this is what we need and what happens in the workplace," and that may not be the full story, so if you have any recommendations for people who are trying to figure that out. And then I'm also just wonder for you, I think when you listen to workers and hear their stories and they're difficult, and maybe you feel some responsibility, how do you manage that dynamic?

Eyal Press (54:02)

I think that the my job is to listen and it's one of the most crucial skills any journalist or a nonfiction writer has, you have to listen really well. And there was a quote that President Biden that I wanted to mentioned in this conversation. He said it at the Democratic National Convention when he accepted the nomination. He told a story of his father telling him, "A job isn't just about a paycheck. It's about dignity. It's about a person's place in the community. It's about all these other things." And I think that I went into this book wanting to hear about those other things, not just wanting to hear about the thing that sometimes the conversation about labor and work is so focused on, "How much does the person earn and do you have these benefits?" and those are hugely important questions and they're not unrelated to dignity and place in community.

But there's a separate set of questions, "How are you treated? How much moral agency do you have in your job? How often do you feel you're asked to do things that go against what you think is proper or right? And how does this job make you feel when you're not at work? Do you talk about it to other people?" A lot of the prison guards I spoke to said no, they don't. And that is part of the conversation about work that I think we have to be having. And those are hard conversations. And I think they do require a level of comfort because people are exposing you hard feelings that they have, but if we don't talk about it, then it's just ...

There's a phrase in the book. I borrowed it from a famous book, "The hidden injuries of class." If we don't talk about these things, then those hidden injuries are really missing from our conversation and they really shouldn't be.

Maureen Conway (56:12)

Thank you. I am done asking you questions. I don't know if you have any final comment that you'd like to share before we close. We only have a couple minutes.

Eyal Press (56:22)

Well, I guess I just want to say thank you again to everyone. And I feel like really like everyone else, this is a hard time. It's a struggle for everyone during the pandemic and I so wish that we'd had to go through this. As I was finishing my book, the pandemic happened and we started having this conversation about essential workers and we started having this conversation about, "Who gets to sit at home behind their screen and shelter in place and who's out there doing work that is danger, putting their own lives and their own health and their own families at risk?

And as terrible a time as this has been, that's a really, really important conversation and that on us that we never had it before. Why did it take the pandemic to force this conversation? But I think it's a really positive thing that we've had it and we're now starting to have conversations about, "Do we really want to go back? Do we really want the status quo that existed for the pandemic or do we want something better?" And I think that as a society, this is a moment of opportunity because we can say, "Actually, no, we don't want what we had."

I think we're a lot of workers who are not rushing back to work right now or quitting jobs and that's part of the same phenomenon, right? We don't actually just want what we had. What we had was making us miserable in some way or was difficult. So I think that this is a really exciting moment in that sense of people ... It's not often in history and as a society where we are thinking what kind of world do we want to live in, and hopefully, it will lead us to a good place rather than a darker place.

Maureen Conway (58:16)

Terrific. Thank you. Thank you so much, Eyal Press for joining us today. Thank you for your book. Again, a great book. Everybody should get it, read it. Really well done. Thank you. Appreciate your work. Thank you everybody for joining us today. Thank you to my fabulous Aspen Institute colleagues. It's a team effort and they do a lot of work to help organize these events. So many thanks to Adrian Lee, Tony Mastria, Victoria Prince. Thanks so much to our audience and I hope you come back. Please do again. Take a moment to let us know what you think in the poll's tab in the Slido box on your screen before you go. You can also send us an email at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org. We'd love to hear from you. We really appreciate your feedback and we hope you'll join us at again. Thanks everyone for joining us.

Eyal Press (59:08)

Thanks again.