

Manufacturing Matters

America's economic recovery is hinged on resurgence of the industrial sector.

For too long, mainstream economists and business leaders have written off the manufacturing sector as no longer vital to our economic engine or—worse—no longer relevant.

That's why I've taken some satisfaction in noting that, at least in some circles, manufacturing is being recognized as essential to economic recovery. Writing in the January issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Alan Tonelson wrote, "Today, the idea of maintaining genuine American prosperity without a vibrant manufacturing sector stands exposed as a fairy tale." In his editorial, "Up from Globalism," Tonelson, a research fellow at the U.S. Business and Industry Council, decries the attitude of the past 40 years that manufacturing was giving way to the service sector as a matter of economic evolution, that making things had been reduced to little more than a quaint enterprise lost in the shadows of information technology and high finance. A colleague of mine observed recently that manufacturing isn't sexy; finance used to be, but now all the money men are disgraced or in hiding.

It's widely recognized that our economic malaise is the result of irrational beliefs, practices, and expectations in the fields of finance and real estate—and, I may add, in misguided trade policy. Tonelson recommends trade-policy overhaul. It's just not a level playing field.

And the myth of the service-sector economy is revealed as nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of the ill-informed. We simply cannot survive by delivering pizzas to one another. We need to make things. And we need to make them here at home—to serve markets near to home. Manufacturing matters to anyone trying to build a better life. As Tonelson puts it, "Real, self-sustaining American recovery and prosperity require a manufacturing base that is not only highly productive and innovative but is a much larger share of gross domestic product."

That the recovery be self-sustaining is crucial. We cannot rely on bail-outs, hand-outs or creative accounting. We need a manufacturing sector that employs knowledge workers as well as traditional laborers, that engages academic institutions in vital R&D programs, that pioneers new applications to serve new markets, and that is willing to invent a future that is sustainable both economically and environmentally.

We're not going to get help from the outside. We need to go into the plants, into the design studios, and into the classrooms to integrate the disparate factions of

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production, product applications and innovation. We need to engage our community leaders in town halls and chambers of commerce to let them know that manufacturing matters. We need to press our elected officials into recognizing that fair trade has to be just that: fair. That small business is, collectively, a big economic engine. And that government oversight and regulation had better serve the greater good or it's of no good at all.

If we want to enlist the support of our communities and our elected officials, we need to remind them of Tonelson's insight that, "a major manufacturing resurgence is key to overcoming America's debt-fueled economic crisis and to re-establish prosperity based on wealth creation and earnings." And that's why manufacturing matters. ■

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