

Contributism

Gives Meaning
to Your Career



Can work
Come with gladness?
 Can backs bend, then unbend,
Eyes smiling, proud and free of rage
 And pain?

Dear Reader,

This pamphlet contains an *idea*. It is one that you have almost certainly never heard before, and yet I believe it will strike you as both new and faintly familiar, like the ringing of a very old and weather-worn bell. In any case, I believe it will have ***significant, practical importance*** for your life and the life of your community. At least, it did for me, when I discovered it two years ago.

The idea is called ***contributism***, and it is, at its root, the recognition that as human beings we find fulfillment and belonging through participatory contribution — through the act of giving. Contributists believe that this simple truth contains the core of what is necessary to repair what is broken in our society, while restoring joy and dignity to our own lives as individuals.

This is just one of a series of pamphlets that my friends and I have written on the subject, with the goal of supplying you with practical tools of personal and social restoration. If you find this pamphlet's ideas compelling, I hope you find another, or find us; there is so much more that we have to say.

Yours,
Pablo Parabola

The Parable

In my experience working in nonprofits and the social sector, working to reduce poverty and improve health-care in some of the poorest countries in the world, I sometimes found that a too-narrow focus on the long-term goals of the organization (goals I would consider very contributist!) sometimes caused us to act in ways that were not contributist on a day-to-day basis — overworking subordinates or ourselves to the point of burnout, being short with colleagues or counterparts, or paying local contract workers as little as possible.



Our social goals were extremely important, and they did make our work contributist in some ways. But paradoxically, our tunnel-vision focus on our goals caused us to act in ways antithetical to the spirit of the goals themselves. *How could we be true to our goal of ending poverty*, I often wondered, *if one of the most direct ways we could make a dent in this issue — paying local contractors a decent wage — was something we were willing to sacrifice for the greater good?*

Was my work contributist? I think it always was in part, but it only became fully so when we thought not only of broader ideals, but also paid close attention to the needs of people around us. I've come to believe that whether you work in a corporate office, a shop floor, or an NGO, anywhere in the world, the way you treat your coworkers and those affected by your work on a day to day basis is the true measure of the contributism of your career.

of the **Aid Worker**

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*How can I have a **good** career? A **fulfilling** one? Is it even possible anymore to spend one's life doing **good work**?*

These are very hard questions, and they seem to become harder every year. In modern America — where human skills are being automated away, where many of us are barely treading water with underpaid gig “employment,” and where many others of us have long since severed ourselves from any sense of moral imagination to better serve our corporate employers — the idea of a *meaningful career* feels more and more like a far-fetched dream from childhood. In our childhood fantasies, we believed we would grow up to be someone helpful to our community: a teacher, a firefighter, a veterinarian. In reality, many of us have found ourselves in roles that feel less inspiring: a cashier, a senior project manager, a driver for Uber Eats.

But what if finding fulfillment in our labor is only so hard because we are both seeing and approaching the problem in the wrong way? Contributism starts by providing us with a new lens — an understanding of the centrality of the right to give. This lens sharpens our vision, allowing us to see with clarity things that were before us all along: new approaches to the daily challenges of life and work; more joyful ways of *playing the game*. Ultimately, this awareness leads us to act differently — and it is by our action that we **reclaim our agency**, and rediscover our right to good and meaningful work.

What makes a good career?

Contributism is a social and economic philosophy — a framework of thinking that aims to describe the

social and economic conditions of the world as it is, and to guide us towards shaping it into the world we want it to be. Contributism's core insight is the idea that true human flourishing, economic development, and social security are all downstream of the act of giving — of participatory contribution. Specifically, when our giving is **FARE** (free, active, relational, and effective), it is *generative*, producing a host of social and economic benefits both *for the giver* and for their community. With every act of FARE giving, we both assert our independence (“*See what I have to give!*”) and affirm our desire to co-relate — our capacity to love. This is, perhaps, the central and only point — we must remember that, at our core, we find fulfillment not just in being loved, but in the act of loving. Contributists seek to assert their own right to give, and to extend that right to others.

When asked what a contributist career might look like, many people might say social work, or teaching, or being a doctor or nurse or EMT. I have great respect for all of these careers, and they do lend themselves particularly well to the contributist impulse. But these careers aren't the best fit for everyone, and even beyond that, not everyone has the privilege to work in such an obviously-contributist career.

It's almost unprecedented to have control over your career. For most of history, and in many societies still, nearly everyone had to do whatever job they needed to do to survive and provide for their families (usually farming). While fewer of us are farmers now, a huge number of us today still find ourselves in “careers of necessity” — working whatever job we will be paid for — even in wealthy societies like America. And even for those who are lucky enough to have choice over

our careers, there are many considerations beyond the perceived *inherent contributism* of a job that constrain our choices — ability to provide for our family, time for personal life, essential healthcare benefits, required qualifications, etc.

The result is that *you have the job that you have*, not necessarily the job that you want. Some people don't even have jobs at all — at least not ones that we get paid for. But even the unemployed have to work — we have tasks and obligations; we cook and clean and visit and manage and care. In other words, even the unemployed play a social role, inhabiting a different type of “career of necessity,” for which they are compensated by their community rather than an employer.

All of this is important to reflect on, because it is a reminder that your career is not some idealized job somewhere out there in your future — the perfect-for-you role that you might one day finally inhabit. Nor, for the retired among us, is it something you did in the past — a former identity which is now behind you. No, your career is right here and now — it is what you get up in the morning to spend the better part of your day doing, and the skills you apply in doing it. It is the way you participate and the way you contribute; it is your primary manner of giving.

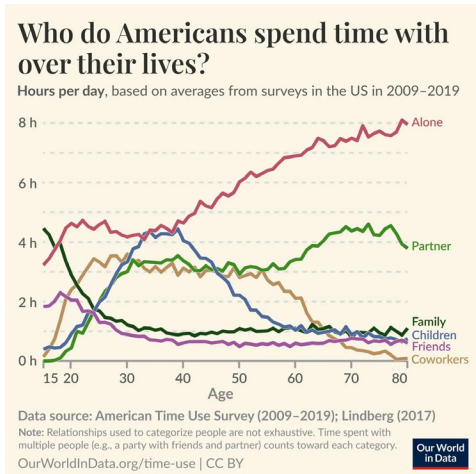
In these terms, it is easy to see that all work can be contributist, because all work is an act of giving, of participatory contribution to society. And when we understand this, we can begin to see with clarity what makes some careers more fulfilling than others. As with every other act of giving, our work becomes meaningful when it is free, active, relational, and effective; the measures of good giving are also the measures of a good career.

Contributism *In* Your Work

One of the reasons many of us feel unsatisfied with our work is precisely because most of us do not work jobs that are freely chosen. The less *free* a career is, the less fulfilling and generative it is; the less contributorist it is. But freedom is not the only measure of giving, and when we are restricted in one measure, we can often compensate for it in another.

Can we make our work fulfilling by making it more *active, relational, or effective*? Or can we somehow overstep the coercion of our employer, reasserting the right to give freely where we would otherwise be exploited?

We can often do all of these things when we shift our attention from being contributorist *through* our work, to being contributorist *in* our work. In other words, set aside for a moment the abstract “social impact” of your job, and think about those most directly impacted by your work — the other people in your workplace.



It is **counter-cultural** to think of your coworkers as your community. But, for all but the wealthiest of us, work will be a major part of our lives for nearly as long as we live, and our coworkers will be among the people we spend the most time with. As we have become more alienated from our work in modern times, we have begun to believe that work is separate from life, and that we must essentially “turn off” our humanity during work hours, then turn it back on after.

But to “turn off” our humanity during such a large part of our lives, even if we do not get great fulfillment out of our work, is to deny the humanity of ourselves and our coworkers. And ironically, doing so denies us the opportunity to **regain fulfillment** from our work. In other words, it is one way in which we assert the *right not to give*. Asserting the *right not to give* protects us from exploitation, but it doesn’t connect us to our humanity.

On the contrary, learning how to give in the context of your workplace, any workplace, is a huge opportunity to reclaim your humanity through contributorism. And whatever job you have, there are always ways to be contributorist in your day to day work.

The best giving — the **best** work — is when you choose (**free**) to give your time and energy (**active**) to those whom you interact with repeatedly (**relational**), and whose needs you understand and can help meet (**effective**).

Surprisingly, this means that our career is most fulfilling not when it has the greatest abstract social impact, but when it involves *putting our skills to use for those we interact with the most*. And this suggests that there is a direct path to reclaiming meaning in your career, and what it requires is ultimately very simple: **choos-**

ing to see and see to your coworkers, and others you interact with at your job.

This includes interpersonal kindness, but also ensuring that you're not giving coworkers more than they can handle, being an understanding manager who sees those you manage as full people, and being a business owner who is fair to customers. It means dotting your calendar with important "1-on-1s" with your coworkers in which you secretly just chat about your lives, or your weekend plans. It means asking them what they need, covering for them, forgetting the time, going the extra mile — not for the sake of your metrics, but just to help these unlikely humans you are surrounded with, these quirky people you work with who — through the repetition of these everyday acts of contributism — might actually become something like your friends.

Crucially, this path to a fulfilling career has nothing to do with your employer. This is especially true if your job is not freely chosen — if your employer is exploiting you. The contributist oversteps their employer's coercion by reclaiming their work hours as an opportunity to give to those around them; to those who they think deserve it. To be a contributist at work, resist your employer's desire to take from you by asserting your right to give.

In this way, acts of giving may be subversive to your employer. But they are not always so. The contributist's orientation is towards giving, not taking. It is *giving* to those around you, not *taking* from your employer, which brings fulfillment. Now, it might be the case that the time and effort you give to your coworkers is no longer accessible to your employer. But you and your employer will also find that, as you become a boon to your coworkers, you become harder to fire. In this way, too, you have wrested back control over your career.

Contributism *Through* Your Work

Still, it is better if we *can* work in an inherently contributist career. Some of us have the tremendous luck — and anxiety — of having job options. How should we think about the external social impact of what we do?

When you consider that you can be a contributist in any job by focusing on your immediate community (those around you at your workplace), the pressure to find an inherently contributist career is relaxed a bit. But it does still matter what you "do" for a living. Every job has some attributes that are simply built-in to the work — being a teacher or nurse is a highly *relational* act of giving; being a firefighter is highly *active*; being a doctor is highly *effective*. These jobs are seen as inherently contributist because simply by showing up every day, you are by default performing a worthwhile act of giving. Of course, even these jobs have pitfalls, but we can easily see that some jobs are more inherently contributist than others.

On the contrary, some jobs have anti-contributist built-in attributes: working for a weapons manufacturer or a sports gambling company, being a call-center worker for a scammy corporation, selling addictive drugs — these jobs all result in bringing harm to others, and I would urge anyone with a choice to avoid them. If you work in a job like this, finding fulfillment in your career is not impossible, but it will be a constant uphill battle as you fight, consciously or not, to counteract the inherent anti-contributist (and therefore, dehumanizing) nature of your work.

But most jobs, I would say, are something close to neutral — there is some give and some take. This is why it is important to remember that, while inherent contributism remains an important factor in your choice, it is not the *only* factor. Perhaps taking a neutral job will allow you the time and/or money to be contributist in other areas of your life — the stability required to spend quality time with family and friends, donate to areas you care about, and volunteer in your community.

I studied economics in college, and one of the field's core tenets is that “everything in life is about tradeoffs.” There will be no perfect job; each will have its pros and cons. Even jobs that are widely considered contributist, such as social work, might be limited by its demanding hours or its worse pay than a job without an explicit contributist goal. A contributist lifestyle for one person might be being a dedicated social worker; for another, it might be working a 9-5 in marketing and putting the extra time and emotional energy into their community.

That said, you may be surprised by what tradeoffs you can handle. In my experience, the world will often tell you that the tradeoffs required to take on an inherently contributist career are more dire than they really are. (This is especially true when you go to a competitive school and study things like economics.) They will say that you must chase the highest salary, the most prestigious role, or the career with the highest potential to “change the world”; or you will never find meaning and purpose in your career. They say this because they are not contributists; they see the world through a more standard lens. If anything I have said so far has been convincing to you, I urge you to reconsider following their advice.

In reality, choosing the more contributist option usually involves minor tradeoffs that pay dividends in **human flourishing**. For example, taking a pay cut to work in administration or law for a company whose values you really admire, or taking a less traditionally prestigious and more flexible job to be able to spend time being a foster parent, may be well within your ability, even if society is pushing you in a different direction. As a general point of advice, if the path less taken is ultimately more contributist and gives you and others more life satisfaction — sometimes you just have to take the leap!

Finally, if you feel compelled to find an inherently contributist career, consider all the different pathways you could take — there might be far more opportunities than you think. For example, I am afraid of seeing blood and death, so I would not be a good healthcare worker. I ended up being an economist and data analyst who measures, in part, whether new healthcare programs are working better than they were before, and trying to improve government services. While my work does not help people as directly as an EMT would, I still get to contribute to making people's lives better and improving healthcare through my work.

It is a privilege to be able to choose your career, so those who can do so should treat it as such. If you can choose, why not choose to do work that is inherently fulfilling, rather than work that is inherently dehumanizing?

In any case, remember that being a contributist at work is accessible to everyone, because it is simply a matter of choosing to reclaim, by whatever means necessary, **your right to give**. And that choice is always up to **you**.

CONTRIBUTISM FOR EVERYONE 03 / 03
BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY
BY RESTORING THE RIGHT TO GIVE

There is so much more to say. How contributism rebuilds the village, and reclaims your spending as an act of love. How contributist policies can, and will, transform societies by realigning incentives to promote human flourishing. How every act of contributism lessens the power of oligarchs, by reducing our dependence on them. How contributist businesses perform better than capitalist ones, because economic contributism corrects core inefficiencies built into capitalism.

My friends and I have written about all of these things, in other pamphlets. If you are curious, **come find us** at a local **contributist meetup**.

Our core project is the **Contributist Pledge** — an iterative, community-developed set of mutual commitments that make up the whole character of a contributist society. Think of the pledge as a *constitution*, but one that is continually created and collectively owned by the people, rather than by political elites. If you're curious about this project — or if you want to help us build the pledge — scan the QR code below.

Scan this QR
code to find your
nearest meetup.

contributism.org

