

The vices are what strike you. The Mercedes AMG factory in Brixworth, a town in England's midlands, is a different world from that of the production line of yore. Engine making was once accompanied by loud noises and the smoke and smells of men and machinery wrestling lumps of metal. Here things are quiet and calm. Skilled mechanics wield high-tech tools amid operating-theatre cleanliness as they work on some of the best racing-car engines in the world. Banks of designers and engineers sit in front of computers nearby. The only vestige of the old world are the vices. There is one on every work bench. At some point, making things of metal requires holding parts still, and nothing better than the vice has come along

Manufacturing exerts a powerful grip on politicians and policymakers in the rich world. It is central to what they want for their countries, they say; it needs to be brought home from abroad; it must be given renewed primacy at home. This is because it used to provide good jobs of a particular sort—jobs that offered decent and dependable wages for people, particularly men, with modest skills, and would do so throughout their working lives. Such jobs are much more scarce than once they were, and people suffer from the lack of them. In their suffering, they turn to politicians—and can also turn against them...

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