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Basic Income & Meaningless Jobs

David Graeber interview & Stenography

Austin D Munday

February 1, 2016

Recently, Switzerland's government has agreed to vote on implementing a Basic Income. If it passes, then Switzerland will be one of the first countries to introduce a Basic Income.

The Basic Income theory or system has been floating around in many different intellectual circles. Less than a week ago Sam Altman of Y-Combinator wrote an essay on it. And there is a whole subreddit devoted to it.

I'm not surprised by its popularity. Most people could really use some extra cash each month, ipso facto a lot of people want the Basic Income.

Anyways, I stenographed a conversation David Graeber had a while back about Basic Income, and I think that the content is still relevant. Here is a link to the video. And here is a pdf of one of his books *The First 5000 Years of Debt*.

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Graeber: I keep meeting people who talk about how meaningless and pointless their jobs are. They say, "You don't really want to know what I do. The truth is I don't really do anything." I hear this over and over again. I thought about it and realized this is something nobody ever talks about. There are millions of people who secretly feel their jobs shouldn't exist.

Host: Are they right?

Graeber: Well who would know better than they... I think what has happened is over the course of the last century. Mechanization has eliminated a lot more jobs than what we really think it has. Somehow we have all this technology but people are working more hours rather than less. This is what I wanted to understand. If you look at it, since the 1930s almost all the manufacturing jobs have vanished, the farming, domestic service are gone. Yet somehow the service administration and clerical jobs have tripled. We have 3 times as many people pushing papers even though we have computers. Why have we effectively made up these jobs? Whole industries exist that don't really need to exist. We don't really need telemarketers or lobbyists.

Host: Economically it make sense to make up jobs so economically those jobs are necessary?

Graeber: This is what fascinates me. In theory this is exactly what shouldn't happen in a competitive capitalist economy. We used to make fun of the Soviet Union because they would make up these jobs so that they would have an ideal level of employment.

Yet corporations are doing the same exact thing. You would think that the last thing they would do is hire people who don't do anything. If you talk to people in the corporation, they say. "I explained to my boss that my job was unnecessary. Then he would say, "Don't tell anyone because I need to have more people under me to be important.""

There are all these internal mechanisms. There are all these people who are like 'I am the east coast manager'. If you talk to them

and get them drunk, they will tell you that they don't really do anything they just go to meetings etc.

Host: [So your saying] There are plenty of people who regard themselves as having very important positions but don't actually make any contributions to society.

Graeber: Well you could say that but I am not here to tell anyone that feels their job is important that they're wrong. I am here to talk to those people who actually feel their jobs aren't meaningful and are suffering inside.

Host: That is interesting you said 'suffering inside'. Does that mean if my job does not have any meaning, does that mean I have job dissatisfaction?

Graeber: I read something by "Fyodor Dostoyevsky" when he was in a prison camp. He said if you wanted to destroy someone psychologically, have them move a rock to the one side of the road and move it back again, over and over. Or fill pitches of water continuously. Have them perform something meaningless forever. They will do anything to make it stop.

Host: That's interesting because some people would be bored if they didn't have a job.... Some people would be hanging around and wanting something to do.

Graeber: If you had people do whatever they wanted, they would come up with more meaningful and useful things to do with their time than what the current system is allocating. No one says they want to be a human resource consultant. Maybe they would write poetry or start a band. Ultimately the benefit to humanity is that they would most certainly be better off than working in our current system.

Host: Well the benefit of having a job is earning money

Graeber: Well, that is the problem. I am personally in favor of the basic income solution. If you just gave people money: Here is 30,000 pounds for everyone decide what you want to do. You would have less parasites than now. More people would come up with more interesting things.

Host: Now you are a prof of anthropology and your article clearly has started a stir. Do you think it really has created some kind of relevant social conclusion?

Graeber: I think I started the conversation. I was actually really shocked. It was a hypothesis. I met people like this. I have never done a statistical analysis. I don't know how many there are out there. So I have put out this piece in a relatively obscure publication. Within a week it had been translated into 20 different languages. The very fact that people had time to read this thing tells me something already.

Host: So just briefly can you conclude that your job isn't a waste of time?

Graeber: Mine? Well ask my students. They like me well enough. I think teaching is a job that is important. I ranked jobs by what would happen if they disappeared. If all garbage collectors or nurse vanished we would be in trouble. If all teaches vanished the world would be a lesser place. It is a problem in time. The same is true for Sci-fi writers or musicians. Maybe we don't need them but the world is a nicer place with them. Its hard to imagine how a financial CEO is in that same category. If they were to all vanish, would we suffer or would the world be a better place?