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Imagining a world with no bullshit jobs

Chris Brooks, David Graeber

August 7th 2018

Is your job pointless? Do you feel that your position could be eliminated and everything would continue on just fine? Maybe, you think, society would even be a little better off if your job never existed?

If your answer to these questions is “yes,” then take solace. You are not alone. As much as half the work that the working population engages in every day could be considered pointless, says David Graeber, Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and author of *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*.

According to Graeber, the same free market policies that have made life and work more difficult for so many working people over the past few decades have simultaneously produced more highly paid managers, telemarketers, insurance company bureaucrats, lawyers and lobbyists who do nothing useful all day. Labor journalist Chris Brooks interviewed David Graeber to learn how so many pointless jobs came to exist and what it means for labor activists.

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<https://roarmag.org/essays/graeber-bullshit-jobs-interview/>

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You make a distinction between bullshit jobs and shit jobs in your book. Can you talk a little bit about the distinction between the two?

Well it's fairly straightforward: shit jobs are just bad jobs. Ones you'd never want to have. Back-breaking, underpaid, unappreciated, people who are treated without dignity and respect... The thing is for the most part, shit jobs aren't bullshit, in the sense of pointless, nonsensical, because actually they usually involve doing something that genuinely needs to be done: driving people around, building things, taking care of people, cleaning up after them...

Bullshit jobs are most often paid quite well, involve nice benefit packages, you're treated like you're important and actually are doing something that needs to be done — but in fact, you know you're not. So in that way they're typically opposites.

How many of these bullshit jobs do you think could be eliminated and what kind of impact could that have on society?

Well pretty much all of them — that's kind of the whole point. Bullshit jobs are ones where the person doing them secretly believes that if the job (or even sometimes the entire industry) were to disappear, it would make no difference — or perhaps, as in the case of say telemarketers, lobbyists, or many corporate law firms, the world would be a better place.

And that's not all: think of all the people doing real work in support of bullshit jobs, cleaning their office buildings, doing security or pest control for them, looking after the psychological and social damage done to human beings by people all working too hard on nothing. I'm sure we could easily eliminate half the work we're doing and that would have major positive effects on everything from art and culture to climate change.

I was fascinated by your connecting the rise of bullshit jobs with the divorce between worker productivity

That's all long-term stuff though. In the more immediate sense, I think we need to figure out how to oppose the dominance of the professional-managerial, not just in existing left organizations — though in many cases, like the US Democratic Party, I don't even know if they should be called left — and thus, to effectively oppose bullshitization.

Right now nurses in New Zealand are on strike and one of their major issues is exactly that: on the one hand, their real wages have been declining, but on the other, they also find they are spending so much time filling out forms they can't take care of their patients. It's over 50 percent for many nurses.

The two problems are linked because of course all the money that would have otherwise been going to keep their wages up, are instead being diverted to hiring new and useless administrators who then burden them with even more bullshit to justify their own existence. But often, those administrators are represented by the same parties, even sometimes in the same unions.

How do we come up with a practical program to fight this sort of thing? I think that's an extremely important strategic question.

and pay. Can you explain this process and how it has developed over the past few decades?

To be honest I'm not sure how new a thing it really is. The point wasn't so much about productivity, in the economic sense, as social benefit. If someone is cleaning, or nursing, or cooking or driving a bus, you know exactly what they're doing and why it's important. This is not at all so clear for a brand manager or financial consultant. There was always something of an inverse relation between the usefulness of a given form of labor, and compensation. There are a few well-known exceptions like doctors or pilots but generally it holds true.

What's happened has been less a change in the pattern, as a vast inflation of the number of useless and relatively well-paid jobs. We deceptively refer to the rise of the service economy here, but most actual service jobs are useful and low paid — I'm talking about waitresses, uber drivers, barbers and the like — and their overall numbers haven't changed at all. What's really increased are the number of clerical, administrative and managerial jobs, which seem to have tripled as an overall proportion of workers over the last century or so. That's where the pointless jobs come in.

Kim Moody argues that rising productivity and low pay has more to do with intensifying management techniques, like lean and just-in-time production and surveillance technology that polices workers, rather than with automation. If that is true, then it seems like we are stuck in a vicious loop of companies creating more bullshit jobs to manage and police workers, thereby making their jobs shittier. What are your thoughts on this?

Well that's definitely true if you're talking about Amazon or UPS or Walmart. I guess you could argue that the supervisory jobs that cause the speedups aren't really bullshit, because they are doing something, if something not very nice. In manufacturing robots really have caused mass gains in productivity in

most sectors, meaning that workers are downsized — though the few that remain are paid better than workers in most sectors overall.

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Nonetheless in all those areas there's the same tendency to add useless levels of managers between the boss, or the money people, and the actual workers, and to a large extent their "supervision" doesn't speed up anything but actually slows it down. This becomes the more true, the more one moves toward the caring sector — education, health, social services of one sort or another. There the creation of meaningless administrative jobs and the concomitant bullshitization of real work — forcing nurses, doctors, teachers, professors to fill out endless forms all day — (I say concomitant because a lot of that, while justified by digitization, is really just there to give the useless administrators something to do), has the effect of massively lowering productivity.

This is what statistics actually show — productivity in industry skyrocketing, and with it, profits, but productivity in say health and education declining, therefore, prices going up, and profits being maintained largely by squeezing wages. Which in turn explains why you have teachers, nurses, even doctors and professors on strike in so many parts of the world.

Another of the arguments you make is that the structure of the modern corporation resembles feudalism more closely than the ideal of hypothetical market capitalism. What do you mean by that?

Well when I was in college they taught me that capitalism means that there are capitalists, who own productive resources, like say factories, and they hire people to make stuff and then sell it. So they can't pay their workers so much they don't make a profit, but they have to pay them at least enough that they can afford to buy the stuff the factory produces. Feudalism in contrast is when you just take your profits directly, by charging

more, that it doesn't have any social value if they have bullshit jobs.

But it's very important I think to begin to reconsider how we think about the value of our work, and these things will become ever more important as automation makes caring labor more important — not just because, as I've already pointed out, it is having the paradoxical effect of causing those sectors to be less efficient, so there are more and more people have to work in those sectors to achieve the same effects, and not even because as a result these are the zones of real conflict, but especially because these are the areas we would not *want* to automate. We wouldn't want a robot talking down drunks or comforting lost children. We need to see the value in the sort of labor we would only really want humans to do.

What are the implications of your theory of bullshit jobs for labor activists? You state that it's hard to imagine what a campaign against bullshit jobs might look like, but can you sketch out some ideas of ways that unions and activists might start tackling this issue?

I like to talk about "the revolt of the caring classes." The working classes have always been the caring classes — not just because they do almost all of the caring labor, but also because, perhaps partly as a result, they actually are more empathetic than the rich. Psychological studies show this, by the way. The richer you are, the less competent you are at even understanding other people's feelings. So trying to reimagine work — not as a value or end in itself, but as the material extension of caring — is a good start.

Actually I'd even propose we replace "production" and "consumption" with "caring" and "freedom" — caring is any action ultimately directed towards maintaining or increasing another person, or other people's freedom, just as mothers take care of children not just so they are healthy and grow and thrive, but most immediately, so they can play, which is the ultimate expression of freedom.

brick layers. Can you talk about this and how it relates to bullshit jobs?

We have this obsession with the idea of “production” and “productivity” (which in turn has to “grow”, hence, “growth”) — which I really think is theological in its origins. God created the universe. Humans are cursed to have to imitate God by creating their own food and clothing, etc., in pain and misery. So we think of work primarily as productive, making things — each sector is defined by its “productivity”, even real estate! — when in fact, even a moment’s reflection should show that most work isn’t making anything, it’s cleaning and polishing, and watching and tending to, helping and nurturing and fixing and otherwise taking care of things.

You make a cup once. You wash it a thousand times. This is what most working class work has always been too, there were always more nannies and bootblacks and gardeners and chimneysweeps and sex workers and dustmen and scullery maids and so on than factory workers.

And yes, even transit workers, who might seem to have nothing to do now that the ticket booths have been automated, are really there in case children get lost, or someone’s sick, or to talk down some drunk guy who’s bothering people... (Here the problem is the public has been so conditioned to think like petty bourgeois bosses they can’t accept that there’s no reason for people who are just there in case there’s a problem to be sitting around playing cards all day, so they’re expected to pretend to be working all the time anyway.) Yet we leave this out of our theories of value which are all about “productivity”.

I suggest the reverse, as feminist economists have suggested, we could think of even factory work as an extension of caring labor, because you only want to make cars or pave highways because you care that people can get to where they’re going. Certainly something like this underlies the sense people have that their work has “social value” — or even

rent, fees and dues, turning people in debt peons, or otherwise shaking them down.

Well, nowadays the vast majority of corporate profits don’t come from making or selling things but from “finance”, which is a euphemism for other peoples’ debts — charging rents and fees and interest and whatnot. It’s feudalism in the classic definition, “direct juro-political extraction” as they sometimes put it.

This also means the role of government is very different: in classic capitalism it just protects your property and maybe polices the labor force so they don’t get too difficult, but in financial capitalism, you’re extracting your profits through the legal system, so the rules and regulations are absolutely crucial, you basically need the government to back you up as you shake people down for their debts.

And this also helps to explain why market enthusiasts are wrong in their claims that it’s impossible or unlikely that capitalism will produce bullshit jobs.

Yes, exactly. Amusingly enough both libertarians and Marxists tend to attack me on these grounds, and the reason is that both are still basically operating with a conception of capitalism as it existed in maybe the 1860s — lots of little competing firms making and selling stuff. Sure, that’s still true if you’re talking about, say, owner-operated restaurants, and I’d agree that such restaurants tend not to hire people they don’t really need.

But if you’re talking about the large firms that dominate the economy nowadays, they operate by an entirely different logic. If profits are extracted through fees, rents and creating and enforcing debts, if the state is intimately involved in surplus extraction, well, the difference between the economic and political sphere tends to dissolve. Buying political loyalty for your extractive schemes is itself an economic good.

There are also political roots to the creation of bullshit jobs. In your book you return to a particularly striking

quote by former President Barack Obama. Can you talk about that quote and what it implies about political support for bullshit jobs?

When I suggested that one reason bullshit jobs endure is that they are politically convenient for a lot of powerful people, of course, lots of people accused me of being a paranoid conspiracy theorist — even though what I was really writing, I thought, was more an anti-conspiracy theory, why is it that powerful people don't get together and try to do something about the situation.

The Obama quote felt like a smoking gun in that regard — basically he said “well everyone says single payer health care would be so much more efficient, sure, maybe it would, but think about it, we have millions of people working in jobs in all these competing private health firms because of all that redundancy and inefficiency. What are we going to do with those people?” So he admitted the free market was less efficient, in health at least, and that's precisely why he preferred it — it maintained bullshit jobs.

Now, it's interesting you never hear politicians talk that way about blue collar jobs — there it's always the law of the market to eliminate as many as possible, or cut their salaries, and if they suffer, well, there's nothing you can really do. For example, Obama didn't seem to have nearly such concern about the auto workers who got laid off or had to give huge pay sacrifices after the bailout of the industry. So some jobs matter more than others.

In the case of Obama, it's pretty clear why: as Tom Frank recently noted, the Democratic Party made a strategic decision starting in the '80s to basically drop the working class as their core constituency and take up the professional managerial classes instead. That's now their base. But of course that's exactly the area the bullshit jobs are concentrated.

In your book you stress that it is not just the Democrats that are institutionally invested in bullshit

jobs, but unions too. Can you explain how unions are invested in sustaining and proliferating bullshit jobs and what this means for union activists?

Well, they used to talk about featherbedding, insisting on hiring unnecessary workers, and then of course any bureaucracy will tend to accumulate a certain number of bullshit positions. But what I was mainly talking about was simply the constant demand for “more jobs” as the solution to all social problems.

It's always the one thing you can demand that no one can object to your demanding, as you're not asking for a freebie, you're asking to be allowed to earn your keep. Even Martin Luther King's famous March on Washington was billed as a march for “Jobs and Freedom” — because if you have union support, the demand for jobs has to be in there. And paradoxically if people are working independently, as freelancers, or even in coops, well, they're not in unions are they?

Ever since the '60s there has been one strain of radicalism that sees unions as part of the problem for this reason. But I think we need to think about the question in broader terms: how labor unions which once used to campaign for less work, less hours, have essentially come to accept the weird trade off between puritanism and hedonism on which consumer capitalism is based — that work should be “hard” (hence good people are “hard-working people”) and that the aim of work is material prosperity, that we need to suffer to earn our right to consumer toys.

You talk at length in your book about how wrong the traditional conception of working class work is. Specifically, you argue that working class jobs have more closely resembled the work typically associated with women than the work associated with men in factories. This means that transit workers have more in common with the care giving work of teachers than