

From Managerial Feudalism to the Revolt of the Caring Classes

David Graeber

December 27, 2019

I've been in a very bad mood this last week, owing to the results of the election in the UK, and I've been thinking very hard about what happened and how to maintain hope.

I don't usually use visual aids but I actually assembled them. And the thing— what I want to talk about a little bit is what seems to be happening in the world politically that we have results like what just happened in the UK, and why there is nonetheless reason for hope, which I really think there is.

In a way, this is very much a blip, but there's a strategic lesson to be learned, I think, speaking as someone who's been involved in attempts to transform the world (at least for the last twenty years since I was involved with the Global Justice Movement). I think that there's a real lack of strategic understanding about *vast* shifts that are happening in the world in terms of central class dynamics that the populist right is taking advantage of, and the left is really being caught flat-footed on. So, I want to make a case of what seems to be going wrong and what we could do about it.

First of all, in terms of despairing: I was very much at the point of despairing. So many people that I know put so much work into trying to turn around the situation. There *seemed to be* a genuine possibility of a broad social transformation in England, but when we got the results, there was a kind of sense of shock.

But actually, if you look at the breakdown of the vote, for example, it doesn't look too great for the right in the long run: basically, the younger you are, the more determined you are to kick the Tories out. Actually, I've never seen numbers quite like this. The electoral base of the right wing is almost exclusively old, and the older you are, the more likely you are to vote conservative. Which is really kind of amazing, because it means that the electoral base of the right is literally dying off, a process which they're actually expediting by defunding healthcare in every way possible. And normally you'd say, "Oh yes, so what. As people get older, they become more conservative." But there's every reason to think that that's not actually happening this time around, especially because traditionally, people who either had been apathetic or had voted for the left who eventually end up voting for the right do so at the point when they get a mortgage, or when they get a sort of secure job with room for promotion and therefore feel they have a stake in the system.

Well, that's precisely what's *not* happening to this new generation. So if that's the case, the right wing's actually in real trouble in the long run. And to show you just how remarkable the situation is, someone put together a electoral map of the UK, showing what it would look like if only people over sixty-five voted, and what it would look like if only people under twenty-five voted.

Here's the first one (blue is Tory):

If only people over sixty-five voted, I believe there would be four or five Labour MPs, but otherwise entirely Conservative.

Now here's the map if only people under twenty-five voted:

There would be no Tory MPs *at all*. There might be a few Liberal Dems and Welsh candidates, and Scottish ones.

And in fact this is a relatively recent phenomena. If you look at the divergence, you know, it *really* is just the last few years it started to look like that. So something has happened that like almost *all* young people coming in are voting not just for the left but for the *radical* left. I mean, Corbyn ran on a platform that just two or three years before would've been considered completely insane and you know, just falling off the political spectrum altogether. Yet the vast majority of young people voted for it.

The problem is that in a situation like this, the swing voters are middle-aged people, and for some reason, middle-aged people broke right. The question is: why did that happen? I've been trying to figure that out.

Now, in order to do so I think we need to really think hard about what has been happening to social class relations. The conclusion that I came to is that essentially, the left is applying an outdated paradigm: they're still thinking in terms of *bosses and workers* in a kind of old-fashioned industrial sense, when what's really going on is that for most people the key class opposition is *caregivers versus managers*. Leftist parties are trying to represent both sides at the same time, but they're really dominated by the latter.

Now, I'm going to go through some basic political economy stuff by way of background. This is a key statistic, which is the kind of thing we were looking at when we first started talking about the 99% and the 1% at the beginning of Occupy Wall Street: essentially, until the mid-70s, there was a sort of understanding (between 1945 and 1975, say) that as productivity increases, wages will go up, too. And they largely went up together. This only takes it from 1960, but it goes back to the 40s. As productivity went up, a cut of that went to the workers. Around 1975 or so, it split. And since then, if you see what's going on here, productivity keeps going up, whereas wages remain flat.

So, the question is: what happens to all that money from the increased productivity? Basically, it goes to 1% of the population, and that's what we were talking about when we talked about the 1%. The other point which was key to the notion of the 99 and 1% was that the 1% are also the people who make all the political campaign contributions. These statistics are from America, which has an unusually corrupt system (bribery is basically legal in America). But essentially, it's the same people who have collected all of the profits from increased productivity and wealth who are making all the campaign contributions. And essentially, they're the people who managed to turn their wealth into power and their power back into wealth.

So, who are these people, and how does this relate to changes in the workforce?

Well, the interesting thing that I discovered when I started looking into this is that the rhetoric we used to describe the changes in class structure since the 70s is really deceptive. Because really,

since the 80s, everybody's been talking about the service economy, that we're shifting from an industrial to a service economy. The image that people have is that we've all gone from being factory workers to serving each other lattes, pressing each other's trousers and so forth. But if you look at the actual numbers of people in retail, people who're actually serving food (I don't have a detailed breakdown here), they remain pretty much constant.

In fact, I've seen figures going back 150 years which show that it's pretty much 15% of the population that does that sort of thing. It has been for over a century. It doesn't really change. It goes up and down a little bit. But basically, the amount of people who're actually providing services—haircuts, things like that—is pretty much the same as it's always been.

What's actually happened is that you've had a growth of two areas. One is providing, what I would call *caregiving work* — I would include education and health in it, but basically it's taking care of other people in one way or another (you have to look at education and health because they don't really have a category of caregiving in economic statistics). On the other hand you have administration, and the number of people who're doing clerical, administrative, and supervisory work has gone up *enormously*. According to some accounts, it's gone up from maybe 20% of the population in, say, the UK or America in 1900 to 40, 50, 60% — I mean even a *majority* of workers.

Now, the interesting thing about that is that huge numbers of those people seem to be convinced that they really aren't doing *anything*, that if their jobs didn't exist it would make no difference at all. It's almost as if they were just making up jobs in offices to keep people busy. And this was the theme of the book I wrote on bullshit jobs.

Just to describe the genesis of that book: I don't come from a professional background myself, but as a professor, I constantly meet the sort of people you meet when you're socializing with people with professional backgrounds. I keep running into people at parties who work in offices and when I ask, "Well what do you actually do? I mean, what does a person who is a management consultant, you know, actually do all day?"

And, very often they will say, "Well, not much."

Or you ask people—you'll say, "I am an anthropologist, what do you do?" and they'll say, "Well, nothing really."

And you know, you think they're just being modest. So, you kind of interrogate them, and a few drinks later, they admit that they meant it literally. They actually do nothing all day. You know, they sit around and they adjust their Facebook profiles. They play computer games. Sometimes they'll take a couple calls a day. Sometimes they'll take a couple calls a week. Sometimes they're just there in case something goes wrong. Sometimes they just don't do anything at all. When you ask, "Well, does your supervisor know this?", they say, "You know, I often wonder. I *think* they do."

So I began to wonder, *how many people are there like this?* Is this some weird coincidence that I just happen to run into people like this all the time? What section of the workforce is actually doing nothing all day?

So I wrote a little article. I had a friend who was starting a radical magazine, who said, "Can you write something provocative? You know, something you'd never be able to get published elsewhere?" So I wrote a little piece called *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs*, in which I suggested that back in the 30s, Keynes wrote this famous essay predicting that by around now we would all be working fifteen-hour weeks because automation would get rid of most manual labor. If you look at the jobs that existed in the 30s, that's true.

So I said, well, maybe what's happened is the reason we're not working fifteen-hour weeks is that they just made up bullshit jobs, just to keep us all working. I wrote this piece as kind of a joke, but within a week, this thing had been translated into fifteen different languages. It was circulating around the world. The server kept crashing, it was getting millions of hits. And I was like oh my god, you mean it's *true*? And eventually someone did a survey. YouGov, I think. And they discovered that of people in the UK, 37% agreed that if their job didn't exist, it would either make no difference whatsoever or the world might be a slightly better place.

I thought about that: what must that do to the human soul? Can you imagine waking up every morning and going to work thinking that you're doing absolutely nothing? No wonder people are angry and depressed.

And I thought about it and you know, it explains a lot of social phenomena if people are just pretending to work all day. And you know, it actually really touched me. And it's strange because I come from a working class background myself, so you'd think that, you know, oh great, so lots of people are paid to do nothing all day and get good salaries. Like, my heart bleeds, you know?

But if you think about it, it's actually a horrible situation because, as anyone who has had a 'real' job knows, the very worst part of any 'real' job is when you finish the job but you have to keep working because your boss will get mad. You have to pretend to work because it's somebody else's time (it's a very strange metaphysical notion we have in our society that someone else can own your time). Since you're on the clock, you have to keep working or pretend to be: you make up something to look busy.

Well, apparently, for at least a third of people in our society, that's *all* they do. Their *entire* job consists of just looking busy to make somebody else happy.

That must be horrible.

But it made a lot of political sense. Why is it that people seem to resent teachers or auto workers? After the 2008 crash, the people who really had to take a hit were teachers and auto workers. There were a lot of people saying, "Well, these guys are making twenty-five dollars an hour, you know?" Well yeah. That's...they're providing a useful service—they're making cars. You're American, you're supposed to like cars. You know, cars is what makes you what you *are* if you're American. How would they resent auto workers?

I realized that it *only* makes sense if there are huge proportions of the population who aren't doing anything, who are totally miserable and are basically saying: "You get to teach kids. You get to make stuff. You get to make cars. And then you want vacations too? That's not fair". It's almost as if the suffering that you experience doing nothing all day is itself a sort of validation, a kind of hair shirt that justifies your salary. I truly hear people saying this logic all the time that, well, teachers get to teach kids. You don't want people to pay 'em *too* much — you don't want people who're just interested in money taking care of our kids, do we? Which is odd, because you never hear people say that you never want people who are just interested in money taking care of our money, so therefore you shouldn't pay *bankers* so much (though you'd think that would be a more serious problem, right?).

So there is this idea that if you're doing something that actually serves a purpose, that should somehow be enough: you shouldn't get a lot of money for it.

So, as a result of this, there is actually an inverse relationship (I *have* seen economic confirmation of this) between how socially beneficial your work is—how *obviously* your work benefits other people—and how much you get paid. There's a few exceptions, like doctors, which every-

body talks about, but generally speaking, the more useful your work, the less they'll pay you for it.

Now, this is obviously a big problem already, but there's every reason to believe that the problem is actually getting worse. Remember, the big growth in jobs over the last thirty years has been in two areas, which are collapsed in the term "service" but are really totally different: one is the sort of administrative, clerical and supervisory work, and the other is caregiving labor, the work where you're actually helping people in some way. So, education and health are the two areas which show up on the statistics.

If you look at these statistics, you discover that productivity in manufacturing, as we all know, is going up. Productivity in certain other areas—wholesale, business is going up. However, productivity in education, health, and other services—caregiving in general, insofar as it shows up on the charts—productivity's actually going *down*.

Why is that? We'll talk in a moment about what productivity actually even means in this context, but here's a suggestion as to why:

This is the growth of physicians versus the growth of actual medical administrators in the United States since 1970. It's a fairly impressive-looking graph there. Basically, that giant mountain is what I called the *bullshit sector*. There's absolutely no reason why you'd actually need that many people to administer doctors.

The real effect of having all those people is to make the doctors and the nurses *less* efficient rather than *more*. I know this perfectly well from education, because I'm a professor; that's what I do for a living. The amount of administrative paperwork you have to do actually increases with the number of administrators. Over the last thirty to forty years, something similar has happened in American universities. It isn't quite as bad as this, but the number of professors has doubled while the number of actual administrators has gone up by 240–300%. So...hold on, more than that, actually. Suddenly, you have twice as many administrators for professors as you had before.

Now, you would think that that would mean that professors have to do *less* administration because you have more administrators. Exactly the opposite is the case: more and more of your time is taken up by administration.

Why is that? The major reason is because if you are hired as executive vice provost or assistant dean, some big shot administrative position at a British or American university, you want to feel like an executive. You get a giant six-figure salary and you get treated like an executive. So if you're an executive, of course, you have to have a minor army of flunkies and assistants to make yourself feel important.

The problem is they give these guys five or six assistants, but then they need to figure out what those five or six assistants are actually going to do, which usually turns out to be making up work for *me*, the professor. Suddenly, I have to do time allocation studies, learning outcome assessments where I describe what the difference between the undergraduate and graduate section of the same course is going to be. It's completely pointless stuff that nobody had to do thirty years ago and made no difference at all, all in order to justify the existence of this kind of mountain of administrators and just give them something to do all day.

Now, the interesting result of that is that...and this is where this sort of stuff comes in. It's actually...the numbers are there, but it's very, very difficult to interpret. So I had to actually get an economist friend to sort of go through all this with me and confirm that what I thought was happening was actually happening. Essentially, what's going on is just as manufacturing,

digitization is being employed to make it much more efficient. Productivity goes up, the number of workers goes down. The wages are actually going up in manufacturing, but it doesn't really make a dent in profits because there are so few workers. This we all know about.

On the other hand, the exact opposite has happened in the caring sector. Digitization is being used as an excuse to make *lower* productivity, so as to justify the existence of this army of administrators.

And if you think about it, in order to translate a qualitative outcome into a form that a computer can even understand, that requires a large amount of human labor. That's why I have to do the learning outcome studies and the time allocation stuff, right. But really, ultimately that's to justify the existence of this giant army of administrators.

Now, as a result of that, you need to have actually *more people* working in those sectors to produce the same outcome, because they're becoming less and less productive. More and more of your time has to be spent... Oh, yes. This is what the average company now looks like. More and more of your time ends up being spent sort of making the administrators happy and giving them an excuse for their existence.

This is a breakdown I saw in a report about American office workers, where they compared 2015 and 2016 and said you know, in 2015 only 46% of their time was spent actually doing their job. That declined by 7% in one year, to 39%. That's got to be some kind of statistical anomaly. Because if that were actually true, in about a decade and a half, nobody will be doing any work at all. But it gives you an idea of what's happening.

So, if productivity is going down these people are just sort of working all the time to satisfy the administrators, the creation of bullshit jobs essentially creates the bullshitization of *real* jobs. There's both a squeeze on profits and wages, because more and more money is going to *pay* the administrators. And you need to hire more and more people.

What do you get? Well, if you look around the world, where is labor action happening? Basically, you have teachers strikes all over America. You have professor strikes in the UK. You have care home workers, I believe, in France. They had nursing home workers, first time ever on strike. Nurse's strikes all over the world. Caregivers are at the cutting edge of industrial action.

The problem, of course, and this is the problem for the left, is that the administrators who are the basic class enemy of the nurses—and I believe in New Zealand, the nurses wrote a very clear manifesto stating this. They said you know, the problem we have is that there's all of these hospital administrators who are not only taking all the money so we haven't got a raise in twenty years, they give us so much paperwork we can't take care of our patients. So that is the sort of class enemy of what I call the caring classes.

The problem for the left is that often those guys are in the same union. And they're certainly in the same political party. Tom Frank wrote a book called *Listen, Liberal*, where he documented what a lot of us had kind of had a sense of intuitively for some time, that what used to be left wing parties — the Clintonite Democrats, the Blairite Labor Party, Macron, Trudeau — all of these guys, at essentially the head of parties that used to be parties based in labor unions and the working classes, and by extension the caring classes as I call them. But have shifted to essentially be the parties of the professional managerial classes. So essentially, they are the representatives of that giant mountain of administrators. That is their core base.

I even caught a quote from Obama where he pretty much admitted it, where he said, "While people ask me why we don't have a single payer health plan in America. Wouldn't that be simpler? Wouldn't that be more efficient?" And he said, "You know, well...yeah, I guess it would."

But that's kind of the problem. We have at the moment what is it two, three million people working for Kaiser, Blue Cross, Blue Shield, all these insurance companies. What are we going to do with those guys if we have an efficient system?"

Essentially, he admitted that it is intentional policy to maintain the marketization of health in America because it's less efficient and allows them to maintain a bunch of paper-pushers in offices doing completely unnecessary work, who are essentially the core base of the Democratic Party. They don't really care if they shut down auto plants, do they? In fact, they seem to take this *glee* in it. They say, "Well you know, economy's changing, you just gotta deal with it." But the moment those guys in the offices who're doing nothing are threatened, the political parties leap into action and get all excited.

So, if you look at what happened in England, it's pretty clear that *the Conservatives won because they maneuvered the left into identifying itself with the professional managerial classes*.

There is a split between the sort of labor union base—which is increasingly unions representing very militant carers of one kind or another—and the professionals, managers and the administrators, both of whom are supposedly represented by the same party.

Now, Brexit was a perfect issue to make the bureaucrats and the administrators and the professionals into the class enemy. Now, it's very ironic because of course, in the long run, the people who're really going to benefit from Brexit are precisely lawyers, because they got to rewrite everything in England. However, this is not how it was represented. Besides the obvious appeal to racism, it was represented as "your enemies are these distant bureaucrats who know nothing of your lives".

Where essentially the Tories managed to outmaneuver Labor and guarantee their victory was precisely by forcing Labor into an alliance with all the people like the Liberal Democrats and the other Remainers, who then used this incredibly complicated constitutional means to try to block Brexit from happening. It was fun to watch at the time on TV. We were all transfixed with all these guys in wigs and strange people called Black Rod and you know...in odd costumes, appealing to all sorts of arcane rules from the 16th century. It was like a great costume drama come to life on television.

It seemed like Boris Johnson was just being constantly humiliated. Everything he did didn't work. His plans collapsed. He lost every vote he tried. But in fact, what it ended up doing was it forced what was actually a radical party which represented the UK's angry youth into an alliance with the professional-managers who live by rules, whose entire idea of democracy is of a set of rules.

This is very clear in America: you could see it in the battle of Trump versus Hillary Clinton. Clinton was essentially accused of being corrupt because she would get hundreds of thousands of dollars for speeches from investment firms like Goldman Sachs (who obviously aren't paying politicians that kind of money unless they expect to get some kind of influence out of it). And constantly, Clinton's defenders would say, "Yes, but that was perfectly legal. Everything she did was legal. Why are people getting so upset? She didn't break the law."

I think that if you want to understand class dynamics in a country like England or America today, that phrase almost kind of gives the game away. Because people of the professional managerial classes are probably the only people alive who think that if you make bribery legal, that makes it okay. It's all about form against content. Democracy isn't the popular will, democracy is a set of rules and regulations and if you follow the rules and regulations, well, you know, yeah that's fine no matter. These guys, this mountain of administrators are the people who think

that way. And they've become the electoral base of people like Clinton, Macron, Tony Blair and Obama.

Corbyn was not like that at all. He was a person who had been a complete rebel against his own party for his entire life. But they maneuvered him into a position where there had been a Brexit vote which represented substance, the popular will, and he was forced into a situation where he had to ally with the people who were trying to block it through legalistic regulation, essentially by appeal to endless arcane laws, thus identifying his class with the professional-managerials.

A lot of my friends who actually were out on doorsteps met people who actually seem to think of Boris Johnson as a regular guy. His actual name is Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson. He is an aristocrat going back like 500 years, but they seemed to think he was a regular guy. Meanwhile, Corbyn, who hadn't even been to college, was a member of the elite, based almost entirely on this.

If you look at people like Trump and Johnson, how do they manage to pull off being populist in any sense? They're born to every conceivable type of privilege. They do it by acting like the exact opposite of the annoying bureaucratic administrator who is your enemy at work. That's the game of images they're playing. Johnson's clearly totally fake. He fakes disorganization, but he's actually a very organized person according to people who actually know him. But he's developed this persona of someone who's all about content over form. And he's just sort of chaotic and disorganized. So they basically play the role of being anti-bureaucrats and they maneuver the other side into being identified with administration, rules, and regulations — the guys who basically drive you crazy.

The question for the left, then, is how to break with that. It strikes me that we need to kind of rip up the game and start over. We're in another world economically than we used to be. Perhaps the best way to do it is to think about the 37% of people who say, "If my job didn't exist, probably the world would be better off. I'm not actually doing anything", and ask: what do they actually mean by that?

In almost every case, what they say is, "Well, it doesn't really benefit anyone." There is a principle that ultimately work is meaningful if it helps people and improves other people's lives. Thus, caring labor in a sense has become the paradigm for all forms of labor. This is very interesting because I think that to a large degree, the left is really stuck on a notion of production rather than caring, and the reason we have been outmaneuvered in the past has been precisely because of that.

I could talk about how this happened: I think a lot of economics is really theological. It's the transposition of old religious ideas about creation, where human beings are sort of forced to work. If you look at the story of Prometheus or the story of the Bible, the human condition—our fallen state—is one where God is our creator. We tried to usurp his position, so God punishes us by saying, "Okay, you can create your own lives but it's going to be miserable and painful." So work is both is both productive, it's creative. But at the same time, it's also supposed to be suffering.

So we have an idea of work as productivity. I was looking at these charts talking about the different productivity of different types of work. Now, I can see where the productivity of construction comes in. But according to this, you could even measure the productivity of real estate. What's productivity of real estate? That doesn't make any sense. You're not producing anything—it's land, it sits there.

Our paradigm for value is production. But if you think about it, most work is not productive. Most work is actually about maintaining things. It's about care. Whenever I talk to a Marxist theorist and they try to explain value (which is what they always like to do), they always take the example of a teacup. They'll usually be sitting with a glass, a bottle, a cup and say, "Well, look at this bottle. You know, it takes a certain amount of socially-necessary labor time to produce this. Say, it takes you know, this much time, this much resources...". They're always talking about production of stuff.

But you know, you produce a cup once. You wash it ten thousand times. Most work isn't actually about producing new things, it's about *maintaining* things. We have a warped notion, which is really very gendered. Real work is like male craftsmen banging away, or some factory worker making a car or something like that. It's almost a paradigm for childbirth, because in the Bible they curse Adam to work and they curse Eve to have pain in childbirth. But that's called "labor." So there's the idea that factories are like these black boxes where you're kind of pushing stuff out like babies through a painful process that we don't really understand. And that's what work mainly consists of.

But actually that's not what work mainly consists of. Most work actually consists of taking care of other people. So I think that what we need to do is we need to start over. We need to first of all think about the working classes not as producers, but as carers. The working classes are basically people who take care of other people — and always have been. Actually, psychological studies show this really well: the poorer you are, the better you are at reading other people's emotions and understanding what they're feeling? That's because it's actually the job of people to take care of others. Rich people just don't have to think about what other people are thinking. They don't care, literally.

And so, first of all, I think we need to redefine the working classes as caring classes. But second of all, we need to move away from a paradigm of production and consumption as being what an economy is about, because if we're going to save the planet, we *really* need to move away from productivism.

I would propose that we just rip up the discipline of economics as it exists and start over. This is my proposal in this regard: I think that we should take the ideas of production and consumption, throw them away, and substitute for them the idea of care and freedom.

As feminists point out, even if you're making a bridge, you're making a bridge because you care that people can get across the river. You make a car because you care that people can get around. So even production is one subordinate type of care. What we do, as human beings, is take care of each other.

But care is actually—and this is, I think, something that we don't often recognize—closely related to the notion of freedom. Normally, care is defined as answering to other people's needs. Certainly that is an important element in it. But it's not *just* that. They take care of the needs of the prisoners (usually, at least), To the point of giving them basic food, clothing, and medical care. But you can't really think of a prison as caring for prisoners. Care is more than that. So why *isn't* a prison a caregiving institution, whereas something else might be?

Well, if you think about care, what is the—kind of paradigm for a caring relation's a mother and a child, right. A mother takes care of a child, or a parent takes care of a child, so that that child can grow and be healthy and flourish. That's true, but on an immediate level, you take care of a child so the child can go and *play*. That's what children actually do when you're taking care of them. What is play? Play is action done for its own sake. It's in a way the very paradigm

of freedom. Because action done for its own sake is what freedom really consists of. Play and freedom are ultimately the same thing.

So, a production/consumption paradigm for what an economy is is a guarantee for ultimately destroying the planet and each other. Even when you talk about degrowth, if you're working within that paradigm, you're essentially doomed. We need to break away from that paradigm *entirely*. Care and freedom on the other hand are things you can increase as much as you like without damaging anything. So we need to think: what are ways that we need to care for each other that will make each other more free? And who're the people who are providing that care? And how can they be compensated *themselves* with greater freedom? To do that we need to like, actually scrap almost *all* of the discipline of economics as it currently exists.

We're actually just starting to think about this. Economics as it currently exists is based on assumptions of human nature that we now know to be wrong. There have been actual empirical tests of the basic sort of fundamental assumptions of the maximizing individual that economic theory is based on, and it turns out that they're not true. It tells you something about the role of economics that this has had almost no effect on economic teaching whatsoever. They don't really care that it's not true.

But one of the things that we have discovered, which is quite interesting, is that human beings have a psychological need to be cared for, but they have an even greater psychological need to care for others, or to care for something. If you don't have that you basically fall apart. It's why old people get dogs. We don't just care for each other because we need to maintain each other's lives and freedoms, but our own psychological happiness is based on being able to care for something or someone.

So, what would happen to microeconomics if we started from that? We're doing actually a workshop tomorrow on the Museum of Care, which we're going to imagine in Rojava, which is in northeastern Syria where there is a women's revolution going on (as you might have heard). It's in places like that where they're trying to completely reimagine economics, the relation of freedom, aesthetics, and value, because at the moment, the system of value we have is set up in such a way that this kind of trap that I've described, and the gradual bullshitization of employment where essentially production work has become a value unto itself in such a way that we're literally destroying the planet. In order to actually reimagine a type of economics that wouldn't destroy the planet, we have to start all over again.

Audience 1: When you observe the productivity in healthcare going down, do you have an explanation according to neoliberal thinking why hospitals—one with *more* administrators, one with *less* administrators—don't have a competition outcome that the hospital with less administrators wins?

David Graeber: *[laughs]* Well, one of the fascinating things about the whole phenomena of bullshitization and bullshit jobs is that it's exactly what's *not* supposed to happen under a competitive system. But it's happened across the board, equally in the private sector and public sector.

Audience 1: Why?

Graeber: That's a long story. But one reason seems to be that—and this is why I actually had managerial feudalism in the title—the system we have is essentially not capitalism as it is ordinarily described. The idea that you have a series of small competing firms is basically a fantasy. It's true of restaurants or something like that. But it's not true of these large institutions.

And it's not clear that it really *could* be true of those large institutions. They just don't operate on that basis.

Increasingly, profits aren't coming from either manufacturing or from commerce, but rather from the redistribution of resources and rent: rent extraction. When you have a rent extraction system, it resembles feudalism much more than capitalism as normally described. If you're taking a large amount of money and redistributing it, you want to soak up as much of that as possible in the course of doing so. And that seems to be the way the economy increasingly works. If you look at anything from Hollywood to the healthcare industry, what you see over the last thirty years is a creation of endless intermediary roles which grab a piece of the pie as it's being distributed downwards.

I could go into the whole mechanisms but essentially, the political and the economic have become so intertwined that you can no longer make a distinction between the two. This is where you go back to that whole thing about the 1% and using political power to accumulate more wealth, using your wealth to create more political power. You have an engine of extraction whereby the spoils are increasingly distributed within these very large bureaucratic organizations. That's essentially how our economy works.

I could talk for an hour about the dynamics, but that's basically it. You could call it capitalism if you like, but it doesn't in any way resemble capitalism the way that people like to imagine capitalism would work.

Audience 2: How to best address this caregiver class, when the context of the proletariat is no longer given to awake their class consciousness?

Graeber: The question is how do you create a class consciousness for that class? Well, that is the question. First of all, you need to actually think about who your actual class enemy is. I don't mean to be too blunt about it, but why is it people are suspicious of the left? People like Michael Albert were pointing this out years ago, that one reason actual proletarians were very suspicious of traditional socialists in many cases is because their immediate enemy isn't the capitalist, who he rarely meets, but the annoying administrator upstairs. To a large extent, traditional socialism means giving that guy *more* power rather than *less*.

So, I think we need to actually look at what's really going on in a hospital or in a school. I use hospitals and schools as examples, but they're very important ones, because people have shown that in most cities in America, hospitals and schools are now the two largest employers. Essentially, work has been reorganized around working on the bodies and minds of other people rather than producing objects. You can't use traditional Marxist analysis to understand the class relations in those institutions. You need to actually reimagine what it would mean. Are we talking about the production of people? If so, what are the class dynamics involved in that? Is production the term *at all*? Probably not. Why not?

That's why I say that we need to reconstitute the language in which we're using to describe this, because we're essentially using 19th century terminology to discuss 21st century problems. And *both* sides are doing that. The right wing is using neoclassical economics, which is basically Victorian. It's trying to solve problems that no longer exist. But the left is using a 19th century Marxist critique of that, which also doesn't apply. We just need new terms.

Audience 3: So, the question is basically to what extent can technology help? The subtext here is there's actually really lots of projects now whose function at some level is to automate management, and to the extent to which that can be molded into removing this [professional-managerial] class that you're talking about, or somehow making it too painful for them to exist.

Some of these projects are companies, but some of them are very independent things that have very sophomoric ideas but with tens of millions in funding.

Graeber: Well, that's the interesting thing, that people talk about it all the time. But this is where power comes in. Why is it that automation means that if I'm working for UPS, the delivery guy gets Taylorized, downsized and super-efficient to the point where our life becomes a living hell, but somehow the profits that come from that end up hiring like, dozens of flunkies who sit around in offices doing nothing all day?

One of the guys when I started gathering testimonies (I gathered several hundred testimonies of people with bullshit jobs or people who thought of themselves as having bullshit jobs) was someone who was an efficiency expert in a bank. He estimated that 80% of people who worked in banks are unnecessary: either they do nothing or they could easily be automated away. What he said was that it was his job to figure that out. But then he gradually realized that *he* had a bullshit job because every single time he proposed a plan to get rid of them, they'd be shot down. He never got a single one through.

The reason is because if you're an executive in a large corporation, your prestige and power is directly proportional to how many people you have working under you. So there's no way they are going to get rid of flunkies. That'd just mean the better they are at it, the less important they'll become in the operation. So somebody always blocked it.

So, this is a basic power question. You can come up with great technological ideas for eliminating people; people do all the time. But who actually gets eliminated and who doesn't has everything to do with power.

Audience 4: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I really like your description of a paradigm that people are stuck on production and consumption, and that you would like to change the paradigm to be towards more care and freedom. For me it kind of sounds a little vague, and that's why I myself think of basic income as a human right, as the actual means to break with the current hegemonic, macroeconomic paradigm, so to speak. And I was interested in your point of view on basic income.

Graeber: Well, I actually totally support that. I think that one of the major objections that people have to universal basic income is that people don't trust people to come up with useful things to do with themselves. Either they think they'll be lazy and won't do anything, or they think if they do do something it'll be stupid: millions of people who're trying to create perpetual motion devices or becoming annoying street mimes or bad musicians or bad poets, or so forth and so on.

I think it actually masks an incredible condescending elitism that a lot of people have, which is really the mindset of the professional managerial classes who think that they should be controlling people, because if you think about the fact that huge percentages—perhaps a third of people—already think that they're doing nothing all day and they're really miserable about it, I think that demonstrates quite clearly why that isn't true.

First of all, the idea that people if given a basic income won't work. Actually, there are lots of people who *are* paid basically to sit there all day and do nothing, *and they're really unhappy*. They'd much rather be working.

Second of all, if 30 to 40% of people already think that their jobs are completely pointless and useless, how bad could it be? Even if everybody goes off and becomes bad poets, at least they'll be a lot happier than they are now. And one or two of them might really be good poets. If just .001% of all the people on basic income who decide to become poets or musicians or invent crazy

devices actually do become Miles Davis or Shakespeare, or actually do invent a perpetual motion device, well, you've got your money back right there, right?

Herald: Great. Thank you so much. Unfortunately that was all the questions that we had time to. If you have any more questions, please, I'm sure that David will just take a few minutes to answer them if you come up here.

Graeber: Oh yeah. I could spend the rest of my life doing this.

Herald: Thank you so much David Graeber for your talk. And please give him a great round of applause.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber
From Managerial Feudalism to the Revolt of the Caring Classes
December 27, 2019

Retrieved on 28th November 2021 from davidgraeber.org
Presented by David Graeber at the 36th Chaos Communication Congress on 12/27/2019.
Transcribed by Yash Lad.

theanarchistlibrary.org