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Bullshit, like paper waste, accumulates in offices with the inevitability of February snow. Justification reports: What are these? Nobody knows. And yet they pile up around you, Xerox-warmed, to be not-read. Best-practices documents? Anybody's guess, really, including their authors'. Some people thought that digitization would banish this nonsense. Those people were wrong. Now, all day, you get e-mails about "consumer intimacy" (oh, boy); "all hands" (*whose* hands?); and the new expense-reporting software, which requires that all receipts be mounted on paper, scanned, and uploaded to a server that rejects them, since you failed to pre-file the crucial post-travel form. If you're lucky, bullshit of this genre consumes only a few hours of your normal workweek. If you're among the millions of less fortunate Americans, it is the basis of your entire career.

In "Bullshit Jobs" (Simon & Schuster), David Graeber, an anthropologist now at the London School of Economics, seeks a diagnosis and epidemiology for what he calls the "useless jobs that no one wants to talk about." He thinks these jobs are everywhere. By all

the evidence, they are. His book, which has the virtue of being both clever and charismatic, follows a much circulated essay that he wrote, in 2013, to call out such occupations. Some, he thought, were structurally extraneous: if all lobbyists or corporate lawyers on the planet disappeared en masse, not even their clients would miss them. Others were pointless in opaque ways. Soon after the essay appeared, in a small journal, readers translated it into a dozen languages, and hundreds of people, Graeber reports, contributed their own stories of work within the bullshit sphere.

Those stories give his new book an ad-hoc empiricism. YouGov, a data-analytics firm, polled British people, in 2015, about whether they thought that their jobs made a meaningful contribution to the world. Thirty-seven per cent said no, and thirteen per cent were unsure—a high proportion, but one that was echoed elsewhere. (In the functional and well-adjusted Netherlands, forty per cent of respondents believed their jobs had no reason to exist.) And yet poll numbers may be less revealing than reports from the bullshit trenches. Here is Hannibal, one of Graeber's contacts:

> I do digital consultancy for global pharmaceutical companies' marketing departments. I often work with global PR agencies on this, and write reports with titles like *How to Improve Engagement Among Key Digital Health Care Stakeholders*. It is pure, unadulterated bullshit, and serves no purpose beyond ticking boxes for marketing departments… I was recently able to charge around twelve thousand pounds to write a two-page report for a pharmaceutical client to present during a global strategy meeting. The report wasn't used in the end because they didn't manage to get to that agenda point.

A bullshit job is not what Graeber calls "a shit job." Hannibal, and many other of the bullshittiest employees, are well compensated, with expanses of unclaimed time. Yet they're unhappy.

Graeber thinks that a sense of uselessness gnaws at everything that makes them human. This observation leads him to define bullshit work as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case."

In the course of Graeber's diagnosis, he inaugurates five phyla of bullshit work. "Flunkies," he says, are those paid to hang around and make their superiors feel important: doormen, useless assistants, receptionists with silent phones, and so on. "Goons" are gratuitous or arms-race muscle; Graeber points to Oxford University's P.R. staff, whose task appears to be to convince the public that Oxford is a good school. "Duct tapers" are hired to patch or bridge major flaws that their bosses are too lazy or inept to fix systemically. (This is the woman at the airline desk whose duty is to assuage angry passengers when bags don't arrive.) "Box tickers" go through various motions, often using paperwork or serious-looking reports, to suggest that things are happening when things aren't. (Hannibal is a box ticker.) Last are "taskmasters," divided into two subtypes: unnecessary superiors, who manage people who don't need management, and bullshit generators, whose job is to create and assign more bullshit for others.

Such jobs are endemic even to creative industries. Content curators, creatives—these and other intermediary non-roles crop up in everything from journalism to art. Hollywood is notoriously mired in development, an endeavor that Graeber believes to be almost pure bullshit. One developer he meets, Apollonia, had been kept busy working over reality shows with titles such as "Transsexual Housewives" and "Too Fat to Fuck." None of these shows ever came close to airing. Oscar, a screenwriter, spent his time working on pitch précis—sixty-page versions, fifteen-page versions—and recapping them at meetings where executives offered self-cancelling

suggestions and obscure, koan-like counsel. “They’ll say, ‘I’m not saying you should do *X*, but maybe you should do *X*,’ ” Oscar recalled. “The more you press for details, the blurrier it gets.”

The epidemiology of the problem—how and why things got this way—is pretty blurry, too. Graber believes that bullshit helps explain why certain large-scale economic predictions have been wrong. In a famous essay drafted in 1928, John Maynard Keynes projected that, a century on, technological efficiency in Europe and in the U.S. would be so great, and prosperity so assured, that people would be at pains to avoid going crazy from leisure and boredom. Maybe, Keynes wrote, they could plan to retain three hours of work a day, just to feel useful.

Here we are nearly in 2028, and technology has indeed produced dazzling efficiencies. As Keynes anticipated, too, the number of jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, and mining has plummeted. Yet employment in other fields—management, service—grows, and people still spend their lives working to finance basic stuff. Graeber blames, in part, the jobs we have. (Politically, he describes himself as an anarchist, but he is the mild-mannered kind, and his thinking is generally well-shaded: he’s equally impatient with free-market hard-liners and the sorts of people who rage at “capitalism” as if it were a chosen conceptual system rather than a name stuck on the socioeconomic fabric woven centuries ago.) Instead of reaping the rewards of our labor in the mid-century style, we now split them among shareholders and growth for growth’s sake. The spoils of prosperity are fed back into the system to fund new and, perhaps, functionally unnecessary jobs. And, though there’s plenty of make-work nonsense in government (a while ago, a Spanish civil servant stopped showing up at the office, which was noticed only six years later, when someone tried to give him a medal for his long service), Graeber locates a tremendous lode of bullshit employment in the private sector. “It’s as if businesses were endlessly trimming the fat on the shop floor

Or maybe she does something even more ambitious. Graeber claims that it’s “unusual” for workers to use nonsense jobs as fronts for more rewarding work. Yet people do write music, poetry, and more at the bullshit desk. George Saunders composed the stories in “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” while ostensibly doing technical writing for an engineering company. Jeffrey Eugenides wrote much of “The Virgin Suicides” during his employment as a secretary. Those are good books. The bullshit paychecks that their authors received were practically Guggenheims. None of us entirely avoids the bullshit. But a few people, in the end, make it work.

into the world before they launched as self-governed professionals. And yet, to the extent that nobody really *needs* an assistant to scrape mud off their boots or move a tray from one room to another, medieval youth employments were, in large part, bullshit jobs. Certain work, in this sense, may be fine, and even helpful on the road to a self-realized life. The bullshit that destroys us is the bullshit that endures.

To account for that persistence, Graeber quotes President Barack Obama on the topic of privatized health care. "Everybody who supports single-payer health care says, 'Look at all this money we would be saving from insurance and paperwork,' " the former President noted. "That represents one million, two million, three million jobs." Graeber describes this comment as a "smoking gun" of bullshittization. "Here is the most powerful man in the world at the time publicly reflecting on his signature legislative achievement—and he is insisting that a major factor in the form that legislature took is the preservation of bullshit jobs," he writes. Politicians are so fixated on job creation, he thinks, that no one wonders *which* jobs are created, and whether they are necessary. Unnecessary employment may be one of the great legacies of recent public-private collaboration.

By most criteria for market efficiency and workplace happiness, that is bad. Yet it leads to a realization that Graeber circles but never articulates, which is that bullshit employment has come to serve in places like the U.S. and Britain as a disguised, half-baked version of the dole—one attuned specially to a large, credentialled middle class. Under a different social model, a young woman unable to find a spot in the workforce might have collected a government check. Now, instead, she can acquire a bullshit job at, say, a health-care company, spend half of every morning compiling useless reports, and use the rest of her desk time to play computer solitaire or shop for camping equipment online. It's not, perhaps, a life well-lived. But it's not the terror of penury, either.

and using the resulting savings to acquire even more unnecessary workers in the office upstairs," he writes.

That is strange. Market competition is supposed to slough off inefficiencies and waste. Is Graeber being naïve about contemporary business? Some argue that bullshit jobs only *look* bullshitty; in truth, they are disaggregated, the white-collar version of the guy on the factory floor who makes a single metal rivet for an airplane. Graeber doesn't buy it. The field he knows best, academia, had as much of a staffing explosion as any, and yet the work of teaching and research is no more complex or scaled-up than it was decades ago. The hordes of new employees must be doing something else.

Graeber comes to believe that the governing logic for such expansion isn't efficiency but something nearer to feudalism: a complex tangle of economics, organizational politics, tithes, and redistributions, which is motivated by the will to competitive status and local power. (Why do people employ doormen? Not because they're cost-effective.) The difference between true feudalism and whatever is going on now—"managerial feudalism" is Graeber's uncatchy phrase—is that, under true feudalism, professionals were responsible for their own schedules and methods.

Left to their own devices, Graeber points out, people tend to do work like students at exam time, alternately cramming and slacking. Possibly, they work this way because it is the most productive way to work. Most of us would assume that a farmer who started farming at 9 *A.M.* and stopped at 5 *P.M.* five days a week was strange, and probably not a very good farmer. Through the better part of human history, jobs from warrior to fisherperson to novelist had a cram-and-slack rhythm, in part because these jobs were shaped by actual productive needs, not arbitrary working clocks and managerial oversight. Graeber laments a situation in which it's "perfectly natural for free citizens of democratic countries to rent themselves out in this way, or for a boss to become indignant

if employees are not working every moment of 'his' time." Still, it's likely that he overstates the pleasures of the freelance life.

Is it possible that bullshit jobs are useful? In Graeber's view, they simply reinforce their premises. "We have invented a bizarre sadomasochistic dialectic whereby we feel that pain in the workplace is the only possible justification for our furtive consumer pleasures, and, at the same time, the fact that our jobs thus come to eat up more and more of our waking existence means that we do not have the luxury of—as Kathi Weeks has so concisely put it—'a life,' " he writes. His own idea of a life, which includes "sitting around in cafés all day arguing about politics or gossiping about our friends' complex polyamorous love affairs," may not be everyone's. He also may misidentify the degree to which most people fret about the nature of their productive output; for some, work is the least important and defining of life's commitments. But his point is that the bullshit economy feeds itself. Workers cram in Netflix binges, online purchases, takeout meals, and yoga classes as rewards for yet another day of the demoralizing bullshit work that sustains such life styles. (Graeber's frame is mostly urban and educated middle-class, which seems unobjectionable, since, one suspects, his readers are, too.) Acculturation happens early. A college student, Brendan, complains of bullshit jobs on campus:

> A lot of these student work jobs have us doing some sort of bullshit task like scanning IDs, or monitoring empty rooms, or cleaning already-clean tables… I'm not altogether familiar with how the whole thing works, but a lot of this work is funded by the Feds and tied to our student loans. It's part of a whole federal system designed to assign students a lot of debt—thereby promising to coerce them into labor in the future, as student debts are so hard to get rid of—accompanied by a bullshit education program designed to train and prepare us for our future bullshit jobs.

Brendan seems to be describing the Federal Work-Study Program, the point of which is to help students offset debt with wages earned on campus. Many of those jobs are plainly bullshitty. My own Federal Work-Study gig was in the basement of a campus research center, and the main task, as I recall it, was to produce a monthly calendar of local events. I would compile listings, mostly from Google, and lay them out in desktop-publishing software. I have no idea how many people received the pamphlet, or whether any read it. Still, I felt lucky: I loved the people there, and I could get free coffee from the center's kitchenette. If anything, it seemed remarkable to me then that I was somehow dodging debt by sitting in a basement doing basic tasks on a computer.

In Graeber's eyes, make-work student jobs educate the young into lives of bullshit. Without such demands on their time, he writes, they could be "rehearsing for plays, playing in a band," and the like. The binary is misleading—it is possible to hold a mind-numbing job *and* be the singer in a band—and anybody who has read much student fiction or seen many campus plays will wonder whether the bullshit quotient is much lessened there. Young people may be asked to do inconsequential work as part of an insidious acculturation scheme. Or they may be asked because their higher-order skills are not honed, and there's benefit—for everyone—in forcing them to attain their lives' endeavors by intent, not by default.

On one of his many feudalism jags, Graeber makes a digression into youth work in medieval Europe. Back then, he points out, everybody—rich or poor, powerful or powerless—undertook service in early adulthood. Aspiring knights were pages; noblewomen worked as ladies in waiting. The goal was to break young people