
THOMAS FRANK

David Graeber: “Spotlight on the financial sector did make apparent just how bizarrely skewed our economy is in terms of who gets rewarded”

David Graeber explains why the more your job helps others, the less you get paid



David Graeber (AP/Michelle Mcloughlin)

David Graeber is an American anthropologist who teaches at the London School of Economics. He is the author of the classic “Debt: The First Five Thousand Years” and played an important role in the launching of Occupy Wall Street. Last year, he wrote a much-discussed essay asking what happened to society’s old promise of more leisure time for workers; for the tasks that have come to occupy the hours that were once promised to be ours, Graeber invented the delicate and slightly obscure label, “bullshit jobs.”

I wanted to know exactly what he meant by that, and so we discussed the matter over email. The following conversation has been lightly edited.

Let's start at the beginning: Keynes' prediction, back in the 1930s, that before too long workers would have all sorts of leisure time because of improving productivity. Is there a history of this idea? I mean, others have argued this as well, correct?

Well, radical elements in the labor movement began embracing such visions from quite early on. After the successful campaigns for the eight-hour day in the 1880s, people immediately started thinking, can we move this to seven, six, or less. Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, and author of "The Right to Be Lazy," was already calling for something along those lines in 1883. I have a Wobbly T-shirt with a turn-of-the-century style design that says "join the IWW for a new dawn," it has a sun rising over the rooftops, and on the sun is written, "four-day week, four-hour day." I don't know how old the image really is but I'm guessing it's from the Teens or the '20s. In the 1930s, a lot of labor unions did move their industries to a 35-hour week. My mom was a garment worker at the time and that's how she ended up getting involved in the ILGWU musical review "Pins and Needles," because everyone had moved to a shorter week and the union started providing leisure activities.

And when did this expectation finally start dying out?

By the '60s, most people thought that robot factories, and ultimately, the elimination of all manual labor, was probably just a generation or two away. Everyone from the Situationists to the Yippies were saying "let the machines do all the work!" and objecting to the very principle of 9-to-5 labor. In the '70s, there were actually a series of now-forgotten wildcat strikes by auto workers and others, in Detroit, I think Turin, and other places, basically saying, "we're just tired of working so much."

This sort of thing threw a lot of people in positions of power into a kind of moral panic. There were think-tanks set up to examine what to do—basically, how to maintain social control—in a society where more and more traditional forms of labor would soon be obsolete. A lot of the complaints you see in Alvin Toffler and similar figures in the early '70s—that rapid technological advance was throwing the social order into chaos—had to do with those anxieties: too much leisure had created the counter-culture and youth movements, what was going to happen when things got even more relaxed? It's probably no coincidence that it was around that time that things began to turn around, both in the direction of technological research, away from automation and into information, medical, and military technologies (basically,

technologies of social control), and also in the direction of market reforms that would send us back towards less secure employment, longer hours, greater work discipline.

Today productivity continues to increase, but Americans work more hours per week than they used to, not fewer. Also, more than workers in other countries. Correct?

The U.S., even under the New Deal, was always a lot stingier than most wealthy countries when it comes to time off: whether it's maternity or paternity leave, or vacations and the like. But since the '70s, things have definitely been getting worse.

Do economists have an explanation for this combination of greater productivity with increased work hours? What is it and what do you think of it?

Curiously, economists don't tend to find much interest in such questions—really fundamental things about values, for instance, or broader political or social questions about what people's lives are actually like. They rarely have much to say about them if left to their own devices. It's only when some non-economist begins proposing social or political explanations for the rise of apparently meaningless administrative and managerial positions, that they jump in and say “No, no, we could have explained that perfectly well in economic terms,” and make something up.

After my piece came out, for instance, *The Economist* rushed out a response just a day or two later. It was an incredibly weakly argued piece, full of obvious logical fallacies. But the main thrust of it was: well, there might be far less people involved in producing, transporting, and maintaining products than there used to be, but it makes sense that we have three times as many administrators because globalization has meant that the process of doing so is now much more complicated. You have computers where the circuitry is designed in California, produced in China, assembled in Saipan, put in boxes in some prison in Nevada, shipped through Amazon overnight to God-knows-where... It sounds convincing enough until you really think about it. But then you realize: If that's so, why has the same thing happened in universities? Because you have exactly the same endless accretion of layer on layer of administrative jobs there, too. Has the process of teaching become three times more complicated than it was in the 1930s? And if not, why did the same thing happen? So most of the economic explanations make no sense.

All true, and very correct about the universities, but there's got to be an official--if not economic--explanation for why we didn't get this Truly Great

Thing that everyone was expecting not all that long ago. Like: Keynes was all wet, or such a system just wouldn't work, or workers aren't educated enough to deserve that much vacation, or the things we make today are just so much better than the things they made in Keynes' day that they are worth more and take more work-hours to earn. There must be something.

Well, the casual explanation is always consumerism. The idea is always that given the choice between four-hour days, and nine or ten-hour days with SUVs, iPhones and eight varieties of designer sushi, we all collectively decided free time wasn't really worth it. This also ties into the "service economy" argument, that nobody wants to cook or clean or fix or even brew their own coffee any more, so all the new employment is in maintaining an infrastructure for people to just pop over to the food court, or Starbucks, on their way to or from work. So, sure, a lot of this is just taken as common sense if you do raise the issue to someone who doesn't think about it very much. But it's also obviously not much of an explanation.

First of all, only a very small proportion of the new jobs have anything to do with actually making consumer toys, and most of the ones that do are overseas. Yet even there, the total number of people involved in industrial production has declined. Second of all, even in the richest countries, it's not clear if the number of service jobs has really increased as dramatically as we like to think. If you look at the numbers between 1930 and 2000, well, there used to be huge numbers of domestic servants. Those numbers have collapsed. Third, you also see that's what's grown is not service jobs per se, but "service, administrative, and clerical" jobs, which have gone from roughly a quarter of all jobs in the '30s to maybe as much as three quarters today. But how do you explain an explosion of middle managers and paper-pushers by a desire for sushi and iPhones?

And then, finally, there's the obvious question of cause and effect. Are people working so many hours because we've just somehow independently conceived this desire for lattes and Panini and dog-walkers and the like, or is it that people are grabbing food and coffee on the go and hiring people to walk their dogs because they're all working so much?

Maybe part of the answer is that people forgot about the expectation of more leisure time, and there's no political agency to demand it anymore, and hence no need to explain what happened to it. I mean, there's no wildcat strikes anymore.

Well, we can talk about the decline of the union movement, but it runs deeper.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one of the great divisions between anarchist unions, and socialist unions, was that the latter were always asking for higher wages, and the anarchists were asking for less hours. That's why the anarchists were so entangled in struggles for the eight-hour day. It's as if the socialists were essentially buying into the notion that work is a virtue, and consumerism is good, but it should all be managed democratically, while the anarchists were saying, no, the whole deal—that we work more and more for more and more stuff—is rotten from the get-go.

I've said this before, but I think one of the greatest ironies of history is how this all panned out when workers' movements did manage to seize power. It was generally the classic anarchist constituencies—recently proletarianized peasants and craftsmen—who rose up and made the great revolutions, whether in Russia or China or for that matter Algeria or Spain—but they always ended up with regimes run by socialists who accepted that labor was a virtue in itself and the purpose of labor was to create a consumer utopia. Of course they were completely incapable of providing such a consumer utopia. But what social benefit did they actually provide? Well, the biggest one, the one no one talks about, was guaranteed employment and job security—the “iron rice bowl”, they called it in China, but it went by many names. You couldn't really get fired from your job. As a result you didn't really have to work very hard. So on paper they had eight- or nine-hour days but really everyone was working maybe four or five.

I have a lot of friends who grew up in the USSR, or Yugoslavia, who describe what it was like. You get up. You buy the paper. You go to work. You read the paper. Then maybe a little work, and a long lunch, including a visit to the public bath... If you think about it in that light, it makes the achievements of the socialist bloc seem pretty impressive: a country like Russia managed to go from a backwater to a major world power with everyone working maybe on average four or five hours a day. But the problem is they couldn't take credit for it. They had to pretend it was a problem, “the problem of absenteeism,” or whatever, because of course work was considered the ultimate moral virtue. They couldn't take credit for the great social benefit they actually provided. Which is, incidentally, the reason that workers in socialist countries had no idea what they were getting into when they accepted the idea of introducing capitalist-style work discipline. “What, we have to ask permission to go to the bathroom?” It seemed just as totalitarian to them as accepting a Soviet-style police state would have been to us.

That ambivalence in the heart of the worker's movement remains. Growing up

in a lefty, working class family, I felt it all the time. On the one hand, there's this ideological imperative to validate work as virtue in itself. Which is constantly being reinforced by the larger society. On the other hand, there's the reality that most work is obviously stupid, degrading, unnecessary, and the feeling that it is best avoided whenever possible. But it makes it very difficult to organize, as workers, against work.

Let's talk about "bullshit jobs." What do you mean by this phrase?

When I talk about bullshit jobs, I mean, the kind of jobs that even those who work them feel do not really need to exist. A lot of them are made-up middle management, you know, I'm the "East Coast strategic vision coordinator" for some big firm, which basically means you spend all your time at meetings or forming teams that then send reports to one another. Or someone who works in an industry that they feel doesn't need to exist, like most of the corporate lawyers I know, or telemarketers, or lobbyists.... Just think of when you walk into a hospital, how half the employees never seem to do anything for sick people, but are just filling out insurance forms and sending information to each other. Some of that work obviously does need to be done, but for the most part, everyone working there knows what really needs to get done and that the remaining 90 percent of what they do is bullshit. And then think about the ancillary workers that support people doing the bullshit jobs: here's an office where people basically translate German formatted paperwork into British formatted paperwork or some such, and there has to be a whole infrastructure of receptionists, janitors, security guards, computer maintenance people, which are kind of second-order bullshit jobs, they're actually doing something, but they're doing it to support people who are doing nothing.

When I published the piece, there was a huge outpouring of confessionals from people in meaningless positions in private corporations or public service of one sort or another. The interesting thing was there was almost no difference between what they reported in the public, and in the private sector. Here's one guy whose only duty is to maintain a spreadsheet showing when certain technical publications were out of date and send emails to the authors to remind them it needed updating. Somehow he had to turn this into an eight-hour-a-day job. Another one who had to survey policies and procedures inside the corporation and write vision statements describing alternative ways they might do them, reports that just got passed around to give other people in similar jobs a chance to go to meetings and coordinate data to write further reports, none of which were ever implemented. Another person whose job was to create ads and conduct interviews for positions in a firm that were invariably filled by

internal promotion anyway. Lots of people who said their basic function was to create tasks for other people.

The concept of bullshit jobs seems very convincing and even obvious to me--I used to work as a temp, I saw this stuff first-hand--but others might pull market populism on you and say, who are you to declare someone's else's job to be bullshit, Mr. Graeber? You must think you're better than the rest of us or something.

Well, I keep emphasizing: I'm not here to tell anybody who thinks their job is valuable that they're deluded. I'm just saying if people secretly believe their job doesn't need to exist, they're probably right. The arrogant ones are the ones who think they know better, who believe that there are workers out there so stupid they don't understand the true meaning of what they do every day, don't realize it really isn't necessary, or think that workers who believe they're in bullshit jobs have such an exaggerated sense of self-importance that they think they should be doing something else and therefore dismiss the importance of their own work as not good enough. I hear a lot of that. Those people are the arrogant ones.

Is the problem of bullshit jobs more apparent to us now because of the financial crisis, the Wall Street bailouts, and the now-well-known fact that people who do almost nothing that's productive reap so much of our society's rewards? I mean, we always knew there were pointless jobs out there, but the absurdity of it all never seemed so stark before, say, 2008.

I think the spotlight on the financial sector did make apparent just how bizarrely skewed our economy is in terms of who gets rewarded and for what. There was this pall of mystification cast over everything pertaining to that sector—we were told, this is all so very complicated, you couldn't possibly understand, it's really very advanced science, you know, they are coming up with trading programs so complicated only astro-physicists can understand them, that sort of thing. We just had to take their word that, somehow, this was creating value in ways our simple little heads couldn't possibly get around. Then after the crash we realized a lot of this stuff was not just scams, but pretty simple-minded scams, like taking bets you couldn't possibly pay if you lost and just figuring the government would bail you out if you did. These guys weren't creating value of any kind. They were making the world worse and getting paid insane amounts of money for it.

Suddenly it became possible to see that if there's a rule, it's that the more obvi-

ously your work benefits others, the less you're paid for it. CEOs and financial consultants that are actually making other people's lives worse were paid millions, useless paper-pushers got handsomely compensated, people fulfilling obviously useful functions like taking care of the sick or teaching children or repairing broken heating systems or picking vegetables were the least rewarded.

But another curious thing that happened after the crash is that people came to see these arrangements as basically justified. You started hearing people say, "well, of course I deserve to be paid more, because I do miserable and alienating work" - by which they meant not that they were forced to go into the sewers or package fish, but exactly the opposite—that they didn't get to do work that had some obvious social benefit. I'm not sure exactly how it happened. But it's becoming something of a trend. I saw a very interesting blog by someone named Geoff Shullenberger recently that pointed out that in many companies, there's now an assumption that if there's work that anyone might want to do for any reason other than the money, any work that is seen as having intrinsic merit in itself, they assume they shouldn't have to pay for it. He gave the example of translation work. But it extends to the logic of internships and the like so thoroughly exposed by authors like Sarah Kendzior and Astra Taylor. At the same time, these companies are willing to shell out huge amounts of money to paper-pushers coming up with strategic vision statements who they know perfectly well are doing absolutely nothing.

You know, you're describing what's happened to journalism. Because people want to do it, it now pays very little. Same with college teaching.

What happened? Well, I think part of it is a hypertrophy of this drive to validate work as a thing in itself. It used to be that Americans mostly subscribed to a rough-and-ready version of the labor theory of value. Everything we see around us that we consider beautiful, useful, or important was made that way by people who sank their physical and mental efforts into creating and maintaining it. Work is valuable insofar as it creates these things that people like and need. Since the beginning of the 20th century, there has been an enormous effort on the part of the people running this country to turn that around: to convince everyone that value really comes from the minds and visions of entrepreneurs, and that ordinary working people are just mindless robots who bring those visions to reality.

But at the same time, they've had to validate work on some level, so they've simultaneously been telling us: work is a value in itself. It creates discipline, maturity, or some such, and anyone who doesn't work most of the time at something they

don't enjoy is a bad person, lazy, dangerous, parasitical. So work is valuable whether or not it produces anything of value. So we have this peculiar switch. As anyone who's ever had a 9-to-5 job knows, the thing everyone hates the most is having to look busy, even once you've finished a job, just to make the boss happy, because it's "his time" and you have no business lounging around even if there's nothing you really need to be doing. Now it's almost as if that kind of business is the most valued form of work, because it's pure work, work unpolluted by any possible sort of gratification, even that gratification that comes out of knowing you're actually doing something. And every time there's some kind of crisis, it intensifies. We're told, oh no! We're all going to have to work harder. And since the amount of things that actually need doing remain about the same, there's an additional hypertrophy of bullshit.

I wonder about the political ramifications of this. You're talking about a situation that obviously requires labor unions, but it could also go the other way. I am reminded of a passage in your book, "The Democracy Project," where you attribute the well-known working-class enmity against the "liberal elite" to the fact that the liberal elite have good jobs, rewarding jobs, jobs that by definition lots of average people will never be able to get. I wonder if you could expand on that.

Well, here we go back to the question of unpaid internships again. Some years ago I wrote a piece for Harpers called "Army of Altruists" where I tried to grapple with the power of right-wing populism, especially with the way that "we hate the liberal elite" and "support the troops" seemed to have a very similar, deep resonance, even to be a way of saying the same thing. What I ended up concluding is that working class people hate the cultural elite more than they do the economic elite—and mind you, they don't like the economic elite very much. But they hate the cultural elite because they see them as a group of people who have grabbed all the jobs where one gets paid to do good in the world. If you want a career pursuing any form of value other than monetary value—if you want to work in journalism, and pursue truth, or in the arts, and pursue beauty, or in some charity or international NGO or the UN, and pursue social justice—well, even assuming you can acquire the requisite degrees, for the first few years they won't even pay you. So you're supposed to live in New York or some other expensive city on no money for a few years after graduation. Who else can do that except children of the elite? So if you're a fork-lift operator or even a florist, you know your kid is unlikely to ever become a CEO, but you also know there's no way in a million years they'll ever become drama critic for the New Yorker or an interna-

tional human rights lawyer. The only way they could get paid a decent salary to do something noble, something that's not just for the money, is to join the army. So saying "support the troops" is a way of saying "fuck you" to the cultural elite who think you're a bunch of knuckle-dragging cavemen, but who also make sure your kid would never be able to join their club of rich do-gooders even if he or she was twice as smart as any of them.

So the right wing manipulates the resentment of the bulk of the working class from being able to dedicate their lives to anything purely noble or altruistic. But at the same time—and here's the real evil genius of right-wing populism—they also manipulate the resentment of that portion of the middle classes trapped in bullshit jobs against the bulk of the working classes, who at least get to do productive work of obvious social benefit. Think about all the popular uproar about school teachers. There's this endless campaign of vilification against teachers, who they say are over-paid, coddled, and are blamed for everything wrong with our education system. In fact, grade school teachers undergo really grueling conditions for much less money than they'd be paid if they'd gone into almost any other profession requiring the same level of education, and almost all the problems the right-wingers are referring to aren't created by the teachers or teachers' unions at all but by school administrators—the ones who are paid much more, and mostly have classic bullshit jobs that seem to multiply endlessly even as the teachers themselves are squeezed and downsized. So why does no one complain about those guys? Actually I saw something telling written by a right-wing activist on some blog—he said, well the funny thing is, when we first started our school reform campaigns, we tried to focus on the administrators. But it didn't take. Then we shifted to the teachers and suddenly the whole thing exploded. It's hard to explain that in any other way than to say: a lot of people resent the teachers for having genuine, meaningful jobs. You get to shape young lives. You get to make a real difference for other people. And the logic seems to be: shouldn't that be enough for them? They want that, and middle-class salaries, and job security, and vacations, and benefits, too? You even see that with auto workers. "But you get to make cars! That's a real job! And you also want \$30 an hour?"

It's an imperfect strategy. The anti-intellectualism for instance works on many sections of the white working class, but it doesn't work nearly so well on immigrants or African-Americans. The resentment against those who get to do meaningful labor exists alongside a resentment for having to do meaningless labor to begin with. It's an unstable mix. But we have to recognize that in countries like the US, it's been pretty effective.

What can be done about all this?

Right after my original bullshit jobs piece came out, I used to think that if I wanted, I could start a whole career in job counseling - because so many people were writing to me saying “I realize my job is pointless, but how can I support a family doing something that’s actually worthwhile?” A lot of people who worked the information desk at Zuccotti Park, and other occupations, told me the same thing: young Wall Street types would come up to them and say “I mean, I know you’re right, we’re not doing the world any good doing what we’re doing. But I don’t know how to live on less than a six figure income. I’d have to learn everything over. Could you teach me?”

But I don’t think we can solve the problem by mass individual defection. Or some kind of spiritual awakening. That’s what a lot of people tried in the ‘60s and the result was a savage counter-offensive which made the situation even worse. I think we need to attack the core of the problem, which is that we have an economic system that, by its very nature, will always reward people who make other people’s lives worse and punish those who make them better. I’m thinking of a labor movement, but one very different than the kind we’ve already seen. A labor movement that manages to finally ditch all traces of the ideology that says that work is a value in itself, but rather redefines labor as caring for other people. I think we saw the first stirrings of that kind of movement during Occupy. I remember being particularly struck with the “We are the 99%” web page—this was a page where people who supported the movement, but were mostly too busy to actually take part in the occupations or assemblies, could contribute by posting pictures of themselves holding up signs where they’d written out their life situation. Demographically it was a very telling. Maybe 80% of them were women. And even those who were men were mostly in caring professions: health care, social services, education. And the complaints were surprisingly uniform: basically they were all saying, “I want to do something with my life that actually benefits others; but if I go into a line of work where I care for other people, they pay me so little, and they put so much in debt, that I can’t even take care of my own family! This is ridiculous!”

Call it the revolt of the caring classes. Because, after all, the working classes have always been the caring classes really. I say this as a person of working class background myself. Not only are almost all actual caregivers (not to mention caretakers!) working class, but people of such backgrounds always tend to see themselves as the sort of people who actively care about their neighbors and communities, and value such social commitments far beyond material advantage. It’s just our obsession with

certain very specific forms of rather macho male labor—factory workers, truck-drivers, that sort of thing—which then becomes the paradigm of all labor in our imaginations; that blinds us to the fact that the bulk of working class people have always been engaged in caring labor of one sort or another. So I think we need to start by redefining labor itself, maybe, start with classic “women’s work,” nurturing children, looking after things, as the paradigm for labor itself and then it will be much harder to be confused about what’s really valuable and what isn’t. As I say, we’re already seeing the first stirrings of this sort of thing. It’s both a political and a moral transformation and think it’s the only way we can overcome the system that puts so many of us in bullshit jobs.

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