

All In One Boat

~ And Heading Through the Straits of Messina

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Bullshit Jobs — A Review

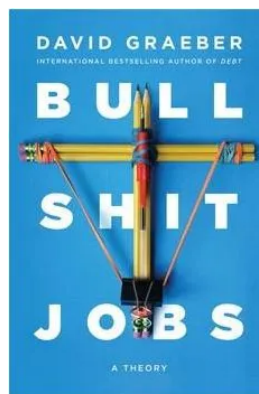
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David Graeber's important new book, [Bullshit Jobs: A Theory](#), begins with “a paradigmatic example” of a bullshit job as it was reported to him by the man who holds it, who works for a subcontractor for the German military. It is so extreme and absurd that it may not be fair to call it paradigmatic, but it is wonderfully revelatory.

The German military has a subcontractor that does their IT work.

The IT firm has a subcontractor that does their logistics

The logistics firm has a subcontractor that does their personnel management and I work for that company.

Let's say soldier A moves to an office two rooms farther down the hall. Instead of just carrying his computer over there, he has to fill out a form.

The IT subcontractor will get the form, people will read it and approve it, and forward it to the logistics firm.

The logistics firm will then have to approve the moving down the hall and will request personnel from us.

The office people in my company will then do whatever they do, and now I come in.

I get an email: “Be at barracks B at time C.” Usually these barracks are one hundred to five hundred kilometers away from my home, so I will get a rental car, drive to the barracks, let dispatch know that I arrived, fill out a form, unhook the computer, load the computer into a box, seal the box, have a guy from the logistics firm carry the box to the next room, where I unseal the box, fill out another form, hook up the computer, call dispatch to tell them how long I took, get a couple of signatures, take my rental car back home, send dispatch a letter with all the paperwork and then get paid.

Graeber would probably agree that some whole categories of job bring no social benefit, such as advertising and public relations, and maybe the German military, but he is interested in something different, as this example shows, something more concerned with the sheer waste of such jobs, and with the psychological effects on people who understand that their jobs are just that: “bullshit.” These jobs, he thinks, take up a third or more of all jobs in all modern economies, and they make many of those who hold them miserable even if they pay well with good benefits. That there are so many of them is damning.

A bullshit job is not usually a shit job. A shit job, such as stocking shelves for Walmart or cleaning offices at night, is often useful, even if you have doubts about the need for Walmarks or about what the offices do by day; you can see the results: the shelves are full and ready for customers, the toilets are clean and smell nice. A bullshit job is one that is unnecessary even if you grant that it is part of a firm or shop that has a socially valuable purpose. Graeber defines it this way: “a bullshit job is 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.” There is a crucial subjective component to this definition, and he is aware that corporate bigwigs will claim that such an employee may have no idea how his or her superficially pointless tasks actually fit into the larger picture, but he thinks the best judge of that claim is the worker who, after all, would rather not admit the pointlessness of the work. He adds, “if an office worker is really spending 80 percent of her time designing cat memes, her coworkers in the next cubicle may not be aware of what’s going on, but there’s no way that she is going to be under any illusions about what she’s doing.” (Graeber writes with a good deal of humor and verve.) I think he is right to so define it, even if there is more to be said about objective social value, exploitation, and so on. His major complaint about such jobs, in fact, is that the people who do them very often feel frustrated, demoralized, humiliated, and even sick.

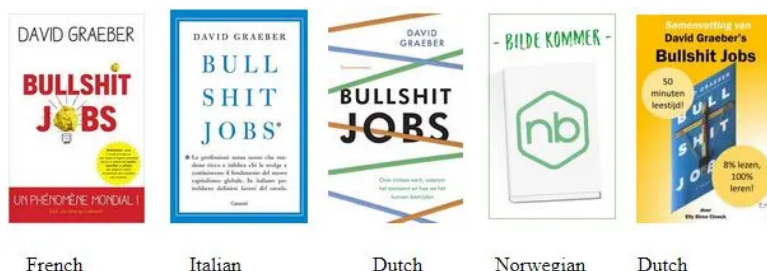
There are those who deny that pointless pseudo-jobs can exist in the private sector, mainly those true-believers in the efficiency of the market who cannot imagine that a corporation would tolerate paying a raft of salaries, often high ones, to parasitical paper-pushers. Others, often the same ones, claim that such inefficient make-work jobs are imposed on corporations by the government, and that if regulations were removed the corporations would revert to their natural lean and mean state. Both these theories are entirely wrong, according to Graeber, and he gives some interesting data and a fair amount of anecdotal testimony to show that they are. These jobs are largely generated from within, and they are legion.

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Graeber’s project on bullshit jobs got started, he tells us, in the summer of 2013 when he published a short piece “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs” in the London radical magazine (and website) *Strike!* (Graeber is American but now teaches anthropology at the LSE.) Within weeks the essay was translated into a dozen languages and reprinted or reposted everywhere, and the *Strike!* site had a million hits. Passages or paraphrases from the book appeared in the London Underground.



In France especially the term has stuck: a 2018 article is called “La bullshitisation de l’économie n’en est qu’à ses débuts” (“The bullshitisation of the economy has only just begun”). Blogs sprang up, and hundreds of people posted testimonies about their silly and degrading jobs. Polls were conducted in several countries that confirmed the extent of them. And then Graeber set up a dedicated Twitter account to solicit more testimonies, many of which he responded to with further questions. Much of the book is made up of passages from these statements, and even without Graeber’s lively and thoughtful comments on them they alone would make the book worth buying.



A woman “working” as a receptionist in a Dutch publishing company wrote that the phone rang only about once a day,
 . . . so I was given other tasks:

- * Keep candy dish full of mints. (Mints were supplied by someone else at the company; I just had to take a handful out of a drawer next to the candy dish and put them in the candy dish.)
- * Once a week I would go to a conference room and wind a grandfather clock. (I found this task stressful, actually, because they told me that if I forgot or waited too long, all of the weights would fall, and I would be left with the onerous task of grandfather clock repair.)
- * The task that took the most time was managing another receptionist’s Avon sales.

Graeber calls workers like this one “flunkies”: they exist because firms would lose face if they lacked a receptionist (or even two, in this case), and corporate executives would feel weak without an entourage. He likens these roles to medieval retainers, who dressed in fancy uniforms and

followed their lord around.

A man who is a digital consultant for global pharmaceutical companies' marketing departments, wrote:

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. But it is very easy to charge a very large amount of money to write bullshit reports. 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 during their allotted meeting time, but the team I wrote it for was very happy with it nonetheless.

Some jobs that may not be mainly bullshit have bullshit obligations imposed on them as part of the corporate "culture" or image. A bank employee wrote about a drive to do charity for a week:

I refuse to participate as, though I give to charity, I will not give through my bank, as for them it's just a big advertising drive in an attempt to shore up morale internally and make it look like banking isn't appropriating labor through usury. They put out a "target" of, say, ninety percent participation—all "voluntary"—and then for two months, they try to get people to sign up. If you don't sign up, they note your name, and then people come and ask you why you haven't signed up. . . . The charity work itself is totally empty. Things like two hours of litter picking. Giving bad sandwiches to the homeless where someone else organizes all the sandwich packages, etc., and bank employees just turn up and hand them out then go home again in their nice cars.

The book is rich with stories like these, some hilarious, some hair-curling, some disturbing—such as those that testify to the psychological breakdowns of the worker.



You would think that these workers, those who fill candy dishes once or twice a day or write short reports for 12,000 pounds, would be happy that they have found a dream job: little work for good money. If we were the sort of people that mainstream economic theory says we are, that is, *homo economicus*, who maximizes utility and all that, then we would be happy. But we are not. Hundreds of respondents wrote with sarcasm, scorn, or despair about the insidious damage to their self-esteem and even their sense of self that bullshit jobs inflicted. Graeber has some interesting pages on the basic human need to do something useful, to feel a part of a community that welcomes and values our work, to make a difference in the world. Without such a fulfilling connection, even if it entails onerous and poorly paid labor, we lose our grip on reality, retreat into social media and computer games, or go insane. Why, he asks, are obstreperous prisoners punished by *denying* them the chance to make license plates for no pay?

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This part of Graeber's argument reminded me of Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown's campaign theme of "the dignity of work." I went to hear him at a bookstore this spring (I live in New Hampshire!) and I liked what he said, though for him the dignity in question seemed to apply to all work, and his points were that there should be jobs for everyone and that all jobs deserved respect. He said nothing about dignity *in* work, or that some jobs were destructive of dignity no matter how well they are paid, but at least he introduced the theme. (I'm sorry he dropped out of the presidential race.) The dignity of work was a major theme of the papal encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981) which, like Graeber, stressed the subjective dimension of labor: work is made for man, not man for work; it also warned against taking work and workers as a kind of "merchandise" with objective measures or prices under capitalism. Graeber has a long and interesting digression on the history of the idea of work, going back to the Bible, and he even quotes the encyclical, but he doesn't talk about dignity, perhaps because it sounds theological to him, or because it has been pressed into service too often as a solace for oppressed workers and a substitute for genuine equality. I think his book nevertheless stands in creative dialogue with many earlier discussions about the meaning of labor, such as Hannah Arendt's in *The Human Condition* (1957), and dignity is a concept that needs reinvigorating. (I haven't yet seen a book that has just come out: Chris Arnade, *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*.)

Graeber also entertains the thesis that jobs are paid in inverse proportion to the good they do in the world. It's hard to deny it. We see Wall Street high-rollers who are paid disgustingly high salaries, with bonuses in the millions and golden parachutes, to do nothing but harm to other people, while the women who clean their offices are paid a pittance. There are exceptions, of course: some doctors earn their high salaries, though even if that is true it is probably nurses and public health workers who have done most to save human lives and enhance human health. Granting the difficulty of ranking social or moral value on an objective scale, there are even quantitative studies that bear this out. According to one, a top-ranked banker or financier destroys about seven dollars of social value for every dollar he is paid (and he is paid a lot), while a nursery-school teacher creates about seven dollars for every dollar she is paid, and she is paid about one five-hundredth what the banker is paid. "Say what you like about nurses, garbage collector, and mechanics," Graeber wrote in his original essay (and expanded on in his book), "it's obvious that were they to vanish in a puff of smoke, the results would be immediate and catastrophic. A world without teachers or dockworkers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science-fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs, or legal consultants to similarly vanish." Things might actually improve. Nonetheless the jobs that are vital are poorly paid.

The laws of supply and demand do not account for these enormous discrepancies, nor does the amount or cost of training, nor does any other factor, Graeber argues, inherent in the capitalist system as it usually conceived. In fact, he says, it isn't really capitalism that prevails in modern economies, but something that he calls "managerial feudalism," with all its hierarchies and waste and conspicuous display, paid for by extracting wealth from productive workers. The *ideology* of capitalism, with its incantation of free market, supply and demand, rational choice, efficiency, and all that, is still the dominant one, constantly drummed home by the major media, which rich people own, but the reality is very different.

Which brings us to Graeber's final section. The unemployed, he says, resent people with jobs. People with jobs resent people without them, who seem to be lazing about and living off the dole. People with real jobs take satisfaction in them, but they resent people with higher salaries who do little or nothing valuable. And those people resent, and envy, those whose jobs, however badly paid, are meaningful. There is a dangerous amount

of resentment in the air, made worse by the universal moral belief that you are not a worthy member of society if you are not working all the time, even at a bullshit job! And made worse, of course, at least in America, by racism and the fear of immigrants.

What we should do now, he thinks, is to embrace the fact that automation has indeed eliminated the need for people to work more than a few hours a week, just as Keynes predicted in the 1930s, but ideologies about the morality of hard work, and the fear of the upper classes that idle workers may create a revolution, have combined to generate vast layers of bullshit employment. As an anarchist Graeber hesitates to propose a policy to change all this, since “policies” are what the politicians and corporate executives deal in and what he wants is that we should all take charge of our lives and jobs and do something together. But do what? There is no campaign afoot now that is demanding the debullshitization of jobs, and if there were it might immediately get tangled up in definitions, committees to apply them, appeal boards, and so on, and thereby make more bullshit jobs. But we could at least institute a Universal Basic Income, whereby everyone receives an annual sum from the government sufficient to live in modest decency. Even the rich would receive it, but it would be the same sum for everyone; there would be no means tests, and hence no bullshit bureaucracy to impose the tests. A UBI policy would decouple work from livelihood, and allow people to do whatever they want. Most would work, because they want to work, but they wouldn’t have to work at meaningless and soul-eroding jobs. It would reduce the amount of festering resentment, and make nearly everyone happier and freer. Utopian? Maybe, but not impossible. Graeber doesn’t mention the Alaska Permanent Fund, which has given as much as \$2000 in some years to every Alaskan resident; that money comes from oil revenues, while UBI, which would deal out larger sums, would presumably be paid for by a fairer tax system. And of course he didn’t know about Andrew Yang, one of the many presidential candidates now criss-crossing my state, who has proposed a UBI of \$1000 a month. That sum is probably only about half of what Graeber would like to see, and might only serve to keep people out of poverty and not really liberate them to find meaningful work. Too many vested interests, of course, are poised to squelch any really generous UBI before it gets very far, but to defend it as eloquently as Graeber does is to provoke us to think in new ways about the society which, after all, we have collectively made and collectively remake every day.

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One last thought here about utopian thinking. For some time now even many thinkers on the left have dismissed visionary thinking about ideal societies as “utopian,” using it in the same disparaging way that conservatives do who don’t want any changes at all. Marx and Engels set the example by denouncing “Utopian Socialists” for building “castles in the air.” Today the totalitarian regimes of the Communists and Nazis are held up as what happens when powerful leaders are seized by utopian dreams. But I think this is unfair. Visions of an ideal society can be compared and evaluated; some are a lot better than others; and the question about how to put them into practice is one that everyone in a democracy is free to debate and support or oppose. I agree with Paul Goodman that when people call an idea “utopian” they really mean “I don’t want to do it.” We need utopian thinking. We need novels such as William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), to name three that have nurtured my spirit. The main danger today is not that a few of us will be gripped by a utopian dream and try to institute it by force, but that our vision will shrink so far that we can only imagine little policies, like extending Obamacare or adding one slightly higher tax bracket. Our problem is that we have bought into what the late Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism,” in his little book with that title (2009). It is the belief, taken as obviously true even by many who deplore it, that “there is no alternative” to capitalism, to quote the infamous sentence of Margaret Thatcher’s. (It was echoed, alas, by Nancy Pelosi this year: “I have to say, we’re capitalists, that’s just the way it is.”) By a process of “reflexive impotence” we quit the good fight for a fundamentally new society and content ourselves with modest reforms, or with defensive measures against the Trumpists. And we quietly despair.

Quite apart from his recommendation of UBI at the end, Graeber’s fresh approach to the state of work in capitalist society is an example of utopian thinking because he makes us see things with fresh eyes. And already, despite Trump, the air is different now from what it was ten years ago when Mark Fisher wrote his bleak book. (He committed suicide in January 2017.) As for Graeber, he was active in the Occupy Wall Street movement, which surprised everyone and is still reverberating in many corners; his big book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011) had an effect on its demands. Black Lives Matter, Me Too, March for our Lives, School Strike for Climate, and the school-teacher strikes have mobilized hundreds of thousands on single issues with deep ramifications, and with some success. Recent polls show “socialism” is now more popular than “capitalism” among Democrats and even more so among people under thirty, whatever they may mean by those words. This may be our moment to think utopian thoughts. In light of the disasters now impending, it may be the most realistic way to think.



NOTE And this brings to mind Harry Frankfurt’s wonderful 1986 book, [On Bullshit](#).

And thanks to Michael Ferber for his review

wbk

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4 thoughts on “Bullshit Jobs — A Review”

1.  Bob Eaton *said*: