



“Well paid to do nothing”? Remuneration in David Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs*

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What if your job suddenly disappeared? This provocative question asked by the anthropologist David Graeber, who died in 2020, struck a particular chord that year in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Workers all across the world were temporarily forced out of work, having discovered themselves to be “nonessential.”^[1] One outcome was a revival of the debate surrounding “bullshit jobs,” the subject of Graeber’s 2018 book.^[2] Graeber draws on a series of individual accounts sent to him to progressively develop his theme, defining bullshit jobs 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” (Graeber 2018, 9). While the world of academia was rather skeptical,^[3] the concept found a powerful resonance in the media and in activist circles, mainly in response to the questions it raises about the usefulness and value of our jobs. Remuneration receives a more marginal treatment, however, remaining a vaguely defined and case-dependent concept throughout the book. It turns out to be a very useful lens, helping us understand the thread and originality of Graeber’s argument as he expands his analysis from the individual level to explore the phenomenon’s economic repercussions and cultural roots.

1

WHERE DOES REMUNERATION COME INTO THE DEFINITION OF A BULLSHIT JOB?

Right from the introduction, Graeber sets out the double enigma that guides his thesis: not only do bullshit jobs exist, even though the world would get along just as well—if not better—without them, but, paradoxically, they tend to be very well paid. Moreover, the rewards are not only monetary, but symbolic. In contrast to “shit jobs,” thankless roles like refuse collector, consisting of tasks that society very clearly needs doing, bullshit jobs are “surrounded by honor and prestige” (Graeber 2018, 15). For Graeber, financial traders are the most egregious example, but he estimates that around 37 percent of professions could fall into this category.^[4] While the individuals we meet in his book claim to do nothing of use to the world, or to simply do nothing *at all*^[5], their situations are intolerable to them. All of this misery at work, something Graeber believes to be symptomatic of a sense of pointlessness, also raises profound questions for *homo œconomicus*: a model upheld by classical microeconomic theory that tells us these workers should be delighted to be paid good money for naught.

2

Nevertheless, his quickly sketched-out inverse relationship between remuneration and utility struggles to hold, given that the examples of bullshit jobs scattered throughout the book cover a broad and diverse range of professions,^[6] occupying very different positions on the social scale—from “strategic leadership” in a prominent UK university (Graeber 2018, 53) to dishwashing in a restaurant kitchen (ibid., 92). Lavish salaries are not therefore a fixed and intrinsic quality of the bullshit job concept. Rather, they are a statistical regularity, making for a denser and more complex analysis. Occasionally, they provide Graeber with an oblique way of injecting a shot of sarcastic humor into his inquiry. The author’s intuitive sense of a relationship between utility and financial reward deserves more thorough exploration. The economist Thomas Coutrot (2019), for example, draws on data from a 2016 study titled *Conditions de travail et risques psychosociaux* (CT-RPS) (Working Conditions and Psychosocial Risks) to propose that 17 percent of the active population in France are employed in bullshit jobs. Like Graeber, he points to the financial sector as a breeding ground for jobs that are perceived as having no social benefit by the individuals who perform them, but also to some less expected roles, like supermarket cashiers.

3

To solve this conundrum, Graeber shifts focus to describe the social and economic organization that characterizes the developed world. The transition from an industrial system to an information economy completely transformed modes of production and the distribution of wealth, following a logic that is more politically than economically rational and imposing a hierarchy based on “class power and class loyalty” (Graeber 2018, 213). The author compares this to the mechanisms of feudalism, but with an added obsession with top-down control, far removed from the autonomy enjoyed by medieval trades.^[7] This “managerial feudalism” propagates a multitude of roles premised on rent-seeking (the finance sector), exploiting weak points in the system (corporate lawyers), and moving wealth between different pockets: a procession of archetypal figures^[8] who, while sometimes of value to their employer, create zero social benefit. This phenomenon might also help explain the demise of the “Keynesian bargain”^[9] of the postwar period, when continuous advances in productivity bumped up the salaries of lower-skilled workers. In fact, Graeber argues, since the 1970s, profits have tended to be skimmed off by managers, in addition to fueling an explosion in wealth for society’s most well off.

The existence of these jobs raises questions not only about the efficiency of our economies, but also about the modern productive structure. Graeber ventures that the amount of work required to sustain our society has been substantially reduced by automation. He seems to subscribe to the “end of work” hypothesis, which sees human labor as a form of submission to necessity, historically positioned and upheld as a central pillar of society for political purposes (Gorz 1988). It is to ensure the continued centrality of work, even when the need has virtually disappeared, that bullshit jobs proliferate. Therefore, Graeber states that if technological progress has not resulted in a real reduction in working hours, it is because the role of work in our social structure is not so much economic as disciplinary. The emphasis on paid employment as a means of subsistence forces individuals to submit to a systemic, abstract domination that organizes their lives. The lack of free time makes them easier to govern and keeps them from engaging in creative work or political action, to borrow the distinction drawn by Hannah Arendt (1958).

WHY ARE BULLSHIT JOBS NOT SEEN AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM?

Finally, the author turns to formulating a cultural explanation for what he calls the “bullshitization of society.” He begins by probing the theological roots of economics, which cause it to treat work as the source of all value, leading us to sanctify it as an end in itself. Even in his earlier ethnological work, where he reveals the processes through which value is created, Graeber is fiercely critical of the concept of production, the cornerstone of the neoclassical theory of wage determination. This theory ascribes value only to the production of things, ignoring the bulk of human labor that goes into the “production of humans”: work done predominantly by women, impossible to automate, and a source of unquantifiable benefits for society. This kind of “caring work” is routinely hidden and poorly compensated despite its social utility. Graeber’s thesis is that this very utility and intrinsic reward actually diminishes its market value, as, the reasoning goes, it ought to be sufficient in itself. Applying anthropological concepts to contemporary societies, he aligns himself with the analyses of modern feminist economics (Pérvier 2020).

Thus, the remuneration of work lies at the heart of the political issues presented by bullshit jobs: as the primary means of distributing wealth and placing value on production, it keeps individuals in line and obscures care work. It is hardly surprising that remuneration should be Graeber’s proposed line of attack, like a magic word that promises to free the masses from the ideological domination of work: by breaking the link between labor and remuneration, the establishment of a universal basic income would give everyone the opportunity to choose how best to spend their time—which shouldn’t leave much for bullshit jobs.

NOTES

The “Trepid” study (*Le travail sous épidémie*—Work during the pandemic), released by Ugict-CGT in partnership with DARES in May 2020, reports that 43 percent of employees view their jobs as essential.

The book developed from a 2013 column in the online magazine *Strike*, which quickly went viral and unleashed a torrent of accounts from people who felt it spoke to their situations.

The book’s reported greatest weaknesses are the lack of rigor in a definition to which Graeber himself does not always adhere, the unsubstantiated relationship between feeling useless and being objectively useless to society, an inadequate grounding in the social science of work, and the limitations of relying on a basic survey to quantify the phenomenon.

Based on a YouGov survey carried out in August 2015, which asked: “Is your job making a meaningful contribution to the world?”

The supposed utility of jobs is sometimes gauged from individuals’ subjective feelings about their work and sometimes from the author’s personal opinions. In this case, Graeber often conflates the state of not being useful with that of not doing anything at all,

which can be problematic.

The case studies are often less concerned with occupations in the traditional sense than with specific situations and jobs.

On the role of corporations in wage determination in the Middle Ages, see François Rivière’s article in this issue:
<https://www.cairn.info/revue-regards-croises-sur-l-economie-2020-2-page-22.htm>.

Graeber suggests a five-part typology, from “flunkies,” who serve as status symbols for their employers, to “taskmasters,” who dish out pointless tasks to their subordinates.

The expression “Keynesian bargain” is similar to more common formulations like the “Keynesian” or “postwar consensus” (denoting cooperation between the UK’s two dominant political parties). It underscores the importance of negotiation and power dynamics in industrial relations.

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ABSTRACT

In Graeber’s book, remuneration has an ambiguous status. It is nonetheless essential in order to understand his analysis of the job value hierarchy and the centrality of labor in Western societies. By valuing productive work only, the compensation system tends to obscure caring work.

OUTLINE

- Where does remuneration come into the definition of a bullshit job?
- Why pay people to be useless?
- Why are bullshit jobs not seen as a social problem?

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