

David Graeber on capitalism's best kept secret

“Income and utility are inversely proportional”



David Graeber

is an American anthropologist and anarcho-communist activist who was once a leading figure in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement. Today, he is professor at the London School of Economics. His last book, *Bullshit Jobs*, has met with international success.

Interview

Reading time: 14 minutes

Key takeaways

- Many employees feel that their job serves no purpose: they fall into David Graeber's category of "bullshit jobs"
- The creation and compensation of jobs follows a logic which is neither socially nor economically rational
- Work should be detached from subsistence thanks to a universal income and aim instead to take care of others

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The author of the bestselling *Bullshit Jobs* debunks the myth of capitalist efficiency, by revealing why companies create and maintain hordes of useless jobs... As the confidant of many a disillusioned employee, he got the hunch straight from the horse's mouth. His findings are both funny at times – and frankly disconcerting.

How do you define “bullshit jobs”?

David Graeber: I have an entirely subjective definition of bullshit jobs: if workers feel that their job is pointless, that if it were to vanish, it would make no difference, or even the world might be a slightly better place, then it means that they are doing a bullshit job. It can be for various reasons: because they are doing nothing all day, or because they feel like their work doesn't benefit the organization, or even because the entire company or industry is useless.

You've asked the employee, not the boss. Why?

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Because they don't know! The boss is the last person you're going to tell if you're just designing cat memes all day!

How many people have “bullshit jobs”?

My subjective measure probably underestimates the number of bullshit jobs. If you're writing reports for people who don't read them, they obviously won't tell you! Originally I assumed that it was about 10 %, and that it was limited to the prosperous bourgeoisie. I come from a working class background, where people actually do stuff. So I started to ask around me: what do you actually do? Often people would be evasive, and finally say: “I really work an hour a day”. Then I wrote this article as a provocation, saying that many administrative jobs were useless. And it went crazy! It was translated into 30 different languages in two weeks. I didn't expect that so many people would feel concerned. Then YouGov did this survey and they found that 37 % of the working public said their job is not making any useful contribution to the world at all. Another survey about engagement at work revealed that a vast majority of people were “passively disengaged” in their job, which means they were basically sleep walking! Only 15 % were “actively engaged”, and 15 % were “actively disengaged”, which means they hated so much their job that they were trying to do a bad job.

You make a distinction between “bullshit” and “shit jobs”. How do they differ?

Let's take the cleaning staff at LSE: they wake up at 5am, wear stupid uniforms and literally clean up shit. They use dangerous solvents, some of them get sick but they don't get paid for the time they have to take off. But their job is necessary: if they weren't there, the university would become inoperable in two days. That's a shit job. In contrast, the executive assistant to the vice provost, who has an office of their own and gets paid more than me, probably has a bullshit job... Although they might be doing something, like making up work for me to do!

You created a hilarious typology of bullshit jobs: the flunkies, the goons, the duct tapers, the box tickers... How do you define these categories?

By dialoguing with workers. 203 people – up to 300 now – became my informants and wrote me with stories. I gradually put together this typology, sometimes based on the terms they used or on what seemed to be prevalent in certain industries.

‘The prestige and power of executives are largely based on how many people they have working under them’

Let’s start with the flunkies. Who are they?

A flunky is there primarily to make someone else feel important, like a receptionist for a company that never gets any phone call. In a sense, almost all bullshit jobs are flunkies. In large corporations, there is no incentive to get rid of unnecessary employees because the prestige and power of the executives is largely based on how many people they have working under them. Take the design of corporate reports: one guy makes the diagrams, another the illustrative cartoons, five others write the report... Nobody reads them, but the executive can say: “I have 500 people working in my department”. It’s the equivalent to some knight in the Middle Ages who’s got one servant to just tweeze his mustache and another guy to polish his stirrups.

There are the *goons*: the only possible reason you might need them is if other companies have them – like corporate lawyers, for example. A *duct taper* is there to fix a problem that shouldn't exist in the first place. If you have a leak in the roof, you could fix it, or you could get a bucket and then hire a guy to empty it when it rains... You would think nobody in their right mind would choose the second option. But that's exactly what a lot of companies do! Another good category is the *box ticker*. People complain that they have to fill in so much paperwork describing how the job is being done that they never get round to doing it at all. A woman in charge of entertainment in a care home told me that a significant part of her job was to interview every single member about what they wanted. She had to give them elaborate forms, tabulate the results on the computer... She spent so much time processing the information that she didn't have time to entertain anybody. So sometimes she would sneak off the job and play the piano for people, just to do something!

Is the rise in bullshit jobs linked to the development of the so-called service sector?

There is a false rhetoric about the rise of the service economy. People use the word “service” to cover information technology or managerial positions because they don’t know how to name them. But if you look at jobs that actually involve providing a service, like hairdressers or cafe waiters, they only make up about 20 % of the work force – which is exactly what it was one hundred years ago. The only difference is that there are less domestic servants and more people working in shops. However, IT workers, supervisors, clerks, and managers have gone through the roof. In some countries they've risen from 20 % in the 1930s to 75 % today. Those are the areas of huge expansion where people have bullshit jobs.

In your former book, *Bureaucracy*, you made the point that bureaucracy didn't disappear after communism, but actually increased. Is this the main source of bullshit jobs?

I think so. To be more precise, it's the fusion of public and private that creates the most bureaucratization. I wrote about this guy who was a subcontractor to a subcontractor to a subcontractor to the German military *[laugh]*. If a German commander wanted to move his laptop from one office to the other, he had to ask somebody to call somebody, and then somebody has to drive 500 kilometers, rent a car, fill out a form, put something in a box that somebody else takes out of the box... Three different corporations are involved! This is insane. It's the most inefficient system ever, but it's been created by privatization and public/private partnerships.

'If employees were co-owners of the company, surely they wouldn't force each other to do nonsense'

You're a professor, but you could have had a career as a cost-killer! If you were the CEO of one such company, wouldn't you lay off these people?

I would resign! I'd turn the company over to the employees and make them sort things out. If they were all co-owners, surely they wouldn't force each other to do nonsense *[laugh]*.

Seriously, how do you explain that companies don't reduce their workforce?

It's an interesting question. There have been some successful experiments: one scandinavian company decided to see what would happen if people worked five hours a day instead of eight, but for the same salary. They discovered that the activity increased when people worked less.

So why don't they all do that?

Because there's more than economic rationality at play here. In a financialized economy, the imperative is different from what it was in classical capitalism. When we think of capitalist enterprises, we assume that we're talking about small or medium sized firms who are competing with each other in a market environment. Where that is still true, you don't find a lot of bullshit jobs. Restaurants, for example, are organized the way we imagine capitalism works: their owners don't hire people just to sit around! But if you're JP Morgan Chase, the logic is different. The profits of financial organisations come neither from commerce nor manufacturing – they come from “regulated rents”. So their reason of governance is different: for some corporations, inefficiency is efficient.

If these corporations don't follow the efficiency rules of capitalism, which system are we living in then?

It could be construed as a kind of feudalism. In capitalism, you get your profits from hiring people to make stuff and then sell it, whereas feudalism is direct appropriation. If you hire your peasants, it's capitalism; if you just take 50 % of their crops, it's feudalism. I tried to find out what percentage of people's income in America gets sucked up by the finance sector (which part of your salary goes to mortgages, student loans, or credit card payments...) and I couldn't find any statistics. The Federal Reserve doesn't have any. Some economists say it's 15 %, some say it's half, but one thing is clear: it's not that different from having a lord take your crops. GP Morgan Chase makes huge profits from fees and penalties, so they set up a system of rules based on what the government will allow them to do, and then they charge you for any mistake. That's how banks make money nowadays. It's like feudalism, because it relies on the legal system, on regulated needs.

‘Supply-side economics means giving money directly to rich people, saying: “go create jobs!”’

What role do politics play in this system?

There's a point to look at: the political pressure to create jobs. This is one of the very few things that both the left and the right agree on. It's not that different from the Soviet Union where there was a political commitment to employ everyone. Obviously there is a difference in how you create these jobs, and the question today is why this pressure is felt by the private sector. The social democratic solution has always been to stimulate the consumer demand so that employers will hire more people to make and sell things. The right-wing solution, which is predominant since the 1980s, has been supply-side and trickle down economics: they give money directly to rich people, saying "go create jobs!" To some degree it doesn't work: 80 % of that money in America went to companies buying their own stock back. And they're not going to hire people to make more stuff if no one is going to buy it. So the obvious thing to do is to hire flunkies.

If people suffer from having bullshit jobs, why aren't they going for more useful jobs?

They can't. There is an inverse relationship between the amount of money you're going to get for a job, and how much it actually helps people. Our society is set up in such a way that if you want to do something useful, for example, be a teacher, they will pay you so little that you can't even take care of your own children. It's outrageous. When I was involved in "Occupy", we set up a web page for people who wanted to show support but were too busy working. We got thousands of stories – that were surprisingly similar – of people working in social services like health or education and who are underpaid. About two thirds of them were women. I call this the revolt of the caring class.

You're talking about "moral envy".

It's fascinating. Moral envy means resenting people for trying to indicate to the world that they're morally superior to you by acting in a way that is actually morally superior to you. That kind of resentment seems rife. People say: "we don't want teachers who are just motivated by money to take care of our children". Nobody ever says we shouldn't pay bankers too much, because we don't want people who are greedy to take care of our money *[laugh]*! That would be obviously a greater danger, so this can't be the real explanation. Something else is going on, which is moral envy. There is almost a sense that if you're an altruist, that should be enough, that virtue is its own reward, as the Stoics would say.

**You defend the idea of a basic income.
Why?**

There are two different versions of the basic income: the right-wing version, where you give people money instead of universal health care and free education, and a liberal version, where you give people a supplement. I'm not for any of them. When I'm talking about a basic income, I don't mean a supplement, but an income which is enough to live on. I am for divorcing livelihood and work entirely. If you're alive, you deserve a livelihood. And it's up to you to decide what you have to attribute to society. With this form of basic income, you might have the problem of how to get people to clean sewers: you'll have to pay them a lot. But nobody will take a bullshit job anymore. Because people want to feel useful!

But can we define objectively which job is useful for society?

I assume that people do know what they're talking about. So if they say that there's no social value to what they do, I believe them. Economists think that it's purely subjective, but people do have a theory of social values. They have an intuitive feeling of them, and they are operating with the idea that they exist independently of the market.

‘The ultimate form
of violence is when
only rich people can
afford to do
meaningful work!’

**Apparently young people are leaving
office jobs to open bakeries. Is it a way to
find meaning?**

Yes, but most of them have money. It’s the
ultimate form of violence: only rich people
can afford to do meaningful work!

**Isn’t there a difference between being
“useful” and being “productive”?**

The idea of production is very deceptive. Economics comes from moral philosophy, which is a branch of theology, and is still informed by a religious sensibility. We live in the Christian idea that work is basically punishment for the original sin, and an imitation of the Christian God who created the universe out of nothing. Production is a male fantasy of birth: to produce means “to push out”. It says in the Bible, “men will have to work and I will multiply women’s pain in pregnancy, in giving birth”. So there is a direct parallel between producing goods and producing babies: they are both imagined as popping out of nowhere, in a painful process. The labor theory of value, which the workers’ movements of the 19th century popularised, was all based on this notion of production which has a patriarchal bias. A Marxist would say: “Here is a glass. How much labor time and how many resources does it take to create it?”. But the real question is: if you only produce a glass once, how many times do you wash it? Marxism overlooks the fact that most labor just vanishes when we only talk about production, and of course, the fact that most of this labor is typically done by women, sometimes not paid at all.

**This is what Hannah Arendt calls
“labor” as opposed to creative “work”...**

Yes. Following Arendt, we usually oppose creative work to reproductive labor. But the second involves a lot more creativity than you think. Dishwashing doesn't but childcare certainly does. What are England's greatest exports? Fantasy literature, music, jokes, humor: things that working class people, especially women, do to entertain kids. All this unpaid or unacknowledged labor is the really creative work.

This is an interesting question: one could be tempted to consider entertainment as useless. Is it?

That's a very important point. I like the example of this guy doing special effects. He said 5 % of his work actually was special effects: making space ships appear and blow up, making dinosaurs attacking people... And he said that was great! No one's going to say that's a bullshit job, because entertaining people is wonderful. But 95 % of what he does is trying to make people on TV look nicer than they actually look, to subtly get into people's mind to make them think they're ugly, so that they'll buy things that don't work... So he thought he was mostly a goon, whereas he liked the entertaining part of his job.

Would a society without bullshit jobs still allow us to be superficial? People would probably stop selling expensive perfumes...

You could assume that people who are selling perfumes would say that this stuff is totally overpriced and people don't need it. But that's not what you get at all. Much more often they say: "I sell overpriced products but people seem to want it, so who am I to judge?" Same with hairdressers: if people want to have elaborate haircuts and it makes them happy, why not? It's very elitist to judge.

'I suggest a Spinozian theory of caring labor, in which work would be aimed at maintaining or augmenting another person's freedom'

So what are we all ultimately working for?

The question we have to ask ourselves is: how to think about economic activity and value in other terms than production and consumption? I suggest a Spinozian theory of caring labor. Caring work is aimed at maintaining or augmenting another person's freedom. And the paradigmatic form of freedom is self-directed activity: play. Marx says at some point that you only achieve true freedom when you leave the domain of necessity and work becomes its own end. That's also the common definition of play. Mothers take care of children so that they can play. Maybe we should have that as a paradigm for social value: we take care of each other so that we can be more free, enjoy life, experience freedom and playful activities. And we will have a much more psychologically healthy and ecologically sustainable society.

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