

Book Review

David Graeber

Bullshit Jobs: A Theory

New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Ever since Machiavelli, courtiers have been regarded with some suspicion. And, ever since the classical economists came up with the “labour theory of value,” that suspicion has come to be more generally associated with the distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” work. The world, it seems to some, is divided between those who contribute to society and those who live off the avails of others. Productive work is said to be work that results in some product or service suitable for trade or sale in the (preferably free) market. Unproductive work is said to be work that doesn’t result in a commercially salable product or service. For example, what I am doing now is unproductive. If, however, *The Innovation Journal* charged for subscriptions and if I received a salary, a freelancer’s fee or a royalty, then — hey presto! — my scribbling would instantly become productive.

In Machiavelli’s time, landed aristocrats and their dependent peasantries still dominated a largely agricultural economy, but yeoman farmers, artisans and others who could measure their contributions in terms of the exchange value of the goods they produced were growing in an emerging capitalist economy. As the feudal mode of production evolved into mercantilism and then into industrial capitalism, this category came to include the employees of entrepreneurs who turned trees into lumber, iron ore into steel, bolts of cloth into clothing, and springs and wires into clocks. Later, their numbers would include automobile workers and software designers. Outside, or on the periphery, of this worthy and useful category once danced diplomats and court jesters, bishops, knights and knaves. Today, the unproductive sector might also absorb family counsellors, human resource experts, public opinion pollsters, teachers, psychologists, cyber-security specialists, forensic accountants, politicians, priests, rabbis, imams, baby-sitters and financial consultants.

One helpful way to look at the differences among types of labour is to consider bed-making. Brooks (2005) uses this simple example to explain that productive labor is whatever adds to the wealth of the capitalist (owner/investor in a private business) by producing surplus value (more commonly known as “profit”). So, he explains: “If I make beds in a capitalist’s mansion, my labour is unproductive. If,” however, “I work in a Holiday Inn making beds my labour is productive, since the capitalist sells my services for a profit. If,” on a speculative third hand, “I make my own bed at home, my labour is neither productive nor unproductive, since it lies outside the capitalist economy.” The labour involved in the making of beds is, of course, exactly the same; what counts is the social relationship of the worker to the mode of production and the generation of wealth.

Although ever more subtle technical economic definitions of what counts and what does not count as productive labour abound, the moral distinction between them rests mainly on the feeling that those who produce items for sale in the capitalist marketplace are valued contributors to the economy and to the wealth of nations, whereas those whose work yields no specific marketable benefit can easily and often be discounted as free-loading pariahs or actual obstacles to prosperity and growth. Indeed, ever since Shakespeare's far-famed admonition to dispense with barristers and solicitors ("The first thing we do," says Dick the Butcher, "let's kill all the lawyers." – *Henry VI, Part 2, Act IV, Scene 2*), honest work has been said to be that which is done with one's hands ("manufacturing"), whereas work that is done with one's head stands in need of more considered and extensive justification.

Labour makes the greatest part of the value of the things we enjoy in this world.

– Adam Smith

As bourgeois society erupted in the seventeenth century, claims to wealth unrelated to aristocratic land ownership but based on manufacturing, commercial trade, emerging urban demographics were more consistently, stridently and successfully made. It became necessary to legitimize the economic power of the new middle classes through an innovative theory of property.

A man grows rich by employing a multitude of manufacturers; he grows poor by maintaining a multitude of menial servants.

– Adam Smith

Although the idea that the value of a commodity reflects the human labour expended to transform some piece of raw nature into a salable product can be tortuously traced back at least to St. Thomas Aquinas and even to Aristotle (Sewell, 1901), it was the patriarch of economic and political liberalism, John Locke (1789, p. 11), who first forcefully put forward a precursor to the labour theory of value in his *Second Treatise on Government* in 1689. He argued first that "though men as a whole own the earth and all inferior creatures, every individual man has a property in his own person (i.e., owns himself); this is something that nobody else has any right to." From this it followed that "the labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are strictly his. So when he takes something from the state that nature has provided and left it in, he mixes his labour with it, thus joining to it something that is his own; and in that way he makes it his property." In one deft step, Locke opened up the path to property ownership to anyone with the wit and the will to extract, refine, monetize, commodify and commercialize a natural resource and to claim the benefit by virtue of the personal labour expended. Thus, were the foundations of the castle walls and the lifestyles of the idle rich and infamous profoundly and permanently cracked. The capitalist revolt against the hereditary nobility was afoot.

Locke's affirmation of individual rights offset the privileges of hereditary position and inherited wealth. By postulating that human intervention into nature and the transformation of some part of nature into a commodity gave to the industrious individual a claim on the value of that commodity in the open marketplace, he implied that, absent work, there simply was no value and that it was the workers who had first claim on the fruits of their labour. In the process, work itself came to be seen as the source of all value and thus to be validated in itself.

Substance was added to this sentiment in the late eighteenth century. As Adam Smith (1776, p. 271) bore witness in England and Scotland: “The sovereign ... with all the officers both of justice and war who serve under him, the whole army and navy are unproductive labourers. They are servants of the public and are maintained by a part of the annual produce of the industry of other people.” As well, he continued, “in the same class must be ranked ... churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds, players, buffoons, musicians, opera singers, opera dancers, etc.”

Characteristically, Karl Marx (1863) was even sharper and more severe. Following Smith, but predating Brooks and his other disciples, Marx wrote uncontroversially that: “productive labour is wage labour which produces surplus value for the capitalist.” To this description, however, he added a normative claim (1867): “to be a productive labourer is therefore not a piece of luck but a misfortune.” Such people, he asserted, are doubly done down. They experience directly the alienation of their labour and the appropriation of the value of their work by the capitalist, whose claim on their efforts (minus the wages they are paid and the other costs of doing business) lies only in the legal relationship of ownership of the means of production, and not in their actual contribution to the productive process.

Productive workers therefore toil not only to provide for their own survival, to redeem the operating costs of the enterprise and create profits for their employers, but they also create the wealth to sustain everyone else whose livelihood derives from attaching themselves like barnacles to the steady hull of productive sweat and striving. In this, of course, can be also found the root of the spurious claim of libertarians and anarcho-capitalists that “taxes are theft” (Rothbard, 1998), a pointed if slightly delayed rejoinder to Proudhon’s slogan that “private property is theft” (Proudhon, 1840) and an argument best left for another time and place.

In the ongoing tension between toil and talk, farmers, miners and industrial workers produce commodities much of the surplus value of which goes to keep from starvation incessant chatterers and fixers from psychiatrists and loan sharks to municipal road menders and fire hydrant painters, school crossing guards, tax collectors and economics professors. Thus are several seeds of envy and resentment sewn. Once again, however, from a classical economic perspective, the importance of a task and the skills deployed are irrelevant; what matters is only whether the work makes a material contribution to something bought and sold in the private sector.

1.

Public servants, of course, constitute a special and an especially denigrated category of unproductive labourers which it is the joy of taxpayers and their self-appointed advocates to lament, berate, accuse of waste and corruption, and label obstructions of what would otherwise be happier lives. While no one doubts the importance of some public sector work (maintaining and building sewers and city streets, keeping watch on prisoners in state penitentiaries, and teaching small children to read in public schools), there is a sizeable number of neoliberal privatizers who share the conviction that any such work could be done better and cheaper if only it were to be off-loaded and run by for-profit businesses. They would delight in turning highways, jails, hospitals, educational institutions and even police forces and armies over to for-

profit enterprises. Over the course of the “new public management,” the fetishism of downsizing and the primacy of budget cutting, they have had considerable success.

For some, the main purpose of government employees seems to be to provide the excuse for promises by politicians who want to “cut red tape,” “find efficiencies,” “abolish the nanny state,” “halt the “gravey train” that allegedly connects “elites” of one sort or another to the overstuffed bag of “taxpayers’ money,” and generally to “run government like a business.” For obvious reasons, a number of ambitious men and women have used such notions to advantage with predictable results in terms of the economics of austerity, the contracting out of public services, the degradation of the public sector, the minimization of public goods and the reduction of public spaces.

Guidelines for bureaucrats: (1) When in charge, ponder. (2) When in trouble, delegate. (3) When in doubt, mumble. – J. H. Boren
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Whether public or private, however, clerical workers, pen-pushers, regulators, administrators and bureaucratic officials have generated a fair amount of derogatory attention over the course of modern history. From Herman Melville’s gloomy story of “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1853) to Franz Kafka’s troubling novel *The Castle* (1926), and on to Joseph Heller’s logically irrational *Catch-22* (1961), Laurence Peter’s satirical *The Peter Principle* (1969), Tom Wolfe’s rumbustiously funny and subculturally insightful “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers” (1971), and James Boren’s gently satirical *When in Doubt, Mumble* (1972), bureaucracy and bureaucrats are generally shown in a poor light. Only in the 1980’s British television series, “Yes, Minister,” do the bureaucrats come out ahead, and then only at the comedic expense of a stumbling politician. Few become heroic figures except, perhaps, for occasional “whistle-blowers,” and then only among a minority of like-minded dissidents — names such as Vladimir Bukovsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Perry Fellwock and Frank Serpico stand out from 1971 alone; currently, people such as John Kiriakou, Sergei Magnitsky, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden have seldom fared well.

2.

Max Weber (2015), of course, tried his best to cast bureaucracy in a healthier role. He saw it as the realization of a rational-legal system of administration which diminished the traditional privileges and prejudices that got in the way of modernity, competency, fairness and progress. With aspirations of achieving a meritocracy to replace inherited incompetence, the Weberian ideal remains a lofty but as yet unrealized goal. Meanwhile, for all that modern organizational theory and practice has contributed to the rational allocation of assets in pursuit of social, political and economic improvement, bureaucratic authority has never escaped the opprobrium of those who choose to accuse it of obstructing innovators and entrepreneurs, circling its own wagons, protecting its own power, succumbing to corruption and cronyism, sycophantically supporting existing power elites (or classes) regardless of ideology, capability and commitment to the common weal, and hampering everything from the dynamics of market capitalism to democratic governance and minimal standards of social justice. Whether raging in defiance of Communist Party “apparatchiks” in the former Soviet Union or poking fun at the current cohort of civil servants in the increasingly politicized and partisan Washington “beltway,”

commentators and critics rarely treat public sector functionaries with fairness, much less with respect.

There have been noticeable exceptions, of course. From time to time individuals and even whole departments will be recognized as highly professional and highly skilled. The exceptions will often be people involved in matters of foreign affairs, international trade or other high-profile portfolios where matters of national importance regularly come to public attention. So, for example, George Marshall, the American diplomat and the principal voice behind the restoration of Western Europe and its enlistment in the Cold War following World War II gained widespread admiration and garnered the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953. Likewise, Canada's Lester B. Pearson, the Canadian diplomat and future Prime Minister was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for his help in resolving the Suez Crisis of 1956 and establishing a permanent UN peace-keeping force. They are just two examples of public servants whose work has neither been ignored nor derided, but has amply been rewarded instead. And, of course, there was Dag Hammarskjöld, who was made a martyr and something of a secular saint even before it became commonly understood that he had been murdered.

Now, however, seismic shifts in the relations of production in late capitalism have created new distinctions and distinguishing features within the contemporary labour force. These differences have two main dimensions. One is the rise of the service industries, largely overlapping but not synonymous with the unproductive labour of the industrial era. The other is the transformation from secure employment and the building of careers to the "gig economy" of causal, contingent, precarious employment.

3.

In Canada, a country that is reasonably representative of modern, affluent OPEC nations, a survey of the relative proportion of employment in the main economic sectors (Statistics Canada, 2018) reveals that, in 2017, just 21% of the workforce was engaged in "productive" labour (manufacturing, construction, resource extraction and agriculture), whereas the service sector led by: wholesale and retail trade (15.3%); health care (12.9%); professional, scientific and technical services (7.9%); education (7.0%); accommodation and food services (6.6%); financial services (6.4%); public administration at all levels of governance (5.2%) accounted for 79% of all work. So, within the strictures of capitalist logic from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, one Canadian worker is ultimately responsible for the wealth that keeps four other Canadians including the wealthiest alive and equipped with the necessities of life and, in a few cases, much, much more.

In our epoch, it is easier to produce something superfluous than something that is necessary. – Karl Marx
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Of course, not everyone (especially capitalists) adheres to strict capitalist logic based on a refined but essentially the same "labour theory of value" first generated by Locke to justify private as opposed to common ownership of goods. Instead, mainstream economists have done their best to shift attention away from labour and to incorporate and legitimize an economic system in which productivity itself plays an increasingly smaller part. With "financialization" replacing "industrialization" and commercialized communication displacing resource extraction

and agriculture, we are being treated to a postindustrial “information” society in which all traditional methods of description, explanation and analysis are being questioned. Even the modern concept of a Gross Domestic Product (the monetary measure of the market value of all final goods and services produced in a country) is being scrutinized.

It is reliably estimated that up to 99 percent of the materials used in the US production process end up as waste within six weeks. For every ton of garbage, in turn, there are five tons of materials to produce it and 25 tons extracted from nature to yield these materials.
– John McMurtry

First developed in 1934 as a measure of economic health and validated in the Bretton Woods conference of 1944 that brought us the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, GDP has been used without excessive quibbling for over half a century. Now, however, it is being questioned by people with varying concerns including the environmental problems inherent in untamed growth (see McMurtry, 2013). As well as the unsustainability of material excess, the United Nations is among the several institutions that have noticed a disturbing disconnection between wealth and human happiness, suggesting that more is not necessarily better (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2018). Finally, the seeming restructuring of the social classes (the vast increase in wealth for the infamous “1%” and the evisceration of the middle classes) under late capitalism is calling into question the social relations of production in the postindustrial setting. This is said to be a structural transformation that might become as significant as the shift from mercantile to industrial capitalism. Profound changes in the means of production (technology), the social relations of production (including the decline of the proletariat and the rise of the precariat) require a reconceptualization of social formations and relations — a task desperately begging to be undertaken if public sector innovation in the coming decades is to be meaningful at all.

4.

David Graeber has a rather different perspective which he presents as a “theory” of importance for anyone with a serious analytical interest in the workforce and, indeed, anyone who happens to be in the workforce at all. His ideas can be succinctly summarized. In fact, Graeber has already done so. The basic elements of his speculations were widely discussed as the result of an earlier essay (Graeber, 2013) that “went viral” on the Internet. *Bullshit Jobs*, the book, adds flesh to that original skeleton.

Graeber’s primary premise is one of disillusionment with the promise that postindustrialism would usher in a technological transformation (it did), a vast increase in consumer products (it did), an overall increase in wealth (it did) and a restructuring of work (it did) in which affluence would be widely shared (it isn’t) and the new high-tech society, low-paid and low-skilled jobs would disappear (they haven’t) and the shiny, happy new society would feature a tremendous amount of satisfying, well-paid, secure employment on reduced work schedules of 30 hours, 20 hours or even fifteen hours per week (it hasn’t).

The postmodern pipe-dream goes back at least as far John Maynard Keynes and carried on through John Kenneth Galbraith and into the thread of popular culture dominated by Newt

Gingrich's intellectual hero, Alvin Toffler. It was a dream of an equitable, affluent society that seemed within reach, especially following World War II, the Bretton Woods Agreement and the steady growth of private business in league with active government and cooperating trade unions that combined to create the framework of a welfare state and to reorganize education to prepare for the challenges and rewards of postindustrialism.

At General Electric, top spokesman Ronald W. Reagan intoned: "At GE, progress is our most important product," and people from CEOs to office staff and assembly line workers joined in the enthusiasm. And, indeed, from roughly 1945 to roughly 1970, there was just enough growth in economic output and advances in social equity to make the "grand bargain" plausible. That, of course, was at a time when senior corporate executives in the United States, according to the Economic Policy Institute (Umoh, 2018), typically earned about thirty times the amount of the average worker in those corporations. Now, although the ratios have fluctuated between about 200:1 and 475:1 over the past two decades, the average CEO in a Fortune 500 company can be confident in winning about 300 times as much remuneration than the average employee in the USA where, incidentally, wages have increased only 4.3% in constant dollars since 1978.

Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at. – David Graeber
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Graeber is exquisitely aware of the wide and growing gaps in income. He is also aware of the degree to which Keynes' was so terribly wrong when he predicted in 1930 that the "economic problem" of humanity could and probably would be solved within a hundred years (we're now just twelve years away from that mark and the economic problem seems to be getting worse). Keynes (1930) had opined that the *real* problem in the early twenty-first century would be finding ways to occupy ourselves in our copious leisure time: "there is, he said, "no country and no people who can look forward to the age of leisure and of abundance without a dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy. It is a fearful problem for the ordinary person." If that was Keynes' worst nightmare, he can rest easy.

Now, of course, we realize that the number of workers in industry, agriculture and resource extraction and refining has collapsed significantly, while professional, managerial and service workers have increased proportionately. So, while productive jobs have been largely "automated away," the slack has been taken up in the non-productive sector. Except that it hasn't.

The main growth areas in the service sector are not lucrative, highly skilled occupations but in poorly paid casual jobs. And, of course, even a college degree is no guarantee of steady, well-paid work. These trends and travails are well known and there is considerable concern about them. Even capital-friendly governments are spending millions of dollars experimenting with innovative methods to alleviate the stress. Tactics ranging from reverse income taxes to guaranteed annual incomes, increases in minimum wages, shared jobs and so on, have been explored at length as economic policy analysts try to formulate innovative public policy aimed at adjusting to the "new normal."

Graeber's focus, however, is not so much with the economic practicalities nor are his responses geared to the kind of political action that once encouraged trade union militancy, the

rise of activists in civil society and pressure upon political parties to take up the cause of economic equity.

Instead, Graeber's attention is directed less toward the politics and economics of the workplace than upon the psychological distress of the worker. He worries about the moral and spiritual costs of work. He ties individual unhappiness and frustration to something he calls our "collective soul." This spiritual damage, he suggests, is contemporary society's dirty little secret and he has taken it upon himself to bring it into the light.

We need to think about how we train and retrain people as they move from job to job to job. Because it's going to happen. We have to accept that. Some people will see their jobs disappear in the years to come. We need a way to soften that blow.

– Bill Morneau, Canadian Finance Minister, 2016.

The problem for Graeber is that the many or even most of the ballooning service sector jobs are not just non-productive, but actually meaningless. They are unnecessary. They are pointless. They have no organic connection to any sensible goal or outcome. They provide redundant administrative oversight on real work that is then quantified, assessed and tested for key performance indicators and made the subject of endless human resource initiatives and palliatives than do not palliate. For a time, they create expansive and expanding ancillary activities in large corporate cultures, but they exist only because it is necessary to find something for people to do as an excuse for giving them paycheques until, that is, corporate restructuring and downsizing eliminate thousands of jobs in attempts to balance the books.

Mostly, however, Graeber tells us that bullshit jobs just get in the way. I can empathize. In my workplace and in colleges and universities across the world, the number of students has been rising slowly but steadily. The number of full-time faculty has been falling precipitously, though the number of adjunct professors has climbed from next to none to as much as 70% to 80% of the teaching staff. Meanwhile, layer upon layer of administration — sometimes growing by 50% or 60% in the brief institutional time of a decade — have been clogging the pores, the arteries and the intestines of higher education. It is a problem.

What grabs Graeber, however, is not the internal sclerosis of overcrowded management, but the worthlessness of the jobs being done at all levels of employment. He has expressed it this way: "It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working." He is tired of the bullshit. I wish that he would pay more attention to the disease and not just the symptoms.

My concern is not that Graeber is unaware of dimensions other than personal depression, low levels of self-esteem and full-blown existential angst. He is perceptive enough to understand the politics of the division of labour and the structure of the labour market. He knows that made up managerialism translates into a hierarchy of misplaced power and status and that it results in a proliferation of precarious labour at the bottom of the corporate ladder. He appreciates the burden that is placed on minimum-wage earners, sometimes juggling two or three jobs in order to "make ends meet" while employers and administrators complain that increases to minimum wage rates will make doing business impossible. No anthropologist with his skill could be

oblivious to the societal factors that determine psychological states. But, he does not follow through.

How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one's job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment.

– David Graeber

Graeber's ultimate posture is revealed in something of a contradiction. He says that the increase of meaningless work is a tactic of the "ruling class" (which he seems to admit does exist). He also thinks that the ruling class would be in imminent danger if the people had too much free time on their hands and began to contemplate disparities of power, wealth and status. He recognizes that efforts are made to ensure that people are taught the inherent moral value of work — a residual version of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" — which keeps the bulk of the population occupied performing tasks that they hate out of a combined sense of moral obligation and practical necessity, while ensuring that those who are derelict in their duty to do dumb stuff are suitably punished both economically and socially by being declared "losers."

Too much thought about such matters, however, could easily become the basis for a revolutionary manifesto or a call for extensive social reform wholly within the boundaries of capitalism; but, Graeber doesn't go there. The answer to our malaise, he concludes, "clearly isn't economic: it's moral and political."

Yet, surely it *is* economic, more than political and political more than moral. Of course, I cannot help but agree with Graeber that our allocation of value to certain occupations is morally upsetting. As much as I enjoy watching an occasional baseball or basketball game, I find it hard to justify \$100 million-dollar salaries for talented men playing a children's game, at least as long as extreme poverty exists and people doing essential work are paid a pittance. Who could seriously question him when he compares one group of workers (early childhood educators, dock workers and garbage collectors) to another group of workers (private equity managers, actuaries and telemarketers) and says that if one were magically to disappear we would grievously miss the first, but would perhaps be better off without the second. The former, of course, can and often do "shit jobs," but somebody's got to do them; the latter are "bullshit jobs" for which there is no moral or practical justification. The indignity of "shit" jobs comes from the low wages and social stigma associated with them; the indignity of the "bullshit jobs" comes from the realization that nobody has to do them. Graeber worries greatly about dignity.

Graeber is also on to something when he explains how our society has normalized the existing division of labour and reward. In thrall to populist politicians who play our resentments like fine violins, we can easily become agitated when told that college teachers are going on strike over "academic freedom," or auto workers are going on strike for wage increases inaccessible to casual discount department store "associates." He appreciates how internal divisions within the middling and working classes can be used to distract and divert attention away from the overarching structures of economic, political and social domination in our society. But, again, he treads lightly over this dangerous ground, individualizing and thereby trivializing the problem.

What's more, Graeber is to be commended for having done his homework. His initial essay was entertaining and at least superficially provocative. He has followed it up with extensive research in which he probes the dilemmas of people, some of whom have lucrative, prestigious employment, but who are also self-aware enough to realize that they are engaged in a game, not of their own choosing, in which success is defined as maintaining the illusion that they are doing something worth doing. When he explains that doing a bullshit job means playing make-believe, he establishes the key to the social relationships in a bullshit environment. As long as the employee goes along with the game and pretends, payment and maybe even promotion will follow. The only way to do a bad job is to admit that the job is a joke. Then the joke will be turned on the unfortunate but honest player who will no longer be permitted to play. This, Graeber says, is a form of spiritual violence.

So long as the bosses pretend to pay us, we will pretend to work. – Soviet joke.

Graeber's subjects include people who are forced to play along by circumstances such as being a recent college graduate with burdensome student loans. They experience problems of mental and emotional health simply by occupying the space, breathing the air, processing the elaborate charade and taking home money for doing so in an unhealthy employment environment, an ecology of unhealthy games. For a select few, the absurdity of the situation can also be an opportunity to ignore the alleged demands of the bullshit job and to invent amusing alternatives which occasionally result in rewarding activity. Such displays of bureaucratic virtuosity, however, are too few to detain us here.

More interesting is the second half of *Bullshit Jobs*, where Graeber gets down to talking about the context in which his subject matter came to be. Here, he speaks of political and economic forces that produce and philosophical considerations that inform bullshit jobs. Here, too, he even goes on at some length about matters such as the "labour theory of value." More sinister, however, are his remarks about the larger toxicity of bullshit.

Anecdotally, for example, he describes a small part of the wardrobe of the sainted Emperor Barack Obama who, he relates, failed even to try to introduce the United States to meaningful health insurance reform not (or not entirely) because he was indebted to or manipulated by "Big Health" and to "Big Pharma," but because he felt that an efficacious, efficient and equitable approach to health care could result in the elimination of an enormous number of bullshit private sector jobs in health insurance companies. The equity and larger efficiency of a public health insurance system (comparably advanced nations spend half the money and get twice the health care outcomes as the United States) were sacrificed, Graeber suggests, because of the fear of the immediate impact that would inevitably result from a single payer system. After all, duplicate bureaucracies in competing private sector firms would become redundant and there would be little need for protocol enforcement to detect and punish people who might try to secure a treatment for which they had not paid a sufficient premium.

In the end, however, Graeber's often insightful, sometimes light-hearted and superficially critical exploration turns out to be an exercise in submission. He offers practical advice to millennials seeking to enter the workforce. He accepts the inevitability that our society will keep on creating bullshit jobs. He understands some of the reasons why — though he stops short of a

sustained analysis that would allow a sufficiently critical theorist at least an outline of the ways in which things might be otherwise. He certainly wishes employees well as they try to navigate the job market to find meaningful work or even to make the work they have meaningful.

Unfortunately, that's all there is. As *Salon* reviewer Erin Keane put it, Graeber's important contribution might be to "help people to know that they are not alone in feeling the effects of the spiritual wear and tear from such jobs" and might also help them prevent "having a nervous breakdown or doing something drastic, like googling graduate programs with full funding packages or following your girlfriend to London with no ideas other than keeping her happy as long as she'll let you."

Therapy is a course in resignation. – Everett Knight

Whatever my criticisms, however, Graeber has certainly hit a nerve. His book is doing well. It is not just descriptive and analytical. It can also be mildly therapeutic. Therapy, however, is essentially a program of adaptation bordering on submission. In the end, *Bullshit Jobs* is three hypotheses, two correlations and one conclusion short of a full-fledged "theory" of anything. I would have been happier if he had come more fully to grips with the larger questions of public policy and innovation that could locate, explain and reshape not just bullshit work in either the public or the private sector. I would have been gratified if he had better connected to the deeper issues of how we want to live and not just how we can put up with living, avoid the worst of it, and take deliberate steps away from acquiescence and toward a sort of personal redemption. Thinking through work and the economy is, after all, a necessary prelude to social innovation worthy of the name — and quite possibly innovation in our own employment as well. And that's no "bull."

Coda

The PEW Research Center, one of the most justifiably respected public opinion polling organizations in the world has undertaken a new project (Dimock, 2018). It explains its efforts in these terms:

Around the globe, we are experiencing a confluence of forces—most notably growing political polarization, revived nationalism, fractured media and the ever-accelerating pace of technological change—that are challenging the essential role that trust and facts play in a democratic society. It seems like every week we are seeing fresh evidence that the anchors of democratic governance are under stress.

Public confidence in the responsiveness, accountability and effectiveness of elected institutions has been mired at historic lows for more than a decade. The role of evidence and facts in describing public events and shaping policy debates is persistently challenged. And as citizens become their own curators in a saturated and disaggregated information environment, the concept of a shared truth, upon which everyone can agree, appears increasingly elusive.

Public sector innovators who remain uninformed about or indifferent to this challenge will have no one else to blame if they did not take notice and act to restore public confidence.

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