

The Rise of Bullshit Jobs

An interview with David Graeber

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In his latest book, David Graeber, the best-selling author of *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, argues that many jobs today are essentially pointless — or, as the book’s title calls them, *Bullshit Jobs*.

Jacobin Radio’s Suzi Weissman sat down with Graeber to find out what bullshit jobs are and why they’ve proliferated in recent years.

A Taxonomy

Suzi Weissman: Let’s just get right down to it. What is the definition of a bullshit job?

David Graeber: A bullshit job is a job which is so pointless, or even pernicious, that even the person doing the job secretly believes that it shouldn’t exist. Of course, you have to pretend — that’s the bullshit element, that you kind of have to pretend there’s a reason for this job to be here. But secretly, you think if this job didn’t exist, either it would make no difference whatsoever, or the world would actually be a slightly better place.

Suzi Weissman: In the book, you start out by distinguishing the bullshit jobs from shit jobs. Maybe we should start doing that right now, so we can talk about what the bullshit jobs are?

David Graeber: Yeah, people often make this mistake. When you talk about bullshit jobs, they just think jobs that are bad, jobs that are demeaning, jobs that have terrible conditions, no benefits, and so forth. But actually, the irony is that those jobs actually aren’t bullshit. You know, if you have a bad job, chances are that it’s actually doing some good in the world. In fact, the more your work benefits other people, the less they’re likely to pay you, and the more likely it is to be a shit job in that sense. So, you can almost see it as an opposition.

On the one hand, you have the jobs that are shit jobs but are actually useful. If you’re cleaning toilets or something like that, toilets do need to be cleaned, so at least you have the dignity of knowing you’re doing something which is benefiting other people — even if you don’t get much else. And on the other hand, you have jobs where you’re treated with dignity and respect, you get good payment, you get good benefits, but you secretly labor under the knowledge that your job, your work, is entirely useless.

Suzi Weissman: You divide your chapters into the different kinds of bullshit jobs. There’s flunkies, goons, duct-tapers, box-tickers, task-makers, and what I think of as bean-counters. Maybe we can go through what these categories are.

David Graeber: Sure. This came from my own work, of asking people to send me testimonies. I assembled several hundred testimonies from people who had bullshit jobs. I asked people, “What’s your most pointless job you ever had? Tell me all about it; how do you think it happened, what’s the dynamics, did your boss know?” I got that kind of information. I did little interviews with people afterwards, follow-up stuff. And so, in a way, we came up with category-systems together. People would suggest ideas to me, and gradually it came together to five categories.

As you say, we have, first, the flunkies. That’s kind of self-evident. A flunky exists only to make someone else look good. Or feel good about themselves, in some cases. We all know what kind of jobs they are, but an obvious example would be, say, a receptionist at a place that doesn’t actually need a receptionist. Some places obviously do need receptionists, who are busy all the time. Some places the phone rings maybe once a day. But you still have to someone — sometimes

two people — sitting there, looking important. So, I don't have to call somebody on the phone, I'll have someone who will just say, "There is a very important broker who wants to speak to you." That's a flunky.

A goon is a little subtler. But I kind of had to make this category because people kept telling me they felt that their jobs were bullshit — if they were a telemarketer, if they were a corporate lawyer, if they were in PR, marketing, things like that. I had to come to terms with why it was they felt that way.

The pattern seemed to be that these are jobs that are actually useful in many cases for the companies they work for, but they felt the entire industry shouldn't exist. They're basically people there to annoy you, to push you around in some way. And insofar as it is necessary, it's only necessary because other people have them. You don't need a corporate lawyer if your competitor doesn't have a corporate lawyer. You don't need a telemarketer at all, but insofar as you can make up an excuse to say you need them, it's because the other guys got one. Alright, so that's easy enough.

Duct-tapers are people who are there to solve problems that shouldn't exist in the first place. At my old university, we only seemed to have one carpenter, and it was really hard to get them. There was a point where the shelf collapsed in my office at the university where I was working in England. The carpenter was supposed to come, and there was a huge hole in the wall, you could look at the damage. And he never seemed to show up, he always had something else to do. We finally figured out that there was this one guy sitting there all day, apologizing for the fact that the carpenter never came.

He's very good at the job, he's very likable fellow who always seemed a little sad and melancholy, and it was very hard to get angry at him, which is of course what his job was. Be a flak-catcher, effectively. But at one point I thought, if they fired that guy and hired another carpenter, they wouldn't need him. So, that's a classic example of a duct-taper.

Suzi Weissman: And then the box-tickers?

David Graeber: Box-tickers are there to allow an organization to say it is doing something which it isn't actually doing. It's sort of like a commission of inquiry. If the government gets embarrassed by some scandal — say, cops are shooting a lot of black citizens — or there's somebody taking bribes, there's some kind of scandal. They form a commission of inquiry, they pretend they didn't know it was happening, they pretend they're going to do something about it, which is completely untrue.

But companies do that, too. They're always creating committees. There's hundreds of thousands of people around the world who work in compliance in banks, and it's complete bullshit. Nobody ever actually has any intention of following any of these laws that are imposed upon them. Your job is simply to approve every transaction, but of course it's not enough to approve every transaction because that looks suspicious. So, you have to make up reasons to say there's some things you looked into. There's very elaborate rituals of pretending to look into a problem, which you're not actually looking into at all.

Suzi Weissman: Then you go into the task-master.

David Graeber: Task-masters are the people there to give people work that isn't necessary, or to supervise people who don't need supervision. We all know who we're talking about. Middle-management, of course, is a classic example of that. I got people who would just tell me flat out, "Yeah I got a bullshit job, I'm in middle-management. I got promoted. I used to actually do the job, and they put me upstairs and they said supervise people, make them do the job. And I know

perfectly well they don't need somebody to supervise them or to make them do it. But I have to come up with some excuse to exist anyway." So, eventually in a situation like that, you say, "Alright, well, we're going to come up with target statistics, so I can prove that you're actually doing what I already know you're doing, so that I can imply I was the guy who made you do that."

In fact, you have people fill out all these forms, so that they're spending less of their time doing the work. This happens increasingly across the world, but in America someone did some statistical study and discovered that I think something like 39 percent of the average time an office worker is supposed to be working, they're actually working at their job. Increasingly, it's administrative emails, pointless meetings, all sorts of form filling-out, and paperwork, basically.

Administrative Bloat

Suzi Weissman: In radical or Marxist thought, there's this notion of productive and unproductive labor. I wonder how the bullshit job category connects to the notion of unproductive labor or jobs.

David Graeber: It's different. Because productive and unproductive, that's whether it is producing surplus-value for capitalists. That's a rather different question. This is subjective assessment of the social value of work by the people doing it.

On the one hand, people do kind of accept the idea that the market determines value. That's true in most countries now, actually. You almost never hear from people in retail or services saying, "I sell selfie-sticks, why do people want selfie-sticks? That's stupid, people are dumb." They don't say that. They don't say, "Why do you need to spend five bucks on a cup of coffee anyway?" So, people in service jobs don't think they have bullshit jobs, in almost no cases. They accept that if there's a market for something, people want it. Who am I to judge? They buy the logic of capitalism to that degree.

However, then they look at the market in labor, and they say, "Wait a minute, I'm paid \$40,000 a year to sit and make cat memes all day and maybe take a phone call, that can't be right." So, the market isn't always right; clearly the market in labor does not work in an economically rational way. There's a contradiction. They have to come up with another system, a tacit system of value, which is very different than productive or unproductive for capitalism.

Suzi Weissman: How does the rise of these bullshit jobs relate to what we think of as productive jobs?

David Graeber: Well, this is very interesting. We have this narrative of the rise of the service economy. You know, since the eighties we've been moving away from manufacturing. The way they present it, in economic statistics, it does seem that farm labor has largely disappeared, industrial labor has gone down — not quite as much as people seem to think it has, but it has — and service is through the roof.

But that also is because they break down services to include clerical, managerial, supervisory, and administrative jobs. If you differentiate them, if you look at service in that sense, at people who are giving you a haircut or serving you food — well, actually, service has remained pretty much flat at 25 percent of the workforce for the last 150 years. It hasn't changed at all. What's really changed is this gigantic explosion of paper-pushers, and that's the bullshit job sector.

Suzi Weissman: You call that the bureaucracy, the administrative sector, the middle-management sector.

David Graeber: Exactly. It's a sector where public and private kind of fuse together. In fact, one area for the massive proliferation of these jobs is exactly where it's kind of unclear what's public and what's private: the interface, where they privatize public services, where the government is back-stopping banks.

The banking section is insane. There's this one guy who I start the book with, actually. I call him Kurt, I don't know his real name. He works for a subcontractor to a subcontractor to a subcontractor to the German military. Basically, there's a German soldier who wants to move his computer from one office to another. He has to make a request to someone to call somebody to call someone — it goes through three different companies. Finally, he has to drive 500 kilometers in a rented car, fill out the forms, put it in a package, move it, somebody else unpacks it, and he signs another form and leaves. This is the most inefficient system you could possibly imagine, but it's all created by this interface between the public-private stuff, which is supposed to make things more efficient.

Suzi Weissman: So much of the ethos, as you point out, from the Thatcher–Reagan days is that government is always the problem and government is where all these jobs are. So, it was an attack on the public sector. Whereas you show that a lot of this comes from the private sector, this bureaucratization. Doesn't the need to maximize profits and cut costs — which is what we think of in terms of capitalism and the stress of competition — militate against the creation of these pointless jobs in that private sector?

David Graeber: You'd think it would, but part of the reason why it doesn't happen is that, when we imagine capitalism we're still imagining a bunch of mid-size firms engaged in manufacturing and commerce, and in competition with each other. That's not really what the landscape looks like nowadays, especially in the FIRE sector.

Also, if you look at what people actually do, there's this whole ideology of lean and mean. If you're a CEO, you get praised for how many people you can fire and downsize and speed up. The guys who are being downsized and sped up are the blue-collar workers, the productive ones, the guys who are actually making things, moving them around, maintaining them, doing actual work. If I'm UPS, the drivers are getting Taylorized constantly.

However, you don't do that to the guys in the offices. Exactly the opposite happens. Within the corporation, there's this whole process of empire-building, whereby different managers are competing with each other, primarily over how many people they have working under them. They have no incentive whatsoever to get rid of people.

You have these guys, teams of people, whose entire job is to write the reports that important executives present at big meetings. Big meetings are kind of like the equivalent of feudal jousts, or the high rituals of the corporate world. You walk in there, and you've got all this gear, and you've got all this stuff, your power points and your reports and so forth. So, there are whole teams who are just there to say, "I do the illustrations for this guy's reports," and "I do the graphs," and "I tabulate the data, and keep the database."

Nobody ever reads these reports, they're just there to flash around. It's the equivalent of a feudal lord — I have some guy whose job is just to tweeze my mustache, and another guy who's polishing my stirrups, and so forth. Just to show that I can do that.

Suzi Weissman: You also see a parallel to the rise of the bullshit jobs, which is the rise of the non-bullshit jobs. You call them the caring or care-giving jobs. Can you describe these jobs? Why is there a rise in those jobs, and what sectors are they in?

David Graeber: I'm taking the concept largely from feminist theory. I think it's very important, because the traditional notion of work, I think, is very much theological and patriarchal. We have this notion of production. It comes with this notion that work is supposed to be painful, it's punishment that God inflicted on us, but it's also an imitation of God. Whether it's Prometheus, or it's the Bible, humans rebel against God, and God says, "Oh, you want my power, fine — you can create the world, but it's gonna be miserable, you will suffer when you're doing it."

But it's also seen as this quintessentially male business: women give birth and men produce things, is the ideology. Of course, it makes all the real work that women do, of maintaining the world, invisible. This notion of production, which lies at the heart of nineteenth-century theories of the workers' movement, the labor theory of value — it's a little deceptive.

You ask any Marxist about labor and labor-value, they always immediately go to production. Well, here's a cup. Somebody has to make the cup, it's true. But we make a cup once, and we wash it ten thousand times, right? That labor just completely disappears in most of these accounts. Most work isn't about producing things, it's about keeping them the same, it's about maintaining them, taking care of them, but also taking care of people, taking care of plants and animals.

There was a debate, I remember, in London about Tube workers. They were closing all these ticket offices in the London Underground. A lot of Marxists were saying, "Oh, you know, it's probably a bullshit job in a sense, because you wouldn't really need ticket-takers under full communism, transport will be free, so maybe we shouldn't defend these jobs." I remember thinking there was something rather sketchy there.

And then I saw this document that was actually put out by the strikers, where they said, "Good luck in the new London Underground without anybody working in the Tube station. Let's just hope your child doesn't get lost, let's just hope you don't lose your stuff, let's just hope there aren't any accidents. Let's just hope that nobody freaks out and has an anxiety attack or gets drunk and starts harassing you."

They go through the list of all the different things that they actually do. You realize that even a lot of these classic working-class jobs are really caring labor, they're about taking care of people. But you don't think of it as that, you don't realize it. It's much more like a nurse than like a factory worker.

Beyond Bullshit

Suzi Weissman: One of the things that you say in your book is that you thought Occupy could be the start of the rebellion of the caring class.

David Graeber: There's this "We Are the 99%" Tumblr page, and it was for people who were too busy working to actually take part in the occupations on an ongoing basis. The idea was, you could write a little sign where you talk about your life situation and why you support the movement. It would always end, "I am the 99%." It had a huge response; thousands and thousands of people did this.

When I went through it, I realized that almost all of them were in the caring sector in some sense. Even if they weren't, the themes seemed to be very similar. They basically were saying,

“Look, I wanted a job where at least I wasn’t hurting anybody. Really, where I was doing some sort of benefit for humanity, I wanted to help people in some way, I wanted to care for others, I wanted to benefit society.” But if you end up in health or education, social services, doing something where you take care of other people, they will pay you so little, and they will put you so deeply in debt, that you can’t even take care of your own family. This is totally unfair.

It was that feeling of a fundamental injustice which I think really drove the movement more than anything else. I realized that they create these dummy jobs, where basically you’re there to make executives feel good about themselves. They have to make up work for other people to do. In education, in health, this is incredibly marked. You see it all the time. Nurses often have to spend half their time filling out paper work. Teachers, primary school teachers, people like me – it’s not quite as bad in higher education as it is if you’re teaching fifth grade, but it’s still bad.

Suzi Weissman: We all dream of this society that frees us from mind-shattering work, so we can pursue our passions and our dreams and care for each other. So, is it just a political question? Is it one that UBI, universal basic income, could address?

David Graeber: Well, I think it would be a transitional demand, that makes sense to me. Marx somewhere actually suggested that there’s nothing wrong with reforms, so long as they are reforms which ameliorate one problem, but create another problem, which can only be resolved by even more radical reforms. If you do that continually, you can eventually get to communism, he said. He is a bit optimistic, perhaps.

You know, I’m an anarchist, I don’t want to create a statist solution. A solution that makes the state smaller, but at the same time ameliorates conditions and makes people freer to challenge the system, that’s hard for me to argue with. And that’s what I like about UBI.

I don’t want a solution that’s going to create more bullshit jobs. A job guarantee looks good, but, as we know from history, it tends to create people painting rocks white, or doing other things that don’t necessarily need to be done. It also requires a giant administration to run that. It does seem often to be the people with the sensibilities of the professional-managerial class who prefer that kind of solution.

Whereas universal basic income is about giving everybody enough that they can subsist on; after that it’s up to you. (I mean the radical versions, obviously; I’m not for the Elon Musk version.) The idea is to divorce work and compensation, in a sense. If you exist, you deserve a livelihood. You could call that freedom in the economic sphere. I get to decide how I want to contribute to society.

One of the things that’s very important about the study that I did on bullshit jobs is how miserable people are. It really came through in these accounts. In theory, you’re getting something for nothing, you’re sitting here being paid to do almost nothing, in many cases. But it just breaks people down. There’s depression, anxiety, all these psychosomatic illnesses, terrible workplaces and toxic behavior, made even worse by the fact that people can’t understand why they’re justified in being so upset.

Because, you know, why am I complaining? If I complain to someone they’re just going to say, “Hey, you’re getting something for nothing and you’re whining?” But it shows that our basic idea of human nature, which is inculcated in everybody by economics, for example – that we’re all trying to get the most reward for the least effort – isn’t actually true. People want to contribute to the world in some way. So, that shows that if you give people basic income, they’re not going to sit around and watch TV, which is one objection.

The other objection, of course, is that, maybe they will want to contribute to society, but they're going to do something stupid, so that society is going to be full of bad poets and annoying street musicians, street mimes everywhere, people developing their crank perpetual-motion-devices and whatnot. I'm sure there'll be some of that, but look: if 40 percent of people already think their jobs are completely pointless, how is it going to be worse than it already is? At least they're going to be a lot happier doing that stuff than they are filling out forms all day.

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