

BULLSHIT JOBS: A THEORY

(DAVID GRAEBER)

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I am trying to understand how human beings create value through their actions, and what that implies for humanity. Although this goal is hardly original, and has occupied much brighter thinkers than me for much of their lives, it is a necessary step in defining Foundationalism, because how we occupy our hands and minds, and what effects that has on us and society, are critical components of human flourishing. And the economic path we have been on for the past several decades has led to the opposite of human flourishing, surface appearances notwithstanding. To guide us to flourishing, we must understand why that is, and what can be done differently.

I am beginning with this lightweight book (and will move on to heavyweight books, such as Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*). The core complaint of the author, David Graeber, a British anthropologist, is that a substantial majority of the white collar work in British and American society is valueless to society and damaging to the worker. They have "bullshit jobs." He defines such jobs as any job that is "pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious," and where that is obvious to the worker himself. Graeber admits that all of his data is qualitative, mostly gained by responses to his request on Twitter for people to tell him about their jobs. That means this book is anecdotes all the way down. This is not as much of a defect as it seems, though, since these are matters that benefit more from thought than quantification. Yes, the book has many defects, among them lack of focus and mediocre writing, but the questions Graeber raises are worth raising.

The author divides BS jobs into different, mushy categories, but if you pull back a little, they all boil down to the same thing—their performance adds no value to individuals, firms, or societies, other than payments made to the worker for his work. Merely unpleasant or boring jobs are not BS jobs, as long as they have a point. Basically, Graeber thinks a BS job is one where if the worker simply stopped working, nobody would notice, or care. Or, alternatively, one where if it were made illegal, no black market would develop (a clever definition, though one only offered in a footnote, when it should have been front-and-center).

Graeber also points out that BS jobs are not just useless to society, but spiritually bad for workers. People do not want to live a purposeless life. Channeling the much better writing of Matthew Crawford (whom he does not cite), he accurately points out that people want mastery and agency, not just a paycheck. “Compensatory consumerism,” as Graeber calls it, is not compensatory, although that is all that is offered in our current setup.

What is the specific cast of BS jobs, given that employment in sectors of the economy such as agriculture and manufacturing has shrunk, and BS jobs have grown? (True, Graeber does not demonstrate they have grown; this is more of a convincing, but not proved, premise.) Services have grown enormously as a percentage of total employment, and it is there that most BS jobs are found, Graeber says. But he makes a key distinction: “services” lumps together true services, such as waiters and plumbers, with “information,” meaning “administrators, consultants, clerical and accounting staff, IT professionals, and the like.” We hear “information” and think “technology”; this is false—it’s actually paper pushers, with a very high percentage of BS jobs.

And of these information jobs, a vast number of them are tied to “finance capital.” Here the rubber meets the road. Finance capital includes not just Goldman Sachs and Chase Bank, but also many related and ancillary services, such as corporate law and much accountancy. I have long been down on the finance sector, but have been unable to clearly formulate why it is parasitical and essentially worthless, to the extent it employs more people than in, say, 1960. Graeber sheds some light. “In a way, one could argue that the whole financial sector is a scam of sorts, since it represents itself as largely about directing investments toward profitable opportunities in commerce and industry, when, in fact, it does very little of that. The overwhelming bulk of its profits comes from colluding with government to create, and then to trade and manipulate, various forms of debt. All I am really arguing in this book is that just as much of what the financial sector does is basically smoke and mirrors, so are most of the information-sector jobs that accompanied its rise as well.”

Graeber claims that the existence of massive numbers of BS jobs disproves oft-made claims about economics. “Economies around the world have, increasingly, become vast engines for producing nonsense. . . . [T]

he fact that so many people are being paid to do nothing in the first place defies all our assumptions about how market economies are supposed to work.” In the eyes of libertarians and so-called free market conservatives, who think the largely unfettered free market necessarily leads to optimal outcomes, the value of work is in the eye of the beholder, and all that matters is whether someone is willing to pay at the margin for the work. If so, it must have value. Orthodox Marxists similarly claim that the existence of BS jobs is an illusion. In Graeber’s mind, both are disproven by the empirical evidence.

Graeber is at pains to deny that the problem is caused by government. He’s not very convincing. First, the claimed rise in BS jobs tightly parallels the rise in regulation, since 1970. Second, the vast majority of his anecdotal examples are either directly ordered by government regulation, or are second-hand effects of government regulation. Most of his BS jobs that are technically in the private sector involve either compliance with government mandates or evasion of them. Graeber thinks it is some kind of slam-dunk argument that because administrators have, supposedly, grown at a more rapid rate at private colleges than at public colleges, government is not the major problem. He ignores that private colleges are both wholly insulated from actual private enterprise and are, in essence, arms of the government and heavily regulated by it, both directly and indirectly. (I suspect, too, that there is a direct link between the growth of BS degrees, such as gender studies and the like, and the growth of BS jobs, since nothing of value has been learned that could be of value to any employer producing value, so the only possible type of job for such a graduate is a BS job.) Graeber then points out how big business, especially big finance business, spends enormous sums on lobbying to demand more regulation of themselves, thereby achieving rent-seeking goals, then pretends the regulation was imposed without their will. Yet he claims this is not a problem with government, but rather one with private business, which is at best half-true.

But, totally aside from government, it is certainly true that BS jobs are not automatically eliminated by the free market. I used to be a mergers and acquisitions lawyer and I’ve seen how a lot of companies work; it is a total myth that companies evolve toward efficiency due to competitive pressures. This myth is beloved of strategy professors at business schools (none of whom, of course, have ever run a business). (Strategy,

like leadership, is something that simply can't be taught, and all people who purport to teach either should be fired.) Most big companies (and, to be fair, organizations) are a seething mass of chaos, laziness, and incompetence; all the productive activities are done by a small minority of the employees, who usually are simply hindered by the rest, and have to spend much of their time routing around the incompetence and the incompetents. This is, of course, why "Dilbert" is funny—because it's true, and everyone knows it. So even were government not to be the largest impetus for BS jobs, they would probably still exist, if in smaller quantities. This means there are really two distinct types of BS jobs—those driven by government requirements, which technically actually fail Graeber's definition, since the work is pointless, but not optional. And true BS jobs, generated by and within the private sector.

More generally, I'm curious if BS jobs are purely a modern phenomenon, or have always been around. I suspect primarily the former, but I don't know. I wonder if Max Weber said anything about BS jobs. Are there BS jobs in today's China? Those things would be fascinating to know, but you won't learn any longitudinal history, or get cross-cultural comparative analysis, from this book.

So what explains the existence of BS jobs? Graeber isn't terribly clear, but he characterizes it overall as "neo-feudalism." By this he seems to mean five things. First, that profit maximizing is not the goal of most modern organizations. Rather, it is to engage in "appropriating, distributing, and allocating money and resources." "Managerialism has become the pretext for creating a new covert form of feudalism, where wealth and position are allocated not on economic but political grounds. . . ." Second, having people working for your organization, but doing nothing, if you are in charge, is a reflection of your glory, just like a medieval lord supposedly had useless people hanging around. Third, offering pseudo-history about the moral imperatives of work over time as opposed to Marx's labor theory of value, Graeber claims we have all internalized an ethic that doing something purposeless, as long as it is "work," is more moral than not working. Fourth, "The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger." He reaches this conclusion on a "cui bono?" analysis—if more wealth and power has shifted to the ruling class, and organized challenges to their power such as unions have been

destroyed, keeping the workers busy with make-work prevents those organized challenges from recurring (he ignores that this reduces wealth and power, since the workers have to be paid, and that organizing can be combined with working). Fifth, he claims automation did kill the jobs; we just made up new BS ones, and then tells us (I am not kidding) that “fully automated luxury communism” is therefore possible.

None of these parallel explanations is real convincing, although it's hard to get a grip on them in order to engage with them. Regardless, Graeber ends with a call for Universal Basic Income, while disclaiming that he's making a policy prescription, in order that he not be required to defend something quantitative. UBI would allow people to walk away from soul-sucking BS jobs, making their continuance unlikely, which certainly seems true. But if it is true that most BS jobs are created by government directives of one type or another, then those jobs are not really “pointless or unnecessary,” and someone would still have to fill them. They might have to be paid more, but the government doesn't care about that. Still, I have a certain sympathy for UBI, as I have described in my review of Andrew Yang's recent book, and it is certainly true that if Graeber is right about BS jobs, UBI might have an impact on the numbers of people working in them.

Graeber's conclusion is that, aside from UBI, his claims about BS jobs mean that Keynes was right—we could all be working fifteen-hour weeks. Were that to happen, Graeber, like Marx and early Communists, imagines that then everyone will spend his days creating art and philosophy, and thereby obtain agency and meaning. I doubt it. In today's society, at least, vice is the most likely use of time. Alternatively, maybe we'd be better off with keeping forty-hour work weeks, and massively increasing output, though that would only have societal benefit if what we produced was not consumerist ephemera, but rather a purpose-directed society, say one devoted to the conquest of Space. Or maybe we could hugely benefit society by cutting overall outside-the-home employment hours for women, and not men, returning to the socially superior system whereby married women usually stayed home and raised children, more children than we have today.

Regardless, I can't recommend this book. The reader learns very little, except for the premise, which is good as a thought experiment, and seems intuitively at least partially right, but is in no way proven.

The book, annoyingly, lacks an index. The author spends a lot of time quoting tedious interlocutors, who say things such as “I [can’t] wait for full communism” and rejoice at their supposed rebellion in wearing discreet Communist paraphernalia to work. And then there are several ludicrous small errors that suggest lack of care in writing. No, “sheriff” does not come, via Norman Sicily, from anglicization of the Arabic *sharif*. It comes, as the *OED* says, from the Old English words for “shire” and “reeve,” and I knew that without consulting the *OED*. No, the job of footmen in Victorian England was not to “run alongside carriages checking for bumps in the road”; that function had long disappeared by the reign of Victoria. No, secretaries in the twentieth century did not do “80 to 90 percent of their bosses’ jobs,” and no, it would not be “fascinating to write a history of books, designs, plans, and documents attributed to famous men that were actually written by their secretaries.” No, the “main reason the Soviet economy worked so badly” was not “because they were never able to develop computer technology efficient enough to coordinate such large amounts of data automatically.” No, simply giving the cash spent on fostering children to their biological parents would not prevent the need for the children to be fostered. On balance, don’t read this book. Just read my review!

Now, let’s do some thinking of our own. Let’s assume there are in fact a very large number of BS jobs, and let’s imagine that everyone who has one simply stays home and reads Proust. What would happen? On Graeber’s premises, there would be no drop in actual value produced. Nothing bad would happen, since nothing that needed doing would stop being done. But it seems to me what would happen is that consumption would go down. Since our money supply is infinitely flexible, money is created to pay people to do BS jobs. That money would no longer be paid to those people (except if partially replaced by UBI). GDP would decline sharply (and monetary velocity would drop?), but as we can see, no actual immediate harm would come to the “real” economy; GDP would simply be more realistic. (I am turning next to Mariana Mazzucato’s *The Value of Everything*, which focuses on what GDP is as related to value, from which I hope to widen my understanding, which I freely admit is very incomplete on this and related topics.)

But in turn, those who formerly held BS jobs would now be unable to purchase goods and services that are not BS (since by definition all

BS services will have disappeared). If demand for goods and services that are not BS declines, necessarily supply of those goods and services will decline. Real GDP would therefore soon decline as well, creating a downstream real effect. Graeber ignores this, simply assuming that the total number of hours worked in non-BS jobs will stay the same. Instead, it will go down, at least partially obviating his pleasant dream of fifteen-hour work weeks with no reduction in overall real output. If this is true, it suggests our entire economy is largely based on fictions, a game of musical chairs, kept going by debt, monetary manipulation, and the growth of BS jobs. (It appears, and I am sure that the Austrian School-types will like this analysis as much as they probably dislike the idea that BS jobs exist in defiance of economic orthodoxy, that what makes this possible is fiat currency. Whatever the many possible drawbacks of the gold standard, when fiat money did not exist, I am pretty sure there were no BS jobs.)

The only way to avoid this would be to substitute non-BS jobs for existing BS jobs. Let's try the reverse line of thought. What if everyone dropped Proust and instead started working eighty-hour weeks (not necessarily outside the home—whatever GDP may include, work inside the home is still work, and often the most societally productive), at non-BS jobs that actually produced goods and services valued by others? (Society would also have to be relieved of all the government regulations that produce BS jobs.) Well, a lot of actual value would be produced. But if all the extra time worked was used to produce, say, more and more polished games for the iPhone, that isn't really a benefit for society, even if it is technically value and not BS work. On the other hand, if it was used to produce the engineering and machines to conquer Space, or any other number of truly productive endeavors, it would be a benefit for society. Perhaps the distinction here is between activities that are primarily consumptive in nature, and have no overarching societal benefit, and those that are capital-increasing, and do have some overarching benefit.

Ah, but of what does that capital consist? As always, we should begin with the end in mind, and that end, for Foundationalism, is human flourishing within the constraints of reality. I think that a flourishing society is one with high aggregate social capital, as well as high aggregate tangible capital. In many ways, a society maximizes itself when, at the

same moment, a man is building rockets to mine asteroids, a woman is raising and teaching her children, and a priest is bringing cheer to the sick and hope to the despairing. The cumulative capital of a civilization is hard to measure, but it exists, and it consists of many different things done by that civilization (but not, please note, all things done).

The ultimate discussion, and answer, then, is to figure out how society can best maximize actual value produced by the labor of its members. No doubt much of the answer is cultural, since central planning certainly isn't going to do it (but I note that cultures that produce any significant amount of, much less maximize, aggregate capital are very rare throughout history). Such things are what I am going to ponder in my next several economics reviews; I will try not to drag it out too long, and I am eager for commentary from readers to help me guide my thoughts.