

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GRAEBER, AUTHOR OF *BULLSHIT JOBS*

What are bullshit jobs?

‘What I am calling “bullshit jobs” are jobs that are primarily or entirely made up of tasks which the person doing that job considers to be pointless, unnecessary, or even pernicious. Jobs that, were they to disappear, would make no difference whatsoever. Above all, these are jobs that the holders themselves feel should not exist’ David Graeber

But how widespread are these jobs? Well, a recent YouGov poll found that, in the UK, only 50% of those who had full-time jobs were entirely sure their job made any sort of meaningful contribution to the world, and 37% were quite sure it did not. Some examples of people who contacted David after reading his essay were:

- An employee at a major accountancy firm contracted by a bank to deal with PPI claims. In his office they purposefully mislead and confuse staff to ensure the process takes longer. His boss says “we make money from dealing with a leaky pipe—do you fix the pipe, or do you let the pipe keep leaking?”
- A tech developer who digitally alters adverts to make teeth look whiter, hair shinier etc in order to sell products claiming to whiten teeth, increase shine on hair
- A scientist who earns huge amounts of money writing papers designed to be waved around in pharmaceutical marketing meetings and later thrown away unread (he uses this money to fund a less remunerative second job researching the eradication of tuberculosis)

Why do bullshit jobs exist?

‘It’s as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working. And here, precisely, lies the mystery. In capitalism, this is precisely what is not supposed to happen ... The answer clearly isn’t economic: it’s moral and political.’

The left and right are united in agreeing that ‘more jobs’ is always a good thing – but does anyone ever stop to ask if these jobs actually need to be done? Graeber cites an interview with Obama where he states that his government decided to keep private health insurance available in addition to Obamacare, even though moving everyone to the single payer system would be much more efficient, because the private healthcare industry represented 2 – 3 million jobs which could not be replaced.

Graeber argues that many finance jobs are feudal in style rather than capitalist – **‘peasants and craftsmen produce things, to a large extent autonomously; lords siphon off a share of what they produce, usually by dint of some complex set of legal rights and traditions’** – if you have ever rented a house through an estate agent or applied for a mortgage this might sound familiar! As with the example of the accountant working on PPI claims, it’s often in the company’s interest to make the process as complicated and expensive as possible.

Why do people keep doing bullshit jobs, and what affect does this have on society?

‘How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one’s job should not exist?’

Economic theory has it that human beings will always seek out the greatest gain for the least effort. So shouldn’t people be pleased to have highly paid jobs that require little work on their part? Two chapters of the book are dedicated to a very detailed ‘anthropology of work’, based on testimonies from workers who contacted David after the success of his original essay, exploring the impact of

bullshit jobs and arguing that they cause moral and spiritual damage both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Do I have a bullshit job?

Is working in publishing, writing a newspaper column, or being a professor of anthropology a bullshit job?

David Graeber marks a distinction between low paid but socially useful jobs e.g. being a tube driver, a nurse, teacher, cleaner or fireman and highly paid jobs that add no value to society, e.g. a corporate lawyer, or finance executive.

He also defines a third sector of jobs that are both reasonably well paid and socially useful/fulfilling which he marks out as the domain of the liberal elite. Why is there so much loathing of the liberal elite at present? Because in a time of very poor social mobility (and it's no coincidence that these are all industries where diversity is markedly low), they are seen to be hoarding the very small crossover of jobs that are both interesting and allow for a middle class lifestyle, whilst at the same time lecturing everyone about their liberal values.

'Voters, I would suggest, tend to resent intellectuals more than they resent rich people, because they can imagine a scenario in which they or their children might become rich, but cannot possibly imagine one in which they could ever become a member of the cultural elite. If you think about it that's not an unreasonable assessment. A truck driver's daughter from Nebraska might not have very much chance of becoming a millionaire—America now has the lowest social mobility in the developed world—but it *could* happen. There's virtually no way that same daughter will ever become an international human rights lawyer, or drama critic for the New York Times'

What should we do about it?

The book's focus is analytic rather than policy orientated, however, in his final chapter he supports Universal Basic Income as a good solution to the problem

And one final thought...

'Whenever there's a crisis, even an ecological crisis, there are calls for collective sacrifice. These calls always seem to involve everyone working more—despite the fact that, as noted, in ecological terms, a mass reduction of working hours is probably the quickest and easiest thing that could be done to save the planet'