

---

# **BULLSHIT JOBS**

**DAVID GRAEBER**

Simon & Schuster  
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

---

Preface:

## On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

In the spring of 2013, I unwittingly set off a very minor international sensation.

It all began when I was asked to write an essay for a new radical magazine called *Strike!* The editor asked if I had anything provocative that no one else would be likely to publish. I usually have one or two essay ideas like that stewing around, so I drafted one up and presented him with a brief piece entitled “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.”

The essay was based on a hunch. Everyone is familiar with those sort of jobs that don't seem, to the outsider, to really do much of anything: HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers, or the sort of people (very familiar in academic contexts) who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees. The list was seemingly endless. What, I wondered, if these jobs really *are* useless, and those who hold them are aware of it? Certainly you meet people now and then who seem to feel their jobs are pointless and unnecessary. Could there be anything more demoralizing than having to wake up in the morning five out of seven days of one's adult life to perform a task that one secretly believed did not need to be performed—that was simply a waste of time or resources, or that even made the world worse? Would this not be a terrible psychic

would running across our society? Yet if so, it was one that no one ever seemed to talk about. There were plenty of surveys over whether people were happy at work. There were none, as far as I knew, about whether or not they felt their jobs had any good reason to exist.

This possibility that our society is riddled with useless jobs that no one wants to talk about did not seem inherently implausible. The subject of work is riddled with taboos. Even the fact that most people don't like their jobs and would relish an excuse not to go to work is considered something that can't really be admitted on TV—certainly not on the TV news, even if it might occasionally be alluded to in documentaries and stand-up comedy. I had experienced these taboos myself: I had once acted as the media liaison for an activist group that, rumor had it, was planning a civil disobedience campaign to shut down the Washington, DC, transport system as part of a protest against a global economic summit. In the days leading up to it, you could hardly go anywhere looking like an anarchist without some cheerful civil servant walking up to you and asking whether it was really true he or she wouldn't have to go to work on Monday. Yet at the same time, TV crews managed dutifully to interview city employees—and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were the *same* city employees—commenting on how terribly tragic it would be if they wouldn't be able to get to work, since they knew that's what it would take to get them on TV. No one seems to feel free to say what they really feel about such matters—at least in public.

It was plausible, but I didn't really know. In a way, I wrote the piece as a kind of experiment. I was interested to see what sort of response it would elicit.

This is what I wrote for the August 2013 issue:

### On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a fifteen-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technolog-

ical terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.

Why did Keynes's promised utopia—still being eagerly awaited in the sixties—never materialize? The standard line today is that he didn't figure in the massive increase in consumerism. Given the choice between less hours and more toys and pleasures, we've collectively chosen the latter. This presents a nice morality tale, but even a moment's reflection shows it can't really be true. Yes, we have witnessed the creation of an endless variety of new jobs and industries since the twenties, but very few have anything to do with the production and distribution of sushi, iPhones, or fancy sneakers.

So what are these new jobs, precisely? A recent report comparing employment in the US between 1910 and 2000 gives us a clear picture (and I note, one pretty much exactly echoed in the UK). Over the course of the last century, the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and in the farm sector has collapsed dramatically. At the same time, “professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers” tripled, growing “from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment.” In other words, productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away. (Even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be.)

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the “service” sector as of the administrative sector, up to and includ-

ing the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or, for that matter, the whole host of ancillary industries (dog washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

These are what I propose to call “bullshit jobs.”

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. Sure, in the old inefficient Socialist states like the Soviet Union, where employment was considered both a right and a sacred duty, the system made up as many jobs as it had to. (This is why in Soviet department stores it took three clerks to sell a piece of meat.) But, of course, this is the very sort of problem market competition is supposed to fix. According to economic theory, at least, the last thing a profit-seeking firm is going to do is shell out money to workers they don’t really need to employ. Still, somehow, it happens.

While corporations may engage in ruthless downsizing, the layoffs and speed-ups invariably fall on that class of people who are actually making, moving, fixing, and maintaining things. Through some strange alchemy no one can quite explain, the number of salaried paper pushers ultimately seems to expand, and more and more employees find themselves—not unlike Soviet workers, actually—working forty- or even fifty-hour weeks on paper but effectively working fifteen hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organizing or attending motivational seminars, updating their Facebook profiles, or downloading TV box sets.

The answer clearly isn’t economic: it’s moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger. (Think of what started to

happen when this even began to be approximated in the sixties.) And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.

Once, when contemplating the apparently endless growth of administrative responsibilities in British academic departments, I came up with one possible vision of hell. 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. Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinetmakers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Nor does the task really need to be done—at least, there’s only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried. Yet somehow they all become so obsessed with resentment at the thought that some of their coworkers might be spending more time making cabinets and not doing their fair share of the fish-frying responsibilities that before long, there’s endless piles of useless, badly cooked fish piling up all over the workshop, and it’s all that anyone really does.

I think this is actually a pretty accurate description of the moral dynamics of our own economy.

Now, I realize any such argument is going to run into immediate objections: “Who are you to say what jobs are really ‘necessary’? What’s ‘necessary,’ anyway? You’re an anthropology professor—what’s the ‘need’ for that?” (And, indeed, a lot of tabloid readers would take the existence of my job as the very definition of wasteful social expenditure.) And on one level, this is obviously true: There can be no objective measure of social value.

I would not presume to tell someone who is convinced they are making a meaningful contribution to the world that, really, they are not. But what about those people who are themselves convinced their jobs are meaningless? Not long ago, I got back in touch with a school friend whom I hadn’t seen since I was fifteen. I was amazed to discover that in the interim, he had become first a poet, then the front man in

an indie rock band. I'd heard some of his songs on the radio, having no idea the singer was someone I actually knew. He was obviously brilliant, innovative, and his work had unquestionably brightened and improved the lives of people all over the world. Yet, after a couple of unsuccessful albums, he'd lost his contract, and, plagued with debts and a newborn daughter, ended up, as he put it, "taking the default choice of so many directionless folk: law school." Now he's a corporate lawyer working in a prominent New York firm. He was the first to admit that his job was utterly meaningless, contributed nothing to the world, and, in his own estimation, should not really exist.

There's a lot of questions one could ask here, starting with, What does it say about our society that it seems to generate an extremely limited demand for talented poet-musicians but an apparently infinite demand for specialists in corporate law? (Answer: If 1 percent of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call "the market" reflects what *they* think is useful or important, not anybody else.) But even more, it shows that most people in pointless jobs are ultimately aware of it. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever met a corporate lawyer who didn't think their job was bullshit. The same goes for almost all the new industries outlined above. There is a whole class of salaried professionals that, should you meet them at parties and admit that you do something that might be considered interesting (an anthropologist, for example), will want to avoid even discussing their line of work entirely. Give them a few drinks, and they will launch into tirades about how pointless and stupid their job really is.

This is a profound psychological violence here. How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one's job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment? Yet it is the peculiar genius of our society that its rulers have figured out a way, as in the case of the fish fryers, to ensure that rage is directed precisely against those who actually do get to do meaningful work. For instance: in our society, there seems to be a general rule that, the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it. Again, an objective measure is hard to find, but

one easy way to get a sense is to ask: What would happen were this entire class of people to simply disappear? Say what you like about nurses, garbage collectors, or mechanics, it's obvious that were they to vanish in a puff of smoke, the results would be immediate and catastrophic. A world without teachers or dockworkers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science-fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs, or legal consultants to similarly vanish.<sup>1</sup> (Many suspect it might improve markedly.) Yet apart from a handful of well-touted exceptions (doctors), the rule holds surprisingly well.

Even more perverse, there seems to be a broad sense that this is the way things should be. This is one of the secret strengths of right-wing populism. You can see it when tabloids whip up resentment against tube workers for paralyzing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyze London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people. It's even clearer in the United States, where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against schoolteachers and autoworkers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry executives who actually cause the problems) for their supposedly bloated wages and benefits. It's as if they are being told "But you get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that, you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?"

If someone had designed a work regime perfectly suited to maintaining the power of finance capital, it's hard to see how he or she could have done a better job. Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorized stratum of the universally reviled unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing, in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc.)—and particularly its financial avatars—but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment

against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value. Clearly, the system was never consciously designed. It emerged from almost a century of trial and error. But it is the only explanation for why, despite our technological capacities, we are not all working three- to four-hour days.

If ever an essay's hypothesis was confirmed by its reception, this was it. "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" produced an explosion.

The irony was that the two weeks after the piece came out were the same two weeks that my partner and I had decided to spend with a basket of books, and each other, in a cabin in rural Quebec. We'd made a point of finding a location with no wireless. This left me in the awkward position of having to observe the results only on my mobile phone. The essay went viral almost immediately. Within weeks, it had been translated into at least a dozen languages, including German, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Czech, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Latvian, Polish, Greek, Estonian, Catalan, and Korean, and was reprinted in newspapers from Switzerland to Australia. The original *Strike!* page received more than a million hits and crashed repeatedly from too much traffic. Blogs sprouted. Comments sections filled up with confessions from white-collar professionals; people wrote me asking for guidance or to tell me I had inspired them to quit their jobs to find something more meaningful. Here is one enthusiastic response (I've collected hundreds) from the comments section of *Australia's Canberra Times*:

Wow! Nail on the head! I am a corporate lawyer (tax litigator, to be specific). I contribute nothing to this world and am utterly miserable all of the time. I don't like it when people have the nerve to say "Why do it, then?" because it is so clearly not that simple. It so happens to be the only way right now for me to contribute to the 1 percent in such a significant way so as to reward me with a house in Sydney to raise my future kids . . . Thanks to technology, we are probably as productive in two days as we previously were in five. But thanks to greed and some busy-bee syndrome of productivity, we are still asked to slave away

for the profit of others ahead of our own nonremunerated ambitions. Whether you believe in intelligent design or evolution, humans were not made to work—so to me, this is all just greed propped up by inflated prices of necessities.<sup>2</sup>

At one point, I got a message from one anonymous fan who said that he was part of an impromptu group circulating the piece within the financial services community; he'd received five emails containing the essay just that day (certainly one sign that many in financial services don't have much to do). None of this answered the question of how many people really felt that way about their jobs—as opposed to, say, passing on the piece as a way to drop subtle hints to others—but before long, statistical evidence did indeed surface.

On January 5, 2015, a little more than a year after the article came out, on the first Monday of the new year—that is, the day most Londoners were returning to work from their winter holidays—someone took several hundred ads in London Underground cars and replaced them with a series of guerrilla posters consisting of quotes from the original essay. These were the ones they chose:

- Huge swathes of people spend their days performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.
- It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs for the sake of keeping us all working.
- The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.
- How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one's job should not exist?

The response to the poster campaign was another spate of discussion in the media (I appeared briefly on *Russia Today*), as a result of which the polling agency YouGov took it upon itself to test the hypothesis and conducted a poll of Britons using language taken directly from the essay: for

example, Does your job “make a meaningful contribution to the world”? Astonishingly, more than a third—37 percent—said they believed that it did not (whereas 50 percent said it did, and 13 percent were uncertain).

This was almost twice what I had anticipated—I’d imagined the percentage of bullshit jobs was probably around 20 percent. What’s more, a later poll in Holland came up with almost exactly the same results: in fact, a little higher, as 40 percent of Dutch workers reported that their jobs had no good reason to exist.

So not only has the hypothesis been confirmed by public reaction, it has now been overwhelmingly confirmed by statistical research.

■ ■ ■

Clearly, then, we have an important social phenomenon that has received almost no systematic attention.<sup>3</sup> Simply opening up a way to talk about it became, for many, cathartic. It was obvious that a larger exploration was in order.

What I want to do here is a bit more systematic than the original essay. The 2013 piece was for a magazine about revolutionary politics, and it emphasized the political implications of the problem. In fact, the essay was just one of a series of arguments I was developing at the time that the neoliberal (“free market”) ideology that had dominated the world since the days of Thatcher and Reagan was really the opposite of what it claimed to be: it was really a political project dressed up as an economic one.

I had come to this conclusion because it seemed to be the only way to explain how those in power actually behaved. While neoliberal rhetoric was always all about unleashing the magic of the marketplace and placing economic efficiency over all other values, the overall effect of free market policies has been that rates of economic growth have slowed pretty much everywhere except India and China, scientific and technological advance has stagnated, and in most wealthy countries, the younger generations can, for the first time in centuries, expect to lead less prosperous lives than their parents did. Yet on observing these effects, proponents of market ideology always reply with calls for even stronger doses of the same

medicine, and politicians duly enact them. This struck me as odd. If a private company hired a consultant to come up with a business plan, and it resulted in a sharp decline in profits, that consultant would be fired. At the very least, he’d be asked to come up with a different plan. With free market reforms, this never seemed to happen. The more they failed, the more they were enacted. The only logical conclusion was that economic imperatives weren’t really driving the project.

What was? It seemed to me the answer had to lie in the mind-set of the political class. Almost all of those making the key decisions had attended college in the 1960s, when campuses were at the very epicenter of political ferment, and they felt strongly that such things must never happen again. As a result, while they might have been concerned with declining economic indicators, they were also quite delighted to note that the combination of globalization, gutting the power of unions, and creating an insecure and overworked workforce—along with aggressively paying lip service to sixties calls to hedonistic personal liberation (what came to be known as “lifestyle liberalism, fiscal conservatism”)—had the effect of simultaneously shifting more and more wealth and power to the wealthy and almost completely destroying the basis for organized challenges to their power. It might not have worked very well economically, but politically it worked like a dream. If nothing else, they had little incentive to abandon such policies. All I did in the essay was to pursue this insight: whenever you find someone doing something in the name of economic efficiency that seems completely economically irrational (like, say, paying people good money to do nothing all day), one had best start by asking, as the ancient Romans did, “*Qui bono?*”—“Who benefits?”—and how.

This is less a conspiracy theory approach than it is an *anticonspiracy* theory. I was asking why action *wasn’t* taken. Economic trends happen for all sorts of reasons, but if they cause problems for the rich and powerful, those rich and powerful people will pressure institutions to step in and do something about the matter. This is why after the financial crisis of 2008–09, large investment banks were bailed out but ordinary mortgage holders weren’t. The proliferation of bullshit jobs, as we’ll see, happened

for a variety of reasons. The real question I was asking is why no one intervened (“conspired,” if you like) to do something about the matter.

•••

In this book I want to do considerably more than that.

I believe that the phenomenon of bullshit employment can provide us with a window on much deeper social problems. We need to ask ourselves, not just how did such a large proportion of our workforce find themselves laboring at tasks that they themselves consider pointless, but also why do so many people believe this state of affairs to be normal, inevitable—even desirable? More oddly still, why, despite the fact that they hold these opinions in the abstract, and even believe that it is entirely appropriate that those who labor at pointless jobs should be paid more and receive more honor and recognition than those who do something they consider to be useful, do they nonetheless find themselves depressed and miserable if they themselves end up in positions where they are being paid to do nothing, or nothing that they feel benefits others in any way? There is clearly a jumble of contradictory ideas and impulses at play here. One thing I want to do in this book is begin to sort them out. This will mean asking practical questions such as: How do bullshit jobs actually happen? It will also mean asking deep historical questions, like, When and how did we come to believe that creativity was supposed to be painful, or, how did we ever come up with the notion that it would be possible to sell one’s time? And finally, it will mean asking fundamental questions about human nature.

Writing this book also serves a political purpose.

I would like this book to be an arrow aimed at the heart of our civilization. There is something very wrong with what we have made ourselves. We have become a civilization based on work—not even “productive work” but work as an end and meaning in itself. We have come to believe that men and women who do not work harder than they wish at jobs they do not particularly enjoy are bad people unworthy of love, care, or assistance from their communities. It is as if we have collectively acquiesced to our own enslavement. The main political reaction to our awareness that

half the time we are engaged in utterly meaningless or even counterproductive activities—usually under the orders of a person we dislike—is to rankle with resentment over the fact there might be others out there who are not in the same trap. As a result, hatred, resentment, and suspicion have become the glue that holds society together. This is a disastrous state of affairs. I wish it to end.

If this book can in any way contribute to that end, it will have been worth writing.

regard—it seized on a broadly existing feeling that had not really found any other voice outside the corridors, a sense that something was very wrong with the organization of society, and it provided a series of frameworks for how one might begin to think about those issues in political terms. In what follows, I will expand on those suggestions, and think a little more systematically about what the larger political implications of the current division of labor actually are, and what might be done about the situation.

Chapter 6

## Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

How vain the opinion is of some certain people of the East Indies, who think that apes and baboons, which are with them in great numbers, are imbued with understanding, and that they can speak but will not, for fear they should be employed and set to work.

—Antoine Le Grand, c. 1675

We have already considered the economic and social forces that have led to the proliferation of bullshit jobs, as well as the misery and distress those jobs cause for those who have to do them. Yet despite this evident and widespread distress, the fact that millions of people show up to work every day convinced they are doing absolutely nothing has not, until now, been considered a social problem. We have not seen politicians denouncing bullshit jobs, academic conferences dedicated to understanding the reasons for the rise of bullshit jobs, opinion pieces debating the cultural consequences of bullshit jobs, or protest movements campaigning to abolish them. To the contrary: if politicians, academics, editorialists, or social movements do weigh in on the matter, it's usually by acting directly or indirectly to make the problem worse.

The situation seems all the more extraordinary when we consider the

larger social consequences of this proliferation. If it's really true that as much of half the work we do could be eliminated without any significant effect on overall productivity, why not just redistribute the remaining work in such a way that everyone is working four-hour days? Or four-day weeks with four months' yearly vacation time? Or some similarly easygoing arrangement? Why not start shutting down the global work machine? If nothing else, it would probably be the most effective thing we could do to put a break on global warming. A hundred years ago, many assumed that the steady advance of technology and labor-saving devices would have made this possible by now, and the irony is that they were probably right. We could easily all be putting in a twenty- or even fifteen-hour workweek. Yet for some reason, we as a society have collectively decided it's better to have millions of human beings spending years of their lives pretending to type into spreadsheets or preparing mind maps for PR meetings than freeing them to knit sweaters, play with their dogs, start a garage band, experiment with new recipes, or sit in cafés arguing about politics, and gossiping about their friends' complex polyamorous love affairs.

I think the easiest way to understand how this happened is to consider how difficult it is to imagine an opinion writer for a major newspaper or magazine writing a piece saying that some class of people is working too hard and might do well to cut it out. It's easy enough to find pieces complaining that certain classes of people (young people, poor people, recipients of various forms of public assistance, those of certain national or ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>) are work-shy, entitled, lacking in drive or motivation, or unwilling to earn a living. The internet is littered with them. As Rachel put it in chapter 4, "I can barely scroll through Facebook without hitting some preachy think piece about my generation's entitlement and reluctance to just do a bloody day's work." 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.

Opinion writers are the moralists of our day. They are the secular equivalent of preachers, and when they write about work, their arguments reflect

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

a very long theological tradition of valorizing work as a sacred duty, at once curse and blessing, and seeing humans as inherently sinful, lazy beings who can be expected to shirk that duty if they can. The discipline of economics itself emerged out of moral philosophy (Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy), and moral philosophy, in turn, was originally a branch of theology. Many economic concepts trace back directly to religious ideas. As a result, arguments about value always have something of a theological tinge. Some originally theological notions about work are so universally accepted that they simply can't be questioned. One cannot assert that hardworking people are *not*, generally speaking, admirable (regardless of what they might be working hard at), or that those who avoid work are not in any way contemptible, and expect to be taken seriously in public debate. If someone says a policy creates jobs, it is not considered acceptable to reply that some jobs aren't worth having. (I know this because I have occasionally done so to policy wonks, partly just to observe the shocked confusion that ensues.) Say any of these things, and anything else you might say will be written off as well as the effusions of a provocateur, a comedian, a lunatic—anyway, someone whose further arguments can now be automatically dismissed.

Still, while the voice of the moralists may be sufficient to convince us not to make a scandal of the proliferation of bullshit jobs (since in public debate, all work must be treated as sacred duty, and therefore any work is always preferable to none at all), when it comes to our own jobs, we tend to apply very different criteria. We expect a job to serve some purpose or have some meaning and are deeply demoralized if we find it does not. But this leads to another question: If work is not simply a value in itself, in what way is it a value to others? After all, when people say their jobs are "worthless" or "no good to anyone," they are making arguments about value. Of what sort?

• • •

The field of value is always contested territory. It seems that whenever there's a word for something everyone agrees to be desirable—"truth," "beauty," "love," "democracy"—then there will be no consensus as to what

it really means. (Oddly enough, this is even true of money: economists are divided over what it is.) But in our own society, arguments about the value of work are particularly important to consider because they have led to what any outside observer would have to describe as weird, topsyturvy effects. As we'll see, people do have a notion of the social value of their work; but our society has reached the point where not only is the social value of work usually in inverse proportion to its economic value (the more one's work benefits others, the less one is likely to be paid for it), but many people have come to accept this situation is morally right—they genuinely believe this is how things ought to be. That we *should* reward useless or even destructive behavior, and, effectively, punish those whose daily labors make the world a better place.

This is genuinely perverse. To understand how it happened, though, will require a bit of work on our own part.

### on the impossibility of developing an absolute measure of value

When someone describes his job as pointless or worthless, he is necessarily operating within some sort of tacit theory of value: an idea of what would be a worthwhile occupation, and therefore what is not. It is notoriously difficult, however, to tease out exactly what that theory is in any given instance, let alone to come up with any reliable system of measurement that would make it possible to say that job X is more valuable or useful to society than job Y.

Economists measure value in terms of what they call "utility": the degree to which a good or service is useful in satisfying a want or need,<sup>2</sup> and many apply something like this to their own jobs. Do I provide something useful to the public? Sometimes the answer to the question is self-evident. If one is building a bridge, one considers it a worthwhile task if one anticipates that other people who wish to get across the river will find it useful. If workers are building a bridge no one is ever likely to use, such as the famous "Bridges to Nowhere" that local politicians in the United States

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

will occasionally sponsor to direct federal money to their districts, they are likely to conclude they are engaged in a bullshit job.

Still, there's an obvious problem with the concept of utility. Saying that something is "useful" is just saying it's effective as a way of getting something else. If you buy a dress, the "utility" of that dress is partly that it protects you from the elements or ensures you don't violate laws against walking down the street naked, but it's largely the degree to which it makes you look or feel nice. So why would one dress achieve that and not another? Economists will usually say this is a matter of taste and therefore not their department. But any utility ultimately ends up in this kind of subjective problem if you push it back far enough, even something so relatively uncomplicated as a bridge. Yes, it can make it easier for people to get to the other side of a river, but why do they want to do that? To visit an aging relative? To go bowling? Even if it's just to shop for groceries. One does not buy groceries simply to maintain one's physical health: one also expresses one's personal taste, maintains an ethnic or family tradition, acquires the means to throw drinking parties with one's friends or to celebrate religious holidays. We can't really discuss any of these things in terms of a language of "needs." For much of human history—and this is still true in much of the world today—when poor people end up in crippling debt to local moneylenders, it's because they felt they had to borrow money to throw proper funerals for their parents or weddings for their children. Did they "need" to do this? Clearly, they felt strongly that they did. And since there's no scientific definition of what a "human need" actually is, beyond the body's minimal caloric and nutritional requirements, and a few other physical factors, such questions must always be subjective. To a large degree, needs are just other people's expectations. If you don't throw a proper wedding for your daughter, it would be a family disgrace.

Most economists conclude therefore that there's no point in sitting in judgment about what people *should* want; better to just accept that they *do* want, and then sit in judgment about how effectively ("rationally") they set about pursuing their desires. Most workers seem to agree. As I've noted, those who felt their jobs were pointless almost never said things such as "I produce selfe sticks. Selfe sticks are stupid. People shouldn't buy stupid

things like that,” or, “Who really needs a two-hundred-dollar pair of socks?” Even the one or two exceptions were revealing. Take Dietrich, who worked for a company that provided party supplies, mostly to local churches:

Dietrich: I worked for years in the warehouse of a novelty store. I don't really know what to say other than it was complete and total BS. One doesn't know true degradation until one has spent a good portion of one's waking hours schlepping around boxes of clown noses, sneezing powders, plastic champagne flutes, cardboard cutouts of basketball players, and all other manner of other pointless knickknacks and nonsense. Most of the time, we just sat in the back of the warehouse with little to nothing to do, musing on the total irrelevance of what we were doing, year after year, as the business proved more and more unsustainable.

To add insult to injury, our paychecks were bright red and had clown faces on them, much to the amusement of bank tellers everywhere—as if their jobs were any more meaningful!

One might speculate at length about why Dietrich found this particular collection of products so offensive. (What's wrong with a little silly fun?) My guess would be: because it wasn't Dietrich who decided he was working for purveyors of ephemeral junk; these products never claimed to be anything other than ephemeral junk, anti-utilities destined only to be thrown away, mockeries of “real” objects and “real” values. (Even the money was a joke.) Even more, novelty items do not reject “real” values in the name of anything in particular; they provide no actual challenge to what they claim to be making fun of. So one could say they aren't even genuine mockery; they're a mockery of a mockery, reduced to something with so little real subversive content that they can be embraced by even the most boring and stodgy members of society “for the sake of the children.”

There's little more depressing than enforced gaiety. Still, even testimonies such as Dietrich's were rare.

In most cases, when employees assessed the social value of their work, they appealed to some variant of the position presented by Tom, the special effects artist we met in chapter 2: “I consider a worthwhile

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

job to be one that fulfills a preexisting need, or even that creates a product or service that people hadn't thought of, that somehow enhances and improves their lives”—as opposed to, in Tom's case, his “beauty work,” which involved manipulating images of celebrities so as to make audiences feel unattractive and then selling them cures that didn't really work. Telemarketers sometimes expressed similar concerns, but, again, much of what they were doing was simple fraud; you don't really need an elaborate theory of social value to tell you why cajoling retirees into buying subscriptions they can't afford to magazines they'll never read is problematic. Very few sat in judgment on their customers' tastes and preferences; it was more the aggressiveness and dishonesty of their own interventions that they felt proved they provided nothing of real value.

Other objections appealed to much older traditions of social critique. Take Rupert, the bank employee, who asserted that “the entire [banking] sector adds no value and is therefore bullshit,” since finance was really just a matter of “appropriating labor through usury.” The labor theory of value he's referencing here, which traces back at least to the European Middle Ages, starts from the assumption that the real value of a commodity is the work that has been invested in making its existence possible. So when we give money in exchange for a loaf of bread, what we are really paying for is the human effort that went into growing the wheat, baking the bread, and packing and transporting the loaves. If some loaves of bread are more expensive than others, it's either because it took more work to produce and transport them, or, alternately, because we consider some of that work to itself be of higher quality—to involve more skill, more artistry, more effort—than others, and therefore are willing to pay more for the resulting product. Similarly, if you're defrauding others of their wealth, as Rupert felt he was doing working for an international investment bank, you're really stealing the real, productive work that went into creating that wealth.

Now, of course, there's a long history of using arguments like this to challenge arrangements where some are—or at least can be said to be—living off the backs of others; but the very existence of bullshit jobs raises certain problems for any labor theory of value. True, saying all value comes from work<sup>3</sup> is obviously not the same thing as saying that all work produces value.

Rupert felt that most bank employees were in no sense idling about; actually, he felt most worked quite hard; only all their labor was ultimately accomplishing, in his estimation, was to come up with clever ways to appropriate the fruits of the *real* labor done by others. But that still leaves us with the same problem of how to distinguish “real” value-creating work from its opposite. If giving someone a haircut is providing a valuable service, why is providing advice on their investment portfolio not?

Yet Rupert’s feelings were not unusual. He might have been unusual in framing them explicitly in terms of the labor theory of value, but he was expressing an uneasiness that many of those working in finance and related fields clearly do feel. Presumably, he had to turn to such theories because mainstream economics just didn’t give him much to work with. According to the prevailing view among contemporary economists, since value is ultimately subjective, there’s simply no way to justify such feelings. Everyone should therefore withhold judgment and operate on the assumption that, if there’s a market for a given good or service (and in this, they would include financial services), then it’s clearly valuable to someone, and that’s all one needs to know. Up to a point, as we’ve seen, most workers would really appear to agree with the economists on principle, at least when it comes to the tastes and proclivities of the general public; but when it comes to their own jobs, their experience often glaringly contradicts the idea that the market can always be trusted in such matters. After all, there’s a market in labor as well. If the market were always right, then someone being paid \$40,000 to play computer games and gossip with old friends on WhatsApp all day would have to accept that the service he provides for the company by playing computer games and gossiping was actually worth \$40,000. It clearly is not. So markets can’t always be right. It follows that, if the market can get things so wrong in the one area the worker knows best, then surely she can’t just blandly assume the market can be trusted to assess the true value of goods and services in those areas where she lacks firsthand information.

Anyone who has a bullshit job, or knows someone who has a bullshit job, is aware, then, that the market is not an infallible arbiter of value. The problem is that nothing else is, either. Questions of value are always at least a little murky. Most people would agree that some companies might just as

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

well not exist, but it’s more likely to be based on some kind of gut instinct than anything they can articulate precisely. If I had to tease out the prevailing, unstated common sense, for a first pass, anyway, I would say that most people seem to operate with a combination of Tom’s and Rupert’s positions: that when a good or service answers a demand or otherwise improves people’s lives, then it can be considered genuinely valuable, but when it merely serves to *create* demand, either by making people feel they are fat and ugly, or luring them into debt and then charging interest, it is not. This seems reasonable enough. But it still doesn’t answer the question of what it means to “improve people’s lives,” and on that, of course, rests everything.

**how most people in contemporary society do accept the notion of a social value that can be distinguished from economic value, even if it is very difficult to pin down what it is**

So we are back, again, to theories of value. What can actually be said to improve people’s lives?

In economics, theories of value have largely served as a way to explain commodity prices: the price of a loaf of bread will fluctuate according to the contingencies of supply and demand, but that price will always gravitate around some kind of center that seems the natural price a loaf of bread *should* have. In the Middle Ages, this was seen explicitly as a moral question: How can one determine the “just price” of a commodity? If a merchant raised prices during wartime, at what point was he paying himself legitimate hazard pay, and at what point was he just gouging? One popular example invoked by jurists at the time was a prisoner living on bread and water who traded his fortune to another prisoner for a boiled egg. Could this really be considered a free choice? Should such a contract be considered enforceable once both prisoners were released?

So the idea that the market can undervalue or overvalue things has been with us for a very long time. It’s still an inherent part of our common sense, otherwise it would be impossible for anyone to ever say they were ripped off or got an especially good deal—even if no one has ever

managed to come up with a reliable formula to calculate exactly what the “real” value of any given commodity should be, and therefore, just how badly one was ripped off or just how good a deal one really got. There are too many factors to take into consideration, and many—sentimental value, individual or subcultural taste—clearly can’t be quantified. If anything is surprising, it’s the dogged insistence of so many economists, amateur and otherwise, that it *should* be possible to do so.

Many hold that all those other forms of value are somehow illusory, or irrelevant to market concerns. Economists, for instance, will often take the position that, since value is ultimately just utility, commodity prices will gravitate around their real market value over time—even if this comes down to a purely circular proposition that whatever price a commodity tends to gravitate around over time must be its real market value. Marxists and other anticapitalists have often been known to take an even more extreme position, insisting that since capitalism is a total system, anyone who imagines she is operating outside it or pursuing values other than those created by the system is fooling herself. Often, when I present the concept of bullshit jobs in radical forums, someone awash in Marxist theory will instantly stand up to declare I have it wrong: maybe some workers think their work is useless, but that work must be producing profits for capitalism, which is all that matters under the present capitalist system.<sup>4</sup> Others, even more finely attuned to the niceties of such matters, will explain that clearly I am really talking about the difference between what Marx terms “productive” and “unproductive” labor—by which he meant labor that is either productive or unproductive *for capitalists*. Productive labor yields some kind of surplus value that capitalists can extract in profits; other labor is at best “reproductive”—that is, like housework or education (these are always put forward as the primary examples), such tasks perform the necessary second-order work of keeping workers alive and raising new generations of workers so that in the future they can, in turn, do the “real” work of being exploited.<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly true that capitalists themselves will often see things in this way. Business lobbies, for instance, are notorious for urging governments to treat schools primarily as places for training future employees. It might

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

seem a little strange seeing the same logic coming from anticapitalists, but, in a way, it makes sense; it’s a means of saying that half measures will never work. For instance, a well-meaning liberal who buys fair trade coffee and sponsors a float in the Gay Pride Parade isn’t really challenging power structures of power and injustice in the world in any significant way, but, ultimately, just reproducing them on another level. This is an important point to make—sanctimonious liberals are irritating and deserve to be reminded of this—but the problem, at least for me, is the leap from saying that *from the perspective of capitalism*, a mother’s love or a teacher’s labors have no meaning except as a means of reproducing the labor force, and the assumption that therefore any other perspective on the matter is necessarily irrelevant, illusory, or incorrect. Capitalism is not a single totalizing system that shapes and embraces every aspect of our existence. It’s not even clear it makes sense to speak of “capitalism” at all (Marx, for instance, never really did), implying as it does that “capitalism” is a set of abstract ideas that have somehow come to take material form in factories and offices. The world is more complicated and messy than that. Historically, the factories and offices emerged first, long before anyone knew quite what to call them, and to this day, they operate on multiple contradictory logics and purposes. Similarly, value itself is a constant political argument. No one is ever quite sure what it is.

• • •

In English, as currently spoken, we tend to make a distinction between “value” in the singular, as in the value of gold, pork bellies, antiques, and financial derivatives, and “values” in the plural: that is, family values, religious morality, political ideals, beauty, truth, integrity, and so on. Basically, we speak of “value” when talking about economic affairs, which usually comes down to all those human endeavors in which people are paid for their work or their actions are otherwise directed toward getting money. “Values” appear when that is not the case. For instance, housework and child care are, surely, the single most common forms of unpaid work. Hence, we constantly hear about the importance of “family values.” But participating in church activities, charitable works, political volunteering,

and most artistic and scientific pursuits are equally unremunerated. Even if a sculptor does end up becoming fabulously wealthy and marries a porn star, or a guru ends up in possession of a fleet of Rolls-Royces, most will consider his wealth legitimate only insofar as it is a kind of side effect, because originally, at least, he wasn't in it just for the money.

What money brings into the picture is the ability to make precise quantitative comparisons. Money makes it possible to say that this amount of pig iron is equivalent in value to that number of fruit drinks or pedicures or tickets to the Glastonbury music festival. This might sound obvious, but the implications are profound. It means the market value of a commodity is, precisely, the degree to which it can be compared to (and, hence, exchanged for) something else. This is exactly what is missing in the domain of "values"—it might sometimes be possible to argue that one work of art is more beautiful, or one religious devotee more pious than another, but it would be bizarre to ask how *much* more, to say that this monk is five times more pious than that one, or this Rembrandt is twice as lovely as that Monet.<sup>6</sup> It would be if anything even more absurd to try to come up with a mathematical formula to calculate just how much it would be legitimate to neglect one's family in pursuit of art, or break the law in the name of social justice. Obviously, people do make such decisions all the time, but by definition, they cannot be quantified.

In fact, one could even further say that is precisely the key to their value. Just as commodities have economic "value" because they can be compared precisely with other commodities, "values" are valuable because they cannot be compared with anything. They are each considered unique, incommensurable—in a word, priceless.

It seems to me that the words "value" and "values" have become our commonsense shorthand for how to think about such complicated questions. It's not a terrible one. Still, even this is more an ideal of how we like to think things should work than an accurate representation of how they actually do work. After all, it's not as if life is really divided between an "economy" where everyone thinks only about money and material self-interest, and a series of other spheres (politics, religion, family, and so on) where people behave entirely differently. Real motives are always mixed.

#### Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

It's always important to emphasize here that for most of human history, it would never have occurred to anyone that it would be possible to even make such distinctions: the very idea of either pure self-interest, or pure selfless altruism, would have seemed equally bizarre—just as bizarre, in fact, as the idea of "selling one's time." Such concepts became possible only with the rise of impersonal markets across Eurasia roughly around 600 BC. The invention of coinage made it possible to create markets where strangers could interact with one another only with an eye to material advantage; wherever these cash markets appeared, whether in China, India, or the Mediterranean world, they were quickly followed by the birth of universal religions that in every case preached that material things were not important, and that the pious should give their goods selflessly to charity. But no attempt to create an absolute firewall between material selfishness and selfless idealism (value and values) has ever been successful; each always ends up leaking into the other. This leakage, it should be emphasized, is not just in one direction. Yes, it often turns out that artists, idealists, priests, and statesmen will turn out to be secretly pursuing some personal material advantage, or sometimes something even worse; but it is equally the case that businessmen will often take pride in their honor or integrity, or workers will agonize over whether their work actually does anyone any good.

This was certainly the primary consideration of those who wondered about the larger meaning of their jobs. In most of the testimonies I collected, "meaningful" was just a synonym for "helpful" and "valuable" for "beneficial." Let's take a glance at some of the ways people reflected on the value of their jobs:

**Car Salesman:** I work for a large used-car finance company in the United States that caters to the subprime market. Oftentimes, I find myself wondering if my job really has any value at all besides to the owners of the company.

**Aerospace Engineer:** The senior management are happy to work fifty to sixty hours a week (and encourage all their minions to do likewise) to be seen to be busy but without ever producing anything of value . . . True, if knowledge and new technology are created as

by-products, then one could argue that the job retains some value. In some instances of my job, this did occur, but it tended to be the exception rather than the rule.

**Telemarketer:** It's a job with no social value whatsoever. At least if you stack shelves at a supermarket, you are doing something that benefits people. Everybody needs groceries and the things supermarkets sell. In call center work, the calls are essentially time-wasting nuisance calls.

**Freelance Academic Translator:** Over the years, I have translated papers from just about every academic discipline—from ecology to corporate law, social science to computer science. The vast majority of it is of no discernible value to humanity whatsoever.

**Pharmacist:** I entered the medical profession under the assumption that my job would be meaningful and my work would be helpful. In reality, I've realized most of the medical field is a house of cards. I would contest the idea that doctors have genuinely helpful jobs.

**Civil Servant:** Neither of these jobs helped anyone in any way.<sup>7</sup>

None of this is likely to be news to most readers; this is the way pretty much anyone might talk about his job if he had to reflect on it in the abstract. As Eric's father remarked in chapter 3, after dutifully chewing Eric out as a "nonsensical idiot" for quitting such a high-paying job, "Well, what good could that job do for anyone anyway?"

The telemarketer cited above made an explicit appeal to the concept of "social value"—value to society as a whole. This concept came up periodically in other accounts as well.

**Homeowner Association Manager:** Managing homeowners associations is one hundred percent bullshit. Wealthy people buy a condo building with a bunch of other wealthy strangers, then hire someone else to manage and maintain it. The only reason this job exists is that the owners don't like or trust each other. I did this job for three years and never saw one hint of social value.

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

Or recall Nigel the Data Perfector, already quoted in chapter 4, who spent hundreds of hours staring at company loyalty card information looking for nonexistent mistakes:

**Data Perfector:** I really think that if we had been processing applications for something that had a more obvious social value—organ transplant registration, say, or tickets to Glastonbury—then it would have felt different.

It's interesting to juxtapose these two, because they show that for most people, "social value" isn't just about creating wealth or even leisure. It is equally about creating sociability. Organ donation allows people to save one another's lives; the Glastonbury music festival allows them to slog through the mud together smoking drugs and playing or listening to their favorite music—that is, to give one another joy and happiness. Such collective experiences can be considered of "obvious social value." In contrast, making it easier for rich people to avoid one another (it's a notorious thing that very wealthy people almost invariably dislike their neighbors), shows "not one hint of social value."

Now, "social value" of this sort clearly can't be measured, and undoubtedly if one were to sit down with any one of the workers whose testimonies I've cited, one would find that each had a slightly different idea of what was useful or valuable to society and what was not. Still, I suspect they would all have agreed on at least two things: first, that the most important things one gets out of a job are (1) money to pay the bills, and (2) the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the world. Second, that there is an inverse relation between the two. The more your work helps and benefits others, and the more social value you create, the less you are likely to be paid for it.

**concerning the inverse relationship between the social value of work and the amount of money one is likely to be paid for it**

*Virtutum omnium pretium in ipsis est.*

—Epictetus

I made this point in the original bullshit jobs article in 2013 because it had struck me during my experience with Occupy Wall Street two years earlier. One of the most frequently heard complaints from supporters of the movement—particularly the ones working too much to spend much time in the camps, but who could only show up for marches or to express support on the Web—ran along the lines of: “I wanted to do something useful with my life; work that had a positive effect on other people or, at the very least, wasn’t hurting anyone. But the way this economy works, if you spend your working life caring for others, you’ll end up so underpaid and so deeply in debt you won’t be able to care for your own family.” There was a deep and abiding sense of rage at the injustice of such arrangements.<sup>8</sup> I began to refer to it, mostly to myself, as the “revolt of the caring classes.” At the same time, occupiers in Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park regularly reported conversations with young Wall Street traders who’d drop by and say things to the effect of: “Look, I know you guys are right. I’m not contributing anything positive to the world, the system is corrupt, and I’m probably part of the problem. I’d quit tomorrow if you could show me how to live in New York on a less-than-six-figure salary.”

Some of the testimonies we’ve already read echoed similar dilemmas: think here of Annie, who noted how many women taking care of preschoolers were ultimately forced to quit and find office jobs to pay the rent, or Hannibal, the medical researcher, who summed up his experience in the medical field with the formula “the amount of money I can charge for doing the work I do is almost perfectly inversely correlated with how useful it is.”

That there’s a real problem here can be demonstrated by a simple thought experiment proposed in the original 2013 piece: imagine if a certain class of people were to simply vanish. Let me expand on this for a moment. If we all woke up one morning and discovered that not only nurses, garbage collectors, and mechanics, but for that matter, bus drivers, grocery store workers, firefighters, or short-order chefs had been whisked away into another dimension, the results would be equally catastrophic. If elementary school teachers were to vanish, most schoolchildren would likely celebrate for a day or two, but the long-term effects would be if anything even more devastating. And while we can no doubt argue about

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

the relative merits of death metal versus klezmer music, or romance novels versus science fiction, there’s no doubt that even if the sudden disappearance of certain categories of authors, artists, or musicians left certain sectors of the population indifferent or even happy, for others the world would become a far more dismal and depressing place.<sup>9</sup>

The same cannot be said of hedge fund managers, political consultants, marketing gurus, lobbyists, corporate lawyers, or people whose job it is to apologize for the fact that the carpenter didn’t come. As Finn said of his software licensing firm in chapter 4: “If I showed up on Monday and the building had disappeared, not only would society not care, I wouldn’t, either.” And there are certainly office buildings in the world—I’m sure anyone reading this book can think, just off the top of her head, of several—that, were they to simply vanish, would leave the world much better off.

Yet in many of these are precisely the people who get paid the very highest salaries.

In fact, it often happens that, at the very top of organizations, apparently crucial positions can go unfilled for long periods of time without there being any noticeable effect—even, on the organization itself. In recent years, Belgium has gone through a series of constitutional crises that have left it temporarily without a sitting government: no prime minister and no one in charge of health, transportation, or education. These crises have been known to continue for considerable periods of time—the record so far is 541 days—without there being any observable negative impact on health, transportation, or education. One has to imagine that if the situation were to endure for decades, it would make some sort of difference; but it’s not clear how much of one or whether the positive effects would outweigh the negative ones.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, at time of writing, the Uber corporation, considered one of the world’s most dynamic, has seen the resignation not only of its founder, Travis Kalanick, but a host of other top executives, with the result that it “is currently operating without a CEO, chief operating officer, chief financial officer, or chief marketing officer”—all without any apparent effect on day-to-day operations.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, there’s a reason why those who work in the financial sector, and who have extremely well-paid occupations more generally, almost

## BULLSHIT JOBS

never go on strike. As Rutger Bergman likes to point out, in 1970 there was a six-month bank strike in Ireland; rather than the economy grinding to a halt as the organizers had anticipated, most people simply continued to write checks, which began to circulate as a form of currency, but otherwise carried on much as they had before. Two years before, when garbage collectors had gone on strike for a mere ten days in New York, the city caved in to their demands because it had become uninhabitable.<sup>12</sup>

• • •

Very few economists have actually attempted to measure the overall social value of different professions; most would probably take the very idea as something of a fool's errand, but those who have tried tend to confirm that there is indeed an inverse relation between usefulness and pay. In a 2017 paper, US economists Benjamin B. Lockwood, Charles G. Nathanson, and E. Glen Weyl combed through the existing literature on the "externalities" (social costs) and "spillover effects" (social benefits) associated with a variety of highly paid professions, to see if it were possible to calculate how much each adds to or subtracts from the economy overall. They concluded that while in some cases—notably anything associated with creative industries—the values involved were just too subjective to measure, in other cases, a rough approximation was possible. Their conclusion: the most socially valuable workers whose contributions could be calculated are medical researchers, who add \$9 of overall value to society for every \$1 they are paid. The least valuable were those who worked in the financial sector, who, on average, subtract a net \$1.80 in value from society for every \$1 of compensation. (And, of course, workers in the financial sector are often compensated extremely well.)

Here was their overall breakdown:<sup>13</sup>

- researchers +9
- schoolteachers +1
- engineers +2
- consultants and IT professionals 0
- lawyers -2

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

- advertisers and marketing professionals -3
- managers -.8
- financial sector -1.5

This would certainly seem to confirm a lot of people's gut suspicions about the overall value of such professions, so it's nice to see it spelled out, but the authors' focus on the most highly paid professionals makes it of limited use for present purposes. Schoolteachers are probably the lowest-paid workers on the list, at least on average, and many researchers get by on very little, so the results certainly don't contradict a negative relation between pay and usefulness, but to get a real sense of the full gamut of employment, one needs a broader sample.

The closest I know to such a study that does use such a broader sample was one carried out by the New Economic Foundation in the United Kingdom, whose authors applied a method called "Social Return on Investment Analysis" to examine six representative occupations, three high-income, three low. Here's a summary of the results:

- city banker - yearly salary c. £5 million - estimated £7 of social value destroyed for every £1 earned;
- advertising executive - yearly salary c. £500,000, estimated £11.50 of social value destroyed per £1 paid;
- tax accountant - yearly salary c. £125,000, estimated £11.20 of social value destroyed per £1 paid;
- hospital cleaner - yearly income c. £13,000 (£6.26 per hour), estimated £10 of social value generated per £1 paid;
- recycling worker - yearly income c. £12,500 (£6.10 per hour) - estimated £12 in social value generated per £1 paid;
- nursery worker - salary c. £11,500 - estimated £7 in social value generated per £1 paid.<sup>14</sup>

The authors admit that many of their calculations are somewhat subjective, as all such calculations must be, and the study focuses only on the top and bottom of the income scale. As a result, it leaves out the majority

of jobs discussed in this book, which are mostly midrange in pay, and in most cases, at least, the social benefit is neither positive nor negative but seems to hover around zero. Still, as far as it goes, it strongly confirms the general principle that the more one's work benefits others, the less one tends to be paid for it.

There are exceptions to this principle. Doctors are the most obvious. Physicians' salaries tend to the upper end of the scale, especially in America, yet they do seem to play an indisputably beneficial role. Yet even here, there are health professionals who would argue they're not as much exceptions as they might seem—such as the pharmacist cited a few pages back, who was convinced most doctors contribute very little to human health or happiness but are mainly just dispensers of placebos. This may or may not be the case; frankly, I don't have the competence to say; but if nothing else, the oft-cited fact that the overwhelming majority of improvement in longevity since 1900 is really due to hygiene, nutrition, and other public health improvements and not to improvements in medical treatment,<sup>15</sup> suggests a case could be made that the (very poorly paid) nurses and cleaners employed in a hospital are actually more responsible for positive health outcomes than the hospital's (very highly paid) physicians.

There are a smattering of other exceptions. Many plumbers and electricians, for instance, do quite well despite their usefulness; some low-paid work is fairly pointless—but in large measure, the rule does seem to hold true.<sup>16</sup>

The reasons for this inverse relation between social benefit and level of compensation, however, are quite another matter. None of the obvious answers seem to work. For instance: education levels are very important in determining salary levels, but if this were simply a matter of training and education, the American higher education system would hardly be in the state that it is, with thousands of exquisitely trained PhDs subsisting on adjunct teaching jobs that leave them well below the poverty line—even dependent on food stamps.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if we were simply talking about supply and demand, it would be impossible to understand why American nurses are paid so much less than corporate lawyers, despite

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

the fact that the United States is currently experiencing an acute shortage of trained nurses and a glut of law school graduates.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the reasons—and myself, I believe that class power and class loyalty have a great deal to do with it—what is perhaps most disturbing about the situation is the fact that so many people not only acknowledge the inverse relation but also feel this is how things ought to be. That virtue, as the ancient Stoics used to argue, should be its own reward.

Arguments like this have long been made about teachers. It's commonplace to hear that grade school or middle school teachers shouldn't be paid well, or certainly not as well as lawyers or executives, because one wouldn't want people motivated primarily by greed to be teaching children. The argument would make a certain amount of sense if it were applied consistently—but it never is. (I have yet to hear anyone make the same argument about doctors.)

One might even say that the notion that those who benefit society should not be paid too well is a perversion of egalitarianism.

Let me explain what I mean by this. The moral philosopher G. A. Cohen argued that a case could be made for equality of income for all members of society, based on the following logic (or, at least, this is my own bastardized summary): Why, he begins, might one pay certain people more than others? Normally, the justification is that some produce more or benefit society more than others. But then we must ask why they do so:

1. If some people are more talented than others (for example, have a beautiful singing voice, are a comic genius or a math whiz), we say they are "gifted." If someone has already received a benefit (a "gift"), then it makes no sense to give them an additional benefit (more money) for that reason.
2. If some people work harder than others, it is usually impossible to establish the degree to which this is because they have a greater *capacity* for work (a gift again), and the degree to which it is because they choose to work harder. In the former case, it would again make no sense to reward them further for having an innate advantage over others.

3. Even if it could be proved that some work harder than others purely out of choice, one would then have to establish whether they did so out of altruistic motives—that is, they produced more because they wished to benefit society—or out of selfish motives, because they sought a larger proportion for themselves.
4. In the former case, if they produced more because they were striving to increase social wealth, then giving them a disproportionate share of that wealth would contradict their purpose. It would only make moral sense to reward those driven by selfish motives.
5. Since human motives are generally shifting and confused, one cannot simply divide the workforce into egoists and altruists. One is left with the choice of either rewarding everyone who makes greater efforts, or not doing so. Either option means that some people's intentions will be frustrated. Altruists will be frustrated in their attempts to benefit society, while egoists will be frustrated in their attempts to benefit themselves. If one is forced to choose one or the other, it makes better moral sense to frustrate the egoists.
6. Therefore, people should not be paid more or otherwise rewarded for greater effort or productivity at work.<sup>19</sup>

The logic is impeccable. Many of the underlying assumptions could no doubt be challenged on a variety of grounds, but in this chapter, I'm not so much interested in whether there is, in fact, a moral case for equal distribution of income, as much as observing that in many ways, our society seems to have embraced in points 3 and 4—just without 1, 2, 5, or 6. Critically, it rejects the premise that it is impossible to sort workers by motives. One need only look at what sorts of careers a worker has chosen. Is there any reason a person might be doing this job *other* than the money? If so, then that person should be treated as if point 4 applies.

As a result, there is a sense that those who choose to benefit society, and especially those who have the gratification of *knowing* they benefit society, really have no business also expecting middle-class salaries, paid vacations, and generous retirement packages. By the same token, there is also a feeling that those who have to suffer from the knowledge they are

#### Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

doing pointless or even harmful work just for the sake of the money ought to be rewarded with more money for exactly that reason.

One sees this on the political level all the time. In the UK, for instance, eight years of “austerity” have seen effective pay cuts to almost all government workers who provide immediate and obvious benefits to the public: nurses, bus drivers, firefighters, railroad information booth workers, emergency medical personnel. It has come to the point where there are full-time nurses who are dependent on charity food banks. Yet creating this situation became such a point of pride for the party in power that Parliamentarians were known to give out collective cheers on voting down bills proposing to give nurses or police a raise. The same party took a notoriously indulgent view of the sharply rising compensation of those City bankers who had very nearly crashed the world economy a few years before. Yet that government remained highly popular. There is a sense, it would seem, that an ethos of collective sacrifice for the common good *should* fall disproportionately on those who are already, by their choice of work, engaged in sacrifice for the common good. Or who simply have the gratification of knowing their work is productive and useful.

This can make sense only if one first assumes that work—more specifically, paid work—is a value in itself, indeed, so much a value in itself that either the motives of the person taking the job, or the effects of the work, are at best secondary considerations. The flip side of the left-wing protest marchers waving signs demanding “More Jobs” is the right-wing onlooker muttering “Get a job!” as they pass by. There seems a broad consensus not so much even that work is good but that *not* working is very bad; that anyone who is not slaving away harder than he'd like at something he doesn't especially enjoy is a bad person, a scrounger, a skiver, a contemptible parasite unworthy of sympathy or public relief. This feeling is echoed as much in the liberal politician's protest against the sufferings of “hardworking people” (what about those who work with only moderate intensity?) as it is in conservative protests about skivers and “welfare queens.” Even more strikingly, the same values are now applied at the top. No longer do we hear much about the idle rich—this is not because they don't exist, but because their idleness is no longer celebrated. During the Great Depression

of the 1930s, impoverished audiences liked to watch high society movies about the romantic escapades of playboy millionaires. Nowadays they are more likely to be regaled with stories of heroic CEOs and their dawn-to-midnight workaholic schedules.<sup>20</sup> In England, newspapers and magazines even write similar things about the royal family, who, we now learn, spend so many hours a week preparing for and executing their ritual functions that they barely have time to have a private life at all.

Many testimonies remarked on this work-as-an-end-in-itself morality. Clement had what he described as “a BS job evaluating grants at a public university in the Midwest.” During his off-hours, which was most of them, he spent a lot of time on the Web familiarizing himself with alternative political perspectives and eventually came to realize much of the money flowing through his office was intimately tied to the US war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He quit, and, to the surprise and consternation of his coworkers, took a significantly lower-paying job with the local municipality. There, he said, the work is harder, but “at least some of it is interesting and helpful to humans.”

One of the things that puzzled Clement was the way that everyone at his old job felt had to pretend to one another they were overwhelmed by their responsibilities, despite the obvious fact that they had very little to do:

Clement: My colleagues often discussed how busy things would get and how hard they work, even though they would routinely be gone at two or three in the afternoon. What is the name for this kind of public denial of the crystal-clear reality?

My mind keeps going back to the pressure to value ourselves and others on the basis of how hard we work at something we’d rather not be doing. I believe this attitude exists in the air around us. We sniff it into our noses and exhale it as a social reflex in small-talk; it is one of the guiding principles of social relations here: if you’re not destroying your mind and body via paid work, you’re not living right. Are we to believe that we are sacrificing for our kids, or something, who we don’t get to see because we’re at work all fucking day?!

#### Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

Clement felt this kind of pressure was especially acute in what he described as the German-Protestant-inflected culture of the American Midwest. Others spoke of Puritanism, but the feeling does not appear to be limited to Protestant or North Atlantic environments. It exists everywhere; the differences are more a matter of varying degrees and intensities. And if the value of work is in part the fact that it’s “something we’d rather not be doing,” it stands to reason that anything we would wish to be doing is less like work and more like play, or a hobby, or something we might consider doing in our spare time, and therefore less deserving of material reward. Probably we shouldn’t be paid for it at all.

This certainly resonates with my own experience. Most academics are first drawn to their careers because they love knowledge and are excited by ideas. After all, pretty much anyone capable of spending seven years earning a PhD knows that she could just as easily have spent three years in law school and come out with a starting salary many times higher. Yet despite that, when two academics in the same department hobnob over coffee, a love of knowledge or excitement about ideas is likely to be the last thing they express. Instead, they will almost invariably complain about how overwhelmed they are with administrative responsibilities. True, this is partly because academics actually are expected to spend less and less of their time reading and writing, and more and more time dealing with administrative problems,<sup>21</sup> but even if one is pursuing some exciting new intellectual discovery, it would be seen as inconsiderate to act as if one was enjoying one’s work when others clearly aren’t. Some academic environments are more anti-intellectual than others. But everywhere, at the very least, there is a sense that the pleasurable aspects of one’s calling, such as thinking, were not really what one is being paid for; they were better seen as occasional indulgences one is granted in recognition of one’s real work, which is largely about filling out forms.

Academics aren’t paid for writing or reviewing research articles, but at least the universities that do pay them acknowledge, however reluctantly, that research is part of their job description. In the business world, it’s worse. For instance, Geoff Shullenberger, a writing professor at New York University, reacted to my original 2013 essay with a blog pointing out that

many businesses now feel that if there's work that's gratifying in any way at all, they really shouldn't have to pay for it:

For Graeber, bullshit jobs carry with them a moral imperative: "If you're not busy all the time doing something, anything—doesn't really matter what it is—you're a bad person." But the flipside of that logic seems to be: if you actually like doing X activity, if it is valuable, meaningful, and carries intrinsic rewards for you, it is wrong for you to expect to be paid (well) for it; you should give it freely, even (especially) if by doing so you are allowing others to profit. In other words, we'll make a living from you doing what you love (for free), but we'll keep you in check by making sure you have to make a living doing what you hate.

Shullenberger gave the example of translation work. Translating a paragraph or document from one language to another—particularly from a dry business document—is not a task that many people would do for fun; still, one can imagine some reasons people might do it other than the money: (They are trying to perfect their language abilities, for example.) Therefore, most executives' first instinct, upon hearing that translation work is required, is to try to see if they can't find some way to make someone do it for free. Yet these very same executives are willing to shell out handsome salaries for "Vice Presidents for Creative Development" and the like, who do absolutely nothing. (In fact, such executives might themselves be Vice Presidents for Creative Development, and do nothing at all other than trying to figure out how to get others to do work for free.)

Shullenberger speaks of an emerging "voluntariat," with capitalist firms increasingly harvesting the results not of paid labor but of unpaid interns, internet enthusiasts, activists, volunteers, and hobbyists, and "digitally sharecropping" the results of popular enthusiasm and creativity to privatize and market the results.<sup>22</sup> The free software industry, perversely enough, has become a paradigm in this respect. The reader may recall Pablo, who introduced the notion of duct taping in chapter 2: software engineering work was divided between the interesting and challenging work of developing core

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

technologies, and the tedious labor of "applying duct tape" to allow different core technologies to work together, because the designers had never bothered to think about their compatibility. His main point, though, was that, increasingly, open source means that all the really engaging tasks are done for free:

Pablo: Where two decades ago, companies dismissed open source software and developed core technologies in-house, nowadays companies rely heavily on open source and employ software developers almost entirely to apply duct tape on core technologies they get for free.

In the end, you can see people doing the nongratifying duct-taping work during office hours and then doing gratifying work on core technologies during the night.

This leads to an interesting vicious circle: given that people choose to work on core technologies for free, no company is investing in those technologies. The underinvestment means that the core technologies are often unfinished, lacking quality, have a lot of rough edges, bugs, etc. That, in turn, creates need for duct tape and thus proliferation of duct-taping jobs.

Paradoxically, the more that software engineers collaborate online to do free creative labor simply for the love of doing it, as a gift to humanity, the less incentive they have to make them compatible with other such software, and the more those same engineers will have to be employed in their day jobs fixing the damage—doing the sort of maintenance work that no one would be willing to do for free. He concludes:

Pablo: My guess is that we are going to see the same dynamics in other industries as well. E.g., if people are willing to write news articles for free, nobody would pay professional journalists. Instead, the money will be redirected to the PR and advertisement industries. Eventually the quality of news will decrease because of lack of funding.

One could argue that this has already begun to happen, as fewer and fewer newspapers and news services employ actual reporters. My purpose here,

though, is not to unravel the complex and often arcane labor arrangements that grow out of this ethos, but simply to document the existence of the ethos itself. Attitudes toward labor have changed. Why? How have so many humans reached the point where they accept that even miserable, unnecessary work is actually morally superior to no work at all?

Here we must consider the history of changing ideas about work itself.

### on the theological roots of our attitudes toward labor

Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God Himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. . . .

Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth.

—Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens (On Human Labor)*, 1981

We may define labor as any exertion of mind or body undergone partly or wholly with a view to some good other than the pleasure derived from the work.

—Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 1890

What is “work”? Normally we see it as the opposite of play. Play, in turn, is defined most often as action that one does for its own sake, for pleasure, or just for the sake of doing it. Work, therefore, is activity—typically, onerous and repetitive—that one does not carry out for its own sake, and that one probably would never carry out for its own sake, or if one did certainly not for very long, but engages in only to accomplish something else (to obtain food, for example, or build a mausoleum).

Most languages have some word that translates at least roughly as “work,” but the precise borders between what we’d designate “work,” “play,” “teaching,” “learning,” “ritual,” or “hurturance” tend to vary a great deal from one culture to another. The particular tradition that has come to shape sensibilities about work in most parts of the world today harkens back to the Eastern Mediterranean, where it is first documented in

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

the early chapters of the book of Genesis, and in the works of the Greek epic poet Hesiod. In both the story of the Garden of Eden and in the myth of Prometheus, the fact that humans have to work is seen as their punishment for having defied a divine Creator, but at the same time, in both, work itself, which gives humans the ability to produce food, clothing, cities, and ultimately our own material universe, is presented as a more modest instantiation of the divine power of Creation itself. We are, as the existentialists liked to put it, condemned to be free, forced to wield the divine power of creation against our will, since most of us would really rather be naming the animals in Eden, dining on nectar and ambrosia at feasts on Mount Olympus, or watching cooked geese fly into our waiting gullets in the Land of Cockayne, than having to cover ourselves with cuts and calluses to coax sustenance from the soil.

Now, one could argue that this is simply in each case a poetic extrapolation of the two key aspects of what has become our common definition of work: first, that it is something no one would ordinarily wish to be doing for its own sake (hence, punishment); second, that we do it anyway to accomplish something beyond the work itself (hence, creation). But the fact that this “something beyond” should be conceived as “creation” is not self-evident. In fact, it’s somewhat odd. After all, most work can’t be said to “create” anything; most of it is a matter of maintaining and rearranging things.<sup>23</sup> Consider a coffee cup. We “produce” it once. We wash it a thousand times. Even work we think of as “productive”—growing potatoes, forging a shovel, assembling a computer—could just as easily be seen as tending, transforming, reshaping, and rearranging materials and elements that already exist.

This is why I would insist our concept of “production,” and our assumption that work is defined by its “productivity,” is essentially theological. The Judeo-Christian God created the universe out of nothing. (This in itself is slightly unusual: most Gods work with existing materials.) His latter-day worshippers, and their descendants, have come to think of themselves as cursed to imitate God in this regard. The sleight of hand involved, the way that most human labor, which cannot in any sense be considered “production,” is thus made to disappear, is largely effected

through gender. In the familiar lines from the story of the Fall, from the book of Genesis, God condemns men to till the soil (“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food”) and women to bear children in similarly unhappy circumstances (“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children”).<sup>24</sup> Male “productive” labor is thus being framed here as the equivalent of childbirth, which, from a male point of view (not so much from a female one, but it is very much a male point of view being presented here), can seem about as close to pure creation *ex nihilo*—the infant appearing fully formed apparently out of nowhere—that human beings can perform.

Yet it is also painful “labor.”

This conception is still with us, for instance, in the way social scientists speak of “production” and “reproduction.” Etymologically, the English verb “produce” derives from the Latin *producere*, “to bring forth,” or “put out,” as one might still say “She produced a wallet from her handbag.” Both the words “production” and “reproduction” are based on the same core metaphor: in the one case, objects seem to jump, fully formed, out of factories; in the other, babies seem to jump, fully formed, out of women’s bodies. In neither case, of course, is this actually true. But as in so many patriarchal social orders, men like to conceive of themselves as doing socially, or culturally, what they like to think of women as doing naturally. “Production” is thus simultaneously a variation on a male fantasy of childbirth, and of the action of a male Creator God who similarly created the entire universe through the sheer power of his mind and words, just as men see themselves as creating the world from their minds and brawn, and see that as the essence of “work” leaving to women most of the actual labor of tidying and maintaining things to make this illusion possible.

### **on the origins of the northern european notion of paid labor as necessary to the full formation of an adult human being**

It’s essential to emphasize the theological origins of this sort of thought. Most of the core assumptions of modern economics originally trace back

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

to theological arguments: for instance, Saint Augustine’s argument that we are cursed with infinite desires in a finite world and thus naturally in a situation of competition with one another—which reappears in secular form in the seventeenth century in Thomas Hobbes—has become the basis for the assumption that rational human action is largely a matter of “economizing,” the optimal allocation of scarce resources by rational actors in a competitive world.

Of course, in the European Middle Ages, when economic matters fell under the jurisdiction of church law, no one really pretended these questions were not theological. Still, that period introduced a further element, not explicitly theological, the importance of which for later conceptions of labor can hardly be overstated. This is the notion of “service.”<sup>25</sup> It is very much a Northern European idea.

In theory, feudal society was a vast system of service: not only serfs but also lower-ranking feudal lords “served” higher ones, just as higher ones provided feudal service to the king. However, the form of service that had the most important and pervasive influence on most people’s lives was not feudal service but what historical sociologists have called “life-cycle” service. Essentially, almost everyone was expected to spend roughly the first seven to fifteen years of his or her working life as a servant in someone else’s household. Most of us are familiar with how this worked itself out within craft guilds, where teenagers would first be assigned to master craftsmen as apprentices, and then become journeymen, but only when they achieved the status of master craftsmen would they have the means to marry and set up their own households and shops, and take apprentices of their own. In fact, the system was in no sense limited to artisans. Even peasants normally expected to spend their teenage years onward as “servants in husbandry” in another farm household, typically, that of someone just slightly better off. Service was expected equally of girls and boys (that’s what milkmaids were: daughters of peasants during their years of service), and was usually expected even of the elite. The most familiar example here would be pages, who were apprentice knights, but even noblewomen, unless they were at the very top of the hierarchy, were expected to spend their adolescence as ladies-in-waiting—that is,

servants who would “wait upon” a married noblewoman of slightly higher rank, attending to her privy chamber, toilette, meals, and so forth, even as they were also “waiting” for such time as they, too, were in a position to marry and become the lady of an aristocratic household themselves. Royal courts similarly had “gentleman waiters,” who attended to the privy chamber of the king.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of young nobles, “waiting” largely meant waiting for an inheritance—or for one’s parents to decide one was old and sufficiently well groomed to merit a transfer of title and property. This might be the case for servants in husbandry as well, but generally speaking, among commoners, servants were paid and expected to save a good share of their wages. So they were acquiring both the knowledge and experience needed to manage a household, shop, or farm, and also the wealth needed to acquire one—or, in the case of women, to be able to offer a dowry to a suitor able to do the same. As a result, medieval people married late, usually around thirty, which meant that “youth”—adolescence, a time when one was expected to be at least a little wild, lustful, and rebellious—would often last a good fifteen to twenty years.

The fact that servants were paid is crucial because it meant that while wage labor did exist in Northern Europe, centuries before the dawn of capitalism, almost everyone in the Middle Ages assumed that it was something respectable people engaged in only in the first phase of their working life. Service and wage labor were largely identified; even in Oliver Cromwell’s time, day laborers could still be referred to as “servants.” Service, in turn, was seen above all as the process whereby young people learned not only their trade, but the “manners,” the comportment appropriate to a responsible adult. As one oft-quoted account by a Venetian visitor to England put it around 1500:

The want of affection in the English is strongly manifested toward their children, for after having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of seven or nine years at the utmost, they put them out, both males and females, to hard service in the households of other people, binding them generally for seven or nine years.<sup>27</sup> And these are called

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

apprentices, and during that time they perform all the most menial offices; and few are born who are exempted from this fate, for everyone, however rich he may be, sends away his children into the houses of others, whilst he, in return, receives those of strangers into his own. And on inquiring their reason for this severity, they answered that they did it in order that their children learn better manners.<sup>28</sup>

Manners, in the medieval and Early Modern sense, went well beyond etiquette; the term referred to one’s manner of acting and being in the world more generally; one’s habits, tastes, and sensibilities. Young people were expected to work for wages in the households of others because—unless one was intending to join the clergy and become a scholar—what we would consider paid work, and what we would consider education, were seen as largely the same thing, and both were a process of learning self-discipline, about “achieving mastery of one’s baser desires”<sup>29</sup> and learning how to behave like a proper self-contained adult.

This is not to say that medieval and Early Modern culture had no place for the rambunctiousness of youth. To the contrary. Young people, even though in service in others’ households, typically also created an alternative culture of their own, centered on youth lodges with names such as the Lords of Mistrule and Abbots of Unreason, which sometimes were even allowed to take temporary power during the popular festivals. Yet ultimately, disciplined work under the direction of an adult head of a household was to transform the young into self-disciplined adults, at which point they would no longer have to work for others but would be self-employed.

■ ■ ■

As a result of such arrangements, attitudes toward work in medieval Northern Europe look quite different from those that prevailed in the classical world, or even, as we’ve seen, the later Mediterranean. (The Venetian ambassador was scandalized by English practices.) Most of our sources from Greek and Roman antiquity are male aristocrats who saw physical labor

or service as fit only for women or slaves. Work, Aristotle insisted, in no sense makes you a better person; in fact, it makes you a worse one, since it takes up so much time, thus making it difficult to fulfill one's social and political obligations. As a result, the punishment aspect of work tended to be emphasized in classical literature, while the creative and godlike aspect was largely seen as falling to those male heads of household rich enough that they didn't actually have to get their hands dirty but could tell others what to do. In Northern Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, almost everyone was expected to get their hands dirty at some point or another.<sup>30</sup> As a result, work, especially paid work, was seen as transformative. This is important because it means that certain key aspects of what was to become known as the Protestant work ethic were already there, long before the emergence of Protestantism.

**how, with the advent of capitalism, work came to be seen in many quarters either as a means of social reform or ultimately as a virtue in its own right, and how laborers countered by embracing the labor theory of value**

No adequate history of the meanings of work has been written.

—C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, 1951

All this was to change with the advent of capitalism. By “capitalism,” here I am referring not to markets—these had long existed—but to the gradual transformation of relations of service into permanent relations of wage labor: that is, a relation between some people who owned capital, and others who did not and thus were obliged to work for them. What this meant in human terms was, first of all, that millions of young people found themselves trapped in permanent social adolescence. As the guild structures broke down, apprentices could become journeymen, but journeymen could no longer become masters, which meant that, in traditional terms, they would not be a position to marry and start families

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

of their own. They were expected to live their entire lives effectively as unfinished human beings.<sup>31</sup> Inevitably, many began to rebel, give up on the interminable waiting, and began marrying early, abandoning their masters to set up cottages and families of their own—which, in turn, set off a wave of moral panic among the emerging employing class very reminiscent of later moral panics about teenage pregnancy. The following is from *The Anatomy of Abuses*, a sixteenth-century manifesto by a Puritan named Phillip Stubbes:

And besides this, you shall have every saucy boy, of ten, fourteen, sixteen, or twenty years of age, catch up a woman, and marry her, without any fear of God at all . . . or, which is more, without any respect how they may live together, with sufficient maintenance for their callings and estate. No, no! It maketh no matter for these things, so he have his pretty pussy to huggle withall, for that is the only thing he desireth. Then build they up a cottage, though but of elder poles, in every lane end almost, where they live as beggers all their life after. This filtheth the land with such store of mendicants . . . that in short time it is like to grow to great poverty and scarceness.<sup>32</sup>

It was at this moment that one can speak of the birth of the proletariat as a class—a term derived appropriately enough from a Latin word for “those who produce offspring,” since in Rome, the poorest citizens who did not have enough wealth to tax were useful to the government only by producing sons who could be drafted into the army.

Stubbes's *Anatomic of Abuses* might be considered the very manifesto of the Puritan “Reformation of Manners,” as they called it, which was very much a middle-class vision, with an equally jaundiced view of both the carnality of court life, and the “heathenish rioting” of popular entertainment. It also shows it's impossible to understand debates about Puritanism and the origins of the Protestant work ethic without understanding this larger context of the decline of life-cycle service and creation of a proletariat. English Calvinists (actually they were only called “Puritans” by those who disliked them) tended to be drawn from the class of master

craftsmen and “improving” farmers who were employing this newly created proletariat, and their “Reformation of Manners” took special aim at popular festivals, gaming, drinking, “and all the annual rites of misrule when youth temporarily inverted the social order.”<sup>33</sup> The Puritan ideal was for all such “masterless men” to be rounded up, and placed under the stern discipline of a pious household whose patriarch could direct them in work and prayer. But this was just the first of a long history of attempts to reform the manners of the lower classes that has followed, from Victorian workhouses where the poor were taught proper time discipline, to welfare and similar government programs today.

Why, starting in the sixteenth century, did the middle classes suddenly develop such an interest in reforming the moral comportment of the poor—a subject they had not previously found of much interest one way or the other? This has always been something of a historical mystery. In the context of life-cycle service, though, it actually makes perfect sense. The poor were seen as frustrated adolescents. Work—and specifically, paid labor under the eye of a master—had traditionally been the means by which such adolescents learned how to be proper, disciplined, self-contained adults. While in practical terms Puritans and other pious reformers could no longer promise much to the poor—certainly not adulthood as it used to be conceived, as freedom from the need to work under the orders of others—they substituted charity, discipline, and a renewed infusion of theology. Work, they taught, was both punishment and redemption. Work was self-mortification and as such had value in itself, even beyond the wealth it produced, which was merely a sign of God’s favor (and not to be enjoyed too much.)<sup>34</sup>

After the industrial revolution, the celebration of work was taken up with renewed vigor by the Methodists, but even more, if anything, in educated middle-class circles that didn’t see themselves as particularly religious. Perhaps its greatest advocate was Thomas Carlyle, an enormously popular essayist, who, concerned with the decline of morality in the new Age of Manmon, proposed what he called a Gospel of Work. Carlyle insisted that labor should not be viewed as a way to satisfy material needs, but as the essence of life itself; God had intentionally created the world

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?  
unfinished so as to allow humans the opportunity to complete His work through labor:

A man perfects himself by working . . . Consider how, even in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work! Doubt, Despair, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like hells dogs lie beleaguering the soul of the poor day-worker, as of every man; but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and all these are stilled, all these shrink murmuring far off into their caves. The man is now a man. The blessed glow of Labour in him, is it not purifying fire, wherein all poison is burnt up?

All true Work is sacred; in all true Work, were it but true hand-labour, there is something of divineness. . . . Oh brother, if this is not “worship,” then I say, the more the pity for worship; for this is the noblest thing yet discovered under God’s sky. Who art thou that complainest of thy life of toil? Complain not. Look up, my wearied brother; see thy fellow Workmen there, in God’s Eternity, sacred Band of the Immortals, celestial Bodyguard of the Empire of Mankind.<sup>35</sup>

Carlyle was ultimately led to the conclusion so many reach today: that if work is noble, then the most noble work should *not* be compensated, since it is obscene to put a price on something of such absolute value (“the ‘wages’ of every noble Work do yet lie in Heaven or else nowhere”)<sup>36</sup>—though he was generous enough to allow that the poor did need to be afforded “fair wages” in order to obtain the means to live.

Such arguments were immensely popular in middle-class circles. Unsurprisingly, the worker’s movement beginning to form in Europe around Carlyle’s time was less impressed. Most workers involved in Luddism, Chartistism, Ricardian Socialism, and the various early strains of English radicalism would probably have agreed there was something divine in work, but that divine quality lay not in its effect on the soul and body—as laborers, they knew better than that—but that it was the source of wealth; everything that made rich and powerful people rich and pow-

ertful was, in fact, created by the efforts of the poor. Adam Smith and David Ricardo, the founders of British economic science, had embraced the labor theory of value—as did many of the new industrialists, since it allowed them to distinguish themselves from the landed gentry, whom they represented as mere idle consumers—but the theory was almost instantly taken up by Socialists and labor organizers and turned against the industrialists themselves. Before long economists began seeking for alternatives on explicitly political grounds. Already in 1832—that is, thirty-five years before the appearance of Marx's *Capital*—we encounter warnings like the following: “That labor is the sole source of wealth seems to be a doctrine as dangerous as it is false, as it unhappily affords a handle to those who would represent all property as belonging to the working classes, and the share which is received by others as a robbery or fraud upon them.”<sup>37</sup>

By the 1830s, many were, in fact, proclaiming exactly that. It is important to emphasize just how universally accepted the labor theory of value became in the generations immediately following the industrial revolution—even before the dissemination of Marx's works, which gave such arguments a renewed energy and a more sophisticated theoretical language. It was particularly powerful in Britain's American colonies. The mechanics and tradesmen who became the foot soldiers of the American War of Independence represented themselves as producers of the wealth that they saw the British crown as looting, and after the Revolution, many turned the same language against would-be capitalists. “The solid rock on which their idea of the good society rested,” as one historian put it, “was that labor created all wealth.”<sup>38</sup> The word “capitalist” at that time was largely a term of abuse. When US President Abraham Lincoln delivered his first annual message to Congress in 1861, for instance, he included the following lines, which, radical though they seem to a contemporary ear, where really just a reflection of the common sense of the time:<sup>39</sup> “Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”

Still, Lincoln went on to insist, what made the United States different

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

from Europe, indeed what made its democracy possible, was that it lacked a permanent population of wage laborers:

“There is not of necessity any such thing as the free hired laborer being fixed to that condition for life. Many independent men everywhere in these States a few years back in their lives were hired laborers. The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages a while, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.”

In other words, even though he didn't put it quite this way, Lincoln argued that, owing to America's rapid economic and territorial expansion, it was possible there to maintain something like the old medieval system, in which everyone started out working for others, then used the proceeds of wage labor to set up shop, or buy a farm (on land seized from its indigenous inhabitants), and then eventually themselves play the capitalist, employing young people as laborers in their own right.

This was definitely the ideal in pre-Civil War America—though Lincoln was from Illinois, not too far from the frontier; workingmen's associations in the old cities of the Eastern Seaboard were already taking issue with arguments like this.<sup>40</sup> What's significant here is that Lincoln felt he had to accept the labor theory of value as the framework of debate. Everyone did. This remained the case at least until the end of the century. It was true even along the Western frontier, where one might have imagined European-style class tensions were least likely to flare up. In 1880 a Protestant “home missionary” who had spent some years traveling along the Western frontier reported that: “You can hardly find a group of ranchmen or miners from Colorado to the Pacific who will not have on their tongues end the labor slang of Denis Kearney, the infidel ribaldry of [atheist pamphleteer] Robert Ingersoll, the Socialistic theories of Karl Marx.”<sup>41</sup>

Certainly a detail left out of every cowboy movie I ever saw! (The notable exception being *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which does indeed begin with a scene where John Huston, as a miner, explains the labor theory of value to Humphrey Bogart.)<sup>42</sup>

**concerning the key flaw in the labor theory of value as it became popular in the nineteenth century, and how the owners of capital exploited that flaw**

Virtually any form of labor can be described as “caring” in the sense that it results in activities that help meet the needs of others.

—Nancy Folbre

I turned to America for a reason. The United States plays a key role in our story. Nowhere was the principle that all wealth derives from labor more universally accepted as ordinary common sense, yet nowhere, too, was the counterattack against this common sense so calculated, so sustained, and so ultimately effective. By the early decades of the twentieth century, when the first cowboy movies were being made, this work was largely complete, and the idea that ranch hands had once been avid readers of Marx would have seemed as ridiculous as it would to most Americans today. Even more important, this counteroffensive laid the groundwork for the apparently bizarre attitudes toward work, largely emanating from North America, that we can still observe spreading across the world, with pernicious results.

Lincoln was no doubt overstating his case, but it is nonetheless true that in the “Artisans Republic” that existed before the Civil War, something roughly like the older tradition of life-cycle service did endure—with the notable difference that most hired laborers were not called “servants” and did not live in their employers’ homes. Politicians did see this as the ideal and legislated accordingly. Would-be capitalists were not granted the right to create limited-liability corporations unless they could prove doing so would constitute a clear and incontestable “public benefit” (in other words, the notion of social value not only existed but was inscribed in law)—this usually meant, in practice, only if they were proposing to dig a canal or build a railroad.<sup>43</sup> Apart from the atheists along the frontier, much of this anticapitalist feeling was justified on religious grounds; popular Protestantism, drawing on its Puritan roots, not only celebrated work, but embraced the belief that, as my fellow anthropologists Dimitra Doukas and Paul Durrenberger have

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

put it, “work was a sacred duty and a claim to moral and political superiority over the idle rich”—a more explicitly religious version of Carlyle’s “gospel of work” (most historians simply call it “producerism”), which insisted that work was both a value in itself *and* the only real producer of value.

In the immediate wake of the Civil War all this began to change with the first stirrings of large-scale bureaucratic, corporate capitalism. The “Robber Barons,” as the new tycoons came to be called, were at first met (as the name given them implies) with extraordinary hostility. But by the 1890s they embarked on an intellectual counteroffensive, proposing what Doukas and Durrenberger call, after an essay by Andrew Carnegie, a “Gospel of Wealth”:

The fledgling corporate giants, their bankers, and their political allies objected to producerist moral claims and, starting in the 1890s, reached out with a new ideology that claimed, to the contrary, that capital, not labor, creates wealth and prosperity. Powerful coalitions of corporate interests made concerted efforts to transform the message of schools, universities, churches, and civic groups, claiming that “business had solved the fundamental ethical and political problems of industrial society.”

Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie was a leader of this cultural campaign. To the masses, Carnegie argued for what we’d now call consumerism: the productivity of “concentrated” capital, under the wise stewardship of the fit, would so lower the price of commodities that the workers of tomorrow would live as well as the kings of the past. To the elite, he argued that coddling the poor with high wages was not good for “the race.”<sup>44</sup>

The promulgation of consumerism also coincided with the beginnings of the managerial revolution, which was, especially at first, largely an attack on popular knowledge. Where once hoopers and wainwrights and seamstresses saw themselves as heirs to a proud tradition, each with its secret knowledge, the new bureaucratically organized corporations and their “scientific management” sought as far as possible to literally turn workers into extensions of the machinery, their every move predetermined by someone else.

The real question to be asked here, it seems to me, is: Why was this campaign so successful? Because it cannot be denied that, within a generation, “producerism” had given way to “consumerism,” the “source of status,” as Harry Braverman put it, was “no longer the ability to make things but simply the ability to purchase them,”<sup>45</sup> and the labor theory of value—which had, meanwhile, been knocked out of economic theory by the “marginal revolution”—had so fallen away from popular common sense that nowadays, only graduate students or small circles of revolutionary Marxist theorists are likely to have heard of it. Nowadays, if one speaks of “wealth producers,” people will automatically assume one is referring not to workers but to capitalists.

This was a monumental shift in popular consciousness. What made it possible? It seems to me that the main reason lies in a flaw in the original labor theory of value itself. This was its focus on “production”—a concept which, as earlier noted, is basically theological, and bears in it a profound patriarchal bias. Even in the Middle Ages, the Christian God was seen as a craftsman and an artificer,<sup>46</sup> and human work—which was always conceived primarily as male work—as a matter of making and building things, or perhaps coaxing them from the soil, while for women “labor” was seen primarily and emblematically as a matter of producing babies. Most real women’s labor disappeared from the conversation. Obviously, the startling, unprecedented increases in productivity that followed in the wake of the industrial revolution played a role here, too: they could only have had led to arguments about the relative importance of machines, and the people operating them, and indeed those arguments remained at the center of political and economic debate throughout the nineteenth century.

But even when it comes to factory labor, there is something of a darker story. The initial instinct of most early factory owners was not to employ men in the mills at all, but women and children: the latter were, after all, considered more tractable, and women especially, more inured to monotonous, repetitive work. The results were often brutal and horrific. The situation also left traditional male craftsmen in a particularly distressing situation; not only were they thrown out of work by the new factories, their wives and children, who used to work under their direction,

#### Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

were now the breadwinners. This was clearly a factor in the early wave of machine-breaking during the Napoleonic Wars that came to be known as Luddism, and a key element in allying that rebellion seems to have been a tacit social compromise whereby it came to be understood that it would be primarily adult men who would be employed in factory work. This, and the fact that for the next century or so labor organizing tended to focus on factory workers (partly simply because they were the easiest to organize), led to the situation we have now, where simply invoking the term “working class” instantly draws up images of men in overalls toiling on production lines, and it’s common to hear otherwise intelligent middle-class intellectuals suggest that, with the decline of factory work, the working class in, say, Britain or America no longer exists—as if it were actually ingeniously constructed androids that were driving their buses, trimming their hedges, installing their cables, or changing their grandparents’ bedpans.

In fact, there was never a time most workers worked in factories. Even in the days of Karl Marx, or Charles Dickens, working-class neighborhoods housed far more maids, bootblacks, dustmen, cooks, nurses, cabbies, schoolteachers, prostitutes, caretakers, and costermongers than employees in coal mines, textile mills, or iron foundries. Are these former jobs “productive”? In what sense and for whom? Who “produces” a soufflé? It’s because of these ambiguities that such issues are typically brushed aside when people are arguing about value; but doing so blinds us to the reality that most working-class labor, whether carried out by men or women, actually more resembles what we archetypically think of as women’s work, looking after people, seeing to their wants and needs, explaining, reassuring, anticipating what the boss wants or is thinking, not to mention caring for, monitoring, and maintaining plants, animals, machines, and other objects, than it involves hammering, carving, hoisting, or harvesting things.

This blindness has consequences. Let me give an illustration. In 2014 there was a transit strike when London’s mayor threatened to close perhaps a hundred London Underground ticket offices, leaving only machines. This sparked an online debate among certain local Marxists about whether the workers threatened with redundancy had “bullshit jobs”—the logic put forward by some being that, either a job produced value for

capitalism, which the capitalists clearly no longer thought these jobs did, or else it served a social function that would be necessary even if capitalism did not exist, which clearly these did not since under full communism, transport would be free. Needless to say I was drawn in. Asked to respond, I eventually referred my interlocutors to a circular put out by the strikers themselves, called "Advice to Passengers Using the Future London Underground." It included lines like these:

Please ensure you are thoroughly familiar with London Underground's 11 lines and 270 stations before traveling . . . Please ensure that there are no delays in your journey, or any accidents, emergencies, incidents, or evacuations. Please do not be disabled. Or poor. Or new to London. Please avoid being too young or too old. Please do not be harassed or assaulted while traveling. Please do not lose your property or your children. Please do not require assistance in any way.

It apparently never having occurred to many advocates of proletarian revolution to investigate what it is that transit workers actually did, they appear to have lapsed into something very like the right-wing tabloid stereotype of city employees as overpaid idlers lounging about on the public dime.

What tube workers actually do, then, is something much closer to what feminists have termed "caring labor." It has more in common with a nurse's work than a bricklayer's. It's just that, in the same way as women's unpaid caring labor is made to disappear from our accounts of "the economy," so are the caring aspects of other working-class jobs made to disappear as well. One might make a case, perhaps, that British working-class traditions of caring labor do make themselves known in popular culture, which is largely a working-class product, with all the characteristic gestures, manners, and cadences by which working-class people cheer one another up reflected in British music, British comedy, and British children's literature. But it is not recognized as value-creating labor in itself.

"Caring labor" is generally seen as work directed at other people, and it always involves a certain labor of interpretation, empathy, and understanding. To some degree, one might argue that this is not really work at

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

all, it's just life, or life lived properly—humans are naturally empathetic creatures; and to communicate with one another at all, we must constantly cast ourselves imaginatively into each other's shoes and try to understand what others are thinking and feeling, which usually means caring about them at least a little—but it very much becomes work when all the empathy and imaginative identification is on one side. The key to caring labor as a commodity is not that some people care but that others don't; that those paying for "services" (note how the old feudal term is still retained) feel no need to engage in interpretive labor themselves. This is even true of a bricklayer, if that bricklayer is working for someone else. Underlings have to constantly monitor what the boss is thinking; the boss doesn't have to care. That, in turn, is one reason, I believe, why psychological studies regularly find that people of working-class background are more accurate at reading other people's feelings, and more empathetic and caring, than those of middle-class, let alone wealthy, backgrounds.<sup>47</sup> To some degree, the skill at reading others' emotions is just an effect of what working-class work actually consists of: rich people don't have to learn how to do interpretive labor nearly as well because they can hire other people to do it for them. Those hirelings, on the other hand, who have to develop a habit of understanding other's points of view, will also tend to care about them.<sup>48</sup>

By this token, as many feminist economists have pointed out, all labor can be seen as caring labor, since—to turn to an example from the beginning of the chapter—even if one builds a bridge, it's ultimately because one cares about people who might wish to cross the river. As the examples I cited at the time make clear, people do really think in these terms when they reflect on the "social value" of their jobs.<sup>49</sup>

To think of labor as valuable primarily because it is "productive," and productive labor as typified by the factory worker, effecting that magic transformation by which cars or teabags or pharmaceutical products are "produced" out of factories through the same painful but ultimately mysterious "labor" by which women are seen to produce babies, allows one to make all this disappear. It also makes it maximally easy for the factory owner to insist that no, actually, workers are really no different from the machines they operate. Clearly, the growth of what came to be called "sci-

entific management” made this easier; but it would never have been possible had the paradigmatic example of “worker” in the popular imagination been a cook, a gardener, or a masseuse.

■ ■ ■

Most economists nowadays see the labor theory of value as a curiosity from the formative days of the discipline; and it’s probably true that, if one’s primary interest is to understand patterns of price formation, there are better tools available. But for the worker’s movement—and arguably, for revolutionaries like Karl Marx—that was never the real point. The real point is philosophical. It is a recognition that the world we inhabit is something we made, collectively, as a society, and therefore, that we could also have made differently. This is true of almost any physical object likely to be within reach of us at any given moment. Every one was grown or manufactured by someone on the basis of what someone imagined we might be like, and what they thought we might want or need. It’s even more true of abstractions like “capitalism,” “society,” or “the government.” They only exist because we produce them every day. John Holloway, perhaps the most poetic of contemporary Marxists, once proposed to write a book entitled *Stop Making Capitalism*.<sup>50</sup> After all, he noted, even though we all act as if capitalism is some kind of behemoth towering over us, it’s really just something we produce. Every morning we wake up and re-create capitalism. If one morning we woke up and all decided to create something else, then there wouldn’t be capitalism anymore. There would be something else.

One might even say that this is the core question—perhaps ultimately the only question—of all social theory and all revolutionary thought. Together we create the world we inhabit. Yet if any one of us tried to imagine a world we’d like to live in, who would come up with one exactly like the one that currently exists? We can all imagine a better world. Why can’t we just create one? Why does it seem so inconceivable to just stop making capitalism? Or government? Or at the very least bad service providers and annoying bureaucratic red tape?

Viewing work as production allows us to ask such questions. This

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

couldn’t be more important. It’s not clear, however, if it gives us the means to answer them. It strikes me that recognizing that a great deal of work is not strictly speaking productive but caring, and that there is always a caring aspect even to the most apparently impersonal work, does suggest one reason why it’s so difficult to simply create a different society with a different set of rules. Even if we don’t like what the world looks like, the fact remains that the conscious aim of most of our actions, productive or otherwise, is to do well by others; often, very specific others. Our actions are caught up in relations of caring. But most caring relations require we leave the world more or less as we found it. In the same way that teenage idealists regularly abandon their dreams of creating a better world and come to accept the compromises of adult life at precisely the moment they marry and have children, caring for others, especially over the long term, requires maintaining a world that’s relatively predictable as the grounds on which caring can take place. One cannot save to ensure a college education for one’s children unless one is sure in twenty years there will still be colleges—or for that matter, money. And that, in turn, means that love for others—people, animals, landscapes—regularly requires the maintenance of institutional structures one might otherwise despise.

**how, over the course of the twentieth century, work came to be increasingly valued primarily as a form of discipline and self-sacrifice**

We keep inventing jobs because of this false idea that everyone has to be employed at some sort of drudgery because, according to Malhusian Darwinian theory, he must justify his right to exist.

—Buckminster Fuller

However this may be, the “Gospel of Wealth” counteroffensive has been successful, and the captains of industry, first in America, then increasingly everywhere, have been able to convince the public that they, and not those they employ, are the real creators of prosperity. Their very success,

however, created an inevitable problem. How are workers supposed to find meaning and purpose in jobs where they are effectively being turned into robots? Where they are actually being *told* they are little better than robots, even as at the same time they are increasingly expected to organize their lives around their work?

The obvious answer is to fall back on the old idea that work forms character; and this is precisely what seems to have happened. One could call it a revival of Puritanism, but as we've seen this idea goes much further back: to a fusion of the Christian doctrine of the curse of Adam with the Northern European notion that paid labor under a master's discipline is the only way to become a genuine adult. This history made it very easy to encourage workers to see their work not so much as wealth-creation, or helping others, or at least not primarily so, but as self-abnegation, a kind of secular hair-shirt, a sacrifice of joy and pleasure that allows us to become an adult worthy of our consumerist toys.

A great deal of contemporary research has confirmed this assessment. True, people in Europe or America have not historically seen their avocation as what should mark them in the eyes of eternity. Visit a graveyard; you will search in vain for a tombstone inscribed with the words "steam-fitter," "executive vice president," "park ranger," or "clerk." In death, the essence of a soul's being on earth is seen as marked by the love they felt for, and received from, their husbands, wives, and children, or sometimes also by what military unit they served with in time of war. These are all things which involve both intense emotional commitment, and the giving and taking of life. While alive, in contrast, the first question anyone was likely to have asked on meeting any of those people was, "What do you do for a living?"

This continues to be the case. The fact that it does remains something of a stubborn paradox because the "Gospel of Wealth" and subsequent rise of consumerism was supposed to have changed all that. No longer were we to think of ourselves as expressing our being through what we produced, but rather, through what we consumed. What sorts of clothes we wear, music we listen to, sports teams we follow. Especially since the seventies, everyone has been expected to sort themselves out into tribal

#### Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

subcultures as sci-fi geeks, dog lovers, paintball enthusiasts, stoners, or supporters of the Chicago Bulls or Manchester United but definitely not as longshoremen or Catastrophe Risk Analysts. And it is true that on one level, most of us do prefer to think of ourselves as being defined by anything other than our jobs.<sup>51</sup> Yet somehow, paradoxically, people regularly report that work is what gives the ultimate meaning to their lives, and that unemployment has devastating psychological effects.

There have been an enormous number of surveys, studies, inquests, and ethnographies of work over the course of the twentieth century. Work about work has become a kind of minor industry in its own right. The conclusions reached by this body of research—and what follows appears to hold true, with only minor variations, for both blue- and white-collar workers virtually anywhere in the world—might be summarized as follows:

1. Most people's sense of dignity and self-worth is caught up in working for a living.
2. Most people hate their jobs.

We might refer to this as "the paradox of modern work." The entire discipline of the sociology of work, not to mention industrial relations, has largely been concerned with trying to understand how both these things can be true at the same time. As two paragons of the field, Al Gini and Terry Sullivan, put it in 1987:

In well over a hundred studies in the last twenty-five years, workers have regularly depicted their jobs as physically exhausting, boring, psychologically diminishing or personally humiliating and unimportant.

[But at the same time] they want to work because they are aware at some level that work plays a crucial and perhaps unparalleled psychological role in the formation of human character. Work is not just a course of livelihood, it is also one of the most significant contributing factors to an inner life . . . To be denied work is to be denied far more than the things that work can buy; it is to be denied the ability to define and respect one's self.<sup>52</sup>

After many years of research on the topic, Gini finally came to the conclusion that work was coming to be considered less and less a means to an end—that is, a way of obtaining resources and experiences that make it possible to pursue projects (as I've put it, values other than the economic: family, politics, community, culture, religion)—and more and more as an end in itself. Yet at the same time it was an end in itself that most people found harmful, degrading, and oppressive.

How to reconcile these two observations? One way might be to return to the arguments I made in chapter 3 and to acknowledge that human beings essentially *are* a set of purposes, so that without any sense of purpose, we would barely be said to exist at all. There is surely truth in this. In some sense we are all in the situation of the inmate who prefers working in the prison laundry to sitting in the cell watching TV all day. But one possibility the sociologists generally overlook is that, if work is a form of self-sacrifice or self-abnegation, then the very awfulness of modern work *is* what makes it possible to see it as an end in itself. We have returned to Carlyle: work *should* be painful, the misery of the job is itself what “forms character.”

Workers, in other words, gain feelings of dignity and self-worth *because* they hate their jobs.

This is the attitude that, as Clement observed, seems to remain in the air all around us, implicit in office small-talk. “The pressure to value ourselves and others on the basis of how hard we work at something we’d rather not be doing . . . If you’re not destroying your mind and body *via* paid work, you’re not living right.” It is, to be sure, more common among middle-class office workers like Clement than among migrant farm workers, parking lot attendants, or short-order chefs. But even in working-class environments, the attitude can be observed through its negation, since even those who do not feel they have to validate their existence, on a day-to-day basis, by boasting how overworked they are will nonetheless agree that those who avoid work entirely should probably drop dead.

In America, stereotypes of the lazy and undeserving poor have long been tied up in racism: generations of immigrants learned what it means to be a “hardworking American” by being taught to despise the imagined

Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

indiscipline of the descendants of slaves, just as Japanese workers were taught to disdain Koreans, or English workers, Irish.<sup>53</sup> Nowadays mainstream media is usually obliged to be more subtle, but there is an endless drumbeat of vilification of the poor, the unemployed, and especially those on public relief—and most people do seem to accept the basic logic of the contemporary moralists: that society is besieged by those who want something for nothing, that the poor are largely poor because they lack the will and discipline to work, that only those who do or have worked harder than they’d like to at something they would rather not be doing, preferably under a harsh taskmaster, deserve respect and consideration from their fellow citizens. As a result, the sadomasochistic element in work described in chapter 4, rather than being an ugly, if predictable, side effect to top-down chains of command in the workplace, has actually become central to what validates work itself. Suffering has become a badge of economic citizenship. It’s not that much different than a home address. Without it, you have no right to make any other claim.

We have come full circle, then, to the situation with which we began; but at least now we can understand it in its full historical context. Bullshit jobs proliferate today in large part because of the peculiar nature of managerial feudalism that has come to dominate wealthy economies—but to an increasing degree, all economies. They cause misery because human happiness is always caught up in a sense of having effects on the world; a feeling which most people, when they speak of their work, express through a language of social value. Yet at the same time they are aware that the greater the social value produced by a job, the less one is likely to be paid to do it. Like Annie, they are faced with the choice between doing useful and important work like taking care of children but being effectively told that the gratification of helping others should be its own reward, and it’s up to them to figure out how to pay their bills, or accepting pointless and degrading work that destroys their mind and body for no particular reason, other than a widespread feeling that if one does not engage in labor that destroys the mind and body, whether or not there is a reason to be doing it, one does not deserve to live.

Perhaps we should leave the last word to Carlyle, who includes in his

celebration of work one chapter that consists entirely of a peculiar diatribe against happiness. Here he was responding to the utilitarian doctrines of men like Jeremy Bentham, who had proposed that human pleasure could be precisely quantified, and therefore all morality reduced to calculating what would provide “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”<sup>54</sup> Happiness, Carlyle objected, is an ignoble concept. “The only happiness a brave man ever troubled himself with asking much about was, happiness enough to get his work done. It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man that he cannot work, that he cannot get his destiny as man fulfilled.”<sup>55</sup>

Bentham and the Utilitarians, who saw no purpose of human life other than the pursuit of pleasure, can be seen as the philosophical ancestors of modern consumerism, which is still justified by an economic theory of “utility.” But Carlyle’s perspective isn’t really the negation of Bentham’s; or if it is, then only in the dialectical sense, where two apparent opposites remain permanently at war with one another, their advocates unaware that in their struggle, they constitute a higher unity which would be impossible without both. The belief that what ultimately motivates human beings has always been, and must always be, the pursuit of wealth, power, comforts, and pleasure, has always and must always be complemented by a doctrine of work as self-sacrifice, as valuable precisely *because* it is the place of misery, sadness, emptiness, and despair. As Carlyle put it:

“All work, even cotton-spinning, is noble; work is alone noble, be that here said and asserted once more. And in like manner too, all dignity is painful. A life of ease is not for any man . . . Our highest religion is named the Worship of Sorrow. For the son of man there is no noble crown, well worn or even ill worn, but there is a crown of thorns!”<sup>56</sup>

## Chapter 7

### What Are the Political Effects of Bullshit Jobs, and Is There Anything That Can Be Done About This Situation?

I believe that this instinct to perpetuate useless work is, at bottom, simply fear of the mob. The mob (the thought runs) are such low animals that they would be dangerous if they had leisure; it is safer to keep them too busy to think.

—George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*

If someone had designed a work regime perfectly suited to maintaining the power of finance capital, it’s hard to see how they could have done a better job. Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorized stratum of the, universally reviled, unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing, in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc.)—and particularly its financial avatars—but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value.

—from “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs”

## Notes

### Preface: On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

1. I've got a lot of push-back about the actuaries, and now think I was being unfair to them. Some actuarial work does make a difference. I'm still convinced the rest could disappear with no negative consequences.
2. David Graeber, "The Modern Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs," *Canberra (Australia) Times* online, last modified September 3, 2013, [www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/the-modern-phenomenon-of-bullshit-jobs-20130831-2sv3j.html](http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/the-modern-phenomenon-of-bullshit-jobs-20130831-2sv3j.html).
3. To my knowledge, only one book has ever been written on the subject of bullshit jobs, *Boulots de Merde!*, by Paris-based journalists Julien Brygo and Olivier Cyran (2015)—and the authors told me it was directly inspired by my article. It's a good book but covers a rather different range of questions than my own.

### Chapter 1: What Is a Bullshit Job?

1. "Bullshit Jobs," LiquidLegends, [www.liquidlegends.net/forum/general/460469-bullshit-jobs?page=3](http://www.liquidlegends.net/forum/general/460469-bullshit-jobs?page=3), last modified October 1, 2014.
2. "Spanish Civil Servant Skips Work for 6 Years to Study Spinoza," Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), last modified February 26, 2016, [www.jta.org](http://www.jta.org)

script; some useless executives must have intervened to change it. “You see there are usually dozens of these guys hovering around any production and every one of them will feel they have to jump in and change around at least one line—or else what’s the excuse for their even being there?”

32. Joseph Campbell was an historian of religion whose book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* argued that all hero myths have the same basic plot. The book was an enormous influence on George Lucas in developing the plots for the original Star Wars trilogy. While Campbell’s argument for a universal archetypal hero narrative is now considered at best something of an entertaining curio by scholars of epic or heroic myth, the analysis he offers probably would be valid now for Hollywood movies, since almost all screenwriters and producers are familiar with the book and attempt to use it in designing plots.

33. Holly Elise, “Billions Lost in Bids to Secure EU Research Funding,” Times Higher Education Supplement, October 6, 2016, accessed June 23, 2017. [www.timeshighereducation.com/news/billions-lost-in-bids-to-secure-european-union-research-funding#survey-answer](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/billions-lost-in-bids-to-secure-european-union-research-funding#survey-answer).
34. “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit,” *Baffler*, no. 19 (Spring 2012): 66–84, with an expanded version in Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 105–148.
35. These titles were, in fact, produced by using the random bullshit job title generator at the website BullShit Job, [www.bullshitjob.com/title](http://www.bullshitjob.com/title).
36. The argument of this paragraph is a very abbreviated version of the argument of the introductory essay in Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 33–44.

### Chapter 6: Why Do We as a Society Not Object to the Growth of Pointless Employment?

1. For instance, at the height of the Greek debt crisis, public opinion in Germany was almost unanimous that Greek debt should not be forgiven because Greek workers were entitled and lazy. This was countered by statistics showing Greek workers actually put in longer hours than German ones; which, in turn, was countered by the argument that this might be true on paper but Greek workers slacked off on the job. At no point did anyone suggest that German workers were working too hard, creating an overproduction problem that could only be solved by lending foreign countries

money to be able to import their goods, let alone that the Greek ability to enjoy life was in any way admirable or a model for others. To take another example, when, in the 1990s, the French Socialist Party ran on the platform of a thirty-five-hour workweek, I remember being struck by the fact that no American news source I was able to find that deigned to mention this fact suggested that reducing working hours might be seen as, let alone be, good in itself, but only presented it as a tactic for reducing unemployment. In other words, allowing people to work less could only be treated as a social good if it allowed more people to be working.

2. Technically the measure is “marginal utility,” the degree to which the consumer finds an additional unit of the good useful in this way; hence, if one already has three bars of soap stockpiled in one’s house, or for that matter three houses, how much additional utility is added by a fourth. For the best critique of marginal utility as a theory of consumer preference, see Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics*, 44–47.
3. And I should note just for the sake of clarity that most of those who embrace the labor theory of value do not make this argument; some value comes from nature, as Marx himself, the most famous advocate of the labor theory of value, did occasionally point out.
4. Of course, this is exactly the position also taken by the most radical free market libertarians.
5. Since reproduction is technically “the production of production,” then maintaining the physical infrastructure or other elements exploited by capitalism would also count.
6. Similarly, in the domain of values, when market comparisons can be made, they are assumed to be somehow incidental, not a reflection of the object’s true worth. No one would actually insist that a Damien Hirst shark is worth, say, two hundred thousand Vipassana meditation retreats, or a Vipassana retreat, one hundred fudge sundaes. It just happens to come out that way.
7. Civil servants in particular would favor the term “help” over “value,” though its use was by no means limited to civil servants.
8. See Graeber 2013:84–87.
9. I’m assuming that there is no genre of music, art, etc., that doesn’t cause more happiness for some than it annoys others. I could be wrong.
10. Some Belgian friends told me the net effects were extremely beneficial, as almost all major parties were committed to the then European-wide con-

- sensus about the need for austerity, but the lack of a government in Belgium at that critical moment meant reforms were not carried out, and the Belgian economy ended up growing substantially faster than its neighbors. It's also worth noting that Belgium does have seven different regional governments that were unaffected.
11. Caitlin Huston, "Uber IPO Prospects May Be Helped by Resignation of CEO Travis Kalanick," *MarketWatch*, last modified June 22, 2017, [www.marketwatch.com/story/uber-ipo-prospects-may-be-helped-by-resignation-of-ceo-travis-kalanick-2017-06-21](http://www.marketwatch.com/story/uber-ipo-prospects-may-be-helped-by-resignation-of-ceo-travis-kalanick-2017-06-21).
  12. Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: The Case for Universal Basic Income, Open Borders, and a 15-Hour Workweek* (New York: Little, Brown, 2017).  
Even police strikes rarely have the anticipated effects. In December 2015 New York police carried out a work stoppage for all but "urgent" police business; there was no effect on crime rate, but city revenues plummeted owing to the lack of fines for traffic violation and similar infractions. The complete disappearance of police in a major city, either owing to a full strike, or in one documented case in Amsterdam during World War II, mass arrest by German occupiers, tends to lead to a rise in property crime like burglary, but leave violent crime unaffected. In rural areas with some tradition of self-governance, like the part of Madagascar where I lived between 1989 and 1991, the withdrawal of police due to IMF austerity measures made almost no difference at all—when I visited again twenty years later people were almost universally convinced that violent crime had increased sharply since the police had returned.
  13. Benjamin B. Lockwood, Charles G. Nathanson, and E. Glen Weyl, "Taxation and the Allocation of Talent," *Journal of Political Economy* 125, no. 5 (October 2017): 1635–82, [www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/693393](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/693393). The reference to *Marketiers* is however taken from an earlier (2012) version of the same paper, with the same title, published at [https://eighthousand-hours-wp-production.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/12/TaxationAndTheAllocationOfTalent\\_preview.pdf](https://eighthousand-hours-wp-production.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/12/TaxationAndTheAllocationOfTalent_preview.pdf), 16.
  14. Ellis Lawlor, Helen Kersley, and Susan Steed, *A Bit Rich: Calculating the Value to Society of Different Professions* (London: New Economics Foundation, 2009), [http://b3cdn.net/FOUNDATION/8c16eabdbd83ca79\\_gjimb0fzh.pdf](http://b3cdn.net/FOUNDATION/8c16eabdbd83ca79_gjimb0fzh.pdf). I have standardized and averaged out some of the salaries, which the original report gave sometimes as hourly wages, sometime as yearly salaries, but in the latter case, usually as ranges.
  15. See, for instance, Gordon B. Lindsay, Ray M. Merrill, and Riley J. Hedin, "The Contribution of Public Health and Improved Social Conditions to Increased Life Expectancy: An Analysis of Public Awareness," *Journal of Community Medicine & Health Education* 4 (2014): 311–17, which contrasts the received scientific understanding of such matters with popular perception, which assumes improvements are almost entirely due to doctors. <https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/the-contribution-of-public-health-and-improved-social-conditions-to-increased-life-expectancy-an-analysis-of-public-awareness-2161-0711-4-311.php?aid=35861>.
  16. Another exception would be highly paid athletes or entertainers. Many get paid so much they are often held out as avatars of bullshit, but I would tend to disagree. If such people succeed in bringing happiness or excitement into others' lives, why not? Obviously, questions could be raised about how much more they are responsible for that happiness and excitement than the teams surrounding them, support staff, and the like, most of whom are paid far less.
  17. If it had anything to do with the dangers of the job, on the other hand, the highest-paid workers in America would be either loggers or fishermen, and in Britain, farmers.
  18. One (in my opinion rather obtuse) economist and blogger named Alex Tabarrok wrote a response to my original bullshit jobs piece that claimed my point about the inverse relation of pay and social benefit was "a great example of faulty economic reasoning," since, he said, I was simply talking about the diamonds-water paradox (which goes back to the Middle Ages, and Adam Smith famously used to propose a distinction between use value and exchange value), that he said had been "solved" a century ago with the introduction of the concept of marginal utility. Actually, my impression was that it had been "solved" at least as far back as Galileo, but the bizarre thing about his claim is that I hadn't engaged in economic reasoning at all, since I didn't propose any explanation for the inverse relation, but just pointed out that it exists (<http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2013/10/bs-jobs-and-bs-economics.html>). How can simply pointing out a fact be faulty reasoning? The example of the relative supply of nurses is drawn from Peter Frases's reply to that piece ([www.jacobinmag.com/2013/10/the-ethic-of-marginal-value/](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/10/the-ethic-of-marginal-value/)); for the glut of lawyers, see, for instance, L. M. Sixel, "A Glut of Lawyers Dims Job Prospects for Many," *Houston Chronicle* online, last modified March 25, 2016, <http://wtchronicle.com/business/article/A-glut-of-lawyers-dims-job-prospects-for-many-7099998.php>.

- I might note that Tabarrok's ploy—take a simple empirical observation and pretend it's an economic argument, and then "refute" it—seems to be common among bad economic bloggers: I once saw a simple observation I had made that kindhearted merchants will sometimes give poor customers a discount on necessities characterized as an attempted "refutation" of economic theory, which the blogger then went on to disprove—as if economists really believed no merchant ever did anything out of kindness!
19. I first encountered the argument in G. A. Cohen, "Back to Socialist Basics," *New Left Review*, no. 207 (1994): 2–16, his critique of the Labour Party manifesto. Various versions of it can be found in his other work, notably in "Incentives, Inequality, and Community: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values" (lecture, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, May 21 and 23, 1991, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/c/cohen92.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/c/cohen92.pdf)).
20. Back in the 1990s, when I still used to argue with libertarians, I found they would almost invariably justify inequality in terms of work: If I would observe, say, that some disproportionate share of social wealth was being distributed upward, a typical response would be along the lines of "to me this just shows that some people are working harder, or working smarter, than others." This particular formulation always struck in my head because of the telltale slipperiness. One cannot, of course, really argue that a CEO who makes a thousand times more than a bus driver is working a thousand times harder, so you slip in "smarter"—which implies "more productive" but, in fact, here just seems to be "in a way for which you're paid much more." All that saves this statement from absolutely meaningless circularity (they're smart because they're rich because they're smart, and on and on) is that it emphasizes that (most of) the very rich do have jobs.
21. This is why the books they produce become ever shorter, more simplistic, and less well researched.
22. Geoff Shullenberger, "The Rise of the Voluntariat," *Jacobin* online, last modified May 5, 2014, [www.jacobinmag.com/2014/05/the-rise-of-the-voluntariat](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/05/the-rise-of-the-voluntariat).
23. Bertrand Russell puts it nicely in his essay "In Praise of Idleness": "What is work? Work is of two kinds: first, altering the position of matter at or near the earth's surface relatively to other such matter; second, telling other people to do so. The first kind is unpleasant and ill paid; the second is pleasant and highly paid." (1935:13).
24. Genesis 3.16. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958:107n53) makes the argument that nowhere in the Bible is it suggested that work

- itself is punishment for disobedience: God simply makes the labor more harsh; others are simply reading Genesis through Hesiod. This might be true, but it doesn't really affect my argument; especially since Christians writing and thinking on the subject have assumed that was the meaning of the biblical passage for centuries. For instance, in 1664 Margaret Cavendish argued "neither can tennis be a pastime, for . . . there can be no recreation in sweaty labor; for it is laid as a curse upon man, that they shall live by the sweat of their brows" (in Thomas 1999: 9). For the best discussion of the early Christian debates on Adam and Eve, which argues that it was Saint Augustine who was really responsible for the notion that all humans are tainted, and, hence, cursed, because of original sin, see Pagels (1988).
25. Much of the next section is a summary of an earlier essay of mine, "Masters, Deference, and Private Property" (1997), itself an abbreviated version of my master's thesis, *The Generalization of Avoidance: Manners and Possessive Individualism in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1987). Some of the classic works on traditional Northern European marriage patterns and life-cycle service include Haimal (1965, 1982), Laslett (1972, 1977, 1983, 1984), Stone (1977), Kasmanul (1981), and Wall (1983); for a more recent survey of the state of the literature, see Cooper (2005). The primary difference between Northern European and Mediterranean marriage patterns from the Middle Ages through the Early Modern period is that in the latter, while men also would often marry late, women married much earlier, and life-cycle service was limited to certain social and professional groups but in no sense a norm.
26. Nowadays, of course, the word "waiter" is used only for those who "wait" tables at restaurants, a mainstay of the "service economy;" but the term was still being used primarily for domestic servants—ranking one step below the butler—in Victorian households. The word "dumbwaiter" for example, originally referred to the fact that servants who brought food to the master's table would often gossip about what they overheard people saying around it; mechanical dumbwaiters performed the same function but could not speak.
27. This is inaccurate. Most were apprenticed in early adolescence.
28. I have quoted it myself in the *Manners* paper (1997:716–17). The translation goes back to: Charlotte A. Sneyd, *A relation, or rather A true account, of the island of England, with sundry particulars of the customs of these people*,

- and of the royal revenues under King Henry the Seventh, about the year 1500, by an Italian, Camden Society volume xxxvi, 1847, 14–15.
29. Susan Brigden, "Youth and the English Reformation," *Past & Present* 95 (1982): 37–38.
  30. In Renaissance England, for example, one frequent representative of the king was a noble servant entitled the "Groom of the Stool," because he was in charge of emptying the king's chamber pot (Starkey 1977).
  31. My father, for example, was for most of his life a plate stripper in offset photo lithography shops. At one point, while first learning my medieval history, I was telling him about the guild system. "Yes," he said, "I served an apprenticeship, too. I retired as a 'journeyman printer.'" When I asked if there were any master printers, he said, "No, we don't have masters anymore. Well, unless you want to say that's the boss."
  32. Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, 1562. This line of objection, of course, reached its peak with Malthus, who came to argue that the working classes would thus tend to breed everyone into poverty, and famously advocated fostering unsanitary conditions to kill them off. Cazenove, who is cited later, was a disciple of Malthus.
  33. K. Thomas 1976:221.
  34. Max Weber's (1905) arguments about the relation of Calvinism and the origins of capitalism, I believe, should be understood in this light. That there was some connection between Protestantism, an ethic of self-disciplined work, and economic growth was considered self-evident by many at the time (Tawney 1924) but few examine the confluence of the three factors: Northern European life-cycle service, Protestantism, and emerging capitalism, even though they appear to broadly coincide.
  35. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 173–74. It is interesting to contrast Carlyle's praise of work for freeing the soul from cares to Nietzsche, who condemned it for that very reason: "In the glorification of 'work' and the never-ceasing talk about the 'blessing of labor' I see . . . fear of everything individual. For at the sight of work—that is to say, severe toil from morning till night—we have the feeling that it is the best police, viz., that it holds everyone in check and effectively hinders the development of reason, of greed, and of desire for independence. For work uses up an extraordinary proportion of nervous force, withdrawing it from reflection, meditation, dreams, cares, love, and hatred" (Daybreak, 1881 [1911:176–77]). One wonders if this is a direct response to Carlyle.
  36. Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 175. Much of the essay is a condemnation of capitalism, as "Mammonism," and like so many nineteenth-century works sounds vaguely Marxist to the modern ear, even when it comes to conservative conclusions: "Labor is not a devil, even while encased in Mammonism; Labor is ever an imprisoned god, writhing unconsciously or consciously to escape out of Mammonism!" (257).
  37. John Cazenove, *Outlines of Political Economy; Being a Plain and Short View of the Laws Relating to the Production, Distribution and Consumption of Wealth* (London: P. Richardson, 1832), 21–22. As far as I know, the first use of the labor theory of value to argue that workers are exploited by their employers is found in a pamphlet called *The Rights of Nature Against the Usurpations of Establishments*, written by the British Jacobin John Thelwall in 1796.
  38. From Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1967), 174: Faler's (1981) study of the town of Lynn in Massachusetts from 1780 to 1860 documents at length the degree to which the labor theory of value formed the framework of public debate for almost a century after the Revolution.
  39. Marx's own works, for example, were little known in the US at the time, though not completely unknown, since Marx himself was working as a freelance newspaper opinion writer and would often publish columns in US papers. Marx, in his capacity as head of the Workingmen's Association, also wrote directly to Lincoln with his own analysis of the American situation a few years later, in 1865, and while Lincoln seems to have read the letter, he had one of his adjuncts respond.
  40. Already in 1845, New York state assemblyman Mike Walsh was arguing along explicitly anticapitalist lines: "What is capital, but that all-grasping power which has been wrung, by fraud, avarice, and malice from the labor of this and all ages past." In Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 149.
  41. E. P. Goodwin, *Home Missionary Sermon*, 1880, in Jostiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1891), 159. Denis Kearney was a California labor leader of the time, now remembered largely for his campaigning against Chinese immigration, and Robert Ingersoll, the author of well-known refutations of the Bible, is now mainly known secondhand through Clarence Darrow's arguments against the literal interpretation of Genesis in the play *Inherit*

- the Wind*, which appear to be taken directly from Ingersoll's writings. I can add a personal testimony here: my own grandfather Gustavus Adolphus ("Dolly") Graeber, who, owing to my family's peculiarly long generations, was born before the US Civil War and worked as a musician for many years along the Western frontier at exactly the time Goodwin was writing—he is reputed to be the man who introduced the mandolin into American music—was, my father once told me, "an Ingersoll man" and, hence, a fervent atheist. He was never a Marxist, but my father became one later.
42. The movie *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is based on a novel of the same name by B. Traven, the pseudonym for a German anarchist novelist who fled his own country and lived most of the years of his life in southern Mexico. His real identity remains the object of speculation to this day.
  43. Thus, for instance, when in 1837 the group of businessmen from Amherst, Massachusetts, proposed to create a limited-liability carriage company, the proposal was opposed by a petition by journeymen on the grounds that "as journeymen, they looked forward to being their own masters when they would not have to relinquish to others the value they created," stating "incorporations put means into the hands of inexperienced capitalists, to take from us the profits of our art, which has cost us years of labor to obtain, and which we consider to be our exclusive privilege to enjoy" (Hanton 2016:57). Ordinarily such requests were only approved if the company was dedicated to creating and maintaining public works of an obviously useful nature such as a railroad or canal.
  44. Durrenberger and Doukas 2008:216–17.
  45. 1974:246.
  46. There is some debate over the relative weight, in medieval Christian theology, of the degree to which work was seen as an imitation of divine creation, and as a means of perfecting the self (see the discussion in Ehmer and Lis 2009:10–15), but both principles appear to have been present from the very beginning.
  47. Classic studies include Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010, and Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, and Keltner 2011.
  48. As a result underlings will also tend to care more about their superiors than their superiors will care about them, and this extends to almost any relation of structural inequality: men and women, rich and poor, black and white, and so on. It has always seemed to me this is one of the main forces that

- allows such inequalities to continue. (I've discussed this in various places, but the curious reader might consult the second chapter of Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 68–72.)
49. From this perspective, for instance, money, markets, finance are just ways of strangers alerting us to what they care about, because we care that caring is directed appropriately; which implies, in turn, that contemporary banking is simply a bad form of caring labor, insofar as it aims it in the wrong direction.
  50. The book was eventually renamed *Crack Capitalism* (2010), which I've always felt was a far inferior title.
  51. One oft-quoted passage from Studs Terkel's *Working*: "Unless a guy's a nut, he never thinks about work or talks about it. Maybe about baseball or about getting drunk the other night or he got laid or he didn't get laid. I'd say one out of a hundred really get excited about work" (1972:xxxiv); but at the same time, from the same testimony, "somebody has to do this work. If my kid ever goes to college, I just want him to have a little respect" (1972:xxxv).
  52. Gini and Sullivan 1987:649, 651, 654.
  53. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995) is the classic study of this phenomenon.
  54. The formula was later reduced to "the greatest good for the greatest number" but Bentham's original theory was based on hedonistic calculation and that's what Carlyle was responding to.
  55. Carlyle 1843:134.
  56. *Ibid.*

#### Chapter 7: What Are the Political Effects of Bullshit Jobs, and Is There Anything That Can Be Done About This Situation?

1. Matthew Kopka, "Bailing Out Wall Street While the Ship of State is Sinking? (Part 2)," *The Gleaner*, January 25, 2010, <http://iamaca-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100125/news/news5.html>, accessed July 22, 2017. At the time, one frequently circulated claim was that autoworkers were making as much as \$75 an hour, but this was based on an industry PR statement that took the total costs of all wages, benefits, and pensions for all workers, and divided them by the total number of hours worked. Obviously, if one calculated by