

DAVID GRAEBER

Bullshit Jobs

A Theory



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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018
First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2018
003

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-26388-4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To anyone who would rather be doing something useful with themselves.

Chapter 5

Why Are Bullshit Jobs Proliferating?

In the Scilly Islands . . . the natives of that group are popularly said to have eked out a precarious livelihood by taking in each other's washing.

—obscure nineteenth-century joke

A bourgeois paradise will supervene, in which everyone will be free to exploit—but there will be no one to exploit. On the whole, one must suppose that the type of it would be that town that I have heard of, whose inhabitants lived by taking in each other's washing.

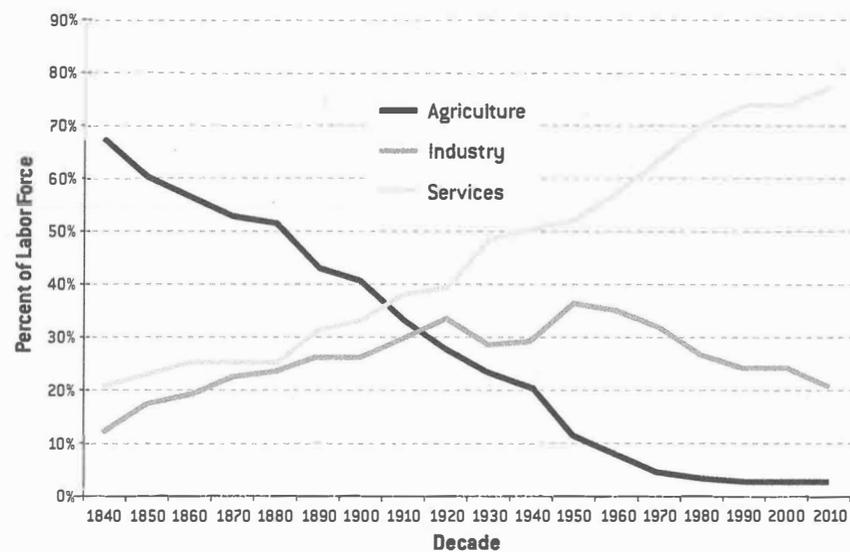
—William Morris, 1887

If the preceding chapters merely described forms of pointless employment that have always been with us in one way or another—or even that have always been with us since the dawn of capitalism—then matters would be distressing enough. But the situation is more dire still. There is every reason to believe that the overall number of bullshit jobs, and, even more, the overall percentage of jobs considered bullshit by those

who hold them, has been increasing rapidly in recent years—alongside the ever-increasing bullshitization of useful forms of employment. In other words, this is not just a book about a hitherto neglected aspect of the world of work. It's a book about a real social problem. Economies around the world have, increasingly, become vast engines for producing nonsense.

How did this happen? And why has it received so little public attention? One reason it has been so little acknowledged, I think, is that under our current economic system, this is precisely what is not supposed to happen: in the same way as the fact that so many people feel so unhappy being paid to do nothing defies our common assumptions about human nature, the fact that so many people are being paid to do nothing in the first place defies all our assumptions about how market economies are supposed to work. For much of the twentieth century, state Socialist regimes dedicated to full employment created bogus jobs

Figure 2 Distribution of the labor force by sector, 1840–2010



as a matter of public policy, and their social democratic rivals in Europe and elsewhere at least colluded in featherbedding and overstaffing in the public sector or with government contractors, when they weren't establishing self-conscious make-work programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA), as the United States did at the height of the Great Depression. All of this was supposed to have ended with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and worldwide market reforms in the nineties. If the joke under the Soviet Union was "We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us," the new neoliberal age was supposed to be all about efficiency. But if patterns of employment are anything to go by, this seems to be exactly the opposite of what actually happened after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989.

So part of the reason no one has noticed is that people simply refused to believe that capitalism *could* produce such results—even if that meant writing off their own experiences or those of their friends and family as somehow anomalous.

Another reason the phenomenon has been able to sail past people's heads is that we have developed a way of talking about changes in the nature of employment that seems to explain a lot of what we see and hear happening around us in this regard, but is, in fact, profoundly deceptive. I'm referring to the rise of what's called the "service economy." Since the 1980s, all conversations on changes in the structure of employment have had to begin with an acknowledgment that the overall global trend, especially in rich countries, has been for a steady decline in farming and manufacturing, and a steady increase in something called "services." Here, for instance, is a typical long-term analysis of the US labor force by sector (see figure 2, page 146).¹

Often it's assumed that the decline of manufacturing—which, incidentally, hasn't declined *that* much in terms of employment in the United States, by 2010 only returning to about what it was at the outbreak of the Civil War—simply meant that factories were relocated to poorer countries. This is obviously true to an extent, but it's interesting to observe that the same overall trends in the composition of employment can be

observed even in the countries to which the factory jobs were exported. Here, for instance, is India (see figure 3, below).

The number of industrial jobs has remained constant or increased slightly, but otherwise the picture is not so very different.

The real problem here is with the concept of a “service economy” itself. There is a reason I just put the term in quotation marks. Describing a country’s economy as dominated by the service sector leaves one with the impression that people in that country are supporting themselves principally by serving each other iced lattes or pressing one another’s shorts. Obviously, this isn’t really true. So what else might they be doing? When economists speak of a fourth, or quaternary, sector (coming after farming, manufacturing, and service provision), they usually define it as the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate). But back in 1992, Robert Taylor, a library scientist, suggested it would be more useful to define it as information work. The results were telling (see figure 4).

As we can see, even in 1990, the proportion of the workforce made up of actual waiters, barbers, salesclerks, and the like was really quite small. It also remained remarkably steady over time, holding for more

Figure 3 Sector contribution to GDP [%], India

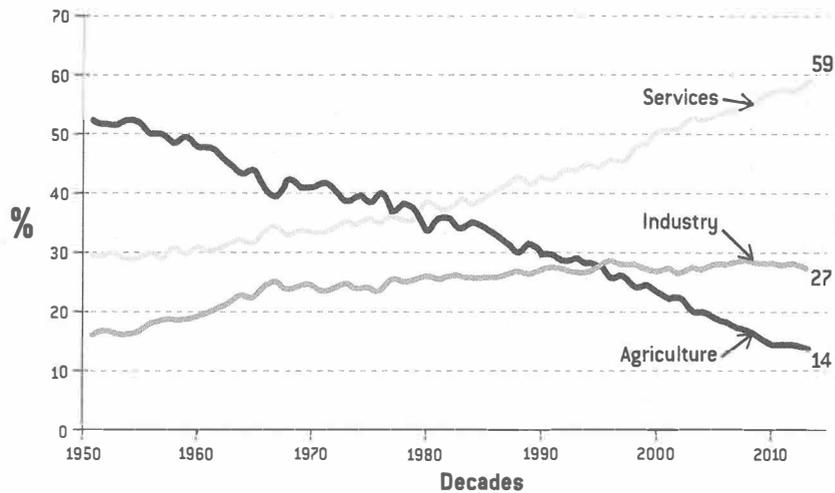
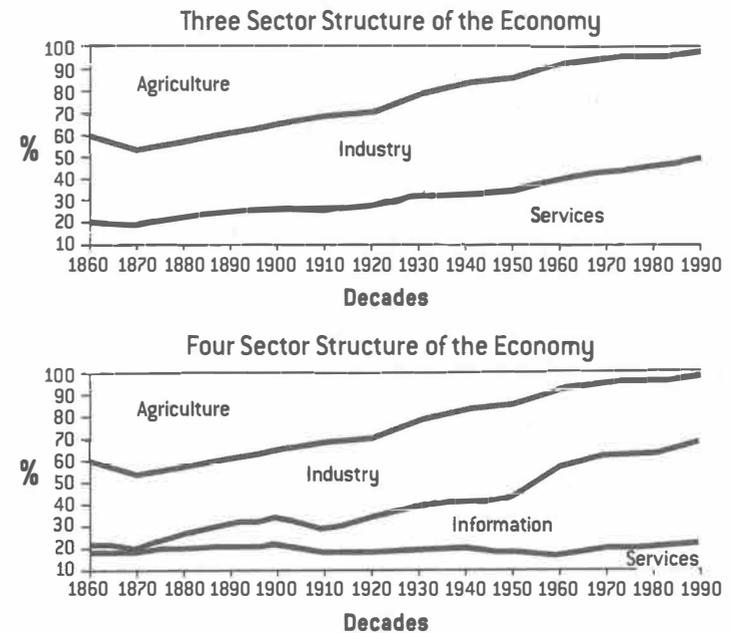


Figure 4 Information as a Component of the Economy



than a century at roughly 20 percent. The vast majority of those others included in the service sector were really administrators, consultants, clerical and accounting staff, IT professionals, and the like. This was also the part of the service sector that was actually increasing—and increasing quite dramatically from the 1950s onward. And while no one, to my knowledge, has pursued this particular breakdown through to the present, the percentage of information jobs was already rapidly on the increase even in the latter half of the twentieth century. It seems reasonable to conclude this trend continued, and that the bulk of the new service jobs added to the economy were really of this same sort.

This, of course, is precisely the zone where bullshit jobs proliferate. Obviously, not all information workers feel they are engaged in bullshit (Taylor’s category includes scientists, teachers, and librarians), and by no means all those who felt they are engaged in bullshit are information

workers; but if our surveys are to be trusted, it seems evident that a majority of those classed as information workers do feel that if their jobs were to vanish, it would make very little difference to the world.

I think this is important to emphasize because despite the lack of statistics, there has been a great deal of discussion since the 1990s about the rise of information-oriented jobs and their larger effect on society. Some, like former US Labor Secretary Robert Reich, spoke of the rise of a new tech-savvy middle class of “symbolic analysts” who threatened to gain all the benefits of growth and leave the old-fashioned laboring classes languishing in poverty; others spoke of “knowledge workers” and “information society”; some Marxists even became convinced that new forms of what they called “immaterial labor”—founded in marketing, entertainment, and the digital economy but spilling outside as well into our increasingly brand-saturated, iPhone-happy daily lives—had become the new locus of value creation—leading to prophecies of the eventual rebellion of the digital proletariat.² Almost everyone assumed that the rise of such jobs had something to do with the rise of finance capital—even if there was no consensus as to how. It just seemed to make sense that, just as Wall Street profits were derived less and less from firms involved in commerce or manufacturing, and more and more from debt, speculation, and the creation of complex financial instruments, so did an ever-increasing proportion of workers come to make their living from manipulating similar abstractions.

These days, it's hard to recall the almost mystical aura with which the financial sector had surrounded itself in the years leading up to 2008. Financiers had managed to convince the public—and not just the public, but social theorists, too (I well remember this)—that with instruments such as collateralized debt obligations and high-speed trading algorithms so complex they could be understood only by astrophysicists, they had, like modern alchemists, learned ways to whisk value out of nothing by means that others dared not even try to understand. Then, of course, came the crash, and it turned out that most of the instruments were scams. Many weren't even particularly sophisticated scams.

In a way, one could argue that the whole financial sector is a scam of sorts, since it represents itself as largely about directing investments to-

ward profitable opportunities in commerce and industry, when, in fact, it does very little of that. The overwhelming bulk of its profits comes from colluding with government to create, and then to trade and manipulate, various forms of debt. All I am really arguing in this book is that just as much of what the financial sector does is basically smoke and mirrors, so are most of the information-sector jobs that accompanied its rise as well.

But here we return to the question already raised in the last chapter: If these are scams, who, exactly, is scamming whom?

a brief excursus on causality and the nature of sociological explanation

In this chapter, then, I want to address the rise of bullshit jobs and to suggest some reasons this may be happening.

Of course, in earlier chapters, particularly chapter 2, we looked at some of the more immediate causes for the creation of useless employment: managers whose prestige is caught up in the total number of their administrative assistants or underlings; weird corporate bureaucratic dynamics; bad management; poor information flow. These are important in understanding the overall phenomenon, but they don't really explain it. We still have to ask, Why were such bad organizational dynamics more likely to occur in 2015 than they were in, say, 1915, or 1955? Has there been a change in organization culture, or is it something deeper: a change, perhaps, in our very conceptions of work?

We are faced here with a classic problem in social theory: the problem of levels of causality. In the case of any given real-world event, there are any number of different reasons why one can say it happened. These, in turn, can be sorted into different kinds of reason. If I fall into an open manhole, one might attribute this to absentmindedness. But if we discover there has been a sudden statistical increase in the number of people falling into manholes in a given city, one must seek a different sort of explanation—either one must understand why overall rates of absentmindedness are going up there, or, more likely, why more manholes are

being left open. This is an intentionally whimsical example. Let's consider a more serious one.

At the end of the last chapter, Meena noted that while many people who end up homeless have a history of addiction to alcohol or other drugs, or other personal foibles, many others are teenagers abandoned by their parents, veterans with PTSD, and women fleeing domestic violence. No doubt if you were to pick a random person sleeping on the streets or in a shelter and examine his or her life history, you would find a confluence of several such factors, usually combined with a great deal of just plain bad luck.

No one individual, then, could be said to be sleeping on the streets simply because he or she was morally reprobate; but even if everyone sleeping on the streets really was morally reprobate in some way, it would be unlikely to do much to explain the rise and fall of levels of homelessness in different decades, or why rates of homelessness vary from country to country at any given time. This is a crucial point. After all, consider the matter in reverse. There have been moralists throughout the ages who have argued that the poor are poor because of their moral turpitude: after all, we are often reminded, it's easy to find examples of people born poor who became wealthy owing to sheer grit, determination, and entrepreneurial spirit. Clearly, then, the poor remain poor because they didn't make an effort they *could* have made. This sounds convincing if you look just at individuals; it becomes much less so when one examines comparative statistics and realizes that rates of upward class mobility fluctuate dramatically over time. Did poor Americans just have less get-up-and-go during the 1930s than during previous decades? Or might it have had something to do with the Great Depression? It becomes harder still to hold to a purely moral approach when one also considers the fact that rates of mobility also vary sharply from country to country. A child born to parents of modest means in Sweden is much more likely to become wealthy than a similar child is in the United States. Must one conclude that Swedes overall have more grit and entrepreneurial spirit than Americans?

I doubt most contemporary conservative moralists would wish to argue this.

One must, then, seek a different sort of explanation: access to edu-

cation, for example, or the fact that the poorest Swedish children aren't nearly as poor as the poorest American ones.³ This doesn't mean that personal qualities do not help explain why *some* poor Swedish children succeed and others do not. But these are different kinds of questions and different levels of analysis. The question of why one player won a game rather than another is different from the question of how hard the game is to play.

■ ■ ■

Or why people are playing the game to begin with. That's a third question. Similarly, in cases like these, where one is looking at a broad pattern of social change, such as the rise of bullshit jobs, I would propose we really need to look not at two but at three different levels of explanation: (1) the particular reasons any given individual ends up homeless; (2) the larger social and economic forces that lead to increased levels of homelessness (say, a rise in rents, or changes in the family structure); and, finally (3), the reasons why no one intervened. We might refer to this last as the political and cultural level. It's also the easiest to overlook, since it often deals specifically with things people are *not* doing. I well remember the first time I discussed the phenomenon of homelessness in America with friends in Madagascar. They were flabbergasted to discover that in the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, there were people sleeping on the streets. "But aren't Americans ashamed?" one friend asked me. "They're so rich! Doesn't it bother them to know everyone else in the world will see it as a national embarrassment?"

I had to concede it was a good question. Why *didn't* Americans see people sleeping on the streets as a national embarrassment? In certain periods of US history, they certainly would have. If large numbers of people were living on the streets in major cities in the 1820s, or even the 1940s, there would have been an outcry and some kind of action would have been taken. It might not have been very nice action. At some points, it would probably have meant rounding up vagrants and placing them in workhouses; at other times, it might have involved building public hous-

ing; but whatever it might have been, they would not have been left to languish in cardboard boxes on public thoroughfares. Since the 1980s, the same American was more likely to react not with outrage at how social conditions could have come to this pass, but by appeal to explanations of the first level—and conclude that homelessness was nothing more than the inevitable result of human weakness. Humans are fickle beings. They always have been. There's nothing anyone can do to change this fact.⁴

This is why I emphasize that the third level is simultaneously political and cultural—it bears on basic assumptions about what people are, what can be expected of them, and what they can justifiably demand of one another. Those assumptions, in turn, have an enormous influence in determining what is considered to be a political issue and what is not. I don't want to suggest that popular attitudes are the only factor here. Political authorities often ignore the popular will. Polls regularly find roughly two-thirds of Americans favor a national health care system but no major political party there has ever supported this. Polls also show most Britons favor reinstating the death penalty, but no major political party has taken this up either.⁵ Still, the larger cultural climate is clearly a factor.

■ ■ ■

In the case of bullshit jobs, this means we can ask three questions:

1. On the individual level, why do people agree to do and put up with their own bullshit jobs?
2. On social and economic levels, what are the larger forces that have led to the proliferation of bullshit jobs?
3. On the cultural and political levels, why is the bullshitization of the economy not seen as a social problem, and why has no one done anything about it?⁶

Much of the confusion that surrounds debate about social issues in general can be traced back to the fact that people will regularly take these different explanations as alternatives rather than seeing them as factors

that all operate at the same time. For example, people sometimes tell me that any attempt to explain bullshit jobs in political terms is wrongheaded; such jobs, they insist, exist because people need the money—as if this consideration had somehow never occurred to me before. Looking at the subjective motives of those who take such jobs is then treated as an alternative to asking why so many people find themselves in a position where the only way they can get money is by taking such jobs to begin with.

It's even worse on the cultural-political level. There has come to be a tacit understanding in polite circles that you can ascribe motives to people only when speaking about the individual level. Therefore, any suggestion that powerful people ever do anything they don't say they're doing, or even do what they can be publicly observed to be doing for reasons other than what they say, is immediately denounced as a "paranoid conspiracy theory" to be rejected instantly. Thus, to suggest that some "law and order" politicians or social service providers might not feel it's in their best interest to do much about the underlying causes of homelessness, is treated as equivalent to saying homelessness itself exists only because of the machinations of a secret cabal. Or that the banking system is run by lizards.

sundry notes on the role of government in creating and maintaining bullshit jobs

This is relevant because when, in the original 2013 essay about bullshit jobs, I suggested that while our current work regime was never designed consciously, one reason it might have been allowed to remain in place was because the effects are actually quite convenient politically to those in power; this was widely denounced as crazy talk. So another thing this chapter can do is clarify a few things in that regard.

Social engineering does happen. The regime of make-work jobs that existed in the Soviet Union or Communist China, for example, was created from above by a self-conscious government policy of full employment. To say this is in no sense controversial. Pretty much everyone accepts that it

is the case. Still, it's hardly as if anyone sitting in the Kremlin or the Great Hall of the People actually sent out a directive saying "I hereby order all officials to invent unnecessary jobs until unemployment is eliminated."

The reason no such orders were sent out was because they didn't have to be. The policy spoke for itself. As long as you don't say "Aim for full employment, but do not create jobs unless they conform to the following standards"—and make it clear you will be very punctilious about ensuring those standards are met—then one can be sure of the results. Local officials will do what they have to do.

While no central directives of this kind were ever sent out under capitalist regimes, at least to my knowledge, it is nonetheless true that at least since World War II, all economic policy has been premised on an ideal of full employment. Now, there is every reason to believe that most policy makers don't actually want to fully achieve this ideal, as genuine full employment would put too much "upward pressure on wages." Marx appears to have been right when he argued that a "reserve army of the unemployed" has to exist in order for capitalism to work the way it's supposed to.⁷ But it remains true that "More Jobs" is the one political slogan that both Left and Right can always agree on.⁸ They differ only about the most expedient means to produce the jobs. Banners held aloft at a union march calling for jobs never also specify that those jobs should serve some useful purpose. It's just assumed that they will—which, of course, means that often they won't. Similarly, when right-wing politicians call for tax cuts to put more money in the hands of "job creators," they never specify whether those jobs will be good for anything; it's simply assumed that if the market produced them, they will be. In this climate, one might say that political pressure is being placed on those managing the economy similar to the directives once coming out of the Kremlin; it's just that the source is more diffuse, and much of it falls on the private sector.

Finally, as I've emphasized, there is the level of conscious public policy. A Soviet official issuing a planning document, or an American politician calling for job creation, might not be entirely aware of the likely effects of their action. Still, once a situation is created, even as an unintended side effect, politicians can be expected to size up the larger political im-

plications of that situation when they make up their minds what—if anything—to do about it.

Does this mean that members of the political class might actually collude in the maintenance of useless employment? If that seems a daring claim, even conspiracy talk, consider the following quote, from an interview with then US president Barack Obama about some of the reasons why he bucked the preferences of the electorate and insisted on maintaining a private, for-profit health insurance system in America:

"I don't think in ideological terms. I never have," Obama said, continuing on the health care theme. "Everybody who supports single-payer health care says, 'Look at all this money we would be saving from insurance and paperwork.' That represents one million, two million, three million jobs [filled by] people who are working at Blue Cross Blue Shield or Kaiser or other places. What are we doing with them? Where are we employing them?"⁹

I would encourage the reader to reflect on this passage because it might be considered a smoking gun. What is the president saying here? He acknowledges that millions of jobs in medical insurance companies like Kaiser or Blue Cross are unnecessary. He even acknowledges that a socialized health system would be more efficient than the current market-based system, since it would reduce unnecessary paperwork and reduplication of effort by dozens of competing private firms. But he's also saying it would be undesirable for that very reason. One motive, he insists, for maintaining the existing market-based system is precisely its inefficiency, since it is better to maintain those millions of basically useless office jobs than to cast about trying to find something else for the paper pushers to do.¹⁰

So here is the most powerful man in the world at the time publicly reflecting on his signature legislative achievement—and he is insisting that a major factor in the form that legislature took is the preservation of bullshit jobs.¹¹

That a political culture where "job creation" is everything might produce such results should not be shocking (though for some reason, it is,

in fact, treated as shocking); but it does not in itself explain the economic and social dynamics by which those jobs first come into being. In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider these dynamics and then return briefly to the role of government.

concerning some false explanations for the rise of bullshit jobs

Before mapping out what actually happened, it will first be necessary to dispose of certain very common, if ill-conceived, explanations for the rise of apparently pointless employment frequently proposed by market enthusiasts. Since libertarians, “anarcho-capitalists,” enthusiasts for Ayn Rand or Friedrich Hayek and the like are extremely common in pop economic forums, and since such market enthusiasts are committed to the assumption that a market economy could not, by definition, create jobs that serve no purpose,¹² one tends to hear these arguments quite a lot. So we might as well address them.¹³

Basically such arguments fall into two broad types. Proponents of each are happy to admit that at least some of those who believe they hold pointless jobs in the public sector are correct. However, the first group argues that those who harbor similar suspicions in the private sector are not correct. Since competing firms would never pay workers to do nothing, their jobs must be useful in some way that they simply do not understand.

The second group admits useless paper-pushing jobs do exist in the private sector, and even that they have proliferated. However, this group insists that private sector bullshit jobs must necessarily be a product of government interference.

A perfect example of the first kind of argument can be found in a piece in the *Economist*, published about a day and a half after the appearance of my original “bullshit jobs” essay in 2013.¹⁴ It had all the trappings of a rush job,¹⁵ but the very fact that this bastion of free market orthodoxy felt the need to respond almost instantly shows that the editors knew how to identify an ideological threat. They summed up their argument as follows:

Over the past century, the world economy has grown increasingly complex. The goods being provided are more complex; the supply chains used to build them are more complex; the systems to market, sell, and distribute them are more complex; the means to finance it all is more complex; and so on. This complexity is what makes us rich. But it is an enormous pain to manage. I'd say that one way to manage it all would be through teams of generalists—craftsman managers who mind the system from the design stage right through to the customer service calls—but there is no way such complexity would be economically workable in that world (just as cheap, ubiquitous automobiles would have been impossible in a world where teams of generalist mechanics produced cars one at a time).

No, the efficient way to do things is to break businesses up into many different kinds of tasks, allowing for a very high level of specialization. And so you end up with the clerical equivalent of repeatedly affixing Tab A to Frame B: shuffling papers, management of the minutiae of supply chains, and so on. Disaggregation may make it look meaningless, since many workers end up doing things incredibly far removed from the end points of the process; the days when the iron ore goes in one door and the car rolls out the other are over. But the idea is the same.

In other words, the author claims that when we speak of “bullshit jobs,”¹⁶ we're really just talking about the postindustrial equivalent of factory-line workers, those with the unenviable fate of having to carry out the repetitive, mind-numbingly boring but still very necessary tasks required to manage increasingly complicated processes of production. As robots replace the factory workers, these are increasingly the only jobs left. (This position is sometimes combined with a rather condescending argument about self-importance: if so many people feel their jobs are useless, it's really because today's educated workforce is full of philosophy or Renaissance literature majors who believe they are cut out for better things. They consider being a mere cog in administrative machinery beneath their dignity.)

I don't think I really need to dwell too much on the second argument, since the reader is likely to have encountered variations of it a thousand times before. Anyone who truly believes in the magic of the marketplace will always insist that any problem, any injustice, any absurdity that might seem to be produced by the market is really caused by government interference with same. This must be true because the market is freedom, and freedom is always good. Putting it this way might sound like a caricature, but I have met libertarians willing to say exactly that, in almost exactly those words.¹⁷ Of course, the problem with any such argument is that it's circular; it can't be disproved. Since all actually existing market systems are to some degree state regulated, it's easy enough to insist that any results one likes (say, high levels of overall wealth) are the result of the workings of the market, and that any features one doesn't like (say, high levels of overall poverty) are really due to government interference in the workings of the market—and then insist that the burden of proof is on anyone who would argue otherwise. No real evidence in favor of the position is required because it is basically a profession of faith.¹⁸

Now, this being said, I should hasten to point out I am not saying government regulation plays *no* role in the creation of bullshit jobs (particularly of the box-ticker variety). Clearly, it does. As we've already seen, whole industries, such as corporate compliance, would not exist at all were it not for government regulations. But the argument here is not that such regulations are one reason for the rise of bullshit jobs, it's that they are the primary or, even, the only reason.

To sum up, then, we have two arguments: first, that globalization has rendered the process of production so complicated that we need ever more office workers to administer it, so these are not bullshit jobs; second, that while many of them are indeed bullshit jobs, they only exist because increases in government regulation have not only created an ever-burgeoning number of useless bureaucrats but also forced corporations to employ armies of box tickers to keep them at bay.

Both these arguments are wrong, and I think a single example can refute both of them. Let us consider the case of private universities in the

United States. Here are two tables, both drawn from Benjamin Ginsberg's book *The Fall of the Faculty*, about the administrative take-over of American universities, which give us pretty much all we need to know. The first shows the growth in the proportion of administrators and their staff in American universities overall. During the thirty years in question, a time during which tuition skyrocketed, the overall number of teachers per student remained largely constant (in fact, the period ended with slightly fewer teachers per student than before). At the same time, the number of administrators and, above all, administrative staff ballooned to an unprecedented degree (see figure 5).

Is this because the process of "production"—in this case, this would presumably mean teaching, reading, writing, and research—had become two or three times more complicated between 1985 and 2005, so that it now requires a small army of office staff to administer it?¹⁹ Obviously not. Here I can speak from personal experience. Certainly, things have changed a bit since I was in college in the 1980s—lecturers are now expected to provide PowerPoint displays instead of writing on blackboards; there's greater use of class blogs, Moodle pages, and the like. But all this is pretty minor stuff. It's nothing even remotely comparable to, say, the containerization of shipping, Japanese-style "just in time"

Figure 5 Changes in the Supply of and Demand for Administrative Services, 1985–2005

Staff	+240%
Administrators	+85%
Student Enrollments	+56%
Faculty	+50%
No. of Degree-Granting Institutions	+50%
No. of BA Degrees Granted	+47%

Source: Calculated from NCEs, "Digest," 2006

production regimes, or the globalization of supply chains. For the most part, teachers continue to do what they have always done: give lectures, lead seminars, meet students during office hours, and grade papers and exams.²⁰

What about the heavy hand of government, then? Ginsberg provides us with a refutation to that claim, too, again in one easy table (see figure 6).

In reality, the number of administrators and managers at private institutions increased at *more than twice the rate* as it did at public ones. It seems extremely unlikely that government regulation caused private sector administrative jobs to be created at twice the rate as it did within the government bureaucracy itself. In fact, the only reasonable interpretation of these numbers is precisely the opposite: public universities are ultimately answerable to the public, and hence, under constant political pressure to cut costs and not engage in wasteful expenditures. This may lead to some peculiar priorities (in most US states, the highest-paid public servant is a football or basketball coach at a state university), but it does tend to limit the degree to which a newly appointed dean can simply decide that, since he is obviously a very important person, it is only natural that he should have five or six additional administrative staff working under him—and only then begin trying to figure out what said staff are actually

Figure 6 Administrative Growth at Public and Private Institutions, 1975–2005

	1975	1995	2005	Change
Administrators and Managers at Public Colleges	60,733	82,396	101,011	+66%
Administrators and Managers at Private Colleges	40,530	65,049	95,313	+135%

Source: Calculated from NCES, "Digest," 2006

going to do. Administrators at private universities are answerable only to their board of trustees. Trustees are usually extremely rich. If they are not themselves creatures of the corporate world, they are at the very least used to moving in environments shaped by its mores and sensibilities—and as a result, they tend to view such a dean's behavior as entirely normal and unobjectionable.

Ginsberg himself sees the increase in the numbers and power of university administrators as a simple power grab—one which, he says, has resulted in a profound shift in assumptions about the very nature of universities and the reasons for their existence. Back in the 1950s or 1960s, one could still say that universities were one of the few European institutions that had survived more or less intact from the Middle Ages. Crucially, they were still run on the old medieval principle that only those involved in a certain form of production—whether this be the production of stonework or leather gloves or mathematical equations—had the right to organize their own affairs; indeed that they were also the only people qualified to do so. Universities were basically craft guilds run for and by scholars, and their most important business was considered to be producing scholarship, their second-most, training new generations of scholars. True, since the nineteenth century, universities had maintained a kind of gentleman's pact with government, that they would also train civil servants (and later, corporate bureaucrats) in exchange for otherwise being largely left alone. But since the eighties, Ginsberg argues, university administrators have effectively staged a coup. They wrested control of the university from the faculty and oriented the institution itself toward entirely different purposes. It is now commonplace for major universities to put out "strategic vision documents" that barely mention scholarship or teaching but go on at length about "the student experience," "research excellence" (getting grants), collaboration with business or government, and so forth.

All this rings very true for anyone familiar with the university scene, but the question remains: If this was a coup, how did the administrators manage to get away with it? One has to assume that even in the 1880s, there were university administrators who would have been delighted to

seize power in this way and each hire themselves a retinue of minions. What happened in the intervening century that put them in a position to actually do so? And whatever it was, how is it connected to the rise of the total proportion of managers, administrators, and meaningless paper pushers outside the academy that occurred during the same period of time?

Since this is the period that also saw the rise of finance capitalism, it might be best to return to the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate) to seek insight into what overall dynamic in the economy sparked such changes. If those whom the *Economist* believes to be administering complex global supply chains are not, in fact, administering complex global supply chains, then what exactly *are* they doing? And does what is happening in those offices provide any sort of window on what is happening elsewhere?

why the financial industry might be considered a paradigm for bullshit job creation

- expedited frictionless convergences
- coordinated interactive market institutions
- contracted virtual clearinghouses
- directed margin adjustments²¹

On a superficial level, of course, the immediate mechanisms that create bullshit jobs in the FIRE sector are the same ones that produce them anywhere else. I listed some of these in chapter 2, when I described the five basic types of bullshit jobs and how they came about. Flunky positions are created because those in powerful positions in an organization see underlings as badges of prestige; goons are hired due to a dynamic of one-upmanship (if our rivals employ a top law firm, then so, too, must we); duct-taper positions are created because sometimes organizations find it more difficult to fix a problem than to deal with its consequences; box-ticker positions exist because, within large or-

ganizations, paperwork attesting to the fact that certain actions have been taken often comes to be seen as more important than the actions themselves; taskmasters exist largely as side effects of various forms of impersonal authority. If large organizations are conceived as a complex play of gravitational forces, pulling in many contradictory directions, one could say there will always be a certain pull in any of these five. Even so, one must ask: Why is there not a greater pressure pulling in the opposite direction? Why is this not seen as more of a problem? Firms like to represent themselves as lean and mean.

It seems to me that those creating, playing around with, and destroying large amounts of money in the FIRE sector provide the perfect place to begin to ask this question—in part because many who work in this sector are convinced that almost everything done in it is basically a scam.²²

Elliot: So I did a job for a little while working for one of the “big four” accountancy firms. They had been contracted by a bank to provide compensation to customers that had been involved in the PPI scandal. The accountancy firm was paid by the case, and we were paid by the hour. As a result, they purposefully mis-trained and disorganized staff so that the jobs were repeatedly and consistently done wrong. The systems and practices were changed and modified all the time, to ensure no one could get used to the new practice and actually do the work correctly. This meant that cases had to be redone and contracts extended.

In case the reader is unaware, the PPI (payment protection insurance) scandal broke in the United Kingdom in 2006, when a large number of banks were found to have been unloading unwanted and often wildly disadvantageous account insurance policies on their clients. Courts ordered much of the money returned, and the result was an entire new industry organized around resolving PPI claims. As Elliot reported it, at least some of those hired to process these claims were intentionally dragging their feet to milk the contract for all they could.

Elliot: The senior management had to be aware of this, but it was never explicitly stated. In looser moments, some of the management said things like “We make money from dealing with a leaky pipe—do you fix the pipe, or do you let the pipe keep leaking?” (or words to that effect). There had been vast sums set aside by the bank to pay compensation for the PPI.

This is actually a fairly common story in the testimonies I received: I heard about similar things going on in law firms involved with asbestos compensation payments as well. Whenever a very large sum of money, in the hundreds of millions, is set aside to compensate an entire class of people, a bureaucracy must be set up to locate claimants, process claims, and portion out the money. This bureaucracy may often involve hundreds or even thousands of people. Since the money that pays their salaries is ultimately coming from the same pot, they have no particular incentive to distribute the spoils efficiently. That would be killing the goose that laid the golden egg! According to Elliot, this often led to “crazy, surreal stuff” like intentionally placing offices in different cities and forcing people to commute between them, or printing and destroying the same documents a half dozen times—all the while threatening legal action against anyone who revealed such practices to outsiders.²³ Clearly, the point was to siphon off as much of the money as possible before it got to the claimants; the longer the lower-level people took, the more the company would earn; but owing to the peculiar dynamic discussed in the last chapter, the very pointlessness of the exercise seemed to exacerbate levels of stress and abusive behavior.

Elliot: The cynicism involved was remarkable. I guess it works out to a form of parasitism. As it happens, the job was also extremely difficult and stressful: it appeared that part of their business model was placing impossible targets which would increase all the time so that turnover was high and more staff would regularly have to be brought in and mis-trained, so that, I imagine, the firm could plausibly ask their client that the contract be extended further.

This was demoralizing, of course. I’m now working as a cleaner, which is the least bullshit/alienated job I have ever had.

David: So this sounds like a whole new category: jobs intentionally done wrong! How common do you think that is?

Elliot: From what I’ve heard among other people in different companies, the PPI industry is basically built around this principle, on the basis that apparently it’s only large accountancy firms that really have the capacity to take on contracts like that.

David: Well, I see how one could make the argument that in any system where you are basically dealing with the distribution of spoils, it makes sense to create as many layers of parasites in between as possible. But who were they ultimately milking? Their clients? Or who?

Elliot: I’m not sure who was ultimately paying for this. The bank? An insurance company that insured the bank against losses on fraud activities in the first place? Of course, ultimately it would be the consumer and taxpayer who pay; all these companies need to know is how to milk it.

As long ago as 1852, Charles Dickens, in *Bleak House*, was already making fun of the legal profession with the case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*—in which two teams of barristers keep the battle over a huge estate alive for more than a lifetime, until they’ve devoured the whole thing, whereupon they simply declare the matter moot and move on. The moral of the story is that when a profit-seeking enterprise is in the business of distributing a very large sum of money, the most profitable thing for it to do is to be as inefficient as possible.

Of course, this is basically what the entire FIRE sector does: it creates money (by making loans) and then moves it around in often extremely complicated ways, extracting another small cut with every transaction. The results often leave bank employees feeling that the entire enterprise is

just as pointless as the accountancy company's intentionally mis-training employees to milk a cash cow. Surprising numbers of bank employees can't even figure out what the real justification for their particular species of bank is supposed to be.

Bruce: I work as a fund accountant at a custodian bank. I've never really figured out what custodian banks do. I understand the concepts associated with custodian banks, but I always thought of them as just an unnecessary added layer of accounting. Custodian banks safeguard concepts such as stocks and bonds. How do they actually do that? Can Russian hackers steal these concepts? As far as I can see, the entire custodian bank industry is bullshit.

One reason for the confusion, perhaps, is that the level of general fear, stress, and paranoia appears to be much greater in banks than in most of the other enterprises we've been considering so far. Employees are under enormous pressure not to ask too many questions. One rebel banker, who described to me in detail the machinations by which the biggest banks would lobby the government to introduce regulations to their advantage and then expect everyone to play along with the pretense that the regulations had simply been imposed, told me he thought it's almost as bad as coming out as gay would have been in the 1950s: "There are many people who have read 'on the phenomenon of bullsh*t jobs' and know of the reality of our industry, yet they (including myself) are consumed by fear of losing our jobs, so we don't talk about or discuss these issues openly. We lie to ourselves, our colleagues, and our families."

Such sentiments were commonplace. Almost all bank workers I corresponded with insisted on elaborate secrecy, effacing any detail that might possibly connect them to their employer. At the same time, many emphasized how cathartic it was to be able to finally express things that had been percolating through their minds for so many years. Here, for instance, is the testimony of Rupert, an economic refugee from Australia now working in the City of London, on bullshitization within the financial institution where he presently works:

Rupert: So in banking, obviously the entire sector adds no value and is therefore bullshit. But let's leave that to the side for a minute and look at those within banking who literally do nothing. There actually are not all that many of these because banking is a weird mix. Overall we do nothing, yet within that nothing it's efficient, meritocratic, and in general lean.

Still, the most obvious is the cheerleader Human Resources Department. At some point, banking realized that everyone hates them, and that their staff knows this, too, so they set about trying to make the staff feel better about it all. We have an intranet that HR was told to make into a kind of internal "community," like Facebook. They set it up; nobody used it. So they then started to try and bully everyone into using it, which made us hate it even more. Then they tried to entice people in by having HR post a load of touchy-feely crap or people writing "internal blogs" that nobody cared about. Still nobody comes.

Three years they've been at this, the internal intranet Facebook page is just full of HR people saying something cheesy about the company and then other HR people saying "Great post! I really agree with this." How they can stand this, I have no idea. It's a monument to the total lack of cohesiveness in banking.

Another one is they have some big drive to do charity for a week. I refuse to participate as though I give to charity, I will not give through my bank, as for them it's just a big advertising drive in an attempt to shore up morale internally and make it look like banking isn't appropriating labor through usury. They put out a "target" of, say, ninety percent participation—all "voluntary"—and then for two months, they try to get people to sign up. If you don't sign up, they note your name, and then people come and ask you why you haven't signed up. In the last two weeks before the end of it, we get automated mails that look like they come from the CEO "encouraging" you to sign up. The last time, I was actually worried about losing my job over holding out. For me, this would have been bad, as I'm in a foreign country on a work visa with no right to remain. But hold on I did.

The number of man-hours spent chasing this “voluntary” charity work is amazing. “Voluntold” is, I believe the technical term.

The charity work itself is totally empty. Things like two hours of litter picking. Giving bad sandwiches to the homeless where someone else organizes all the sandwich packages, etc., and bank employees just turn up and hand them out then go home again in their nice cars. A lot of the charity work is driven by “best company to work for in X” awards that stipulate criteria like “charitable work.” The bank then has to hit that criteria to be considered, which will then help them with recruiting. They spend god knows how many hours every year trying to do this.

Okay, next: the time sheet guy . . .

After listing a few positions that could easily be automated away and seem to exist only to provide employment, Rupert ends with the most apparently useless position of all:

Rupert: Finally, middle management. The other day, I had to get an approval from someone at middle-management level. I clicked on a system to email out approval requests. Twenty-five middle managers were listed (only one needed to approve). I had only ever heard of one of them. What are these people doing all day long? Are they not worried about being found out and having to work at McDonald’s?

According to those middle managers who’ve contacted me, the answer to “What are these people doing all day long” would be, in many cases, at least, “Not much.” So in Rupert’s estimation, at least, in the lower echelons, competence and efficiency actually do seem to be the reigning values; the higher one goes up the ladder, the less true this appears to be.

Rupert’s account is fascinating from any number of perspectives. Take the theme of how artificial contests operate as a mechanism of bullshitization, one that cropped up in numerous other contexts as well. Many of the follies of local government in the UK, for instance, are driven by a similar desire to be named “best council” in a given region, or in the country as a

whole. In every case, such contests set off a frenzy of box-ticking rituals, climaxing, in this case, in the ridiculous simulations of charity demanded of present employees so as to be able to tell potential future employees that their company has been voted one of the best places to work. Most of the other elements in Rupert’s testimony appear in other accounts from inside major financial institutions as well: the confused mix of frenetic, stressful, but almost magic efficiency in some sectors, the obvious bloat in others; all in a context where no one was quite sure what the bank really did or if it was even a legitimate enterprise; the fact that such questions could never be discussed.

Another common theme was the way many of those laboring in financial institutions—to a much larger degree than those in most large corporations—had little or no idea how their work contributed to the bank as a whole. Irene, for example, worked for several major investment banks in “Onboarding”—that is, monitoring whether the bank’s clients (in this case, various hedge funds and private equity funds) were in compliance with government regulations. In theory, every transaction the bank engaged in had to be assessed. The process was self-evidently corrupt, since the real work was outsourced to shady outfits in Bermuda, Mauritius, and or the Cayman Islands (“where bribes are cheap”), and they invariably found everything to be in order. Nonetheless, since a 100% percent approval rate would hardly do, an elaborate edifice had to be erected so as to make it look as if sometimes, they did indeed find problems sometimes. So Irene would report that the outsider reviewers had okayed the transaction, and a Quality Control board would review Irene’s paperwork and duly locate typos and other minor errors. Then the total number of “fails” in each department would be turned over to be tabulated by a metrics division, this allowing everyone involved to spend hours every week in meetings arguing over whether any particular “fail” was real.

Irene: There was an even higher caste of bullshit, propped atop the metrics bullshit, which were the data scientists. Their job was to collect the fail metrics and apply complex software to make pretty pic-

tures out of the data. The bosses would then take these pretty pictures to their bosses, which helped ease the awkwardness inherent in the fact that they had no idea what they were talking about or what any of their teams actually did. At [Big Bank A], I had five bosses in two years. At [Big Bank B], I had three. The vast majority were installed, cherry-picked by higher-ups, and “gifted” these castles of shit. In many cases, sadly, it was how the companies met their minorities-in-management quota.

So once again, we have the same combination of fraud, pretense (no one was allowed to talk about the shady companies in the Cayman Islands), a system designed not to be understood, which was then pushed off on managers who had no idea what was going on below them, largely because it made no sense. It was all just a meaningless ritual. What’s entirely unclear is whether anyone on top of the food chain—the data crunchers, the just-passing-through executives, even the higher-ups who chose them—actually knew how pointless it all was.

Finally, on top of the usual artificially induced stress and tension and barking about deadlines, the usual sadomasochistic interpersonal relations, and the usual fearful silences (that is, all the things that typically happen when pointless projects are organized on top-down lines), there was the intense pressure on employees to take part in a different set of rituals designed to prove the institution really cared. In Irene’s case, these were not staged charity events, but New Age seminars that often drove her to the point of tears:

Irene: On top of the metrics, there were the cruel, patronizing “flexibility” and “mindfulness” seminars. No, you can’t work fewer hours. No you can’t get paid more. No, you can’t choose which bullshit projects to decline. But you can sit through this seminar, where the bank tells you how much it values flexibility.

The mindfulness seminars were even worse. They attempted to reduce the unfathomable beauty and stupefying sadness of the human experience into the raw physicality of breathing, eating, and shitting.

Breathe mindfully. Eat mindfully. Shit mindfully, and you can be successful in business.

All of this, presumably, to remind the employee that if one reduced life to pure physicality, the fact that some abstractions were more “real” than others, and that some office tasks seemed to serve a legal and moral or even economic purpose and others did not, was not really all that important. It’s as if they first forbid you to acknowledge you are engaging in empty ritual, then force you to attend seminars where hired gurus tell you, “In the final analysis, isn’t everything we do just empty ritual?”

What we’ve seen so far from Elliot, Rupert, and Irene are all partial, situated perspectives on very large and complicated organizations. None of them has an overall, panoptic view. But it’s not entirely clear if anyone else does, either. One has to assume the higher-ups in Irene’s story, who intentionally assign executives from minority backgrounds to the onboarding sector, are aware that most of what goes on in that part of the company is bullshit. Even they might not know precisely how and why. Nor would it be possible to create some kind of secret survey to determine what percentage of bank workers secretly believe their jobs to be bullshit and the divisions in which they tend to be concentrated. The closest I was able to find to general insight came from a certain Simon, who had been employed by a series of large international banks in risk management, which basically, he says, means to analyze and “find problems in their internal processes.”

Simon: I spent two years analyzing the critical payment and operations processes at one bank, with the sole aim to work out how a staff member might use the computer systems to commit fraud and theft, and thereby recommend solutions to prevent this. What I discovered by chance was that most people at the bank didn’t know why they were doing what they were doing. They would say that they are only supposed to log into this one system and select one menu option and type certain things in. They didn’t know why.

So Simon's job was basically to be the all-seeing eye that determined how different parts of a bank's many moving parts fit together and iron out any incoherences, vulnerabilities, or redundancies he might find. In other words, he's about as qualified to answer the question as anyone could be. His conclusions?

Simon: In my conservative estimation, eighty percent of the bank's sixty thousand staff were not needed. Their jobs could either completely be performed by a program or were not needed at all because the programs were designed to enable or replicate some bullshit process to begin with.

In other words, forty-eight thousand of the bank's sixty thousand employees did nothing useful—or nothing that couldn't easily be done by a machine. These were, Simon believed, *de facto* bullshit jobs, even if the bank workers themselves were deprived of the means to assess or collectively analyze the situation, and expected to keep any suspicions to themselves. But why didn't the bank's higher-ups figure this out and do something about it? Well, the easiest way to answer that question is to observe what happened when Simon did suggest reforms:

Simon: In one instance, I created a program that solved a critical security problem. I went to present it to an executive, who included all his consultants in the meeting. There were twenty-five of them in the boardroom. The hostility I faced during and after the meeting was severe, as I slowly realized that my program automated everything they were currently being paid to do by hand. It's not as if they enjoyed it; it was tedious work, monotonous and boring. The cost of my program was five percent of what they were paying those twenty-five people. But they were adamant.

I found many similar problems and came up with solutions. But in all my time, not one of my recommendations was ever actioned. Because in every case, fixing these problems would have resulted in

people losing their jobs, as those jobs served no purpose other than giving the executive they reported to a sense of power.

So even if these jobs didn't originate as flunky jobs, which presumably most didn't, they ended up being maintained as such. The threat of automation, of course, is an ongoing concern in any large enterprise—I've heard of companies where programmers will show up to work wearing T-shirts that say "Go Away or I Will Replace You with a Very Small Shell Script"—but in this case, and many like it, the concern went to the very top: to the very executives who (if, for instance, they are involved in private equity in any way) pride themselves on the ruthlessness with which they acquired other corporations and saddled them with enormous debts in the name of downsizing and efficiency. These very same executives prided themselves on their own bloated staffs. In fact, if Simon is also correct, they did so because that's what a large bank really was: it was made up of a series of feudal retinues, each answerable to some lordly executive.²⁴

**on some ways in which the current form of managerial
feudalism resembles classical feudalism,
and other ways in which it does not**

The upper quintile is growing in size and income because all the value created by actual productive workers in the lower quintiles gets extracted by those at the top. When the top classes rob everybody else, they need a lot more guard labor to keep their stolen loot secure.

—Kevin Carson

If we return to the example of the feudal overlord in chapter 2, this actually makes perfect sense. I was using feudal overlords and retainers as a metaphor at that point. But in the case of banks, at least, it's not clear

how much is metaphor and how much is literal truth. As I pointed out, feudalism is essentially a redistributive system. Peasants and craftsmen produce things, to a large extent autonomously; lords siphon off a share of what they produce, usually by dint of some complex set of legal rights and traditions (“direct juro-political extraction” is the technical phrase I learned in college),²⁵ and then go about portioning out shares of the loot to their own staff, flunkies, warriors, retainers—and to a lesser extent, by sponsoring feasts and festivals and by occasional gifts and favors, giving some of it back to the craftsmen and peasants once again. In such an arrangement, it makes little sense to speak of separate spheres of “politics” and “the economy” because the goods are extracted through political means and distributed for political purposes. In fact, it was only with the first stirrings of industrial capitalism that anyone started talking about “the economy” as an autonomous sphere of human activity in the first place.

Under capitalism, in the classic sense of the term, profits derive from the management of production: capitalists hire people to make or build or fix or maintain things, and they cannot take home a profit unless their total overhead—including the money they pay their workers and contractors—comes out less than the value of the income they receive from their clients or customers. Under classic capitalist conditions of this sort it does indeed make no sense to hire unnecessary workers. Maximizing profits means paying the least number of workers the least amount of money possible; in a very competitive market, those who hire unnecessary workers are not likely to survive. Of course, this is why doctrinaire libertarians, or, for that matter, orthodox Marxists, will always insist that our economy can’t really be riddled with bullshit jobs; that all this must be some sort of illusion. But by a feudal logic, where economic and political considerations overlap, the same behavior makes perfect sense. As with the PPI distributors, the whole point is to grab a pot of loot, either by stealing it from one’s enemies or extracting it from commoners by means of fees, tolls, rents, and levies, and then redistributing it. In the process, one creates an entourage of followers

that is both the visible measure of one’s pomp and magnificence, and at the same time, a means of distributing political favor: for instance, by buying off potential malcontents, rewarding faithful allies (goons), or creating an elaborate hierarchy of honors and titles for lower-ranking nobles to squabble over.

If all of this very much resembles the inner workings of a large corporation, I would suggest that this is no coincidence: such corporations are less and less about making, building, fixing, or maintaining things and more and more about political processes of appropriating, distributing, and allocating money and resources. This means that, once again, it’s increasingly difficult to distinguish politics and economics, as we have seen with the advent of “too-big-to-fail” banks, whose lobbyists typically write the very laws by which government supposedly regulates them, but even more, by the fact that financial profits themselves are gathered largely through direct juro-political means. JPMorgan Chase & Co., for example, the largest bank in America, reported in 2006 that roughly two-thirds of its profits were derived from “fees and penalties,” and “finance” in general really refers to trading in other people’s debts—debts which, of course, are enforceable in courts of law.²⁶

It’s almost impossible to get accurate figures about exactly what proportion of a typical family’s income in, say, America, or Denmark, or Japan, is extracted each month by the FIRE sector, but there is every reason to believe it is not only a very substantial chunk but also is now a distinctly greater chunk of total profits than those the corporate sector derives directly from making or selling goods and services in those same countries. Even those firms we see as the very heart of the old industrial order—General Motors and General Electric in America, for example—now derive all, or almost all, of their profits from their own financial divisions. GM, for example, makes its money not from selling cars but rather from interest collected on auto loans.

Still, there is one crucial difference between medieval feudalism and the current, financialized version. We’ve already mentioned it earlier in the chapter. Medieval feudalism was based on a principle of self-governance in

the domain of production. Anyone whose work was based on some kind of specialized knowledge, whether lace makers, wheelwrights, merchants, legal scholars, was expected to collectively regulate their own affairs, or including who would be allowed to enter the profession and how they would be trained, with minimal supervision from anybody else. Guilds and similar organizations typically had elaborate hierarchies within (though not always so much as they do today: in many medieval universities, for instance, students elected their professors), but at the very least, a medieval sword smith or soap maker could go about his work in the confidence that he would never have anyone who was not himself a sword smith or a soap maker telling him he was not going about it correctly. Industrial capitalism obviously changed all that, and the rise of managerialism in the twentieth century drove the process even further; but rather than this in any sense reversing under financialized capitalism, the situation has actually worsened. "Efficiency" has come to mean vesting more and more power to managers, supervisors, and other presumed "efficiency experts," so that actual producers have almost zero autonomy.²⁷ At the same time, the ranks and orders of managers seem to reproduce themselves endlessly.

■ ■ ■

If one wants a parable for what seems to have happened to capitalism over the last forty-odd years, perhaps the best example I know is the Elephant Tea factory outside Marseille, France, currently occupied by its employees. I visited the plant a few years ago, and one of the occupiers—who took me and some friends on a tour of the grounds—told us the story of what happened. Originally, it was a local enterprise, but during the age of mergers and acquisitions, the company was bought up by Unilever, owner of Lipton, the world's largest tea producer. At first, the company left the organization of the plant more or less alone. The workers, however, were in the habit of tinkering with the machinery, and by the nineties, they had introduced a series of improvements that sped up production by more than 50 percent, thus markedly increasing profits.

Now, in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, there was a tacit understand-

ing in much of the industrialized world that if productivity in a certain enterprise improved, a certain share of the increased profits would be redistributed to the workers in the form of improved wages and benefits. Since the eighties, this is no longer the case. So here.

"Did they give any of that money to us?" our guide asked. "No. Did they use it to hire more workers, or new machinery, to expand operations? No. They didn't do that, either. So what did they do? They started hiring more and more white-collar workers. Originally, when I started working here, there were just two of them: the boss and the HR guy. It had been like that for years. Now suddenly there were three, four, five, seven guys in suits wandering around. The company made up different fancy titles for them, but basically all of them spent their time trying to think of something to do. They'd be walking up and down the catwalks every day, staring at us, scribbling notes while we worked. Then they'd have meetings and discuss it and write reports. But they still couldn't figure out any real excuse for their existence. Then finally, one of them hit on a solution: 'Why don't we just shut down the whole plant, fire the workers, and move operations to Poland?'"

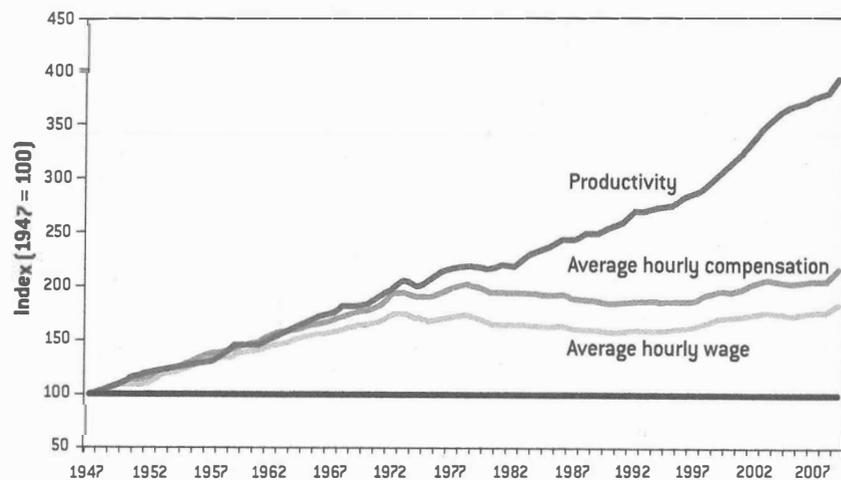
Generally speaking, extra managers are hired with the ostensible purpose of improving efficiency. But in this case, there was little to be improved; the workers themselves had boosted efficiency about as much as it was possible to do. But the managers were hired anyway. What this suggests is that what we are really dealing with here has nothing to do with efficiency but everything to do with changing understandings of the moral responsibilities of corporations. From roughly 1945 to 1975, there was what is sometimes referred to as a "Keynesian bargain" between workers, employers, and government—and part of the tacit understanding was that increases in worker productivity would indeed be matched by increases in worker compensation. A glance at the diagram on the next page confirms that this was exactly what happened. In the 1970s, the two began to part ways, with compensation remaining largely flat, and productivity taking off like a rocket (see figure 7).

These figures are for the United States, but similar trends can be observed in virtually all industrialized countries.

Where did the profits from this increased productivity go? Well, much of it, as we are often reminded, ended up swelling the fortunes of the wealthiest 1 percent: investors, executives, and the upper echelons of the professional-managerial classes. But if we take the Elephant Tea factory as a microcosm for the corporate world as a whole, it becomes obvious that wasn't all that happened. Another considerable chunk of the benefits of increased productivity went to creating entirely new and basically pointless professional-managerial positions, usually—as we've seen in the case of universities—accompanied by small armies of equally pointless administrative staff. As we have seen so often, first the staff is allocated and *then* someone has to figure out what, if anything, they will actually do.

In other words, the feudal analogy is not even really an analogy. Managerialism has become the pretext for creating a new covert form of feudalism, where wealth and position are allocated not on economic but

Figure 7



Source: EPI analysis of Bureau of Economic Analysis and Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

political grounds—or rather, where every day it's more difficult to tell the difference between what can be considered “economic” and what is “political.”

Another classic feature of medieval feudalism is the creation of hierarchies of ranked nobles or officials: a European king might grant land to a baron in exchange for providing a certain number of knights to his army; the baron, in turn, would grant most of that land to some local vassal on the same basis, and so on. Such devolution would proceed, through a process of “sub-infeudation,” down to local lords of the manor. This was the process by which the elaborate ranks of dukes, earls, viscounts, and so forth that still exist in places like England originally came into being. In India and China, matters were typically more indirect; the usual practice was to simply allocate the income from a certain territory or province to officials who were likely to actually live in the nearest city, but for our purposes here, the result is not so very different.²⁸

As a general principle, I would propose the following: in any political-economic system based on appropriation and distribution of goods, rather than on actually making, moving, or maintaining them, and therefore, where a substantial portion of the population is engaged in funneling resources up and down the system, that portion of the population will tend to organize itself into an elaborately ranked hierarchy of multiple tiers (at least three, and sometimes ten, twelve, or even more). As a corollary, I would add that within those hierarchies, the line between retainers and subordinates will often become blurred, since obeisance to superiors is often a key part of the job description. Most of the important players are lords and vassals at the same time.

how managerial feudalism manifests itself in the creative industries through an endless multiplication of intermediary executive ranks

Every dean needs his vice-dean and sub-dean, and each of them needs a management team, secretaries, admin staff; all of them

only there to make it harder for us to teach, to research, to carry out the most basic functions of our jobs.

—anonymous British academic²⁹

The rise of managerial feudalism has produced a similar infatuation with hierarchy for its own sake. We have already seen the phenomenon of managers whose job it is to manage other managers, or the elaborate mechanisms Irene described whereby banks set up a hierarchy of offices to endlessly rarify what's ultimately an arbitrary and meaningless set of data. Often, this kind of managerial sub-infeudation is a direct result of the unleashing of "market forces." Recall here Kurt, with whom we began chapter 1, who was working for a subcontractor to a subcontractor to a subcontractor to the German military. His position was the direct outcome of market reforms supposedly designed to make government more efficient.

The same phenomenon can be observed in a dozen different fields. For instance, the multiplication of levels of managers whose basic job is to sell things to one another has come to dominate almost all "creative industries"—from books, where editors at academic presses in many cases don't even read half the books they are supposed to have edited, because they are expected to spend most of their time marketing things to other editors; to the visual arts, where recent decades have seen the rise of a whole new stratum of managerial intermediaries called curators, whose work assembling the work of artists is now often considered of equal value and importance to the art itself; to even journalism, where the relationship between editors and reporters has been complicated by an additional level of "producers."³⁰ Film and television have fared particularly badly. At least, so it seems from testimonials within the industry. Where once the Hollywood studio system relied on a relatively simple relation between producers, directors, and writers, recent decades have witnessed an apparently endless process of managerial sub-infeudation, resulting in a daunting array of producers, subproducers, executive producers, consultants, and the like, all in constant search for something, anything, to actually do.³¹

I received several testimonies from workers in TV "development"—that is, small companies in the business of coming up with programming ideas to pitch to larger ones. Here's an example that illustrates just how much the introduction of market elements within the process has changed things:

Owen: I work in development. This part of the television industry has expanded exponentially in the last twenty years. TV used to be commissioned by one channel controller who would ask producers he liked to make whatever shows they wanted. There was no "development." There was just making the show.

Now every company in TV (and film, too) has its own development team, staffed by three to ten people, and there are more and more commissioners whose job it is to listen to their pitches. None of these people make TV shows.

I have not gotten a show sold for four years. Not because we are particularly bad but because of nepotism and politics. That's four years that have amounted to precisely nothing. I could have sat with my thumb up my arse for four years, and nothing would be any different. Or I could have been making films.

I would say the average development team gets one show commissioned every three to four months. It's bullshit through and through.

Such complaints are similar to what one regularly hears in academia: it's not just the senselessness of the process that rankles, but as with all box-ticking rituals, the fact that one ends up spending so much more time pitching, assessing, monitoring, and arguing about what one does than one spends actually doing it. In film, television, and even radio, the situation becomes even more distressing, because owing to internal marketization of the industry, a substantial chunk of those who work in it spend their time working on shows that do not and will never exist. Apollonia, for instance, did a stint for a development team pitching ideas for reality TV shows with titles such as *Snipped* (where men voted too promiscuous by the audience underwent a vasectomy live on the air), *Transsexual*

Housewives, and—this was a real title—*Too Fat to Fuck*. All were cast and promoted, even though not one was ever produced.

Apollonia: What would happen is we would come up with ideas together and then sell them to networks. Which involves sourcing the talent, building a sizzle video (a thirty-second promo for something that doesn't exist yet), and then shopping that sizzle around to try and sell it to a network. While I was there, we didn't sell any shows, presumably because my boss was an idiot.

Apollonia did all the work, so that the Vice President and the Senior Vice President—who were the only other members of her team—could helicopter around the city meeting other vice presidents and senior vice presidents for lunch, and generally acting like high-powered media executives. During the time she worked there, the result of such efforts was precisely zero.

How did this happen? And what happens when an idea *is* accepted? One current Hollywood scriptwriter was kind enough to send me his insider's analysis of what went wrong and how things now play out:

Oscar: In the Golden Age of Hollywood, from the 1920s to the 1950s, studios were vertical operations. They were also companies headed by one man, who took all the decisions and who banked his own money. They were not yet owned by conglomerates, and they had no board of directors. These studio "heads" were far from intellectuals, or artists, but they had gut instincts, took risks, and had an innate sense about what made a movie work. Instead of armies of executives, they would actually hire armies of writers for their story department. Those writers were on the payroll, supervised by the producers, and everything was in-house: actors, directors, set designers, actual film stages, etc.

Starting in the sixties, he continues, this system came under attack as vulgar, tyrannical, and stifling of artistic talent. For a while, the resulting ferment did allow some innovative visions to shine through, but the ultimate result was a corporatization far more stifling than anything that had come before.

Oscar: There were openings in the sixties and seventies (New Hollywood: Beatty, Scorsese, Coppola, Stone), as the film industry was in complete chaos at the time. Then, in the 1980s, corporate monopolies took over studios. It was a big deal, and I think a sign of things to come, when Coca-Cola purchased Columbia Pictures (for a short while). From then on, movies wouldn't be made by those that liked them or even watched them. (Clearly, this ties in with the advent of neoliberalism and a larger shift in society.)

The system that eventually emerged was suffused with bullshit on every level. The process of "development" ("development hell," as writers prefer to call it) now ensures that each script has to pass through not just one but usually a half dozen clone-like executives with titles such as (Oscar lists some) "Managing Director of International Content and Talent, Executive Managing Director, Executive Vice President for Development, and, my favorite, Executive Creative Vice President for Television." Most are armed with MBAs in marketing and finance but know almost nothing about the history or technicalities of film or TV. Their professional lives, like that of Apollonia's boss, seem to consist almost entirely of writing emails and having ostensibly high-powered lunches with other executives bearing equally elaborate titles. As a result, what was once the fairly straightforward business of pitching and selling a script idea descends into a labyrinthine game of self-marketing that can go on for years before a project is finally approved.

It's important to emphasize that this happens not just when an independent writer tries to sell a script idea to a studio on "spec," but even in-house, for writers already inside a studio or production company. Oscar is obliged to work with an "incubator," who plays a role roughly equivalent to that of a literary agent, helping him prepare script proposals that the incubator will then pass to his own network of top executives, either within or outside the company. His example is of another television show, though he emphasizes the process is exactly the same for movies:

Oscar: So I "develop" a series project with this "incubator" . . . writing a "bible": a sixty-page document that details the project's concept,

characters, episodes, plots, themes, etc. Once that's done comes the carnival of pitching. The incubator and I propose the project to a slew of broadcasters, financing funds, and production companies. These people are, purportedly, at the top of the food chain. You could spend months in the vacuum of communications with them—emails unanswered and so on. Phone calls are considered pushy, if not borderline harassment. Their jobs are to read and seek out projects—yet they couldn't be more unreachable if they worked from a shack in the middle of the Amazon Jungle.

Pitching is a strategic ballet. There is a ritual delay of at least a week between each communication. After a month or two, however, one executive might take enough of an interest to agree to a face-to-face meeting:

Oscar: In the meetings, they ask you to pitch them the project all over again (although they're supposed to have already read it). Once that's done, they usually ask you prewritten one-size-fits-all questions filled with buzzwords . . . It's always very noncommittal, and without exception, they tell you about all the other executives that would need to approve the project in case it would be decided to move forward.

Then you go, and they forget about you . . . and you have to follow up, and the loop begins anew. In fact, an executive will seldom tell you yes or no. If he says yes, and then the project goes nowhere or else gets made and bombs, it's his responsibility. If he says no and then it succeeds somewhere else, he will get blamed for the oversight. Above all, the executive loathes taking responsibility.

The game, then, is to keep the ball in the air as long as possible. Just to option an idea, which involves a mere token payment, typically requires approval from three other branches of the company. Once the option papers are signed, a new process of stalling begins:

Oscar: They will tell me the document they optioned is too long to send around; they need a shorter pitch document. Or suddenly they

also want some changes to the concept. So we have a meeting, we talk it over, brainstorm.

A lot of this process is just them justifying their jobs. Everybody in the room will have a different opinion just for the sake of having a reason to be there. It's a cacophony of ideas, and they talk in the loosest, most conceptual terms possible. They pride themselves on being savvy marketers and incisive thinkers, but it's all generalities.

The executive loves to talk in metaphors, and he loves to expose his theories about how the audience thinks, what it wants, how it reacts to storytelling. Most fancy themselves corporatized Joseph Campbells³²—with no doubt, here again, an influence from the corporate “philosophies” of Google, Facebook, and other such behemoths.

Or they'll say “I'm not saying you should do X, but maybe you should do X”; both tell you to do something and not to do it at the same time. The more you press for details, the blurrier it gets. I try to decipher their gibberish and tell them what I think they mean.

Alternately, the executive will totally, wholeheartedly agree with everything the writer proposes; then as soon as the meeting is over, he'll send out an email instructing her to do the opposite. Or wait a few weeks and inform her the entire project must be reconceived. After all, if all he did was shake the writer's hand and allow her to get to work, there'd be little point of having an Executive Creative Vice President to begin with—let alone five or six of them.

In other words, film and TV production is now not all that entirely different from the accountancy companies mis-training employees to stall the distribution of PPI payments, or Dickens's case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*. The longer the process takes, the greater the excuse for the endless multiplication of intermediary positions, and the more money is siphoned off before it has any chance to get to those doing the actual work.

Oscar: And *all this* for a (now) fifteen-page document. Now, extrapolate that to more people, a script, a director, producers, even more

executives, the shoot, the edit—and you have a picture of the insanity of the industry.

At this point, we are entering into what might be termed the airy reaches of the bullshit economy, and therefore, that part least accessible to study. We cannot know what Executive Creative Vice Presidents are really thinking. Even those who are secretly convinced their jobs are pointless—and for all we know, that's pretty much all of them—are unlikely to admit this to an anthropologist. So one can only guess.

But the effects of their actions can be observed every time we go to the cinema. "There's a reason," says Oscar, "why movies and TV series—to put it plainly—suck."

• • •

The rule of finance has seen the insertion of competitive games of this sort at every level of corporate life, or, for that matter, within institutions such as universities or charities that had previously been seen as the very antithesis of corporations. Perhaps in some it hasn't reached that zenith of bullshit which is Hollywood. But everywhere, managerial feudalism ensures that thousands of hours of creative effort will literally come to nothing. Take the domain of scientific research, or higher education once again. If a grant agency funds only 10 percent of all applications, that means that 90 percent of the work that went into preparing applications was just as pointless as the work that went into making the promo video for Apollonia's doomed reality TV show *Too Fat to Fuck*. (Even more so, really, since one can rarely make such an amusing anecdote out of it afterward.) This is an extraordinary squandering of human creative energy. Just to give a sense of the scale of the problem: one recent study determined that European universities spend roughly 1.4 billion euros a year on failed grant applications³³—money that, obviously, might otherwise have been available to fund research.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that one of the main reasons for technological stagnation over the last several decades is that scientists, too, have

to spend so much of their time vying with one another to convince potential donors they already know what they are going to discover.³⁴ Finally, the endless internal meeting rituals where Dynamic Brand Coordinators and East Coast Vision Managers³⁵ for private corporations display their PowerPoint presentations, mind maps, and graphics-rich glossy reports, are all essentially exercises in internal marketing as well.

We've already seen how, internally, large numbers of ancillary bullshit jobs tend to cluster around such internal marketing rituals: such as those hired to prepare, edit, copy, or provide graphics for the presentations or reports. It seems to me all this is an intrinsic feature of managerial feudalism. Where once universities, corporations, movie studios, and the like had been governed by a combination of relatively simple chains of command and informal patronage networks, we now have a world of funding proposals, strategic vision documents, and development team pitches—allowing for the endless elaborations of new and ever more pointless levels of managerial hierarchy, staffed by men and women with elaborate titles, fluent in corporate jargon, but who either have no firsthand experience of what it's like to actually do the work they are supposed to be managing, or who have done everything in their power to forget it.

conclusion, with a brief return to the question of three levels of causation

At this point, we can return to President Obama's remarks about health care reform and allow the pieces to fall together. The "one million, two million, three million jobs" that Obama was so concerned to preserve were created, specifically, by the very sorts of processes we have just been describing: the seemingly endless accrual of layer upon layer of unnecessary administrative and managerial positions resulting from the aggressive application of market principles, in this case, to the health care industry. It's a slightly different situation than most of those we've been looking at, since the US health care system, almost uniquely among those of wealthy countries, was always mainly private. Despite this—even more

so after Obama, actually—it shows the exact same entanglement of public and private, economic and political, and the same role of government in guaranteeing private profits, as one is beginning to see in Canada or Europe with the partial privatization of national health systems. In every case (and in this case of US health care reform this was done quite self-consciously), ensuring that at least some of those profits are redistributed to creating well-paid, prestigious, but ultimately bullshit office jobs.

I began the chapter by speaking of different levels of causality. The reasons why individuals create, or accept, bullshit jobs are by no means the same as the reasons why such jobs will tend to proliferate in certain times and places rather than others. The deeper structural forces that drive such historical changes, in turn, are not the same as the cultural and political factors that determine how the public, and politicians, react to them. This chapter has been largely about structural forces. No doubt bullshit jobs have long been with us; but recent years have seen an enormous proliferation of such pointless forms of employment, accompanied by an ever-increasing bullshitization of real jobs—and despite a popular misconception that all this is somehow tied to the rise of the service sector, this proliferation appears to have everything to do with the growing importance of finance.

Corporate capitalism—that is, that form of capitalism in which production is largely carried out within large bureaucratically organized firms—first emerged in America and Germany in the late nineteenth century. During most of the twentieth century, large industrial corporations were very much independent of, and to some degree even hostile to, the interests of what was called “high finance.” Executives in firms dedicated to producing breakfast cereals, or agricultural machinery, saw themselves as having far more in common with production-line workers in their own firms than they did with speculators and investors, and the internal organization of firms reflected this. It was only in the 1970s that the financial sector and the executive classes—that is, the upper echelons of the various corporate bureaucracies—effectively fused. CEOs began paying themselves in stock options, moving back and forth between utterly unrelated companies, priding themselves on the number of employees they could

lay off. This set off a vicious cycle whereby workers, who no longer felt any loyalty to corporations that felt none toward them, had to be increasingly monitored, managed, and surveilled.

On a deeper level, this realignment set off a whole series of trends that had enormous implications on virtually everything that was to follow, from changes in political sensibilities to changes in directions of technological research. To take just one particularly revealing example: back in the 1970s, banks were still the only companies that were enthusiastic about the use of computers. There seems to be an intrinsic connection between the financialization of the economy, the blossoming of information industries, and the proliferation of bullshit jobs.³⁶

The results were not just some sort of recalibration or readjustment of existing forms of capitalism. In many ways, it marked a profound break with what had come before. If the existence of bullshit jobs seems to defy the logic of capitalism, one possible reason for their proliferation might be that the existing system *isn't* capitalism—or at least, isn't any sort of capitalism that would be recognizable from the works of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or, for that matter, Ludwig von Mises or Milton Friedman. It is increasingly a system of rent extraction where the internal logic—the system's “laws of motion,” as the Marxists like to say—are profoundly different from capitalism, since economic and political imperatives have come to largely merge. In many ways, it resembles classic medieval feudalism, displaying the same tendency to create endless hierarchies of lords, vassals, and retainers. In other ways—notably in its managerialist ethos—it is profoundly different. And the whole apparatus, rather than replacing old-fashioned industrial capitalism, is instead superimposed on top of it, blending together in a thousand points in a thousand different ways. Hardly surprising, then, that the situation seems so confusing that even those directly in the middle don't really know quite what to make of it.

This was the structural level. In the next two chapters, I will turn to the cultural and political level. Here, of course, it is impossible to be neutral. Even to ask why it is that the existence of forms of pointless employment is not seen as a great social problem is to at least suggest that it really ought to be. Clearly, the original essay acted as a kind of catalyst in this

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 groups¹) 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

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, topsy-turvy 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,² 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

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 money-lenders, 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 selfie sticks. Selfie 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

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 work³ 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 cannot 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

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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

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.⁶ 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.

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.⁷

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.

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

Data Perfecter: 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.⁸ 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

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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

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.¹²

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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:¹³

- 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.¹⁴

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,¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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

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

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.¹⁹

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

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.²⁰ 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 they 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!?

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,²¹ 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.²² 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

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 “nurturance” 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

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.²³ 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”).²⁴ 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

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.”²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ And these are called

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.²⁸

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 “achiev[ing] mastery of one’s baser desires”²⁹ 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 Misrule 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.³⁰ 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

of their own. They were expected to live their entire lives effectively as unfinished human beings.³¹ 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 Anatomie 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 filleth the land with such store of mendicants . . . that in short time it is like to grow to great poverty and scarceness.³²

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 *Anatomie 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.”³³ 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 workfare 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.)³⁴

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 Mammon, 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

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, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like hell-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.³⁵

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”)³⁶—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, Chartism, 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-

erful 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.”³⁷

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.”³⁸ 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, were really just a reflection of the common sense of the time:³⁹ “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

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.⁴⁰ 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 tongue's end the labor slang of Denis Kearney, the infidel ribaldry of [atheist pamphleteer] Robert Ingersoll, the Socialistic theories of Karl Marx.”⁴¹

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.)⁴²

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.⁴³ 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

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.”⁴⁴

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,”⁴⁵ 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,⁴⁶ 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 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,

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 allaying 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

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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

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*.⁵⁰ 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

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 Malthusian 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

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.⁵¹ 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."⁵²

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

indiscipline of the descendants of slaves, just as Japanese workers were taught to disdain Koreans, or English workers, Irish.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵

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, sadism, 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!”⁵⁶

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”

Events," *International Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 77–93; also M. Klar and T. Kasser, "Some Benefits of Being an Activist," *Political Psychology* 30, no. 5 (2009): 755–77. The study, however, focuses on street actions; it would be interesting to see if this also extends to less embodied forms of protest.

20. Many, of course, then quit in horror and disgust. But we don't know the real numbers. Rachel suggested to me that many young people, unless in expensive metropolises like London, were less inclined to stick it out than their parents had been simply because the cost of housing and life in general is so ridiculously inflated that nowadays even an entry-level corporate job is not going to guarantee stability and security anymore.

Chapter 5: Why Are Bullshit Jobs Proliferating?

1. Louis D. Johnston, "History Lessons: Understanding the Declines in Manufacturing," *MinnPost*, last modified February 22, 2012, www.minnpost.com/macro-micro-minnesota/2012/02/history-lessons-understanding-decline-manufacturing.
2. It would be vain to try to list them all but Reich's book was *The Work of Nations* (1992), and the classic statement on immaterial labor is Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), though it became famous largely through Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (1994, 2000), which predicted the revolt of the computer geeks.
3. There are many such studies. For one example, see Western and Olin Wright 1994.
4. I had a friend who was addicted to heroin and went on a methadone program. Bored of waiting for doctors to decide he was "ready" to begin reducing his dosage, he started pouring off a little of the drug each day until, some months later, he was able to announce triumphantly that he was clean. His doctor was furious, and told him only professionals have the competence to decide when he should have done this. It turns out the program was funded on the basis of the number of patients they served and had no incentive to actually get anyone off drugs.

One should never underestimate the power of institutions to try to preserve themselves. One explanation for the thirty-year impasse of the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process"—if at this point one can even call it that—is that on both sides, there are now powerful institutional structures which would

lose their entire *raison d'être* if the conflict ended, but also, a vast "peace apparatus" of NGOs and UN bureaucrats whose careers have become entirely dependent on maintaining the fiction that a "peace process" is, in fact, going on.

5. UKIP doesn't count.
6. To head off any possible accusations of essentialism: I am proposing these three levels as modes of analysis, and not suggesting the existence of autonomous levels of social reality that in any sense exist in their own right.
7. I sometimes ask my students, when discussing Marx, "What was the unemployment level in ancient Greece? Or medieval China?" The answer, of course, is zero. Having a large proportion of the population who wish to work, but cannot, appears to be peculiar to what Marx liked to call "the capitalist mode of production." But it appears to be, like public debt, a structural feature of the system which must nonetheless be treated as if it were a problem to be solved.
8. To take a random example, the famous March on Washington in 1963, at which Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, was officially called the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom: demands included not just antidiscrimination measures but also a full-employment economy, jobs programs, and a minimum-wage increase" (Touré F. Reed, "Why Liberals Separate Race from Class," *Jacobin* 8.22.2015, www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/bernie-sanders-black-lives-matter-civil-rights-movement/), accessed June 10, 2017.
9. David Sirota, "Mr. Obama Goes to Washington," *Nation*, June, 26, 2006.
10. Of course, some might argue that Obama was being disingenuous here, and downplaying the political power of the private health industry, in the same way that politicians justified bank bailouts by claiming it was in the interest of millions of minor bank employees who might otherwise have been laid off—a concern they most certainly do not evince when, say, transit or textile workers are faced with unemployment. But the very fact that he was willing to make the argument is revealing.
11. To those who accuse me of being a paranoid conspiracy theorist for suggesting that government plays any conscious role in creating and maintaining bullshit jobs, I hereby rest my case. Unless you think Obama was lying about his true motives (in which case, who exactly is the conspiracy theorist?), we must allow that those governing us are, in fact, aware that "market solutions" create inefficiencies, and unnecessary jobs in particular, and at least in certain contexts look with favor on them for that very reason.

12. I might note in passing that the same is true of many orthodox Marxists, who argue that since by Marx's definition all labor within the capitalist mode of production must either produce surplus value, or aid in the reproduction of the apparatus of value-creation, the appearance that a job is useless must be an illusion based on a false folk theory of social value on the part of the jobholder. This is really just as much a statement of faith as the libertarian insistence that the market can never be responsible for social problems. One might argue whether this position was really held by Marx but even this is basically a theological debate. It ultimately depends on whether one accepts the premise that capitalism is a totalizing system: that is, that within a capitalist system social value is determined only by the market system. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.
13. This is then preemptive. I acknowledge that historically, for an author to head off obvious objections almost never succeeds in stopping future critics from raising those objections anyway; generally, they just pretend their objections were never anticipated and ignore any counterarguments to them that might have been made. But I figured it was worth a try.
14. www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2013/08/labourlabor-markets-0. Accessed April 1, 2017.
15. For instance, it contained glaring flaws in basic logic: the author attempted to refute my argument that giving workers security and leisure time will often result in social unrest by noting unrest by workers who did not have security and leisure time. Even those who have received no training in formal logic, and therefore have never heard of the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent, but still have basic common sense, are generally aware that the statement "if A then B" is not the same as "if B then A." As Lewis Carroll adroitly put it, "You might as well say 'I see what I eat' is the same as 'I eat what I see'".
16. The piece has no byline.
17. If you ask: "Are you really saying the market is always right?" they will often reply, "Yes, I am saying the market is always right."
18. Instead, it's always assumed the burden of proof is on those who question such assertions.
19. I note in passing—and this will be important later—that while the number of administrators has gone up, the real explosion has been in administrative *staff*. This figure does not, I should emphasize, refer to caterers or cleaners, who were, in fact, being largely outsourced during this period, but to administrative underlings.

20. Most of the changes that did directly affect teaching, such as, say, class chat rooms, were managed by the (proportionally declining numbers of) teachers themselves.
21. Some phrases generated by the random Financial Bullshit Generator, accessed July 4, 2017, www.makebullshit.com/financial-bullshit-generator.php.
22. There are other enterprises, of course, that are basically fraudulent in nature—or, in some cases, are dedicated to providing the means for others to commit fraud. A number of testimonials I received were from college paper writers. There have always been smart students or graduates willing to pick up a little cash writing term papers for lazy classmates, but in America in recent decades, this has coalesced into an entire industry, coordinated on a national level, employing thousands of full-time paper writers. One of them suggested to me that the industry was the predictable result of the convergence of credentialism—the fact that one now needed a degree of some kind to gain access to almost all desirable jobs in America—and business logic.

Barry: When I first started this work, I imagined I would be constantly learning fascinating, new information about a broad array of subjects. While I have had the opportunity to write the rare, interesting essay on queer theory or the history of Roman blood sport, I've found that I'm largely writing countless papers about business and marketing.

After some consideration, this makes a lot of sense to me. Higher education is constantly justified on the basis that it is an *investment in your future*. The crippling load of student debt is worth it because it is going to allow for a stable six-figure income someday. It's hard for me to imagine that many folks are studying to get a Bachelor of Business Administration because it's their passion—I'm pretty sure they're just jumping through the hoops to get the degree that they see as their path to a high-paying job. As for my clients, I think they see themselves as willing to increase their level of investment in return for a lower workload and guaranteed good marks. The amount I charge for writing a few key term papers is only a tiny fraction of the average tuition cost.

This makes sense to me, too. If you're actually paying attention in business courses when the professor tells you that it's normal and even admirable to attempt to get the greatest benefit for the least amount of investment, and

- that same professor then assigns you a paper, there's really no reason not to hire someone else to write it if that's the most efficient thing to do.
23. For the record, I don't know which of the four it was.
 24. Another reason sometimes cited for the multiplication of unnecessary levels of executive or administrative staff is protection from the threat of lawsuits. Here's the account of one bank employee, Aaron: "It's common to now see 'Chief of Staff' roles in large financial institutions . . . they are simply an ineffectual buffer between senior managers and any potential litigation from regulators or disgruntled employees. This buffer never works because in litigation, the plaintiff will *always* name the senior manager in the court papers as this maximizes the likelihood the case gets settled to avoid embarrassment. So what do the Chiefs of Staff end up doing? Well, they tend to organize meetings with senior managers and their leadership teams and commission lots of pointless management consultant surveys to try and work out why morale is so low (a question that could be answered much more easily by simply asking employees what they think. You often see them organizing charity days and puff pieces in newspapers or journals." According to Aaron, HR staff are now less likely to fulfill such roles, as they, too, fear legal liability. Clearly, the situation varies in different banks.
 25. It's probably relevant, admittedly, that the economics department in my college was entirely dominated by Marxists; the phrase goes back at least to Perry Anderson (1974).
 26. Much of this argument and several of the examples are taken from the first chapter of Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 3–44.
 27. Of course, this is not the way things are represented, and, naturally, in any branch of industry defined as "creative," whether software development or graphic design, production is typically outsourced to small groups (the celebrated Silicon Valley start-ups) or individuals (casualized independent contractors) who do work autonomously. But such people are often largely uncompensated. For a good recent critical history of managerialism, see Hanlon, 2016.
 28. Definitions of feudalism vary, from any economic system based on tribute-taking, to the specific system prevalent in Northern Europe during the High Middle Ages, in which land was granted in exchange for military service in ostensibly voluntary relations of vassalage—a system which outside Europe is documented mainly in Japan. From this perspective most other

- Asian empires and kingdoms operated with, as Weber called them "patrimonial prebendal" systems where lords or important officials collected the income from a certain territory but did not necessarily occupy or directly administer it, an approach European kings also later attempted to impose when they had the power. All this could be endlessly dissected but here I really only want to make the point that in such systems, where there are people who are primary producers, and others whose basic job it is to move those things around, the latter almost invariably end up organized into very elaborate chains of command. The nineteenth-century Ganda kingdom in East Africa might seem a particularly telling example in this regard: all farming and most productive work was done by women; most men, as a result, ended up part of an elaborate hierarchy of titled officials running from the village to the king, or as flunkies or retainers to such officials. When too many idle men accumulated, rulers would start wars or sometimes simply round thousands up and massacre them. (For the best recent synthesis on feudalism from a Marxist perspective, Wood, 2002; on the Ganda, Ray, 1991.)
29. Cited as an anonymous source in Alex Preston, "The War Against Humanities in Britain's Universities," *Guardian*, Education Section, 1, March 29, 2015.
 30. One might argue that Marcel Duchamp, by placing a urinal in a gallery and declaring it a work of art, opened the door to the entry of managerialism into the arts. At any rate he eventually became horrified by the door he'd opened up, and spent the last decades of his life playing chess, which, he argued, was also one of the few things he could do that could not possibly be commodified.
 31. Many suggest to me one reason for the dishwater mediocrity or even plain incoherence of so many contemporary movie scripts is that each of these supernumeraries will typically insist on changing at least a line or two, just to be able to say they had some influence on the final product. I first heard about this when after seeing the endlessly terrible 2008 remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The entire plot seemed to be designed to lead up to a moment of realization, where the alien comes to understand the true nature of humanity (that they are not basically evil, just very bad at handling grief). Yet when the moment came, the alien never actually said this. I asked a friend in the industry how this could have happened and he assured me that the line I was expecting was almost certainly in the original

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 Else, “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.
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.
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.
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. The reference to Marketers is however taken from an earlier (2012) version of the same paper, with the same title, published at https://eighty-thousand-hours-wp-production.s3.amazonaws.com/2014/12/TaxationAndTheAllocationOfTalent_preview.pdf, 16.
14. Eilis 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/nefoundation/8c16eabdbadf83ca79_ojm6b0fzh.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 Frase's reply to that piece (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://wtonchronicle.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).
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 stuck 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.
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, "Manners, 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 Hajnal (1965, 1982), Laslett (1972, 1977, 1983, 1984), Stone (1977), Kassmaul (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 Josiah 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" (Hanlon 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://jamaica-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