



Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Jürgen Rudolph

Senior Lecturer & Academic Partner Liaison, Kaplan Higher Education Singapore

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2018.1.2.17>

Apologies for the foul language! The title of the book under review could easily be construed as a marketing ploy to increase book sales (comparable to the 'Complete Idiot's' and 'for Dummies' guides). To immediately counter such a first impression and sneaking suspicion, the reader may rest assured that this is a serious, important and excellent book by a famous anthropology professor, currently at the London School of Economics (and the author of other exquisite books on *Debt: The First 5,000 years* and *The Utopia of Rules: Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*).

The first thought a reader of JALT may have could well be bemusement – how did a book with such a title, and with such fecal language ("bullshit jobs", "shit jobs", "bullshit society", "bullshitization", and my favourite: "de-bullshitization") ever get reviewed in a purportedly serious Journal on Applied Learning & Teaching? And what does such a book have to do with teaching and learning in the first place? I will provide a more elaborate answer to these admittedly good questions in the course of this review. A short, preliminary response would be that the book contains many academic examples of BS jobs – something our esteemed readers may wish to avoid. Moreover, and even more importantly, with a heightened emphasis on graduate employability, we would not want our students and graduates to end up in pointless jobs, and be able to prepare them for, and point them to, more meaningful professions and activities. In other words, we would not want to be part of a BS education that prepares for BS jobs!

Graeber's book is based on his 2013 essay "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" that caused an internet sensation, and within weeks, was translated into more than a dozen languages. The essay and its easily-relatable title hit a raw nerve and images of people looking busy, but secretly checking their social media accounts, immediately came to mind. In 2015, an anonymous group plastered the London Underground with quotations from the essay (see photos in this review).

Graeber conducted substantial qualitative research that enriches the text with many quotable testimonies and quite a few great stories. He analysed more than 250 thoughtful and detailed responses resulting from a Twitter request



Figure 1: Photo from London Underground, 2015 (England, 2015).

and also as a response to the original essay, and set up an email account [doihaveabsjoborwhat@gmail.com](mailto:doihaveabsjoborwhat@gmail.com) (and also downloaded 124 descriptions people offered about their jobs in online discussions of his essay). But at the risk of stating the obvious, Graeber's is an unabashedly polemical work. His important book is about a "neglected aspect of the world of work" that constitutes "a real social problem" (146) – "one that most people don't even acknowledge exists" (270).

To be economical, and less offensive to our more sensitive readers (who have probably long stopped reading at this point), I shall henceforth largely abbreviate the subject matter as 'BS jobs', but regrettably, fecal language cannot be avoided altogether. A BS job is defined as a "form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (9-10). If a BS job disappeared tomorrow, it may not only make no difference to the world, but perhaps even make it a better place.

A great example of a BS job is one that requires the employee (a subcontractor to the German military) to rent a car and drive up to 500km to oversee a person's computer being moved five metres from one room to another. Predominantly, BS jobs are in the administrative, financial and information sectors, and some of Graeber's favourite examples of BS jobs are hedge fund managers, political consultants, marketing gurus, lobbyists and corporate lawyers. (My corporate lawyer wife begs to differ.) However, Graeber's key characteristic of a BS job is phenomenological, via self-identification, i.e. if you feel your job is BS, it probably is; and conversely, if you feel that your job is not BS, then it is not.

While BS jobs are pointless, they are different from "shit jobs" (henceforth abbreviated as 'S jobs'). While BS jobs often pay well, S jobs are usually not BS; "they typically involve work that needs to be done and is clearly of benefit to society; it's just that the workers who do them are paid and treated badly" (14). S jobs "tend to be blue collar and pay by the hour", whereas BS jobs "tend to be white collar and salaried" (15).

Remarkably, Graeber hypothesizes that the social value of work is "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)" (196). And he can cite studies on the social return on investment that show, for instance, that city bankers (with an annual salary of £5 million) destroy much social value, while nursery workers (with an approximate salary of £11,500) generate quite a bit of it (211). In other words, BS jobs 'take' more from society than they 'give' to it.

There may not only be a proliferation of BS jobs, but we may, as a consequence, live in a BS society (23). Signs of a 'bullshitization' of our economy are that "more than half of working hours in American offices" are spent on BS, and the problem may be getting worse (24). I should immediately mention here that Graeber's statistics could be regarded as ad hoc empiricism and should be, in my view, taken with a big pinch of salt. He refers to a YouGov poll of British people in 2015 and another one in the Netherlands – 37% of the Brits and 40% of the Dutch stated that they believed their jobs had no reason to exist. I find his qualitative testimonies far more compelling.

Graeber comes up with a hilarious five-fold taxonomy of BS jobs: Flunkies; Goons; Duct Tapers; Box Tickers; and Taskmasters. Flunkies or "feudal retainers" are unnecessary subordinates that are supposed to hang around and make the bosses look or feel important, such as doormen, underemployed receptionists (with silent phones), or useless secretaries or administrative assistants (with time to watch YouTube all day). Goons refer to people "whose jobs have an aggressive element" and who sell people things they neither need nor want, like telemarketers or PR agency employees (36).

Duct Tapers are staff whose jobs exist only because they "solve a problem that ought not to exist" (40) – for instance, IT staff who are hired to patch or bridge major flaws that their bosses are too lazy or inept to fix. Box Tickers are employees who "allow an organization to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing" (45) –

like the PR consultant whose reports nobody reads. Finally, taskmasters are unnecessary superiors who assign work to people who do not need management, and thus are the opposite of flunkies (unnecessary subordinates). In the worst case, taskmasters become BS generators whose role is to create BS tasks for others, to supervise BS, and to create new BS jobs (51).

In addition to the five categories, there are complex multiform BS jobs. For instance, a "flak catcher" is a combination of a flunky and a duct taper – a subordinate "hired to be at the receiving end of often legitimate complaints but who are given that role precisely because they have absolutely no authority to do anything about them" (60).

Graeber's favourite whipping boys are people employed in the financial sector. He variously states that "many of those employed in the banking industry are privately convinced that 99 percent of what banks do is bullshit that does not benefit humanity in any way" (64); that "one could argue that the whole financial sector is a scam of sorts, since it represents itself as largely about directing investments toward profitable opportunities in commerce and industry, when, in fact, it does very little of that... basically smoke and mirrors" (150-151); and, quoting one of his respondents, the "'entire [banking] sector adds no value and is therefore bullshit,' since finance was really just a matter of 'appropriating labor through usury'" (cited in 199).

The psychological aspects of BS jobs can be devastating, inducing "feelings of hopelessness, depression, and self-loathing" (134). Graeber devotes two chapters to this "spiritual violence" (chapters 3 & 4) that is "directed at the essence of what it means to be a human being" (134). We do know from the popular content theories of motivation (Maslow; Herzberg; and McClelland) and the philosophical assumptions of leadership (McGregor's Theory Y) that people are not inherently lazy and do want to contribute something meaningful to society.



Figure 2: Photo from London Underground, 2015 (England, 2015).

BS jobs have a long history (for instance, in the Soviet Union and its satellite states – see further below). However, Graeber observes in "recent years" an enormous proliferation of BS jobs as well as "an ever-increasing bullshitization of real jobs" (190). Such trends appear to *defy the logic of capitalism* which is supposed to be in pursuit of profit

maximisation, forever increasing productivity and ruthlessly eradicating inefficiencies. I found Graeber's answer audacious, yet intuitively convincing: one possible reason for the proliferation of BS jobs "might be that the existing system *isn't* capitalism" (191). It is *managerial feudalism* which, in many ways "resembles classic medieval feudalism, displaying the same tendency to create endless hierarchies of lords, vassals, and retainers" (191). The problem of BS jobs appears to be intrinsically intertwined with the problem of bureaucracy (which is the focus of Graeber's previous book *The Utopia of Rules*). Consequently, the rationale of BS jobs appears to be more political than economic (a population kept busy with make-work is less likely to revolt).

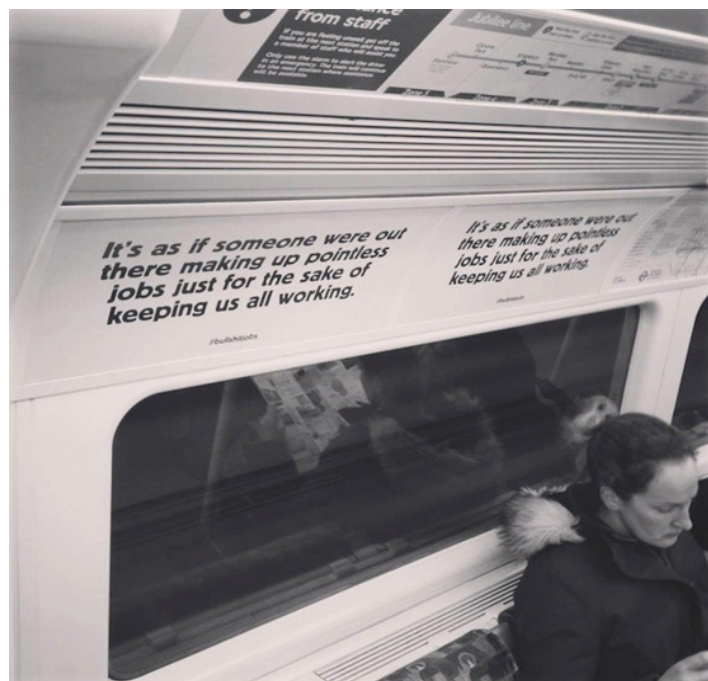


Figure 3: Photo from London Underground, 2015 (England, 2015).

I confess that reading Graeber's original 2013 essay (which is reproduced at the beginning of the book) immediately struck a chord with me. John Maynard Keynes (perhaps Britain's most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century economist), in 1930, predicted that technological advances would enable employees – at least in countries such as the U.S. and the U.K. – to work for only 15 hours a week. A 1960s counterculture slogan was "Let the machines do all the work" (cited in 258), and a newer version is the leftist la la land of 'fully automated luxury communism'. Most of us can testify that this never happened – in Singapore, where our journal is based, people are amongst the 'hardest-working' in the world, apparently clocking around 2,200 hours at work per year on average (and I am also – happily, I hasten to add – writing these lines while on annual leave).

While Keynes's utopian vision may be technically feasible, Graeber argues that through "some strange alchemy no one can quite explain", we have somehow arrived in an inefficient state not completely unlike the Soviet Union, "where employment was considered both a right and a sacred duty" (xvi). A cautionary example of the Soviet excesses of full employment via bogus jobs is that customers had to go through three clerks before buying a loaf of bread. Less extreme examples abound. For instance, in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the public sector was 'featherbedded'

(overstaffed) by social-democratic governments, and during the Great Depression in the U.S., make-work programs were implemented. And Graeber refers to Obama's 'smoking gun' of bullshitisation when the former President explicitly justified his sticking with the US health insurance system by warning that otherwise, up to three million form-filling jobs would be lost.

George Orwell had theorised already in the 1930s: "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" (cited in 245).

From an ecological perspective, a mass reduction of working hours à la Keynes could be a major contribution to saving the planet. However, work appears to be commonly viewed as an end in itself, and there seems to be a consensus "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" (215). The perception of holding a BS job as "morally superior to no work at all" (220) is ironically shared by both the political right and left, with 'more jobs' being perhaps the only political slogan that both sides can agree on (though rightwingers may be more inclined to exclaim 'get a job!').

The perceived moral superiority of work appears to have theological roots. Graeber cites the Genesis, in which, after the Fall, God condemned men: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (cited in 222). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century's revival of Puritanism, work came to be increasingly valued as a form of self-discipline and self-sacrifice. Buckminster Fuller's quote is instructive: "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" (cited in 239).

This leads us to the *paradox of work*: while most people hate their jobs, their "sense of dignity and self-worth is caught up in working for a living" (241). Graeber's analysis goes even further: "Workers... gain feelings of dignity and self-worth *because* they hate their jobs" (242). This goes hand in hand with the unfair stereotype of the lazy and undeserving poor. Instead of directing their frustration at the paradoxical system of work, people often rather busy themselves with their social envy of the 'liberal elite' (a pejorative term used to depict members of the 'ruling classes' who are politically left of centre and perceived to be out of touch with the masses they supposedly support).

Graeber also intriguingly analyses the philosophical roots of the paradox: the Utilitarian "belief that what ultimately motivates human beings has always been, and must always be, the pursuit of wealth, power, comfort, and pleasure", must be complemented by an anti-Utilitarian doctrine (in the vein of Thomas Carlyle's "Gospel of Labour") "of work as self-sacrifice, as valuable precisely *because* it is the place of misery, sadism, emptiness, and despair" (244).

As Graeber has been a distinguished academic for more than two decades (Yale, Goldsmith's College, LSE), he unsurprisingly offers some highly readable illustrations of his theory from the realm of Higher Education. With reference to Ginsberg's *The Fall of the Faculty*, the increase in the numbers and power of university administrators is seen as a "power grab" that majorly distracts from the original mission of universities which is to produce scholarship and train a new generation of scholars (163). In essence, academia had a similar staffing explosion as other sectors. While the work of teaching and research has not changed fundamentally, the masses of additional staff are doing other things. Similar to other sectors, one of the causes of the bullshitisation of universities may be the desire to quantify the unquantifiable. In the logic of managerial feudalism, 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 academic, cited in 182). I found the extensive citations of 'Chloe', a former Academic Dean at a prestigious British university, revelatory:

[A]ll nonexecutive Deans, PVCs [Pro-Vice Chancellors], and other 'strategic' roles in universities are bullshit jobs... An executive PVC or Dean (in other words, s/he who holds the budget) can cajole, coerce, encourage, bully, and negotiate with departments about what they can, ought, or might want to do, using the stick (or carrot) of money. Strategic Deans and other such roles have no carrots or sticks. They are nonexecutive... I was given a 75% full-time equivalent Personal Assistant, a 75% full-time equivalent 'Special Project and Policy Support Officer' and a full-time postdoctoral Research Fellow, *plus* an 'expenses' allowance of twenty thousand pounds. In other words, a shed-load of (public) money went into supporting a bullshit job... I spent two years of my life making up work for myself and for other people (cited in 53-54).

It is to Graeber's credit that he does not offer simplistic solutions to the problem of BS jobs that he so richly describes in his book. I sympathise with his "call for the de-bullshitization of real work rather than firing people in unnecessary positions" (271). Graeber is a self-described (very mild-mannered) anarchist – who is credited with inventing the Occupy movement's slogan 'We are the 99%' – and it is thus unsurprising that he also considers more radical solutions. These include a "mass reduction of working hours or a policy of universal basic income" (270). However, Graeber's point is not to provide solutions, "but to start us thinking and arguing about what a genuine free society might actually be like" (285).

A few critical observations are in order. As was mentioned before in this review, I found the statistics that half of the jobs are BS jobs unconvincing. The samples are from the U.K. and the Netherlands (thus hardly representative for the rest of the world), and when people are asked whether they are making "a meaningful contribution to the world", we are perhaps setting the bar too high as we are not allowing for the possibility of them being modest when they 'no' (and even if the answer is 'no' that does not necessarily mean their jobs are 'BS').

Graeber's qualitative approach is much more successful than his quantitative analysis (and occasionally problematic generalisations). Nonetheless, there is the problem of a skewed convenience sample (people would have needed to read the essay) and selection bias, when it comes to the testimonies that he received. While I regard Graeber's book as largely polemical in nature, and there are certainly no claims of statistical representativeness, we should still be cautious with some of the more sweeping generalisations.

In particular, there is no persuasive evidence that half of all jobs are BS jobs. What Graeber has shown, is that there is much BS going on in the workplace and that many (perhaps even all?) jobs contain various amounts of BS. Another weakness is the neglect of non-Western examples, although it would be silly to accuse an anthropologist of Westocentrism. Graeber also seems to omit tech and other start-ups (that tend to have flat organisational structures) and larger, innovative organisations (famously radical examples are Valve, Morning Star and China's Haier) from his analysis. There is also nothing much on the gig economy which appears to be an important trend in the realm of work.

Graeber also appears to have missed out on some seminal literature that he could have used to supplement his argument. For instance, Parkinson's Law states that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion", and its originator C. Northcote Parkinson (1958) knew that there is not much relationship between the work to be done and the size of the staff to which it may be assigned. In Graeber's defence, he refers to Parkinson's Law (and another gem: the Peter principle) in his earlier work (Graeber, 2015, 3), so it appears to be more out of modesty, and avoiding repetition, that he does not refer to Parkinson's Law in the book under review. More recently, Hamel and Zanini (2016) suggested that reassigning some 24 million corporate 'bureaucrats' in the U.S. to more productive tasks could give the economy a \$3 trillion boost.

With increasing automation, the question of what to do with the 'surplus workforce' will become ever more pertinent, and we will have to reconsider the meaning of work. It is hoped that Graeber's important book will be the start of investigating this issue from a new angle. A universal basic income has advocates from across the political spectrum, and pilot basic income programmes are being, or have been, conducted in Canada, Finland, Kenya and the U.S.

As an academic, one of my personal takeaways is to continue moving in the direction of meaningful activities, and away from those that reek of BS; and to spread the word within my circle of influence. As lecturers, we may be fortunate that the economic value and the social value of our work may be largely aligned (while for other jobs, they would appear to be fundamentally at odds).

All in all, Graeber's book offers a remarkably eclectic mix of everyday anecdotes and testimonies, historical insights, literary and pop-culture references as well as wide-ranging theoretical frameworks. *Bullshit Jobs – a Theory* is intellectually engaging, provocative and a hilarious, great read. It is the book that made me think the most this year, and I highly and unreservedly recommend it.

## Additional References

England, C. (2015, January 6). Activists Plastered the London Tube with Posters Telling People Their Jobs Suck. *Vice*. Retrieved from [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yvq9qg/david-graeber-pointless-jobs-tube-poster-interview-912](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yvq9qg/david-graeber-pointless-jobs-tube-poster-interview-912)

Ginsberg, B. (2011). *The fall of the faculty*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Graeber, D. (2011). *Debt: the first five thousand years*. New York, NY: Melville House.

Graeber, D. (2015). *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy*. New York, NY: Melville House.

Hamel, G., & Zanini, M. (2016). The \$3 Trillion Prize for Busting Bureaucracy (and How to Claim it). <https://www.managementexchange.com/sites/default/files/three-trillion-dollars.pdf>

Parkinson, C. N. (1958). *Parkinson's Law: The Pursuit of Progress*. London, England: John Murray.

Copyright: © 2020 Jürgen Rudolph. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.