

## **On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs and how western work ethic contributes to explaining their existence**

“Bullshit jobs” is a term and theme brought up by the anthropologist David Graeber in an essay 2013 and expanded in his most recent book “Bullshit Jobs. A Theory”. Before illuminating Graeber's understanding and categorization of these jobs, a sidenote about the origin of the word “bullshit” is to be made: It is an early-twentieth-century elaboration on “bull”, deriving from the French “bole”, meaning deceit or fraud.

Deduced from personal observance and 250 case studies, David Graeber defines bullshit jobs as forms of paid employment which are not only completely unnecessary but oblige the employee to justify his/her job, even though feeling it contributes nothing to the world. In bullshit occupations Graeber finds a possible explanation for the non-fulfilment of John Maynard-Keynes' prediction 100 years ago that by now people would only have to work for 15 hours a week due to technological advance. Briefly put: yes, technological development did happen but the free time that could have been generated through that has been filled up with unnecessary tasks and jobs. Graeber goes on to categorize these jobs into five types; those being flunkies, goons, duct-tapers, box-tickers and taskmasters.

According to his theory, **flunkies** are unnecessary employees who fulfil the only task of making someone else look or feel important. As he puts it quite ironically: “You cannot be magnificent without entourage”. Classical examples of these types of occupation are receptionists with silent phones, unneeded assistants in general and the staff at airline desks whose duty it is to comfort angry passengers about lost baggage – if the suit cases wouldn't have been lost in beforehand, these people would not be needed and if there were efficient ways of finding lost luggage neither.

The occupation of **goons** always has an element of deception and aggression and exists only because these goons are employed. Graeber names armies as his prime example, as he goes on to explain that if no country employed soldiers, there would be no need of armies anymore.

In the civil sector he mentions telemarketers, PR specialists, lobbyists and corporate lawyers. Goons are furthermore characterized by having no or even a negative social impact.

**Duct-tapers** spend their working time to solve problems that ought not to exist or generally compensate their superiors' inabilities. According to Graeber they are especially to be found in software development, where core technologies have to be adjusted to somehow work together, without having been designed for that.

**Box-tickers**, Graeber goes on, allow an organization to claim it is doing something, it essentially ain't doing. These jobs are especially found in bureaucracies and organizations with elaborated hierarchies, as well as in fact finding commissions who often produce large reports without really having had an impact.

Last but not least, **task-masters** portray the opposite to flunkies – they are unnecessary superiors who assign, supervise and generate bullshit tasks and without whom the organization would perfectly be perfectly fine. Middle management is named as the field where these “bullshit generators” are especially to be found.

The intriguing part of Graeber's theory about bullshit jobs comes into play, when he turns to the central puzzle: Following his assumptions and accepting the very existence of bullshit jobs – *why* do they actually exist? Why would an employer be willing to pay someone for essentially nothing?

Following mainstream economic logic, the very essence of capitalism is profit maximizing – cutting costs wherever possible. So the very last thing an employer would be expected to do, was to hire and pay people without actual need. And thus 37% of the employees surveyed in a poll in Great Britain reported that they felt their job did actually contribute nothing to the world. In the Netherlands the number was even higher – 43% felt to have a useless occupation. In the course of his book, David Graeber offers various explanations for this – at first dazzling – existence of bullshit jobs and why there are indeed reasons for the proliferation if not emergence of them. Being an anthropologist, he has a special focus on human history and societal, structural forces. Already anticipating one of the main insights, Graeber argues that the western work ethic is one highly contributing in understanding why bullshit jobs exist. In the following, several aspects of what Graeber calls western work ethic shall be explained and examined.

Western work ethic is deeply rooted in developments during medieval times and connected to specific characteristics of feudalism. Especially the **Christian religion** and its assumptions about the nature of humans shape it. Christianity starts with a negative understanding of the very essence of being human, one depicting humanity as sinful and lazy and by God's will supposed and obligated to work; earning their living. Following this logic, hard work is genuinely seen as admirable, without actually asking about the content of this "hard work".

Furthermore, idleness is even depicted as theft, as socially unwanted. According to Graeber, this explains why the existence of bullshit jobs, which he tries to prove in the course of his book, is not contested in public, not seen as problem, not researched by academics. Broken down, work is seen as something necessary, desirable and natural – no matter, what kind of work and without asking about the purpose of the work being done. **Work as end in itself**. This he finds proven even by the former US president Barack Obama who expressed that it would indeed be possible and even more profitable to fuse the public and the state health care system – but, and here the imperative for more jobs without the direct question to which tasks comes into play, that would eliminate three million jobs. Graeber interprets Obama in the way that the former US president was actually admitting that the existence of inefficient structures and even bullshit jobs was politically desired or at least tolerated.

Further on, Graeber adds, there has arisen something he calls "**right-scolding**" – a genuine thinking that no one is entitled to have a good life; to have everything they need. Rather, these living standards have to be *earned*. Again, work is seen as the means without focus on the actual purpose of the work itself.

The last aspect of western work ethic Graeber points out is the medieval understanding of ~~money~~<sup>time</sup> **as finite, money-like resource** that can be spend and purchased. This shapes the understanding that a worker is not paid for the actual output he or she generates, but for the time he or she spent. So the loans of bullshit jobs take into account how much time was used for the task, not how useful or productive the work actually was.

Not directly tied to western work ethic, but indeed to our European history and medieval **experiences during feudalism** is the common measurement of any superior's importance by the number of employees working under him or her, which especially proliferates flunkies' jobs.

A further reason for bullshit jobs to exist and proliferate Graeber sees – d'accord with George Orwell and other dystopian authors – in the ruling class having figured out how dangerous a happy population with free time on their hands is to the political stability. In other words, he argues that the current work regime might not have been designed consciously by the ruling class but definitely **allowed to remain in place** as its effects are actually convenient to those in power.

To sum up Graeber's theory about bullshit jobs – they exist due to several structural, culture-rooted reasons, all being closely related to medieval experiences with feudalism and the resulting western work ethic. Taking this thought further, it would mean that bullshit jobs are specific to “western world” and shouldn't be found in countries not sharing Christian-European history and development. Extended research on that would be intriguing and necessary in order to understand the phenomenon of bullshit jobs further. Because even though the arguments being made in the course of the book appear to be very continuous and logically, bullshit jobs remain – as the book's subtitle points out – a theory.