

Bullshit Jobs (w/ David Graeber) – Srsly
Wrong Ep. 153



Contents

[00:00:38]	3
[00:03:46]	5
[00:12:39]	7
[00:14:39]	9
[00:16:01]	10
[00:23:17]	12
[00:23:31]	12
[00:27:43]	16
[00:38:04]	19
[00:40:27]	21
[00:43:50]	22
[00:50:53]	24
[00:52:08]	25
[00:54:17]	26
[00:55:35]	27
[00:56:30]	28
[00:58:46]	30
[01:03:33]	31
[01:06:14]	33
[01:08:59]	34
Additional reading	35

The Wrong boys speak with David Graeber about his new book ‘Bullshit Jobs’, exploring the ever multiplying ways our society makes up stuff for people to do. They also discuss the puritan work ethic, and even discover how to solve global poverty in just three steps.

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Narrator

Today’s episode of SRSLY WRONG is proudly brought to you by...

☒ The profound spiritual violence of doing a task that you secretly suspect doesn’t need to be done.

☒

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Opening Theme Music - Punkerslut Srsly Wrong Theme ☒

[00:00:38]

☒

Narrator

We now go to a comfy Irish pub where two salaried professionals sit together for an after-work drink.

☒

(Crowd sounds)

Professional 1

Hey man, I got– table’s right over here.

Professional 2

Hey– oh, is this seat taken? Just kidding.

(They share a chuckle)

Professional 2

How’s it going, man? It’s been a while. Like, y- you were texting me it was a rough day today?

Professional 1

Yeah. Just rough in how *the same* it was, as every other day. I basically have to make sure people do things that they always do every day.

Professional 2

Are you, like, a manager?

Professional 1

Yeah. I just call people and ask if they’re doing things. We call it “check-ins.” I check in with a lot of people. It’s a horror, existence.

Professional 2

Well, at least you have something to do, man. I go through these folders on the computers, I make sure that all the forms are filled out correctly. Straight-up, I have my own form about form quality. But, like, ultimately there’s only five or six of those to do a week. I’m on Facebook. I’m on solitaire. And every time I’ve ever told the boss that I’ve got nothing to do he either, like, looks at me like I’m crazy, or he makes me do something really humiliating and banal like wipe tables or something.

Professional 1

At least you can keep your brain to yourself. You can listen to music, listen to podcasts and stuff. I don't know. I'm jealous of your job, to be honest.

Professional 2

Today I listened to this podcast, they did an interview with— David Graeber?

Professional 1

I don't know who that is.

Professional 2

Oh you d— haven't heard of him? Oh, he is— it's pretty great. He's, like, an activist and a writer, and he just wrote this book called *Bullshit Jobs* about the spiritual crisis of all these meaningless jobs that people have to work.

Professional 1

Oh, yeah, all right.

Professional 2

So it's really up my alley. Actually, would you mind if I told you a little bit about my day in detail? Like, I just sort of need to get this off my chest.

Professional 1

I'd love to hear about your day in detail.

Professional 2

Okay. So, like— all right, I get in at— I think it must be, ooh, five after I'm supposed to be there. So, like, 9:35. (Memory chimes) And he comes out of his office and he's, like, "Oh, do you have—" (Fades into Boss)

Boss

—anything to report? You got enough to do? You need anything?

Professional 2

Oof— busy. In one word: busy. I've— it's nonstop. These forms, and—

Boss

Good, great to hear it.

Professional 2

—yeah. Been working really hard. A lot of attention to detail. Phone calls coming in.

Boss

Good, good, good. That's what I like to hear: Stuff. Getting. Done. Perfect.

Professional 2

Yeah. Like, my job really needs to exist.

Boss

And you're doing real work?

Professional 2

Doin' real work. Yeah, nonstop. It's—

Boss

Perfect. I— I'm just gonna stop you there. I got a lotta real work I need to do. Especially the next—

Professional 2

Oh! Oh, yeah—

Boss

—fifty minutes. So I'm gonna head in my office.

Professional 2

Sorry for wasting your time, sir.

Boss

Just— if anyone comes, make 'em wait. If anyone calls, put 'em on hold. Just fifty minutes is all I'm askin'. I got— I got stuff to do. Real work.

Professional 2

Okay. I– yeah, I’ll be doing my real work out here as well. Sorry. What I mean to say is, yes, I’m your humble flunky. Your word is my command.

Boss

Oh, Johnson. You’re a nervous wreck. Always gonna be a beta. But I love you.

Johnson

Yes, sir.

Boss

That’s why I keep you around.

(Door opens and closes)

Johnson

(Muttering) Yeah, ”a beta,” huh? The original scientist who described wolf pack behavior and invented the term, he never said it applied to humans. But he even later realized that it only applies to wolves in captivity. So, like, shows what that fuckin’ boss knows. I’ll just un-minimize this window. I wonder what Boss would think about that. Slide just one earbud in. (Phone typing) ”Anarchist podcast.” And so I’ll just press play on the podcast now.

Theme Song Plays...

[00:03:46]

Shawn

Today on the show we have David Graeber with us. David, you’re an anthropologist, professor, activist, and author. And I noticed on your Twitter bio that you said, ”Don’t call me the anarchist anthropologist, because I think that–”

David Graeber:

Yeah.

Shawn

”–anarchism is something you do, and not an identity.” So I was wondering, before we get started on your new book, what does it mean to you to ”do anarchism”?

David Graeber:

Oh, well, it really comes from the idea of direct action. Anarchism and direct action have been very closely linked over time. Because, you know, the core notion of anarchism is you take the idea that, ”the ends do not justify the means” to the point where the means have to embody the ends. You’re supposed to act as close as possible to the way you would in a free society. And of course you don’t *really* know how people would act in a free society, but you try to approximate it.

You try to make decisions in a way that wouldn’t require coercive enforcement. You try to treat people as you would treat them in a society where you couldn’t force people to do things they didn’t want to do. But, you know, that’s not what you do if you’re operating within a university environment. I mean, you try to as much as you can. But you’re not fooling yourself that– you know, you’re not in a prefigurative space. (Laughs) The best you can do is ameliorate the situation. So, you know, it seems silly for me, who’s, like, working in a capitalist system.

I mean, yeah, sometimes I have been involved in such experiments. And then I’m me being an anarchist, you know? If you’re occupying the square. If you’re involved in a direct action, large or small. I actually have called direct action, ”the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.” You know, you do that as much as you can in the relations with people that you love and trust, and you try to expand that circle of people that you love and trust as widely as possible. But under present situation, you know, me doing what I do, it would be pretentious of me to say that my practice of anthropology is anarchist. It’s not.

Shawn

In your new book, you make the case that about 40% of jobs, according to some public opinion polling in the UK— or potentially more— are what you call “bullshit jobs.” And these are jobs that don’t need to exist, jobs that the workers themselves feel don’t serve a useful purpose, or don’t contribute to making a better world. Can you give an example of a bullshit job, and why you think it’s important to call out this phenomenon at this time?

David Graeber:

Yeah. I should emphasize, as you pointed out, the key thing here is that the person doing the job thinks it’s bullshit. This is very important. Because I don’t want to be some guy going around saying, “Oh, you guys. You’re just pointless and stupid.” I mean, Douglas Adams has this famous scene where, you know, there’s this planet that tries to get rid of all their useless people, and these for him include everyone from used car salesmen to hair dressers. So they see the planet’s about the blow up, and have three arks. One for leadership types, one for workers, and one for useless people. And then they just send the useless ship into the sun.

And— (laughs) it struck me that this is exactly what I don’t want to be doing here. I want to destroy the jobs. I don’t want to destroy the people. I want to liberate the people from these jobs. And my premise, though, is that most people in bullshit jobs know it. In fact, they know it better than anybody, and they don’t like it very much. It’s not that there are useless people in the world. Everybody wants to be useful. But we have a weird economy which is structured in such a way that huge proportions of the public are trapped in positions which they think, if that job were to disappear— or even if that entire industry were to disappear— it would just make no difference. Or maybe the world would be a slightly better place.

I set up a Gmail account called, “DoIHaveABSJobOrWhat@gmail.com” and, you know, I got hundreds of responses. So if you want to get a sense of what those were like— well, obviously telemarketers. I’ve never met a telemarketer who didn’t think their job was bullshit. A lot of people were in middle management. A lot of people who were, you know, in the sort of clerical administrative supervisory roles where you wonder if they actually do anything. Well, often they don’t. And they’re perfectly willing to tell you, as long as you promise them anonymity. Corporate lawyers. I’m sure the upper echelons of corporate lawyers are all about justifying themselves. But pretty much everybody else who’s, like, toiling in the legal mills, those guys say, you know, if this entire industry were to vanish— great. We’d all be better off.

I thought, you know, here was this amusing hypothesis I have, and I put it out in a little magazine. So it just went crazy, went viral all over the world. It was translated— I think now it’s up to 22 languages. I just heard it’s been translated into Bangla and Persian. Apparently they have a bullshit job problem in Iran, as well, and Bangladesh. (Laughter) But the scale of the thing was just way beyond anything I imagined. But eventually people did polls. Someone in the UK did a poll, and then there was another one in Holland. And they found that something between 37% and 40% of people said that their job makes no meaningful contribution to anything, and that if it didn’t exist it wouldn’t matter. Which I thought was astounding.

Because even after the piece went viral I was assuming 15% or 20%. But it was, like, almost 40%. And those are the people who were *sure* that their jobs were bullshit. You know, there were also those who thought it might be. And then you have to count people who don’t realize, because they’re doing real work in support of bullshit, right? Because imagine you have a big office building full of corporate lawyers who are working on a tax scam, right? Well, somebody’s got to water the plants. Somebody’s got to clean that place. You know, somebody’s got to do security, reception.

So those guys are doing real jobs, but they don’t know that the entire operation they’re supporting is just completely unnecessary nonsense. So if you think about that, well, it’s quite possible that half the work done in our society is completely unnecessary, and if it were to vanish there would be no ill effects— except a lot of people wouldn’t get paid. But, you know, if you could figure out a way to support people otherwise, the work itself is totally unnecessary.

Shawn

Well, this is really fascinating because, I mean, under the logic of capitalism, efficiency is such a primary concern. And I'm sure advocates of a market-based system would say, "Well, we'd never have bullshit jobs, because we would immediately notice that this is inefficient." How could this ever happen?

David Graeber

Yep. That's the interesting question. I mean, this is the kind of thing you expect that's gonna be happening in the Soviet Union. And did, right? They have a full employment policy, and therefore they had to make up jobs. Hence the famous line, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." There were millions of people in these idiotic jobs. Like, you want to buy something in a store in Russia, one person would select it, another person would give you a ticket, another person would take the ticket, and the— you know, so they made up all these incredible inefficient systems so as to employ as many people as possible.

So then the question becomes, why is it that this is happening in capitalism? And, especially, why is it that the moment the alternative collapses, the moment all these socialist systems fall apart, instead of capitalism becoming even more, like, lean and mean and efficient— even though that was the rhetoric, right? You know, now we're gonna have a really supercharged capitalist globalization— fire the unnecessary people. There was a whole obsession with lean and mean corporations, and CEOs were celebrated for how many people they could fire. But all those guys who were fired, they were the actual productive blue-collar workers who did the stuff.

So if you're UPS, the delivery guys. The drivers. The people who were actually doing the work. You know, you downsize them and you speed them up and you tailorize them, and you make their lives a living hell. But the guys in the sort of meaningless positions like, you know, "East Coast Vision Coordinator," or, "Brand Manager," you know, that kind of stuff, those guys don't get fired. In fact, they seem to get more and more. And part of the reason for that is that in large corporations, if you're a manager, if you're an executive, your prestige— and sometimes even your salary— is actually directly related with how many people you have working under you. So just think about that for a moment. There's, like, no incentive to fire people.

There's was one guy who was really telling. He worked for a bank and he was an efficiency security expert. And he said that, in his estimation, about 80% of people who work in banks could easily be either gotten rid of entirely or replaced with a shell script or some relatively simple automation. So only about 20% of the people who work in a given large bank are actually necessary. But the really interesting thing he said is, he realized he had a bullshit job because he was there to recommend ways that they could be more efficient.

And he would come up with plan after plan after plan. So in 15 years, not a single one of his plans had ever been implemented. So he realized that he was— [laughs] you know, he was just there to let the bank say that it was doing something it wasn't doing, which is what I call a box-ticker. And why? Because every time he came up with a plan to make something more efficient, somebody would say, "Oh, wait a minute, that would mean like 20% of my people would be fired. No!" You know? Because he would take a hit in terms of his prestige.

[00:12:39]

☒ *Infomercial music*

Shawn

And now it's time for David Graeber's, "Five types of bullshit jobs." Type #1 is: A Flunky.

Aaron

The flunkies exist for the boss to feel superior to. And something that David Graeber called, "managerial feudalism" of, you know, the boss is the lord and he feels important and big by having his many serfs.

Shawn

So this can be stuff like: door attendants, assistants, receptionists.

Aaron

Hey Shawn, I was wondering, do you want to just do the Ol' Flunky Sketch?

Shawn

Pull the Ol' Flunky Sketch out of retirement? I love the way you think. Let's do it. I'll be Mr. Spendsworth, you be Mr. Buysworth?

Aaron

All right. So I'll just, uh, pick up the phone. (Phone dial tone, dialing) And I'll dial... Mr. Spendsworth. (Rings)

Mr. Spendsworth

Hello?

Mr. Buysworth

Ah, Spendsworth.

Mr. Spendsworth

Buysworth. Calling me on my business line during business hours?

Mr. Buysworth

Yes, I just had-

Mr. Spendsworth

You fiend!

Mr. Buysworth

-my flunky turn in 30 sheets. And my other flunky is looking them over. Hm!

Mr. Spendsworth

I'm so intimidated. Mr. Buysworth has two flunkies. What am I gonna do?

Mr. Buysworth

Yes. One of my flunkies was just telling me how important their job is and how much real work they do.

Mr. Spendsworth

My flunkies would tell me that, too- if they had the time! I work these flunkies to the bone.

Mr. Buysworth

(Growls) Spendsworth!

Mr. Spendsworth

What do you say to that, Buysworth?

Mr. Buysworth

I'll have you know that one of them is nested under the other one, so I'm two levels up.

Mr. Spendsworth

Well, I'll have you know I have 15 total flunkies.

Mr. Buysworth

And they're all directly below you, I imagine?

Mr. Spendsworth

That's none of your business!

Mr. Buysworth

Fifteen years at the company and you're only one level up.

Mr. Spendsworth

My business is very sleek. It's shaped like a 15-legged spider.

Mr. Buysworth

(Growls) Such a good metaphor. Excuse me, I have a spider here on my desk, I'm just going to kill it.

Mr. Spendsworth

Buysworth! Don't kill that spider just because it reminds you of my corporate structure-!

Mr. Buysworth

(Chuckles with menace) What's this? Oh, I have real work to do.

Mr. Spendsworth

Oh, would you look at the time. It's been 50 minutes already.

Mr. Buysworth

Don't you try to hang up on me. I was trying to hang up on you.

Mr. Spendsworth

Well, I'm hanging up on you, and your- your-

Mr. Buysworth

Well, I'm gonna hang up first.

Mr. Spendsworth

-pitiful amount of flunkies.

Mr. Buysworth

Goodbye. Hanging up.

Mr. Spendsworth

I'm going to hang up first.

Mr. Buysworth

No, I'm gonna hang up.

Mr. Spendsworth

No, you don't hang up-

Mr. Buysworth

I'm hanging up right now.

Mr. Spendsworth

It's a real-

Mr. Buysworth

First. Before you do.

Mr. Spendsworth

No!

Mr. Buysworth

Ye-

Mr. Spendsworth

I'll be hanging up first!

Mr. Buysworth

Spendsworth, I will be hanging up first-

Mr. Spendsworth

Buysworth, I'm going to hang up first. (Click)

[00:14:39]

☒ *Smooth jazz*

Narrator

Today's episode of SRSLY WRONG is proudly brought to you by Morgan Beatty's *12 Rules for Resentful Young Men*.

☒ *Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata", First Movement, Adagio sostenuto plays lugubriously* ☒

Morgan Beatty

(Weepy Kermit voice) Now, David Graeber says that there needs to be less jobs. And now I have (croaking) art on the walls of my house to remind me that the people who say, "Don't create jobs," have killed millions of people. And it comes from the same foundational ideas. And in *Shrek 1*, Shrek had a job to do. He had to save Fiona, and stop Lord Farquaad in his dastardly plans. It's chaos. And at the beginning of the film, when "*All Star*" plays, that represents the beginning of the cycle of renewal,

of him learning to take care of himself, become a full man— a full human being! And at the end of the movie, when they have the Shrek-In-The-Swamp Karaoke Dance Party, that represents a return home, a full man, and individualism. (Chokes up) I'm sorry. Individualism is our only way to be free from tyranny.

☒ *Jazz returns*

Narrator:

Incredible. Morgan Beatty's, "12 Rules for Resentful Young Men". Buy this book like the fate of Western civilization depends on it.

(Piano and guitar fade)

[00:16:01]

Aaron

The thing that really sticks out to me is just, like, how insulting that is to the individual to have to spend your entire day doing something that's useless, because it's so important to people to feel useful, to feel esteemed. And then there's, like, this extra added insult on top of, like, having to pretend that what you're doing is useful to the other people in the company, to the corporation. So you exist in this state of unreality, where you know you're doing something that's pointless, but you have to pretend that it's not pointless. And it's—

David Graeber

Yep.

Aaron

I don't know. I just see it as so damaging to, like, your sense of self.

David Graeber

Yeah. I think you're exactly right. And that's exactly what people report. One guy described it as, "a Kafkaesque nightmare." He said, "All of us are sitting there knowing what we're doing is completely pointless, but we can't say it to each other. And we're all saying, 'He knows. Does he know? He must know.'" You know? That he had a job working for an insurance company where he said they had twice as many managers as employees. Everybody's managing each other. [Laughter] So they'd all be sitting there in a circle, like, trying to build up each other— "Oh, you know, you're so necessary to the team. Thank god we have you." You know?

Shawn

That's sort of like the emotional labor of, like, Walmart or customer service, where you're smi— like, you're super friendly to all the customers, no matter the mood you're in. Except, like, with an internal culture where you're being super, like, "Oh, you're so important." "No, you're important." Like—

David Graeber

Yeah.

Shawn

—"You've had such an important day!"

David Graeber

Yeah, exactly. But the problem is, at least if you're, like, an airline hostess or something like that, right— the classic emotional labor studies— you know exactly what's expected of it. But these guys, they're never quite sure. Right? "Does my boss know I'm not actually doing anything?" Because some of these people were, like, working one hour a day, two hours a week, you know? Otherwise they just have to look busy. So then the question is, like, you know, how convincing do I have to be? Is it okay that they see that I'm on Facebook all day or playing Minesweeper?

Or do I have to, like, do it up like I'm doing something really important. Do they know and just expect me to play along anyway? Or do they not even know? Everybody's in this kind of limbo where they're just trying to figure out what you can say and what you can't. And just endless paranoia and

degradation involved in that. I mean, you could have a nice boss. There's a taboo about your boss actually just saying, "Look, we really just hired you to troubleshoot problems once or twice a week. Otherwise just stay out of people's way and do whatever you like, we don't care." You know, they won't actually say that. I don't know why.

I had a job once in graduate school where I was working for a guy, he was a professor of anthropology and he was, like, a Marxist who studied workplace resistance, right? So I was like, okay, if there's anybody I can talk to really as a boss, this would be him. I was his research assistant, and he was explaining to me how to do the timesheets. So I said, "Okay, how much can I lie?" And he just looked at me like I was from outer space, you know? (Laughs) So I just quickly pretended I never said it and said—okay, even this guy you can't be straight with. It's clear there's something about the relation of a boss that you can't actually say what's really going on.

Shawn

One of the interesting things that you bring up in the book is that you say, "the bullshitization of the economy has only just begun."

David Graeber

Yeah.

Shawn

And so that refers not just to the bullshit jobs themselves, but bullshit creeping into other jobs?

David Graeber

Yes. And I think that there's a relationship between those two things. I observed this directly in an academic context. If you look at universities— and this seems to be true at pretty much everywhere—there's been a managerial takeover. So whereas 30-40 years ago if you said, "the university," people would assume you meant the faculty. Now when you say, "the university," people assume you mean the administrators. And the administrators, more and more, see themselves as executives.

So there's been an increase in the number of administrators, but there's been a veritable explosion of the number of administrative staff. Basically there are these armies of minions these guys have, and it's part of the corporatization. And in fact, it's happened much more in private universities than in public ones, because the public ones are at least a little bit accountable for what they do with the money. Whereas private ones, you know, they're only accountable to trustees. Trustees are familiar with the sort of standards of the corporate world.

So for them this is totally normal that you if you hire somebody to a major post, of course you're gonna, like, give them five flunkies and only then figure out what those flunkies are gonna do. So here you get a vice dean or a vice chancellor or a provost, and you give 'em five people and they'll say, "Oh, okay. You are in charge of time allocation studies. And you're gonna be in charge of synergistic strategizing." And those guys then make up all this paperwork, and then the people who have to do the paperwork is, of course, me. They'll try to suddenly have me take down what I'm doing all day. (Laughs) So instead of teaching I have to sort of, like, provide detailed accounts of my teaching.

Aaron

I have personal experience with a job I did for quite a few years, which was hotel maintenance. And you would think, "Okay, like, obviously hotels need maintenance people." But it's kind of like you were saying. It's the sort of thing where, you know, you need to be there when something breaks. When nothing's broken... Sometimes there's projects— go around to every room and repaint the bathroom ceiling. But, like, sometimes you don't need to paint every bathroom ceiling. So I ended up saying I was doing things that I wasn't actually doing because they didn't need to be done, but my bosses wanted to know that I was constantly doing things, even though—

David Graeber

Exactly.

Aaron

—there wasn't enough things to constantly be doing. And I had to write down everything that I did at the end of the day. So a lot of the days, my biggest task was making up stuff that I had done during

the day so that there was something on these sheets that my bosses literally never read once. But they were there in the book.

David Graeber

Yeah. There's a lot of stuff like that. Like, piling up documents which almost certainly no one's ever gonna read, but there's some possibility they might, so you've got to make it at least— you know, it's a little bit like those things that people are showing in the background in movies, you know, where they have to actually do up the document in case some guy freezes the frame and looks at it to see what it really says.

Yeah, so there's a huge industry of writing bullshit reports for these high-level meetings because executives like to, like, be able to walk in with a sheaf of reports. And chances are they're never gonna be used at all. But, you know, if something comes up they can whip it out and say, "Actually, we have a report on that specific topic," and just sort of throw it on the table. And it's just total bullshit, you know? It doesn't really matter what you say in the report.

I talked to one guy, he said he's doing medical research. You know, real medical research on tuberculosis diagnosis. He said it'll probably save lots of lives in the Global South. He has a whole team of people. They've been working on it steadily. He says there's no money in it, because it's useful. Right? Useful stuff, if there's no obvious way to turn a profit off it, nobody's gonna pay you. So what these guys do is, for four days a week they work on their real work, which no one will pay them for.

Then for one day a week they write bullshit reports for, you know, pharmaceutical marketing meetings. And he says he can get £10,000— that would be, what, about \$14,000— for one 20-page report. Even if they're not used. The guys don't care. The props are important. It's part of their, you know, sort of prestige and persona that they can just whip these things out. There's other guys whose entire job was making the cartoons or graphics for those reports.

Shawn

Yeah. (Laughter)

[00:23:17]

☒

Narrator:

Today's episode of the SRSLY WRONG Podcast is brought to you by Universal Basic Income. Because society is already paying people to do nothing. We might as well be honest about it.

☒

[00:23:31]

Shawn

The second *Bullshit Jobs* taxonomy is: The Goon. Someone who does a job that the person who hires them wouldn't do themselves. And it's a job that doesn't contribute to society as a whole, but it does benefit their employer.

Aaron

And crucially, it's people who act deceptively and aggressively on behalf of the employer.

Shawn

Goon jobs are the types of jobs where an employer needs to hire them because other companies have them, like: corporate lawyers; public relations; people who collect donations on the street, interrupting you walking and it's, like, a good cause and you'll feel guilty— that's this field. Goons. Here, I'll just put on my Goon Sketch Hat.

Aaron

I'll put on my CEO Hat, and...–

CEO

You know, my meteoric rise to the CEO of this company...

Goon 1

Mm-hmm?

CEO

...Would never have been possible without you. Y'know?

Goon 1

Well, thank you, sir.

CEO

Early on when we had that patent conflict?

Goon 1

Yep.

CEO

You went in there, you took care of it.

Goon 1

I negotiated, sir.

CEO

Then when we had that class action lawsuit you found the right lawyers, you put pressure on the right places...

Goon 1

We showed them our point of view. And then we were able to come to a mutual agreement.

CEO

I need you to go in there and I need you to negotiate and get this contract signed. Fate of the company rests in your hands.

Goon 1

I'll go to the negotiating chamber. I will get the results.

(Door slams)

Goon 2

Hi. You ready to, uh, redraw this contract in a new way? Because the way it is right now, not gonna work for us.

Goon 1

I've got my copy here. I think we should go with my. Mine's already signed–

Goon 2

Lemme take a look at this.

Goon 1

Yeah. Please take a look.

Goon 2

Mm– y– no. (Chuckles) Let's just cross that out. (Scratch)

Goon 1

I'm just gonna take a look at yours. Oh, that won't do.

Goon 2

I'll just cross that out.

Goon 1

Do you think you're gonna get that? That's cute.

Goon 2

Oh, let's cross that out...

Goon 1

This has got to go!

Goon 2

No, that's non-negotiable.

Goon 1

Oh, that's non-negotiable?

Goon 2

That's non-negotiable.

Goon 1

Then what are we doing in the Negotiation Room?

Goon 2

Negotiating you to that position.

Goon 1

Sorry, do you mind me asking how much they pay at that firm?

Goon 2

Oh, sure, yeah. Sharing wages is a great way for everyone to stay informed. 200K. Just got a new raise—

Goon 1

200K?

Goon 2

Yeah.

Goon 1

And they put you in charge of negotiations?

Goon 2

Uh, yeah. Why, how much are you making?

Goon 1

I'm embarrassed to say now that you've said yours.

Goon 2

Come on.

Goon 1

250K.

Goon 2

Oh, jeez, what the fuck.

Goon 1

Yeah.

Goon 2

Well, at least— like, you're probably feeling really fulfilled, at that pay level? (Goon 1 laughs) I imagine I'll - I'll feel fulfilled once I get there.

Goon 1

The emptiness grows deeper every day. But anyways, this has got to go. Just— I'm gonna rip this page out. (Tearing)

Goon 2

Well, that's very theatrical of you, but I do happen to have another copy right here.

Goon 1

This is the one we're signing today.

Goon 2

That's funny. That's funny.

Goon 1

Well, you're funny.

Goon 2

Oh, you think so? Really—

Goon 1

Yeah. I mean, well, it's— I'm almost cracking up.

Goon 2

Do you want to go- with me- to a concert this weekend?

Narrator

Fourteen months later.

☒ *Organ playing Mendelssohn's "Wedding March"*

(Crowd cheers)

Goon 2

Oh, look, the birds are eating the rice. I hear it expands in their stomach and then they die. That's hilarious-

Goon 1

That's hilarious. Oh my god.

Goon 2

(Laughs) Thanks everyone.

Goon 1

Thank you-

Goon 2

We love you-

Goon 1

Thanks for- (Blows kisses)

Goon 2

Throw more rice! (Blows kisses) I'll just get in the car, "Just Married," with the cans on the back. (Car door)

Goon 1

Oh, it's gonna be hear interesting to hear those cans. It's an ambient sound. (The car and cans provide ambience)

Goon 2

Phew. It's been a whirlwind 14 months since we first went to that concert.

Goon 1

Oh, yeah. I always forget that's how we met: competing negotiators on the big file. Oh, it's so different than our lives now. (They laugh)

Goon 2

Life is so much better now, now that you're a teacher, I'm a nurse. We're both doing something of value to the community. And yeah, we get paid less-

Goon 1

Yeah.

Goon 2

-and yeah, that's messed up.

Goon 1

We get paid like shit, frankly. (They laugh)

Goon 2

Yeah, it's really bad-

Goon 1

And we've got to split expenses, and...

Goon 2

But, I mean, like, I would give up 200K a year for you. I would give up 800K a year for you. I'd give up two million a year for you.

Goon 1

(Laughs) Oh my god. Remember the first time we met, and I said you're so funny?

Goon 2

Yeah?

Goon 1

That's what I was talking about.

Goon 2

Aw, really?

Goon 1

That was so—

Goon 2

You think so?

Goon 1

—funny. Yes.

Goon 2

(Laughs) I'm serious, though. I would. I would give up two million a year for you. You're worth it.

Goon 1

Oh, that's funny. That's funny. I didn't marry you for your looks. (They laugh) Just kidding.

Goon 2

Now you're being funny. Or—

Goon 1

Yeah, well, I figure maybe I'll try that on that we're one thing instead of two separate people. Married life! #MarriedLife. Now come over here and kiss me—

Goon 2

— oh! (Kissing)

☒ *Music swells and shifts*

[00:27:43]

Aaron

How much of all this do you think comes from just, like, a sort of a cultural belief that work is good, in and of itself, regardless of whether it accomplishes anything or not? It's, "work ennobles the soul."

David Graeber

Yes. Very, very—

Aaron

If you're not working, then you're bad, you're useless.

David Graeber

Exactly. There is an idea that everybody should be working harder than they want to work, preferably for someone they don't like very much, at something they don't really enjoy. And if you don't do that, you're a bad person. But most people don't think it necessarily applies to themselves. Some do. But everybody feels that somebody who doesn't do that and wants public relief is a scrounger, is a crook. They've really conditioned us to be suspicious of each other and to say, you know, people are basically lazy.

Of course the irony is, anybody who's ever done research on what people actually do knows that if you deny people the ability to just work at all or do anything, they tend to go crazy and get very upset and get really depressed. And even in prison they still, like, take away people's work privileges as a way of punishing them, because they're rather be, like, pressing shorts in the prison laundry or, you know, cleaning the latrine than just sitting in their room playing cards or watching TV all day. And the fact that people are so depressed in these jobs just shows that the desire to contribute something to the world is very fundamental to what human beings are, the basic nature of humanity.

On the other hand, it's also true that we have this very weird idea that work ennobles us. And I try to trace this backwards, and a lot of the book is about trying to figure out these very often theological strands that kind of come together in our conception of work. I always go back to the Bible, and Hesiod.

If you read the story of Prometheus, originally it's much like the Garden of Eden. You know, sit at the table of the gods and eat nectar and ambrosia, but then we rebelled. Either we stole fire or we ate of the Tree of Knowledge, or basically we got too big for our britches and tried to trod into God's business, sought knowledge inappropriately, so we're punished.

And how are we punished? We're punished by having to work. But that work is also an imitation of god's. The idea is, you want to be like God? You want to create things?— because that's what gods do, they create things— Fine. Go and create things. You're not gonna like it very much. (Laughs) You know? I'm gonna make that process of creation as miserable as possible. And in the Garden of Eden God curses Adam to have to produce food with the sweat of his brow, as we all know. But at the same time he also curses Eve, he says, "From now on, when you give birth it'll be painful. And that painful process is called labor."

So, it's like work. And this is very interesting and revealing, I think, because the notion of what "work" is, is an invitation of Divine Creation, so it's production. And the word, "produce," the Latin word "*producere*," it actually means, "to shove out," like giving birth. You could still say, like, you know, "He produced something from his wallet," right? It is to pull it out, or take it out. So, you know, you have this image of these factories that are kind of shoving stuff out like little babies. Production, creation, is our idea of work. But if you think about it, that's a weird idea of what work is, right? Because that's not actually what most work consists of.

Most work consists not of making stuff, but of maintaining it. You might make a cup once, but you wash it a thousand times and you stack it a thousand times. So that's what work actually mainly consists of. So it's, like, this very male-centric, patriarchal notion of what work is. Guys imitate what women do naturally. They just kind of shove out these babies while we shove out the stuff. We produce things. So, a.) you've got this notion of production, but it's supposed to be painful and miserable.

And then on top of that, you have this idea which comes from Northern Europe, and isn't even a theological idea, it's kind of a weird moral conception, that you need to work when you're a kid. Between roughly the ages of 15 and 30, adolescence, is when you're working. And you need to work under somebody else's direction, probably shouldn't be that pleasant, in order to become an adult. And the weird thing about Medieval society, and Northern Europe, and England and Germany, much of France, was that everybody had to be a wage laborer.

It's not like wage labor didn't exist. But they had to be a wage laborer between the ages of 15 and 30. Craftspeople were the famous example of that. You know, you're an apprentice, then a journeyman, and then finally you make your masterpiece, you become a master craftsman when you're roughly 32 or so, and then you can get married and you can start your own shop and eventually get your own flunkies and apprentices. But everybody did that.

Peasants did it. That's servants and husbandry. Lords did it. That's what pages were. Knights had pages. So they were eventually gonna be knights. There were ladies in waiting. They were, like, apprentice noblewomen. That's where the word "waiter" comes from, too. They were basically junior nobles who, like, hung around the king and waited on them. And they were also waiting for their inheritance so they didn't have to do that anymore. Become nobles in their own right, you know, get their own servants who are, like, junior nobles and so forth.

Now suddenly around 1500-1600s, you get capitalism emerging, wage labor becomes a permanent thing. So that means suddenly everybody's a teenager for example. Or, like, a lot of the population are just stuck in permanent adolescence. So instead of this idea that you're a kid, you know, do wage labor, you're under somebody else's discipline, work makes you mature, makes you learn how to become self-contained a real adult. And then once you are an adult you don't have to do it anymore. Instead of that you get this division between the home and the workplace, which used to be the same. But now you go to work for five days a week, 9:00 to 5:00 or whatever, and you go and get to be an adult when you go home. At home, when you're consuming stuff, then you're a grown-up.

Shawn

Oh, yeah. So it's like a 9:00 to 5:00 adolescence to prove that you're worthy of your 5:00 to 11:00—

David Graeber

Of being an adult when you go home.

Shawn

–television, Netflix– (Laughs)

David Graeber

Yes, exactly. And therefore work is supposed to be unpleasant. It's supposed to be unfulfilling in a certain way. But it's okay. You know, it's this thing that allows you to grow up and become a real person during the rest of the week. So this is actually really telling. Because what happens– and I sort of did some research on this– is basically the guys who were the sort of industrialists, the emerging middle classes– bourgeoisie, if you want to use the Marxist terms– sort of say, "Well, you know, value comes from work. Everything we see around us is produced by our work." And they use that sort of labor theory of value, as it was called, as a way of saying aristocrats are a bunch of idle parasites.

But they get hoisted on their own petard, kind of backfires on them, because then the workers start saying, "Wait a minute. Maybe you're the idle parasites. Maybe we're the guys producing the value." And all during the 19th century the idea that all value comes from labor, that we create the world, and that working people are the real creators of everything we see around us, and ultimately deserve credit for it– everybody is saying that. I mean, if you read Abraham Lincoln he sounds like a Marxist. All those guys sound like Marxists when you read them today.

And then in the 20th century there's a backlash. Basically guys like Andrew Carnegie say, "Well, we can't have this." They called it "the Gospel of Work." You know, Americans defined themselves through their jobs, through what they do. "We need to change this." And there was a concerted effort to create what he called "The Gospel of Wealth," that basically value doesn't come from work, it comes from people like me. You know, it comes from entrepreneurs. "We have the vision."

And the fact that work was seen as creating stock rather than maintaining, taking care of things, is what made it possible for people like Carnegie to say, "Oh, look at a factory worker. You know, that's your paradigm for real work? Factory workers might as well be machines themselves. In fact, I hope to replace them with machines. So you're not actually creating value. I'm creating the value here." And that's what people now think. It really worked. In the 19th century if you said, "wealth creator," people would assume you meant workers. Now if you say, "wealth creator," people assume you mean capitalists. Rich people.

And as a result, okay, your work is not the meaning of your life. It's not what you contribute to society. It's not how you produce value. Then why do it? How do you tell people work is good? Well, you had to fall back on Puritanism. You gotta fall back on this theological stuff that work is supposed to be miserable. It's your way of self-sacrifice that, you know, justifies your consumer practices when you're not working. So you go back to this notion that it's self-discipline, that it's self-sacrifice– it's like the secular hairshirt.

But, okay, if work is suffering that proves your value as an adult, well, anything you get out of work, anything gratifying about it makes it less valuable. Right? And that means if the work is fun or interesting, you know, it's less valuable. But it gets to the point– and this is the point we're at now– where even the knowledge that your work is benefitting society and helping other people itself is a form of gratification, which means the work is actually worth less as a form of self-sacrifice, and therefore you shouldn't have to be paid as much. And in fact, that's what you see. People's whose work benefits society are not paid as much, with a few notable exceptions, and people are okay with that.

Aaron

"Benefitting society is its own reward. You don't need to be paid as well." (Laughs)

David Graeber

Exactly.

Shawn

So that's the reason why, like, nurses, mental health workers, childcare providers–

David Graeber

Exactly.

Shawn

—like, "Oh, it's so great to take care of kids. Like, why should I have to pay you more than \$14 an hour?"

David Graeber

Yeah, and they'll say things like that. They'll say, like, "Well, you know, we wouldn't want people who are greedy to take care of our children. I mean, people who are motivated basically by money, you know, you wouldn't want them to be teachers." (Laughter)

Shawn

Yeah. So we need to enforce teacher poverty at all costs.

David Graeber

Yeah. And then I think a lot of it is actually unconscious resentment by people who have bullshit jobs for people who have real work. Like after the 2008 crash, the bankers didn't get hit. The auto executives in the bailed out companies didn't get hit. Who had to take a hit is the guys who were actually making the cars. And there's all this outrage— "Oh, well, you know, they're making \$24 dollars an hour. It's really \$54 if you count the benefits. That's so outrageous." And it's like— well, why not? You know, they're providing a necessary service, they're working hard— why shouldn't they be able to take their kids on vacation? Why shouldn't they have a nice house in the suburbs? And the notion seemed to be, "But— but you guys get to make cars. Like, that— that's, like, a real thing that people want." (Laughter)

[00:38:04]

☒ *Infomercial music*

Aaron

The third type of bullshit job is: The Boxticker. Just a position that exists so that a company can check off a box and say that they are doing something. It can be things like performance managers.

Shawn

So, like, an example that Graeber gives from governments— a fact-finding commission into some kind of controversy that's set up to fail. It only exists so the government is able to say, like, "Oh, look, we did a fact-finding commission. We did an investigation on this issue. Like, aren't we good? Aren't we noble?" They exist to say, like, "Oh, now we have a director of increasing diversity." What's crucial about, sort of, like, the boxticker is that the director of diversity doesn't actually have the power to increase diversity. They just have the power for the company to say they have a director of diversity.

Aaron

Oh, hey, do you, uh, wanna whip out the Ol' Boxticker Sketch?

Shawn

Our grandparents used to do that sketch together. *Of course*. I'd be happy to do it.

Aaron

Okay. So you're the Boss and I'm the Boxticker.

Boxticker

Oh, I'm so excited. My first week on the job and I just completed my first report on how to improve the environmental impact of the organization. I put so much work into this. I interviewed every employee. I have prepared a comprehensive list of suggestions. My boss is gonna be so impressed.

(Light knocking)

Boss

Uh— do you mind if I come in? How's it goin'—

Boxticker

Oh, hey! Yeah, I was just thinking about how stoked I am to present to you my report.

Boss
Well–

Boxticker
It's going great. I put so much–

Boss
–awesome.

Boxticker
–work into it.

Boss
And it's all done?

Boxticker
It's all done, yeah. It's–

Boss
Cool. Can I take a look at it?

Boxticker
Definitely, please do. If you need me to explain any parts of it to you, I am here.

Boss
Hm. Sure. Can you– can you pass me that pair of scissors on your desk?

Boxticker
Sure, yeah. Definitely.
(Sounds of paper cutting)

Boxticker
Hey, oh, wait– that's the report. You kn– why– what are you doing?

Boss
Yeah. We won't be taking the recommendations, uh, this week. (Cutting continues)

Boxticker
You didn't even read it.

Boss
It comes from above me. We're not taking the recommendations this week.

Boxticker
So you don't need to know what the recommendations are to know that you're not taking them?

Boss
Um– I don't need to understand that, at this time.

Boxticker
I mean, can you just, like, pretend to take it, and cut it up not in front of me, so I didn't know that it was just–

Boss
Oh, was that morale deflating? (Cutting continues)

Boxticker
Yeah. I mean, I was really excited–

Boss
Sorry, I was just–

Boxticker
–I put a lot of work into this, and I know I have to do one every week. And n- now I know that this is what happens to them?

Boss
Uh, yeah, well, not– Yeah. Anyway. So I'll leave you to next week's report, and keep up the great work.

[00:40:27]

☒

Narrator:

Welcome to Keyboard Warrior Radio Theatre.

☒

Keyboard Warrior 1

(typing sounds)

They're saying that there should be less jobs? We need more jobs. We've got unemployed people. We need to take care of our veterans. Does the sound of an "unemployed veteran" sound good to you? I don't think so. You need to create stable, good-paying jobs through massive energy projects, resource extraction. We need jobs. Jobs, jobs, jobs.

Keyboard Warrior 2

(typing sounds)

You want to force disabled veterans to go to work? That's a humiliating ritual, to make them show their worth before you let them eat. It's disgusting. Abolish work today. Abolish all jobs.

Keyboard Warrior 1

(typing sounds)

Oh, Nephew. I forgot that I had you on my Facebook. I know you're just a young lad, but as you get older you start to realize nothing gets done without jobs. If there was no jobs, who would pick up the garbage? Who would bring the food to your table? Who would drive taxi cabs? Who would put out fires? Society is formed by a network of jobs. And that's why I always vote for jobs. Whoever brings the jobs gets my ballot.

Keyboard Warrior 2

(typing sounds)

Oh, Uncle. You're so utterly stupid and naïve. What you've listed there was a series of tasks. Some of those tasks can be automated. Garbage can be sent through pneumatic tubes from people's homes to collection points. Now, some of the things you mentioned are tasks that people will have to do, but that doesn't mean it has to be their "job" where they have to show up every day and do it.

Keyboard Warrior 1

(typing sounds)

Even your idea to build pneumatic tubes to carry garbage to the dump, the only way that could be built is through jobs. Construction workers and journeymen and engineers. It's the power of jobs. And someday you, too, will have a job, and you'll join us.

Keyboard Warrior 2

(typing sounds)

I'm scared to get my first job, because I know they're gonna drill this shit into my head, and soon I'm gonna sound like you. The only solution is to destroy not just all the jobs, but all the people who have ever worked a job.

Keyboard Warrior 1

(typing sounds)

There's a new proposal being kicked around the Senate right now to exterminate everyone who doesn't work. So your idea is quite a bit like that.

Keyboard Warrior 2

(typing sounds)

It's actually the opposite of that. Kill everyone who does work.

Keyboard Warrior 3

(typing sounds)

Hello, you two. I've been reading this thread and I'm just itching to weigh in. I'm a centrist. I'm not sure if you've heard of centrism, but it's a political ideology where you always want to look for

something. And, like, that sounds so extreme. And you guys are both talking about killing each other. And this is what us centrists call an extreme spiral. The middle ground is: some jobs are good, like firemen, or daycare worker, people who clean hospitals. That's an important job. Clean hospitals: that's a legitimately important job. Not to mention doctors, another part of hospitals. There's tons of people who need help doing the stuff around their house because they have disabilities, or they're aging. And they don't get the level of care that they deserve. Those are jobs in wait. Every uncleaned room is an uncreated job. And I think that's the middle ground. #Centrism.

☒

Narrator

And we'll see you next time for another episode of Keyboard Warrior Radio Theatre.

☒

[00:43:50]

Shawn

Looping back to the bullshitization of the economy...

David Graeber

Yes.

Shawn

If you're correct— and honestly, I think you are— but if you're correct and we're at an early stage of bullshitization, what does late stage bullshitization look like? What's the dystopia?

David Graeber

Well, I mean, just imagine, like, what we're in except more so. Because, you know, they're talking about the robots coming to replace our jobs, right? And every now and then this rhetoric has a little efflorescence and dies down again. So a lot of people say, "Well, you know, people have been saying that for years. It's not like there's been mass unemployment." And in fact, it's true. Like, back in— and certainly by the 1930s they thought The Depression was caused by technological unemployment. That was the phrase they used at the time. So this whole idea that mechanization is gonna cause mass unemployment has been— every decade or so there's a panic about it.

So people say, "Well, you know, maybe it's not really a problem." But then the other way to look at that is to say, well, maybe it happened and instead of just getting rid of the unnecessary work and sort of making us all work less, they just made up bullshit jobs. Right? Which is certainly what it looks like. You know, if you look back in the '30s at the jobs that existed, about half of them have been eliminated. So in theory we could all be working a 15-20-hour week, probably fairly easily. Instead they make up the sort of pointless jobs. So all I would anticipate is, unless we recognize the problem and actually make a collective decision to do something about it, it's just gonna be more and more extreme. We're gonna have to create industries which essentially exist because of themselves.

I think corporate law is the paradigm for that, right? Because corporate lawyers— sometimes I say they're a little like armies, but then people give me shit. So let me use a different example— feudal lords. You know, back in the Middle Ages the idea is feudal lords, well, they protect the peasants. Well, who do they protect the peasants from? Other feudal lords. So basically corporate lawyers are like that. Any firm needs a lot of lawyers to protect the firm from the other firm's lawyers. That's the dystopian future. That those kind of industries, that only exist because they exist, and that feed off themselves and that, you know, sort of endlessly pile on more and more of them will grow to the point where that's all anybody's doing.

Shawn

Yeah. So I want to ask the opposite question, too. You mentioned a 15-hour work week, and in the book you always talk about potentially a basic income. If people take this critique seriously and say, like, we as a society all come together and say, "You know, this book is spot-on. Graeber's right. We

need to embody this critique into our society,” like, what changes should we make going forward to fix this problem? Less jobs?

David Graeber

Yeah, well– less jobs would be very nice. But the technical problem is, how do you address this without creating even more bureaucracy and therefore even more bullshit jobs? Because, you know, I’ve been talking about the private sector, but it’s obviously not as if the public sector isn’t full of them, too. I always say that they’re somewhat different in structure. That in the public sector a lot of the unnecessary jobs are basically bureaucrats and, you know, office workers who are basically there to make poor people feel bad about themselves. Whereas in the private sector, most of the useless office workers are there to make rich people feel good about themselves. (Laughter) But either way, like, how do you get rid of them? In England we sometimes use the term, “creating committees to investigate the problem of too many committees. (Laughs) You know? The more you try to address the problem, the more you just make more of it.

Shawn

Oh, yeah– do you call that, “The Iron Law”– of something, in *Utopia of Rules*?

David Graeber

Oh, the Iron Law of Liberalism– oh yeah, that was a different book. Yes, the Iron Law of Liberalism– and I’m using the term, “liberalism” in its old fashioned, 19th century sense where it basically meant “libertarianism.” So the Iron Law of Liberalism is that any market reform designed to reduce bureaucracy and red tape will in fact create more regulations and more bureaucrats than existed before. And more paperwork. And I think– I’ve tried to find someone to give me a counter-example. I mean, I’ve challenged people to come up with a counter-example. I haven’t found one. No one’s been able to produce one.

My favorite statistic that I always trundle out is Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Between 1992 and 2001, or 2002– this is the period of “Shock Therapy” where the actual Russian economy shrank dramatically– during that period, the total number of civil servants– I mean, not even private bureaucrats, public bureaucrats– went from one million to 1.25 million. So there was a 25% increase in the number of bureaucrats after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Shawn

Wow.

David Graeber

Yeah. So how do you avoid that? And that’s why I ended up embracing basic income. I mean, you can say, “Well, reduce work hours.” And that’s the obvious thing to do, and I’m for that. Right? But it seems to me that I can’t see how you would reduce work hours– in the current system that we’ve got now, anyway– in a way that wouldn’t require a lot of bureaucracy, a lot of legislation interfering in every aspect of our lives. Because think about it. You know, our work has invaded our lives. How would you reduce it?

You know, if we were all going to 9:00 to 5:00 jobs, you know, you could say, “Okay, from now on, they’re 10:00 to 3:00 jobs.” You know, you could demand everybody gets three months’ vacation. You could do a lot of things. But the problem is, there’s a lot of casualized labor, there’s a lot of contract labor. There’s a lot of things which are, like, technically monthly salaries, so they can make you work all the time– like the kind of job I have. Where they pay me once a month, but nobody really knows how many hours I work. They make me do these bullshit time allocation studies, but then they ignore them. You know, in fact, if I were doing everything they wanted I would be working probably 80 hours a work. No human being can do that, so I slack off on some of those responsibilities. But, you know, there’s– I don’t want the government monitoring that stuff.

(Laughs) So it’s hard to see how you would, like, directly address it in the current environment. So basic income, on the other hand, universal basic income– and the “universal” part is very important here– not only would it be a leftist, anti-bureaucratic position, but it would target the bureaucrats who are really annoying. Because, you know, some bureaucrats are doing useful stuff. But some bureaucrats are there to make it harder for you to get benefits. Some bureaucrats are there to, like, you know, see if

you're really looking for a job or whether you're really married to that person. Or, you know, whether you're really using that room, or would have to be taxed for it, or— you know, all of those guys. The really irritating bureaucrats. Those guys would all go. You know, we wouldn't need them anymore.

They would all get basic income, too, right? So they could go off and form a jug band or go spelunking or, you know, decide to restore antique furniture. Whatever makes them happy. I don't care. (Laughs) And the world would be a better place. Anyway, they'd be a lot happier than doing what they do. Because one thing that became very clear from my researching the book is that bureaucrats whose job is to make you miserable are often very miserable themselves. They don't actually enjoy doing— I mean, there's a few sadists, right?

Shawn

Yeah, there— (laughs) there's not many jug band members that just really wish they could deny someone benefits instead.

David Graeber

Exactly. But the other way around? Probably yeah.

[00:50:53]

☒ *Infomercial music*

Shawn

The fourth type of bullshit job is: The Duct Taper. A duct taper is someone who is fixing a problem that shouldn't exist in the first place.

Aaron

Say your job is to follow the bosses around and pick up their coffee cups because the bosses won't just put the cup in the place where it's supposed to be. It's a problem that's created out of laziness or created out of incompetence. And the problem could just go away, but instead they hire the duct taper, the patcher-upper.

Shawn

Or, like, someone who will help people do their applications for social assistance and stuff like that. So, like, ideally the system shouldn't be set up in such a way where people are turned down welfare or disability for frivolous reasons. But yet that happens, because the people who are in charge of deciding who gets welfare or disability are hired goons. Because the people who hired them would never turn down people for welfare to their face. That's a goon.

Aaron

To solve the problem that the goons are making in the welfare industry you need to hire duct taper to, like, walk people through the process of applying for welfare.

Shawn

Make sure they check all the right boxes, because the process has no sympathy for them.

Aaron

It feels like it's about time for— I just want to see if you're on the same page as me?

Shawn

Duct—

Aaron

(together)

Duct Taper Sketch.

Shawn

(together)

Duct Taper Sketch.

Aaron

Yes!

Shawn
Strap in.
(Music fades)

[00:52:08]

(Water dripping, slowly)

Duct Taper

Oh. So how's that bucket with the water dripping into it doing? Hm. Only about 1/15th full. Oh, got a nice comment on my profile picture.

Manager

Randall, what are you doing?

Randall

Oh, I was just—

Manager

You're on your phone on company time?

Randall

—no, I was just— yeah, I was just... checking my phone. The bu— the bucket's doing fine. You can see there's barely any water in it.

Manager

What are you talking about? Look, you've got two buckets for a reason. And it's because the process is this:

Randall

I know what the process is.

Manager

You put the bucket down underneath the water. The water will drip. There's a leak in the pipe. You carry the other bucket, which has water in it, across to the other side of the facility, dump it down the dumping drain, and then walk back, put the empty bucket underneath the drip, take the now-full bucket, and parade it back to the other side of the facility yet again to dump it in the dumping drain.

Randall

See, but the thing is—

Manager

And you continue this process—

Randall

—if I keep moving like that constantly, there's no water in the bucket. There's no point.

Manager

But you're— you're stealing from us, just sitting there.

Randall

I'm not stealing from—

Manager

Looking at your phone. You're stealing.

Randall

—you, you're paying me for an outcome, and I'm providing you that outcome.

Manager

We're not paying you for an outcome. We're paying you for a *process*.

Randall

That—

Manager

We're paying you for an action. A series of actions. For a set period of time—

Randall

The— the process shouldn't exist. Can I offer you some opinions on an update to the process?

Manager

Absolutely not. Now pick up this bucket and parade your little self to the other side to dump it down the dumping hole. And I want that to continue for your entire shift as is in your contract agreement.

Randall

Why don't you just fix the pipe?

Manager

Oh, we're going to. We'll have a guy in sometime.

Randall

This problem doesn't need to exist.

Manager

Well, it's - it's not a problem. You're here. You empty the bucket.

Randall

Never mind. I'm gonna parade. I need the job, so I'm gonna start parading. And I'm sorry—

Manager

There we go.

Randall

—for arguing.

Manager

Thank you.

Randall

I'll just... do the cycle. Walk in a circle all day.

Manager

(Clapping) That's the applause you get for doing your job.

Randall

Well, thank you for the positive encouragement. You're a great manager.

Manager

Thank you. I'm gonna go to my office now. (Footsteps) I've really encouraged that guy. (Door opens and closes) That's why they pay me the big bucks. Now I'll just get out my phone. Oh, someone comment on my profile picture. Oh— (laughs) you too, Jessica.

☒ *Ukulele*

[00:54:17]

(Crowd sounds)

Person 1

Hey, man, do you mind if I take a look at that book you're holding?

Person 2

Oh, sure. Morgan Beattie was explaining how "Shrek 2" is feminist propaganda. (Yawns) Oh, you know, it's meant to emasculate fans of the original. It's really great, incisive stuff.

Person 1

And do you mind if I just drop it here in the garbage, where it belongs? (Crunch)

Person 2

That's a bit, uh, creepy that you just threw my book out.

Person 1

How do you feel about me handing you a second book, now? A different book?

Person 2

Well, at least it is a book. That makes up for it.

Person 1

One book for one book.

Person 2

David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs*.

Person 1

It just came out.

Person 2

I haven't read this one. Nice.

Person 1

Yeah.

Person 2

Oh, it just came out. That makes sense.

Person 1

Yeah, it's really good. It's a lot better than—

Person 2

Oh, did you read that one? That's in the trash?

Person 1

Oh— no, no, no. But I've read dozens of think pieces about it.

Person 2

Yeah, I'm— I'm sick of talking about it.

Person 1

No, but I mean, I'm not sure if I actually agree with people cleaning their own rooms.

Person 2

Okay?

Person 1

I don't know. My dad always told me when I was growing up, "Every uncleaned room is an uncreated job."

Person 2

Yeah.

Person 1

We should pay people to clean each other's rooms.

Person 2

Oh— oh!

Person 1

Because if you're just cleaning your own room, that's not economic activity. That's just something you're doing by yourself. But if you want to grow the economy and make the economy expand, one of the ways to do that would be to pay everyone to clean each other's rooms. I think the government should pay someone to clean my room.

Person 2

Holy. Cow. I never thought that somebody would debunk that you should clean your room. That's so great. That's so great.

[00:55:35]

☒ *Infomercial music*

Aaron

The fifth and final type of bullshit job is: The Taskmaster. People whose entire job consists of assigning work to others. The people underneath would be fine continuing to do those tasks even if they disappeared, if they evaporated. Type 2 Taskmaster is even worse, has, like, a negative impact assigning

bullshit tasks to other people. They aren't just bullshit themselves. They create more bullshit, forcing other useful workers like teachers to spend more of their time assessing and justifying what they're doing and less time actually doing it. And I think, uh, the best way for us to demonstrate for you what a Taskmaster is like is with The Taskmaster Bit.

Shawn

Oh, yeah! Can I do my Working Class Joe voice?

Aaron

I wouldn't have it any other way.

☒ *Music fades*

[00:56:30]

(Working class sounds: tools and din)

Working Class Joe

Hey, I'm a Working Class Joe doing my machinery ovah heah.

Taskmaster

Joe? Joe, I know you're busy fixing cars, but you didn't fill out your forms this week.

Working Class Joe

Oh, my god. I' been doin' car stuff. I'm hired for cars. I don't wanna be fillin' out your stupid forms.

They don't make any sense. Like, I gotta check, "Oh—"

Taskmaster

How do we know—

Working Class Joe

"—yes, the wheel. I did the wheel."

Taskmaster

How do we know that you're doing everything properly unless there's the forms?

Working Class Joe

Check the car. I'm up to my elbows in car right now.

Taskmaster

(Laughs) I— Look, if I knew about cars well enough to check them, I wouldn't be the one—

Working Class Joe

How— how often do you have to chase people down like this while they're doin' the car stuff?

Taskmaster

Oh, you know, people—

Working Class Joe

How frequently does that happen?

Taskmaster

People forget to fill out the forms quite a bit. I guess that's why they need me.

Working Class Joe

I'm gonna tell you what my day's like.

8:00 a.m.: cars, cars, cars, cars.

Lunch at noon, for one hour, unpaid.

1:00 p.m.: cars, cars, cars, cars.

5:00: I'm outta here.

Okay? 100% cars. Now—

Taskmaster

Forgot one thing. Cars, cars, cars— forms!

Working Class Joe

Look—

Taskmaster

Cars, cars, cars— forms!

Working Class Joe

Look, smart guy, what do you do when you're not chasing us down like this? You're reviewing the forms in your office all day? Read, read, read, read, read— the whole time?

Taskmaster

Well, no, I do lots of things. I design new forms. I go to seminars about how to create new forms. I go to seminars about how to motivate people to fill out forms. I'm (laughs) so passionate about forms. They're really the glue that holds society together.

Working Class Joe

Well, look, we all get paid. Your salary comes from the fixed cars. My salary comes from the fixed cars.

Taskmaster

Yep.

Working Class Joe

The friggin' boss's salary comes from the fixed cars. Not a single salary, not a single dime comes from forms. They're a suck—

Taskmaster

Well, I wouldn't say that's true.

Working Class Joe

They're a suck. Not like fixin' cars. Fixin' cars is good for everyone. Really contributes. Forms?

Taskmaster

Forms have a part to play in everything. That's my motto.

Working Class Joe

The part is sucking.

Taskmaster

The part is lubrication.

Working Class Joe

I'd like to see you fix a friggin' car.

Taskmaster

I'd like to see you design your own form.

Working Class Joe

Go to hell, you piece o' shit animal.

Taskmaster

All right, so I'll just get those forms by the end of the day.

Working Class Joe

Like hell you will, you piece of shit.

Taskmaster

Hey now, don't make me go to HR.

Working Class Joe

All right. Well, check later for the forms, I guess.

Taskmaster

Thanks a million. Toodles!

Working Class Joe

Fuckin' guy.

(Working class sounds fade)

[00:58:46]

Shawn

Another one of your earlier books that I wanted to just reference one part of because I loved it so much, gave me something to think about for days. In "Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology" you give a three-point plan for ending global poverty.

David Graeber

Oh, yeah!

Shawn

It's bold, utopian, it's exactly the stuff I love. And you acknowledge in the book, you know, "This is really complicated to put into practice." But the three ideas in it are: an amnesty on international debt...

David Graeber

Yep.

Shawn

...Cancelling all technology patents and intellectual property older than a year, and allowing for free movement for travel and residence around the world— basically, open borders. So I wanted to ask, why would this end global poverty?

David Graeber

Well, I think just the third one would, you know? I mean, let's just look at that. Everybody says, "Oh, oh, the problems of differential incomes across countries, and international trade, and the histories of wealth and development— oh, it's very complicated." People have thought about it for generations, how we would solve some of these problems, and it's very intractable and no one knows, and— yeah, right.

Let's imagine the following scenario. Anybody in the world could live wherever they want. If I live in Mozambique, if I live in Cambodia, and I want to move to Cleveland or I want to move to Holland, nobody's stopping me. All right. The moment that happens, do you think that the governments of America, Holland, England, France, all— Germany, all the rich countries in the world would not instantly figure out a way to make people in Mozambique and Cambodia want to stay there? You know, (laughs) they would figure out a way to make—

You know, I mean, people in Mozambique and Cambodia probably mostly would want to stay there if they could, right? I think some people are adventurers and always be, and want to see the world. You know, that's not a problem. But, you know, the overwhelming majority, they probably want to stay there. They speak the language, you know? They like the music, they like the food— okay. So there's an incentive to want to stay in your own country. But if suddenly every single rich country had to figure out how to make migrants not want to come there but want to stay at home, I bet you they would come up with things that would make life in those countries, you know, relatively pleasant really fast. (Laughter) They wouldn't come up with something? I bet they would.

It's a little bit like what Kropotkin said about the dirty jobs problem. Everybody always asks that one. "Well, if you have a free and equal society, who'll clean the sewers? You know, who will do the coal mining and the toilet cleaning?" And, you know, there's various lefty theorists have come up with various funny suggestions about this. Fourier said, "Oh, you know, little children love to play in filth. Let them do it." You know? (Laughs) Kropotkin had a little more practical one.

He said, imagine everybody had to do a shift of a couple hours a day doing unpleasant jobs like that. That means all the engineers, the scientists, the— everybody would be forced to do these jobs. I bet you toilet cleaning and coal mining robots would be invented in a matter of months. It would be everybody's top priority, would be to get rid of those jobs entirely. Right now, you know, those are the jobs we have the least incentive to robotize. But if everybody had to do them, you know, I mean, those jobs would be eliminated almost immediately.

Shawn

(Laughs) I love that idea. Thanks for coming on the show. This has been an awesome interview. And personally, like, your book's been a big inspiration to me. I love the stuff that you're doing.

David Graeber

Oh, thanks.

Shawn

So, I mean, I suspect a good number of our listeners are familiar with you, but if someone's completely new to you, like, "This guy's on the money," where can they find you online?

David Graeber

Ah, well, that's interesting, because I have a webpage now. And I didn't used to, but it was created. At the time I did this book, said, "Okay, I gotta do it. I've been putting it off." And several of the people who actually have bullshit jobs, who had provided me with testimonies and I'd become friends with online pulled together to create a webpage for me—time at their bullshit jobs, so they can do it. And they just told me, "Well, wait, we've discovered that DavidGraeber.com is taken." So I was surprised. Although I was talking to an old girlfriend who said, "Yeah, don't you remember? Like, that night that—and we all got stoned and you, like, (laughs) reserved the domain name? I guess you forgot." Anyway. So I don't remember how to access it anyways. So the guy went through a whole list, and I didn't realize that there isn't just .ORG and .NET. There's like 30 of them. So, one really called out to me. As soon I heard it, "Well, obviously it's gotta be that." So there is a webpage now called "DavidGraeber.Industries". (Laughter)

Shawn

That's amazing. I also— I love the idea that "DavidGraeber.com", you've got it, it's out there, but it's just... it's just beyond your grasp now.

David Graeber

(Laughs) Yeah. I— yeah. I've just totally forgot. Anyway. So DavidGraeber.Industries. Yeah, and it's still growing. It's really just starting up, but it's there.

Shawn

Awesome. Well, you know, and thanks so much, again, for coming on the show, and I love the book. I read it— I devoured it in just, like, under a week. So, thanks again.

David Graeber

Thank you. Take care.

☒ *Music*

[01:03:33]

Johnson

I'll just take my earbud out, here. This is really a bullshit job. I am a Boxticker. I fill out these forms just so that they can say that there's accountability in the form process. I'm a Duct Taper. The modem is faulty and I have to restart it every couple days so he can get on the internet and get to his sites. I'm obviously his Flunky. When the summer interns come in, I'm a Taskmaster. I have to make all these bullshit jobs for them. And, god, I mean, the only bullshit job that isn't part of my complex multi-form bullshit job is a Goon. I'm not a Goon. (Sighs) Oh, fuck, at least I'm not a Goon.

Boss

Johnson!

Johnson

Oh, Mr. Spendsworth! Has it been 50 minutes already?

Mr. Spendsworth

Yes, the telephone call with Mr. Buysworth is completed. Oh, yeah, I do have to ask you to do one other thing, if you can clear a bit of time of your plate.

Johnson

Oh... You know what? Okay, I'll— I've got a lot of work to do, but I want to be a good employee, so I'll absolutely do it. Anything. Let me know.

Mr. Spendsworth

So you know down at the lower levels of the company, and we've got those guys who, like, crawl under cars, get all dirty like animals, and— I don't know, I'm not— I'm not exactly sure what they do—

Johnson

Yeah, like auto mechanics, and repairmen?

Mr. Spendsworth

—yes, yeah, that's what they call them.

Johnson

Yeah.

Mr. Spendsworth

Auto mechanics, yeah. So we're gonna be laying off 40% of our auto mechanics. *Hasta la vista, baby*. That's what you— (laughs) you're gonna be my "*Hasta la vista, baby*" guy. You gotta just go tell the people what they don't want to hear.

Johnson

Okay, sir. Yeah. I'll go do something that you wouldn't do.

Mr. Spendsworth

Those jobs don't need to exist. It's gonna make the company leaner. The machines can do all that. No machine can do what we do. You know what I'm talkin' about, right? What managers do? That, uh—

Johnson

Uh, yeah.

Mr. Spendsworth

—*Je ne sais quoi* of the human spirit that's the backbone of the managerial tradition?

Johnson

Uh, yeah, yeah. The—

Mr. Spendsworth

Yeah. Pretty soon it's just gonna be us and the eggheads. And, you know, between you and me, one day we can automate the eggheads. Then it'll just be managers all the way down. A beautiful future. You wanna take my hand and walk with me into it, Fellow Manager?

Johnson

(Breath) Yes. Yes, I do.

Mr. Spendsworth

Well, then there's just one other question I have to ask you.

Narrator

Three months later.

☒ *Organ playing Mendelssohn's "Wedding March"*

(Crowd cheers)

Johnson

Oh, my god. They should clean up those dead birds.

Mr. Spendsworth

Really? You'd think. Huh.

Johnson

I'll just open the door here, you can step in there.

Mr. Spendsworth

Hm. Can't wait to hear those cans rattling as the car drives away. (Car starts)

Johnson

"Just Married", right across the back.

Mr. Spendsworth

(Laughs) That's us! Just married, I can't believe it.

(Cans rattle)

Johnson

Yeah, just married. No one will be able to miss that we're married.

Mr. Spendsworth

Remember, I used to be your boss, and—

Johnson

Oh, yeah, that was so long ago now. It just feels like—

Mr. Spendsworth

Like another—

Johnson

—a different world.

Mr. Spendsworth

—another life. (Laughs) But that's enough shop talk here. Come here, you. (Kissing)

☒ *Music swells*

[01:06:14]

(Memory chimes)

(Crowd sounds)

Professional 1

Thank you so much for telling me about your day. This David Graeber guy sounds great. I really want to go out and buy that book. You said it's out now?

Johnson

Yeah. The book just came out. It's called, *Bullshit Jobs*. And actually, one of the hosts was saying on the show it was his top book of 2018 so far.

Professional 1

Wow, wow.

Johnson

Yeah. And, I mean, he went on to say that he's only read one book so far in 2018 that came out in 2018, but he also said that that little bit of honesty should devalue the endorsement.

Professional 1

Wow. Sounds like a forthright and trustworthy endorsement. Oh, hey, Bucket Dumper! Bucket Dumper, over here!

Johnson

Bucket Dumper, we're over here.

Bucket Dumper

Hey guys.

Professional 1

You still parading around in circles with your bucket?

Bucket Dumper

Yes.

Professional 1

He was just telling me about bullshit jobs. Sounds like you're a Duct Taper.

Bucket Dumper

You know, having not read the book yet, I don't understand what you're saying at all. But that's one of the reasons I'm gonna check it out. What's— did you guys— is there a drink special?

Professional 1

Oh, I'll cover you. Order whatever you want. Six bucks for a drink. Throw six bucks to you for a drink. Start donating six bucks a month to the SRSly WRONG Podcast. That's how you get access to the whole archive of all their old episodes, bonus episodes, secret Facebook group.

Bucket Dumper

Whoa. And you can support independent content. That's a bargain. The other thing I was thinking is, like, maybe we need to have a revolution?

Professional 1

Oh, yeah, a revo- like, to change all this?

Bucket Dumper

Yes. Like, why should I have to parade a bucket back and forth for eight hours a day in order to have a place to sleep?

Professional 1

They should just let you fix the pipe and then pay you forever for that fixed pipe.

Bucket Dumper

Yeah. Because, like, this is just nonsense. The work culture with, like, the Protestant work ethic and- it's just madness. And, like, we can overthrow it and we can do so much. Like, we can introduce a basic income, we can invest in technology that helps people- we could-

Professional 1

Makes sense, makes sense. We could abolish prisons.

Bucket Dumper

We could tackle the - the problem of institutional sexual assault within the police, the military, and the prison system. Like, we could do a lot. Like, we-

Professional 1

Hey, while- while we're at all this, can we provide people with food, shelter, clothing, education, and transportation?

Bucket Dumper

Yes! Yes.

☒

Narrator

And so, the disgruntled bullshit job-havers implemented all of the things that he just said, and more. Forever approaching that receding horizon of a perfect utopia moving closer and closer to a better society forever until the end of time.

☒

Closing Theme Music - Punkslut Srsly Wrong Theme ☒

[01:08:59]

Narrator

Next time on SRSly WRONG:

Aaron

Mr. Graeber, we have written two overlapping songs. We- we were just really hoping to sing in front of you. Can you do us the honor of letting us sing them to you?

David Graeber

Uh, yeah, I can, actually.

Shawn

Thank you. One, two, three- (Music starts)

☒

Shawn

Jobs, they should contribute to the world. It's a form of spiritual violence.

|
Aaron
David Graeber, you're the best. I think you are such a star.
|
☒
Shawn
Yeah. That song was dedicated to you.
David Graeber
Oh. Oh, really? Oh, thank you.
Aaron
I think Shawn's was really good, though.
David Graeber
And you as well.
Aaron
Oh, thanks. Thank you.
Shawn
Yeah. I thought yours was good, too.
-~THE END~-

Additional reading

- ☒ **From David Graeber (1961-2020)**
- <http://www.DavidGraeber.Industries>
- Articles
- ☒ On the phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs (Article)
- ☒ What's the Point if We Can't Have Fun? - The Baffler
- ☒ After the pandemic, we can't go back to sleep - Jacobin
- ☒ How to change the course of human history - Eurozine
- Books
- ☒ Bullshit Jobs - ISBN-10 150826466X (PDF on Libcom)
- ☒ Utopia of Rules - ISBN-10 1612195180
- ☒ Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology (pdf + ebooks)
- ☒ Capitalism is just a really bad way of organizing communism (PDF)
- Video
- ☒ The five types of bullshit jobs: The Real News
- ☒ David Graeber on Basic Income
- ☒ Batshit Construction
- ☒ David Graeber on the Value of Work
- ☒ Graeber debates Peter Thiel
- ☒ From Managerial Feudalism to the Revolt of the Caring Classes

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