

THE BULLSHIT CONSPIRACY

A Theory of Society + Fictitious Jobs +
Vicious Critique of Famous Dr Graeber

MANUEL ECHEVERRÍA

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No-bullshit jobs, as developed in this paper, is a nested definition of fictitious employment. The theory ascribed to Graeber (2019) is proven to be irrational, empirically false, contested or inconsistent. Data on two of his major works indicates that although he often is presented as left-wing, anarchist, and activist, his actual statements are nevertheless aligned with right-wing ideology. To underscore these points, his work is conceptualised as a bullshit theory, in the sense that it is redundant, fake, creates unnecessary tasks, and requires duct taping. Furthermore, it is evaluated as a PR-flunky in the arms race to promote essentially an Alt-right world view, where the US Democrats are portrayed as a left-wing party, and academia is depicted as radical. A theory of society is discussed in view of this multifaceted topic.

Introduction

Only a minor part of the population is engaged in the production of goods and services in advanced economies. Still, job statistics suggest that most people have an employment. Disregarding unemployed and those essential to the production of goods and services:

- What do people in wealthy countries do all day?

According to David Graeber (2019), most people still have to waste their time under supervision or in constrained environments with few opportunities to carry out meaningful tasks. This is arguably also true in imperialist countries.

This paper discusses the theory of fictitious employment all the way from basic definitions of bullshit jobs, to the explanation of the phenomenon and its political implications. As the discussion is fundamental, the critique is not limited to one single person or particular clusters of individuals. A completely different approach is developed and applied to his data.

This paper also contributes to the intense, involute debate on the prevalence of a left-wing culture within academia. It highlights that the current perceptions of quality and ideology in academia are distorted to the extent that the opposite of what is commonly claimed is true.

On the Definition of Bullshit Jobs

Dr Graeber's (2019) famous theory about *bullshit jobs*, turns out to be a *bullshit theory* on logical grounds. This section begins by showing that he is unable to use his own definition. An auxiliary definition which can account for his assertions leads to further contradictions or absurdities.

If Dr Graeber is given the benefit of the doubt, his final working definition (see Appendix) translates to:

Final working definition (F'): a job is bullshit when **[i]** an employee believes his job is completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious, and this belief is valid and correct, **[ii]** and the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case as part of the conditions of employment.

Seen as a construct good enough to introduce an empirical study, this definition is alright. Initially, Graeber (2019) seems content with a hands-on approach where 'the worker's perspective is about as close as one is likely to get to an accurate assessment of the situation'. (p.10) However, instead of proceeding with his intriguing data, he insist in theoretical deliberations.

That is unfortunate, because from a theoretical point of view, his reasoning leads to absurdities, serious inconsistencies or even contradictions. To clarify: I mean logical contradiction, which in this case invalidates his theoretical credentials altogether already at the outset.

Dr G feels it is necessary to point out that he assumes an 'underlying reality' (p.10). He then proceeds with an application at the end of ch 1:

F1: If the retail worker genuinely believes that he provides nothing of value to his customers, can we then say that retail worker does, indeed, have a bullshit job? *I would say the technical answer, according to our working definition, would have to be yes (p.22)*

Dr G's *technical answer* is paradoxical: if the same retail worker changes his mind – then it would indeed be the case that his work could in principle oscillate between bullshit and non-bullshit over time, even though the 'underlying reality' does not change. This is at odds with his previous assertion that it is not just a matter of belief, but that the worker is correct. To quote Dr G:

'I'm assuming there is an underlying reality here ... because otherwise we'd be stuck with accepting that the exact same job could be bullshit one day and nonbullshit the next, depending on the vagaries of some fickle worker's mood.' (p.10)

Note that his conclusions do not necessarily follow from his third and last 'working definition' (F or F'). Logically, his definition allows a discrepancy between belief and so-called underlying reality. ¹

Aforementioned definition is not true when either the worker does not believe it is bullshit in the sense of **[i]** OR this belief is invalid or incorrect OR he does not feel obliged to pretend....

Therefore, if a worker believes it is a bullshit job, it is still possible that the job is not actually completely pernicious, etc. – and thus strictly speaking, not a bullshit job. Hence F1 is not technically true by default *whenever the beliefs are congruent with [i]* (completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious), because they are not necessarily correct. Such remark (i.e. F1) would however be true with the following *type* of definition:

Implied or Equivalent F (IF): A job is bullshit *if* an employee believes his job is completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious, *then (iff.)* his belief is valid and correct.

Where **[ii]** could be interpreted as attached either before or after the implication arrow. Because then if the belief is invalid or incorrect, then he does not believe his job is completely pointless, and unnecessary, and pernicious. However, this would mean that every time a worker believes a job is bullshit in the sense of **[i]**, then that belief must be true even if it is obviously possible to conceive an underlying reality were the conditions of **[i]** do not hold, e.g. the job was not pernicious or unnecessary (which may be thought as independent of the worker's actual beliefs).

¹ Please note that F' is a generous improvement on my behalf. Insistence on his unaltered definition (F) does not allow a discrepancy, and subsequent problems remain. Those discussed here are merely a representative sample of issues.

Due to the definition, this must either be thought of as contradiction or that the 'underlying reality' always happens to be a consequence of beliefs of the workers whenever they think they have a bullshit job (in the sense of [i]). Matrix style. A very interesting proposition indeed. Joint efforts are quite a treat if workers are assumed to have different beliefs. Equivalence does not ameliorate the absurdities.

In a remarkable display of cognitive dissonance, Graeber (2019) seems aware of the problem of subjectivity on the value of work, but is unable to apply that very reasoning on his crucial definition of a bullshit job (F), which is essentially subject to the very same problem.² It is *as if* different persons wrote his book, and failed to communicate properly.

No-Bullshit Jobs

This sections introduces coherent no-bullshit definitions. I show that Graeber's typology and subsequent reasoning is at odds with his own definitions and previous analysis.

Dr Graeber presents a typology with five categories: Flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, taskmasters. As the previous analysis already suggests, the conceptual problem is that although he spent a whole chapter on a definition, he still is unable to avoid inconsistencies. The problem boils down to an unshakable belief that his conceptualisation of subjectivity, is more than an economical way of doing a survey.

² 'I believe it is right to defer to the **particular** worker ... whether their work actually does anything at all, when it comes to the ... issue of whether the work in question does anything *of value*, I will think it's the best thing to defer to the overall opinion of those who work in the industry. Otherwise we could end up in the rather silly position of saying that of thirty legal aides ... twenty-nine have bullshit jobs because they think they do, but the one true believer who disagrees does not.' (Graeber 2019, P.63)

Clearly, it is possible to pin down an important category of jobs which do not employ the subjective assessment of the worker, by focusing on output:

Silly Jobs: *A job is silly if it can be removed without adverse effects on the production of a given output (e.g. service or commodity).*

This concerns many jobs which can be rationalized e.g. by the employment of AI, more efficient organization etc. A set intersecting silly jobs is

Stupid Jobs (SJ): *Silly jobs with a cost-benefit requirement.*

Such cost-benefit requirement could e.g. be increased profits, break even or even health gains and other intangibles.

Clever Jobs (CJ): *There is no way of rearranging production such that the amount of stupid jobs decreases.*

This means that if one departs from a final set of clever jobs, and production is reorganised, then the amount of stupid jobs remain the same or increase. The remaining jobs after a rearrangement, which minimises the amount of jobs which can be removed with a favourable cost-benefit effect, without adverse effects on the production of a given service or commodity, are the clever jobs. CJ can be generalised, e.g. to rule out other things than jobs.

Worker assessment is still crucial if the cost-benefit requirement involves job satisfaction, and to acquire affordable data. Note that whole sectors could be reorganised and planned in order attain clever jobs.

No-Bullshit Jobs (NBJ): *Clever jobs with worker satisfaction, democratic control over the production process and income distribution as objectives.*

No-bullshit jobs rule out most bullshit jobs, and would lead to a drastic reduction of today's more or less mandatory work. I will address the former in detail below. The definition of a *silly job* is not limited to cases when the user/consumer is completely unaware of sub-contracts, chains of production or tasks prior to the final output. However, the intuitive appeal may increase in such cases.

No-bullshit jobs are clever jobs with no-bullshit requirements. My definition relies on a process which encourages algorithms. No-bullshit jobs may first be attained by excluding stupid jobs from the perspective of the final product, and then allowing more subjective elements if deemed necessary. It is in principle possible that the resulting set of jobs may have desirable subjective or intangible qualities without first using such as conditions. The converse order is not ruled out for some requirements.

Given it is impossible to rearrange production in such a way that the amount of stupid jobs decreases (either literally or subject to a cost-benefit objective), egalitarianism and democratic control is considered on the remaining. This rules out jobs with instances of democratic control and worker satisfaction, but useless/stupid otherwise. None of this implies that hangarounds with influence must be forbidden in a society adhering to NBJ. The definition is possible to generalise, e.g. with requirements which take into account the preferences of the workforce. It is e.g. convenient to loosen up the meaning of *adverse effects* when applying a cost-benefit rule.

However, the limitation of definitions about jobs, is of course that it encourages to take *final* services and goods as given. Strict No-bullshit-jobs requirements on democratic control and egalitarianism could be incompatible with a whole social system. On the other hand, it is possible to assert that due to arbitrary preferences on some goods and services, the best we can do is to improve on the existing set of products.

In this context, this limitation is then again one indication that we are dealing with a serious definition, not something that on second thought leads to inconsistencies or is hazy enough to encompass almost everything. If no-bullshit jobs are incompatible with a set of goods, services or system, it is reasonable to say that we are dealing with a *bullshit system or production* in the sense of a set of no-bullshit requirements. It is also conceivable to define jobs from a given set of requirements on a system. It is enough to use *bullshit system/production* interchangeably to describe what may be regarded as unnecessary output or waste, loosely speaking.

It is evident that Graeber is unable to discuss the subject without inconsistencies due to obscure definitions. He believes that without the subjective element, currently unknown notions of social value are required. As I have shown by construction, this assertion is incorrect for a comprehensive set of cases. This resolution has far-reaching repercussions on what is to be regarded as the domain of the social sciences.

Bullshit Typology

This section shows that Graeber's data and typology should be understood in terms of silly, stupid, bullshit output or as an artefact of a bullshit system. He fails to carry out coherent reasoning as a result of bad theory.

Graeber (2019) proceeds with a typology of five bullshit categories: *Flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box ticker* and *taskmasters*. He defines **flunkies** as: 'Flunky jobs are those that exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important. Another term for this category might be "feudal retainers." ... Such roles tend to multiply in economies based on rent extraction and the subsequent redistribution of the loot.' (p.28)

Flunkies are simply *silly or stupid* if formally part of a production process of a separate output. Otherwise *flunkeys* do provide a service, however unnecessary it may seem, and should be thought of in terms of *bullshit production*. Once again Dr G is unable to analyse the subject coherently with his own definitions. Although he hints continuation of prior reasoning, he effectively categorises *flunkies* on the basis of *bullshit production or system* – not his bs-definition. This leads to a serious inconsistency as he simultaneously rules out prostitution and striptease as *bullshit jobs* on the grounds that 'It's not so much that stripper is a bullshit job, perhaps, but that this situation shows us to be living in a bullshit society'. He furthermore emphasizes effective demand. (p.23, p.294).

Thus, even if the benefit of the doubt is given, he still either fails to apply his theory in the former case or in the latter, but is incoherent enough to insist on both. No-bullshit jobs can exclude most of these with stricter no-bs requirements.

Goons are defined as aggressive bs-jobs which only exist because other employ them, by invoking an arms-race logic. (Ibid, p.36) I will come back to this latter aspect, because I proposed a theory which among other things, implies the emergence of otherwise unnecessary jobs/tasks/bureaucracy and surveillance as a result of interaction between competing organisations. (Echeverría, 2011; 2013). Similarly, **taskmasters** are at least partially unnecessary superiors who may create unnecessary tasks for others. (Graber 2019, p.51).

Hence, at least partially *silly or stupid*. *Goons* can be *silly or stupid* as well, but the rationale is generic and related to a *bs-system* or *output* – not Dr G's conspicuously idiosyncratic definition of *bs-jobs*. Although he spent the first chapter developing it, it seems forgotten or remains as an abstruse reference in his subsequent analysis.

Duct tapers are defined as the ones solving unnecessary problems (p.40). As such this category is closest to G's attempt (F) to define bs-jobs in ch.1. This category fall neatly under *Silly or Stupid jobs*. **Box tickers** are all about pretending to do something which in fact is not done. It is about looking good on paper. (p.45) His examples either fall under *stupid jobs* or bs system. **2nd order bs-jobs** are defined as pointless because they are performed in support of a pointless enterprise. These clearly fall under the notion of bs-production or system, not his attempted definition.

To his defence, he seems to downplay his theoretical ambitions in spite of the book's title (p.63). Furthermore, Graeber's reflections about psychological effects and alienation, mostly among what working-class people usually refer to as spoiled brats, are seriously interesting and mostly reasonable. I am inclined to believe, that if Graeber's book is read among blue-collar workers, hard-working nurses, primary-school teachers, and researchers who have lost their valuable time or innovative ideas to impostors controlled by the state or business community etc., it will result in a relaxation of social tensions around the world if taken at face value.

On the Theory of Society

I am a critic of mainstream economic theory, I have conducted theoretical research in that spirit, and work to promote valid critique. I can safely say that the demand for Graeber's critique of economics is high among economists, because it is so sweet that it could serve as PR for LSE. I will begin with misunderstandings of general interest which are crucial to have sorted out in order to deliver serious critique or conduct theoretical research in Economics. The social role of Economics is used as a doorway to an outline of a theory of society.

Complexity is a recurrent theme among critics. Oversimplification and the use of basic math may be a serious critique, I agree. Notwithstanding, it is far too simplistic to claim that society in most interesting cases, is too complex to grasp. Moreover, there seems to be a false assumption at work which postulates that so-called complex phenomena must have complicated answers.³

I have personally worked and developed relatively simple theories in the social sciences, which can account for an astonishingly array of theoretical deliberations or stand firm against repeated and independent empirical tests. In addition, some theorists from the humanities are inclined to agree 'it's ridiculous to pretend we could ever reduce human behavior, economic or otherwise, to a mathematical formula of any sort (Graeber 2011, p.115). But if you cannot grasp a phenomenon with maths, words or both, then it follows that you cannot grasp it with words alone. Those who employ formulas are free to use both. It is understood that it is possible to make points about qualitative aspects of the structure of a phenomenon or argument by using symbols, which also have quantitative interpretations.

For instance, Graeber (2019, p.81f) claims that 'if one were to admit that humans have complicated motivations, there would be too many factors to take into account, it would be impossible to properly weight them, and predictions could not be made.' According to him, economic theory works with the 'underlying assumption is that if humans are offered the option to be parasites, of course they'll take it.' This would presumably be at odds with data on working-class lottery winners and several of his examples, where people become miserable when they have nothing to do.

³ On the contrary, it is embarrassing to use overly complicated solutions to simple problems in the pursuit of truth. A childish fascination with showing off technical skills is however not a quirk limited to people with low self-esteem. It also lends for-profit journals an attractive appeal. As one Econometrics lecturer once made clear to the new PhD candidates: 'you are not here to find stuff out, you are here to impress the judges'. In other words: you are not here to do science, you are here to make journals look good.

Ironically, most, if not all valid or interesting theoretical points made by Graeber (2019) were captured by me in a paper with the title *Value-Oriented Organizations with Value-Oriented Hierarchies*, first presented [2011](#). With a couple lines of code I argued that a subset of intrinsically motivated individuals would enjoy to work with stimulating projects, preferably their own, if they had the resources, time or autonomy to do so. Organizations partly consisting of such individuals, would tend to choose flat organisations, and would only assign a superior if deemed necessary for some reason e.g. due to additional red-tape from the outside world or other functions, but not as one that compromised their work.

It is a theory where not only the hearts and minds of the workers are at stake and adapt, but the relations of production are themselves to some extent the outcome of social conflict. The distribution mirrors underlying tensions. Hierarchies, bureaucracy, surveillance and unnecessary tasks are derived from a fairly basic framework which is embraced by many economists. These are emergent phenomena when organizations are forced to compete in order to finance their operations.

In addition, three distinct cultures are derived from social interaction. A hierarchical culture is a result of competition as a means to discipline the workforce. Individuals conform to power, even potentially motivated ones are forced to compromise. What seems radical is in fact merely symbolic deviations which do not challenge status quo. A second intermediary is ephemeral or transitory, characterised by intrigue and calculation. The third culture is consistent with egalitarianism and the pursuit of meaningful work.

Interestingly enough, Dr Graeber boldly claims discovery of a theory which is no less than the 'three main moral principles on which economic relations can be founded', in his other magnum opus *Debt – The Last 5,000 years*. He calls these *hierarchy*, *exchange* and *communism* (Graeber, 2011, pp.94-113). Due to the astonishingly wide range of claims throughout his work, he gives the impression of being able to grab each principle from a set of at least thousand alternatives, which makes him a one-in-a-billion theorist.

Because this 'theory' is even more obscurely formulated, I will refrain from criticism for now. I am just happy and flattered to observe that most, if not all of the interesting claims by 'the best anthropological theorist of his generation', that make sense, were succinctly expressed in my first thesis paper in economics, with a few lines of basic math, some typos and bad, mostly American English, independently of his efforts.

The point is that the body of theoretical economics is to be regarded as a universal, allowing all sorts of theories. It is precisely because of this, that its telling perspectives nevertheless are conspicuously constrained.

Furthermore, simplification is not just a habit of theorists, it is also a principle which evidently is at work in many crucial dealings in human affairs. Power, clearly employs risk management in decision making. One of the many facets of control through surveillance and the so-called labour market is predictability. We are constantly fed with visions about how unpredictable life is, when in fact the opposite is the case in most important regards. One of the great achievements of our culture is to give people thrills, emphasise randomness, diversity, freedom of choice etc. in order to counteract mass claustrophobia and panic.

One cherished principle in game theory, is to emphasise the plausibility of self-fulfilling prophecies (see e.g. Binmore, 1990). Economic theory remains relevant even if it seems completely wrong to the scientifically minded. Why? One of the explanations is that if people are convinced that their situation consists of a given set of choices and associated consequences, then they may also be convinced of the rationality of a subset of choices. Although rationality often is mystified by both economists and critics, it is almost banal in a wide range of such cases. Therefore, economic indoctrination is more than just ideology in the minds of fools, it is also a way of making existing institutions work.

People who believe that they will be worse off if they change their strategy given plausible beliefs of the actions of others will tend not to change their strategies and thus become predictable. Many neoclassical economists and TINA politicians were rather unsophisticated in their insistence of mainly one or a few equilibrium outcomes. The transparency of their con relied on too much raw power. From a more general point of view, their alternatives were just one of a range of possible equilibria. This realisation has been something of a nightmare for some doctrinarian economists and politicians because it seems to imply unpredictability.

My stance is that their fears are misplaced as robust institutions are erected with such multitude of equilibria. It is the very substance which can be used as building blocks in order to combine stability, adaptability and perceptions of free choice. Such spaces are consistent with an individual experience of doing the best of a given situation, guided by both individual and collective judgement. The perception of free choice is further reinforced when interacting in other social settings with predetermined best responses. If people are controlled in this manner, they will not have strong incentives to alter their beliefs, even if exposed to challenges in terms of ideas of radical alternatives. As long as their preferred actions are not aligned towards a radical reconfiguration of the incentive structure, they will remain under control.

This framework has become one of the governing principles of contemporary imperial design. Control over the distribution of predictability in order to achieve objectives, such as predictability of the dangerous and perceived unpredictability of the harmless, becomes a possibility. Regardless of the astonishingly diversity and complexity of the sum total of workplace experience, a simple pattern remains. From the perspective of power, either you stay or you leave. As long as the consequences of this binary outcome can be inferred with reasonable accuracy, what may seem as a chaotic experience for an individual, fits like a standard path in a circuit of a computer on the aggregate. Predictability for whom?

It is one thing to argue that the immensely complicated human psyche and the sum total of all combined actions and perceptions, adaptations and perceptions of perceptions of all this, creates a wealth of phenomena, some of which are beyond our grasp. It is another thing entirely to propose that all those intricate instances of the human experience are decisive for the structure of the system or are allowed to threaten the stability of a given system of power.

It is known that a class of equilibria resulting from robot-like calculations have a corresponding set of equilibria which may emerge by mindless trial-and-error given certain configurations. Although time and other factors may discriminate, they are nevertheless intimately linked and may coincide in terms of outcomes altogether.

Chance or chaos as the ancients would have preferred does indeed fit in a box in a special sense. And a box may be the end result of chaos, which in turn can be used to contain additional chaos. It is as if chaos and order themselves can be allowed to strategize in the act of creation. Hence it is possible to allow people to experiment and still be reasonably sure that their combined actions will converge to a set of desired outcomes. In principle it is thus possible to design such arrangement by solving a corresponding problem, either by rational calculation or a simulation of myopic agents. It is also possible to observe the unintended consequences and seek to understand the underlying incentives which ensure stability, very much like an engineer may borrow from nature's design. The dichotomies intentional-unintentional, rational-irrational or planned-spontaneous are therefore not charged with the same tension in the study of society. The seemingly smooth transitions between rather unarranged and arranged environments in our social experience, tells us something about perceived complexity, to the extent that it seizes to refuse conceptualisation at this fundamental level.

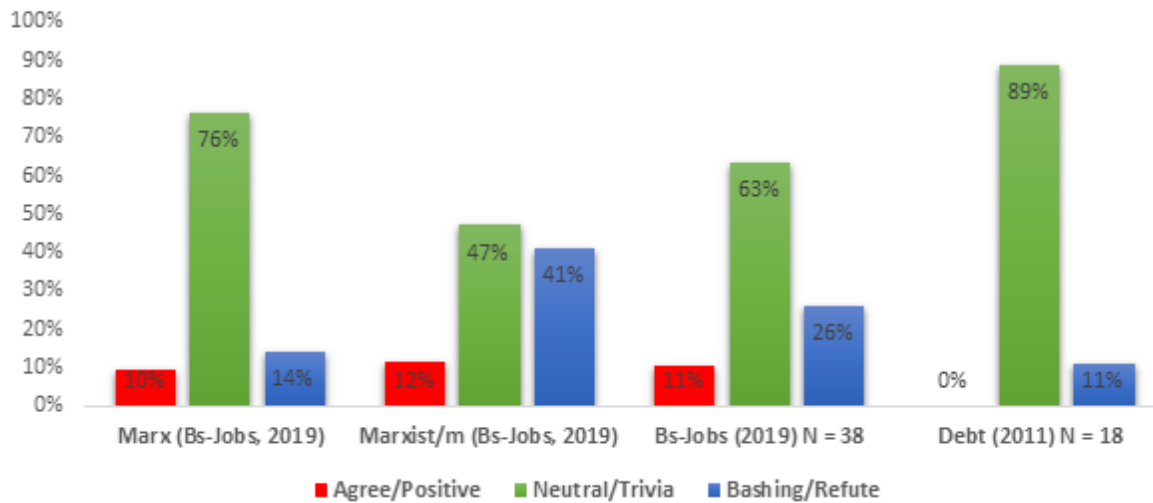
Fictitious Marxism

I have previously argued that universities, journals and media, to a considerable extent should be expected to conform to finance/power in appointments of professors and publications. Is a self-proclaimed anarchist with activist credentials an exception? David Graeber's ideological inclination is indicative of the academic culture in elite universities and has theoretical implications on the discussion of fictitious employment. This section argues that Bullshit-jobs theory is fake, requires duct taping, creates unnecessary tasks, is redundant, and is a PR-flunky for the Right. It should therefore be regarded as a Bullshit Theory in the sense of Graeber (2019) or vintage smash-and-grab of work from leftists who are not themselves impostors.

Overall, Graeber's stance on Marx/Marxists leans towards the negative side. His two acclaimed, and best-selling works; Bullshit Jobs (2019) and Debt, were analysed. The study relies on a complete sample on the occurrences of *Marx* and associated expressions, in the main text and footnotes, excluding references. Three categories are used: Agree/positive, Neutral/Trivia and Refute/Bashing

These figures could in principle be improved on. Although some occurrences refer to the same text segment, it is not an issue which distorts the picture much. Time-consuming changes would not alter the results significantly, and are prone to arbitrariness. If anything, the neutral category is overemphasised as numerous occurrences where the legacy of Marx is downplayed, are categorised as neutral. Moreover, Graeber argues that Marx/Marxists are wrong on the fundamental issues: labour theory, history of capitalism, inability to deal with bs-jobs etc.

Graeber's Stance on Marx/ists/ism Bullshit Jobs (2019) & Debt (2011)



Only five (neutral) occurrences were found in the main text of Debt (2011), the rest were footnotes. He refutes Marx on two occurrences. Among other things, the neutral contain four occurrences where he argues that Marx was not the originator, and one where he was the originator of a myth. For the record, several categorised as neutral/trivia concern cases when Graeber argues that Marx was not the originator of certain ideas or downplays his relevance. Most of these remarks are contested, and so are several of his refutations. My categorisation is naïve in the sense that it does not take into account that prominent scholars in western academia arguably have a political agenda which aims to invalidate Marx as a serious theorists.

For example, some philosophers argue that Marx merely mimicked Hegel. As a forthright caricature, many Cambridge-associated historians would agree that Marx or subsequent Marxists were able to predict which pair of trousers or skirts to wear next morning, but failed on most serious issues. These scholars use refined rhetoric to suggest that Marx should be regarded as an ideological figure, presumably not a serious thinker like themselves. Graeber may not be the most extreme example, but he does not stand out from this crowd to any considerable extent.

The figures of Bullshit Jobs (2019) indicate that Marx gets a less condemning touch. Overall, he agrees or is positive to Marx/Marxists 11 % of the time, refutes them about 26 %, and is neutral/trivial roughly 63 % of the occurrences. About half of the neutral are trivia or pop-cultural references; one in four reveal that Marx was a child of his time and/or not the originator of ideas usually associated with him. These figures do reflect important aspects of the text but do not capture if the key issues are refuted or accepted.

In this context, whether or not Marx or Marxism can account for the phenomenon of bullshit jobs is focal. Graeber (2019) creates a backdrop which suggests that Marxism is unable to deal with the phenomenon of bullshit jobs. For instance, he claims that 'orthodox Marxists, will always insist that our economy can't really be riddled with bullshit jobs; that all this must be some sort of illusion' (p.176).

Furthermore, Marxist of two types are reported to appear in random encounters. Those 'awash in Marxist theory', lurking about in 'radical forums', are presumably frequently able to 'instantly stand up to declare' that bullshit-job theory is wrong. Then there is the high-level Marxian, 'even more finely attuned' to arcane theory, who is prone to objections with problematic anti-feminist connotations, allegedly due to the habit of making a distinction between productive and reproductive labour (p.202).

The problem with Graeber's unjustified aversion against Marxists, and arguably also Marx, is twofold. Firstly, his persona presumably has legitimate activist credentials, is an anarchist, and appears to be widely regarded as a left-wing intellectual. More to the point, the other vital part of his theory, concerning the societal rationale and proliferation of fictitious jobs, is more or less an exact replica of the theory proposed by arguably the most famous and influential Marxist intellectual of all time, namely the legendary, nearly mythical revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. As if this was not spectacular enough, this classic theory was proposed in a work of singular importance, I would argue his most important contribution.

Whatever your political inclination may be, if you are erudite enough to have read it, you probably at least secretly agree it is a brilliant piece of work. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* makes most critics of finance in the 21st century so far look rather uninformed. It conceives finance capitalism as an international economic, political and social network with small-world properties. A radical reconfiguration of the global order through warfare is predicted as a consequence of the logic of finance capital, and the discrepancy between Germany's economic potential and relatively meagre colonial sphere of influence. He comments on the eroding distinction between savings and investment banks, the concentration of capital, the emergence of financial giants, debtor states, monopolistic competition and exploitation of the underdeveloped world.

He warns about a parasitic United State of Europe, a world ruled by an *aristocracy* which creates a society after its image. He underscores the tendency of advanced capitalist countries to become rentier states based on usury and 'clipping coupons'. Rents enough to bribe the working class and create a mass of docile *retainers*. He speaks about 'great tame masses of retainers, no longer engaged in the staple industries of agriculture and manufacture, but kept in the performance of personal or minor industrial services under the control of a new financial aristocracy'.

Bourgeois and opportunistic left-wing politicians, journalists and lawyers are deemed to work to develop and maintain the parasitic imperialist system of exploitation. Notwithstanding the 'bourgeois professors who are paid to depict capitalist slavery in bright colours'.

He never invokes Marx's labour theory of value or adheres to petty distinctions that would anger his female comrades in order to explain this phenomenon; in spite of citing Marx on the new bourgeois segments of the working class.

In addition, in the chapter *Parasitism and Decay of Capitalism*, he describes the rentier in his usual no-nonsense way:

Further, imperialism is an immense accumulation of money capital in a few countries ... Hence the extraordinary growth of a class, or rather, of a stratum of rentiers, i.e., people who live by "clipping coupons", who take no part in any enterprise whatever, whose profession is idleness. The export of capital, one of the most essential economic bases of imperialism, still more completely isolates the rentiers from production and sets the seal of parasitism on the whole country that lives by exploiting the labour of several overseas countries and colonies. (Lenin, 1916)

Reading Dr Graeber is a way of doing time travel to a world before hipsters presumably rediscovered Lenin as grass-root investors. Marx is mostly reduced to a pop-cultural reference when not bashed or refuted on dubious grounds. Needless to say, searches on Rosa Luxemburg, Hilferding, Lenin and Imperialism result in exactly zero hits. Instead, a hazy, timid version of Lenin's theory about the new rentier aristocracy is presented: 'I was using feudal overlords and retainers as a metaphor ... in the case of banks ... it's not clear ... how much is literal truth ... feudalism is essentially a redistributive system.' He then sets out to explain what many Marxists presumably fail to grasp, i.e. what Lenin, incidentally an idol among many orthodox, calls parasitism: 'The whole point is to grab a pot of loot ... by means of fees, tolls, rents, and levies, and then redistributing it ... one creates an entourage of followers that is both the visible measure of one's pomp and magnificence, and at the same time, a means of distributing political favor (p.175-177)

Graeber first makes efforts to disqualify Marxists like Lenin by pretending they are unable to grasp modern capitalism, then proceeds by giving a similar but less accurate account of contemporary capitalism than Lenin,

perhaps one of the most read political thinkers of the modern era, did a century before him. The main difference is the absence of imperialism, even though it is directly linked to finance, fictitious capital and employment. He therefore misses the opportunity to clearly state that the bullshit system generates bullshit monopolies, credit, money and jobs which benefit immensely from exploitation and domination abroad. This is what makes the system more than mere redistribution. Monopoly is not only a way of managing production, it is also a way to enforce the small-world properties of the imperial networks, through a structured chain of command.

Even if people in less developed countries have similar systems, they are still subservient retainers disciplined by a bullshit network which spans the globe in order to organise global exploitation. That network is controlled by elites from imperialist countries. The main difference is that they compete for the chance of being exploited in second or third-class bullshit systems. They will therefore not be able to afford services abroad to the same extent, and will simultaneously be forced to serve their more privileged imperialist counterparts who have plenty of time to do nothing as they prefer.

At the end of the day, the bullshit money created in the imperialist countries, will be used to give the veneer of legality when enforcing property rights to control resources, production and people around the world. Bullshit credit and rent is magically generated and transformed to no-bullshit things like houses close to no-bullshit beaches abroad, protected by bullshit property rights.

Intimate bullshit surveillance and imperial information networks are used to control people, and profit from the flows of ideas. The choice between controlling people through corporate bosses or directly through assigned bullshit politicians or dictators is a tactical choice, especially abroad. Ultimately, \$\$ are backed by nuclear weapons, the destroyer of last resort.

The split between finance and industrial capital was according to some of the foremost experts at the beginning of the 20th century, already on the

way of fusing and being controlled by international finance. That is what *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* is about. Graeber tries to move that fusion to the 1970s. True that here were interruptions in the process of financialisation. Like the arrangements in response to the wars which Lenin predicted; related wartime protectionism; reconstruction required state intervention and new global institutions etc. Nevertheless, the so-called decolonisation led to a higher reliance on imperial control through dark financial networks, i.e. tax havens ⁴.

His idea that bullshit jobs seem to 'defy the logic of capitalism' *and* that the proliferation of bullshit jobs has to do with the emergence of a new system or at least a new kind of capitalism (p.191) is not even supported by his own assertions, because his description is almost identical to what experts on the subject concluded after careful analysis already at the beginning of the 20th century, only that he omits imperialism from his account.

Neo-feudalism plus credit cards, based on advanced forces of production is a catchphrase which may serve to emphasise Marxian 'contradictions' emanating from intensified tensions⁵ between the social character of production, and its current imperialist form. Domination by means of fictitious capital and employment; insignias of elite power and refusal to move beyond a class-based system. Conspicuous waste of time and resources; echoes of the exploitation of the world by the few through global imperialist networks, commanding forces of production which require participation of a small fraction of the population to ensure reproduction. It was always understood that these were socioeconomic, political and cultural entities shaping life through oppression, not mere abstractions.

⁴ For good business journalism on the subject of tax havens, see the work of [Nicholas Shaxson](#).

⁵ The effects of these tensions are to some extent captured even by bourgeois economics in terms of externalities and market failures. Besides, the delegation problem of wasteful employment and distribution of loot in terms of perks is mainstream or theoretically trivial.

Minor Remarks of Political Importance

Graeber (2019) keeps suggesting Marxist-controlled institutions without being ironic. In view of this, his assertion that the 'mainstream Left largely controls the production of humans [i.e. education & health]' (p.268), adds to the impression that he not only regards academia, but also the Democrats as left-wing projects to some extent. Considering that Graeber evidently values semantics and etymology as important intellectual endeavours, his articulation is to the very least unfortunate, if he did not want to give that impression. Such stance is not only exotic outside the US, but is also refuted by a leading progressive within the Democratic Party. She clearly stated that the "Democratic Party is not a Left party", and characterised it as a 'Centre-Conservative Party'. ([Lemon, 2020](#)).

I also remain unconvinced about the presumably prevalent masochistic sentiments of the working class. Graeber (2019) alludes to a 'bizarre sadomasochistic dialectic whereby we feel that pain in the workplace is the only possible justification for our furtive consumer pleasures' (p.242, 246). Would a right-wing mummy get away with such degrading view of the human spirit? ⁶ In view of the quality of his theory, his consistently unfair treatment of Marxists, and his conformist approach towards imperialism, it appears bizarre to argue that it all somehow is genius PR for the left based on some sophisticated reversed psychology or sublime rhetoric.

His idea about moral envy or resentment against those who do socially valuable and meaningful work is similarly obscure. It may lead to further inconsistencies, and seems to be at least partially at odds with perceptions of *occupational prestige*. Physicians, Lawyers, Computer system analyst or scientist, and teachers are at the top. Artists, some supervisors, clerks and

⁶ **If in doubt, ask yourselves:** Would a right-wing academic like Jordan B Peterson get away with such claims based on intuition?

machine operators can be found at the bottom (NORC, 1989). This classic study was undertaken in the era of Thatcher and Reagan, who championed the corporate ideology which emerged as the winner of the cold war. This right-wing project was campaigned with a slogan of no alternatives to neoclassical economics, austerity, and corporate power. It was accompanied with glorification of entrepreneurs, imaginative myths about efficiency and natural corporate hierarchies equated with individualism and human nature. Even so, the results do not support the hypothesis of widespread moral envy or resentment against those who do good or by any reasonable standard contribute to society. More recent surveys affirm a widespread appreciation for useful and altruistic jobs⁷. (see Appendix on Prestige, Status & Trust)

To summarise:

- **Bullshit-Job theory is fake.** The first section showed that Graeber's basic definitions and concepts about fictitious employment, i.e. his *bullshit jobs* are irrational. Contradictions and logical inconsistencies immediately emerge even when a friendly treatment is pursued.
- **Bullshit-Job theory requires pretence and duct taping.** Graeber is unable to apply his own definitions. But even if given the benefit of the doubt, i.e. we pretend he makes sense, he still manages to be inconsistent by applying double standards on analogous examples.
- **Bullshit-Job theory creates unnecessary tasks.** One of his main tasks is to argue a qualitatively new system or capitalism associated with bs-jobs. A highly contested assertion in terms of facts alone. More importantly, Graeber manages self-refutation once more, by

⁷ Top three occupations are perceived to have "very great" prestige: Firefighters (61%), scientists (54%), teachers (54%). The lowest ratings go to real estate brokers (5%), actors (9%), bankers (10%). (Harrispol, 2007). See Global Teacher Status Index (2018)

giving a description sufficiently close of how capitalism was described over a century ago by the foremost experts of the time.

- **Bullshit-Job theory is redundant.** It is either false or a copy of previous work. His remaining valid or interesting points either coincide with my theory on the foundations – first published and discussed years before his; or coincides with one of the most influential political thinkers of the modern era – on the most important application, i.e. the explanation of the phenomenon – first published and discussed a century ago.
- **Bullshit Jobs is a PR-flunky for the Right.** Graeber's engages in phrase-radicalism with pop-cultural references to Marx. Meanwhile, he refutes or bashes Marx or Marxists on most key issues. Still he manages to copy most of Lenin's theory (arguably one of the originators of Marxism-Leninism), but omits all serious critique of imperialism. This smash-and-grab takeover was very lucrative and successful reputation-wise. It steals ideas and a tremendous amount of attention from solid work from leftists who are not impostors. As a minor remark, he portrays key institutions as left-wing, even Marxist.

Therefore, the work of Graeber (2019) is a bullshit theory in the sense of Graeber (2019) – loosely speaking of course. Whatever his intentions may have been, his behaviour, implied ethics, and the consequences of his work, are aligned with the alt-right project, also on a deeper level which involves deception. If Graeber represents the left within academia, then that left resides comfortably within the boundaries of an intellectual culture submissive to finance and power. A rhetoric Centre-Liberalism or Conservatism of sorts, which I dearly hope people around the world are free enough to favour. Common decency however, demands that we stop pretending otherwise.

Additional Remark: Some of his examples may seem to have implications for the secrecy and conspiracy by Dentith and Orr (2018), due to allusions of pretence, conspiracy, confidence artists and scams. However, they do not by any means aid their theory, which cannot recover after my critique. It would only seem to be the case at the cost of further inconsistencies unless something akin to [The Cambridge Conspiracy \(2020\)](#) has taken place and history as we know has been wildly Reedited.

Appendix

The difference between the 2018 & 2019 editions of *Bullshit Jobs* is cosmetic. Hard-cover & digital versions were checked.

Graeber (2019) defines bullshit jobs in the following manner:

Final Working Definition (F): a bullshit job is **[\$]** 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. (p.9f)

He asserts that the meaning of **[\$]** is that an employee believes his job is bullshit, and such belief is valid and correct (p.292, footnote 14). This is combined with F to get F'.

Graeber on Marx

	Agree/Positive	Neutral/Trivia	Refute/Bash	Total
Marx	4	24	10	38
	11%	63%	26%	

* Trivia/Pop is trivia proper or pop-cultural references to Marx.

	Trivia/Pop*	Unoriginal**	Rest	Total	Marxism Academia***
Neutral	11 46%	6 25%	7 29%	24	4 17%

** Unoriginal is trivia about other people who arguably had Marx's ideas independently of him.

*** Marxism [in] Academia is trivia or anecdotes about people who supposedly are Marxists within academia. Not necessarily disjoint.

Info on Occupational Prestige, Status and Trust

Wikipedia, Occupational Prestige:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupational_prestige

Methodological review on prestige

<http://what-when-how.com/sociology/occupational-prestige/>

Data NORC (1989)

<http://ibgwww.colorado.edu/~agross/NNSD/prestige%20scores.html>

Status

HarrisPoll

<https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/cW5yvX>

Global Teacher Status Index (2018)

<https://www.varkeyfoundation.org/media/4790/gts-index-9-11-2018.pdf>

Trust

https://www.nim.org/sites/default/files/medien/135/dokumente/2018_-_trust_in_professions_-_englisch.pdf

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