

Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations



***Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, By David Graeber (2018) New York: Simon & Schuster, 327 pages. ISBN: 978-1-50114-331-1**

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Volume 75, Number 3, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072357ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072357ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Muldoon, J. (2020). Review of [*Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, By David Graeber (2018) New York: Simon & Schuster, 327 pages. ISBN: 978-1-50114-331-1]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 75(3), 624–625.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1072357ar>

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Bullshit Jobs: A Theory

By David Graeber (2018) New York:
Simon & Schuster, 327 pages.
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Anthropologist David Graeber has written a thought provoking, stimulating book on the nature of work in the modern world. Despite its vulgar title, the book is the product of erudition, insight and real bravery to question current nostrums of work. Before I begin with my review, let me state my skepticism, as someone who writes in management history, that work has ever been meaningful for people in the sense that Graeber writes about. The pleasure people found from work was that it put food on the table. I doubt a worker in a mine, factory, or, like my grandfather, a grave digger, found much meaning in their work. They worked because they had to or starve. However, as time marched on, people believed that a job should have meaning.

Graeber, a radical academic, argues that we have witnessed the emergence of bullshit jobs (bs jobs going forward), which is a job that is so useless and unnecessary that the job incumbent is aware of its uselessness and cannot justify the job. He lists five different categories of job types: flunkies (whose job is to make the boss feel good), goons (such as corporate lobbyists whose job is to fight goons from other companies), duct tapers (who fix errors), box tickers (people who use paperwork or gestures to make it seem like they are busy) and task managers (people who manage but are unneeded). Each of these jobs is the bane of modern life and although they often appear to be prestigious, white collar jobs, they are anything but. In fact, they are soulless. These jobs exist because people do not want to be accused of being lazy; modern managers want to justify their jobs and to create a sense of corporate feudalism.

Graeber's argument is provocative, interesting and thoughtful. But here is the rub, while he succeeds as a provocateur,

he fails as an academic. There are several issues with the book. (I must confess that Graeber writes from a radical, even Marxist, perspective. My viewpoint is from mainstream and managerial economics.) Firstly, the issues with redundant or useless jobs is not, as Graeber points out, a market failure in the sense that Graeber writes about. Nor am I sure that Graeber even understands what market failure is, as the firm is a product of market failure. However, even conceding this point, many of the problems would be familiar with the arguments from transaction-costs economics. His argument of corporate feudalism is nothing more than Williamson's argument of opportunism: people (in this case, executives) pursue their own interests. This is a problem inherent in transacting and contracts.

Secondly, is the sample of respondents' representative of the population or are they people complaining because someone wants to hear their message of woe? As a faculty member, I complain about my job all the time, even though I am not digging graves. This is a major anthropological failure with research that the respondents tell the interviewer what they wish to hear. For something as important as this a sample of about 950 words is not enough to make such as indictment against society. Furthermore, they do not seem to represent the population. How many people learn Chinese or write poetry at work? The sample is worthless. Even if the sample of respondents represents the population, just because people complain about it, doesn't mean their job is useless. People may not understand how their job is useful. A job may appear useless to the job incumbent but could have real value to the firm because it allows for another person to better leverage their distinctive competence. The sample failures are why this was published as a popular press book—it would not have passed muster in a journal.

The biggest issue I have with the book is that Graeber is writing about management

and business while lacking a background or education in either. This is a common error of today that someone trained in Anthropology, Sociology, History or Literature, despite never having a managerial job nor taking courses in economics or management, can write intelligently about business. As I noted above, Graeber does not understand transaction costs economics and most of the transactions talked about in the book come from contracts, not market transactions. He also writes some ignorant statements. For example, he states that the American public wants a single-payer system. However, he fails to mention that each time the Democrats have attempted to reform the system, they have handed Congress back to the Republicans. This fact indicates that using survey, especially on complicated issues, can lead to deeply biased and misleading results. He also writes that computers can predict costs—there is no need for a marketplace. It is obvious that Graeber has read economics; it is also obvious that he would fail Economics-101 as prices are mostly subject to the individual.

Here is the rub, if these jobs are useless, why doesn't a company come in, eliminate the jobs, and then undercut their competitors? Because the individual may believe the job is meaningless, but that does not mean the job is meaningless. Given the high levels of salaries, companies would be hemorrhaging cash which is not happening. Often firms hire people for slack resources, to prepare for unusual events.

Likewise, many of the job types, such as goons, exist because the government created the need for those jobs or because companies are attempting to protect themselves (for example, in case a lawsuit happens). When an ethical crisis occurs, the company creates a task force because the government and public are encouraging them to do so. Since they have taken proactive measures, their legal liability will be reduced, according to federal law. Like-

wise, companies create so much paperwork because of complex legal and social isomorphic pressures. When Graeber writes that the private University undermines the premise of his argument. Private universities are not for profit businesses; they have a different mission—their mission is to cater to those individuals who can pay the full rate—America's over class. Therefore, it makes sense that they would create administrators, who hear every grievance. In fact, the modern university is one of the few places, where sexual relationships—even between consenting adults, is regulated. Why? Probably to prevent radical students from protesting and mommy and daddy from suing. Of course, such a job would be personally meaningless, but that does not mean it does not serve a purpose.

However, this is clearly a book worth reading—it is funny, has many moments of true insight, and would appeal to the radical. But its real value is this: it has provided further justification that modern management is failing, a point echoed over the years.

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