

# Soiling with its poison

The problem with employment that is insufficiently rewarding

**W**hy should I let the toad work / Squat on my life?" Philip Larkin asked this in 1954, just before he applied for, and got, the job of librarian at the University of Hull. His poem "Toads" appeared in a new poetry magazine called *Listen* and, despite its tiny circulation, he fretted that the university's appointments committee might have seen it. A year later, when the poem was reprinted in his collection *The Less Deceived*, he asked his publisher, the Marvell Press, not to promote the book around Hull – an especially unreasonable request given that the press was based in Hull. Larkin's fears were surely groundless. "Toads" reveals him to be what he was – a keen and efficient emptier of an in-tray. Like most of us, he needed the toad work to moor and shape his life. "Work is a good thing in small doses", he wrote to a friend just after leaving university. "It canalizes one's energy and prevents one from starving." Larkin put it that way round for a reason, I think. Work's primary purpose may be to prevent us from starving – or to pay off the bills and pay into a pension, as "Toads" has it – but it is also a way of channelling our disparate desires, filling our days with a point, perhaps even defying death by making something that will survive us. Sigmund Freud said that the keys to a worthwhile life were love and work – although both, he knew, could also cause untold misery by exposing our fragility and dependence on others.

These books are about the misery. They suggest that something has gone badly awry with the toad work. Not only must we let it squat on our lives; we must also loudly agree that the squatting is doing us good. "Hard-working families" are as lionized as Stakhanov was in Stalinist Russia. Mobile devices, remote log-ins and a pervading cult of busyness allow work to bleed into our uncontracted hours and be confused with life itself. And yet, for many people, work no longer meets their basic needs, never mind the inflated symbolic demands we place on it. Not all hard-working families can live on what work pays them, and must rely on benefits, tax credits, or food banks. Work in the cruelly misnamed "gig economy" is precarious and emotionally draining. The more securely employed often find their jobs futile and belittling.

As David Graeber argues in *Bullshit Jobs: A theory*, today's ideal of endless work makes no sense. We are at our most creative and productive when our work takes the form of periodic, intense bursts of energy followed by relaxation, as in societies based on hunter-gathering or annual harvests. The student's last-minute revision and essay-deadline brinkmanship may be widely derided, but is both rational and efficient. The future that John Maynard Keynes promised in 1930, in which labour-saving technology would allow for a fifteen-hour working week, should have returned us to these natural rhythms by now. It might also have saved the planet from capitalism's unsustainable dream of endless growth.

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Andrea Komlosy

WORK

The last 1,000 years

Translated by Jacob K. Watson with Loren Balhorn  
272pp. Verso, £16.99 (US \$26.95).  
978 1 78663 410 8

David Graeber

BULLSHIT JOBS

A theory

368pp. Allen Lane, £20.  
978 0 241 26388 4

US: Simon and Schuster, \$27. 978 1 5011 4331 1

James Bloodworth

HIRED

Six months undercover in low-wage Britain

280pp. Atlantic Books, Paperback, £12.99  
(US \$19.95).

978 1 78649 014 8

So why carry on with work patterns that don't actually work? Perhaps because, as Andrea Komlosy argues in *Work: The last thousand years*, her long-range global history, we are as conflicted about work as Larkin was. We have inherited some of the ancient Greek and Roman disdain for it – along with the belief that its most tedious elements are best outsourced to women, peasants, skivvies and slaves. But down the centuries this became overlain with the Judeo-Christian sense of work as both righteous punishment and virtuous sacrifice, both affliction and salvation. The medieval monasteries, which believed in both the *vita contemplativa* and that "to work is to pray", turned this Janus-faced attitude into an article of faith.

For Komlosy it comes down to our restricted modern definition of "work". The word is a "linguistic chameleon", a discursive combat zone. Indo-European languages distinguish between creative and toilsome work, between the "opus" that is fulfilling and life-defining and the "labour" that is endured and leaves little trace. The origin of the Latin *labo* – to totter or waver – may have been the swaying of slaves under their heavy loads, while *tripalium*, for a three-pronged instrument of torture, gave rise to the French *travail* (creative opposite: *oeuvre*) and the Spanish *trabajo* (creative opposite: *obra*). Only the word "work" feels capacious enough to accommodate all these senses, from "my life's work" to "the toad work". Capitalism's unsung genius, Komlosy writes, is for making labour – the socially necessary but unexalted form of work – invisible and unremunerated. It might be the priceless labour of giving birth and raising children, or looking after a sick or elderly relative. Or it might be what Ivan Illich called "shadow work": the dull daily admin of modern life, from shopping for groceries to queuing at the post office, which the very rich pay others to do. Recently such shadow work has expanded, for precariously employed professionals, the labour



of career management and self-promotion. Applying for jobs takes work, as does updating a LinkedIn profile or curating a Twitter account.

Komlosy's story is this: since the thirteenth century (where her book really begins, despite its subtitle), the work that used to be done as a valued part of subsistence economies, particularly within the home, has come to be completed voluntarily and unnoticeably, particularly by women. The cumbersome sociological term for this creeping process is "housewife-ization". Modern industrial society defines work as non-domestic, legally codified and waged. But global capitalism has always relied on different kinds of unpaid labour and unofficial slavery to keep it ticking over, and still does. So the unequal power relationships of work are closely bound up with what we as a society decide to call work – and, by extension, what kinds of activities (and people) we value.

Komlosy's book is deeply researched, lucid and persuasive – but, like much historical sociology, rather abstract and voided of detail. David Graeber, by contrast, has the rare ability to vivify his sociological explanations in ways that his readers can use to make sense of their lives. An article he wrote for the radical zine *Strike!* in 2013, "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs", went viral. It focused mainly on jobs in lobbying, corporate law, private equity, telemarketing, financial advice and PR, which often seemed to perform no useful function. Little firm evidence was provided for the uselessness of these jobs, but then the article was partly, as its subtitle suggested, "a rant". This book fleshes out the rant, expands the definition of bullshit jobs, and turns it into a thesis.

Graeber begins by defining a bullshit job as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious

that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case". "Pointless" is a relative value, as Graeber concedes, and he only partially gets round this problem by stressing that even those doing the bullshit jobs think that their jobs are bullshit. But when he divides bullshit jobs into types, the examples tend to convince. Most of us have come across "box tickers", for instance, whose job is to massage an organization's public image, coming up with form-filling charades or sham staff consultations that allow it to claim it is doing something that it isn't. Likewise "duct tapers", who supply a cheap, inadequate fix to some structural flaw in an organization. If a workplace culture is toxic and stressful, then employing people to run sessions on mindfulness and conscious breathing is a form of "duct taping", treating a few random symptoms to avoid addressing deeper causes.

How does Graeber's thesis hold up in the university, the workplace that he (and I) know best? Pretty well. It certainly supports his claim that the more one's work benefits others – the less bullshit it entails, in other words – the less one is likely to be paid for it. At the bottom of the university's pay scale are the cleaners, caterers, security guards, technicians, library assistants, maintenance and office staff without whom the university would cease to function. At the top are the senior managers, who act as what Graeber calls "taskmasters". Their role is to come up with corporate-speak delivery strategies and workload allocation models that they then "cascade" down the chain through email trails and staff briefings, thus implicating everyone else in the gigantic simulation of activity of which their own jobs consist. Some-

how, in the midst of all the nagging, bullying and backside-covering, the real work of a university gets done.

As for the academics, they have learned not to dwell on the more pleasurable parts of their jobs. They dare not say that reading, thinking, writing and teaching might be valuable activities in themselves – only that these meet some funding criterion or consumer demand or official metric of teaching and research “excellence”. As Graeber shows, this forms part of a larger belief system, most evident in the number of unpaid internships in sought-after careers such as journalism and publishing, where, it is thought, one should be willing to do a rewarding job without much reward. For academics this means that the job’s rewarding aspects – being able to read, think, write and teach for a living – are seen as a privilege granted in return for one’s “real” work: the tedious administrative task of measuring these aspects and proving that they are valuable. If work isn’t hurting, you are doing it wrong, or it isn’t work.

For Graeber, bullshit jobs exist not just because we have turned endless busyness with work into a “moral value”. They have proliferated because, in our market-driven culture, we insist on trying to quantify the unquantifiable, to nail the jelly of incalculable value to the wall of accountants’ columns. What cannot be easily quantified is work that involves caring for others, or that performs some public good that is not immediately tangible or monetizable. Measuring such unmeasurables, Graeber argues, is worse than pointless: it wastes enormous

labour on turning elusive outcomes into some form that bureaucratic and IT systems can recognize. Hence the emergence in the NHS, education and other areas of the public sector of successive systems of monitoring and surveillance, each one more micro-managing than the last – which, of course, has failed to have the desired effect, so that the failed efforts must be redoubled.

Like the philosopher Harry Frankfurt, whose book *On Bullshit* (2005) first gave the concept intellectual purchase, Graeber has some fun inserting the word “bullshit” into

scholarly-sounding sentences, and coming up

with derivations and compound terms such as “bullshitization” and “second-order bullshit jobs”. But any suggestion of glibness is scotched by his cool anger at the “genuine scar across our collective soul” that this kind of work represents. For Graeber is surely right that even a well-paid bullshit job can be soul-sapping. The rational choice economics that now dominates our public culture holds that human beings are driven by a straightforward calibration of costs and benefits. Work is simply a “disutility” – the sacrifice of one’s time and convenience for money. This presumably is why bankers tend to refer to their salaries as “compensation”, and why our political elites seem to believe that the poorest sections of society would, given the option, prefer to “sleep off a life on benefits”, as George Osborne said in 2012. Some of the most irrational austerity policies, such as the hounding of sick and disabled welfare claimants with sanctions and compulsory reassessments, are underpinned by this “rational” model of human incentivization. According to its blunt-edged instrumentalism, people should be grateful for any job, pointless or not, because it is the price we all pay for being alive.

Graeber, a social anthropologist, believes that work offers compensations that are not just economic. Noting the delight that infants convey when they realize they can cause predictable effects in the world, even just by gripping and moving a pencil, he suggests that this “pleasure at being the cause” underlies all meaningful work. We need to feel (in ways that we cannot always measure) that we are making a difference. As Larkin knew, this feeling often demands some shared suspension of disbelief – which is all part of that comic and touching human delusion that what we do matters more than it does. But depriving people of even the consoling pretence that their jobs have a point is demeaning, because it is exercising power over them for its own sake. Forcing someone to work for no useful reason that he or she can discern is, as Graeber writes, “to squash a human like a bug”.

James Bloodworth’s *Hired: Six months undercover in low-wage Britain* is about what

happens when the toad work does not simply squat on us, but squashes us. His concern is less bullshit jobs than shit jobs, the ones he spent the first half of 2016 moving round the country picking up. As he concedes, such journeys around the low-wage economy are not new: George Orwell, Barbara Ehrenreich, Polly Toynbee, Fran Abrams and others have gone

before him. This does not lessen the book's point or impact.

Bloodworth begins as an order picker at the Amazon warehouse in Rugeley, Staffordshire, where a hand-held device tracks his every move. By the end of his first month there, he has walked the equivalent of all the way to Antwerp. Moving on to Blackpool, he becomes a home care worker, a "flash of cobalt darting up garden paths" to clear up sick or wipe someone's bottom in a twenty-minute window, his time policed by an agency that has offered the council the most competitive bid for its services. In Swansea, he works in a call centre as a "renewals consultant", the job that comes closest to being bullshit as Graeber defines it. In a town surrounded by the wreckage of steelworks and collieries, Bloodworth is paid £7.20 an hour to ring customers who have found a cheaper car insurance quote elsewhere to persuade them not to switch. "The equivalent of a shovel in South Wales today", he writes, "is a telephone headset." He ends up in London as an Uber driver. Although this entails being repeatedly called a "scab" and a "prick" by passing black cab drivers, it turns out to be the most agreeable and interesting of the jobs he does, with a varied clientele and the chance to explore unfamiliar parts of the city. It is also the most subtly insidious. For Uber sees itself as a tech company that happens to hold a cab operator's licence, and Bloodworth is not an employee but rather someone granted permission to use the company's app. Behind the image of the freewheeling freelancer lies a familiar tale of exploitation. If he is too choosy about which fares he accepts, or amasses too many poor customer ratings, the app freezes him out. So he feels constantly on call and under scrutiny.

Bloodworth's prose style is no more than serviceable, and he is fond of slightly off-kilter metaphors. Skilled jobs disappear "like steam from a kettle", while his alarm clock pierces the silence "like a firework going off in a churchyard". His narrative has, forgivably enough, a certain one-note unremittingness. But it does make clear – and we shouldn't have needed him to tell us this – that many zero-hours jobs are little more than high-tech slavery. And, as he writes towards the end, those of us funding the rollout of platform capitalism, to get sushi served by courier or a cheap ride home after midnight, may find that we are its next victims, the next slaves to its algorithms – our own jobs may soon be similarly organized.

Yet still we keep prodding and swiping. The toad work seems more obdurate and unyielding than ever, sustained by the seemingly unstoppable forces of technology and the market. All we can do is resent those who moan about being in the same unfortunate state as us. Graeber has a nice term for this phenomenon: "rights-scolding", the kind of talk that condemns millennial snowflakes for having the temerity to want stable and fulfilling employment. Rights-scolding is a hopeless way to make sense of an already hopeless state of affairs: it is hopelessness squared. It leaves us all, from hedge fund manager to Amazon picker, stuck inside the closed box of co-dependent misery that is much of modern work. If we could only venture outside that box, we might discover that not everything that makes life worth living – play, pleasure, art, friendship, curiosity, love – shows up in growth figures.

