

[On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs](#) (+traduction et réaction *The Economist*)

David Graeber, *STRIKE! MAGAZINE*, August 17, 2013

In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshaled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.



Why did Keynes' promised utopia – still being eagerly awaited in the '60s – never materialise? The standard line today is that he didn't figure in the massive increase in consumerism. Given the choice between less hours and more toys and pleasures, we've collectively chosen the latter. This presents a nice morality tale, but even a moment's reflection shows it can't really be true. Yes, we have witnessed the creation of an endless variety of new jobs and industries since the '20s, but very few have anything to do with the production and distribution of sushi, iPhones, or fancy sneakers.

So what are these new jobs, precisely? A recent report comparing employment in the US between 1910 and 2000 gives us a clear picture (and I note, one pretty much exactly echoed in the UK). Over the course of the last century, the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and in the farm sector has collapsed dramatically. At the same time, "professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers" tripled, growing "from one-quarter to three-quarters of total employment." In other words, productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away (even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be).

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the "service" sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza deliverymen) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

These are what I propose to call "bullshit jobs."

It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs just for the sake of keeping us all working. And here, precisely, lies the mystery. In capitalism, this is precisely what is *not* supposed to happen. Sure, in the old inefficient socialist states like the Soviet Union, where employment was considered both a right and a sacred duty, the system made up as many jobs as they had to (this is why in Soviet department stores it took three clerks to sell a piece of meat). But, of course, this is the very sort of problem market competition is supposed to fix. According to economic theory, at least, the last thing a profit-seeking firm is going to do is shell out money to workers they don't really need to employ. Still, somehow, it happens.

While corporations may engage in ruthless downsizing, the layoffs and speed-ups invariably fall on that class of people who are actually making, moving, fixing and maintaining things; through some strange alchemy no one can quite explain, the number of salaried paper-pushers ultimately seems to expand, and more and more employees find themselves, not unlike Soviet workers actually, working 40 or even 50 hour weeks on paper, but effectively working 15 hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organising or attending motivational seminars, updating their facebook profiles or downloading TV box-sets.

The answer clearly isn't economic: it's moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger (think of what started to happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s). And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.

Once, when contemplating the apparently endless growth of administrative responsibilities in British academic departments, I came up with one possible vision of hell. Hell is a collection of individuals who are spending the bulk of their time working on a task they don't like and are not especially good at. Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinet-makers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Neither does the task really need to be done – at least, there's only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried. Yet somehow, they all become so obsessed with resentment at the thought that some of their co-workers might be spending more time making cabinets, and not doing their fair share of the fish-frying responsibilities, that before long there's endless piles of useless badly cooked fish piling up all over the workshop and it's all that anyone really does.

I think this is actually a pretty accurate description of the moral dynamics of our own economy.

Now, I realise any such argument is going to run into immediate objections: "who are you to say what jobs are really 'necessary'? What's necessary anyway? You're an anthropology professor, what's the 'need' for that?" (And indeed a lot of tabloid readers would take the existence of my job as the very definition of wasteful social expenditure.) And on one level, this is obviously true. There can be no objective measure of social value.

I would not presume to tell someone who is convinced they are making a meaningful contribution to the world that, really, they are not. But what about those people who are themselves convinced their jobs are meaningless? Not long ago I got back in touch with a school friend who I hadn't seen since I was 12. I was amazed to discover that in the interim, he had become first a poet, then the front man in an indie rock band. I'd heard some of his songs on the radio having no idea the singer was someone I actually knew. He was obviously brilliant, innovative, and his work had unquestionably brightened and improved the lives of people all over the world. Yet, after a couple of unsuccessful albums, he'd lost his contract, and plagued with debts and a newborn daughter, ended up, as he put it, "taking the default choice of so many directionless folk: law school." Now he's a corporate lawyer working in a prominent New York firm. He was the first to admit that his job was utterly meaningless, contributed nothing to the world, and, in his own estimation, should not really exist.

There's a lot of questions one could ask here, starting with, what does it say about our society that it seems to generate an extremely limited demand for talented poet-musicians, but an apparently infinite demand for specialists in corporate law? (Answer: if 1% of the population controls most of the disposable wealth, what we call "the market" reflects what *they* think is useful or important, not anybody else.) But even more, it shows that most people in these jobs are ultimately aware of it. In fact, I'm not sure I've ever met a corporate lawyer who didn't think their job was bullshit. The same goes for almost all the new industries outlined above. There is a whole class of salaried professionals that, should you meet them at parties and admit that you do something that might be considered interesting (an anthropologist, for example), will want to avoid even discussing their line of work entirely. Give them a few drinks, and they will launch into tirades about how pointless and stupid their job really is.

This is a profound psychological violence here. How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one's job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment. Yet it is the peculiar genius of our society that its rulers have figured out a way, as in the case of the fish-fryers, to ensure that rage is directed precisely against those who actually do get to do meaningful work. For instance: in our society, there seems a general rule that, the more obviously one's work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it. Again, an objective measure is hard to find, but one easy way to get a sense is to ask: what would happen were this entire class of people to simply disappear? Say what you like about nurses, garbage collectors, or mechanics, it's obvious that were they to vanish in a puff of smoke, the results would be immediate and catastrophic. A world without teachers or dock-workers would soon be in trouble, and even one without science fiction writers or ska musicians would clearly be a lesser place. It's not entirely clear how humanity would suffer were all private equity CEOs, lobbyists, PR researchers, actuaries, telemarketers, bailiffs or legal consultants to similarly vanish. (Many suspect it might markedly improve.) Yet apart from a handful of well-touted exceptions (doctors), the rule holds surprisingly well.

Even more perverse, there seems to be a broad sense that this is the way things should be. This is one of the secret strengths of right-wing populism. You can see it when tabloids whip up resentment against tube workers for paralysing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyse London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people. It's even clearer in the US,

where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against school teachers, or auto workers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry managers who actually cause the problems) for their supposedly bloated wages and benefits. It's as if they are being told "but you get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?"

If someone had designed a work regime perfectly suited to maintaining the power of finance capital, it's hard to see how they could have done a better job. Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorised stratum of the, universally reviled, unemployed and a larger stratum who are basically paid to do nothing, in positions designed to make them identify with the perspectives and sensibilities of the ruling class (managers, administrators, etc) – and particularly its financial avatars – but, at the same time, foster a simmering resentment against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value. Clearly, the system was never consciously designed. It emerged from almost a century of trial and error. But it is the only explanation for why, despite our technological capacities, we are not all working 3-4 hour days.

Emplois Foireux par David Graeber

Dans les années 30, John Maynard Keynes avait prédit que, à la fin du siècle, les technologies seront suffisamment avancées pour que des pays comme le Royaume Uni ou les Etats Unis envisagent des temps de travail de 15 heures par semaine. Il y a toutes les raisons de penser qu'il avait raison. Et pourtant cela n'est pas arrivé. Au lieu de cela, la technologie a été manipulée pour trouver des moyens de nous faire travailler plus. Pour y arriver, des emplois ont du être créés et qui sont par définition, inutiles. Des troupes entières de gens, en Europe et en Amérique du Nord particulièrement, passent leur vie professionnelle à effectuer des tâches qu'ils savent sans réelle utilité. Les nuisances morales et spirituelles qui accompagnent cette situation est profonde. C'est une cicatrice qui balafre notre âme collective. Et pourtant personne n'en parle.

Pourquoi donc, l'utopie promise par Keynes – et qui était encore attendue dans les années 60 – ne s'est jamais matérialisée? La réponse standard aujourd'hui est qu'il n'a pas su prédire la croissance massive du consumérisme. Entre moins d'heure passés à travailler et plus de jouets et de plaisirs, nous avons collectivement choisi le dernier. Cela nous présente une jolie fable morale, mais même un moment de réflexion nous montre que cela n'est pas vrai. Oui, nous avons été les témoins de la création d'une grande variété d'emplois et d'industries depuis les années 20, mais peu ont un rapport avec la production et distribution de sushi, iPhones ou bakets à la mode.

Quels sont donc ces nouveaux emplois précisément? Un rapport récent comparant l'emploi aux Etats Unis entre 1910 et 2000 nous en donne une bonne image (et je notes au passage, il en est de même pour le Royaume Uni). Au cours du siècle dernier, le nombre de travailleurs, employés dans l'industrie ou l'agriculture a dramatiquement diminué. Au même moment, les emplois en tant que "professionnels, clerks, managers, vendeurs et employés de l'industrie de service" ont triplés, passant "de un quart à trois quart des employés totaux". En d'autres mots, les métiers productifs, comme prédit, a pu être largement automatisé (même si vous comptez les employés de l'industrie en Inde et Chine, ce type de travailleurs ne représente pas un pourcentage aussi large qu'avant)

Mais plutôt que de permettre une réduction massive des heures de travail pour libérer la population mondiale et leur permettre de poursuivre leurs projets, plaisirs, visions et idées, nous avons pu observer le gonflement, non seulement des industries de "service", mais aussi du secteur administratif, jusqu'à la création de nouvelles industries comme les services financiers, le télémarketing, ou la poussée sans précédent de secteurs comme les avocats d'affaire, des administrations, ressources humaines ou encore relations public. Et ces chiffres ne prennent pas en compte tous ceux qui assurent un soutien administratif, technique ou sécuritaire à toutes ces industries, voir toutes les autres industries annexes rattachées à celles-ci (les laveurs de chiens, livreurs de pizza ouvert toute la nuit) qui n'existent seulement par ce que tout le monde passe tellement de temps au travail.

C'est ce que je vous propose d'appeler des "Emplois Foireux". C'est comme si quelqu'un inventait des emplois sans intérêt, juste pour nous tenir tous occupés. Et c'est ici que réside tout le mystère. Dans un système capitaliste, c'est précisément ce qui n'est pas censé arriver. Dans les inefficaces anciens états socialistes, comme l'URSS, où l'emploi était considéré comme un droit et un devoir sacré, le système fabriquait autant d'emploi qu'il était nécessaire (une des raisons pour lesquelles il fallait trois personnes pour vous servir dans les supermarchés un morceau de viande). Mais, bien sûr, c'est le genre de problème que le marché compétitif est censé régler. Selon les théories économiques, en tout cas, la dernière chose qu'une entreprise qui recherche

le profit va faire est de balancer de l'argent à des employés qu'ils ne devraient pas payer. Pourtant, cela arrive en quelque sorte.

Alors que les entreprises s'engagent dans des campagnes de licenciement, celles ci touchent principalement la classe des gens qui font, bougent, réparent ou maintiennent les choses, alors que à travers une alchimie bizarre que personne ne peut expliquer, le nombre de salariés "pousse-papier" semble gonfler, et de plus en plus d'employés se retrouvent, au contraire des travailleurs de l'ex URSS, travaillant 40 ou 50 heures par semaine, mais travaillant de façon réellement efficace 15 heures, comme Keynes l'avait prédit, passant le reste de leur temps à organiser ou aller à des séminaires de motivation, mettre à jour leur profile facebook ou télécharger des séries télévisées.

La réponse n'est clairement pas économique: elle est morale et politique. La classe dirigeante a découvert qu'une population heureuse et productive avec du temps libre est un danger mortel (pensez à ce qui c'est passé lorsque cette prophétie à commencé à se réaliser dans les années 60). Et, d'un autre côté, le sentiment que le travail est une valeur morale en elle même, et que quiconque qui ne se soumet pas à une forme intense de travail pendant leur temps de veille ne mérite rien, est particulièrement pratique pour eux.

Une fois, en contemplant la croissance apparente des responsabilités administratives dans les départements académiques, j'en suis arrivé à une vision possible de l'enfer. L'enfer est un ensemble de gens qui passent la majorité de leur temps sur une tâche qu'ils n'aiment pas et dans laquelle ils ne sont pas spécialement bons. Disons qu'ils ont été engagés car ils sont de très bons menuisiers, et qu'ils découvrent qu'ils doivent passer une grande partie de leur temps à cuire du poisson. La tâche n'a rien de passionnant, au moins il y a une quantité limitée de poissons à faire cuire. Et pourtant, ils deviennent complètement obsédés par le fait que certains de leurs collègues pourrait passer plus de temps à faire de la menuiserie, et ne pas faire leur part des responsabilités de cuisson de poisson, sous peu des piles entières de poisson inutiles et mal cuits envahiront l'atelier, et cuire des poissons est devenu l'activité principale.

Je pense que c'est plutôt une description précise de la dynamique morale de notre économie.

Maintenant, je réalise qu'un tel argument va inévitablement générer des objections: "qui êtes vous, pour définir quels emplois sont réellement nécessaires? Et c'est quoi votre définition d'utile? Vous êtes un professeur d'anthropologie, qui a 'besoin' de ça?" (et il est vrai que beaucoup de lecteurs de tabloids [NDT - équivalent anglais des magazines people et à scandale] pourraient envisager mon travail comme l'exemple même de l'inutilité) Et sur un certain niveau, c'est vrai. Il n'y a pas de mesure objective de la valeur sociale du travail.

Je ne voudrais pas dire à quelqu'un, qui est convaincu qu'il effectue une réelle contribution à l'humanité et au monde, que en fait, non. Mais qu'en est-il des gens qui sont convaincus que leur travail n'a pas de sens? Il y a peu j'ai repris contact avec un ami d'enfance que je n'avais pas vu depuis l'âge de 12 ans. J'ai été étonné d'apprendre, que dans l'intervalle, il était d'abord devenu un poète, puis le chanteur d'un groupe de rock indépendant. J'avais entendu certaines de ses chansons à la radio, sans savoir que c'était quelqu'un que je connaissais. Il était clairement brillant, innovant, et son travail avait sans aucun doute illuminé et amélioré la vie de gens au travers du monde. Pourtant, après quelques albums sans succès, il perdit son contrat, et plombé de dettes et devant s'occuper d'un jeune enfant, finit comme il le dit lui même "à prendre le choix par défaut de beaucoup de gens sans direction: la fac de droit". Il est aujourd'hui un avocat d'affaires travaillant pour une firme proéminente newyorkaise. Il était le premier à admettre que son travail n'avait aucun sens, ne contribuait en rien au monde, et de sa propre estimation, ne devrait pas réellement exister.

On pourrait être en droit de se poser beaucoup de questions, à commencer par, qu'est ce que cela dit sur notre société – une demande extrêmement limitée en musiciens poètes talentueux, mais une demande apparemment infinie d'avocats spécialiste des affaires? (Réponse: si 1% de la population contrôle la plupart des richesses disponibles, ce que nous appelons le "marché" reflète ce qu'ils pensent est utile ou important, et personne d'autre). Mais encore plus, cela montre que la plupart des gens dans ces emplois en sont conscients. En fait, je ne pense pas que j'ai rencontré un avocat d'affaire qui ne pense pas que son emploi soit merdique. Il en est de même pour toutes les nouvelles industries citées plus haut. Il existe une classe entière de professionnels qui, si vous deviez les rencontrer dans une soirée et admettent que vous faites quelque chose d'intéressant (un anthropologiste, par exemple), feront tout pour éviter de discuter leur travail. Après quelques verres, ils risquent même de se lancer dans des tirades sur combien leur travail est stupide et sans intérêt.

Cela est profondément psychologiquement violent. Comment peut on commencer à discuter de dignité au travail, quand on estime que son travail ne devrait même pas exister? Comment cette situation ne peut-elle pas créer un sentiment profond de rage et de ressentiment? Pourtant et c'est tout le génie de cette société, dont les dirigeants ont trouvé un moyen, comme dans le cas des cuiseurs de poisson, de s'assurer que la rage est directement dirigée précisément vers ceux qui font un travail qui a du sens. Par exemple, dans notre société, il semble y avoir une règle, qui dicte que plus le travail bénéficie aux autres, moins il sera payé pour ce travail.

Encore une fois, une mesure objective est difficile à trouver, mais un moyen simple de se faire une idée est de se demander: qu'arriverait-il si cette classe entière de travailleurs disparaissait? Dites ce que vous voulez à propos des infirmières, éboueurs ou mécaniciens, mais si ils venaient à disparaître dans un nuage de fumée, les conséquences seraient immédiates et catastrophiques. Un monde sans profs ou dockers serait bien vite en difficulté, et même un monde sans auteur de science fiction ou musicien de ska serait clairement un monde moins intéressant. Ce n'est pas complètement clair comment le monde souffrirait de la disparition des directeurs généraux d'entreprises, lobbyistes, chercheurs en relation presse, télémarketeurs, huissiers de justice ou consultant légaux (Beaucoup soupçonnent que la vie s'améliorerait grandement). Pourtant à part une poignées d'exceptions (les médecins), la règle semble valide.

De façon encore plus pervers, il semble exister un consensus sur le fait que c'est la façon dont les choses devraient se passer. C'est un des points forts secrets du populisme de droite. Vous pouvez le voir quand les tabloids s'en prennent aux cheminots, qui paralysent le métro londonien durant des négociations: le fait que ces travailleurs peuvent paralyser le métro, montre que leur travail est nécessaire, mais cela semble être précisément ce qui embête les gens. C'est encore plus clair aux Etats Unis, où les Républicains ont réussi à mobiliser les gens contre les professeurs d'école ou les travailleurs de l'industrie automobile (et non contre les administrateur des écoles ou les responsables de l'industrie automobile qui étaient la source du problème) pour leurs payes et avantages mirifiques. C'est un peu comme si ils disaient "mais vous pouvez apprendre aux enfants! ou fabriquer des voitures! c'est vous qui avez les vrais emplois! et en plus de ça vous avez le toupet de demander une retraite et la sécu?"

Si quelqu'un avait conçu un plan pour maintenir la puissance du capital financier aux manettes, il est difficile de voir comment ils auraient mieux fait. Les emplois réels, productifs sont sans arrêt écrasés et exploités. Le reste est divisé en deux groupes, entre la strate des sans emplois, universellement vilipendé et une strate plus large de gens qui sont payés à ne rien faire, dans une position qui leur permet de s'identifier aux perspectives et sensibilités de la classe dirigeante (managers, administrateurs, etc.) et particulièrement ses avatars financiers, mais en même temps produit un ressentiment envers quiconque à un travail avec un valeur sociale claire et indéniable. Clairement, le système n'a pas été consciemment conçu, mais a émergé d'un siècle de tentatives et d'échecs. Mais c'est la seule explication pourquoi, malgré nos capacités technologiques, nous ne travaillons pas 3 à 4 heures par jour.

The
Economist

On "bullshit jobs"

The Economist, Aug 21st 2013

ANTHROPOLOGIST David Graeber has written an amusing essay on the nature of work in a modern economy, which seems to involve lots of people doing meaningless tasks they hate:

In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshalled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it.

It is not the case, he writes, that people have to keep working to produce the consumer goods for which the rich world hungers. Outrageously, meaningless employment—in what he calls "bullshit jobs"—is concentrated in "professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers":

In other words, productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away (even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be).

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning not even so much of the "service" sector as of the administrative sector...

Why in the world would firms spend extraordinary amounts of money employing people to do worthless tasks (especially when they've shown themselves to be exceedingly good at *not* employing people to do worthless tasks)? Says Mr Graeber:

The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger (think of what started to happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s).

I am immediately bursting with questions. Such as, should we conclude that protesters around the world—in Brazil, India, North Africa, Turkey—are in fact *too happy*? How does the ruling class co-ordinate all this hiring, and if much of the economy's employment is useless in the first place why not just keep them on during recessions?

But there is actually an important point here. The place to start is to recognise that, romance aside, many of the industrial jobs that have been automated away were incredibly tedious and unpleasant for those doing them. The development of assembly line processes contributed to rising worker wages in part because of increased productivity...but also because employers were tired of training workers only to lose them once they realised they'd be affixing Tab A to Frame B, repeatedly, all day long.

Employers had to retain such workers—had to pay them a wage sufficient to keep them on the job despite its dreadful tedium—because the machines of the era lacked the manual dexterity to complete the required tasks, and so a line of human machines was the only way to make the highly productive assembly-line system work. As technology evolved, however, automating routine tasks became ever easier. And the high wages needed to compensate labourers for the soul-crushing repetitiveness of their work gave employers every incentive to automate routine tasks as soon as it was technically feasible.

Perhaps you see where this is going.

As technology has improved, it has become ever easier to dispense with human labour in mechanical processes. There are still jobs where a very high level of physical dexterity and task flexibility is needed—in construction, for example, or janitorial work—and people continue to do those jobs. But it is not surprising that employment growth has shifted elsewhere. And administrative jobs are the modern equivalent of the industrial line worker.

Over the past century the world economy has grown increasingly complex. The goods being provided are more complex; the supply chains used to build them are more complex; the systems to market, sell and distribute them are more complex; the means to finance it all is more complex; and so on. This complexity is what makes us rich. But it is an enormous pain to manage. I'd say that one way to manage it all would be through teams of generalists—craftsman managers who mind the system from the design stage right through to the customer service calls—but there is no way such complexity would be economically workable in that world (just as cheap, ubiquitous automobiles would have been impossible in a world where teams of generalist mechanics produced cars one at a time).

No, the efficient way to do things is to break businesses up into many different kinds of tasks, allowing for a very high level of specialisation. And so you end up with the clerical equivalent of repeatedly affixing Tab A to Frame B: shuffling papers, management of the minutiae of supply chains, and so on. Disaggregation may make it look meaningless, since many workers end up doing things incredibly far removed from the end points of the process; the days when the iron ore goes in one door and the car rolls out the other are over. But the idea is the same.

One question is why today's workers aren't rewarded with high wages for their suffering. And one possible answer is that, well, they are. Real wages for today's clerical workers are far higher than they were for manufacturing workers a century ago, and the work, for all its tedium, probably isn't nearly as unpleasant. Administrative workers get to sit down in climate-controlled offices, tweeting and playing fantasy football on their desktop when time allows. If firms had to pay more to get a body in the deskchair, they would.

Technology continues to improve, however. Just as robots became ever better at various manual tasks over the past century—and were therefore able to replace human labour in a growing array of jobs, beginning with the most routine—computer [control systems](#) are able to handle ever more of the work done by human administrative workers. Jobs from truck driver to legal aid to medical diagnostician to customer service technician will soon be threatened by machines. Starting with the most routine tasks. Human labour will not be eliminated entirely from these sectors. Jobs that require a particularly high level of task flexibility, or creativity, or empathy may continue to employ people (for a while). Yet most office jobs will eventually go the way of the dodo.

And at that point advanced economies may find it necessary to address what is really the central complaint in Mr Graeber's essay. The issue is not that jobs used to have meaning and now they don't; most jobs in most periods have undoubtedly been staffed by people who would prefer to be doing something else. The issue is that too little of the recent gains from technological advance and economic growth have gone toward giving people the time and resources to enjoy their lives outside work. Early in the industrial era real wages soared and

hours worked declined. In the past generation, by contrast, real wages have grown slowly and workweeks haven't grown shorter.

The development of large-scale technological unemployment or underemployment, however, would force rich societies to revisit a system that primarily allocates purchasing power via earned wages. And that, in turn, could allow households to get by or even thrive while working many fewer hours than is now typically the case—albeit through a pretty hefty level of income redistribution. They would then be free to write poetry or tutor disadvantaged children, though we shouldn't be surprised if most use their new leisure to spend more time with a beloved video game.

We can't be certain that the robots are coming for all our jobs. Disemployment in administrative jobs could create new, and perhaps highly remunerative, work in sectors or occupations we can't yet anticipate. If we're lucky, that work will be engaging and meaningful. Yet there is a decent chance that "bullshit" administrative jobs are merely a halfway house between "bullshit" industrial jobs and no jobs at all. Not because of the conniving of rich interests, but because machines inevitably outmatch humans at handling bullshit without complaining.