

## MORE ABOUT WORK – a companion to Chapter 5 of Snafu

### 1. Introduction

In Chapter 5 of Snafu, I examined the prediction that John Maynard Keynes made in his 1930 essay, “Economy Possibilities for our Grandchildren.” He thought that, by 2030, we would have to work only fifteen hours a week in order to afford “the good life.”<sup>1</sup> In this article, I take a closer look at work.

### 2. We don’t need a definition of work, do we?

If it feels like work, it is work – right? Well—if we want to get technical about it, work is any force that’s exerted (over time) to convert one form of energy to another, or to convert energy to mass. So, that means everything is work. Life is work. Even eating is work. It’s the conversion of the chemical potential energy of organic mass (food) into other forms of energy. And, we work in our sleep too—digesting food, producing new cells, getting rid of old ones.

Eating and sleeping don’t “feel” like work—we don’t experience any resistance. And, Newton’s first law of motion says that, when we exert a force—when we convert energy—there is always resistance—there is always inertia. Those of us who aren’t Zen masters, don’t notice most of our biological functions. When they speed-up or slow-down, we don’t “feel” their inertia. But, we do feel the inertia of our voluntary functions. Our days begin in bed. Newton perceptively said that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. Getting out of bed involves real resistance—especially on Mondays. Yet we overcome it. It’s part of the “work” we must do in order to live, even though we’d much rather stay in bed.

So, at a fundamental level, there’s no difference between work and play. They both involve applying force to convert energy from one form to another. Sure—but we’d like to think of ourselves as something more than just machines for converting energy, at least outside of office hours. The difference between what we call work and what we call play isn’t about what we do. It’s about why we do it. Play is exertion freely chosen. Work involves some

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<sup>1</sup> Keynes, John Maynard, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” in *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 358-73, available at <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>.

degree of compulsion—some restriction of our freedom. The most common restriction comes from the need to work for a living. This is, in fact, more than a need. It's an instinct. Our creation myths emphasize the necessary connection between work and survival—"the curse of Adam." By contrast, our utopian myths are about breaking that connection—freeing us from the need to work. We have an instinct for work, but we prefer play.

So, we have our definition—work is exertion that involves some degree of compulsion, while play—let's call it leisure—is exertion that's free of compulsion. The nature of the exertion isn't what matters. It's all about the purpose. LeBron James plays basketball for recreation during the off-season. It's the same thing as he does for a living. But, in the off-season, he's free of the demands of the coach, the owner, and the fans. It's the freedom that counts, not the activity.

### **3. Idleness—instinct or myth?**

What about idleness? What about our attempts to avoid exertion? It's not possible to avoid exertion entirely, but you already know that. Some think that there's an instinct for idleness. If that were true, it would be a direct contradiction of the survival instinct. We could not survive by idleness. It's easy to confuse idleness with rest. Outside of sleep, rest is part of the normal rhythm of life. As anthropologist, David Graeber, puts it: "...most people who have ever existed have assumed that normal human work patterns take the form of periodic intense bursts of energy, followed by relaxation, followed by slowly picking up again toward another intense bout."<sup>2</sup> So, rest is part of the work cycle, and it's a part of leisure. But rest is not the same as idleness. Our default setting is a cycle of activity and rest. The activity is either voluntary (leisure) or done under some degree of compulsion or necessity (work). Breaking the cycle with prolonged periods of doing absolutely nothing is not normal, and certainly not instinctive. Yet, from ancient times, philosophers and righteous elites have fretted about wanton idleness (not in themselves, of course), condemning it as an intrinsic human failing (of the common folk), or a rebellion against social order, or as simply irrational. But what is idleness, really?

In 1935, Bertrand Russell wrote an essay called in *In Praise of Idleness*. But it was really about work and leisure, not idleness. The title was just ironic humor (he was English). The

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<sup>2</sup> Graeber, David. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (p. 86). Penguin Books Ltd. May 2018. Kindle Edition. (Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*)

essence of his argument was that: “A man who has worked long hours all his life will be bored if he becomes suddenly idle. But without a considerable amount of leisure a man is cut off from many of the best things. There is no longer any reason why the bulk of the population should suffer this privation; only a foolish asceticism, usually vicarious, makes us continue to insist on work in excessive quantities now that the need no longer exists.” Russell was echoing the sentiment Keynes expressed in his 1930 essay.

Brian O’Connor, on the other hand, tackles idleness with fearsome exactitude in his 2018 book, *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*.<sup>3</sup> Who knew that people write books about such things? Anyway, O’Connor says that: “Idleness is experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose. That absence of purpose explains its restful and pleasurable qualities... It involves a departure from a range of values that make us the kinds of people we are supposed to be in order to live well [in society].”<sup>4</sup> Okay, so that makes idleness nothing more than an extreme form of leisure—a bare minimum of activity undertaken without any compulsion at all, free of any personal drive for self-actualization or any social pressure to conform. It is as complete an exercise of freedom as a human being can manage. And, that’s pretty much where O’Connor comes out (after 186 closely argued pages):

“We can see, perhaps, that idleness involves a sense of acting in accordance with values we take to be our own, meeting our personal understanding of what we prefer to do. It is often appreciated as freedom from pressures that seem to want to turn us into human beings of a distinctive kind, requiring us to relate to others—and indeed our own life stories—in ways that appear empty yet supposedly right. Idleness involves no inner struggle in which happiness is subordinated to some higher principle or other. The idle self is at home with itself.”<sup>5</sup>

At the start of his book, O’Connor says: “In principle, it is possible to imagine a life that is largely idle...”<sup>6</sup> Yet, this is precluded by his argument that idleness is an almost heroic exercise of freedom. Freedom is always limited. We cannot free ourselves entirely of our

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<sup>3</sup> O’Connor, Brian. *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*. Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition at p 78. (“O’Connor, Idleness”)

<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, Idleness at p 5.

<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, Idleness at p 185-186.

<sup>6</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, Idleness at p5.

inner struggles, nor resist entirely the pressures of society. Being alive is work. The minimum participation in society is work. So, idleness is necessarily fleeting or episodic. No one gets to remain an island of freedom for a lifetime—or anything remotely close to a lifetime. Even in the least intrusive society imaginable, there would still be some social pressure, compelling us to *work* for the freedom to be idle. They say Jeff Bezos is the world's richest man. Is he rich enough to “buy” the freedom to be idle? He could walk away from Amazon, buy a desert island and lie on the beach. But could he really bring himself to do that? And, if he did, how long would it be before his inner drive (and this is a very driven guy), or some external pressure, compelled him to abandon idleness for some purposeful activity (say, hiring servants or tweaking his investment portfolio)? At the other end of the social scale, there is someone else (actually there are billions of them,) living on a few dollars a day. That kind of money doesn't buy much time for idleness. And then, there are the rest of us. For how much of your day are free you to do absolutely as you please or to do nothing at all?

#### **4. So, where's the boundary between work and leisure?**

Freedom is always relative. This means that there's a wide grey zone along the border between work and leisure. A good illustration of where things blur is parenthood. Even though we sign on willingly, some parts of parenting are just plain work. No matter how altruistic, every parent has to do things they'd rather not do. The compulsion is “softer” than survival or economic necessity. It's moral, and it's mostly internal (though there are social pressures). Nonetheless, it's a compulsion. Sometimes we can stray from altruistic choices without the risk of failing as parents, because not everything is “mission critical.” But then a secondary compulsion often kicks in—guilt. The point is that the difference between work and leisure isn't digital. There's a kind of waveband along the border in which the peaks and troughs vary with the nature of the activity, the passage of time, and even our moods. The boundary between activities undertaken under compulsion and those undertaken freely is fuzzy, yet freedom of choice is still what separates work from leisure. In the fuzzy, grey zone, there's pleasant work and there's virtuous leisure—a range of activities that involve small, willing surrenders of freedom, some of which we don't even notice.

#### **5. The preference for leisure**

So, if we were as free as we could be, and if our material needs were somehow met without us having to work, most of our exertion would be leisure—cycles of activity and rest, freely

chosen, spiced with periods of idleness (leisure's pleasant extremity). Our natural preference for voluntary exertion over compulsory exertion should mean that we have a tendency to maximize leisure and minimize work. And, we do—sort of.

## **6. The curious persistence of work**

Despite our preference for leisure, we tend to do more work than we need to do in order to survive and minimize our need for future work. This has always been the case. Sure, we find ways to reduce work, and we use vast, extraneous sources of energy, from wind to nuclear fission. But we haven't yet achieved our utopian dream of removing human work from the survival equation.

For example, ever since human civilization began, we've produced "cultural goods"—art, literature, music, architecture and so on. Some of these were the products of leisure, but most were not. Most involved work that people were paid or coerced to do. While cultural goods are not strictly necessary for survival, most of us think they have personal and social value. They express our creativity, celebrate our love of beauty and stimulate our search for meaning beyond mere survival. Without cultural goods, life would be dull. So, the work we do to produce them is generally thought to be worth the effort. It may even be thought of as work that improves some aspects of future leisure.

In cultural goods we find some of our earliest records of "social work"—work that wouldn't have been done unless people had banded together to satisfy their survival needs so that some of them had the time to make things that weren't strictly necessary for survival. The social aspect of work is even older than the production of cultural goods. It is as old as work itself. Working together is an integral part of our survival instinct.

At an individual level, survival involves a delicate interplay between the instinct to cooperate with others and the instinct to compete with them. As Francis Fukuyama puts it: "Human beings compete to cooperate, and cooperate to compete; cooperation and competition are not alternatives but two sides of the same coin."<sup>7</sup> So far in human society, cooperation has dominated, making all work to some extent "social." Long before Adam Smith marveled at the productivity gains accomplished by the division of labor in a Scottish pin factory, the

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<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy* (Kindle Locations 9336-9337) Profile. Kindle Edition.

original “Adam delved and Eve span.”<sup>8</sup> They divided between them the work they needed to do in order to survive.

Yet, there has always been the “other side of the coin”—competition. Sometimes it even coopts the instinct to cooperate. The most extreme example of this is war—cooperation in the cause of destructive competition. Yet, most of the time, we cooperate constructively, keeping competition within socially accepted bounds. And, throughout human history, we’ve been doing this in ever more complex ways, albeit interrupted regularly by periods during which competition trumps cooperation.

The kinds of work we do, how we work, and who works, are all affected by the interaction of cooperation and competition. This interaction is seldom in equilibrium. Our competitive instinct often leads to patterns of dominance and submission—Hobbes’s “war of all against all.”<sup>9</sup> But, usually, even those strong enough to dominate are smart enough to give up some freedom in return for respite from constant competition. As a species, we are intelligent enough to understand both the value of cooperation and how to make it work. So much so, that we have been able to create societies so complex that they exceed our ability to understand them or to predict how they will respond to the countless actions of the millions of people they comprise. Globally, human society is a constellation of complex systems that constantly adapt to the countless interactions of individuals and groups in ways that are, collectively, more unpredictable than natural systems like the weather. It’s no wonder then that work has been affected not only by the give and take of cooperation and competition at every level from interpersonal to civilizational, but also by the complexity of the numerous social systems we’ve created. Our opposing instincts of competition and cooperation create problems for work. And, so do the limitations to our intellect, reason and perception. Not only are we unable to predict the outcome of the myriad inputs we make to our social systems, but we are also unable to manage even the intended consequences of those outputs. And, as historian, Niall Ferguson remarked: “The only real law of history is the law of *unintended* consequences.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From John Ball’s speech of 1381 at Blackheath, England. Sources: 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica Archived 27 March 2007 at the Wayback Machine. Webster’s online Dictionary Archived 12 May 2005 at the Wayback Machine.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, 1651. Project Gutenberg 2009, XIII.9, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3207>.

<sup>10</sup> Niall Ferguson, from “Heed History’s Lessons”, an interview in *The Australian*, 7 November 2018 (emphasis on “unintended” added)

So, thanks to the “tension of instincts,” our intrinsic human limitations, and the “complexity problem,” we end up doing some work that isn’t necessary for survival, that isn’t directed at minimizing the need for future work, and that doesn’t advance social wellbeing or prevent social decay. In other words, we end up doing some work that has no purpose beyond channeling resources to those who do it and those who arrange it. This “distributive work” is something we’d be better off not doing, if we only we understood how to avoid doing it.

In a 2013 article,<sup>11</sup> David Graeber looked at jobs that have no social benefit beyond employing those who do them. He called them “Bullshit Jobs.” Then, in his 2018 book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*,<sup>12</sup> he went as far as to define five categories of Bullshit Jobs. Before we get to his categories, let’s look at his definition of a Bullshit Job:

“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.”<sup>13</sup>

The beauty of Graeber’s definition is that it’s mainly subjective. If you do a job you think is bullshit, then it is bullshit. After all, you think about your job more often and more deeply than anyone else does, and you look for meaning in it, so your opinion about its worth is the one that matters most.

Graeber’s 2013 article generated a significant number of responses from readers. So, he started dialogues with many of them in order to find out more about their jobs, and he drew on these dialogues for his book. It turns out that Bullshit Jobs abound in advertising, financial services, corporate law and management, but not so much in medicine, research, teaching and cleaning. Graeber doesn’t spend much time discussing differences of opinion about jobs. He didn’t, for example, receive responses from corporate lawyers or advertising executives who thought their jobs had social value, just from those who didn’t. And, he didn’t seem to chat with cleaners who questioned the value of their repetitious drudgery, just with those who found it meaningful. His survey wasn’t scientific. But this doesn’t matter much for our purposes. What matters more is that a remarkable number of people opened up to him

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<sup>11</sup> Graeber, David, On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant, Strike!, August 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Graeber, David, Bullshit Jobs: A Theory, May 2018, Penguin Books Ltd, Kindle Edition

<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at pp 9 & 10

about work they regarded as meaningless, so much so that Graeber felt able to categorize Bullshit Jobs. These are his categories:

1. *Flunkies*—essentially assistants whose work could easily be done by their bosses (e.g. many PAs), or people who perform tasks that don't really need to be done (e.g. most receptionists), and who are often simply “on-call” or who perform “make work” tasks. This category includes superfluous intermediaries (think HR, sometimes satirically referred to as Human Remains).
2. *Goons*—people whose work involves aggression or manipulation—lobbyists, advertising or PR executives, telemarketers or corporate lawyers.
3. *Duct-Tapers*—people whose jobs exist only because of some organizational glitch or fault—say, computer engineers who spend their time ‘patching’ or ‘kludging’ instead of writing code, or copy editors who fix mistakes made by those above them in a hierarchy.
4. *Box Tickers*—people who perform superficial audits or compliance checks or who gather statistics that serve no purpose, or a purpose that is purely cosmetic. A good example is the growing armies of people in the public sector and private sector who claim to measure things like ‘best place to work’, ‘most valuable brand’, and the like. There are also those who perform ‘know your customer’ (KYC) checks for banks, yet laughably often fail to detect money launderers.
5. *Taskmasters*—people who assign tasks to underlings who already know what to do, or who create new bullshit tasks for underlings. This is ‘middle management’, those who populate the layer of unnecessary supervision in corporations and bureaucracies.

Graeber adds a catch-all category he calls “complex multiform bullshit jobs,” which are jobs that incorporate characteristics from more than one of the other categories, or that fall between categories, or that fall outside his five categories. So, next time somebody asks you what you do for a living, and you can't be bothered explaining, you could say: “I have a complex multiform bullshit job.” They'll think you're joking—but you might not be.

Graeber thinks that as many as fifty percent of jobs may be Bullshit Jobs, and that the “*bullshitization*” of jobs is increasing.<sup>14</sup> Imagine if he’d also surveyed jobs in which only some of the work is “pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious,”<sup>15</sup> that is, if he’d looked at “bullshit work,” and not just Bullshit Jobs. How much bullshit work finds its way into jobs that do have some social value? It’s an unanswerable question. But, if Graeber is right, a fair amount of the work we do is bullshit work, even if our jobs aren’t Bullshit Jobs. Given our preference for leisure, the proliferation of bullshit work is hard to reconcile—or is it? Let’s look at this by reference to Graeber’s categories.

According to Graeber, “*flunky* positions are created because those in powerful positions in an organization see underlings as badges of prestige; *goons* are hired due to a dynamic of one-upmanship.”<sup>16</sup> These positions reflect the human desire for dominance and prestige. They also reflect human greed. In other words, they are examples of the competitive instinct prevailing over the cooperative instinct. The functions of *flunkies* and *goons* arise out of what Graeber calls “managerial feudalism.” It’s like medieval feudalism, which was “essentially a redistributive system”<sup>17</sup> under which “the lord” siphoned off some of what the peasants and craftsmen produced, kept most of it, offered up some to his king, and handed-off the rest to his flunkies and goons, the people who helped maintain his power or enhance his prestige. Graeber says that “feudal logic”<sup>18</sup> has migrated to top corporate executives, so that large corporations “are less and less about making, building, fixing, or maintaining things and more and more about political processes of appropriating, distributing, and allocating money and resources.”<sup>19</sup> In this redistributive process, executives must not only pay their corporate flunkies and goons, but they must also pass on a sizable share of the benefits to stockholders. In the corporate world, stockholders (collectively) are the equivalent of the medieval king, who must be placated if the feudal lord is to hang on to his estate. This managerial feudalism is the triumph of the competitive instinct, and its concomitant vices of greed, avarice and power lust, raised to a systems level. It is a system under which the cooperation of those lower in the hierarchy (employees) is “bought” with a combination of wages and the fear of unemployment. The cooperation of those higher up than the

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<sup>14</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p62, and at p137

<sup>15</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at pp 9 & 10

<sup>16</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p164

<sup>17</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p175

<sup>18</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p176

<sup>19</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p177

executives (stockholders) is rewarded with dividends and share buy-backs. This leaves top management with an outsized share of the spoils— just like medieval lords—only more so.

It was “managerial feudalism” that led Cyril Northcote Parkinson to observe that “work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.”<sup>20</sup> Although “Parkinson’s Law” arose from the study of public officials, the two factors on which Parkinson based his “law” apply equal to today’s large corporations. The first factor is that a manager “wants to multiply subordinates, not rivals.”<sup>21</sup> “So A would rather have C and D, junior men, below him. They will add to his consequence; and, by dividing the work into two categories, as between C and D, he will have the merit of being the only man who comprehends them both.”<sup>22</sup> They will be “kept in order by fear of the other’s promotion.”<sup>23</sup> As this pyramid expands, so that C and D each hire two subordinates, A finds himself working harder than ever, because Parkinson’s second factor comes into play—managers “make work for each other.”<sup>24</sup> To use one of Parkinson’s examples, they all review the same incoming document, and “E decides that it falls within the province of F; who places a draft reply before C, who amends it drastically before consulting D, who asks G to deal with it. But G goes on leave at this point, handing over the file to H, who drafts a minute, which is signed by D and returned to C, who revises his draft accordingly and lays the new version before A.”<sup>25</sup> In the corporate world, Parkinson’s Law is alive and well, and it accounts for, at least, some of the “*bullshitization*” of work.

Graeber says that “*duct-taper* positions are created because sometimes organizations find it more difficult to fix a problem than to deal with its consequences.”<sup>26</sup> We are familiar with ‘band-aid’, ‘duct tape’, ‘patch’ or ‘kludge’ measures—quick, temporary fixes. At an institutional level, they arise out of the political, financial and technical complexities involved in truly solving problems. “Duct-taping” is the result of a combination of organizational failings, human vices and limitations, and complexity. Sometimes managers are in too much of a hurry. Sometimes they don’t see problems, either because they are remote from them

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<sup>20</sup> Parkinson, Cyril Northcote, “Parkinson’s Law”, 19 November 1955, *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/news/1955/11/19/parkinsons-law>, p1 (Parkinson)

<sup>21</sup> \_\_\_\_, Parkinson at p3

<sup>22</sup> \_\_\_\_, Parkinson at p3

<sup>23</sup> \_\_\_\_, Parkinson at p4

<sup>24</sup> \_\_\_\_, Parkinson at p3

<sup>25</sup> \_\_\_\_, Parkinson at p4

<sup>26</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* at p164

and unaffected by them, or because they'd rather not look for fear of having to take "ownership" of what they find. There are even some problems that benefit managers. Other problems go unsolved because managers are not confident they can solve them and would rather work around them than be seen to fail at solving them, or they go unsolved because managers don't have the budget to solve them, or because they are too lazy. Other problems often 'duct-taped' are those would take time to solve, and whose results might not be seen until still later. Managers shy away from these kinds of problems because they are rewarded for short-term results, not long term outcomes. Then there is the "complexity problem," which we will discuss a little later.

Graeber's "*box-ticker* positions exist because, within large organizations, paperwork attesting to the fact that certain actions have been taken often comes to be seen as more important than the actions themselves; *taskmasters* exist largely as side effects of various forms of impersonal authority."<sup>27</sup> In other words, these are the kinds of jobs that arise mainly out of the "complexity problem."

Before we look at the role of complexity, we need to examine work that *isn't* bullshit work—work that we think of as having value. What do we mean when we talk about the value of work?

## 7. The value of work

The original value of work was as a means of survival. And, this value still holds for most of us. But this doesn't mean that all work that enables us to survive has equal value. Graeber's findings suggest that, when free to choose our work, we generally favor work of higher "social value" over work of lower social value, sometimes even when the latter is better paid.

Most of us agree that, although money is a means to survival, it isn't a complete reward for work. In part, this follows from the nature of money. Money is just a way of measuring relative value. So, as Keynes said, "to regard it as having value itself is a relic of the view that the value of money is regulated by the value of the substance of which it is made, and is

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<sup>27</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p164

like confusing a theatre ticket with the performance.”<sup>28</sup> If we are already earning enough “tickets” to get by, more money doesn’t offer us any added satisfaction *while* we’re working. It doesn’t enhance the work experience. Sure, we can think about the things it buys, and we can experience the satisfaction of wearing our new Rolex to work. But the actual or contemplated enjoyment of life’s luxuries usually isn’t enough of a trade-off for the time and energy we expend at work if we don’t like or value the work itself.

When we apply force, we experience inertia. When we “apply” time, there is no inertia. Yet, no matter how low a value we place on our time, we are always reluctant to use it for things we don’t like doing, or things we don’t see any point in doing. We think of these things as a misuse of our time. Part of our preference for leisure is about using our time as we like. So, we resist being compelled to use it in other ways. And, this resistance to the misuse of time is analogous to inertia. We could call it “time inertia.” And, we do “feel” it in the way we experience time. “Time inertia” is whatever reduces the quality of our experience of time (leaving aside pain, suffering, loss or grief).

Money offers nothing to the experience of time beyond a background sense of security about having it, or insecurity about not having it. We can’t “experience” money. It’s just a measurement we use for exchanging things, and we can’t experience a measurement. We can experience some of the things we buy with money (or the satisfaction of contemplating the things we want to buy), but it’s hard for us to consciously experience this while expending time and energy on work. We can switch between our experience of work and our experience of wearing the Rolex at work (or thinking about other things we might buy) but we can’t have both experiences at once. The myth of multitasking is that we can do more than one cognitive task simultaneously. The truth is that we make rapid switches between tasks.<sup>29</sup> And, although we can do this switching while we’re at work, it doesn’t alter the fact that a lot of what we experience at work is—well, work. So, we’d prefer that experience to have a “value” in addition to the one that’s measured in money, because money doesn’t neutralize “time inertia.” At best, it offers intermittent relief during the time we’re working, and it may seem to promise a better quality of time outside of work. The value we seek in work

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<sup>28</sup> Keynes, JM, 1983. From “The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume XI: Economic Articles and Correspondence, Academic,” edited by Donald Moggridge, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan/Cambridge University Press at p402.

<sup>29</sup> Rosen, Christine, “The Myth of Multitasking”, *The New Atlantis*, Number 20, Spring 2008, pp. 105-110.

lies in the quality of the experience of “work time”—in the reduction of “time inertia.” But how would we measure this value? The short answer is—subjectively.

There is no universal measurement for the experience of “work time” or “time inertia.” It’s different for different people. The conclusion Graeber draws from his survey is that the quality of “work time” improves with the worker’s perception of the “social value” of the work performed, that is, “time inertia” decreases as “social value” increases. He says that, “for most people, ‘social value’ isn’t just about creating wealth or even leisure. It is equally about creating sociability.”<sup>30</sup> By “sociability,” Graeber means the promotion of social wellbeing—doing something that benefits society. This chimes with Hegel’s view of work as a social necessity. According to Hegel, “why we ought to work is a description of what we actually are”—social beings.<sup>31</sup> And, the satisfaction we achieve from work “has a strict relationship with the degree to which [our personal] choices [about how we invest our time] relate to the needs of others.”<sup>32</sup> Marx agreed with Hegel, though his idea of work was work in its ultimate, idealised form under communism, which would be “a pleasurable moral enterprise, guided by a conscious interest in the welfare and happiness of others.”<sup>33</sup>

Social complexity has intensified since Hegel and Marx wrote (and social attitudes to work have changed), but the idea of the social benefit of work persists. Graeber doesn’t say at what level social benefit needs to occur in order for workers in today’s world to think of their work as valuable. But, he quotes a study by three US economists that examined, at a national level, the social benefits and social costs of the work of various well-paid professionals.<sup>34</sup> Those ranked highest for social benefits were—researchers.<sup>35</sup> They added nine dollars of social value for every dollar they were paid. Other socially beneficial professionals were engineers and schoolteachers. Managers ranked highest for social costs. They cost society eight dollars in value for every dollar they were paid—(tell *that* to your boss!) Other socially damaging professionals were lawyers, advertising and marketing

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<sup>30</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* at p 207

<sup>31</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, *Idleness* at p 78.

<sup>32</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, *Idleness* at p 76

<sup>33</sup> \_\_\_\_, O’Connor, *Idleness* at p 88

<sup>34</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* at p 210. The quoted study is: Benjamin B. Lockwood, Charles G. Nathanson, and E. Glen Weyl, “Taxation and the Allocation of Talent,” *Journal of Political Economy* 125, no. 5 (October 2017): 1635-1682.

<sup>35</sup> A study conducted by researchers that ranks researchers as the professionals who contribute the highest social value—interesting.

professionals, and those in the financial sector. Consultants and IT professionals were neutral—neither benefitting nor costing society.<sup>36</sup> Graeber found a broader sample in a UK study, though one that also omitted professionals in the broad middle of the salary range. This study (also at a national level) found that a similar group of professionals topped the social destruction league—investment bankers, tax accountants and advertising executives. While, at the bottom end of the salary scale, hospital cleaners, recycling workers and those who worked in nurseries added the most social value.<sup>37</sup> So, it seems that, even at the relatively abstract level of a nation state, workers “feel” social bonds and prefer work that creates benefits for society as a whole.

These studies (however imperfect) reinforced Graeber’s own informal survey, leading him to propose that there is an inverse relationship between salary and social value. The higher your salary, the lower the social value of your work.<sup>38</sup> Graeber acknowledges that there are exceptions to this “rule,” such as doctors, and successful artists, performers and athletes. Doctors usually do socially beneficial work, even those who are well-paid. While the work of highly-paid movie and sports stars generally doesn’t have a social cost, and it may even have a social benefit.

If Graeber is right, then money is, in fact, a measure of the social value of work—an inverse one. But, as Graeber acknowledges, this is an anomaly. It arises out of our current form of social organisation, our prevailing social ideology—essentially, finance capitalism—and its implications for work. Later, we will look more closely at the connection between social ideology and work. But, for now, it’s back to the social value of work and how this might translate into a better “work time” experience.

Although Graeber doesn’t discuss the quality of the “work time” experience of workers with jobs of higher social value, what emerges from his stories about the experiences of those with Bullshit Jobs, is that the work activity matters less than the purpose of the activity. It seems that we will tolerate highly repetitive tasks, or the irregular rhythms of “on-call” work, or work that entails stress, physical hardships or risks, if the purpose of the work is clear to us. And, although the assessment of “purpose” is subjective, the common denominator is that the purpose must be social, not selfish.

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<sup>36</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p 210.

<sup>37</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p 211.

<sup>38</sup> \_\_\_\_, Graeber, Bullshit Jobs at p 195, 207, 210, 213, 258.

So, if we will do almost any kind of work if we think it has social value, why do so many of us end doing work that we think has little or no social value? Is it something about the way work is organised in society? In order to answer this question, we will need to take a look at the evolution of work, and society's attitude towards work. But, before we do that, let's get back to the "complexity problem," and its impact on the kind of work we do.

## 8. The Complexity Problem

Suppose you interact with only three other people at work (one co-worker, a single supplier, and a solitary customer). The four of you can be connected to one another in up to six ways, and there are sixty-four possible patterns of connection. If we were to add a boss, another co-worker, a service provider, two more customers and a bureaucrat to your list of work connections, there would be ten of you, and you could be connected in up to forty-five ways, but there would now be 3.5 million possible patterns of connection.<sup>39</sup> As the number of "elements" in a system increases arithmetically, the patterns of connection between them grow exponentially. And, our work connections reach into the rest of our life, so it's hard to disentangle them from the larger system that we call society, with its (literally) trillions of connection patterns. This is complexity.

A complex system is non-linear, that is, small changes can produce huge consequences. This is sometimes called the "Butterfly Effect"—"a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can produce a tornado in Texas."<sup>40</sup> A complex system is also "dynamic, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and solutions can't be imposed; rather, they arise from the

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<sup>39</sup> Allison, Markku, *Complexity In Systems, Organizations, And The Workplace*, 4 June 2015, Work Design Magazine, Expert Insights <https://workdesign.com/2015/06/complexity-in-systems-organizations-and-the-workplace/>

<sup>40</sup> Lorenz, Edward Norton (1938-2008), an American theoretical meteorologist, used the metaphor of a butterfly flapping its wings to illustrate that small disturbances in a complex weather system can be magnified as they interact with other elements of the system. In a lecture he gave in December 1972, he said: "a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can produce a tornado in Texas." See: José Manuel Sánchez Ron, "When Lorenz Discovered the Butterfly Effect," *Open Mind*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/when-lorenz-discovered-the-butterfly-effect/>

circumstances. This is frequently referred to as *emergence*.<sup>41</sup> And, it means that the elements of the system “evolve with one another and with the environment; and evolution is irreversible. Though a complex system may, in retrospect, appear to be ordered and predictable, hindsight does not lead to foresight because the external conditions and systems constantly change.”<sup>42</sup> The “elements” of a complex system, and the system itself, constrain one another, making the system unpredictable.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike the “elements” of a natural system, such as the weather, no one in a human social system is simply passive, obeying only the laws of physics, or only following its instincts, like the butterfly. Each “element” is sentient, intelligent and semi-rational, guided sometimes by logic, and at other times by ego, experience, perceptual limitations, prejudices, and even whims. Each can influence the system, deliberately or by accident, in ways that are radically disruptive and entirely random.

Although we work within a complex system that defies our understanding, not everything about work involves complexity. Some of the issues we face are simple. They fall into a context we can readily identify and for which we have rules, heuristics or best practices. Other issues are complicated. We need to analyze information, and enlist expertise, before responding. Still others are complex. All we can do is probe and respond, as best we can, to whatever “emerges.” Only in retrospect will we be able to see the relationship between cause and effect. “This is the realm of “unknown unknowns,” and it is the domain to which much of contemporary business has shifted.”<sup>44</sup> Then there is chaos. The unexpected and unfathomable—the meltdown, the blow-up, the disaster. We must react quickly, then adjust our reaction depending on what happens next, and so on, until the chaos subsides.<sup>45</sup> But, it’s not always easy to recognize the context. Is the issue simple, complicated, complex or chaotic? We tend to skip over the task of putting issues into these contexts. Rather, we fall back to patterns of response based on experience, training or intuition. And, these responses don’t always work. Generally, we are slow to respond to “emergent” circumstances, and we often mishandle chaotic ones.

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<sup>41</sup> Snowden, David J. and Boone, Mary E., *A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making*, Harvard Business Review, November 2007 Issue, <https://hbr.org/2007/11/a-leaders-framework-for-decision-making> (Snowden and Boone on Complexity)

<sup>42</sup> \_\_\_ Snowden and Boone on Complexity

<sup>43</sup> See: \_\_\_ Snowden and Boone on Complexity

<sup>44</sup> \_\_\_ Snowden and Boone on Complexity

<sup>45</sup> See generally \_\_\_ Snowden and Boone on Complexity

As McKinsey & Co put it in a 2010 article:

“Despite widespread agreement that organizational complexity creates big problems by making it hard to get things done, few executives have a realistic understanding of how complexity actually affects their own companies. When pressed, many leaders cite the *institutional* manifestations of complexity they personally experience: the number of countries the company operates in, for instance, or the number of brands or people they manage. By contrast, relatively few executives consider the forms of *individual* complexity that the vast majority of their employees face—for example poor processes, confusing role definitions, or unclear accountabilities.”<sup>46</sup>

So, it's not hard to see how bullshit work finds its way into organizations, even those that like to think of themselves as efficient.

But the problem of complexity is not only about how we react to emergent circumstances, it's also about how we keep reacting, especially to emergent circumstances that cause big changes to the system itself, for example, how we assimilate new technologies. As we make choices about how to respond to disruptive technological changes, those choices affect the evolution of whole ecosystems of work. Over time, types of work evolve that are unexpected and that, with the benefit of hindsight, come to be regarded as unnecessary, socially unhelpful or, perhaps, just plain bullshit.

For example, according to Graeber's survey, no one would miss investment bankers who re-package car loans for the securitization market. So, let's consider the wider ecosystem of work that gave rise to car loans. Even 150 years ago, it wasn't settled how cars would be powered. Both electric motors and internal combustion engines were emerging technologies. No one knew that the internal combustion engine would win out. Let's imagine that (after getting some rest and recovering his composure) Elon Musk is whisked back in time to the

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<sup>46</sup> Birkinshaw, Julian and Heywood, Suzanne, “*Putting organizational complexity in its place*”, May 2010, McKinsey & Co, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/putting-organizational-complexity-in-its-place>

mid-1800s, taking with him the latest technology for electric cars, as well as reams of statistics and audiovisual evidence about traffic accidents, vehicular emissions and the costs of highway systems. He preaches to governments around the world about the inefficiencies of the internal combustion engine, the dangers of pollution, and the merits of electric cars. Suppose that he convinces them that the electric motor should be promoted, and the internal combustion engine banned. But, to his surprise, they decide that electric cars should be run on light rails, well away from pedestrians, and with low speed limits. A century and a half later, would people be buying electrically-powered boxes that run slowly on rails? There might be no such thing as car loans. Everything from manufacturing to healthcare, policing to insurance, advertising to urban planning might be radically different. The point is that our responses to the emerging technology of the automobile could have been different. And, if they had been different, the ecosystem of work around the automobile could have been very different too. Today, some of the work we do is directed at undoing the effects of some of the choices we made about the automobile. And, in the future, we might work at undoing some of the choices we are now making about the emerging technologies of the “Information Age,” such as Artificial Intelligence.

We are prisoners of complexity. At every level in society, in every period of history, we make choices whose consequences we cannot fathom at the time—choices that create work whose social value (or lack of it) emerges only later, and some of that work inevitably turns out to be pure bullshit. And, as Graeber fears, it might be that greater complexity leads to greater *bullshitization* of work. Only time will tell.

## **9. Work and ideology**

Although work has always been cooperative, there has always been plenty of competition about who would get to do less of it—who would get to enjoy more leisure. As human civilization evolved, a social hierarchy developed and, among other things, it “regulated” work. Over time, an uneasy coalition emerged between those who mainly used force (or the threat of force) to maintain their position at the top of the hierarchy (doing less work), and those who used only guile. The latter—shamans and priests—exploited the superstitious or spiritual side of human nature in order to have the rest of society pay for their leisure. But, lacking the power to enforce their status, they had to offer something in return. So, they

invented “god.”<sup>47</sup> The function of “god” was to sanction hierarchy, explain the origin of work, harness the cooperative instinct, and persuade those lower in the hierarchy to postpone leisure. Priests were careful to ration the leisure of their followers, re-scheduling most of it to an imaginary afterlife. Okay, that’s a glib and cynical summary of the 6,000 years of human civilisation that ended with the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment. But it wasn’t just self-interest that led priests to park the mysteries of the universe at the door a supreme being, it was also a genuine reaction to the awe of human consciousness. And, religion did serve to fill gaps about human existence that, although gradually narrowed by science, have never been entirely closed. Also, by harnessing the cooperative instinct, religion helped evolve codes of ethics and morality, and create the rule of law. And, this was of great social value. But, at least for common folk, work was still something ordained by god, and leisure was the devil’s playground.

The Scottish Enlightenment provided the intellectual foundations for the Industrial Revolution. David Hume led the attack on theology that eventually killed off god as the guiding force of society. While Adam Smith accidentally deified self-interest as the guiding hand of markets, and market exchanges as the guiding hand of society. Smith did this accidentally—really? Yes. Like most prophets, Smith was misinterpreted. There’s a discussion of this in Chapter 6 of Snafu. It would be a long digression to repeat it here. But feel free to read Chapter 6.

The Industrial Revolution marked a shift in the nature of work. As farm workers and domestic servants moved to cities to become factory workers, and as mechanisation and mass production thinned the ranks of artisans and craftsmen, work activity changed, and so did the rhythm of work. It ceased to be performed in the home, or close to it. It was no longer regulated by daylight and the changing seasons. Artificial lighting extended the working day. Machines made workers function more like them—constantly and repetitively. Mass production required planning, coordination and supervision. It bred managers. The result was much less freedom, longer periods without rest, wages instead of profits, and a weaker connection between work and its end product. For many, this connection became so weak as to obscure the purpose of work beyond the exchange of time and energy for money.

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<sup>47</sup> A collection of deities that, in Western culture, gradually merged into one supreme being, the creator of the universe.

In the US, as the Progressive Era (1890 to 1920) rolled back some of the worst excesses of the Gilded Age, attitudes to work changed again. Ordinary people looked at the “Leisure Class” with envy and resentment. Although the Great Depression (1929 to 1939) postponed their dreams of leisure, it hardened their opposition to exploitative working conditions, and the “shorter hours movement” reached its peak in 1933.<sup>48</sup> But the greater leisure that Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal seemed to offer was postponed by World War II. The heroic efforts required to win the War, and the existential threat posed by the Cold War that followed, had the unexpected effect of re-sanctifying work as a secular virtue.

During the boom years of the 1950s, full employment and full production coexisted, with workers receiving a decent share of the bounty, but with weekly working hours stalled at forty. This Keynesian bargain survived the turbulent 1960s, during which the first wave of privileged Baby Boomers mounted a rebellion against their parents’ “religion of work.” But, their hippie alternative of “turn on, tune in, drop out”<sup>49</sup> would become leisure’s last stand.

In the 1970s, when economic growth began to slow, the Keynesian pact between capitalists, workers and the state began to fall apart. In its place emerged a theory of competitive individualism, a distortion of Adam Smith’s “Classical” economics. The champions of this theory were the “Neo-Classical” economists, led by Milton Friedman. They believed that individual self-interest in market exchanges was the godlike “invisible hand”<sup>50</sup> that guided the economy. They became the high priests of the secular religion supposedly handed down by Smith. It was a religion that soon infected politics and social theory, and re-infected the remnants of western theology. It validated the “economistic fallacy”—the idea that markets are separate from society, and that society should serve the needs of markets.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Whaples, Robert, “Hours of Work in U.S. History,” EH.net, n.d., <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/hours-of-work-in-u-s-history/>.

<sup>49</sup> This phrase was popularized by Timothy Leary from around 1966 and is the title of his 1967 psychedelic rock album. See: Urban Dictionary <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=turn%20on%2C%20tune%20in%2C%20drop%20ut>

<sup>50</sup> Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), Book IV, Chapter II, p. 456, paragraph 10.

<sup>51</sup> Block, Fred and Somers, Margaret R., *The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi’s Critique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 30 (citations omitted), Kindle.

Before the beginning of this century, as the globalisation of trade and production returned to levels not seen since the start of World War I, and then surpassed them, more jobs emigrated to developing countries, where wages were lower. Supply chains became more complex and work more atomized. In the US, corporations downsized their workforces and re-purposed many of their remaining workers. Old jobs disappeared. New ones emerged. For the last thirty years or so, automation has made a big impact on work. This an old story that began in earnest during the Industrial Revolution, and it has continued since then. But, in the Information Age, automation has grown exponentially. And, it might well be (or become) the single greatest contributor to changes in work.

It is conceivable that most forms of work will be automated during the lifetime of someone entering the workforce today. But, no matter how quickly automation completes its endgame, it will not only reduce the number of workers required to run the economy, but it will also change the kind of work they do.

Automation certainly yields huge productivity gains. But Adair Turner thinks that “...it is possible that rapid productivity improvements in a particular sector of the economy unleashes a proliferation of “zero-sum” activities, in which different people compete against one another for a share of the economic cake, but where all of their activity adds not at all to the sum total of goods and services which are capable of increasing human welfare.”<sup>52</sup> Turner goes on to give examples of “zero-sum” activities—clever cyber criminals versus clever cyber experts countering their attacks, tax accountants and lawyers going head-to-head with government tax policy wonks, duelling advertising executives hyping opposing products, financial traders and active investment managers churning investments without adding any value over index investing, crypto-currency traders accomplishing little more than wasting terawatts of electricity, auditors and compliance officers facing off against regulators, armies of corporate lawyers, investment bankers and executives engaging in the increasingly circular game of mergers and acquisitions, and political lobbyists playing politicians off against one another, with political gridlock as the outcome.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Turner, Adair, *Capitalism in the age of robots: work, income and wealth in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century*, 10 April, 2018, Lecture at School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC (Turner on Capitalism & Robots) at p. <https://www.ineteconomics.org/uploads/papers/Paper-Turner-Capitalism-in-the-Age-of-Robots.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> \_\_\_Turner on Capitalism & Robots at p. 11.

Turner's list is remarkable like Graeber's. And, Turner shares Graeber's view that this *bullshitization* of work (not that he calls it that) is increasing:

"We get a huge acceleration in human ingenuity, in our ability to automate economic activities and dispel the need for work, and instead of an accelerated increase either in human welfare or leisure, we get a proliferation of low paid low productivity jobs and of zero-sum activities, as we all keep working hard, but without a commensurate improvement in aggregate human welfare."<sup>54</sup>

In his article, Turner notes that many of those engaged in zero-sum activities are highly paid. This is one of the strange paradoxes of the prevailing social ideology—it actively rewards bullshit work. A more alarming paradox is that:

"...radical automation may eventually reduce towards zero the number of people involved in those economic activities *essential* to produce the goods and services which support human welfare, while having no such impact on the amount of human labour devoted to zero-sum activities, which may therefore grow in relative importance as we "find things to do."<sup>55</sup>

But automation is just a tool. Everything depends on what society does with it. As economic historian, Louis Hyman notes, before the Industrial Revolution, there was the "industrious revolution."<sup>56</sup> Workers were herded into factories long before mechanization was far advanced. So, when automation really took off in the late nineteenth century, pre-existing social changes dictated its effect on work. According to Hyman, a social shift in work relationships always precedes a technological shift. He says that the latest social shift, the one that preceded the digital revolution, began in 1970s. He argues that, since then:

"...we have seen an increase in the use of day laborers, office temps, management consultants, contract assemblers, adjunct professors, Blackwater mercenaries and every other kind of worker filing an I.R.S. form 1099. These jobs span the income ranks, but

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<sup>54</sup> \_\_\_Turner on Capitalism & Robots at p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> \_\_\_Turner on Capitalism & Robots at p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Hyman, Louis, *It's Not Technology That's Disrupting Our Jobs*, 18 August 2018, New York Times, Sunday Review <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/opinion/technology/technology-gig-economy.html> (Hyman on Job Disruption)

they share what all work seems to have in common in the post-1970s economy: They are temporary and insecure...

In the last 10 years, 94 percent of net new jobs have appeared outside of traditional employment. Already approximately one-third of workers, and half of young workers, participate in this alternative world of work, either as a primary or a supplementary source of income.”<sup>57</sup>

Hyman points to the emergence of finance capitalism as the main cause of the social shift that began in the Seventies. There emerged, he says, “a philosophy that favored stock and bond prices over production, of short-term gains over long-term investment.”<sup>58</sup> But, that wasn’t the whole story. At the end of the 1970s, a political “sea change” in the US (and in the UK) ushered Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher into power. They broke the unions, changed competition policy, and fostered the notion of “shareholder value”. Over the decade that followed, “casino capitalism” took hold. Hyman is right about the new social relationship towards work. For most workers, the new flexible, freelance work environment represents “the freedom to be afraid,”<sup>59</sup> and that’s why no one wants to talk about shorter working hours. Workers are afraid for their jobs, no matter how unsatisfied that may be with them. The workforce is no longer a well-organised. It is atomised, and the elites make sure it stays that way.

## 10. Leisure and ideology

In a society dominated by markets, leisure looks like just another opportunity for exchange. Free time becomes “consumption time.” Leisure morphs into a competitive game of “conspicuous consumption,” fuelled by advertising.

As wage stagnation took hold from the mid-1970s, easy credit emerged to keep consumption buoyant. With no decrease in work time, the offset was an increasing supply of the “stuff” of leisure, and the credit to pay for it. Free time came to be spent buying things like endless varieties of food and booze, non-stop audio-visual “infotainment,” light trucks with a bogus connection to sports, arranged “adventure” holidays, serial home improvements, and a succession of electronic devices with vanishingly small differences.

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<sup>57</sup> \_\_\_\_, Hyman on Job Disruption.

<sup>58</sup> \_\_\_\_, Hyman on Job Disruption.

<sup>59</sup> \_\_\_\_, Hyman on Job Disruption.

Oddly, even the elites fell for the doctrine of work as virtuous in itself, rather than the means to “the good life.” Today, many of them work far more than they need to work. And, even some of their leisure activities resemble work, as they strive to perfect their “body image,” count their calories, fret over their topspin serve or their golf handicap, learn martial arts, collect expensive “status goods,” and try to outdo one another with private jets, exotic getaways, and over-achieving offspring.

For the “99%,” the difference is only one of degree, but it’s a crucial difference. They need to borrow in order to finance the compulsion to consume that society actively fosters. While our competition instinct naturally stimulates our interest in “positional goods,” it is impossible to tell where that instinct ends, and where the influence of pervasive marketing begins. We may never know, unless there is a societal shift away from market fundamentalism and consumerism. But it’s a safe bet that easy credit and saturation advertising drive people farther along the road to “leisure-as-consumption” than they might otherwise go, given that so many have to work so hard to afford it.

The strange malady of being “time poor” now seems to afflict almost everyone in full-time employment. Since we cannot store or accumulate time, we are encouraged by the Sirens of advertising to accept that this is “just the way it is”, and to accumulate the “stuff” of leisure as a substitute for the real thing. When you’re just one “frog” among many, and the water starts to boil, but no one jumps out of the pond, you try to grin and bear the heat, like all the other “frogs.” And, even the growing number of workers who are part of the insecure “gig economy” hear the same Sirens and sweat it out in the same pond.

## **11. Towards a reconciliation of work and leisure**

Here’s another thought experiment. Imagine a world in which the state pays everyone an income sufficient to live well, no matter whether they work or not. You’ve probably heard of the idea of a Universal Basic Income (UBI), but let’s go one better—a Universal Ample Income (UAI). Let’s not consider how much it might be, or how it might be funded. Let’s just assume that most people would consider it ample, and that it would be paid under a system that is somehow sustainable. After all, it’s just a thought experiment.

In a UAI world, most people would be likely to choose leisure. Recall that we’re using “leisure” to indicate a wide spectrum of activities, as long as they are freely chosen. The

range is from things some would consider work to things most would consider too passive (and everything in between). Money would still play an important role in work and leisure. No matter how high the UAI, there would be some who would want to earn more. And, they'd be willing to surrender some of their freedom in return for a higher income—otherwise (god forbid) there would be no bond salesmen or telemarketers. But some of the activities for which people would receive payment in addition to the UAI, might well be leisure activities. It's not hard to imagine, for example, that dog-lovers might be paid for walking other people's dogs, even though it's something they love doing. Both the activity and the payment would be voluntary. But, because different people value their time and energy differently, some dog owners would surely put a high enough value on other activities to be willing to pay someone else to walk their dogs. And, those people who like walking dogs would be happy enough to receive payment for something they'd probably be doing anyway.

Similarly, artists would make art, and actors would perform, whether or not they were paid—just as they've always done. Yet, some would surely be paid as a token of appreciation for their artistry, or in return for their works of art. Patronage of the arts, and the market for works of art, would not dry up under a system of UAI, nor would there be a shortage of artists. It's more likely that there'd be more of them.

Some people would even choose to do things that almost everyone else would consider work, but without requiring extra payment. There is already a vast volunteer workforce doing “work” they care about. Some volunteers do not consider it work. They think of it a part of their leisure. Others do consider it work, but in the cause of a moral, social or religious objective for which they don't mind some restrictions to their freedom.

The idea that some people would be paid for their leisure activities is no stranger than its opposite—that people would work for no pay. Both situations already exist, and a system of UAI might make each more prevalent. Researchers would keep researching, even if no one supplemented their UAI, though they might re-direct their fields of inquiry, because they would be entirely free to do so. Doctors and nurses would still treat the sick, though they might rebel against the strictures of health insurers and the bureaucracy of hospital administrators. If they didn't require additional payment, they would have much more leverage over both. Teachers would keep teaching. But, if the schools weren't paying them extra, they might change curriculums and school hours, and they might re-define education altogether.

Under UAI, other activities might atrophy. Would people still be willing to sell cigarettes to children, compile elevator music selections, manage junk-jewelry supply chains, fill delivery orders for Amazon, write furniture assembly instructions for IKEA, or design marketing algorithms for Facebook? Would people work for enterprises they hate, or make products they think harmful or useless, or sell goods or services they don't like or value? What would be the point of doing those things if they didn't have to do them in order to make a living, and when they could be doing things they like with people they like? The only point would be to earn more money in order to spend it or accumulate it. Those unsatisfied with the UAI would be those for whom enough is not enough—those who value money higher than leisure, or higher than the kind of work they'd be willing to do for nothing. Would we consider their outlook a healthy one? Currently, we do seem to consider it acceptable, because we live in a society that regards it as fine to accumulate money or to spend it extravagantly. Today, exchanging our finite endowments of time and energy for more money, instead of claiming more leisure, is somehow thought of as admirable. But, in a UAI society it might come to be considered a strange choice.

Would a UAI world be less productive than a world driven by an economic compulsion to work? Would freedom from work make us lazier, less creative, or less sociable? If money is the means to a good life rather than an end in itself or an instrument of one-upmanship, then it's reasonable to suppose that most people would go on using their skills and talents, their creativity and their inventiveness, much as they do now, or even more so. And, they'd have more time to do this. If Graeber is right, they'd gravitate towards socially valuable activities. The line between work and leisure would smudge. And, the things people would be willing to pay for would change, as would the things people would be paid extra for doing. Teachers might end up earning more than bankers, firemen more than corporate lawyers, nurses more than advertising executives. The blurring of work and leisure might lead to a "care and creativity" economy that might be no less productive than our current economy, though productive in a different way. It might be an economy in which we would measure gross social value instead of gross domestic product.

## **12. Conclusion**

While life expectancies vary from place to place, and the rich generally live longer than the poor, the duration of a life is not the true measure of its quality. After the material necessities

of life are satisfied, greater wealth does not necessarily lead to greater enjoyment of life.<sup>60</sup> No matter how wealthy, healthy, beautiful or talented, none of us is assured of a better than average life experience. The enjoyment of life depends on many factors, only a few of which are under our control, and even those can be thwarted by fate. Pain, injury, grief and loss are roughly democratic. This makes the experience of time as valuable for one person as another. Hence, we should be reluctant to allow anyone else to dictate how we spend our time. That choice—the freedom to enjoy our experience of time—is an important element of the liberty of the individual. So, a liberal democracy ought to protect this freedom by reducing working hours whenever feasible. In doing so, it should not fear idleness, as people have a limited need for it. Rather, it should expect to see socially productive leisure activities, as well as extra, voluntary work. And, it should expect a surge in the production of socially valuable goods and services, and a dramatic decline in “zero-sum” activities and exploitative work practices. And, in this, there would be a practical morality, as Bertrand Russell put it:

“Good nature is, of all moral qualities, the one the world needs most, and good nature is the result of ease and security, not a life of arduous struggle. Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen, instead, to have overwork for some and starvation for others. Hitherto we have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines; in this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish forever.”<sup>61</sup>

We escaped “Adam’s curse,” only to saddle ourselves with a bigger one—competitive production, consumption and accumulation de-coupled from social purpose. We could take the “bullshit” out of work by recognizing the nature, origin and purpose of work as shared exertion for social advancement, not individual exertion for purely personal gain. If we don’t recognize this, we won’t lift the curse.

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<sup>60</sup>See, for example: Smith, Adam, *The Theory Of Moral Sentiments*, (Edinburgh: Alexander Kincaid and J. Bell, 1759) p128: “In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for.”

<sup>61</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *In Praise of Idleness*, an essay first published in 1935, from *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*, Routledge 1994 at p 25.

