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Book Review

David Graeber¹

Bullshit Jobs: A Theory

London: Penguin Books, 2019. 368 pp.

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In this insightful and provocative study, David Graeber highlights a phenomenon that seems all too pervasive in the modern world: that more and more of us feel that we are engaged in bullshit. Despite this widespread feeling, while the concept of bullshit has been discussed within political theory (e.g. Blackledge, 2015), it remains fairly marginal across management and organization studies. A few notable exceptions (e.g. Christensen, et al., 2019; Spicer, 2013, 2017) have recognized bullshit as a salient feature of organizations and that it is factually meaningless and embedded with or intended for misinterpretations and unclarifiable unclarity. It generates problematic consequences that can neglect or blind organizational members from real problems, impede organizational learning ability, enable social manipulations, corrode or even corrupt organizational decision making. Bullshit therefore performs and is something we live by (Christensen, et al., 2019).

However, as Graeber argues, there might be more to bullshit than meets the eye. What if bullshit is something we have to live *for*, rather than live *by*? What if bullshit is not just an aspect of the workplace encounters but work itself? What if such bullshit is not factually meaningless, but dominates the meaning of our sense of authenticity and self-worthiness? *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* shows why such questions are worthy of our attention by offering a productive account of positioning and clarifying what bullshit jobs are, by analyzing what physical and mental impacts bullshit jobs have on individuals and society, by revealing why then bullshit jobs have still penetrated the capitalist society, and by suggesting what we can do about this situation. In the following, I will first outline Graeber's arguments before locating the book's contributions and connections to the emerging scholarships within organization studies.

Graeber's book opens with a discussion of the article he wrote in 2013 for a new radical magazine 'Strike!': 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs'. It was inspired by two main

questions, “if [certain] jobs really are useless, [are] those who hold them aware of it?” (p.xiii); and “Could there be anything more demoralizing than having to wake up in the morning five out of seven days of one’s adult life to perform a task that one secretly believed did not need to be performed?” (p.xiii). Quotations from this article were used by the polling agency YouGov to reveal that 37% of British and 40% Dutch workers believed their job had no good reason to exist. If this perception is true, how does it fit with our models of capitalism as an efficient or at least a profit hungry system?

In the first two chapters, Graeber highlights what he believes to be 5 types of bullshit jobs. His working definition of a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is pointless to the extent that even the employee cannot justify its existence, although the employee might need to pretend this is not the case (p.9-10). For example, if the king is secretly a Marxist, he would conceivably consider his job to be bullshit. This way of conceiving the problem of bullshit allows Graeber to differentiate bullshit jobs from shit jobs, as the latter refers to inferior working conditions and treatments (e.g. minimum income) but are not necessarily pointless. Ironically, as Graeber argues, many jobs that we cannot live without are shit jobs (e.g. nurses; cleaners; delivery services), while bullshit jobs often offer better pay and good working conditions.

Examples of bullshit jobs and their categorization are derived from two bodies of empirical evidence. First, from the ongoing online discussions triggered by the 2013 essay where participants made references to their personal experience of pointless or absurd jobs. Graeber downloaded 124 of these references for sorting and coding. Second, from the first-hand testimonies people sent to an email ‘doihaveabsjoborwhat@gmail.com’ (as Gmail does not allow the word ‘bullshit’ in addresses) created by Graeber in 2016 and collected over 250 testimonies. The two bodies of empirical evidence generated 110,000 words of materials which were colour coded. Graeber also developed follow-up interviews and conversations with informants, and therefore considers this book as an ongoing dialogue and a collaborative production.

Graeber proposes 5 categories of bullshit jobs, including flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, and taskmasters. An example that brings the categories together (although Graeber used it for ‘box tickers’) is ‘fact-finding committees’ created by *certain* official bodies ranging from working groups to the scale of governments. Graeber sharply argues that such committees

are essentially or even merely of a political nature: far from finding facts, they are a condition and consequence of political manipulations to show that when there is a controversy, there is a response being made, but for whom and to what purpose? What ‘facts’ are such committees looking for? More specifically, what things are taken into account, how are such things being considered, and how the ‘decisions’ are selected remain fundamentally obscure and morally problematic. The creation of such committees through false consensus-seeking generates *flunkies* who make the official body look important, *goons* with an aggressive or distortive element, *duck tapers* who find (temporary) ‘solutions’ to problems, *box tickers* who mainly exist “to allow an organization to be able to claim it is doing something” (p.45). These processes generate a fifth category of bullshit jobs – *taskmasters* who are assigned (maybe by people of the above four categories) to do bullshit tasks and/or bullshit generators that allocate such tasks to others. While no typology is perfect, it would be helpful to distinguish among the five types if Graeber’s categorization process was illustrated in some way regarding how the types were formed and what corresponding bases (e.g. relations; definitions) were used to construct the categorical distinctions.

Although bullshit jobs are defined through self-identification, Graeber reveals the complex multiform of bullshit jobs and rightly emphasizes that there is at least one class of people that are “just blind to all the bullshit they create” (p.65) but are (part of) the ongoing fuel of bullshitization.

Building upon the concept and the categorized phenomena of bullshit jobs, in the following two chapters, Graeber explores the physical and mental impacts of undertaking such jobs. He illustrates the sense of pointlessness generated by the lack of social and aspirational values in what one does. He highlights a consequent moral confusion: if human nature means that we seek our best advantages by “getting the most benefits for the least expenditure of time and effort” (p.68), why would bullshit jobs make (some) people unhappy? Graeber argues that such a presumption of human nature is wrongheaded (at least for some or hopefully most people). The penetrating sense of falseness and purposelessness, as the core of experiencing bullshit jobs, can affect us physically and psychologically by stripping us “the pleasure at being the cause” (p.83) and therefore the meaningfulness grounded in our sense of self and being. This insight echoes with Graeber’s definition of bullshit jobs, as it is the self-identification of bullshit that marks the devastating impact of these jobs on those who perform them. It reinforces the infuriating frustration and ambiguity, as it remains unclear if the job holder could acknowledge

that there is something ridiculous or perhaps even outrageous going on; if so, to whom should one acknowledge; and upon such acknowledgment, what or who should be held responsible? This sense of scriptlessness, as Graeber convincingly shows, constitutes an open secrecy of false pretence: “there is a taboo on being too explicit” (p.110). Such silence sculpts workplace sadism and deepens spiritual insubordination as a form of covert violence.

In the final three chapters, Graeber asks why bullshit jobs are not seen as a social problem but have proliferated in our society, and if there is anything can be done about this situation? To answer this question, he articulates the concept of “managerial feudalism” (p.175) where managerialism has become in relation to bullshit jobs the pretext for creating a covert form of ‘direct juro-political extraction’. Wealth and position are allocated on political grounds, which creates and is maintained by the “multiplication of intermediary executive ranks” (p.181) as a process of structural sub-infeudation. Graeber asks, why such proliferation of pointless employment has not been objected to? One answer to this question might be ‘to pay the bills’, which raises the second question: if finance (e.g. mortgages; child care) is no longer a concern, would we keep doing what we are doing now? This reveals the essential point of the labour theory of value as a recognition that “the world we inhabit is something we made, collectively, as a society, and therefore, that we could have made differently” (p.238). Similarly, John Holloway in *Crack Capitalism* (2010) emphasizes that capitalism is not a behemoth towering over us; rather, it exists only because we produce and re-produce it through our waking existence. Through such reproduction, bullshitization, as Graeber argues, has become part of the political landscape maintained by a balance of class resentment and moral envy. It has invented a sadomasochistic dialectic where we use various forms of pain in the workplace to justify the meaningfulness and pleasure of the jobs, such as using suffering to justify how hard one has worked. The meaning of work has since become a form of discipline and self-sacrifice, even to the extent that having a life has become a luxury and that such situation has become a compliment of self-worthiness. Drawing on this situation, he briefly discusses ‘Universal Basic Income’ (UBI) as a stepping-stone toward a transformation from the perverse situation, as he explains that “it is not a book about a particular solution. It’s a book about a problem – one that most people don’t even acknowledge exists” (p.270). While recognizing the limitation of UBI, at a basic level, Graeber considers it as a way to free up our time and energy for us to start thinking.

Bullshit jobs: A theory powerfully articulates its claim that we live in a world characterized in part by the social phenomenon and problems of bullshit jobs as the kafkaesque blend of absurd and mundane. It forms the empty-business arrested by unfulfilled expectations and a penetrating sense of stagnation, which has become a typical experience of work. This book constitutes a more holistic conception and perception of work through its contradiction of meanings and the under-researched neo-normative forms of domination and control. It sheds light on the emerging interest in meaningful work and its under-examined dark sides, as the danger to (over-)pursue meaningfulness might constitute processes of bullshitization. It can contribute to the debate of “what meaningfulness actually signifies” (Bailey, et al., 2019, p.482) outside the unitary understanding within positive frameworks and address the ‘who, whom’ question raised by critical and labour process scholars as ‘meaningful to whom and determined and regulated by whom’, illuminating the interaction between ‘as-if meaningfulness’ and ‘the authentically felt meaningfulness’ (Bailey, et al., 2017; Bailey, et al., 2019) woven into the fabric of everyday organizational life and therefore revealing the inevitable partiality of meaningfulness at work. Moreover, through Graeber’s method-related notes scattered across chapters, this book also inspires the possibility of studying bullshit jobs through (confidential) gossip as a form of organizational hinterland where myths and stories reside and organize (e.g. Fan, et al., 2020). Different dimensions of bullshit jobs can further link to the phenomena of boredom at work and emotional labour, which are scatteredly mentioned in the book. Despite that, this book with its engaging writing style fortifies a foundation for studying bullshit in organizations as a topic of analytical investigation in its own right. Importantly it is a step forward to propose a way of understanding and practicing freedom.

Note

1. In memory of David Graeber, anthropologist, anarchist and activist, a true radical thinker and a leading figure in the Occupy Wall Street Movement who coined ‘we are the 99%’, passed away on 2 September 2020 aged 59.

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