

Applied Sociology Thematic Group *For the Australian Sociology Practitioner* Contact Email for September 2013

Greetings one and all,

It seems my August topic brought a number of you to life. It was gratifying to get so many responses. Thank you, keep it up.

This month a paper by Prof. David Graeber, on "Nonsense Job" caught my eye. He starts out by pointing to, John Maynard Keynes, who, in 1930, predicted that by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour working week.

I remember in the 1970s and 80s, there was still much talk in the journals about the two or three day working week. So, as we all know this has not happened, indeed there are many companies and even some government departments that demand longer hours from their workers than the 48hr week would suggest. I know people whose standard working hours are 8am to 6pm with in a white collar job that demands frequent extra hours from with no extra pay.

Graeber points out that 'huge swathes of people in the Western world spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed'. So what are these new jobs? Over the last 100 years, the number of workers employed as domestic servants, in industry, and on the farm have dropped 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 the toiling masses in India and China are not nearly as large a percentage of the world population as they used to be.

BUT, as Graeber goes on to suggest that "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 so much the "service" sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries such as financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented expansion of sectors such as 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-delivery drivers) 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".

So what is happening? It seems to me that today's management thinking has embraces Marx's insistence that everyone should be a worker. I once wrote a paper titled 'Could Marx accept the idea of a non-working class?' I concluded that although he came close once or twice, in the end he could not accept it. The other issue that comes more from the right, is why are workers paid? That is, is it for the number of hours they attend a workplace or the skills that they bring to the employer? In many industries we now have the technologies that enable the product of an organisation to be completed in a much shorter time than previously. This is Keynes argument, if the work can be done quicker, then the worker should have more time to themselves.

My conclusion is that because work is part of population control for both Marx and the Corporations, there is a fear that if people are not obliged to work to exist, they will bring down their Gemeinschaft constructions and loose power.

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

What do you think?

Alan Scott
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Further reading: Read more: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/public-service/the-modern-phenomenon-of-nonsense-jobs-20130831-2sy3j.html#ixzz2dmQfe14T>