

Preface:

On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

In the spring of 2013, I unwittingly set off a very minor international sensation.

It all began when I was asked to write an essay for a new radical magazine called *Strike!* The editor asked if I had anything provocative that no one else would be likely to publish. I usually have one or two essay ideas like that stewing around, so I drafted one up and presented him with a brief piece entitled “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.”

The essay was based on a hunch. Everyone is familiar with those sort of jobs that don't seem, to the outsider, to really do much of anything: HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers, or the sort of people (very familiar in academic contexts) who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees. The list was seemingly endless. What, I wondered, if these jobs really *are* useless, and those who hold them are aware of it? Certainly you meet people now and then who seem to feel their jobs are pointless and unnecessary. 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—that was simply a waste of time or resources, or that even made the world worse? Would this not be a terrible psychic

wound running across our society? Yet if so, it was one that no one ever seemed to talk about. There were plenty of surveys over whether people were happy at work. There were none, as far as I knew, about whether or not they felt their jobs had any good reason to exist.

This possibility that our society is riddled with useless jobs that no one wants to talk about did not seem inherently implausible. The subject of work is riddled with taboos. Even the fact that most people don't like their jobs and would relish an excuse not to go to work is considered something that can't really be admitted on TV—certainly not on the TV news, even if it might occasionally be alluded to in documentaries and stand-up comedy. I had experienced these taboos myself: I had once acted as the media liaison for an activist group that, rumor had it, was planning a civil disobedience campaign to shut down the Washington, DC, transport system as part of a protest against a global economic summit. In the days leading up to it, you could hardly go anywhere looking like an anarchist without some cheerful civil servant walking up to you and asking whether it was really true he or she wouldn't have to go to work on Monday. Yet at the same time, TV crews managed dutifully to interview city employees—and I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were the *same* city employees—commenting on how terribly tragic it would be if they wouldn't be able to get to work, since they knew that's what it would take to get them on TV. No one seems to feel free to say what they really feel about such matters—at least in public.

It was plausible, but I didn't really know. In a way, I wrote the piece as a kind of experiment. I was interested to see what sort of response it would elicit.

This is what I wrote for the August 2013 issue:

On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs

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 fifteen-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technolog-

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ical 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's promised utopia—still being eagerly awaited in the sixties—never materialize? 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 twenties, 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 includ-

ing 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 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 it 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 forty- or even fifty-hour weeks on paper but effectively working fifteen hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent organizing 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

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happen when this even began to be approximated in the sixties.) 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 cabinetmakers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Nor 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 coworkers 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 realize 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 whom I hadn't seen since I was fifteen. 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 percent 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 pointless 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 labor 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 to be 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

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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 dockworkers 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.¹ (Many suspect it might improve markedly.) 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 paralyzing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyze London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people. It's even clearer in the United States, where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against schoolteachers and autoworkers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry executives 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 he or she could have done a better job. Real, productive workers are relentlessly squeezed and exploited. The remainder are divided between a terrorized 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

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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 three-to four-hour days.

If ever an essay's hypothesis was confirmed by its reception, this was it. "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs" produced an explosion.

The irony was that the two weeks after the piece came out were the same two weeks that my partner and I had decided to spend with a basket of books, and each other, in a cabin in rural Quebec. We'd made a point of finding a location with no wireless. This left me in the awkward position of having to observe the results only on my mobile phone. The essay went viral almost immediately. Within weeks, it had been translated into at least a dozen languages, including German, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Czech, Romanian, Russian, Turkish, Latvian, Polish, Greek, Estonian, Catalan, and Korean, and was reprinted in newspapers from Switzerland to Australia. The original *Strike!* page received more than a million hits and crashed repeatedly from too much traffic. Blogs sprouted. Comments sections filled up with confessions from white-collar professionals; people wrote me asking for guidance or to tell me I had inspired them to quit their jobs to find something more meaningful. Here is one enthusiastic response (I've collected hundreds) from the comments section of Australia's *Canberra Times*:

Wow! Nail on the head! I am a corporate lawyer (tax litigator, to be specific). I contribute nothing to this world and am utterly miserable all of the time. I don't like it when people have the nerve to say "Why do it, then?" because it is so clearly not that simple. It so happens to be the only way right now for me to contribute to the 1 percent in such a significant way so as to reward me with a house in Sydney to raise my future kids . . . Thanks to technology, we are probably as productive in two days as we previously were in five. But thanks to greed and some busy-bee syndrome of productivity, we are still asked to slave away

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for the profit of others ahead of our own nonremunerated ambitions. Whether you believe in intelligent design or evolution, humans were not made to work—so to me, this is all just greed propped up by inflated prices of necessities.²

At one point, I got a message from one anonymous fan who said that he was part of an impromptu group circulating the piece within the financial services community; he'd received five emails containing the essay just that day (certainly one sign that many in financial services don't have much to do). None of this answered the question of how many people really felt that way about their jobs—as opposed to, say, passing on the piece as a way to drop subtle hints to others—but before long, statistical evidence did indeed surface.

On January 5, 2015, a little more than a year after the article came out, on the first Monday of the new year—that is, the day most Londoners were returning to work from their winter holidays—someone took several hundred ads in London Underground cars and replaced them with a series of guerrilla posters consisting of quotes from the original essay. These were the ones they chose:

- Huge swathes of people spend their days performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.
- It's as if someone were out there making up pointless jobs for the sake of keeping us all working.
- 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.
- How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labor when one secretly feels one's job should not exist?

The response to the poster campaign was another spate of discussion in the media (I appeared briefly on *Russia Today*), as a result of which the polling agency YouGov took it upon itself to test the hypothesis and conducted a poll of Britons using language taken directly from the essay: for

example, Does your job “make a meaningful contribution to the world”? Astonishingly, more than a third—37 percent—said they believed that it did not (whereas 50 percent said it did, and 13 percent were uncertain).

This was almost twice what I had anticipated—I’d imagined the percentage of bullshit jobs was probably around 20 percent. What’s more, a later poll in Holland came up with almost exactly the same results: in fact, a little higher, as 40 percent of Dutch workers reported that their jobs had no good reason to exist.

So not only has the hypothesis been confirmed by public reaction, it has now been overwhelmingly confirmed by statistical research.



Clearly, then, we have an important social phenomenon that has received almost no systematic attention.³ Simply opening up a way to talk about it became, for many, cathartic. It was obvious that a larger exploration was in order.

What I want to do here is a bit more systematic than the original essay. The 2013 piece was for a magazine about revolutionary politics, and it emphasized the political implications of the problem. In fact, the essay was just one of a series of arguments I was developing at the time that the neoliberal (“free market”) ideology that had dominated the world since the days of Thatcher and Reagan was really the opposite of what it claimed to be; it was really a political project dressed up as an economic one.

I had come to this conclusion because it seemed to be the only way to explain how those in power actually behaved. While neoliberal rhetoric was always all about unleashing the magic of the marketplace and placing economic efficiency over all other values, the overall effect of free market policies has been that rates of economic growth have slowed pretty much everywhere except India and China; scientific and technological advance has stagnated; and in most wealthy countries, the younger generations can, for the first time in centuries, expect to lead less prosperous lives than their parents did. Yet on observing these effects, proponents of market ideology always reply with calls for even stronger doses of the same

medicine, and politicians duly enact them. This struck me as odd. If a private company hired a consultant to come up with a business plan, and it resulted in a sharp decline in profits, that consultant would be fired. At the very least, he'd be asked to come up with a different plan. With free market reforms, this never seemed to happen. The more they failed, the more they were enacted. The only logical conclusion was that economic imperatives weren't really driving the project.

What was? It seemed to me the answer had to lie in the mind-set of the political class. Almost all of those making the key decisions had attended college in the 1960s, when campuses were at the very epicenter of political ferment, and they felt strongly that such things must never happen again. As a result, while they might have been concerned with declining economic indicators, they were also quite delighted to note that the combination of globalization, gutting the power of unions, and creating an insecure and overworked workforce—along with aggressively paying lip service to sixties calls to hedonistic personal liberation (what came to be known as “lifestyle liberalism, fiscal conservatism”)—had the effect of simultaneously shifting more and more wealth and power to the wealthy and almost completely destroying the basis for organized challenges to their power. It might not have worked very well economically, but politically it worked like a dream. If nothing else, they had little incentive to abandon such policies. All I did in the essay was to pursue this insight: whenever you find someone doing something in the name of economic efficiency that seems completely economically irrational (like, say, paying people good money to do nothing all day), one had best start by asking, as the ancient Romans did, “*Qui bono?*”—“Who benefits?”—and how.

This is less a conspiracy theory approach than it is an *anticonspiracy* theory. I was asking why action *wasn't* taken. Economic trends happen for all sorts of reasons, but if they cause problems for the rich and powerful, those rich and powerful people will pressure institutions to step in and do something about the matter. This is why after the financial crisis of 2008–09, large investment banks were bailed out but ordinary mortgage holders weren't. The proliferation of bullshit jobs, as we'll see, happened

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for a variety of reasons. The real question I was asking is why no one intervened (“conspired,” if you like) to do something about the matter.



In this book I want to do considerably more than that.

I believe that the phenomenon of bullshit employment can provide us with a window on much deeper social problems. We need to ask ourselves, not just how did such a large proportion of our workforce find themselves laboring at tasks that they themselves consider pointless, but also why do so many people believe this state of affairs to be normal, inevitable—even desirable? More oddly still, why, despite the fact that they hold these opinions in the abstract, and even believe that it is entirely appropriate that those who labor at pointless jobs should be paid more and receive more honor and recognition than those who do something they consider to be useful, do they nonetheless find themselves depressed and miserable if they themselves end up in positions where they are being paid to do nothing, or nothing that they feel benefits others in any way? There is clearly a jumble of contradictory ideas and impulses at play here. One thing I want to do in this book is begin to sort them out. This will mean asking practical questions such as: How do bullshit jobs actually happen? It will also mean asking deep historical questions, like, When and how did we come to believe that creativity was supposed to be painful, or, how did we ever come up with the notion that it would be possible to sell one’s time? And finally, it will mean asking fundamental questions about human nature.

Writing this book also serves a political purpose.

I would like this book to be an arrow aimed at the heart of our civilization. There is something very wrong with what we have made ourselves. We have become a civilization based on work—not even “productive work” but work as an end and meaning in itself. We have come to believe that men and women who do not work harder than they wish at jobs they do not particularly enjoy are bad people unworthy of love, care, or assistance from their communities. It is as if we have collectively acquiesced to our own enslavement. The main political reaction to our awareness that

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half the time we are engaged in utterly meaningless or even counterproductive activities—usually under the orders of a person we dislike—is to rankle with resentment over the fact there might be others out there who are not in the same trap. As a result, hatred, resentment, and suspicion have become the glue that holds society together. This is a disastrous state of affairs. I wish it to end.

If this book can in any way contribute to that end, it will have been worth writing.

Chapter 2

What Sorts of Bullshit Jobs Are There?

My research has revealed five basic types of bullshit jobs. In this chapter, I will describe them and outline their essential features.

First, a word about this research. I am drawing on two large bodies of data. In the wake of my original 2013 essay, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs,” a number of newspapers in different countries ran the essay as an opinion piece, and it was also reproduced on a number of blogs. As a result, there was a great deal of online discussion, over the course of which many participants made references to personal experiences of jobs they considered particularly absurd or pointless. I downloaded 124 of these and spent some time sorting through them.

The second body of data was actively solicited. In the second half of 2016, I created an email account devoted solely to research and used my Twitter account to encourage people who felt they now or once had a bullshit job to send in firsthand testimonies.¹ The response was impressive. I ended up assembling over 250 such testimonies, ranging from single paragraphs to eleven-page essays detailing whole sequences of bullshit jobs, along with speculations about the organizational or social dynamics that produced them, and descriptions of their social and psychological effects. Most of these testimonies were from citizens of English-speaking countries, but I also received testimonies from all over Continental Europe,

as well as Mexico, Brazil, Egypt, India, South Africa, and Japan. Some of these were deeply moving, even painful to read. Many were hilarious. Needless to say, almost all respondents insisted their names not be used.²

After culling the responses and trimming them of extraneous material, I found myself with a database of more than 110,000 words, which I duly color coded. The results might not be adequate for most forms of statistical analysis, but I have found them an extraordinarily rich source for qualitative analysis, especially since in many cases I've been able to ask follow-up questions and, in some, to engage in long conversations with informants. Some of the key concepts I'll be developing in the book were first suggested in or inspired by such conversations—so, in a way, the book can be seen as a collaborative project. This is particularly true of the following typology, which grew directly from these conversations and which I like to see less as my own creation and more as the product of an ongoing dialogue.³

the five major varieties of bullshit jobs

No typology is perfect, and I'm sure there are many ways one could draw the lines, each revealing in its own way,⁴ but over the course of my research, I have found it most useful to break down the types of bullshit job into five categories. I will call these: flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, and taskmasters.

Let us consider each in turn.

what flunkies do

Flunky jobs are those that exist only or primarily to make someone else look or feel important.

Another term for this category might be “feudal retainers.” Throughout recorded history, rich and powerful men and women have tended to surround themselves with servants, clients, sycophants, and minions of

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one sort or another. Not all of these are actually employed in the grandee's household, and many of those who are, are expected to do at least some actual work; but especially at the top of the pyramid, there is usually a certain portion whose job it is to basically just stand around and look impressive.⁵ You cannot be magnificent without an entourage. And for the truly magnificent, the very uselessness of the uniformed retainers hovering around you is the greatest testimony to your greatness. Well into the Victorian era, for instance, wealthy families in England still employed footmen: liveried servants whose entire purpose was to run alongside carriages checking for bumps in the road.⁶

Servants of this sort are normally given some minor task to justify their existence, but this is really just a pretext: in reality, the whole point is to employ handsome young men in flashy uniforms ready to stand by the door looking regal while you hold court, or to stride gravely in front of you when you enter the room. Often retainers are given military-style costumes and paraphernalia to create the impression that the rich person who employs them has something resembling a palace guard. Such roles tend to multiply in economies based on rent extraction and the subsequent redistribution of the loot.

Just as a thought experiment: imagine you are a feudal class extracting 50 percent of every peasant household's product. If so, you are in possession of an awful lot of food. Enough, in fact, to support a population exactly as large as that of peasant food producers.⁷ You have to do something with it—and there are only so many people any given feudal lord can keep around as chefs, wine stewards, scullery maids, harem eunuchs, musicians, jewelers, and the like. Even after you've taken care to ensure you have enough men trained in the use of weapons to suppress any potential rebellion, there's likely to be a great deal left over. As a result, indigents, runaways, orphans, criminals, women in desperate situations, and other dislocated people will inevitably begin to accumulate around your mansion (because, after all, that's where all the food is). You can drive them away, but then they're likely to form a dangerous vagabond class that might become a political threat. The obvious thing to do is to slap a uniform on them and assign them some minor or un-

necessary task. It makes you look good, and at least that way, you can keep an eye on them.

Now, later I'm going to suggest that a dynamic not entirely different happens under the existing form of capitalism, but for the moment, all I really want to stress is that assigning people minor tasks as an excuse to have them hang around making you look impressive has a long and honorable history.⁸

So, what might the modern equivalent be?

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Some old-fashioned feudal-style retainer jobs still do exist.⁹ Doormen are the most obvious example. They perform the same function in the houses of the very rich that electronic intercoms have performed for everyone else since at least the 1950s. One former concierge complains:

Bill: Another bullshit job—concierge in one of these buildings. Half my time was spent pressing a button to open the front door for residents and saying hello as they passed through the lobby. If I didn't get to that button in time and a resident had to open the door manually, I'd hear about it from my manager.

In some countries, such as Brazil, such buildings still have uniformed elevator operators whose entire job is to push the button for you. There is a continuum from explicit feudal leftovers of this type to receptionists and front-desk personnel at places that obviously don't need them.

Gerte: In 2010 I worked as a receptionist at a Dutch publishing company. The phone rang maybe once a day, so I was given a couple of other tasks:

- Keep candy dish full of mints. (Mints were supplied by someone else at the company; I just had to take a handful out of a drawer next to the candy dish and put them in the candy dish.)
- Once a week, I would go to a conference room and wind a grand-

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father clock. (I found this task stressful, actually, because they told me that if I forgot or waited too long, all of the weights would fall, and I would be left with the onerous task of grandfather clock repair.)

- The task that took the most time was managing another receptionist's Avon sales.

Clearly, one call a day could be handled by someone else at the press in the same manner it is in most people's homes: whoever happens to be the closest to the phone and isn't in the middle of something else picks it up and answers. Why shell out a full-time salary and benefits package for a woman—actually, it would seem, in this case, two women—just to sit at the front desk all day doing nothing? The answer is: because not doing so would be shocking and bizarre. No one would take a company seriously if it had no one at all sitting at the front desk. Any publisher who defied convention that blatantly would cause potential authors or merchants or contractors to ask themselves, "If they don't feel they have to have a receptionist, what other things that publishers are normally expected to do might they just decide doesn't apply to them? Pay me, for example?"¹⁰

Receptionists are required as a Badge of Seriousness even if there's nothing else for them to do. Other flunkies are Badges of Importance. The following account is from Jack, who was hired as a cold caller in a low-level securities trading firm. Such firms, he explains, "operate by stolen corporate directories: internal company phonebooks that some enterprising individual has stolen a physical copy of and then sold to various firms." Brokers then call upper-level employees of the companies and try to pitch them stocks.

Jack: My job, as a cold caller, was to call these people. Not to try to sell them stocks, but rather, to offer "free research material on a promising company that is about to go public," emphasizing that I was calling on behalf of a broker. That last point was especially stressed to me during my training. The reasoning behind this was that the brokers themselves would seem, to the potential client, to be more capable and professional if they were so damn busy making money that they needed

an assistant to make this call for them. There was literally no other purpose to this job than to make my neighbor the broker appear to be more successful than he actually was.

I was paid two hundred dollars per week, cash, literally from the broker's wallet, for making him look like a high roller. But this didn't just make for social capital for the broker with regards to his clients; in the office itself, being a broker with your own cold caller was a status symbol, and an important one in such a hypermasculine, hypercompetitive office environment. I was some kind of totem figure for him. Owning me could mean the difference between his getting a meeting with a visiting regional head or not; but for the most part, it just put him on a slightly higher rung on the social ladder of the workplace.

The ultimate goal of such brokers being to sufficiently impress their boss that they would be moved from the lowly "trading pit" to an office of their own upstairs. Jack's conclusion: "My position at this company was wholly unnecessary and served no purpose whatsoever other than to make my immediate superior look and feel like a big shot."

This is the very definition of a flunky job.

The pettiness of the game here—even in the 1990s, \$200 was not a lot of money—helps lay bare dynamics that might express themselves in more opaque ways in larger and more complex corporate environments. There we often find cases where no one is entirely sure how or why certain positions were invented and maintained. Here is Ophelia, who works for an organization that runs social marketing campaigns:

Ophelia: My current job title is Portfolio Coordinator, and everyone always asks what that means, or what it is I actually do? I have no idea. I'm still trying to figure it out. My job description says all sorts of stuff about facilitating relationships between partners, etc., which as far as I'm concerned, just means answering occasional queries.

It has occurred to me that my actual title refers to a bullshit job. However, the reality of my working life is functioning as a Personal Assistant to the Director. And in that role, I do have actual work tasks

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that need doing, simply because the people I assist are either too “busy” or too important to do this stuff themselves. In fact, most of the time, I seem to be the only one at my workplace who has something to do. Some days I run around frantically, whilst most of the midlevel managers sit around and stare at a wall, seemingly bored to death and just trying to kill time doing pointless things (like that one guy who rearranges his backpack for a half hour every day).

Obviously, there isn't enough work to keep most of us occupied, but—in a weird logic that probably just makes them all feel more important about their own jobs—we are now recruiting another manager. Maybe this is to keep up the illusion that there's so much to do?

Ophelia suspects her job was originally just an empty place filler, created so that someone could boast about the number of employees he had working under him. But once it was created, a perverse dynamic began to set in, whereby managers off-loaded more and more of their responsibilities onto the lowest-ranking female subordinate (her) to give the impression that they were too busy to do such things themselves, leading, of course, to their having even less to do than previously—a spiral culminating in the apparently bizarre decision to hire another manager to stare at the wall or play Pokémon all day, just because hiring him would make it look like that was not what everyone else was doing. Ophelia ends up sometimes working frenetically; in part because the few necessary tasks (handed off to her) are augmented with completely made-up responsibilities designed to keep low-level staff bustling:

Ophelia: We are divided between two organizations and two buildings. If my boss (the boss of the whole place, in fact) goes to the other building, I have to fill in a form to book a room for her. Every time. It is absolute insanity, but it certainly keeps the receptionist over there very busy and therefore, indispensable. It also makes her appear very organized, juggling and filing all this paperwork. It occurs to me that this is what they really mean in job ads when they say that they expect you to make office procedures more efficient: that you create more bureaucracy to fill the time.

Ophelia's example highlights a common ambiguity: Whose job is really bullshit, that of the flunky? Or the boss? Sometimes, as we've seen with Jack, it's clearly the former—the flunky really does only exist to make his or her immediate superior look or feel important. In cases like that, no one minds if the flunky does absolutely nothing:

Steve: I just graduated, and my new “job” basically consists of my boss forwarding emails to me with the message “Steve refer to the below,” and I reply that the email is inconsequential or straight-up spam.

In other cases, as with Ophelia, the flunkies end up effectively doing the bosses' jobs for them. This, of course, was the traditional role of female secretaries (now relabeled “administrative assistants”) working for male executives during most of the twentieth century: while in theory secretaries were there just to answer the phone, take dictation, and do some light filing, in fact, they often ended up doing 80 percent to 90 percent of their bosses' jobs, and sometimes, 100 percent of its nonbullshit aspects. It would be fascinating—though probably impossible—to write a history of books, designs, plans, and documents attributed to famous men that were actually written by their secretaries.¹¹

So, in such cases, who has the bullshit job?

Here again, I think we are forced to fall back on the subjective element. The middle manager in Ophelia's office reorganizing his backpack for a half hour every day may or may not have been willing to admit his job was pointless, but those hired just to make someone like him seem important almost invariably know it and resent it—even when it doesn't involve making up unnecessary busywork:

Judy: The only full-time job I ever had—in Human Resources in a private sector engineering firm—was wholly not necessary. It was there only because the HR Specialist was lazy and didn't want to leave his desk. I was an HR Assistant. My job took, I shit you not, one hour a day—an hour and a half max. The other seven or so hours were spent playing *2048* or watching YouTube. Phone never rang, Data were en-

tered in five minutes or less. I got paid to be bored. My boss could have easily done my job yet again—fucking lazy turd.



When I was doing anthropological fieldwork in highland Madagascar, I noticed that wherever one found the tomb of a famous nobleman, one also invariably found two or three modest graves directly at its foot. When I asked what these modest graves were, I would always be told these were his “soldiers”—really a euphemism for “slaves.” The meaning was clear: to be an aristocrat meant to have the power to order others around. Even in death, if you didn’t have underlings, you couldn’t really claim to be a noble.

An analogous logic seems to be at work in corporate environments. Why did the Dutch publishing outfit need a receptionist? Because a company has to have three levels of command in order to be considered a “real” company. At the very least, there must be a boss, and editors, and those editors have to have some sort of underlings or assistants—at the very minimum, the one receptionist who is a kind of collective underling to all of them. Otherwise you wouldn’t be a corporation but just some kind of hippie collective. Once the unnecessary flunky is hired, whether or not that flunky ends up being given anything to do is an entirely secondary consideration—that depends on a whole list of extraneous factors: for instance, whether or not there is any work to do, the needs and attitudes of the superiors, gender dynamics, and institutional constraints. If the organization grows in size, higher-ups’ importance will almost invariably be measured by the total number of employees working under them, which, in turn, creates an even more powerful incentive for those on top of the organizational ladder to either hire employees and only *then* decide what they are going to do with them or—even more often, perhaps—to resist any efforts to eliminate jobs that are found to be redundant. As we’ll see, testimonies from consultants hired to introduce efficiencies in a large corporation (say, a bank, or a medical supply corporation) attest to the awkward silences and outright hostility that ensue when executives real-

ize those efficiencies will have the effect of automating away a significant portion of their subordinates. By doing so, they would effectively reduce managers to nothing. Kings of the air. For without flunkies, to whom, exactly, would they be “superior”?

2. what goons do

The use of this term is, of course, metaphorical: I’m not using it to mean actual gangsters or other forms of hired muscle. Rather, I’m referring to people whose jobs have an aggressive element, but, crucially, who exist only because other people employ them.

The most obvious example of this are national armed forces. Countries need armies only because other countries have armies.¹² If no one had an army, armies would not be needed. But the same can be said of most lobbyists, PR specialists, telemarketers, and corporate lawyers. Also, like literal goons, they have a largely negative impact on society. I think almost anyone would concur that, were all telemarketers to disappear, the world would be a better place. But I think most would also agree that if all corporate lawyers, bank lobbyists, or marketing gurus were to similarly vanish in a puff of smoke, the world would be at least a little bit more bearable.

The obvious question is: Are these really bullshit jobs at all? Would these not be more like the Mafia hit men of the last chapter? After all, in most cases, goons are clearly doing something to further the interests of those who employ them, even if the overall effect of their profession’s existence might be considered detrimental to humanity as a whole.

Here again we must appeal to the subjective element. Sometimes the ultimate pointlessness of a line of work is so obvious that few involved make much effort to deny it. Most universities in the United Kingdom now have public relations offices with staffs several times larger than would be typical for, say, a bank or an auto manufacturer of roughly the same size. Does Oxford really need to employ a dozen-plus PR specialists to convince the public it’s a top-notch university? I’d imagine it would take at least that many PR agents quite a number of years to convince the public

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Oxford was *not* a top-notch university, and even then, I suspect the task would prove impossible. Obviously, I am being slightly facetious here: this is not the only thing a PR department does. I'm sure in the case of Oxford much of its day-to-day concerns involve more practical matters such as attracting to the university the children of oil magnates or corrupt politicians from foreign lands who might otherwise have gone to Cambridge. But still, those in charge of public relations, "strategic communications," and the like at many elite universities in the UK have sent me testimonies making it clear that they do indeed feel their jobs are largely pointless.

I have included goons as a category of bullshit job largely for this reason: because so many of those who hold them feel their jobs have no social value and ought not to exist. Recall the words of the tax litigator from the preface: "I am a corporate lawyer . . . I contribute nothing to this world and am utterly miserable all of the time." Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to ascertain how many corporate lawyers secretly share this feeling. The YouGov survey did not break down its results by profession, and while my own research confirms such feelings are by no means unique, none of those who reported such attitudes were particularly high-level. The same is true of those who work in marketing or PR.

The reason I thought the word "goon" appropriate is because in almost all cases, goons find their jobs objectionable not just because they feel they lack positive value but also because they see them as essentially manipulative and aggressive:

Tom: I work for a very large American-owned postproduction company based in London. There are parts of my job that have always been very enjoyable and fulfilling: I get to make cars fly, buildings explode, and dinosaurs attack alien spaceships for movie studios, providing entertainment for audiences worldwide.

More recently, however, a growing percentage of our customers are advertising agencies. They bring us adverts for well-known branded products: shampoos, toothpastes, moisturizing creams, washing powders, etc., and we use visual effects trickery to make it seem like these products actually work.

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We also work on TV shows and music videos. We reduce bags under the eyes of women, make hair shinier, teeth whiter, make pop stars and film stars look thinner, etc. We airbrush skin to remove spots, isolate the teeth and color correct them to make them whiter (also done on the clothes in washing powder ads), paint out split ends and add shiny highlights to hair in shampoo commercials, and there are special deforming tools to make people thinner. These techniques are literally used in every commercial on TV, plus most TV drama shows, and lots of movies. Particularly on female actors but also on men. We essentially make viewers feel inadequate whilst they're watching the main programs and then exaggerate the effectiveness of the "solutions" provided in the commercial breaks.

I get paid £100,000 a year to do this.

When I asked why he considered his job to be bullshit (as opposed to merely, say, evil), Tom replied:

Tom: I consider a worthwhile job to be one that fulfills a preexisting need, or creates a product or service that people hadn't thought of, that somehow enhances and improves their lives. I believe we passed the point where most jobs were these type of jobs a long time ago. Supply has far outpaced demand in most industries, so now it is demand that is manufactured. My job is a combination of manufacturing demand and then exaggerating the usefulness of the products sold to fix it. In fact, you could argue that that is the job of every single person that works in or for the entire advertising industry. If we're at the point where in order to sell products, you have to first of all trick people into thinking they need them, then I think you'd be hard-pressed to argue that these jobs aren't bullshit.¹³

In advertising, marketing, and publicity, discontent of this sort runs so high that there is even a magazine, *Adbusters*, produced entirely by workers in the industry who resent what they are made to do for a living and wish to use the powers they've acquired in advertising for good instead

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of evil—for instance, by designing flashy “subvertising” that attacks consumer culture as a whole.

Tom, for his part, didn’t consider his job bullshit because he objected to consumer culture in itself. He objected because he saw his “beauty work,” as he called it, as inherently coercive and manipulative. He was drawing a distinction between what might be called honest illusions and dishonest ones. When you make dinosaurs attack spaceships, no one actually thinks that’s real. Much as with a stage magician, half the fun is that everyone knows a trick is being played—they just don’t know exactly how it’s done. When you subtly enhance the appearance of celebrities, in contrast, you are trying to change viewers’ unconscious assumptions about what everyday reality—in this case, of men’s and women’s bodies—*ought* to be like, so as to create an uncomfortable feeling that their lived reality is itself an inadequate substitute for the real thing. Where honest illusions add joy into the world, dishonest ones are intentionally aimed toward convincing people their worlds are a tawdry and miserable sort of place.

Similarly, I received a very large number of testimonies from call center employees. None considered his or her job bullshit because of conditions of employment—actually, these appear to vary enormously, from nightmarish levels of surveillance to surprisingly relaxed—but because the work involved tricking or pressuring people into doing things that weren’t really in their best interest. Here’s a sampling:

- “I had a bunch of bullshit call center jobs selling things that people didn’t really want/need, taking insurance claims, conducting pointless market research.”
- “It’s a bait and switch, offering a ‘free’ service first, and then asking you for \$1.95 for a two-week trial subscription in order for you to finish the process and get you what you went on the website to acquire, and then signing you up for an auto-renewal for a monthly service that’s more than ten times that amount.”
- “It’s not just a lack of positive contribution, but you’re making an active negative contribution to people’s day. I called people up to hock them useless shit they didn’t need: specifically, access to their

‘credit score’ that they could obtain for free elsewhere, but that we were offering (with some mindless add-ons) for £6.99 a month.”

- “Most of the support covered basic computer operations the customer could easily google. They were geared toward old people or those that didn’t know better, I think.”
- “Our call center’s resources are almost wholly devoted to coaching agents on how to talk people into things they don’t need as opposed to solving the real problems they are calling about.”

So once again, what really irks is (1) the aggression and (2) the deception. Here I can speak from personal experience, having done such jobs, albeit usually very, very briefly: there are few things less pleasant than being forced against your better nature to try to convince others to do things that defy their common sense. I will be discussing this issue in greater depth in the next chapter, on spiritual violence, but for now, let us merely note that this is at the very heart of what it is to be a goon.

3. what duct tapers do

Duct tapers are employees whose jobs exist only because of a glitch or fault in the organization; who are there to solve a problem that ought not to exist. I am adopting the term from the software industry, but I think it has more general applicability. One testimony from a software developer describes the industry like this:

Pablo: Basically, we have two kinds of jobs. One kind involves working on core technologies, solving hard and challenging problems, etc.

The other one is taking a bunch of core technologies and applying some duct tape to make them work together.

The former is generally seen as useful. The latter is often seen as less useful or even useless, but, in any case, much less gratifying than the first kind. The feeling is probably based on the observation that if core technologies were done properly, there would be little or no need for duct tape.

Pablo's main point is that with the growing reliance on free software (free-ware), paid employment is increasingly reduced to duct taping. Coders are often happy to perform the interesting and rewarding work on core technologies for free at night but, since that means they have less and less incentive to think about how such creations will ultimately be made compatible, that means the same coders are reduced during the day to the tedious (but paid) work of making them fit together. This is a very important insight, and I'll be discussing some of its implications at length later; but for now, let's just consider the notion of duct taping itself.

Cleaning is a necessary function: things get dusty even if they just sit there, and the ordinary conduct of life tends to leave traces that need to be tidied up. But cleaning up after someone who makes a completely gratuitous and unnecessary mess is always irritating. Having a full-time occupation cleaning up after such a person can only breed resentment. Sigmund Freud even spoke of "housewife's neurosis": a condition that he believed affected women forced to limit their life horizons to tidying up after others, and who therefore became fanatical about domestic hygiene as a form of revenge. This is often the moral agony of the duct taper: to be forced to organize one's working life around caring about a certain value (say, cleanliness) precisely *because* more important people could not care less.

The most obvious examples of duct tapers are underlings whose jobs are to undo the damage done by sloppy or incompetent superiors.

Magda: I once worked for an SME [a small or medium-size enterprise] where I was the "tester." I was required to proofread research reports written by their posh star researcher-statistician.

The man didn't know the first thing about statistics, and he struggled to produce grammatically correct sentences. He tended to avoid using verbs. He was so bad, I'd reward myself with a cake if I found a coherent paragraph. I lost twelve pounds working in that company. My job was to convince him to undertake a major reworking of every report he produced. Of course, he would never agree to correct anything, let alone undertake a rework, so I would then have to take the

report to the company directors. They were statistically illiterate too, but being the directors, they could drag things out even more.

There is, it seems, a whole genre of jobs that involve correcting the damage done by a superior who holds his position for reasons unrelated to ability to do the work. (This overlaps somewhat with flunky positions where the jobholder has to do the superior's work, but it's not exactly the same thing.) Here's another example, of a programmer who got a job for a firm run by a Viennese psychologist who fancied himself an old-style scientific revolutionary, and who had invented what was, in the company, referred to simply as "the algorithm." The algorithm aimed to reproduce human speech. The company sold it to pharmacists to use on their web-sites. Except it didn't work:

Nouri: The company's founding "genius" was this Viennese research psychologist, who claimed to have discovered the Algorithm. For many months, I was never allowed to see it. I just wrote stuff that used it.

The psychologist's code kept failing to give sensible results. Typical cycle:

- I demonstrate his code barfs on a ridiculously basic sentence.
- He'd wear Confused Frown: "*Oh . . . how strange . . .*" like I just discovered the Death Star's one tiny weakness.
- He'd disappear into his cave for two hours . . .
- Triumphant emerges with bug fix—now it's perfect!
- Go to step one.

In the end, the programmer was reduced to writing very primitive Eliza scripts¹⁴ to mimic speech for the Web pages just to cover up the fact that the Algorithm was basically gibberish, and the company, it turned out, was a pure vanity project run by a rented CEO who used to manage a gym.

Many duct-taper jobs are the result of a glitch in the system that no one has bothered to correct—tasks that could easily be automated, for instance, but haven't been either because no one has gotten around to it, or

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because the manager wants to maintain as many subordinates as possible, or because of some structural confusion, or because of some combination of the three. I have any number of testimonies of this sort. Here's a sampling:

- “I worked as a programmer for a travel company. Some poor person's job was to receive updated plane timetables via email several times a week and copy them by hand into Excel.”
- “My job was to transfer information about the state's oil wells into a different set of notebooks than they were currently in.”
- “My day consisted of photocopying veterans' health records for seven and a half hours a day . . . Workers were told time and again that it was too costly to buy the machines for digitizing.”
- “I was given one responsibility: watching an in-box that received emails in a certain form from employees in the company asking for tech help, and copy and paste it into a different form. Not only was this a textbook example of an automatable job, it actually used to be automated! There was some kind of disagreement between various managers that led to higher-ups issuing a standardization that nullified the automation.”

On the social level, duct taping has traditionally been women's work. Throughout history, prominent men have wandered about oblivious to half of what's going on around them, treading on a thousand toes; it was typically their wives, sisters, mothers, or daughters who were left with the responsibility of performing the emotional labor of soothing egos, calming nerves, and negotiating solutions to the problems they created. In a more material sense, duct taping might be considered a classic working-class function. The architect may come up with a plan that looks stunning on paper, but it's the builder who has to figure out how to *actually* install electrical sockets in a circular room or to use real duct tape to hold things together that in reality simply don't fit together the way the blueprints say they should.

In this latter case, we're not really talking about a bullshit job at all, any

more than we're talking about a bullshit job when an orchestra conductor interprets the score of a Beethoven symphony or an actress plays Lady Macbeth. There will always be a certain gap between blueprints, schemas, and plans and their real-world implementation; therefore, there will always be people charged with making the necessary adjustments. What makes such a role bullshit is when the plan obviously can't work and any competent architect should have known it; when the system is so stupidly designed that it will fail in completely predictable ways, but rather than fix the problem, the organization prefers to hire full-time employees whose main or entire job is to deal with the damage. It's as if a homeowner, upon discovering a leak in the roof, decided it was too much bother to hire a roofer to reshingle it, and instead stuck a bucket underneath and hired someone whose full-time job was to periodically dump the water.

It goes without saying that duct tapers are almost always aware they have a bullshit job and are usually quite angry about it.

I encountered a classic example of a duct taper while working as a lecturer at a prominent British university. One day the wall shelves in my office collapsed. This left books scattered all over the floor, and a jagged half-dislocated metal frame that once held the shelves in place dangling cheerfully over my desk. A carpenter appeared an hour later to inspect the damage but announced gravely that, since there were books all over the floor, safety rules prevented him from entering the room or taking further action. I would have to stack the books and then not touch anything else, whereupon he would return at the earliest available opportunity to remove the dangling frame.

I duly stacked the books, but the carpenter never reappeared. There ensued a series of daily calls from Anthropology to Buildings and Grounds. Each day someone in the Anthropology Department would call, often multiple times, to ask about the fate of the carpenter, who always turned out to have something extremely pressing to do. By the time a week was out, I had taken to doing my work on the floor in a kind of little nest assembled from fallen books, and it had become apparent that there was one man employed by Buildings and Grounds whose entire job it was to apologize for the fact that the carpenter hadn't come. He seemed like a

nice man. He was exceedingly polite and even-tempered, and always had just a slight trace of wistful melancholy about him, which made him quite well suited for the job. Still, it's hard to imagine he was particularly happy with his choice of career. Most of all: there didn't seem any obvious reason the school couldn't simply get rid of the position and use the money to *hire another carpenter*, in which case his job would not be needed anyway.

4. what box tickers do

I am using the term “box tickers” to refer to employees who exist only or primarily to allow an organization to be able to claim it is doing something that, in fact, it is not doing. The following testimony is from a woman hired to coordinate leisure activities in a care home:

Betsy: Most of my job was to interview residents and fill out a recreation form that listed their preferences. That form was then logged on a computer and promptly forgotten about forever. The paper form was also kept in a binder, for some reason. Completion of the forms was by far the most important part of my job in the eyes of my boss, and I would catch hell if I got behind on them. A lot of the time, I would complete a form for a short-term resident, and they would check out the next day. I threw away mountains of paper. The interviews mostly just annoyed the residents, as they knew it was just bullshit paperwork, and no one was going to care about their individual preferences.

The most miserable thing about box-ticking jobs is that the employee is usually aware that not only does the box-ticking exercise do nothing toward accomplishing its ostensible purpose, it actually undermines it, since it diverts time and resources away from the purpose itself. So here Betsy was aware that the time she spent processing forms about how residents might wish to be entertained was time *not* spent entertaining them. She did manage to engage in some leisure activities with the residents (“Fortunately, I was able to play the piano for the residents every

day before dinner, and that was a beautiful time, with singing, smiling, and tears”), but as so often in such situations, there was a sense that these moments were indulgences granted her as a reward for carrying out her primary duties, which consisted of the filling out and proper disposition of forms.¹⁵

We’re all familiar with box ticking as a form of government. If a government’s employees are caught doing something very bad—taking bribes, for instance, or regularly shooting citizens at traffic stops—the first reaction is invariably to create a “fact-finding commission” to get to the bottom of things. This serves two functions. First of all, it’s a way of insisting that, aside from a small group of miscreants, no one had any idea that any of this was happening (this, of course, is rarely true); second of all, it’s a way of implying that once all the facts are in, someone will definitely do something about it. (This is usually not true, either.) A fact-finding commission is a way of telling the public that the government is doing something it is not. But large corporations will behave in exactly the same way if, say, they are revealed to be employing slaves or child laborers in their garment factories or dumping toxic waste. All of this is bullshit, but the true bullshit *job* category applies to those who are not just there to stave off the public (this at least could be said to serve some kind of useful purpose for the company) but to those who do so within the organization itself.¹⁶

The corporate compliance industry might be considered an intermediary form. It is explicitly created by (US) government regulation:

Layla: I work in a growing industry born out of the federal regulation the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

Basically US companies have to do due diligence to make sure they aren’t doing business with corrupt overseas firms. Clients are big companies—tech, auto companies, etc.—who might have myriad smallish businesses they supply or work with in places like China (my region).

Our company creates due diligence reports for our clients: basically one to two hours of internet research that is then edited into a report. There is a lot of jargon and training that goes into making sure every report is consistent.

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Sometimes the internet reveals something that's an easy red flag—like a company's boss had a criminal case—but I would say the realness/bullshit factor is 20/80. Unless someone has been criminally charged, I have no way of knowing from my apartment in Brooklyn if they've been handed an envelope full of cash in Guangzhou.¹⁷

Of course, on some level, all bureaucracies work on this principle: once you introduce formal measures of success, “reality”—for the organization—becomes that which exists on paper, and the human reality that lies behind it is a secondary consideration at best. I vividly remember the endless discussions that ensued, when I was a junior professor at Yale University, about a first-year archaeology graduate student whose husband had died in a car crash on the first day of the term. For some reason, the shock caused her to develop a mental block on doing paperwork. She still attended lectures and was an avid participant in class discussions; and she turned in papers and got excellent grades. But eventually the professor would always discover she hadn't formally signed up for the class. As the *éminence grise* of the department would point out during faculty meetings, that was all that really mattered.

“As far as the guys in Registration are concerned, if you don't get the forms in on time, you didn't take the course. So your performance is completely irrelevant.” Other professors would mumble and fuss, and there would be occasional careful allusions to her “personal tragedy”—the exact nature of which was never specified. (I had to learn about it from other students later on.) But no one raised any fundamental objections to Registration's attitude. That was just reality—from an administrative point of view.

Eventually, after last-minute attempts to have her fill out a sheaf of late-application appeal documents also met with no response, and after numerous long soliloquies from the Director of Graduate Studies about just how inconsiderate it was of her to make things so difficult for those who were only trying to help her,¹⁸ the student was expelled from the program on the grounds that anyone so incapable of handling paperwork was obviously not suited for an academic career.

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This mentality seems to increase, not decrease, when government functions are reorganized to be more like a business, and citizens, for example, are redefined as “customers.” Mark is Senior Quality and Performance Officer in a local council in the United Kingdom:

Mark: Most of what I do—especially since moving away from frontline customer-facing roles—involves ticking boxes, pretending things are great to senior managers, and generally “feeding the beast” with meaningless numbers that give the illusion of control. None of which helps the citizens of that council in the slightest.

I’ve heard an apocryphal story about a Chief Executive who turned on the fire alarm, so all the staff gathered in the car park. He then told all the employees who were with a customer when the alarm went off to return to the building immediately. The other employees could return when one of the people dealing with a customer needed them for something, and so on and so forth. If this had happened when I was at that council, I would have been in the car park for a very long time!

Mark goes on to describe local government as little more than an endless sequence of box-ticking rituals revolving around monthly “target figures.” These were put up on posters in the office and coded green for “improving,” amber for “stable,” and red for “decline.” Supervisors appeared innocent even of the basic concept of random statistical variation—or at least, pretended to be—as each month, those with green-coded figures were rewarded, while those with red urged to do a better job. Almost none of this had any real bearing on providing services:

Mark: One project I worked on was to come up with some housing “service standards.” The project involved playing lip service to customers, and having long discussions with managers at meetings, before finally writing up a report that got praised (mainly because it was presented and laid out attractively) by managers in the meeting. The report then got filed away—making absolutely no difference to the

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residents but still somehow requiring many hours of staff time, not to mention all the hours the residents themselves spent filling in surveys or attending focus groups. In my experience, this is how most policy works in local government.¹⁹

Note here the importance of the physical attractiveness of the report. This is a theme that comes up frequently in testimonies about box-ticking operations and even more so in the corporate sector than in government. If the ongoing importance of a manager is measured by how many people he has working under him, the immediate material manifestation of that manager's power and prestige is the visual quality of his presentations and reports. The meetings in which such emblems are displayed might be considered the high rituals of the corporate world. And just as the retinues of a feudal lord might include servants whose only role²⁰ was to polish his horses' armor or tweeze his mustache before tournaments or pageants, so may present-day executives keep employees whose sole purpose is to prepare their PowerPoint presentations or craft the maps, cartoons, photographs, or illustrations that accompany their reports. Many of these reports are nothing more than props in a Kabuki-like corporate theater—no one actually reads them all the way through.²¹ But this doesn't stop ambitious executives from cheerfully shelling out half a workman's yearly wages of company money just to be able to say, "Ooh yes, we commissioned a report on that."

Hannibal: I do digital consultancy for global pharmaceutical companies' marketing departments. I often work with global PR agencies on this, and write reports with titles like *How to Improve Engagement Among Key Digital Health Care Stakeholders*. It is pure, unadulterated bullshit, and serves no purpose beyond ticking boxes for marketing departments. But it is very easy to charge a very large amount of money to write bullshit reports. I was recently able to charge around twelve thousand pounds to write a two-page report for a pharmaceutical client to present during a global strategy meeting. The report wasn't used in the end because they didn't manage to get to that agenda point

during their allotted meeting time, but the team I wrote it for was very happy with it nonetheless.

There are whole minor industries that exist just to facilitate such box-ticking gestures. I worked for some years for the Interlibrary Loan Office in the University of Chicago Science Library, and at least 90 percent of what people did there was photocopy and mail out articles from medical journals with titles such as the *Journal of Cell Biology*, *Clinical Endocrinology*, and the *American Journal of Internal Medicine*. (I was lucky. I did something else.) For the first few months, I was under the naïve impression that these articles were being sent to doctors. To the contrary, a bemused coworker eventually explained to me: the overwhelming majority were being sent to lawyers.²² Apparently, if you are suing a doctor for malpractice, part of the show involves assembling an impressive pile of scientific papers to plunk down on the table at an appropriately theatrical moment and then enter into evidence. While everyone knows that no one will actually read these papers, there is always the possibility that the defense attorney or one of his expert witnesses might pick one up at random for inspection—so it is considered important to ensure your legal aides locate articles that can at least plausibly be said to bear in some way on the case.

As we will see in later chapters, there are all sorts of different ways that private companies employ people to be able to tell themselves they are doing something that they aren't really doing. Many large corporations, for instance, maintain their own in-house magazines or even television channels, the ostensible purpose of which is to keep employees up to date on interesting news and developments, but which, in fact, exist for almost no reason other than to allow executives to experience that warm and pleasant feeling that comes when you see a favorable story about you in the media, or to know what it's like to be interviewed by people who look and act exactly like reporters but never ask questions you wouldn't want them to ask. Such venues tend to reward their writers, producers, and technicians very handsomely, often at two or three times the market rate.

But I've never talked to anyone who does such work full-time who doesn't say the job is bullshit.²³

5. what taskmasters do

Taskmasters fall into two subcategories. Type 1 contains those whose role consists entirely of assigning work to others. This job can be considered bullshit if the taskmaster herself believes that there is no need for her intervention, and that if she were not there, underlings would be perfectly capable of carrying on by themselves. Type 1 taskmasters can thus be considered the opposite of flunkies: unnecessary superiors rather than unnecessary subordinates.

Whereas the first variety of taskmaster is merely useless, the second variety does actual harm. These are taskmasters whose primary role is to create bullshit tasks for others to do, to supervise bullshit, or even to create entirely new bullshit jobs. One might also refer to them as bullshit generators. Type 2 taskmasters may also have real duties in addition to their role as taskmaster, but if all or most of what they do is create bullshit tasks for others, then their own jobs can be classified as bullshit too.

As one might imagine, it is especially difficult to gather testimonies from taskmasters. Even if they do secretly think their jobs are useless, they are much less likely to admit it.²⁴ But I found a small number willing to come clean.

Ben represents a classic example of type 1. He is a middle manager:

Ben: I have a bullshit job, and it happens to be in middle management. Ten people work for me, but from what I can tell, they can all do the work without my oversight. My only function is to hand them work, which I suppose the people that actually generate the work could do themselves. (I will say that in a lot of cases, the work that is assigned is a product of other managers with bullshit jobs, which makes my job two levels of bullshit.)

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I just got promoted to this job, and I spend a lot of my time looking around and wondering what I'm supposed to be doing. As best I can tell, I'm supposed to be motivating the workers. I sort of doubt that I'm earning my salary doing that, even if I'm really trying!

Ben calculates that he spends at least 75 percent of his time allocating tasks and then monitoring if the underling is doing them, even though, he insists, he has absolutely no reason to believe the underlings in question would behave any differently if he weren't there. He also says he keeps trying to allocate himself real work on the sly, but when he does so, his own superiors eventually notice and tell him to cut it out. But then, when he sent in his testimony, Ben had only been at the job for two and a half months—which might explain his candor. If he does succumb eventually and accepts his new role in life, he will come to understand that, as another testimony put it, “The entire job of middle management is to ensure the lower-level people hit their ‘productivity numbers’”—and will therefore start coming up with formal statistical metrics that his underlings can try to falsify.

Being forced to supervise people who don't need supervision is actually a fairly common complaint. Here, for instance, is the testimony of an Assistant Localization Manager named Alphonso:

Alphonso: My job is to oversee and coordinate a team of five translators. The problem with that is that the team is perfectly capable of managing itself: they are trained in all the tools they need to use and they can, of course, manage their time and tasks. So I normally act as a “task gatekeeper.” Requests come to me through Jira (a bureaucratic online tool for managing tasks), and I pass them on to the relevant person or persons. Other than that, I'm in charge of sending periodic reports to my manager, who, in turn, will incorporate them into “more important” reports to be sent to the CEO.

This kind of combination of taskmastering and box ticking would appear to be the very essence of middle management.

In Alphonso's case, he did actually serve one useful function—but only because his team of translators, based in Ireland, was assigned so little work by the central office in Japan that he had to constantly figure out ways to finagle the reports to make it look like they were very busy and no one needed to be laid off.



Let us move on, then, to taskmasters of the second type: those who make up bullshit for others to do.

We may begin with Chloe, who held the post of Academic Dean at a prominent British university, with a specific responsibility to provide “strategic leadership” to a troubled campus.

Now, those of us toiling in the academic mills who still like to think of ourselves as teachers and scholars before all else have come to fear the word “strategic.” “Strategic mission statements” (or even worse, “strategic vision documents”) instill a particular terror, since these are the primary means by which corporate management techniques—setting up quantifiable methods for assessing performance, forcing teachers and scholars to spend more and more of their time assessing and justifying what they do and less and less time actually doing it—are insinuated into academic life. The same suspicions hold for any document that repeatedly uses the words “quality,” “excellence,” “leadership,” or “stakeholder.” So for my own part, my immediate reaction upon hearing that Chloe was in a “strategic leadership” position was to suspect that not only was her job bullshit, it actively inserted bullshit into others' lives as well.

According to Chloe's testimony, this was exactly the case—though, if at first, not precisely for the reasons I imagined.

Chloe: The reason that my Dean's role was a bullshit job is the same reason that all nonexecutive Deans, PVCs [Pro-Vice Chancellors], and other “strategic” roles in universities are bullshit jobs. The real roles of power and responsibility within a university trace the flow of money

through the organization. An executive PVC or Dean (in other words, s/he who holds the budget) can cajole, coerce, encourage, bully, and negotiate with departments about what they can, ought, or might want to do, using the stick (or carrot) of money. Strategic Deans and other such roles have no carrots or sticks. They are nonexecutive. They hold no money, just (as was once described to me) “the power of persuasion and influence.”

I did not sit on university leadership and so was not part of the bunfights about targets, overall strategy, performance measures, audits, etc. I had no budget. I had no authority over the buildings, the timetable, or any other operational matters. All I could do was come up with a new strategy that was in effect a re-spin of already agreed-upon university strategies.

So her primary role was to come up with yet another strategic vision statement, of the kind that are regularly deployed to justify the number crunching and box ticking that has become so central to British academic life.²⁵ But since Chloe had no actual power, it was all meaningless shadow play. What she *did* get was what all high-level university administrators now receive as their primary badge of honor: her own tiny empire of administrative staff.

Chloe: I was given a 75% full-time equivalent Personal Assistant, a 75% full-time equivalent “Special Project and Policy Support Officer,” and a full-time postdoctoral Research Fellow, *plus* an “expenses” allowance of twenty thousand pounds. In other words, a shed-load of (public) money went into supporting a bullshit job. The Project and Policy Support Officer was there to help me with projects and policies. The PA was brilliant but ended up just being a glorified travel agent and diary secretary. The Research Fellow was a waste of time and money because I am a lone scholar and don’t actually need an assistant.

So, I spent two years of my life making up work for myself and for other people.

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Actually, Chloe appears to have been a very generous boss. As she spent her own hours developing strategies she knew would be ignored, her Special Projects Officer “ran around doing timetable scenarios” and gathering useful statistics, the Personal Assistant kept her diary, and the Research Fellow spent her time working on her own personal research. This in itself seems perfectly innocent. At least none of them was doing any harm. Who knows, maybe the Research Fellow even ended up making an important contribution to human knowledge of her own. The truly disturbing thing about the whole arrangement, according to Chloe, was her ultimate realization that if she had been given real power, she probably *would* have done harm. Because after two years as Dean, she was unwise enough to accept a gig as head of her old department and was thus able see things from the other side—that is, before quitting six months later in horror and disgust:

Chloe: My very brief stint as Head of Department reminded me that at the very minimum, ninety percent of the role is bullshit: Filling out the forms that the Faculty Dean sends so that she can write her strategy documents that get sent up the chain of command. Producing a confetti of paperwork as part of the auditing and monitoring of research activities and teaching activities. Producing plan after plan after five-year plan justifying why departments need to have the money and staff they already have. Doing bloody annual appraisals that go into a drawer never to be looked at again. And, in order to get these tasks done, as HoD, you ask your staff to help out. Bullshit proliferation.

So, what do I think? It is not capitalism per se that produces the bullshit.²⁶ It is managerialist ideologies put into practice in complex organizations. As managerialism embeds itself, you get entire cadres of academic staff whose job it is just to keep the managerialist plates spinning—strategies, performance targets, audits, reviews, appraisals, renewed strategies, etc., etc.—which happen in an almost wholly and entirely disconnected fashion from the real lifeblood of universities: teaching and education.

On this, I will leave Chloe the last word.

Chloe at least was allocated her staff first and only then had to figure out how to keep them occupied. Tania, who had a series of taskmaster jobs in both the public and private sectors, provides us with an explanation of how entirely new bullshit positions can come about. This last testimony is unique because it explicitly incorporates the typology developed in this chapter. Toward the end of my research, I laid out my then nascent five-part division on Twitter, to encourage comments, amendments, or reactions. Tania felt the terms fit her experience well:

Tania: I might be a taskmaster in your taxonomy of BS jobs. I was one of two deputy directors of an administrative services office that handled HR, budget, grants, contracts, and travel for two bureaus with total resources of about \$600 million and a thousand souls.

At some point as a manager (or as a duct taper helping to fill functional gaps), you realize that you need to hire a new person to meet an organizational need. Most of the time, the needs I am trying to fill are either my own need for a box ticker or a duct taper, or the needs of other managers, sometimes to hire people for non-BS work or to hire their ration of goons and flunkies.

The reason I need duct tapers is usually because I have to compensate for poorly functioning program-management systems (both automated and human workflows) and, in some cases, a poorly functioning box ticker and even a non-BS-job subordinate who has job tenure and twenty-five years of outstanding performance ratings from a succession of previous bosses.

This last is important. Even in corporate environments, it is very difficult to remove an underling for incompetence if that underling has seniority and a long history of good performance reviews. As in government bureaucracies, the easiest way to deal with such people is often to “kick them upstairs”: promote them to a higher post, where they become somebody else’s problem. But Tania was already at the top of this particular hierarchy, so an incompetent would continue to be her problem

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even if kicked upstairs. She was left with two options. Either she could move the incompetent into a bullshit position where he had no meaningful responsibilities, or, if no such position was currently available, she could leave him in place and hire someone else to really do his job. But if you take the latter course, another problem arises: you can't recruit someone for the incompetent's job, since the incompetent already has that job. Instead, you have to make up a new job with an elaborate job description that you know to be bullshit, because, really, you're hiring that person to do something else. Then you have to go through the motions of pretending the new person is ideally qualified to do the made-up job you don't really want him or her to do. All this involves a great deal of work.

Tania: In organizations with structured job classifications and position descriptions, there has to be an established and classified job to which you can recruit someone. (This is a whole professional universe of BS jobs and boondoggery unto itself. It's similar to the world of people who write grant proposals or contract bids.)

So the creation of a BS job often involves creating a whole universe of BS narrative that documents the purpose and functions of the position as well as the qualifications required to successfully perform the job, while corresponding to the format and special bureaucratese prescribed by the Office of Personnel Management and my agency's HR staff.

Once that's done, there has to be a narrative job announcement of the same ilk. To be eligible for hire, the applicant must present a resume incorporating all the themes and phraseology of the announcement so that the hiring software our agency uses will recognize their qualifications. After the person is hired, their duties must be spelled out in yet another document that will form the basis for annual performance appraisals.

I have rewritten candidates' resumes myself to ensure that they defeat the hiring software so I can be allowed to interview and select them. If they don't make it past the computer, I can't consider them.

To present a parable version: imagine you are a feudal lord again. You acquire a gardener. After twenty years of faithful service, the gardener develops a serious drinking problem. You keep finding him curled up in flowerbeds, while dandelions sprout everywhere and the sedge begins to die. But the gardener is well connected, and getting rid of him would offend people you don't feel it would be wise to offend. So you acquire a new servant, ostensibly to polish the doorknobs or perform some other meaningless task. In fact, you make sure the person you get as doorknob polisher is actually an experienced gardener. So far, so good. The problem is, in a corporate environment, you can't just summon a new servant, make up an impressive-sounding title for him ("High Seneschal of the Entryways"), and tell him his real job is to take over when the gardener is drunk. You have to come up with an elaborate fake description of what a doorknob polisher would, in fact, do; coach your new gardener in how to pretend he's the best doorknob polisher in the kingdom; and then use the description of his duties as the basis of periodic box-ticking performance reviews.

And if the gardener sobers up and doesn't want some young punk messing with his business—now you have a full-time doorknob polisher on your hands.

This, according to Tania, is just one of the many ways that taskmasters end up creating bullshit jobs.

on complex multiform bullshit jobs

These five categories are not exhaustive, and new types could certainly be proposed. One compelling suggestion I heard was for a category of "imaginary friends"—that is, people hired ostensibly to humanize an in-human corporate environment but who, in fact, mainly force people to go through elaborate games of make-believe. We will be hearing about forced "creativity" and "mindfulness" seminars and obligatory charity events later on; there are workers whose entire careers are based on dressing up in costumes or otherwise designing silly games to create rapport in

office environments where everyone would probably be happier just being left alone. These could be seen as box tickers of a sort, but they could equally be seen as a phenomenon unto themselves.

As the previous examples suggest, it can also sometimes be clear that a job is bullshit but still be difficult to determine precisely which of the five categories it belongs to. Often it may seem to contain elements of several. A box ticker might also be a flunky, or might end up becoming a mere flunky if the organization's internal rules change; a flunky might also be a part-time duct taper or become a full-time duct taper if a problem arises and, instead of fixing it, the boss decides it would be easier to just reassign one of his idle minions to deal with the effects.

Consider Chloe the nonexecutive Dean. In a way, she, too, was a flunky, since her post was created by higher-ups for largely symbolic reasons. But she was also a taskmaster to her own subordinates. Since she and her subordinates didn't have much to do, she spent some of her time looking for problems they could duct-tape until she finally came to the realization that even if she were given some kind of power, most of what she'd be doing would just be box-ticking exercises anyway.

I received one testimony from a man who worked for a telemarketing company with a contract with a major IT firm. (Let's say Apple. I don't know if it was Apple. He didn't tell me which one it was.) His job was to call up corporations and try to convince them to book a meeting with an Apple sales representative. The problem was that all of the firms they would call already had an Apple sales rep permanently attached to them, often working out of the same office. What's more, they were perfectly aware of this.

Jim: I often asked my managers how they would convince prospects of the value of taking a meeting with a sales rep from our technology giant customer when they already had a sales rep from that same technology giant on their premises. Some were as hapless as I was, but the more effective managers patiently explained to me that I was missing the point: an appointment-setting call is a game of social niceties.

Prospects don't take a meeting because they think it might help

solve a business problem; they take it because they fear it would be impolite not to.

This is as pointless as pointless can be, but how, exactly, would one classify it? Certainly Jim, being a telemarketer, would qualify as a goon. But he was a goon whose entire purpose was to maneuver people into box ticking.

Another ambiguous multiform category are flak catchers, who might be considered a combination of flunky and duct taper but who have certain unique characteristics of their own. Flak catchers are subordinates hired to be at the receiving end of often legitimate complaints but who are given that role precisely because they have absolutely no authority to do anything about them.

The flak catcher is, of course, a familiar role in any bureaucracy. The man-whose-job-it-was-to-apologize-for-the-fact-that-the-carpenter-didn't-come might be considered a flak catcher of sorts, but if so, his position was an unusually cushy one, since he only really had to talk to university professors and administrators who were unlikely to scream, pound the table, or become visibly upset. In other contexts, flak catching can be genuinely dangerous. When I first came to the United Kingdom in 2008, one of the first things that struck me was the ubiquity of the notices in public places reminding citizens not to physically attack minor government officials. (It struck me this should rather go without saying. But apparently it doesn't.)

Sometimes flak catchers are well aware of what they're there for, as with Nathaniel, who signed up for a work-study program at a college in Canada, and was assigned to sit in the registrar's office and call people to tell them that some form was filled out incorrectly and they'd have to do it all over again. ("Since all frontline workers were students, it kept the cap on how pissed off anyone could reasonably get. The first line you used when someone became agitated was, 'Sorry, man, I know it's BS. I am a student, too.'") Other flak catchers seem touchingly innocent:

Tim: I work in a college dormitory during the summer. I have worked at this job for three years, and at this point, it is still completely unclear to me what my actual duties are.

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Primarily, it seems that my job consists of physically occupying space at the front desk. This is what I spend approximately seventy percent of my time doing. While engaged in this, I am free to “pursue my own projects,” which I take to mean mainly screwing around and creating rubber band balls out of rubber bands I find in the cabinets. When I am not busy with this, I might be checking the office email account (I have basically no training or administrative power, of course, so all I can do is forward these emails to my boss), moving packages from the door where they get dropped off to the package room, answering phone calls (again, I know nothing and rarely answer a question to the caller’s satisfaction), finding ketchup packets from 2005 in the desk drawers, or calling maintenance to report that a resident has dropped three forks down the garbage disposal, and now the sink is spewing decayed food.

In addition, often people will yell at me for things that are clearly not my fault, such as the fact that they dropped three forks down the garbage disposal, or the fact that there is construction happening nearby, or the fact that they have not paid their outstanding rent balance, and I am forbidden from accepting \$1,400 in cash, and my boss does not work on weekends; or the fact that there is no convenient TV available on which they can watch *The Bachelor*. I assume it’s a kind of catharsis for them to do this yelling, since I am nineteen years old and clearly abjectly powerless.

For these duties, I am paid fourteen dollars an hour.

On the surface, it may seem as if Tim is just a flunky, like the unnecessary receptionist in the Dutch publishing house: it just wouldn’t look good to have no one sitting there at all. But, in fact, it seems likely that insofar as Tim provides a real service to his employers, it’s precisely by giving angry students someone they can vent at. Why else, after three years, would they still be keeping him so completely in the dark? The main reason I hesitate to make flak catcher a category of bullshit job is because this *is* a real service. Tim is not making up for a structural flaw like the man whose job it was to apologize for the fact that the carpenter didn’t come.

He's there because if you gather together a large number of teenagers, a few will invariably throw temper tantrums about stupid things, and Tim's employer would prefer they direct their outrage at someone other than himself. In other words, Tim's is a shit job, but it's not entirely clear that it's a bullshit one.

a word on second-order bullshit jobs

A final ambiguous category consists of jobs which are in no sense pointless in and of themselves, but which are ultimately pointless because they are performed in support of a pointless enterprise. An obvious example would be the cleaners, security, maintenance, and other support staff for a bullshit company. Take Kurt's office that provides the paperwork required to move German soldiers' computers down the hall. Or Nouri's firm that promoted an algorithm that didn't work. Or any of a hundred fake telemarketing or compliance firms. In every one of those offices, someone has to water the plants. Someone has to clean the toilets. Someone has to handle pest control. And while it's true that most of the companies in question operate in large office buildings hosting any number of different sorts of enterprise—which usually makes it unlikely that any one cleaner or electrician or bug sprayer is providing services exclusively for those who believe themselves to be engaged in useless occupations—if one were to measure the total proportion of cleaning or electrical work that is ultimately performed in support of bullshit, that number would be very high. (One would have to assume 37 percent, in fact, if the YouGov survey is accurate.²⁷)

If 37 percent of jobs are bullshit, and 37 percent of the remaining 63 percent are in support of bullshit, then slightly over 50 percent of all labor falls into the bullshit sector in the broadest sense of the term.²⁸ If you combine this with the bullshitization of useful occupations (at least 50 percent in office work; presumably less in other sorts), and the various professions that basically exist only because everyone is working too hard (dog washers, all-night pizza deliverymen, to name a few), we could probably get the

real workweek down to fifteen hours—or even twelve—without anyone noticing much.

a final note, with a brief return to the question: is it possible to have a bullshit job and not know it?

The idea of second-order bullshit jobs once again raises the issue of the degree to which bullshit jobs are just a matter of subjective judgment and the degree to which they have objective reality. I believe bullshit jobs to be very real—when I say we can only rely on the judgment of the worker, I'm simply talking about what we can, as observers, know about them. I would also remind the reader that while I believe it is right to defer to the particular worker about the factual question of whether their work actually does anything at all, when it comes to the rather more subtle issue of whether the work in question does anything *of value*, I will think it's the best thing to defer to the overall opinion of those who work in the industry. Otherwise we could end up in the rather silly position of saying that of thirty legal aides working in the same office and performing the same tasks, twenty-nine have bullshit jobs because they think they do, but the one true believer who disagrees does not.

Unless one takes the position that there is absolutely no reality at all except for individual perception, which is philosophically problematic, it is hard to deny the possibility that people *can* be wrong about what they do. For the purposes of this book, this is not that much of a problem, because what I am mainly interested in is, as I say, the subjective element; my primary aim is not so much to lay out a theory of social utility or social value as to understand the psychological, social, and political effects of the fact that so many of us labor under the secret belief that our jobs lack social utility or social value.

I am also assuming that people are not *usually* wrong, so if one really did want to map out, say, which sectors of the economy are real and which are bullshit, the best way to do so would be to examine in which sectors the preponderance of workers feel their jobs are pointless and in which

sectors the preponderance do not. Even more, one would try to tease out the tacit theory of social value that led them to this conclusion: if someone says, “My job is completely pointless,” what are the unspoken criteria being applied? Some, like Tom the special effects artist, have thought these things through and can simply tell you. In other cases, workers are not able to articulate a theory, but you can tell that one must be there, if only on a not completely conscious level—so you have to tease out the theory by examining the language people use and observing their gut reactions to the work they do.

For me, this isn't really a problem. I'm an anthropologist: teasing out the implicit theory that lies behind people's everyday actions and reactions is what anthropologists are trained to do. But then there's the problem that people's theories are not all the same. For instance, it has come to my attention, while conducting this research, that many of those employed in the banking industry are privately convinced that 99 percent of what banks do is bullshit that does not benefit humanity in any way. I can only assume that others working in the industry disagree with this assessment. Is there any pattern here? Does it vary with seniority? Are higher-ups more likely to believe in the social benefits of banking? Or do many of them secretly agree that their work has no social value but just don't care? Maybe they even take delight in the knowledge that their work does not benefit the public, thinking of themselves as pirates, or scam artists, in some romantic sense? It's impossible to say (though Jeffrey Sachs's testimony in the last chapter at least suggests that many at the very top simply feel they have a right to whatever they can get).

The real problem for my approach comes when one has to deal with those in professions that everyone *else* regularly invokes as prime examples of bullshit jobs who don't seem to think of their jobs that way themselves. Again, no one has done detailed comparative survey work in this regard, but I did notice certain interesting patterns in my own data. I heard from only a smattering of lawyers (though from a large number of legal aides), only two PR flacks, and not a single lobbyist. Does this mean we have to conclude these are largely nonbullshit occupations? Not necessarily. There are any number of other possible explanations for their

silence. For instance, perhaps fewer of them hang around on Twitter, or maybe the ones that do are more inclined to lie.

I should add as a final note there was really only one class of people that not only denied their jobs were pointless but expressed outright hostility to the very idea that our economy is rife with bullshit jobs. These were—predictably enough—business owners, and anyone else in charge of hiring and firing. (Tania appears to be something of an exception in this regard.) In fact, for many years, I have been receiving periodic unsolicited communications from indignant entrepreneurs and executives telling me my entire premise is wrong. No one, they insist, would ever spend company money on an employee who wasn't needed. Such communications rarely offer particularly sophisticated arguments. Most just employ the usual circular argument that since, in a market economy, none of the things described in this chapter could have actually occurred, that therefore they didn't, so all the people who are convinced their jobs are worthless must be deluded, or self-important, or simply don't understand their real function, which is fully visible only to those above.

One might be tempted to conclude from these responses that there is at least one class of people who genuinely don't realize their jobs are bullshit. Except, of course, what CEOs do isn't really bullshit. For better or for worse, their actions do make a difference in the world. They're just blind to all the bullshit they create.