

Anarchist discussion: David Graeber on Bullshit Jobs

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On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant

David Graeber

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

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

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

But rather than allowing a massive reduction of working hours to free the world's population to pursue their own projects, pleasures, visions, and ideas, we have seen the ballooning of not even so much of the 'service' sector as of the administrative sector, up to and including the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or the unprecedented

expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations. And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza delivery) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones.

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

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

While corporations may engage in ruthless downsizing, the layoffs and speed-ups invariably fall on that class of people who are actually making, moving, fixing and maintaining things; through some strange alchemy no one can quite explain, the number of salaried paper-pushers ultimately seems to expand, and more and more employees find themselves, not unlike Soviet workers actually, working 40 or even 50 hour weeks on paper, but effectively working 15 hours just as Keynes predicted, since the rest of their time is spent 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 happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s). And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.

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

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

I would not presume to tell someone who is convinced they are making a meaningful contribution to the world that, really, they are not. But what about those people who are themselves

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

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

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

Even more perverse, there seems to be a broad sense that this is the way things should be. This is one of the secret strengths of right-wing populism. You can see it when tabloids whip up resentment against tube workers for paralysing London during contract disputes: the very fact that tube workers can paralyse London shows that their work is actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people. It's even clearer in the US, where Republicans have had remarkable success mobilizing resentment against school teachers, or auto workers (and not, significantly, against the school administrators or auto industry managers who actually cause the problems) for their supposedly bloated wages and benefits. It's as if they are being told 'but you

get to teach children! Or make cars! You get to have real jobs! And on top of that you have the nerve to also expect middle-class pensions and health care?’

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

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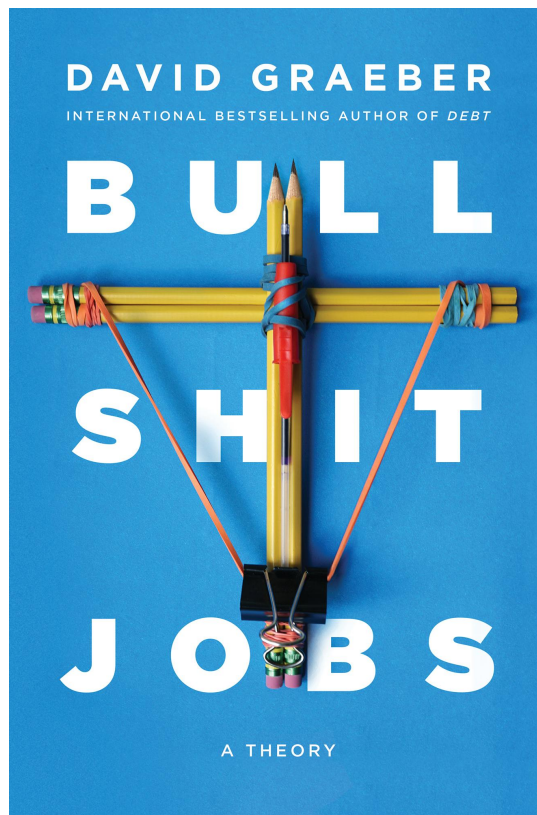
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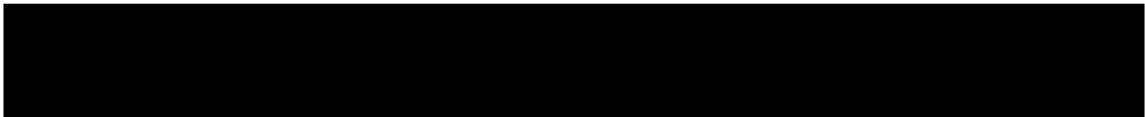
Bullshit Jobs

A Theory

David Graeber



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a brief excursus on the history of make-work and particularly of the concept of buying other people's time

Boss: How come you're not working?

Worker: There's nothing to do.

Boss: Well, you're supposed to pretend like you're working.

Worker: Hey, I got a better idea. Why don't *you* pretend like I'm working? You get paid more than me.

—Bill Hicks comedy routine

Groos's theory of "the pleasure at being the cause" led him to devise a theory of play as make-believe: humans invent games and diversions, he proposed, for the exact same reason the infant takes delight in his ability to move a pencil. We wish to exercise our powers as an end in themselves. The fact that the situation is made up doesn't detract from this; in fact, it adds another level of contrivance. This, Groos suggested—and here he was falling back on the ideas of Romantic German philosopher Friedrich Schiller—is really all that freedom is. (Schiller argued that the desire to create art is simply a manifestation of the urge to play as the exercise of freedom for its own sake as well.¹⁰) Freedom is our ability to make things up just for the sake of being able to do so.

Yet at the same time, it is precisely the make-believe aspect of their work that student workers like Patrick and Brendan find the most infuriating—indeed, that just about anyone who's ever had a wage-labor job that was closely supervised invariably finds the most maddening aspect of her job. Working serves a purpose, or is meant to do so. Being forced to pretend to work just for the sake of working is an indignity, since the demand is perceived—rightly—as the pure exercise of power for its own sake. If make-believe play is the purest expression of human freedom, make-believe work imposed by others is the purest expression of lack of freedom. It's not entirely surprising, then, that the first historical evidence we have for the notion that certain categories of people really ought to be working at all times, even if there's nothing to do, and that work needs to be made up to fill their time, even if there's nothing that really needs doing, refers to people who are not free: prisoners and slaves, two categories that historically have largely overlapped.¹¹

It would be fascinating, though probably impossible, to write a history of make-work—to explore when and in what circumstances "idleness" first came to be seen as a problem, or even a

¹⁰ I am, of course, offering an extremely simplified version of Schiller's philosophy.

¹¹ In legal terms, most slaveholding societies justify the institution by the legal fiction that slaves are prisoners of war—and, in fact, many slaves in human history were captured as the result of military operations. The first chain

sin. I'm not aware that anyone has actually tried to do this.¹² But all evidence we have indicates that the modern form of make-work that Patrick and Brendan are complaining about is historically new. This is in part because most people who have ever existed have assumed that normal human work patterns take the form of periodic intense bursts of energy, followed by relaxation, followed by slowly picking up again toward another intense bout. This is what farming is like, for instance: all-hands-on-deck mobilization around planting and harvest, but otherwise, whole seasons taken up largely by minding and mending things, minor projects, and puttering around. But even daily tasks, or projects such as building a house or preparing for a feast, tend to take roughly this form. In other words, the traditional student's pattern of lackadaisical study leading up to intense cramming before exams and then slacking off again—I like to refer to it as “punctuated hysteria”—is typical of how human beings have always tended to go about necessary tasks if no one forces them to act otherwise.¹³ Some students may engage in cartoonishly exaggerated versions of this pattern.¹⁴ But good students figure out how to get the pace roughly right. Not only is it what humans will do if left to their own devices, but there is no reason to believe that forcing them to act otherwise is likely to cause greater efficiency or productivity. Often it will have precisely the opposite effect.

Obviously, some tasks are more dramatic and therefore lend themselves better to alternating intense, frenetic bursts of activity and relative torpor. This has always been true. Hunting animals is more demanding than gathering vegetables, even if the latter is done in sporadic bursts; building houses better lends itself to heroic efforts than cleaning them. As these examples imply, in most human societies, men tend to try, and usually succeed, to monopolize the most exciting, dramatic kinds of work—they'll set the fires that burn down the forest on which they plant their fields, for example, and, if they can, relegate to women the more monotonous and time-consuming tasks, such as weeding. One might say that men will always take for themselves the kind of jobs one can tell stories about afterward, and try to assign women the kind you tell stories during.¹⁵ The more patriarchal the society, the more power men have over women, the more this will tend to be the case. The same pattern tends to reproduce itself whenever one group clearly is in a position of power over another, with very few exceptions. Feudal lords, insofar as they worked at all, were fighters¹⁶—their lives tended to alternate between dramatic feats of arms

gangs were employed in Roman plantations. They were made up of slaves who had been placed in the plantation's *ergastulum*, or prison, for disobedience or attempted escape.

¹² There is certainly work on moralists in China, India, the classical world, and their concepts of work and idleness—for instance, the Roman distinction of *otium* and *negotium*—but I am speaking here more of the practical questions, such as when and where even useless work came to be seen as preferable to no work at all.

¹³ Writing of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century weavers, E. P. Thompson informs us: “The work pattern was one of alternate bouts of intense labor and of idleness, wherever men were in control of their own working lives. (The pattern persists among some self-employed—artists, writers, small farmers, and perhaps also with students—today, and provokes the question whether it is not a “natural” human work rhythm.) On Monday or Tuesday, according to tradition, the hand-loom went to the slow chant of Plen-ty of Time, Plen-ty of Time: on Thursday and Friday, A day t'lat, A day” (1967:73).

¹⁴ When I was in high school there was a kind of macho game among the coolest students, before exams, where they would boast how many hours they'd gone without sleep-cramming beforehand: thirty-six, forty-eight, even sixty hours. It was macho because it implied such students had not done any study at all before, since they had been thinking about more important things. I rapidly figured out that if one reduced oneself to a mindless zombie, the extra hours of study weren't actually going to help. I suspect this is one reason I am now a professor.

¹⁵ Hunting versus gathering again being the paradigmatic example. Child-care is probably the most dramatic exception: it's largely a woman's domain, but it is always generating stories.

¹⁶ I am ignoring here the managerial functions of running their estates, but it's not clear this was considered

and near-total idleness and torpor. Peasants and servants obviously were expected to work more steadily. But even so, their work schedule was nothing remotely as regular or disciplined as the current nine-to-five—the typical medieval serf, male or female, probably worked from dawn to dusk for twenty to thirty days out of any year, but just a few hours a day otherwise, and on feast days, not at all. And feast days were not infrequent.

The main reason why work could remain so irregular was because it was largely unsupervised. This is true not only of medieval feudalism but also of most labor arrangements anywhere until relatively recent times. It was true even if those labor arrangements were strikingly unequal. If those on the bottom produced what was required of them, those on top didn't really feel they should have to be bothered knowing what that entailed. We see this again quite clearly in gender relations. The more patriarchal a society, the more segregated men's and women's quarters will also tend to be; as a result, the less men tend to know about women's work, and certainly, the less able men would be able to perform women's work if the women were to disappear. (Women, in contrast, usually are well aware of what men's work entails and are often able to get on quite well were the men for some reason to vanish—this is why in so many past societies, large percentages of the male population could take off for long periods for war or trade without causing any significant disruption.) Insofar as women in patriarchal societies were supervised, they were supervised by other women. Now, this did often involve a notion that women, unlike men, should keep themselves busy all the time. "Idle fingers knit sweaters for the devil," my great-grandmother used to warn her daughter back in Poland. But this kind of traditional moralizing is actually quite different from the modern "If you have time to lean, you have time to clean," because its underlying message is not that you *should* be working but that you *shouldn't* be doing anything else. Essentially, my great-grandmother was saying that anything a teenage girl in a Polish shtetl might be getting up to when she wasn't knitting was likely to cause trouble. Similarly, one can find occasional warnings by nineteenth-century plantation owners in the American South or the Caribbean that it's better to keep slaves busy even at made-up tasks than to allow them to idle about in the off-season; the reason given always being that if slaves were left with time on their hands, they were likely to start plotting to flee or revolt.

The modern morality of "You're on my time; I'm not paying you to lounge around" is very different. It is the indignity of a man who feels he's being robbed. A worker's time is not his own; it belongs to the person who bought it. Insofar as an employee is not working, she is stealing something for which the employer paid good money (or, anyway, has promised to pay good money for at the end of the week). By this moral logic, it's not that idleness is dangerous. Idleness is theft.

This is important to underline because the idea that one person's time can belong to someone else is actually quite peculiar. Most human societies that have ever existed would never have conceived of such a thing. As the great classicist Moses Finley pointed out: if an ancient Greek or Roman saw a potter, he could imagine buying his pots. He could also imagine buying the potter—slavery was a familiar institution in the ancient world. But he would have simply been baffled by the notion that he might buy the potter's *time*. As Finley observes, any such notion would have to involve two conceptual leaps which even the most sophisticated Roman legal theorists found difficult: first, to think of the potter's capacity to work, his "labor-power," as a thing that was distinct from the potter himself, and second, to devise some way to pour that capacity out, as it

labor at the time. I suspect it wasn't.

were, into uniform temporal containers—hours, days, work shifts—that could then be purchased, using cash.¹⁷ To the average Athenian or Roman, such ideas would have likely seemed weird, exotic, even mystical. How could you *buy* time? Time is an abstraction!¹⁸ The closest he would have likely been able to come would be the idea of renting the potter as a slave for a certain limited time period—a day, for instance—during which time the potter would, like any slave, be obliged to do whatever his master ordered. But for this very reason, he would probably find it impossible to locate a potter willing to enter into such an arrangement. To be a slave, to be forced to surrender one’s free will and become the mere instrument of another, even temporarily, was considered the most degrading thing that could possibly befall a human being.¹⁹

As a result, the overwhelming majority of examples of wage labor that we do encounter in the ancient world are of people who are already slaves: a slave potter might indeed arrange with his master to work in a ceramics factory, sending half the wages to his master and keeping the rest for himself.²⁰ Slaves might occasionally do free contract work as well—say, working as porters at the docks. Free men and women would not. And this remained true until fairly recently: wage labor, when it did occur in the Middle Ages, was typical of commercial port cities such as Venice, or Malacca, or Zanzibar, where it was carried out almost entirely by unfree labor.²¹

So how did we get to the situation we see today, where it’s considered perfectly natural for free citizens of democratic countries to rent themselves out in this way, or for a boss to become indignant if employees are not working every moment of “his” time?

First of all, it had to involve a change in the common conception of what time actually was. Human beings have long been acquainted with the notion of absolute, or sidereal, time by observing the heavens, where celestial events happen with exact and predictable regularity. But the skies are typically treated as the domain of perfection. Priests or monks might organize their lives around celestial time, but life on earth was typically assumed to be messier. Below the heavens, there is no absolute yardstick to apply. To give an obvious example: if there are twelve hours from dawn to dusk, there’s little point saying a place is three hours’ walk away when you don’t know the season when someone is traveling, since winter hours will be half the length of summer ones. When I lived in Madagascar, I found that rural people—who had little use for clocks—still often described distance the old-fashioned way and said that to walk to another village would

¹⁷ Historically speaking, the institution of wage labor is a sophisticated latecomer. The very idea of wage labor involves two difficult conceptual steps. First, it requires the abstraction of man’s labor from both his person and his work. When one purchases an object from an ancient craftsman, one has not bought his labor but the object, which he has produced under his own time and his own conditions of work. But when one purchases an abstraction, labor power, which the purchaser then uses it at a time and under conditions which he, the purchaser, not the “owner” of the labor power, determines (and for which he normally pays after he has consumed it). Second, the wage-labor system requires the establishment of a method of measuring the labor one has purchased, for purposes of payment, commonly by introducing a second abstraction, labor time.) M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 65–66: “We should not underestimate the magnitude, speaking socially rather than intellectually, of these two conceptual steps; even the Roman jurists found them difficult.”

¹⁸ An early Christian would have been outright offended, since time, properly speaking, belonged only to God.

¹⁹ Though, in fact, Homer represents the fate of the *thes*, or occasional agricultural hireling, who rented himself out in this manner, as actually worse than a slave, since a slave at least is a member of a respectable household (*Odyssey* 11.489–91).

²⁰ The only notable exception to this rule is that free citizens in democracies were often willing to hire themselves out to the government for public works: but this is because the government being seen as a collective of which the citizen was a member, it was essentially seen as working for oneself.

²¹ See David Graeber, “Turning Modes of Production Inside Out: Or, Why Capitalism Is a Transformation of Slavery (Short Version),” *Critique of Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (March 2006): 61–81.

take two cookings of a pot of rice. In medieval Europe, people spoke similarly of something as taking “three paternosters,” or two boilings of an egg. This sort of thing is extremely common. In places without clocks, time is measured by actions rather than action being measured by time. There is a classic statement on the subject by the anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard on the subject; he’s speaking of the Nuer, a pastoral people of East Africa:

[T]he Nuer have no expression equivalent to “time” in our language, and they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth. I do not think that they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time or having to coordinate activities with an abstract passage of time, because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision. Nuer are fortunate.²²

Time is not a grid against which work can be measured, because the work is the measure itself.

The English historian E. P. Thompson, who wrote a magnificent 1967 essay on the origins of the modern time sense called “Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,”²³ pointed out that what happened were simultaneous moral and technological changes, each propelling the other. By the fourteenth century, most European towns had created clock towers—usually funded and encouraged by the local merchant guild. It was these same merchants who developed the habit of placing human skulls on their desks as *memento mori*, to remind themselves that they should make good use of their time because each chime of the clock brought them one hour closer to death.²⁴ The dissemination of domestic clocks and then pocket watches took much longer, coinciding largely with the advent of the industrial revolution beginning in the late 1700s, but once it did happen, it allowed for similar attitudes to diffuse among the middle classes more generally. Sidereal time, the absolute time of the heavens, had to come to earth and began to regulate even the most intimate daily affairs. But time was simultaneously a fixed grid, and a possession. Everyone was encouraged to see time as did the medieval merchant: as a finite property to be carefully budgeted and disposed of, much like money. What’s more, the new technologies also allowed any person’s fixed time on earth to be chopped up into uniform units that could be bought and sold *for* money.

Once time was money, it became possible to speak of “spending time,” rather than just “passing” it—also of wasting time, killing time, saving time, losing time, racing against time, and so forth. Puritan, Methodist, and evangelical preachers soon began instructing their flocks about the “husbandry of time,” proposing that the careful budgeting of time was the essence of morality. Factories began employing time clocks; workers came to be expected to punch the clock upon entering and leaving; charity schools designed to teach the poor discipline and punctuality gave way to public school systems where students of all social classes were made to get up and march

²² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutes of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 103. Maurice Bloch, in *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–94, argues that Evans-Pritchard overstates things, and is no doubt correct if Evans-Pritchard really is making arguments as radical as is sometimes attributed to him, but I don’t think he truly is. Anyway, the counterarguments have to do mainly with a sense of historical time rather than day-to-day activity.

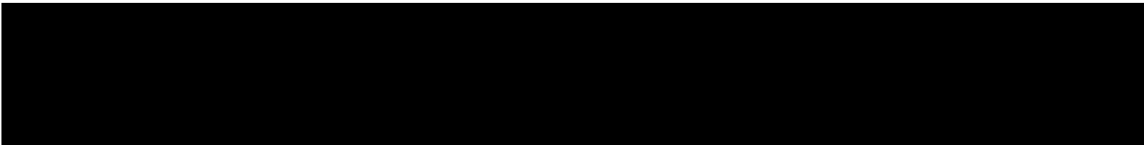
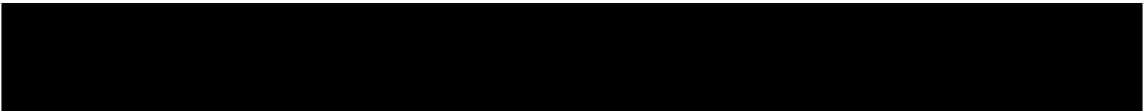
²³ E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56–97.

²⁴ See Jacques LeGoff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), for classic essays extending E. P. Thompson’s insights back to the High Middle Ages.

from room to room each hour at the sound of a bell, an arrangement self-consciously designed to train children for future lives of paid factory labor.²⁵

Modern work discipline and capitalist techniques of supervision have their own peculiar histories, too, as forms of total control first developed on merchant ships and slave plantations in the colonies were imposed on the working poor back home.²⁶ But the new conception of time was what made it possible. What I want to underline here is that this was both a technological and a moral change. It is usually laid at the feet of Puritanism, and Puritanism certainly had something to do with it; but one could argue equally compellingly that the more dramatic forms of Calvinist asceticism were just overblown versions of a new time sense that was, in one way or another, reshaping the sensibilities of the middle classes across the Christian world. As a result, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, starting in England, the old episodic style of working came increasingly to be viewed as a social problem. The middle classes came to see the poor as poor largely because they lacked time discipline; they spent their time recklessly, just as they gambled away their money.

Meanwhile, workers rebelling against oppressive conditions began adopting the same language. Many early factories didn't allow workers to bring their own timepieces, since the owner regularly played fast and loose with the factory clock. Before long, however, workers were arguing with employers about hourly rates, demanding fixed-hour contracts, overtime, time and a half, the twelve-hour day, and then the eight-hour day. But the very act of demanding "free time," however understandable under the circumstances, had the effect of subtly reinforcing the idea that when a worker was "on the clock," his time truly did belong to the person who had bought it—a concept that would have seemed perverse and outrageous to their great-grandparents, as, indeed, to most people who have ever lived.



²⁵ Those who designed modern universal education systems were quite explicit about all this: Thompson himself cites a number of them. I remember reading that someone once surveyed American employers about what it was they actually expected when they specified in a job ad that a worker must have a high school degree: a certain level of literacy? Or numeracy? The vast majority said no, a high school education, they found, did not guarantee such things—they mainly expected the worker would be able to show up on time. Interestingly, the more advanced the level of education, however, the more autonomous the students and the more the old episodic pattern of work tends to reemerge.

²⁶ The West Indian Marxist Eric Williams (1966) first emphasized the history of plantations in shaping the techniques of worker control later employed in factories; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (London: Penguin, 2004), adds ships, focusing on merchant vessels active in the slave trade, as the main other experiment-zone for rationalized work discipline during the period of merchant capital. Naval vessels are relevant, too, especially as they often employed unfree labor as well, since many of the sailors were "pressed" into service against their will. All of them involved contexts where in the absence of long traditions of what one could or could not demand of an employee—which were still felt to apply in areas that had emerged more directly from feudal relations—closely supervised work could itself be reorganized around new ideals of clocklike efficiency.