

# Beyond bullshit jobs

Eliane Glaser

Why do pointless jobs continue to proliferate in these lean times?

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In the summer of 2013, the anthropologist and activist David Graeber coined an unlovely yet highly resonant term: 'bullshit jobs'. Writing in the online magazine *Strike!*, he recalled the prediction by John Maynard Keynes that by the end of the twentieth century technological advance would mean that in countries like Great Britain or the United States there could be a 15-hour working week. Graeber notes that, though this was a reasonable assumption to have made at that time, it has not come to pass:

Instead, technology has been marshalled, 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.<sup>1</sup>

Graeber's article has helped to fill that silence. Since it was published, a lot of people have started talking about this issue. Nearly a million people have read the article online, and it has been translated into more than fifteen different languages. *Strike!* magazine subsequently published it as a pamphlet and distributed it on the London Underground, to raise awareness among commuters travelling to those bullshit jobs.

What are these jobs? Over the last century, while the numbers of people employed

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in industry and agriculture have collapsed, jobs in the managerial and clerical sectors have multiplied. The expansion of the service sector is well known, but it is the huge increase in administrative jobs that is the primary object of Graeber's concern - 'the creation of whole new industries like financial services or telemarketing', as well as all the jobs that supply ancillary support for these industries, 'dog-washers, all-night pizza deliverymen' - jobs that only exist 'because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones'. Graeber readily acknowledges that there are no objective measures of value (and anticipates the challenge 'You're an anthropology professor, what is the "need" for that?'). But the huge response to his article suggests that he has put his finger on something.

The standard explanation for why we are not working a 15-hour week is the rise of consumerism. People need to work harder to produce trainers, mobile phones and sofas, and to earn enough money to buy those things themselves. But, as Graeber notes, many of the jobs they are working in don't actually produce anything. It is true that people are working harder because the cost of living has increased, and people are paying off debts such as mortgages, student loans and payday loans; but these are themselves arbitrary ways of organising society - bullshit expenses, if you like. Unemployment is only a problem in this contingent context.

The peculiar aspect of this state of affairs is that it is economically incoherent, even on capitalism's own terms. In a world ever more in thrall to the imperatives of profit, competition and market-driven efficiency, it is bizarre for employers in the public and private sector alike to be behaving like the bureaucracies of the old Soviet Union, shelling out wages to workers they do not appear to need. Many workers do indeed seem to be working just fifteen hours a week, especially since the advent of the supposedly time-saving internet: they are spending the remaining time, as Graeber aptly has it, 'updating their Facebook profiles or downloading TV box-sets'. There have been layoffs, but these have primarily occurred in productive areas; at the same time, unproductive jobs have multiplied.

The explanation for this conundrum of modern western society, Graeber concludes, cannot be economic: it must be moral and political. One factor may be that if a job matters, going on strike has a real effect. But more broadly, a population that is busy and tired is less likely to revolt. While acknowledging that this situation has been brought about not systematically but through centuries of trial and error, Graeber writes:

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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.

This essay takes Graeber's article and the reaction to it as a starting point; it then draws out some of its explosive implications for our understanding of neoliberalism and the meaning and purpose of contemporary work. It does not offer a systematic analysis of the economics of work; rather, it attempts to bring together and expand on a number of contemporary discussions about the nature and function of work; the ways in which austerity has strengthened the imperative to work almost for its own sake, creating a contradictory discourse of necessity and futility; the left's ambivalent attitude to work; and the possibilities for rethinking and resisting all this.

## **Bullshit jobs in the context of 'austerity'**

The retro-authentic imagery of austerity invokes a time when work was productive in a straightforward sense. Austerity discourse is a black-and-white disguise for our hugely complex society and economy - an economy in which bullshit jobs can exist. Austerity's ascetic discipline is a cover for the fact that producing stuff is not what we do any more. It is not the point of work. The decline of manufacturing in the UK accounts for the absence of a sound economic recovery. When David Cameron and George Osborne pose for photo-calls wearing hard hats and high-vis jackets, they are deploying a visual language that disavows its own symbolic function, attempting to project real-world solidity while actually cloaking themselves in the nostalgic costumes of the manufacturing era. When an infrastructure project is announced, or when a corporation relocates its operation to the UK, politicians and the media announce that what will be created is 'jobs', as if jobs themselves were the new product. The expansion of the job market is

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almost a substitute for economic growth.

All parties declare 'jobs' to be a universal good. The Coalition advocates work in a tone of punitive, almost manic intensity.<sup>2</sup> Earlier this year George Osborne hailed full employment as an achievable goal. Party chairman Grant Shapps followed with the risible notion of rebranding the Tories the new 'Workers' party'. The slogan 'For hardworking people' adorned the lecterns of the 2013 Tory party conference.

This association between the right and work is in part a co-option and neutralisation of working-class interests and identity, along similar lines to blue-collar Republicanism in the US. David Cameron has declared the Tories the 'party of the poor'. Labour, for its part, offers more work as the solution to poverty, incidentally displaying a poverty of imagination about other ways in which people could be spending their lives.

This emphasis on work, and the pretence that jobs are not bullshit, can also be used as a tool to suppress challenges to rising inequality and the iniquities resulting from the financial crash. George Osborne's hard hat is wielded as a symbol of gritty productivity, distracting attention from the fact that the elites whose interests the Coalition represents are themselves unproductive in traditional terms. The austerity imperative to work, an imperative that is imposed regardless of whether or not jobs have a purpose, conceals the monopolistic excesses of the banks and financial elites. We (you) must work hard to pay off the debt, even if the macroeconomic benefits of that injunction are not clear. The well-known coalition habit of erroneously describing the economy in terms of the household budget helps masks an ambiguity. Does working hard to pay off the debt mean working hard to produce goods to sell to other countries, or working hard to make money to buy more goods so businesses can make more profits, and contribute more tax revenues? It seems likely that part of the real motive is, as in Graeber's understanding, a political one: to impose the moral imperative to work hard so that people do not challenge austerity; so that they believe in fact that austerity is their own fault and that their work is a necessary reparation; so that they keep their heads down and direct their anger not towards exploitative elites but towards those who are on 'benefits'; and, indeed, so that they involve themselves in a whole quasi-religious masochistic ethics of work that prevents them from making any (political) demands at all.

Austerity intensifies this contradiction in the wider neoliberal discourse about jobs. On the one hand, capitalism, and especially austerity capitalism, is all about

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leanness, eliminating waste and cutting to the bone. The logic of the market dictates that everything possible must be done to save money, reduce debt and make a useful profit, using the minimum number of people. Technological advancement is praised for increasing efficiency as belts are tightened in businesses and the state. Jobs are cut at tube stations and checkout workers are replaced with automated machines.

On the other hand, there is the opposite objective: to create jobs, seemingly for the sake of it. There is a weirdly profligate and pointless proliferation of activity, especially in the emphasis on 'growth'. Growth is not about efficiency. It's about more jobs not less. This is an entirely different discourse - of capacious open-endedness rather than tight expediency. HS2 has an outrageously small predicted economic benefit, yet it has been justified on the basis that it will create jobs and contribute to growth. Meanwhile GDP does not measure making stuff or increasing national wealth. It measures the circulation of wealth, money changing hands. This is yet another aspect of the diffuse and surreal complexity of what is referred to 'the economy' - and one that undermines the straightforwardness of Coalition demands that we sacrifice our lives to it. Presenting the economy as a handbag, or as the subject of a quasi war effort, distracts attention from these macroeconomic mysteries, of which bullshit jobs are both symptom and fake remedy.

This deep incoherence in Coalition rhetoric, in which the metaphors pull in entirely opposite directions, remains largely uninterrogated. Yet it is a potentially very useful contradiction, because it enables a challenge to be made to the stringent discourse of scarcity and necessity that allows no possibility of an alternative, and portrays idealism and state support as luxuries we cannot afford.

### **The meaningfulness and usefulness of work**

The contemporary reinforcement of the Protestant work ethic is a formidable ideological enemy. Yet the pressure to work is experienced as internal as well as external. The Marcusean aspiration to pursue our own projects and pleasures has been imported into the realm of work itself. In *The Last Night*, Federico Campagna argues that the glimpse of freedom that emerged with the advent of secular modernity proved too frightening, and we replaced traditional religion with faith in the new god of work, entailing a 'submission to submission itself'.<sup>3</sup>

As Jo Littler, Nina Power and members of the Precarious Workers Brigade noted

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in their roundtable conversation in *Soundings* 56, the ‘cultural fetishisation’ of work has coincided with a huge increase in precarious and unpaid work, which only serves to increase its perceived value. We are living for work as never before, but we can no longer count on a job for life. Everyone has, supposedly, become middle class, at least in the (narrow) sense that management discourse is as active in the call centre as in the boardroom.<sup>4</sup> But at the same time we have all been proletarianised, in that every part of the job market, apart from the tiny elite sector, suffers from low wages and lack of security.

In part, this work-worship is the result of a deliberate neoliberal strategy to add carrot to stick; to encourage employees to internalise the values of a company as their own; to give themselves over to work, body and soul. Capital has been able, writes Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, to ‘renew its psychic, ideological, and economic energy’, specifically thanks to the absorption into work of ‘creativity, desire, and individualistic, libertarian drives for self-realisation’.<sup>5</sup> The fact that many of us find meaning, identity and fulfilment in our work complicates the rejection of work as a capitalist imposition. It is interesting that autonomists regard our sense of alienation from work - the split between life and labour that Marx described - not as a problematic loss of authenticity, but rather as an opening up of the possibility of emancipation, via the recognition of estrangement from the capitalist system. This can be a problem when the soul itself is being put to work, as Bifo notes: it becomes harder to detach oneself psychically. On the other hand, we shouldn’t take a narrowly instrumental approach to our endeavours. Unproductive jobs may be regarded as bullshit, but - like art - their very non-instrumentality may sometimes be the key to their value.

Tellingly, the psychological and ideological investment of work with meaning has coincided with the rise of bullshit jobs. Over the last two decades, as Jason Smith notes in his introduction to Bifo’s book, work may be no longer economically necessary, but it is ‘vital to the constitution of the self’. It’s as if meaning has been imported into work to provide a cover for the breakdown in its economic rationale. Neoliberalism simultaneously overinvests work with meaning and drains it of meaning, via automation and audit: ironically, it is precisely the attempt to ‘capture’ impact and use-value via audit mechanisms that makes many jobs bullshit. Graeber cites the proliferation of administration in British academia as one illustration of this trend. Indeed, a lot of the meaningfulness discourse around work is itself bullshit -

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all those motivational seminars with their new-age management mumbo-jumbo. The bullshit phenomenon is self-sustaining: right-wing populist rhetoric proclaiming that those with interesting jobs should count themselves lucky then feeds resentment towards fellow workers whose jobs are less bullshit than ours, rather than towards the pernicious system itself.<sup>6</sup>

It is in this context that bureaucracy has ballooned everywhere. Workers, particularly in the public sector, can't apparently be trusted to do their jobs properly without surveillance. But bureaucracy is also booming as the result of an almost existential anxiety that things do not have import - or even exist - unless they have a parallel existence on a tick-box form, online, or as monetary value. As Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert have described, bureaucracy is removing interest, thought, spontaneity and joy from creative and professional work.<sup>7</sup> This going through the motions of tasks you don't believe in creates an unsettling, corrosive sense of inauthenticity: the sense that you are bullshitting yourself.

But in a world where people are increasingly disempowered yet beset on all sides by busyness and over-stimulation, we are driven, perversely, to want bullshit. These jobs provide a kind of relief, writes Jason Smith: 'We no longer feel compelled to act, that is, to be effective. Our passivity almost seems like a release, a refusal, a de-activation of a system of possibilities that are not ours'.<sup>8</sup> We think we want meaning, and in some ways we do; but we also want to zone out from the treadmill of childcare and phoning call centres and email traffic and just hang out on Twitter (although social media itself can be a new form of semi-work).

Work that people find genuinely creative and meaningful - such as making music or writing journalism - is now often supposed to be done unpaid. While technology has failed to liberate people into a life of leisure, it has succeeded in shunting non-bullshit work into non-work time. For cyber-enthusiasts like Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired*, this constitutes a kind of Marxist liberation. In a discussion of what he calls 'Pro-Ams', people who pursue amateur activities to professional standards, Anderson writes that 'Marx was perhaps the original prophet of the Pro-Am economy ... it is when the tools of production are transparent that we are inspired to create'.<sup>9</sup> By claiming that ordinary people now own the means of production, Anderson is forgetting the small aspect of Marx's work concerning wages. Our culture has over-valorised work, while simultaneously making it more bullshit, leaving us to do the work that really matters in our ever shorter evenings.

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## Bullshit jobs and the nature of capitalism

Are bullshit jobs a feature of capitalism, or do they run counter to capitalism? These jobs force us to question whether capitalism has always been, at its core, uncompetitive and inefficient - whether it has evolved or devolved into something that is flabby, Byzantine, and disobedient to its own rules. Also at stake here is the nature of the relationship between capitalism and modern neoliberalism. Does the existence of bullshit jobs reveal capitalism to be vulnerable, all-powerful, many-headed, consistent, incoherent or simply mutable?

The notion of bullshit jobs complicates a narrow idea of labour as purely productive (as in some variants of Marxism), just as it undermines the assumptions of neoclassical economics concerning market efficiency, scarcity and necessity, and supply and demand. These latter assumptions are mirrored by some anti-capitalist commentators. For example, the artist and campaigner Stephanie McMillan writes in her engaging graphic account of the 2011 Occupy campaign:

Competition is the major economic driving force of capitalism. Capitalists compete against each other for the sale - by out-marketing each other or by undercutting each other in price ... This puts pressure on the rate of profit to fall. To remain competitive, the capitalists are forced to continually cut the costs of production ... Competition also drives technological development as each capitalist pursues ever-increasing efficiency and speed. They mechanize their factories to minimize the number of workers.<sup>10</sup>

Bullshit jobs reveal that the modern economy doesn't obey simple hydraulic economic principles. But were these not mythical in the first place? In striking opposition, Manuel De Landa has argued that capitalism, with its natural tendency towards monopoly, should be redefined as anti-market in essence.<sup>11</sup> To what extent are such counterintuitive complexities integral to capitalism in its classic definition?

Marx certainly knows that for capitalism the point of jobs is not to produce food processors or cars, with concrete use value, but to produce products that can be exchanged for profit: labour enables an accumulation of profit through the retention of surplus value. He also wrote about 'unproductive' labour, by which he meant (at



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least) two different things: both jobs that do not make good use of human capacities, and jobs that do not create surplus value. On these terms, do bullshit jobs even create surplus value, let alone useful stuff? On the other hand there are jobs which are 'unproductive' in a strict sense, but which contribute more broadly to the interests of capitalism: for example being a researcher for a right-wing think tank.<sup>12</sup> Is it the case that the power of ever-more concentrated elites now creates huge numbers of bullshit jobs just so that they themselves can make a profit - as with the corporate interests behind HS2? Or is it the case that, as in Graeber's view, this is not even about finance at all but about politics, and keeping a population pacified? Is Marx's unproductive labour the same as Graeber's bullshit jobs? Or does the notion of bullshit jobs take us one step further?

The emancipatory potential of technology as imagined by Marcuse and Keynes, with its potential of rendering labour useless, is always going to come up against the operating terms of the capitalist model, which is founded on extracting value from labour. Capitalism has the capacity to produce great innovation, but also relies for its continued existence on restricting the potential of both humans and machines. Of course Marx was aware of this paradox. In the *Grundrisse* he writes:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition - question of life and death - for the necessary.<sup>13</sup>

If the phenomenon of bullshit jobs illustrates the contradictions of capitalism, however, their proliferation is not necessarily a 'useful' crisis: the contradictions they embody will not automatically precipitate a major reaction. As Bifo argues, the social content of capitalist production frequently contradicts its own semiotic framework; it produces a system of 'misunderstandings, contrary injunctions and perverse juxtapositions', and these entangle us in a kind of double bind (p66).

The big questions here concern the nature of the fall-out from the contradictions between technological unemployment and capitalism's reliance on labour. Are the interests of capitalism and the internet aligned or opposed?<sup>14</sup> The infinite time-

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wasting addictiveness of the internet is what fills the time of those who sit for much of the day working at their bullshit jobs, meandering from one fruitless website to the next. Does this drag capitalism down or keep it afloat? The multiplication of IT consultants suggests the latter. But it seems a pernicious absurdity that there are plans for every schoolchild to learn how to code, thereby providing infinite foot soldiers for Apple and Google. It does seem that neoliberalism is exploiting new technology not only for profit but also for political ends. Bullshit jobs go beyond exposing the fact that neoliberalism appears to reduce all aspects of human life to economics: even this is a euphemistic cover-up. Behind it lies power, repression and the unproductive concentration of wealth.

### **Beyond bullshit jobs?**

In reaction to the ramping up of austerity injunctions, many on the left are now questioning the nature of work.<sup>15</sup> Indeed everything points to anti-work as a priority: the effects of unsustainable growth on the environment; the economic crashes caused by overproduction; and the precariousness of work itself. The fact that bullshit affects both white-collar and blue-collar jobs offers an opportunity for an alliance. And there are even grounds for co-operation with those on the right who are truly in favour of economy.

Yet a section of the left still finds itself in an unholy alliance with right-wing demands for more work, for example in campaigning for 'the right to work', particularly in an age of high unemployment and precarity. Graeber sees the left's endorsement of 'productivism' as a product of its historic association with unionism.<sup>16</sup> While it continues to restrict its focus to the problem of unemployment, Labour neither reaps the rewards of technological innovation nor engages with broader questions about the quality of life. There is an analogue here with feminism, which has traditionally and understandably lobbied for women's better access to work. If the critique of bullshit jobs has the potential to open up a split on the right between those who are wedded to neoliberalism and those who are wedded to genuine market efficiency, it also exposes a split on the left between those who are demanding more work and those who want to rethink work from scratch.

It is true that cuts and low pay make such blue-sky thinking difficult. But that is surely part of their aim. It's time for the left - and society as a whole - to ask

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questions about the value of work, our investment in work and the best use of our time. Can we understand our own motivations and articulate them clearly and without bullshit, and then analyse neoliberalism's motives and the way it bullshits us about those, so that we can disentangle its needs and desires from our own?

Women who take time off work to have children often find that the experience exposes society's rubrics of work to be the constructs they really are. Practical solutions to the problem of work include the introduction of a thirty-hour week and a citizen's income. But these proposals face considerable political resistance, on the right and the left. They would entail a radical reallocation of resources. But there are psychological obstacles too. The injunctions of the workplace provide protection from the shame of not being perpetually busy. And are we also attracted to our job, even or especially if it is a bullshit job, because we are frightened of pleasure? In the ascetic discourse of austerity it is even easier to erase the difficult question of what we really want. Do we collude on some level with the deracination of our working lives, because it meets our need for evasion and distraction? Does it provide a way to avoid intimacy with our children and family? A way to avoid facing difficult problems and truths? Our ability to be properly alive is intimately connected to our acknowledgement of mortality, and bullshit work is deadening - which helps us avoid thinking about death. It's important to interrogate these profound and counterintuitive phenomena if we are to reimagine work.

In his book Federico Campagna sketches out a playful - yet also bullshit - way of resisting the demands of contemporary work: he suggests smiling compliantly to bosses and customers and then, when backs are turned, napping at one's desk, downloading and selling data, and whiling away long afternoons playing Candy Crush Saga. He argues that to be genuinely alive in an age that has given up on grand projects we must stop hoping - either for revolution or for redemption through sacrifice and success at work. In the *Grundrisse*, on the other hand, Marx chides Adam Smith for associating work with suffering and freedom with happiness. This only applies, Marx points out, to work as capitalist imposition. It can be fulfilling if society is conceived differently.

Piecemeal resistance may be our best bet while we are not in a position to be able to enjoy meaningful and useful jobs; work less in order to care for others, pursue projects and have fun; or invest non-work time with value. But the more neoliberalism denies such possibilities, the more realistic they begin to appear.

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**Eliane Glaser** is a writer, journalist, Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Canterbury Christ Church University, and Associate Research Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She is the author of *Get Real: How to See Through the Hype, Spin and Lies of Modern Life*.

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## Notes

1. David Graeber, 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs', *Strike!* magazine, Summer 2013.
2. As Kirsten Forkert notes in *Soundings*, 'The idea of hard work has for some time been central to neoliberalism, but its meaning has been intensified through austerity measures and debt morality - which requires sacrificing one's living standards to pay off the debt'. See Forkert, 'The new moralism: austerity, silencing and debt morality', *Soundings* 56.
3. Campagna continues: 'Work does not simply act as the only entrance to the market of resources, but also as the main platform for the exchange of social recognition, and as the intimate theatre of happiness ... is there any place where we can feel safer than when we are in our workplace, snug in the warm embrace of our office family?' Campagna, *The Last Night: Anti-work, Atheism, Adventure*, Zero Books 2013.
4. See Madeleine Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruining Our Lives*, Harper 2005.
5. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, Semiotext(e) 2009, p96.
6. See for example the political and public reaction to Cait Reilly's legal challenge to being made to work at Poundland (as discussed by Kirsten Forkert in the *Soundings* piece referred to above).
7. See Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert: 'Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: A Dialogue', *New Formations* 80-81 (August 2013)
8. Jason Smith, intro to *The Soul at Work*, p10.
9. Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion Press 2006, pp62-64.

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10. Stephanie McMillan, *The Beginning of the American Fall*, Seven Stories Press 2012, p60.

11. Manuel De Landa, 'Markets and Antimarkets in the World Economy', [www.alamut.com](http://www.alamut.com).

12. I am very grateful to Hugo Radice for these distinctions.

13. Marx, *Grundrisse*, David McLellan's 1972 edition, p142, cited in *The Soul at Work*, p64.

14. Interestingly, a response to Graeber's piece in the *Economist* does acknowledge that 'the development of large-scale technological unemployment or underemployment ... would force rich societies to revisit a system that primarily allocates purchasing power via earned wages'. See 'On "bullshit jobs"', *The Economist*, 21 August 2013.

15. See for example Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and PostWork Imaginaries*, Duke 2011); Anna Coote and Jane Franklin, eds, *Time On Our Side: Why We All Need a Shorter Working Week*, New Economics Foundation 2013; Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso 2013; Carl Ceerström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working*, Zero Books 2012; Ivor Southwood, *Non-Stop Inertia*, Zero Books 2011.

16. David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, Penguin 2013, pp285-7.