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Are You in a BS Job? In Academe, You're Hardly Alone



Specta Films C.E.P.E.C., Les Films de Mon Oncle

By David Graeber | MAY 06, 2018

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I would like to write about the bullshitization of academic life: that is, the degree to which those involved in teaching and academic management spend more and more of their time involved in tasks which they secretly — or not so secretly — believe to be entirely pointless.

For a number of years now, I have been conducting research on forms of employment seen as utterly pointless by those who perform them. The proportion of these jobs is startlingly high. Surveys in Britain and Holland reveal that 37 to 40 percent of all workers there are convinced that their jobs make no meaningful contribution to the world. And there seems every reason to believe that numbers in other wealthy countries are much the same. There would appear to be whole industries — telemarketing, corporate law, financial or management consulting, lobbying — in which almost everyone involved finds the enterprise a waste of time, and believes that if their jobs disappeared it would either make no difference or make the world a better place.

Generally speaking, we should trust people's instincts in such matters. (Some of them might be wrong, but no one else is in a position to know better.) If one includes the work of those who unwittingly perform real labor in support of all this — for instance, the cleaners, guards, and mechanics who maintain the office buildings where people perform bullshit jobs — it's clear that 50 percent of all work could be eliminated with no

downside. (I am assuming here that provision is made such that those whose jobs were eliminated continue to be supported.) If nothing else, this would have immediate salutary effects on carbon emissions, not to mention overall social happiness and well-being.

Even this estimate probably understates the extent of the problem, because it doesn't address the creeping bullshitization of real jobs. According to a 2016 survey, American office workers reported that they spent four out of eight hours doing their actual jobs; the rest of the time was spent in email, useless meetings, and pointless administrative tasks. The trend has much less effect on obviously useful occupations, like those of tailors, steamfitters, and chefs, or obviously beneficial ones, like designers and musicians, so one might argue that most of the jobs affected are largely pointless anyway; but the phenomenon has clearly damaged a number of indisputably useful fields of endeavor. Nurses nowadays often have to spend at least half of their time on paperwork, and primary- and secondary-school teachers complain of galloping bureaucratization.

And then there's higher education.

In most universities nowadays — and this seems to be true almost everywhere — academic staff find themselves spending less and less time studying, teaching, and writing about things, and more and more time measuring, assessing, discussing, and quantifying the way in which they study, teach, and write about things (or the way in which they propose to do so in the future. European universities, reportedly, now spend at least 1.4 billion euros [about 1.7 billion dollars] a year on failed grant applications.). It's gotten to the point where "admin" now takes up so much of most professors' time that complaining about it is the default mode of socializing among academic colleagues; indeed, insisting on talking instead about one's latest research project or course idea is considered somewhat rude.

All of this will hardly be news to most *Chronicle* readers. What strikes me as insufficiently discussed is that this has happened at a time when the number of administrative-support staff in most universities has skyrocketed. Consider here some figures culled from Benjamin Ginsberg's book *The Fall of the Faculty* (Oxford, 2011). In American universities

from 1985 to 2005, the number of both students and faculty members went up by about half, the number of full-fledged administrative positions by 85 percent — and the number of administrative staff by 240 percent.

In theory, these are support-staff. They exist to make other peoples' jobs easier. In the classic conception of the university, at least, they are there to save scholars the trouble of having to think about how to organize room assignments or authorize travel payments, allowing them to instead think great thoughts or grade papers. No doubt most support-staff still do perform such work. But if that were their primary role, then logically, when they double or triple in number, lecturers and researchers should have to do much less admin as a result. Instead they appear to be doing far more.

This is a conundrum. Let me suggest a solution. Support staff no longer mainly exist to support the faculty. In fact, not only are many of these newly created jobs in academic administration classic bullshit jobs, but it is the proliferation of these pointless jobs that is responsible for the bullshitization of real work — real work, here, defined not only as teaching and scholarship but also as actually useful administrative work in support of either. What's more, it seems to me this is a direct effect of the death of the university, at least in its original medieval conception as a guild of self-organized scholars. Gayatri Spivak, a literary critic and university professor at Columbia, has observed that, in her student days, when people spoke of "the university," it was assumed they were referring to the faculty. Nowadays it's assumed they are referring to the administration. And this administration is increasingly modeling itself on corporate management.

To get a sense of how total the shift of power has become, consider a story I heard recently, about a prominent scholar who had just been rejected for a named chair at Cambridge. The man was acknowledged to be at the top of his field, but he didn't even make the shortlist. The kiss of death came when a high-ranking administrator glanced over his CV and remarked, "He's obviously a very smart guy. But I have no use for him." That judgment settled the matter. When even Cambridge dons are presumed to exist to further the purposes of managers, rather than the other way around, we know the corporate takeover of the global university system is complete.

All of this doesn't explain why people such as myself (and I have it relatively easy) are expected to spend hours filling out time-allocation studies, writing recommendation forms and meeting notes, calculating measures of my work's social impact, or providing hypothetical grades on colleagues' publications to assess how they'd likely be ranked by an outside panel for departmental funding purposes — all during time that I might have otherwise spent discussing the history of social theory with grad students or, God forbid, reading a book. (I can't remember the last time I read a book. I mean, like, a whole book, cover to cover. It basically never happens...)

But it's possible to connect the dots. Let me begin by introducing a concept: managerial feudalism. Rich and powerful people have always surrounded themselves with flashy entourages; you can't be really magnificent without one. Even at the height of industrial capitalism, CEOs and high-ranking executives would surround themselves with a certain number of secretaries (who often did most of their actual work), along with a variety of flunkies and yes men (who often did very little). In the contemporary corporation, the accumulation of the equivalent of feudal retainers often becomes the main principle of organization. The power and prestige of managers tend to be measured by the number of people they have working under them — in fact, in my research, I found that efficiency experts complained that it's well-nigh impossible to get most executives, for all their "lean and mean" rhetoric, to trim the fat in their own corporations (apart from blue-collar workers, who are ruthlessly exploited).

Office workers are typically kept on even if they are doing literally nothing, lest somebody's prestige suffer. This is the real reason for the explosion of administrative staff in higher education. If a university hires a new dean or deanlet (to use Ginsberg's charming formulation), then, in order to ensure that he or she feels appropriately impressive and powerful, the new hire must be provided with a tiny army of flunkies. Three or four positions are created — and only then do negotiations begin over what they are actually going to do. True, if the testimonies I've received are anything to go by, many of those people don't end up doing much; some administrative-staff will inevitably end up sitting around playing fruit mahjong all day or watching cat videos. But it's generally considered good form to give all staff members at least a few hours of actual work to do

each week. Some managers, who have more thoroughly absorbed the corporate spirit, will insist that all of their minions come up with a way to at least look busy for the full eight hours of the day.

To get a sense of how this dynamic might work itself out, let me take an example from one of the testimonies I received. Let's call our informant "Chloe, the nonexecutive dean." Chloe's testimony is particularly useful because she has stood, as it were, on both sides of the divide. She not only performed a stint creating bullshit tasks for others to do, but afterward, as head of department at a different university, was able to see what the effects of such behavior actually were.

Chloe was a professor of sociology at a prominent British university who unwisely took on a three-year gig as dean with a specific responsibility to provide "strategic leadership" to a troubled campus. Of course, most of those toiling in the academic mills have come to fear the word "strategic." "Strategic mission statements" — or, worse, "strategic vision documents" — instill a particular terror, since they are the primary means by which corporate management techniques are insinuated into academic life. So one might feel justified already in suspecting that Chloe has been placed in a bullshit position. According to her testimony, this was indeed the case:

The reason that my Dean's role was a bullshit job is the same reason that all non-executive Deans, Pro-Vice-Chancellors, or 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 organisation. An executive PVC or Dean (i.e. s/he who holds the budget) can cajole, coerce, encourage, bully, 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 non-executive. 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 bun fights about targets, overall strategy, performance measures, audits etc. I had no budget. I had no authority over the buildings, the time table or any other operational matters. All I could do was come up with a new strategy which was, in effect, a re-spin of already agreed University strategies.

So Chloe's primary role was to come up with yet another strategic vision statement, of the kind that are deployed to justify the number-crunching and box-ticking that has become so central to academic life. But since she had no actual power, it was all meaningless shadow play. What she did get was her own tiny empire of administrative staff.

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 post-doctoral research fellow, PLUS £20,000 "expenses" allowance. 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 apart from anything else, I am a lone scholar and all my work is deeply qualitative. I do not work in teams and don't actually need an assistant.

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

Chloe appears to have been a 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, trying to find problems he might troubleshoot, or at least assess; the personal assistant kept Chloe's schedule, and the research assistant spent her time working on her own personal research. That in itself might be innocent enough. At least none of them seems to have been doing any harm. Who knows, maybe the research assistant even ended up making an important contribution to human knowledge in her own right, during the time she wasn't helping Chloe.

Still, the truly disturbing thing about the whole arrangement, according to Chloe, was her realization that if she had been given real power, she probably would have done harm. Because after her two-year stint as dean, she was unwise enough to accept the gig as head of her old department — that is, before quitting six months later in horror and disgust:

My very brief stint as Head of Department reminded me that at least, at the very minimum, 90% of the role is bullshit. Filling out the forms that the Faculty Dean sends so that s/he 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 5-year-plan justifying why departments need to have the money and staff they already have. Doing bloody annual appraisals which 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.

What's more, having been trained in social theory, Chloe had all the tools to understand what was happening around her, to trace out the underlying dynamics at play:

It is not capitalism per se that produces the bullshit. It is managerialist ideologies put into practice in complex organisations. 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 life blood of universities — teaching and education.

Chloe was a minor player, which is one reason she could be so clear-eyed about what was really going on. As another academic put it, "Every dean needs his vice dean and subdean, and each of them needs a management team, secretaries, admin staff, all of them only there to make it harder for us to teach, to research, to carry out the most basic functions of our jobs." University professors have to spend increasing proportions of their days performing tasks which exist only to make overpaid academic managers feel

good about themselves. These managers surround themselves with officious armies of functionaries who are little more than the kind of feudal retainer a medieval knight might employ to tweeze his mustache or polish the stirrups on his saddle before a joust.

One might be tempted to lay all this down to the peculiarities of the British academy, choked as it is with weird, "marketized" bureaucracy — but in the United States the problem is just as bad. In fact, administrative bloat and consequent bullshitization in the U.S. are worse in private universities than in public ones. (This makes sense: in public universities, administrators are to at least some degree accountable to the public; in private ones, they are answerable only to trustees, who are familiar mostly with the standards prevalent in the corporate world and therefore find it normal for an incoming executive to expect to be assigned a bevy of assistants and only then set about making up work for them.) The obvious question is: Why are these standards so common in the corporate world? Why has managerial feudalism expanded from the corporate world into practically everything else? And why has academe been so particularly hard hit?

I can't claim to have a definitive answer to any of these questions, though I have a number of hypotheses. I suspect that bullshitization has been so severe because academe is a kind of meeting place of the caring sector — defined in its broadest sense, as an occupation that involves looking after, nurturing, or furthering the health, well-being, or development of other human beings — and the creative sector. These are, certainly, the two sectors of undeniably valuable work that have been most plagued by bullshitization.

The creative industries have, over the past several decades, pretty much all seen the multiplication of new and exotic levels of managerial positions that are mainly involved in selling things to one another. Many editors at academic presses, for instance, tell me they haven't read even half the books they are supposed to have edited, since they are expected to spend almost all of their time drafting or reviewing proposals or marketing things to other members of the editorial board. The visual arts have seen the rise of a whole new stratum of managerial intermediaries called curators. News reporters find their relations with editors complicated by an additional level of "producers." Film and television, which have always had producers, have undergone an endlessly elaborate

process of managerial subinfeudation, resulting in a daunting array of producers, subproducers, executive producers, consultants, and the like. ("Do you want to know why Hollywood films nowadays all tend to suck?" one scriptwriter wrote to me. "Well, consider the fact that there are now in every stage of making a movie at least a dozen suits hanging around, each and every one of them insisting on making changes in the script, tinkering, revising, intervening in some way to justify their existence.")

In the creative industries, as in the sciences and humanities, much of this is justified by various sorts of internal competition. It no longer suffices, for instance, for a scriptwriter to pitch a film idea once; now an extensive process of "development" involves elaborate mock-ups and ads for nonexistent products. Then there are teams of executives whose sole job is to decide which of the various proposals deserves to be made. This is the Hollywood equivalent of the 1.4 billion euros per year that European universities spend on failed grant applications. Inserting such contests into the heart of the creative process has, in most cases, had effects on culture just as predictably disastrous as our newfound habit of insisting that scientists spend most of their time begging for funding has had on the advancement of science. For some reason, this is how things must now be done.

In the caring professions, the causes are slightly different. Here, too, there has been an endless multiplication of previously unnecessary managerial positions and the consequent proliferation of paperwork. But much of that, I think, is also a result of digitization. While digital technologies have the effect of rapidly increasing productivity in the manufacturing sector, applied to caring labor they tend to have the opposite effect: They reduce productivity, as nurses and teachers are obliged to spend increasing proportions of their time pretending to quantify the unquantifiable. The result is profoundly inflationary. In the United States, the cost of health care and university education skyrocketed during precisely the time that those sectors became increasingly digitized. This inflation in the caring sector is not a product of managerialism or of digitization alone. Rather, it results from an unhappy confluence of the two.

So: How might it be possible to turn all this around?

It's hard to see how a movement against bullshitization could really emerge from within the academy. Top-down reforms are almost inconceivable. To give a sense of the problem: Once, a colleague and I approached the newly appointed director of our university — a man who was clearly keen to make a name for himself — and tried the following. "We have a plan for how you can make yourself famous," we said. "I'm sure you're aware this university tops the ranks in percentage of lecturers' time spent in self-assessment exercises. Imagine that you were to announce you're going to totally reverse this, and embark on a campaign to eliminate unnecessary paperwork and go back to teaching and learning things again. You'd be instantly on the cover of every magazine in Britain!" He replied, "Well, that certainly sounds appealing. Are you willing to come up with a detailed plan for how this would be done?"

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It was a very gentle way of saying, "Don't be ridiculous." If we had tried to write up a plan, the result would have produced more paperwork than we were all already doing. (In British universities, this even has a name: the "forming committees to discuss the problem of too many committees problem."). And the odds that the director's large and well-paid staff of administrative assistants would have decided to abolish themselves were approximately zero.

It's hard to envision change coming from any kind of bottom-up movement, either. Something about the experience of grad school, the job market, and pre-tenure trials ends up rendering 99 percent of even the most secure academics utterly incapable of meaningful rebellion. It's a matter that surely deserves sociological analysis. The tenure system is ostensibly there to give professors the security to experiment with potentially

dangerous ideas. Yet somehow the process of obtaining it reduces a good proportion of the most perceptive and sophisticated human beings our society produces to a state in which they can't imagine what a dangerous idea would even look like.

Again, to return to my own experience: During the British student movement of 2010, which saw occupations in virtually every college protesting government plans to triple tuition fees, I struggled to figure out some way for my colleagues — every one of whom claimed passionate support for the movement — to chip in. Expecting them to do anything militant, even spending a day in one of the occupations, was out of the question. So I suggested a boycott of self-assessment exercises. Many of those were mandated by the government, but since direct government funding was being cut off anyway, why not simply refuse to carry them out? So I proposed that we scan each document that passed our desk for tell-tale vocabulary, keeping a tally of the words "quality," "excellence," "leadership," "stakeholder," and "strategic." The moment the total passed five, we would tear up the document and throw it away.

The more polite of my colleagues pretended I was joking. Most stared at me as if I were a lunatic.

Experiences like that revealed to me a special vision of hell: Eternal damnation is a group of people performing unnecessary, unpleasant tasks that they are bad at and can't stand doing — but spend all their time on anyway because they are so indignant about the prospect that anyone else might be doing less. Change, if it is to come, will have to come from outside the academy.

This might seem unlikely; but I don't think it's impossible.

It strikes me that a real problem with the university system is that, intellectually, it is becoming the only game in town. Scholars have no other place to go, scientists few, and even as university departments themselves become less and less concerned with ideas, almost anyone whose work is in any way related to the life of the mind — artists or journalists, for instance — becomes more and more likely to have to spend at least some time employed by one. These two phenomena are related. The best thing that could happen to universities would be to face a little competition.

It's helpful to remember that universities have faced effective competition before, and benefited from it. Most 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers had nothing but contempt for universities, which they saw as corrupt, pedantic, moribund, and medieval; they preferred to write for the general public. The modern university was a bid for renewed relevance. Similarly, in the mid-20th century, it wasn't the French academic system but nonuniversity groups and institutions like Georges Bataille's Collège de Sociologie (which was not a college), the Existentialists, or even professional psychiatrists like Jacques Lacan, who invented much of what we now think of as French theory. In each case, the real innovators were much closer to artistic and journalistic circles — which are now, ironically, themselves being drawn into the university — than to academe. But it can hardly be said that academe did not come out better for the competition.

One reason is that there was a lot of money floating around. It wasn't hard for maverick intellectuals who might otherwise end up in the post office or rural schoolroom to find at least enough money to live on. Perhaps the easiest way to begin to de-bullshitize academic life would be to do something about the current precarity of intellectual life.

In fact, the phenomenon of bullshit jobs is one of the most compelling arguments in favor of a policy of universal basic income. One common objection to simply providing everyone with the means to live and then allowing us to make up our own minds about how we see fit to contribute to society is that the streets will immediately fill up with bad poets, annoying street musicians, and vendors of pamphlets full of crank theories. No doubt there would be a little of this, but if 40 percent of all workers are already engaged in activities they consider entirely pointless, how could it be worse than the situation we already have? At least this way they'd be happier.

A likely result of universal guaranteed income would be the rapid defection of a large number of academics from their university positions to intellectual circles where they would once again be able to argue about ideas and research things they actually find interesting. They might establish free schools where they could teach anyone who wished to learn. Universities would not become extinct. They would retain many strategic advantages. But they would be forced to de-bullshitize very rapidly.

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