

PROGRESS, BULLSHIT JOBS, AND THE PROMISE OF A DECENT WORKDAY

By
Andrés Gualito



Epiphanies

"In a few years—within our own lifetimes—we will be able perform all the operations of agriculture, mining, and manufacturing with one-fourth the human effort to which we are accustomed... I anticipate that the standard of living in progressive nations, within a century, will be from four to eight times higher than it is today... Yet there is no country or person, I believe, who can look forward to the age of leisure and plenty without fear. For we have been trained too long for struggle and not for enjoyment... Three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may eliminate the problem for a long time. For three hours a day is enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us... When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of great social importance, there will be great changes in moral precepts... The love of money as a possession—separated from the love of money as a means of enjoying the realities of life—will be recognized for what it is, a somewhat odious morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities, which one surrenders with a shrug." "shoulders to the specialists in mental illnesses."

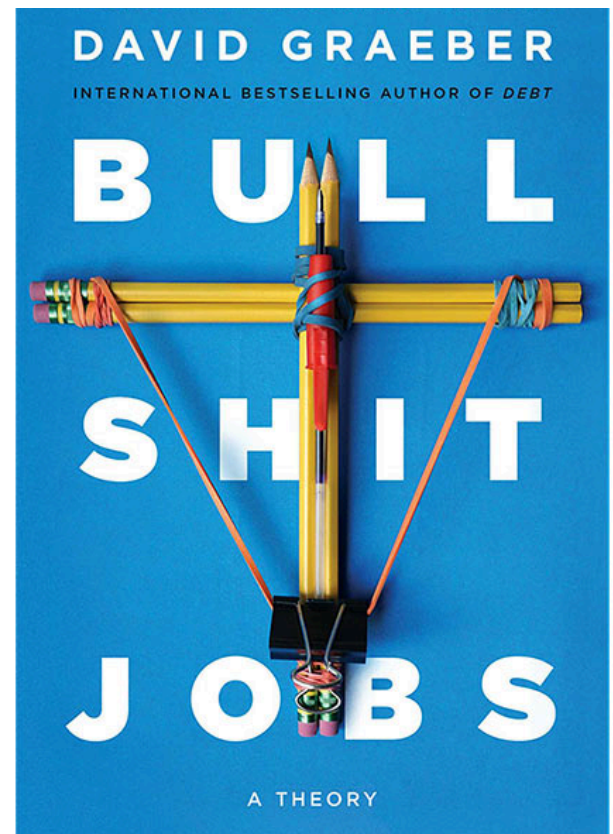
Now that in much of the world, and particularly in Mexico, there is a debate about the economic and social viability of a fair working day for human beings, it seemed pertinent to me to return to what the famous and influential British economist John M. Keynes mentioned in a very optimistic way about the economic and social future of humanity in the distant 1930s, in an essay entitled "The Economic Possibilities of Our Grandchildren," resurfaced a few years ago thanks to an illustrious publication by David Graeber entitled "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs."

Among other things, Keynes predicted that by 2028, mainly thanks to an increase in technological development, the standard of living of humans, in terms of well-being, would be between four and eight times higher than what it was at that time. He even dared to predict that as long as the world remained protected from certain eventualities, such as wars, people in sufficiently developed countries could aspire to a 15-hour workweek.



Well, it turns out we're almost at 2028, and not only are our grandchildren's economic prospects nowhere in sight, but there's also no sign of reducing the long working hours that exist in some countries, like Mexico, and which are often confused with productivity.

As Graeber pointed out in his essay, there are nowadays many reasons to believe this would be a real possibility, especially because the technological advancements that currently exist, even in countries not considered highly developed, are capable of allowing us to work fewer hours per day. But instead, it seems that technology has been directed, at best, to find ways to make us work more, perhaps, as Graeber himself mentions, by creating endless useless or bullshit jobs, with all the moral and emotional damage that this entails for people.



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“Graeber mentions that the most common explanation for Keynes's "utopia" still failing to materialize is that he failed to consider the rise of consumerism as a result of the alienation and desalination of capitalism. But curiously, jobs related to production and distribution have not increased as much—because, as predicted, technology has enabled the automation of many of these processes—as have managerial, administrative, commercial, service jobs, or those related to new secondary industries, such as pet care or overnight food deliveries, which owe their existence precisely to the fact that we spend most of our time working.

The absurd thing, said Graeber, is that inventing jobs was something expected in state models outside of capitalism, such as in the former Soviet Union, where work was considered almost a sacred duty, and therefore all the necessary jobs were invented so that everyone could work at whatever they could, even if they were meaningless jobs.

But in a capitalist world, dominated by premises such as market competition, efficiency and all those things that would apparently do everything necessary to avoid paying for unnecessary employees, it seems strange that should happen.

Perhaps, Graeber continued, the reasons for maintaining this lifestyle were part of a model of capitalist control, which by giving a superlative moral value to work, sought to subject us to labor discipline in which free time is believed to be something truly immoral.



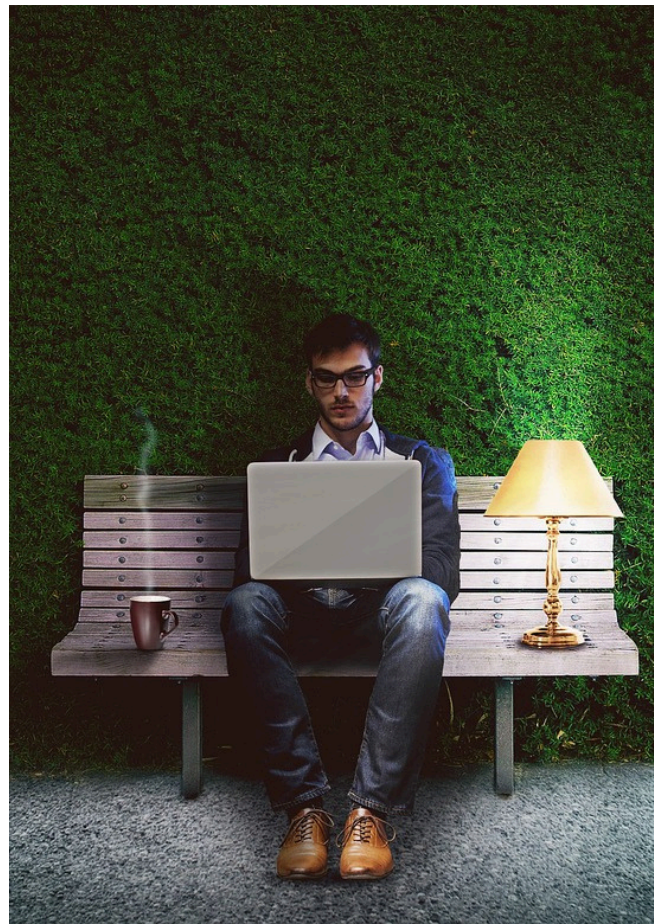
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For whatever reason, and without getting into the muddy terrain of unnecessary work, (because it is difficult to find a fair measure of the social value of some jobs), the fact is that the reduction in working hours, which would allow people to have enough free time to pursue alternative, creative projects or hobbies—to foster a true state of well-being— simply hasn't arrived. On the contrary, it's not uncommon to find more and more people staying in their workplaces for long hours, although certainly, and paradoxically, this doesn't mean they are strictly speaking working or being "productive" all of the time.



It's undeniable that living conditions today are better than they were a hundred years ago, at least in general terms, but it's not a reason to celebrate too soon, as these improvements in living conditions only affect a very small percentage of the world's population. In Mexico, despite the significant economic and social progress experienced in recent years, there are still more than 46 million people living in poverty, more than 37 million in moderate poverty, and just over 9 million people living in extreme poverty. Most of these people are certainly not "lazy." Many of them spend at least twelve to fourteen hours a day on work-related activities, which leaves them practically unable to engage in other activities during the day, whether personal or collective, such as becoming more involved in political or social affairs, or, for example, enabling parents to better raise children and adolescents.

According to the UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) 2023 Technology and Innovation Report, Mexico ranks 61st globally in the Country Readiness for Frontier Technologies (CFT) index, which includes AI, nanotechnology, drones, robotics, gene editing, the Internet of Things, 5G networks, and 3D printing. All of this technology, which is crucial for the future progress of nations and perhaps for reducing our working hours, is already widespread throughout a large part of the population, promising great benefits in the short term. However, to achieve this, we must implement policies that allow us to be productive and efficient without sacrificing our well-being. We must abandon the capitalist narrative of measuring our work performance by the time we spend in our workplaces, exploited until our last breath, as if we were in the midst of feudalism.



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Of course, this isn't so easy, because we can't deny that, whether we like it or not, we are part of something more than a "simple" global economic system, based on private property, market exchange, wage labor, and production for profit. Capitalism, as Nancy Fraser points out, "is a social order that empowers a profit-driven economy to exploit the extra-economic support it needs to function. These supports consist of wealth expropriated from nature and from subjugated peoples..." This state of affairs allows for the establishment of capitalism's main dimensions: its structural racism; the exploitation and invisibility of social reproduction, which increasingly erodes its conditions of sustenance; its appropriation of nature through the plundering and degradation of the environment; and the growing tendency toward authoritarianism in political regimes around the world.

Nothing is enough, for whom enough is little, said Epicurus. How long should we work to be productive? Can we produce more by working less, as Keynes predicted? Is there a correlation between spending more time at work and increasing productivity? What is the utility of wealth, "how much money do we need to lead a good life"? What is our purpose in life, and what place does money have in it? Is it a means or an end? Of course, this is not about advocating for not working, but about finding the middle ground between necessary productivity and the free time humans require to do something more with their lives, beyond just working.



According to the most recent OECD report, which analyzed the workload in its member countries, the average number of hours a person works per year is 1,632. In this sense, it is in the countries considered the most developed and innovative, such as Denmark, Norway, Austria, Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands, where people work the fewest hours per year, and where, coincidentally, there are the highest levels of productivity.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Mexico, with an average of 2,207 hours worked per year, followed by Costa Rica with 2,170 hours, Chile with 1,953 hours, and Greece with 1,880 hours. In other words, in Mexico, the average person works 26% more hours than the average in the member economies. This means that Mexican workers work around 500 hours more per year than the average in OECD countries. This also does not seem to be related to an increase in productivity, but quite the opposite.

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The OECD itself defines "time poverty" as a situation in which a worker spends very few hours a day on leisure activities, recreation, physical and mental recovery, and personal care. This is the case in Mexico, where workers typically spend an average of 13.5 hours a day on activities outside their work environment, including eating and sleeping. This doesn't even include the excessive commute times in megacities like Mexico City. Given these figures, it's not surprising that an increasing number of people are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression, which could be related to a lack of rest and general working conditions, which also evidently lead to low productivity due to physical and mental exhaustion. So if employers want more productivity and more money in their already, in many cases, overfilled pockets, rather than asking their employees work even harder, they should consider having well-paid, trained, and more rested workers, which would surely generate greater and more genuine commitment to company interests.



Another aspect to consider, about this general lack of free time, is the issue of absences in the upbringing of children and adolescents, which is sometimes confused with financially maintaining a home, particularly in this turbulent information age. Parenting should be more than "giving" children an electronic device to entertain themselves, without truly monitoring and sharing what they do, think, and feel. But how can one truly raise children if there isn't even time to attend to one's basic needs? Perhaps this perverse dynamic of living to work is also largely responsible for raising completely asocial individuals, devoid of empathy, generosity, and above all, without any sense of social justice and cooperation.

We must insist that all governments—all, but especially those that identify as leftist—and the private sector must build a better working environment, on that will allow us to maintain and even increase productivity, with the caveat that even economic growth and material enrichment has limits.

Finally, we must not forget that technology should serve to make our workload less burdensome. Technology should serve to make our work increasingly more productive, but less labor-intensive, thereby ensuring the construction of a true state of individual and social well-being for ourselves and, why not, for our grandchildren as well.

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