

Why Are We Still Working?: A Critique of Contemporary Leninism

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The traditional Marxist doxa will have it that the proletariat are never provided enough labor positions, a factor of their poverty; subsequently, one of the major projects of the USSR was guaranteeing employment to all citizens. In capitalism, employment is among the costs that, at the height of competition, capitalists need to cut to remain ahead — leading to periodic crashes. It was also understood that despite this, the proletariat had to be offered employment to some degree such that commodities could even be bought to sustain the capitalist class. However, on the whole, the emphasis remains on the working class being *denied* labor. Michael Parenti, among these “traditional Marxists” (for lack of a better word), writes in *Black-shirts and Reds*:

“...[B]usiness is not dedicated to creating jobs. In fact, capitalists are constantly devising ways to downsize the workforce. From 1980 to 1990, the net number of jobs created by the biggest corporations in the United States, the ‘Fortune 500,’ was zero. The new jobs of that period came mostly from less capital-intensive smaller firms...” (pg. 125)

It is true that capitalists are not creating jobs, not in “crony capitalism” and not in laissez-faire capitalism, as evidenced by [a study on neoliberalism spanning 18 countries](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107919/1/Hope_economic_con) → https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107919/1/Hope_economic_con

[sequences_of_major_tax_cuts_published.pdf](#). What is interesting however, is that capitalists aren't exactly creating jobs, but they also aren't exactly "downsizing the workforce," as Parenti's traditional Marxist view will have it. In fact, it seems the opposite: we are working way more than we need to.

David Graeber was an anarchist writer who takes the complete opposite, almost anti-Marxian view, writing in his classic *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs* → <https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/>:

"In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century's end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right..."

Automation has, in fact, phased out much of human labor — much of the dangerous human labor for which Marx's theories were originally intended for. What is supposed to happen, then, is not that the net jobs created be zero, but that it be *less*. Why is it not?

It may be because jobs that have been phased out have been merely replaced by a ballooning executive class, a managerial class, a bureaucratic class, whatever you like to call it. The relevance of this semi-unique class has caused many anarchists to break from Marxism, as the latter merely fails to consider this class seriously ([Michael Albert has stated](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBvJOLqYPgM) → <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBvJOLqYPgM> that, just as capitalism is ideology for a capitalist class, Marxism is ideology for a managerial class; this may be vindicated by the fact that many Marxist leaders, such as Lenin and Castro, emerged from well outside the peripheries of the traditional working class of their respective time.)

What do these managerial positions look like? In among his master-works, *Bullshit Jobs*, Graeber painstakingly enumerates the endless anecdotes of those in such positions such that he diagnoses a common social ailment which he names "bullshit jobs." These jobs are meaningless, often described as "shuffling papers around," "being paid to look busy," etc.

Graeber explains two causes of this issue, one social and one moral. The social one is that it benefits the capitalist class that people remain working, or even merely at work, because if you let people be truly free you'll get 60s counterculture all over again, and capitalists' power will be yet again threatened. The moral one is that our society has become workaholic to the point that not working is almost shameful, or even worse, that working *pleasurable* jobs is unfair, stemming not just from jealousy but also residue from a Puritan-esque ethic that work must be unpleasant in order to be virtuous.

Graeber's explanations, however, feel very half-baked — they feel more like descriptions of current affairs and not the true root causes of them. I believe part of the issue is Graeber's avoidance of Marxian analysis, which, if applied properly, explains this dilemma perfectly.

I preface this analysis by saying I don't think it is sufficient to say these new jobs are merely the result of governmental expansion — neither of expansion of the public sector nor of increased regulation in the private sector necessitating bureaucratic jobs. As Graeber has elucidated, the issue extends into the territory of jobs that have nothing to do with government and nothing to do with government regulation per se — as such, the dilemma remains, even moreso in standing foursquare against the ideological dogma that capitalist markets are so terribly efficient.

Guy Debord writes in his hauntingly relevant text, *Society of the Spectacle*:

“Automation [...] obliges the commodity system to resolve the following contradiction: the technological developments that objectively tend to eliminate work must at the same time preserve labor as a commodity, because labor is the only creator of commodities. [...] To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or ‘service’ sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities...” (#45)

This more neo-Marxian analysis, which takes Marx in stride but develops him to apply to developing conditions of postmodernity, seems much more readily applicable than the more traditional Leninist view. It seems now that workers do not need labor, they need to be *free from* labor. Capitalism behaves such that aggregate demand needs to remain even if labor becomes phased out; as the vast majority of society lives off but the sale of their labor, there will remain the necessity of who to sell it *to*, even in the face of obsolescence.

In this sense, capitalism may be obsolete. In this sense as well, the old Marxian methods, both of analysis and revolutionary practice, may be obsolete. It is important to remember this whilst anti-intellectuals like Parenti claim that all who stray from his idea of a pure Marxist path are merely perverting what is rightfully — and in his view almost eternally — true. It might have never occurred to Parenti that his own Marxism-Deus is anything but a set dogma, detached from the material. In their excellent essay, *Marxism or Freedom* → <https://bruchstellen.org/?p=407>, writer Natasha explains:

“We need to try and remember Marx’s atheism, not because it was made by Marx, but because we need to rethink the very ways in which theory informs praxis, and overthrowing all the fetishes that Kautskyism, the Soviet bureaucracy, Trotskyist parties, and SYRIZA-type formations requires ‘radical doubt’ in the old sense. We also need to remember the atheism of Marx in order to not fall into the very easy trap of just calling out ‘Marxism’ as a term, and thinking that we have solved everything. [...]

Marx remains important, as does Lenin — not in the sense that they were enlightened gurus that forged our theories and so on, but in the sense that they were the historic moments which transcended and destroyed previous fetishes and conceptions about politics and human liberation. Ignoring Marx ignores a huge contribution to freedom; it does not mean ‘liberating the masses’ from the fetish of Marx, it just means depriving humans of that logical path towards liberation.”

The path forward, from what I can see, lies not in “Marxism-Leninism,” nor in any other even more dogmatic splinters, but in the neo-Marxist innovations of Situationism, of Debord, of Fisher, etc.