

Bullshit Jobs: A Critical Pedagogy Provocation

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For what and for whom do I study? And against what and against whom?... To the extent that the future is not inexorably sealed and already decided, there is another task that awaits us. Namely the task of the inherent openness of the future . . . It is not by resignation but by the capacity for indignation in the face of injustice that we are affirmed (Freire, 2001:73-74).

I precede the ‘provocation’ —a word I first heard used by my colleagues Gordon Asher and Leigh French—below with the following caveats. First, I produced this provocation as part of a workshop on Critical Pedagogy that Gordon Asher, Leigh French and I co-organised preceding a day conference on Critical Pedagogies. Second, the provocation that follows, like those of Asher and French, sought to spark off debate; it used David Graeber’s rhetorical argument about paid work today, with its explicit use of the ‘b’ word, to encourage academics at the event to re-contextualise regimes of accountability in the university that they are experiencing and to consider how critical pedagogy could help them do so. Finally, I have been lucky enough to leave full time employment when voluntary redundancy was on offer (being already off work on stress-related sick leave, for the first and last time in my full-time, paid working life). This allowed me to stop being a wage slave and become, instead, as one of my colleagues put it, like Tony Benn who left Parliament to take up politics; I was leaving the university to take up education.

David Graeber’s recent (2013) piece ‘On the phenomenon of bullshit jobs’ observes that during the 20th century, the percentage of people in the US and UK performing ‘professional, managerial, clerical, sales and service’ sector jobs rose from 25% to 75% of the workforce, in part accounted for by ‘an unprecedented expansion of sectors like corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources and

public relations'. Why has there been such a growth in these jobs? Graeber says first, like many others, that de-industrialisation, coupled with technological, communicational and transportation advances, led to whole swathes of work being dramatically reduced and/or moved South (as was the case with industry). Second, again, not an uncommon observation, there has been a significant increase in service, and, especially, administrative sector jobs. The latter rests on 'the creation of new industries like financial services or telemarketing, or on the unprecedented expansion of jobs in areas such as 'corporate law, academic and health administration, human resources, and public relations' (Graeber, 2013) and in sectors of work supporting the needs of the above sets of workers. Graeber deems these service and administrative sector jobs 'bullshit jobs'—a concise term that emphasises their seeming meaninglessness. He notes that the expansion of jobs in these two sectors occurred alongside the elimination of productive jobs, in which workers interacted with the world and made tangible (even if sometimes virtual) things. Most remaining workers only spend a fraction of their time doing the work they believe they were originally hired to do; more time is spent performing morally and politically dispiriting 'bullshit' tasks. Only a small fraction of this remainder still have the kinds of employment that many of the latter group thought they were initially entering.

Given the mid twentieth century belief that technology would eventually end long working days, why, are most employees 'relentlessly squeezed or exploited' at jobs that require them to spend more time performing work that makes them more visible and accountable to managers? Why are they encouraged to blame their plight on either the few workers with meaningful jobs or on 'a terrorised stratum of the universally reviled, unemployed' [and we might add migrants and precariously employed] whose plight was created by the class that structured the workplace? Graeber (2013) suggests that we consider the elite mentality producing these jobs: "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 anyone else".

Graeber concludes his short piece, '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' and are spending more of their time on bullshit activities in these jobs. They are encouraged to feel 'a simmering resentment against anyone whose work has clear and undeniable social value' as well as against the under-, insecurely- and unemployed. I would amend Graeber's argument: It is not just that many people are being made to perform jobs of little worth and much effort whilst a few perform highly satisfying jobs. Even in academia, where he works as I have done, a privileged few are granted time to pursue research. But even amongst these, as well as amongst all others, at least in England, there has been a serious erosion of the sense that one was entering a vocation in the Weberian sense of a calling: they must meet publishing and grant targets individually set for them that enable management surveillance and require them to monitor themselves as well as receive highly favourable student evaluations of their teaching.

But these tasks are not simply meaningless. Nor is it the case, as Prolapsarian (as s/he calls themselves (2013) suggests, that Graeber fails to recognise the valuable work of administrators and support workers. Rather, as the growing literature on new managerialism and accountability suggests, *all* workers increasingly must fulfil these tasks that take them away from the work they were hired to do. With regard to educators, as Ball (2003) notes, these tasks introduce the 'terrors of performativity', about which others, and I, have written¹. As Ball says, the self becomes a spectacle that requires continuous re-fabrication. Davies and Bendix (2005) further note that the very process of 'performing the new entrepreneurial subject of neo-liberalism – flexible, productive and strategic – requires that one also takes up neo-liberal discourses and practices as one's own' (2005: 82). Taking up these discourses and practices renders one more visible to management plus students, and requires that one internalise and become complicit with these discourses and practices. Thus, the self is partly reshaped to meet the growing demands of producing facsimiles, simulations, taking time and energy from the arguably more important work of teaching, research

¹ Speaking for myself, I sought to understand and share with others, the effects of these regime's impact on my subjectivity, my workload, and relationships with students, colleagues and managers (see Canaan, 2013, 2011, 2008).

and administration.

Despite these limits, Graeber's analysis helps explain the growing attraction of critical pedagogy: it speaks to the tension between acknowledging that students and lecturers are interpolated by the neoliberal logic and also being aware of, as the Freire quote in the epigraph indicates, an alternative logic. The more one explores this tension, deepening one's awareness of the circumstances producing current work conditions and mind sets, the more fully one nurtures potential alternatives that can be worked towards.

Whilst I was on a full-time permanent contract, I tried to nurture this tension that critical pedagogy offers, especially in my final decade. I sought to rethink module content, outcomes and forms of assessment as well as engender fuller, contradiction-laden dialogues with students. I also was able to reshape teaching and learning spaces when, with student support, I convinced the university to create (from autumn 2007) a space students came to call 'the beanbag room'. This is a relatively open learning space with no pre-designated front, back or sides and with comfortable chairs for pregnant or disabled students and beanbags for the rest of us, placed in a circle on the floor, sitting 'at the same level with one another' as students often remarked in module evaluations. In these spaces I sought to facilitate more dialogical ways of engaging than those that the increasingly constrained and regulated university environment in which I worked encouraged.

Within this space, a colleague and I then (2008-2009) set up and taught an ongoing second and third year undergraduate routeway, Public Sociology. We viewed Public Sociology as what Burawoy calls Critical Public Sociology, impelled by what he and we saw as the need in the current increasingly neoliberalised environment for Sociology to move 'from interpretation to engagement, from theory to practice, from the academy to its publics' (Burawoy 2005:324). This Public Sociology also sought to facilitate student awareness of the need for 'critique', . . . that is to be "*critical of*" as well as "*critical to*" the world it engages, a public sociology that seeks to transcend rather than uphold what exists' (Burawoy, 2005:325).

We sought to encourage student critique of hegemonic forms of Sociology and question if Sociology was or could be value neutral. We sought to help students consider these ideas by offering them the chance to take these sociological insights elsewhere. Students went on placements outside the classroom, often outside the university. Some explored contemporary issues, working with grassroots, campaigning groups with which they could deepen their awareness of the increasingly iniquitously divided and polarised world in which they lived. Others chose to work with churches or local community groups—often less explicitly challenging of their prior views—than was the case with the first set of students. In the third year students either continued the same project or developed another. In Projects which replaced dissertations, students had to evaluate the degree to which Public Sociology informed their practices. Teaching and learning was facilitated by insights from critical pedagogy, which guided the routeway.

Despite students often finding this routeway ‘eye opening’ as mentioned in module evaluations, the programme had considerable limitations. I present three: first, our teaching and administrative loads were heavy and our students required greater academic support than had their predecessors before neoliberalisation had so intensified and regulated academic work. We could not find adequate time to overcome these challenges—nor did management acknowledge them . . . a plight undoubtedly shared by other academics as well as teachers. Second, the bullshit dimension of academic jobs consumed much of our energy and time. Finally, students did not necessarily come to classes politicised or wanting to be politicised, especially as the university is increasingly construed as a space of workplace skills development and the neoliberal logic pervades more of our lives. Thus, encouraging students to consider learning for praxis, fusing theory with practice in order to prise open and work to progressively transform the current order was a challenge. This was especially true for these minority ethnic and white working class first generation students, who, understandably, sought to obtain the skills and insights that could help them move up what they perceived as the possible (but uncertain) ladder of social mobility.

These kinds of frustrations contributed to my involvement with other critical pedagogy informed projects, outside the university and in informal education, and to my departure from full-time university work in summer 2012. For the sake of brevity I discuss here one informal project I am involved with, BRE(A)D, Birmingham Radical Education whose motto is 'We shall rise!'. The project is impelled by a similar logic to that which led to the creation of alternatives within and against, and outside and against the, neoliberalised university. They are part of a wider acknowledgement that the supposed crisis that capitalism has been experiencing post the 2007-2009 (financial problems governments created by allowing banks and national banking and other financialised system of banks) seems to be getting off the ground now, but this has taken two years. During this time we held several events with Columbian and Greek popular educators/critical pedagogues and a day event on Freire, but until recently, our efforts lacked momentum. In the interim, however, we have doggedly sought to elucidate our aims.

Our work now has two strands, which we clarified in and through a collaborative discussion. One of my BRE(A)D colleagues, Marion Bowl, first introduced to this discussion Foley's idea of 'learning in social action'. Foley notes that such learning occurs 'informally and incidentally . . . as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways to do something about it' (Foley 1999:1-2). Foley further suggests that such learning starts from the assumption that the world in which we live is organised 'in the interests of capital and against' workers' interests. Consequently, it entails engagement with processes of 'emancipatory struggle' against current conditions (1999:131) in order to 'illuminate and give strategic direction to . . . the education practice' of a campaign or organisation engaged in struggle (Foley, 1999:133).

Marion then noted in our discussion that perhaps BRE(A)D could conceptualise our second strand of work as 'learning for social action', extending Foley's initial concept which could entail 'working with groups of people or individuals who want to know more about why the world is a bad place. What's Neo liberalism? Why is it screwing

up my chances? What is the bedroom tax and why is it important to have arguments opposing that. Helping people to rehearse the political arguments . . . and how they're impacting on people's everyday lives. She further noted that such learning for social action could provide participants in discussions that gave them a kind of 'critical confidence' with which they could 'rehearse the hegemonic political arguments . . . so that they might more fully understand complex policies or political changes and how they're impacting on peoples' lives'.

This discussion helped BRE(A)D clarify the dual edged programme of work we had been envisaging. With regard to 'learning in social action, BRE(A)D are now proposing to facilitate a series of discussions with local campaigning groups, guided by a document I wrote, as an activist, about the need for campaigning groups to reflect on and clarify issues that often underly our work (Canaan, 2014). With regard to 'learning for social action', we are now planning to hold sessions at an adult education college in Birmingham, starting with a discussion of the current economic situation and the supposed need for government austerity packages.

We are unsure where this will take us. Our hope is that it will enable BRE(A)D, at a local level, to 'attack the groundwork' of capitalism, as Joss Winn (2014) put it.

Note

This article is a redrafted provocation from a co-organised Critical Pedagogies workshop preceding the conference, 'Critical Pedagogies: Equality and Diversity in a Changing Institution', Edinburgh University, September 2013

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