

Bullshit jobs and universal basic income

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Abstract

David Graeber devotes the last section of the last chapter of his last book to Universal Basic Income (UBI). In freeing human labour from its market form (decommodification), Graeber is thinking in particular of bullshit jobs, the central feature of which is the meaninglessness and uselessness of the tasks, since they contribute neither to social nor individual well-being. Because Graeber did not elaborate on this idea of the feasibility of UBI, it is helpful to consider some critical objections in this regard; for example, is the proposed UBI too anti-capitalist and, in this sense, utopian? Moreover, if UBI did reduce the amount of junk and bullshit jobs, wouldn't it simultaneously erode the labour market and the foundations of the work ethic? Finally, wouldn't the introduction of UBI represent an excessive burden on public finances, without the support of which UBI is unfeasible? In this paper, I prove that the answer to these questions is: definitely not. This means that Graeber is right—especially in relation to the empirical data that are typical of Slovenia.

KEYWORDS: David Graeber, universal basic income, junk jobs, bullshit jobs, decommodification, welfare state

Introduction

In the 21st century, the first to rehabilitate the study of alienation was the anthropologist David Graeber (2013) who, in his book *Bullshit jobs: A theory* (2019), revived the debate the true foundations of which, after Rousseau and Hegel, had only been laid down by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century. The debate almost entirely died down a hundred years later because it seemed to be no longer needed. After a temporary discredit of

Marxism, which coincided with the practical collapse of real socialisms and the economic triumph of neoliberalism, in academic circles, alienation was also considered to be an emptied scholastic-leftist category unable to compete with more current terms, such as entrepreneurship, innovation, genetics, ecology, terrorism, and similar. This has been proven wrong by the current expansion of bullshit jobs that have been widely gaining ground in the most developed economies, which seems to contradict the belief in the redemptive nature of market competition. The only plan that might impede this expansion of human stupidity is, according to Graeber, a universal basic income (UBI).

In the first section of this article, I summarise the Marxist diagnosis about what went wrong, because it is largely congruent with Graeber's explanation. The second section of the article addresses the situation in Slovenia to enable an evaluation of the weight of the problem through numbers that Graeber gives for developed countries. The last section examines whether or not Graeber was right to ignore the question that is most often used to refute UBI: "But where would the money come from?" When Graeber advocates UBI, he does not even want to address this question, saying that he does not find it surprising that people deem UBI unfeasible, 'because we've all grown up with largely false assumptions about what money is, how it's produced, what taxes are really for' (Graeber, 2019, p. 280). But is he right?

The diagnosis

Graeber's theory of bullshit jobs once again¹ brings into focus the origin of the problem: specifically, alienation, originating in the economic sphere and spreading out to all other, non-economic areas. As this is also the Marxist diagnosis, I will briefly resume it here. Marx distinguished five areas of alienation:

Economic alienation: is a process of changing one's labour power to commodity, wherein the conditions of private ownership and in the wage labour relationship, the fruits of workers' labour, as well as the control of their work and the production process, are taken away from them

the object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer ... The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external exis-

¹ The last one to do this in the very time of the rise of neoliberalism was Erich Fromm in his book *To have or to be* (1976). In his book Fromm also draws on Marx's concept of alienation, and considering the question of what to do offers exactly the same answer as Graeber—universal basic income (Fromm, 2013). Fromm first advocated UBI as early as in 1955.

tence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (Marx, 1979b, pp. 302-304)

Religious alienation: natural and human powers, wishes, emotions and needs are projected into supernatural forces then used to manipulate those who are subordinate: 'The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself' (Marx, 1979b, p. 303).

Political alienation: economic alienation is, in turn, the basis for the alienation of the state along with the entire political and ideological apparatus that becomes the tool of domination, reflecting and protecting economic relations: 'Man was the actual principle of the state, but he was unfree man. It was therefore the democracy of unfreedom, accomplished alienation' (Marx, 1979b, p. 75).

Social alienation: due to exploitation in the sphere of production, all other relations in all other fields are also instrumentalised, where another man is no longer man's goal, but his means to achieve something else. When, in the relationship between production forces and production relations, one element becomes alienated, the other element also becomes alienated, and vice versa. This results in general dehumanisation, the highest expression of which is the rule of capital

An immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life activity, from his species-being, is *the estrangement of man from man...* What applies to a man's relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor. (Marx, 1979b, p. 310)

Individual alienation: last but not least, in the wage position, the worker is also alienated from themselves, that is, as a person, both at the physical as well as psychosocial level: 'Production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the human commodity,' but being caught in the wage relationship produces man 'as a mentally and physically dehumanised being' (Marx, 1979b, p. 317).

Marx says that all the listed forms of alienation stem from the first, economic one. However, Graeber is not certain that this is true. Namely, were this true capital would not tolerate, pay—even encourage and multiply—meaningless jobs that benefit no one, not even those who perform them. According to market logics, bullshit jobs should be inversely proportional to the development of capitalism; so, why does competition not work here?

The answer clearly isn't economic: it's moral and political. The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger (think of what started to happen when this even began to be approximated in the '60s). And, on the other hand, the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them. (Graeber, 2019, pp. xvi–xvii)

Moreover, even workers themselves believe that work and even jobs are sacred² (similarly to market and debts) and that their un/usefulness is no measure whatsoever (Kučič, 2020). This is where the difference between Marxism and Graeber's anarchism begins.³ Obviously, the abolition of private ownership and wage labour relations and a unified rebellion of the proletariat against the owners of the means of production is not necessarily the first, unavoidable, and even less so, sufficient solution. At least since Max Weber, it has been clear that Marx's plan on what to do was wrong. However, the fact that we are no closer to the answer today than we were a hundred years ago, for Graeber, is not a reason to offer his own alternative. If we do not yet have a specific program for solving the problem, this does not mean that we should remain silent about the problem (because, in this case, we would never come to a solution). Instead of offering a cure, he offers a diagnosis, because as opposed to a diagnosis, which has to be a single and the right one, therapies can be different and also combined. This is why the last sentence of Graeber's last book reads: 'The main point of this book was not to propose concrete policy prescriptions, but to start us thinking and arguing about what a genuinely free society might actually be like' (2019, p. 285).⁴

Despite the above-quoted highlight, Graeber makes one exception in his entire opus. Namely, right under the title of the very last chapter of the book, he writes: 'On universal basic income as an example of a program that might begin to detach work from compensation and put an end to the dilemmas described in this book' (Graeber, 2019,

² This is more than a metaphor. The basis of this antisocial prejudice is actually Biblical and dates back to at least the second century B.C., to *Sirah*, the book of the *Old Testament*. It reads: 'Better is he who labors and abounds in all things, than he who boasts and lacks bread' (Sir 10, 27). The Slovenian version of this axiom goes: He who does not work shall not eat—the most recent one to spread this prejudice in Slovenia was the Slovenian Minister of Economy, Zdravko Počivalšek (Furlan Jež, 2018).

³ Graeber gave a concise account of the divergence with Marxism in his essay *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology* (Graeber, 2004), where he derives from the thesis he formulates as follows: '1. Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy. 2. Anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice' (2004, 6). As an application of the mentioned thesis, it is also worth noting the practical, simple and feasible solution to the problems related to inequality at the global level, which he presents in three points (2004, p. 78).

⁴ He underlines the same thing, even if in a more humorous way in the book (2019, pp. 269-270).

pp. 269-285). To illustrate the contribution of the potential UBI to the reduction of alienation in Graeber gives, in an anthropological style, some principled arguments for the introduction of UBI and states numerous examples of the distress experienced by concrete individuals (at work and outside it). He provides three important highlights, often overlooked, even by the advocates of UBI.

First, 'Even a modest Basic Income program could become a stepping-stone toward the most profound transformation of all: to unlatch work from livelihood entirely' (Graeber, 2019, p. 281). By all means, UBI is not a universal recipe for the dis-alienation of the five areas listed at the beginning of this article. Undoubtedly, however, UBI—even a modest one—is a huge and important step forward. This warning will become pivotal, especially when making decisions about the amount of the concrete sum of UBI, which must slightly exceed the minimum living costs, and be slightly below the minimum salary (for full-time work) because of the substantial gap between both figures.

Second, concerning one of the basic anarchist axioms—to reduce the power of the state and bureaucracies of all kinds—Graeber firmly rejects the fear that the introduction of UBI would further strengthen the power of the state due to its becoming also authorised for the realisation of UBI. On the contrary, the power of authorities would decrease because the right to UBI would abolish, in the most radical of all possible ways, the state's power to economically dictate, trouble and condition people's lives—as it currently does—in the most delicate area, where we are the most vulnerable, that is, in ensuring the fulfilment of our basic existential needs. The same applies to bureaucracy: according to Graeber, it would not be further expanded by UBI. Namely, with the assertion of this human right, a part of bureaucracy could automatically be redirected from the controlling and extortionist functions (= biopolitics,⁵ Foucault) to more useful tasks,⁶ while at

⁵ In contrast to the usual, known, visible, sudden and (most often) individual blackmail, the violence of structures is more difficult to notice, as it is usually underestimated by reduction to sporadic events. This is facilitated by these characteristics: because structural violence is not limited to individuals, because it is more long-term, because it works at very different levels, because the impact is by no means uniform (marginalised and least visible suffer the most), because the source of such violence cannot be one point and therefore also not visible at first glance. Foucault also draws attention to these circumstances with terms such as: biopolitics (Foucault, 2000), bio-power and micro-power (Foucault, 2000a, pp. 148, 150).

⁶ This is what is most typical of the Slovenian social work centres, the basic social care institutions in Slovenia. In the past two decades, these have been de-professionalised in three ways: first, by deliberately forcing out the professional role of social work (with forced redirection of experts into non-social, surveillance tasks as well as with the downsizing of the centres); second, through increased bureaucratisation of the centres as the result of inappropriate state social policy to the beneficiaries of social benefits; third, with the transformation of social work centres from social-supportive institutions to the lightning rods of user discontent (for more see Leskošek, 2011; special section of the *Social Work Journal*, SD 2011; Leskošek & Dragoš, 2014; Dragoš, 2015; Cafuta, 2021). The point is: the only way of reducing these negative trends in social work centres is to introduce the right to UBI.

the same time the part of bureaucracy which is impossible to retrain would simply become redundant and would disappear (Graeber, 2019, p. 280).

Third, among the many positive effects of UBI, two cannot be achieved without it.⁷ The first is linked to preserving the foundation of the welfare state, which has been under attack for the past half-century. This foundation, the *sine qua non* of the welfare state, is the redistribution of resources from the upper to the lower social strata to provide marginalised categories (those who are expelled from the labour market or have not yet been included in it) the means of survival as an unconditional right. The second effect concerns bullshit jobs that affect all, including the affluent. UBI would break the vicious circle of being trapped in these meaningless jobs as refusing them would not be an existentially risky project. For the first time in the history of capitalism, the door would importantly break open for all citizens to the production mode that Marx called “the realm of freedom”: the de-commodification of labour that is no longer instrumentalised for the needs of survival but is an end to itself in the sense of expressing creativity. Of course, there will still always be the unavoidable work that is existentially necessary, although not necessarily pleasant. However, with UBI, this necessary part—“the realm of necessity”—would also be free from manipulation, as it would not provide grounds for exploiting anybody. Only when people’s minimum level of existence is unconditionally guaranteed can the door to the realm of freedom break open, including the possibility of workers’ own self-decision about whether they would want to go through this door or not (and prefer living in idleness, even if in poverty or at its margins).⁸ However, we should not forget about an additional prerequisite for entering the realm of freedom as mentioned by Marx in the third part of *Das Kapital* (and by Keynes four decades later), namely, the shorter working day. It is only beyond the realm of necessity—while not without it—as Marx says,

that the development of human powers begins, which is an end to itself, the true realm of freedom, which however, can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The basic prerequisite is the reduction of the working day. (Marx, 1973, p. 914)

⁷ The introduction of UBI would have many beneficial effects at the individual level (greater health, well-being), from an economic point of view (greater labor market flexibility, reduced existential risk in entrepreneurial decisions) and society as a whole (less inequality, greater cohesiveness). However, all these improvements can also be achieved with appropriate sectoral policies, i.e., in situations in which we are without UBI—except in two areas (mentioned below), where UBI is the only option for improvement (more in Dragoš, 2019).

⁸ In debates about UBI, this category of idlers is marked as “surfers”, because they do not understand their UBI as the starting point for their professional career, but as an opportunity for surfing (ideally in southern countries, where the prices are lower and the waves are higher).

It is this very year, 2021, after a century and a half since Marx's above diagnosis, that the first global study was conducted (in 194 countries) on the deadliness of work due to long working hours. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of deaths due to cardiovascular diseases caused by over long working hours increased by 42% and stroke due to the same cause by 19%, amounting to a total of 745,000 deaths (WHO, 2021). This is also what Graeber warns about (Kučič, 2020): 'If we don't stop working more, we will soon be forced to choose between various catastrophes compared to which the current pandemic will look like a Sunday stroll in the park.' In short, work kills if it is too long. For some time now, the prerequisite for the reduction of the working day has not been a technological but an ideological one (Kučič, 2020). The only quick, reliable, and efficient "vaccine" against this pandemic is the introduction of UBI.

The problem

Graeber's exact definition of bullshit jobs reads like this:

a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee is obliged to pretend that is not the case. (Kučič, 2020, pp. 9-10)

He points out that though it is impossible to exactly measure the range of bullshit jobs, this does not mean the phenomenon does not exist.⁹ In developed economies, such jobs amount to 37–40%, meaning that 'roughly half of the economy consists of, or exist in support of, bullshit' (Kučič, 2020, p. 285).

How could the size of the problem, which should be mitigated by introducing UBI, be at least roughly determined? Three highlights from Graeber's definition are essential here; the first two are explicit, and the third (phenomenological) one is implicit: (a) the existence of bullshit jobs is independent of the amount of the wage (Graeber's book is an anthology of such examples); (b) because the definition only includes paid jobs, it leaves out the largest and most vulnerable category, which is provided for by the welfare state, that is, jobless people who have no access to the labour market and are at the same time without means of subsistence; (c) although the definition is not focused on the precariat, it also does not exclude it (entirely). These two social problems—bullshit jobs and the precariat—intersect, resulting in two things. First, a part of the precariat finds itself within bullshit jobs, and second, the precarious part of bullshit jobs also includes two subcat-

⁹We have not been able to count all the stars and galaxies, yet that does not mean that the universe is not big.

egories: the first one shows that underpayment and insecurity of the precariat is the only difference between precarious bullshit jobs and other bullshit jobs, which also means that precarious bullshit jobs are equally as pointless and useless as other bullshit jobs within this category which are not precarious. The second subcategory of bullshit-precariat, however, certainly do not consider their work, as such, meaningless—despite the precariousness of their job and underpayment. This is especially true for Slovenia, where, for example, most of the cultural sector—creative, useful, meaningful—operates using the labour of precarious workers (Murovec et al., 2020). At the same time, it is clear that even the most meaningful and creative jobs can become unbearable in precarious working conditions if they do not enable subsistence (or they are very much underpaid considering the intensity of input). In Slovenia, the most current, acute and dangerous example of this is the health care system, which is on the verge of collapse due to the drain of nurses: they are taking jobs as supermarket cashiers, and not because they think that serving consumers and registering their habits is more meaningful than caring for patients' lives. To sum up: the above definition also implicitly allows for bullshit jobs to include that part of precarious jobs that are only “pernicious” (Graeber) for those who perform them, because they find themselves in the vicious circle of exhaustion in otherwise socially useful or even necessary jobs. The slave's suffering is no smaller if they know that picking cotton is useful for making shirts. It follows that, as with the first subcategory of precarious workers within bullshit jobs, the same applies to this second subcategory: the term *junk* jobs is appropriate for both, which does not apply for the rest of the precariat (outside bullshit jobs) whose material deprivation does not erode the meaningfulness of the work they do. For the sake of clarity, I should summarise this confusion in the labour market in two points: while *bullshit* jobs are tied to the futility of work and *precarious* jobs to their underpayment, it is also worth noting the intersection of these two categories, which is even more problematic, and I label it as *junk* jobs: these are all jobs that are pointless and underpaid at the same time (sometimes even unpaid); among junk jobs, there are two types of meaningless work: those that are meaningless for all involved and for society as a whole, and at the same time underpaid; the second type of this same category of junk jobs are tasks that become meaningless only for workers as performers of these tasks (otherwise they are useful for users and society) because workers lose the meaning of their work through wage deprivation (e.g., underpaid nurses, underpaid social service providers, cleaners, etc.). The point: unlike the first category of junk jobs, which can be abolished without harming anyone, the second category of junk jobs is the opposite - it must be financially rehabilitated (stimulated) in order

to prevent erosion of the meaning of socially useful tasks. Is something like this even possible within capitalism?

What is the weight of these three elements (a, b, c) in Slovenia?

The problem regarding the first item (a) is seen from Slovenian public opinion surveys. Therefore, I am summarising 20 facts:

(1) Among the 16 possibilities that “are the most life-enriching” Slovenians chose “creative work”, more often than shopping, maintaining internet contacts, travelling to exotic places or travelling within Slovenia (Toš, 2020, p. 66).

(2) When judging the quality of work or job, the respondents are asked to rank seven given qualities;¹⁰ Slovenians put the meaningfulness of work “where you have the feeling of achieving something” in the **first** place. This option was chosen by 94.7% of respondents (with “good salary” only figuring third; Toš, 2018, p. 894). Similarly to the substantial size of this share from 2017, the following trend is also astonishing: a decade before: as many as 75.0% of respondents chose the same quality, while in 1995 this choice was made by only 30.9% of respondents (Toš, 2018, p. 939).

(3) A further sharpening of the above probing of motivation for work is represented by a typically “workaholic” statement: “I would like going to work, even if I did not need money”, and Slovenians’ response to it. In Slovenia, as many as 55.6% of respondents agree with this statement, while only 21.2% reject it; our affirmative share was larger and the share of rejections smaller than those in neighbouring countries, as well as in, for example, Finland¹¹ (Toš, 2018, p. 442).¹²

(4) “Personal contacts with other people” at work, as the tested formulation read, were important for 85.4% of the respondents, with only 4.1% claiming the opposite; the share of the latter is among the smallest among the 37 countries participating in the survey (Toš, 2018, p. 451).

(5) The statement “I am proud of the kind of job that I do” was rejected by only 2.9% of respondents, which is the fourth-smallest share among 37 countries (Toš, 2018, p. 489).

¹⁰ These include: good salary, adequate working time, possibility of own initiative, long vacation, meaningful work (the feeling of achievement), responsible work, nothing of the listed.

¹¹ We should not forget: Before Slovenia gained independence and also over a longer historical period, Finland was quite comparable to Slovenia—while since Slovenia's independence it has become an unattainable model in all other indicators (similar to the Czechia).

¹² Measured on the five-grade scale, where I joined the first two options in the affirmative answer and the last two options in the negative one—the same applies to the data in this and the following items.

(6) As many as 57% of Slovenians, and the highest share among all 37 countries, agree with the statement, “To avoid unemployment, I would be willing to accept a lower position for a lower payment” (Toš, 2018, p. 494).

However, the above image of “workaholics” is spoiled by an alarming piece of data about relationships at work:

(7) The Slovenian share of those who estimate that the relations at work between the management and the employees are bad (rather + very) amounts to 12.4%, which is the third-highest share among all 37 countries (Toš, 2018, p. 482).

(8) In Slovenia, the share of those whose work is (always + often) stressful amounts to 51.2%, which is the highest share among all 37 countries (Toš, 2018, p. 471).

(9) The share of those who can decide independently about the daily distribution of their working hours (“when I start and finish work”) is only 11.5%, which is among the smallest of all 37 countries (Toš, 2018, p. 474).

(10) In Slovenia, the share of those who experienced discrimination at work¹³ amounts to 18.5%, which is above the average of the 37 countries (Toš, 2018, p. 454).

(11) In Slovenia, the share of those who experienced any discrimination in the workplace (e.g. “intimidation, psychological or physical abuse”) is 10.7%, which is just under the average of 37 countries, but above the average of former socialist countries (Toš, 2018, p. 456).

(12) Over 44% of Slovenian respondents agree with the statement, “I give to the (working) organisation more than it gives to me” (Toš, 2020, p. 256).

(13) 17.9% agree with the statement “that the organisation exploits me” (Toš, 2020, p. 256).

(14) 44.7% agree that they are “not rewarded enough” for what they contribute to the organisation (Toš, 2020, p. 256).

(15) 39.2% opposed the statement: “I would recommend to my children employment in the organisation I am currently employed for” (Toš, 2020, p. 257).

(16) 30.3% state that “at the moment I am employed in my current organisation mainly because I do not have a better alternative” (Toš, 2020, p. 257).

¹³ This means: in performing tasks at work or accessing employment (e.g., job application); the question refers to the last previous years.

(17) 31.8% state that “I would be happy to quit if I could obtain a better employer” (Toš, 2020, p. 257).

(18) 36.7% state that “at the moment it is too stressful for me to leave the organisation” (Toš, 2020, p. 257).

(19) 68.2% state: “I think I could easily become attached to a different organisation” (Toš, 2020, p. 257).

(20) Typically, Slovenia also has a record high level of discontent with the relationship between the management and the employed within companies, which was measured before the most recent economic crisis, that is, at the peak of the economic conjuncture, after which everything became even worse: in 2005, in Slovenia, 15.5% of respondents stated that relationships were bad (“rather bad” + “very bad”), which is the highest measured value of all 44 countries participating in the survey; at that time the average¹⁴ of all countries was only 6.8%, while in the former socialist countries the average was slightly lower: 6.1% (Toš, 2013, p. 583; own calculation).

Slovenia stands out by how high we value work, which is shown in the first six items. With regard to bullshit jobs, this is positive data—but only under the condition of a possibility that such jobs can be avoided. The rest of the 14 items are pessimistic. Slovenians expressed relatively high shares of clear dissatisfaction regarding poor working conditions, mainly on account of the management. If optimistic and pessimistic items are read together, they make an explosive mixture that Graeber does not mention (because he did not examine Slovenia). The combination of high aspirations concerning work and a simultaneous entrapment in poor working conditions increase workers’ frustration regarding both their jobs and the content of their work. Moreover, this is the very point of the first form of alienation mentioned in the first part of this article: when the working process, including the product, becomes alienated to become an independent and foreign force, ‘the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien’ (Marx, 1979b, pp. 303-304). A similar highlight is given by Guy Standing: ‘Alienation arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one’s own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate; it is simply done for others, at their behest’ (Standing, 2018, p. 49).

The other element from Graeber’s definition (given under item (b)) implies the erosion of the sense of the existing welfare state. This problem is particularly poorly recognisable in Slovenia, where averages tend to be manipulated. It is true that the share of poor

¹⁴ Slovenia is not included in the calculation of the average.

people has (so far) been under the European average along with the share of social inequalities; the shares of public health and schooling are still prevalent; all the indicators of social security are high above the European average along with the general quality of life measured through subjective satisfaction with the quality of public services, which is still quite good (because we have succeeded in not destroying our socialist heritage, yet). This, however, does not mean that politicians are right when they boast about the extent of our welfare state.¹⁵ On the contrary, it is according to the criterion of the welfare state that Slovenia figures as one of the worst countries in Europe. This becomes immediately obvious when we take a look at trends and move away from the average (to the interior of individual categories and areas). If we compare the period before the previous economic crisis (2002–2008) with the crisis years of 2009–2015, Slovenia belongs among the group of three lowest-ranking European countries according to the measure of the increase of income inequalities: inequality has risen the most in Croatia, immediately followed by Slovenia, and with Spain in third place (Jianu, 2018). The same goes for gender inequality. Despite quite beneficial data on this, which for Slovenians are much above the European average, the trend is catastrophic: in the period of 2010–2017 the gender pay gap in Slovenia increased by more than in all other EU countries (SE Committee, 2020).¹⁶

The same can be said for poverty. In the 24 most important indicators of social and health care, Slovenia ranks lower than the European average in each and every one of them. Among these, the most critical areas include: housing and social protection (measured in the share of GDP), health care for specific age categories including shares of employees in this area, unemployment costs, poverty and the social exclusion of single persons, underequipment with social networks, the magnitude of poverty of older people and increased gender pay gap—these are the indicators where Slovenia is lagging behind the European average by 30 to as much as 96%, and in the rest of the indicators by 4 to 30% (see Dragoš, 2021). In almost all indicators, Slovenia is worse even than the UK, Czechia, and Greece, although the UK is a European synonym for neoliberalism; during the period of Slovenia's transition to independence, Czechia was the most simi-

¹⁵ For example, former Slovenian financial minister, Dušan Mramor, minimalised the extent of poverty by saying that in Slovenia 'it is presented in a very populist way', since the share of poor people is still under the European average. (Mramor, 2015; for criticism of this standpoint see Dragoš, 2015a). Current minister of labour, Janez Cigler Kralj: 'Considering poverty and social exclusion Slovenia is one of the most efficient in the struggle with these two phenomena' (Kolbl, 2020). Romana Tomc, the president of the Strategic Council on Social Policy: 'With regard to financial means earmarked for social policy, Slovenia is above the European average in many fields' (Vlada RS, 2021).

¹⁶ Most recent data for the past four years show that women work longer than men to achieve retirement, and that compared to other countries in the world and in the EU Slovenian women have at the same time 'the highest workload both in paid and family, i.e. unpaid work' (Zupanič, 2021).

lar to Slovenia; and, after the most recent economic crisis, Greece is considered one of the most socially unstable countries in the EU.

As mentioned above, while the number of poor people in Slovenia *is* lower than in other countries, these people have less chance of finding a way out of poverty (Table 1).

Table 1: The necessary number of extra working hours¹⁷ per week to be able to exit poverty (OECD, 2021a)

Country	Single person	Unemployed couple	
	no children	no children	2 children
EU (28)	20	27	31
OECD (41)	21	28	31
Russia	28	40	40
Croatia	23	33	43
Romania	16	23	24
Greece	15	22	25
UK	14	20	6
USA	22	31	34
Denmark	19	0	0
Japan	14	10	2
Slovenia	30	46	29
Ranking of Slovenia in OECD (41)	1	1	26

As can be seen from the table above, among all 41 OECD countries, people living under the poverty threshold in Slovenia are the worst off, because they need the highest number of additional hours of work to be able to exit poverty (in the existing system of social rights). To rise above the poverty threshold, a poor person in Slovenia should work as much as 30 extra hours a week, that is, 50% of additional labour compared to the European average, or 43% with regard to the OECD average. This amounts to eight hours of work more than the poor in the USA, which (until recently) has not even known the concept of the welfare state, and 16 hours more than comparable persons in the neoliberal UK; it is seven hours more than Croatia, although compared to Croatia Slovenia has always been considered as having a better economy and a better living standard (so far); according to the same criterion a poor person would have even more chance to exit poverty in Romania, the poorest European country, and Greece, the new European social patient. For the first time in a several-hundred-year history, according to this social criterion, Slovenia has even been overtaken by Russia. The situation is even worse for unemployed couples (without children) if they become poor in Slovenia; they can only exit poverty with additional labour exceeding the European average by as much as 70%. They are only slightly better off if they have children, which is the result of a mis-

¹⁷ Assumption: payment per working hour is in the amount of 67% of the average salary in the country. This data relates to the average price of labour and the amount of (in)sufficient social benefits for the eligible persons living under the poverty threshold.

planned and accelerated transformation of Slovenian social policy into a birth rate policy (Dragoš, 2017) by which Slovenia takes after Poland not only Hungary.

Similarly catastrophic is the situation with the precariat (highlight *c* from Graeber's definition). The following table shows the part of the precariat that is forced to take part-time jobs.

Table 2: *Involuntary part-time workers*¹⁸ (OECD 2021b; own calculation)

Country	Involuntary part time jobs						Insecurity of young people (15-24 years) in the labour market (%)		
	Before the economic crisis and after (% increase)			Involuntary part time jobs among all part time jobs (%)			'07	'16	% diff
	'07-10	'10-15	'07-18	'07	'18	% diff			
Slovenia	75	57	50	5.6	7.2	29	5.9	10.5	78
Austria	7	24	16	11.3	8.9	-21	2.3	3.8	65
Czechia	50	-8	-40	16.9	6.5	-62	3.7	3.5	-5
Denmark	26	-2	-14	14.2	13.7	-4	2.9	6.4	121
Sweden	9	6	-7	26.9	23.1	-14	7.1	7.8	10
Greece	35	58	115	42.4	64.2	51	13.3	35.1	164
Portugal	-1	31	-7	32.4	38.1	18	11.7	14.0	20
Germany	1	-29	-45	18.2	8.5	-53	/	/	/
UK	68	15	52	/	/	/	7.5	5.8	-23
USA	96	-5	25	/	/	/	6.9	7.0	1
EU average (28)	21	23	30	/	/	/	/	/	/

In the trend and share of involuntary part-time employment, Slovenia (closely followed by Greece) shows the most devastating situation. Even before the economic crisis, between 2007 and 2010, when the economy still flourished throughout Europe, the share of involuntary part-time jobs was increasing more in Slovenia among all the presented countries, with only the USA ranking worse than Slovenia (the first column). Then this trend was further accelerated during the economic crisis, resulting in a significant increase of involuntary part-time jobs in the post-crisis period, with 50% more in a single decade (2007–2018). This is far above the European average (showing a 30% increase). During the same period, some countries, such as Czechia and Germany, did just the opposite and managed to lower the share of involuntary partial employments by almost the same percentage as Slovenia's increase. These tables show exactly what Lidija Jerkič, the Trade Union president warns about: 'The more we fight precarity the more we have it. The more the crisis revealed the uncertainty of such jobs, the more such jobs we produce' (Milharčič, 2021).

¹⁸ 'Labour market insecurity is defined in terms of the expected earnings loss associated with unemployment. This loss depends on the risk of becoming unemployed, the expected duration of unemployment and the degree of mitigation against these losses provided by government transfers to the unemployed (effective insurance)' (OECD, 2021b).

In short, Graeber is right: the beginning of the solution to these problems—and many others¹⁹ related to them—is the introduction of UBI. This right would help us most efficiently, rapidly and definitely achieve three things: prevent further erosion of the coverage of existential resources at the minimum level, raise the benefits for the most deprived categories (social beneficiaries, the elderly, the precariat), and enable all others to abandon bullshit and junk jobs. And, by the way, UBI would help realise, and without detriment, the neoliberals' wet dreams about the higher flexibility of the workforce, which they presently condition with the constant shrinking of workers' rights. The first is possible without the second only by introducing UBI (until we replace capitalism with something else).

Is UBI economically viable?

Yes, it is.

Among many questions and polemics related to the realisation of UBI, the economic basis of this idea is the only question with two characteristics: first, it is the easiest to resolve (in all societies, not only rich ones); and second, it is typically raised again and again, moreover, by the same people, even when you explain it to them over and over.²⁰

The usual misunderstanding with regard to UBI is the economic or fiscal one, and it goes like this: UBI is too expensive; even the wealthiest countries are not rich enough to be able to afford it. The alleged blow to public finance is proven with a simple multiplication of the proposed amount for UBI and the number of the population. For example, according to this formula, an UBI of, say, only €450²¹ for the two million inhabitants in Slovenia would make a hole in the state budget of a fantastic eleven billion annually. Therefore, what must be taken to take in order to give? The question is a populist one, and the calculation is incorrect. The truth is quite the contrary because in UBI the fiscal question is the simplest of them all (the most difficult questions are the political ones).

The first exact calculation for the cost of the realisation of UBI was made by a Slovenian sociologist Valerija Korošec some time ago (2010). Ten years later, her elaboration is nominally obsolete, because today's social transfers are higher than the amount of her

¹⁹ Including the ecological one which will not be solvable without UBI (Dragoš, 2019, pp. 75-83).

²⁰ Certainly, this is not the reason to stop repeating the answers.

²¹ If UBI is to be introduced this instant, the amount of €450 (that I use in this presentation) would mean its minimum, the very bottom line. Under this line UBI would no longer make sense, because the administratively defined amount of the minimum living cost in Slovenia is €442, and the social benefit amounts to €402. The maximum amount of UBI would be just under the minimum wage which in Slovenia currently amounts to €736.

proposal for UBI, which, of course, was higher than social transfers of the time (or else UBI would not make sense). However, the logic and the calculation remain topical for the present and the future, because she has proved the following: (a) in Korošec's calculation, UBI was much higher than the basic social assistance of the time and the basic cost of living; (b) if UBI were introduced, there would be no need to introduce new taxes to fill the public purse; moreover, there would be no need to raise or progressively change current taxes; (c) the positive effects of UBI would not only be seen in the social field (which is the most important), but in many others, including the economy, particularly in times of crisis.²²

How is this possible?

When the agreed right to UBI is converted to individual financial transfers, it can be done in two ways: I marked the first one as Version A, and the second as Version B. Both are fiscally sustainable; however, the second one, is more populist and irrational.

First, a brief introduction to Version B, which is not the most sensible one (nor politically realistic): if each person—the rich as well as the poor and everybody in between—obtain the same amount in cash, it is then of course necessary that a rich person who receives UBI in one pocket has at the same time taken the multiplier of this UBI from the other pocket, so that it can be transferred to the poor. So, where is the problem? Certainly not in the economy or the fiscal sustainability: these numbers add up and depend on progressive taxation.

The better version is the Version A, which is also politically realistic and fiscally neutral. Of course, in Version A everybody has the right to receive UBI, as in Version B. The difference is that in Version A the transfer in cash is only received by those who are actually moneyless, while for all other citizens a part of their resources—because they already have them—is reclassified as UBI. Let us see a simple and majority example that belongs to the first way of asserting the right to UBI.

Version A: if I have a job and I receive a transfer of €1000, the only thing that practically changes for me with the introduction of €450 of UBI is my bank statement about my salary, and also the received sum of money. The only change due to UBI would be the form of payslip, which would now state as shown in Table 3.

This means that all those who are not poor because we have income higher than UBI – including the richest, tycoons and criminals in the territory of Slovenia—will not receive

²² We can find similar highlights in a study by Van Parijs (2011, p. 51-58); I strongly recommend it to the lovers of diagrams, because the appendix of that study compares the financial sustainability of standard UBI with competitive proposals.

a cent of additional money from the state budget with a simple argument, seen from the above payslip: because we already have the money, either from income from paid work, rent, pension or other resources.²³ The same applies within the national economy in general: this money already exists, but with the introduction of UBI its smaller part will be reclassified into the right to UBI. The new way would mean that the employer (the right part of the table) would formally pay me a “lower” salary (€550), because the rest (€450) will be reclassified as UBI. which will only indirectly be transferred by the employer via a state fund, either as direct financial input into this fund or with indirect input, i.e. through taxes.²⁴ The whole point is that if I lose my job or the employer goes bankrupt, I keep at least UBI (€450), and only in this case, and not otherwise—this amount becomes the burden for the state budget! Therefore, over 80% of citizens will not present any additional cost for the state, although they—like everybody else—will have the unalienable right to UBI.

Table 3: Comparison of the payslip before the introduction of UBI and after (Version A) (Dragoš, 2019, p. 57)

Current way	Payment transfer		€
	€	New way (Version A)	
Employer (pays)	1000	Employer (pays)	550
		State (UBI)	450
Total	1000	Total	1000

The most frequent objection against Version A is that it involves some sort of trick, as for the majority of the population the promised right to UBI turns into an apparent and fake one, because the right to money is not considered a right, if it is not financially covered and expressed. This objection is mistaken. Specifically, also in the beneficiaries who are materially provided for, their UBI is not only apparent, because they already have this money. The main point is that in no case no one remains without the €450 of UBI, and that the system guarantees this sum to everyone, is viable, that is, fiscally sustainable. In this sense, the right to UBI is no different from other rights, such as the right to a just trial, free health care, or clean water. Even if I never use the free ride in an ambulance, because I do not need to, this does not mean that I am without this health care right. I keep the right to a just trial even if I never appear in a court procedure. When the right to

²³ Including property, which would only exclude basic assets, such as real estate in which the beneficiary lives.

²⁴ This administrative-fiscal system can be operated by the existing Tax Office of the Republic of Slovenia or a separate body should be founded, perhaps similar to the Public Accounting Service Slovenia used to have during the socialist period. The beneficiary can either receive the UBI on their existing personal account, marked under a specific item, so it can be distinguished from their other income, or UBI can be transferred to a special bank card issued for this purpose, as suggested by Standing (2018, p. 266). Regardless of the version used, essentially, the access to this amount should remain intact, and can only be used by the beneficiary, any time they want without any conditioning or control.

clean water was written in the Slovenian Constitution, no one understood this as a commitment to regularly acquire additional hectolitres of water regardless of their access to this benefit (Ahačič et al., 2015). If water daily runs from my tap in sufficient amounts or I even have a pool in my backyard, I do not need more of it. Therefore, the right to water is not in having an additional quantity of it, but in the state guaranteeing that I will never be without it—this is what the right is all about. I must know that this right will automatically be activated in the form of H₂O as soon as I run out of money to pay the bills for water or when the well that I am currently using runs dry.²⁵ Equally, the right to UBI unconditionally guarantees that I will never run “dry”, no matter what happens.

And vice versa. In the conditions when we are without UBI, a person without their income and assets can only count on social assistance in cash (SAC). Compared to UBI, this has the following drawbacks: (a) despite a recent²⁶ increase in SAC, it still does not even cover the threshold of the minimum cost of living, which in Slovenia has been determined very rigorously (too low, completely arbitrary, and outdated); (b) SAC is far from being unconditional; (c) due to complicated access to this right (for lack of information, bureaucracy, stigma),²⁷ SAC never reaches all its beneficiaries.

How much would Version A of the realised UBI in the minimum amount of €450 burden the state budget? As suggested above, a large majority of citizens would not burden the budget by even a cent, because they already have this money, and only a part of their income would be reclassified as UBI. Additional budgetary funds would only be necessary for the poor minority of citizens. To simplify the matter, let us assume that each of the around 60,000 Slovenian beneficiaries²⁸ of SAC receives the full amount of this transfer. With the introduction of the right to UBI in the amount of €450, the SAC beneficiary would additionally burden the state budget **only** for the amount of the difference between its current SAC and the new amount of UBI, that is, the difference they now do not have, because their SAC is too low (i.e., €48.00). This amounts to an additional €34.6 million, meaning a completely new burden to the state budget annually due to the introduction of UBI. From the aspect of budgetary costs, this amount is peanuts and

²⁵ An empirical study based on the example of South Africa shows that the largest influence on water consumption per capita is not exerted by natural phenomena (the weather and precipitation), but ‘social factors, such as access to water and income’ (Cole et al., 2018).

²⁶ Within the Slovenian coalition governments this was a unique event the merit for which goes exclusively to the Levica left Parliamentary party and its pressures, without which the increase in financial social assistance would never have occurred.

²⁷ See Leslie's testimony in Graeber, 2019, pp. 271-272.

²⁸ In 2018, there were 54,859 (on May 1, 2018) and 59,525 (on October 1, 2018) all together, i.e., the receivers of permanent and extraordinary social assistance in cash (DSP, 2018).

would not require any new taxes or an increase in existing ones. A tiny redistribution between budget items would suffice. For example, the stated annual cost of UBI is:

(1) €4 million lower than the income obtained by the state only with the taxation of “unconventional gambling”;

(2) exactly equal to the amount that is currently received by the state with one of the numerous influxes from the EU budget (item: “Competition for Growth and Employment”);

(3) a good fifth smaller than the annual cost that the state spends on its stationery and office services;

(4) less than half a percentage of all expenses of the state (in 2017) or less than one per cent of the sum needed for the injection of equity capital of the then state-owned bank Nova Ljubljanska Banka (NLB);

(5) only 21% of the net profit of the NLB bank (in 2017);

(6) slightly over 3% of the crisis bonuses that the state paid out during the COVID-19 pandemic;

(7) not even 6% of the wealth of the richest two-member Slovenian household or not even 2% of the wealth of the top ten richest people in Slovenia on the Manager magazine list (Košak, 2018);

(8) 1.2% of the means lost to corruption (Ferlič Žgajnar, 2019) or 1.6% of the amount of the uncollected taxes in Slovenia (Morozov, 2019).

Even if this *ad hoc* estimate of the introduction of UBI would be five times underestimated (which it is not!), the amount would still be far lower than the amount of the interest from the valuable security issued in foreign markets. In short, in terms of the economy, UBI is far from an impossible project.

Conclusion

Although the source of capitalist expansion of bullshit jobs is economic (alienation), the problem is mainly political, says Graeber. The ruling class is aware that a happy and creative population with plenty of free time would present “a mortal danger” to the system. ‘Is there anything that can be done about this situation,’ until capitalism is replaced with something else (Graeber, 2019, p. 245)? Although as a theoretician and an anthropologist, Graeber does not go further into this, in the last chapter of his last book, he makes an exception. He appeals for the introduction of UBI. This right is, as he says, the

only measure that would 'put an end to the dilemmas described in this book' (2019, p. 269).

Bullshit, junk, and precarious jobs are massively eroding modern economies from two aspects, from the aspect of exploitation of work and from the aspect of the meaningfulness of work. The result is the erosion of society and the state (especially the welfare state). The question is whether, also in Slovenia, these trends are as strong as Graeber suggests, and whether the potential introduction of UBI would be economically sustainable at all—the answer to both is positive.

Graeber is right.

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Povzetek

David Graeber zadnji del zadnjega poglavja svoje zadnje knjige posveča univerzalnemu temeljnemu dohodku (UTD). Pri osvobajanju človeškega dela iz njegove tržne oblike (dekomodifikacija) opozarja Graeber zlasti na ničvredne in nesmiselne oz. drekaste službe. Za ničvredna delovna mesta je značilno izkoriščanje, podplačanost ali pa odsotnost plačila, ter pomanjkanje pravic delavcev. Po drugi strani pa je pri nesmiselnih (drekastih) delovnih mestih njihova osrednja značilnost nekoristnost opravil, saj ne prispevajo niti k socialni niti k individualni blaginji (tudi v primerih, ko je delavec za delo dobro plačan). Ker Graeber omenjene ideje o izvedljivosti UTD ni podrobneje razložil, je v zvezi s tem koristno razmisliti o nekaterih pomembnih pomislekih, na primer: Ali je predlagan UTD preveč protikapitalističen in v tem smislu utopičen? Če bi UTD res zmanjšal količino ničvrednih in nesmiselnih delovnih mest, ne bi istočasno spodkopal trga dela in temeljev delovne etike? Ali ne bi uvedba UTD pretirano obremenila državni proračun, brez katerega je UTD neizvedljiv? V tem prispevku dokazujem, da je odgovor na ta vprašanja: odločni ne. To pomeni, da ima Graeber prav—zlasti v zvezi z empiričnimi podatki, ki so značilni za Slovenijo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: David Graeber, univerzalni osnovni dohodek, ničvredno delo, nesmiselno delo, dekomodifikacija, socialna država

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