

The Drinking Bird
(Part of *The Roosters Trilogy*)

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Cast of Characters:

Armadillo Annex

Square Blue Sky

Some Passersby

Setting:

The United States of America

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PROLOGUE: "Quote Un-Quote Women's Work"

ARMADILLO ANNEX and SQUARE BLUE SKY stand on a street corner dressed as hotdogs, handing out flyers.

*Behind them
in a storefront
are a bunch of mannequins
wearing aprons and
taking casseroles out of brand-new
top-of-the-line
state-of-the-art
ovens.
& putting casseroles
into
brand-new
top-of-the-line
state-of-the-art
ovens.*

*The ovens are next-year's models
and the casseroles you'll cook in them
will never burn because
every oven you see in this window display
is equipped with state-of-the-art
heat-sensing
technology
which is based on
geothermal imaging technology
developed specifically for
the United States Military
by the company that makes the ovens.*

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but who are these women?
Where in the United States of America today
is there still a neighborhood
where every house has a housewife
and they all live next to each other?
Or are we talking about
like in the 50s?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

The point is not that this exists,
necessarily,

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, so what's the point?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

The point,
if you'll let me finish,
the point of the metaphor
allegory
the image
the rhetorical device,
the thing,
I'm talking about,
is to use
this image
this situation
which maybe is sort of plucked from another age,
but which allows us to conceptualize this sector of
the economy,
to use this image to think in a different way about
work and the way that work is commodified.
So if we picture this community,
whether it exists now or not
in which the convention is that we have these
two-parent nuclear families in which one parent,
usually male, goes to a quote un-quote job,
and the other parent, usually female,
stays home and cooks and cleans and takes care of the
kids.
We think of the parent who goes out of the house to
work, the father, as the one with a job.
But, in fact, the parent who stays home is also
working,
and so the line of thinking
or the rhetorical figure
sort of goes
if we imagine these stay-at-home workers,
women,
going next-door instead,
so that each of these women is taking care of someone
else's house
and getting paid for it,
the idea is, according to this line of thinking,
that we would have a greater appreciation for
this kind of work.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

But, the point I'm making

SQUARE BLUE SKY

That wasn't the point you were making?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No, the point I'm making,
is that progressive as it may sound,

SQUARE BLUE SKY

It doesn't sound that progressive.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

this is actually a really entrenchedly capitalist way
of conceiving of value and of trying to address the
problem of devaluation of
quote un-quote
women's work.
Because it assumes that the solution to something
being devalued
is to put a price on it.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Isn't that literally how you value something that
doesn't have a value?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

In capitalism, yes.
Because in capitalism
everything has a price
and we take the price to be the value.
But there are certain things that
are price-less.
We call things priceless
and we say you can't put a price on them
because we sense, perhaps without recognizing it,
that these things transcend a capitalist system of
value
that these things, in their purest essence,
transcend capitalism
or exist outside of it.
And these things

that we call "women's work"
home-cooking,
providing a clean, safe, comfortable home,
raising children,
these are price-less gifts,
not commodities.

I mean this is why you see people who can afford to
pay someone to watch their kids agonizing over whether
they're spending enough time with their kids.
We have this sense that there is something
invaluable about being raised by your family rather
than by an employee.

Even when you hear the counterpoint,
when you meet someone entirely raised by a nanny,
who doesn't feel any resentment, or misgiving,
it's always phrased as

PASSERBY ALPHA

"She was like a mother to me."

PASSERBY BETA

"I'm still in touch with her."

ARMADILLO ANNEX

never

PASSERBY GAMMA

"Yes, she provided a very good value."

PASSERBY DELTA

"Her service was excellent. She is infinitely skilled
in child-rearing. I would not hesitate to recommend
her to another child."

ARMADILLO ANNEX

When we say of an employee

PASSERBY ALPHA

"She was like a mother to me."

ARMADILLO ANNEX

we prove that mother is a higher title than model
employee or consummate professional.

So instead of making quote un-quote women's work into wage labor, we should be trying to find ways to make more wage labor into priceless labor.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but just because something should be priceless, doesn't mean we really treat it as priceless. Right? I mean I think that's what your little allegory or whatever is trying to solve is this idea that while quote un-quote women's work may be price-less capitalism is already devaluing it by treating it as free. That's the shitty thing about capitalism, right? Is that it takes things that should be priceless gifts and turns them into commodities and we're so used to that that we don't even know a gift when we see one. We just say,

PASSERBY EPSILON

Cool, free stuff.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes. I think that's right. But I do think that there are things that we can recognize as priceless, maybe even as we're commodifying them. And I think that childrearing is probably one of them.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but, I think the point I was trying to make is that I think within capitalism like if we forget about all the allegories and metaphors and like theoretical principles, just with, like, the way people are conditioned, I think that people are conditioned to value things they had to pay for.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I think that's true for things, objects,
though, at the same time,
I think that we're conditioned to try to get a good
deal,
to get more than we give.
Ideally, if we can afford it,
we'd like to pay a lot of money for something that's
worth a lot more.
So, even if you get something for free, you want to be
able to say that it would normally be expensive.

PASSERBY ZETA

These headphones normally go for, like six hundo per
pair,
but because I'm buddies with the guy at the record
store and he knows I know how to appreciate quality
sound, he gave me the pair the company sent him for,
like,
promotional purposes or whatever.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

But, I think things are very different when it comes
to services,
things we get from other people,
at least for the sort of person who really craves
social connection.

So we try to pretend that we are friends (or family)
with the people we pay to do things every day, whether
we're paying them to drive us somewhere or do our
nails or feed us, either at a restaurant or a grocery
store.

This is why hotels and a lot of other businesses call
their customers guests. We would rather feel like
guests than customers. But we don't behave like
guests. We don't make the bed when we leave, we don't
offer to help cook. Instead of doing the things a
guest does to say thank you, we pay to be treated like
a guest. If we really want to say thank you, we leave
a big tip.

Or, like our conversation yesterday about TV
chauffeurs.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Yeah, I don't know.

I still think that there's nothing wrong with being friendly with someone who works for you.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Of course not.

But my point was that part of the fantasy that these tv shows are selling us is this idea that you can buy the kind of friendship and love that can only really come from the open exchange of gifts and favors among equals.

This idea that not only is your chauffeur always there to bail you out of your wacky high jinks, but might also be able to offer assistance in the high jinks or even sage advice. But it's a one way street. There is no episode of *How I Met Your Mother* in which the gang give Ranjit relationship advice or helps him get out of a bind. It's a one way street.

But like the quote-unquote women's work we were talking about before, that kind of a relationship can't really be bought, or at least it can't be bought without being devalued. Because then we're taking something that someone would do out of love or friendship and we're paying them for it. And because it's capitalism, we're underpaying them for it. You can't pay someone to watch your kid unless your time is worth more than theirs, otherwise it wouldn't be worth it. You have to be earning enough to justify not watching your kid yourself.

So, that's the problem, in a nutshell with saying, What if every caregiver and housekeeper went next door?

is that plenty of caregivers and housekeepers are already getting up at the crack of dawn to leave their kid with a relative so that they can go around cleaning other people's houses and taking care of other people's kids.

And, to put it bluntly, if one of those other people's kids can grow up and say

PASSERBY ALPHA

"She was like a mother to me."

ARMADILLO ANNEX

then that nanny was probably getting underpaid,

Because you don't pay your mother in money.

PART I: Bullshit Jobs

PART I, Section A. "Bullshit Jobs"

*They're at work
but they're not working.*

*It's an open-plan office
and in the distance we can see
desks and computers and pencils and pens and
touch screens and printers.*

*ARMADILLO ANNEX and SQUARE BLUE SKY
are playing ping-pong
or air hockey
and eating cereal
at work.*

It's that kind of office.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

There are two or three fundamental types of work.

The first one I'll get to later.

Right now I want to talk about the second one,
what David Graeber calls a bullshit job.¹

The purpose of a bullshit job,
fundamentally,
is to keep people occupied.

This is a job which could disappear with little or no
consequence, to society
or to the worker for that matter,
beyond the loss of a paycheck.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, I want to stop you there,
because, I think
ok, because I want
I guess I worry
that there's a lot of demeaning that goes on
of certain kinds of work

¹ David Graeber, "On The Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs," *Strike Magazine*, August 17, 2013

and
by extension
certain types of workers
which I think
especially given the way the election came out
we
as coastal progressives
I think we just have to be a little more careful
even when we think we're putting forward
progressive
worker-friendly ideas
that we're not actually dismissing the value of a kind
of work that we don't really know anything about.

So, like I don't know if you would call like
fast food service a bullshit job,
but I think that you have to accept that
like it or not
there is a really enormous demand for fast food
and so someone does have to take the money and cook
the burgers and stuff.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No,
I do want to get to fast food
and food service in general
because I think that's an interesting case,
but what I'm talking about is different.
I'm not talking about "bad" jobs,
which I agree is maybe fundamentally subjective
beyond being able to say
objectively
from a distance that a job is exploitative
in that it doesn't pay enough
or the work conditions are unacceptable,
we have to accept that different kinds of work appeal
to different people—
and that's something that connects to something else—
but what I'm talking about
are not "bad" jobs but something pretty specific which
has come to be referred to as
a bullshit job.
Bullshit jobs,
in the sense that the phrase is most typically used,
are actually mostly white collar jobs.

These are jobs that have emerged from a convergence of a couple of factors, one of which is what we could call education inflation—a bachelor's degree has about the value on the job market that a high school diploma had fifty years ago, so more and more people are going to grad school just to get entry-level jobs. So you have all of these heavily educated people who need somewhere to go in the workforce.

And then you have this rich-get-richer corporate economy where companies have realized that they can make more money by focusing on figuring out how to make more money (if that doesn't sound tautological) than they can by figuring out how to make a better product or how to offer a better service.

So, you get to this place where the leading job for a young person coming out of a competitive college or grad school is, for lack of a better term, corporate money-maker, whether it's called consulting or marketing or advertising or what have you, the job is essentially to be smart and invent ways of increasing profitability. And the problem is that because there's no added product independent of the profit,

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but there has to be a product somewhere, right, so even if you're working in marketing or advertising it's with the goal of moving more units or selling more of the service being offered so at the end, there is a product, right?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Sometimes, I mean, yes, in the cases you're describing, there is, but again, I think we're reaching a point

where the idea that the goal of advertising and marketing is to gain a larger share of a finite market is a little outdated—

I mean you can look at Starbucks which thirty years ago essentially just created a new enormous coffee market which has continued to grow; it was never about cornering the relatively small pre-Starbucks take-out coffee market; I mean, drip coffee was and continues to be next to free at most of the places where coffee was available for sale pre-Starbucks—

so advertising and marketing today are more about convincing people they need something they didn't know they needed than convincing them to buy your product instead of someone else's.

And a lot of these jobs are even more abstract than that,

because, as I said, it's also about making more money without making more product because that's money with no overhead beyond paying the person who thinks up the way to do it.

And so there's no ceiling,
and so the idea of supply and demand goes out the window

because if you're a college grad from the right school looking for a job

and you're capable of thinking up a new idea for making a company money you can more or less invent a job for yourself.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but I feel like college grads are actually having a harder and harder time finding jobs.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

In general, yes,
and like anything, this kind of thing has ebbed and flowed depending on how companies are doing and whether companies feel that they can take a gamble on any given kid to make them money,
but remember this sector of the economy
the money-making sector, at the risk of sounding tautological again,
has been booming.

These jobs are essentially in the
income-inequality sector,
their purpose is to make the rich richer,

so as other jobs have disappeared these are the jobs that people are taking again, people privileged enough to have dropped several hundred thousand dollars on an education (or had someone drop it on their behalf) which, student debt, is another force driving heavily-educated workers to these jobs in the "money" sector. And the point I want to make, which will help take us back to why people are starting to describe these as bullshit jobs is that, by definition, the demand for workers whose purpose is to make a company money is infinite, right? You can only design so many toasters before you need someone to convince people that they need more than one toaster per kitchen or a new toaster every year. So demand for toaster designers is finite. But a company can always make more money. And so the problem becomes that the bar for creating another one of these jobs becomes absurdly low.

I'll give you an example:

So, on some level, the most basic way to make a company more money is to figure out how to spend less money making the money. Call this efficiency or productivity. So, imagine a brilliant graduate of a prestigious college is hired as an Efficiency Expert to optimize productivity at a company applying all that advanced math and cutting-edge social science research she's been studying.

The irony is that that's often an inefficient job, or at least one of diminishing returns.

In the best case scenario, that Efficiency Expert saves the company a significantly greater amount of money than she gets paid to do the performance review.

But that trick only really works once. The chances that in her next thousand hours your efficiency specialist is going to make the office that much more efficient again are pretty slim.

In fact, by definition, the more potential there is for improvement the second time around, the worse the person did the first time, the less efficient the efficiency expert was at maximizing efficiency.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but how many companies have permanent, in-house efficiency experts?

Isn't that something that you'd hire a consulting firm for or something?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Maybe, but either way, it's a job and it's a job that doesn't create greater value or more employment; it creates greater profit for the company and, in most cases, eliminates other jobs.

But, the thing is, the efficiency expert doesn't even have to do a great job. She doesn't have to be streamlining things so that products are more affordable (is that ever really the goal?). She only has to save the company marginally more than she costs in order to justify her employment. But that's not a particularly meaningful job, making a company just barely efficient enough to justify her continued employment (or her consulting firm's fee).

And here's the kicker. How do we know if she really is justifying her position? There's no real way to know, unless someone else is reviewing her work, right? To make sure that she's saving the company money. So we need an efficiency expert to supervise the efficiency of the efficiency expert.

And all of these employees, in a successful company, are making the company a greater profit, whether large or small.

And remember, these are companies which are throwing their financial weight around to game the system to their advantage, which is what the efficiency expert is really doing, efficiency is almost a euphemism, we're not talking about better typing posture, for the most part, we're talking about more money for less, whether it's less US office space fewer US employees and more machines or fewer full-time workers with benefits and more part-time workers without benefits.

Or it's less corporate tax paid more tax incentives claimed.

But even the people who have these jobs are starting to feel that something is missing. They're being paid handsomely, but they're working all the time. And they're not seeing their work have an effect on the world, besides the greater success of their company.

This is not the proletariat that Karl Marx had in mind, but they're alienated from the product of their labor all the same. The work they do doesn't touch on whatever the company does or makes.

SQUARE BLUE SKY
besides money.

ARMADILLO ANNEX
besides money. And they start to think that it wouldn't make much of a difference to society if the job just disappeared.

That's what we call a bullshit job. And some of them have quit their bullshit jobs and started blogs to write about this.

But the thing is,

the bullshit job is growing a twin,
another kind of bullshit job
is being created
only it's affecting a part of the society which can't
afford to think of itself
of its jobs
as expendable,
but is being told that anyway,
though in very different terms.

And the thing is,
I think that not only are the two problems linked,
but they may have the same solution, too.
And that it's maybe the solution to some other
problems, as well.

PART I, Section B. "Bullshit Robot Jobs"

*They are dressed as robots, now
handing out different flyers
outside a consumer electronics store*

or

*they are eating sushi
at a mod japanese restaurant.
Behind them,
distorted
through the fish tank dividing wall
Godzilla can be seen fighting a giant robot
on tv.*

ARMADILLO ANNEX

So, the second kind of job (or third, I forget)
the twin of the bullshit job
is the job that can be done,
or could foreseeably be done by a machine.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the percentage of
jobs that fall in this category is growing, arguably
exponentially, but in the US, it's maybe only in the
last 50 years or so that machines have been starting
to take over human jobs faster than we can invent more
human jobs building or operating or maintaining the
machines.

And so, there's a lot of throwing up of hands
surrounding the replacement of people by machines in
these jobs.

The assumption is that the mechanization of these jobs
is bad for the workers who have been trained to do
these jobs and whom it will be expensive or hard to
retrain.

There's an anecdote from an episode of *The Simpsons*,
though, which I think reveals the faulty assumption on
which the argument that mechanization is bad for
workers is based.

In "King Size Homer,"² Homer becomes so obese that he is considered disabled and is allowed to work from home. the job that he does from home is some version of the job he is always falling asleep on at the plant, but working from home, the job essentially boils down to pressing Y or N on his computer. For a while he is content with the incredible easiness of the job and sits at home eating and pressing the Y key on his keyboard. But he bores of the job eventually, so he rigs up a drinking bird toy to press the key and goes to the movies. In this example, Homer saves himself labor and time by mechanizing his own job.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but if I'm remembering correctly, doesn't he cause a meltdown at the power plant?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Sure, but that's only because the machine he uses to do is job is pretty crude (the bird falls over). But it's not hard to imagine a machine which could effectively regulate whatever it is that Homer is supposed to be regulating, given that Homer doesn't seem to have to exercise any real judgement, he's just pressing a key.

The point is that this case upends the assumption that it's the employer who benefits from mechanization. The fact is that mechanization always saves the employee labor. The problem is that we're operating in a system where the right to sustenance and shelter is predicated on the opportunity to perform labor, so a worker who doesn't have to labor as much to produce the same output loses income and so loses access to sustenance and shelter. In Homer's case, though, he's still getting paid for the labor that the bird does for him. He's happy, Mr. Burns is getting the work done that he's paying for, and Homer doesn't have to do what is now essentially a bullshit job.

² Greaney, Dan, writer. "King Size Homer." *The Simpsons*. Fox. November 5, 1995. (Season 7; Episode 7)

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but what does that leave? What is there besides bullshit jobs and jobs which will become bullshit jobs once someone invents a machine that can do them? I mean, the way computers are going, with AI and everything

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I would argue that what you have left are jobs for which the product of the labor is enhanced by the possibility of imperfection. Because imperfection is still something that human beings excel at.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but what job is better when it's done poorly?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Not poorly,
imperfectly,
unpredictably.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

So, like a professional athlete, for example? Where part of what we're interested in is the specific human element, the backstory, the motivation, the personal drama.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yeah, I think so.
Or like an artist, in the sense that we look to art to reflect the human condition. We value imperfection in art because it helps us feel less alone in our own imperfection.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, wait, so then playing sports or making art is kind of a bullshit job for a robot.

Like, there's like a mirror thing going on or a complementary thing.

Jobs that a machine can do become bullshit jobs for humans to do.

But there are jobs that a human has to do to have meaning.

It's almost a process versus product thing.

People sit down to watch sporting events that last hours, when the efficient thing would be to just check the scores at the end of the game. So being able to win isn't actually the defining characteristic of a great athlete. It's how they win, how they overcome the obstacles. I guess that's why we have rules about performance enhancing drugs. We want them to be good, but we don't want them to be so good that there's no suspense.

So a machine can't do those jobs. Because there's no suspense with machines. It's all about the product. You build a machine to do something and if it doesn't do it you don't say

Nearby, some people are watching TV through a shop window.

or at the bar.

A TV WATCHER

"Whoah, cool, I didn't see that coming!"

ANOTHER TV WATCHER

"What an unexpected twist!"

SQUARE BLUE SKY

You just call someone to come fix it.

So, there are jobs that are better for a human to do and jobs that are better for a machine to do.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Exactly.

And I think part of my point is that we kind of already know what they are.

Even the jobs that we don't have machines for yet, there's a fundamental difference that's there.

So there are jobs that can't currently be done better by a machine, but will eventually be done by machines.

And then there are also jobs that when we apply this standard are actually two jobs.

So, of course a machine can make a chair.
But a person can make a kind of a chair with a
personal quality that a machine can't necessarily
replicate, though a machine may play some part in that
process.

So, there are actually
and this may become clearer in time
there are or there will be
two kinds of chairs.
There is the chair as a practical object
which keeps you from sitting on the floor.
And with time this will be a better and better chair,
more ergonomic, less expensive.
Offices need these chairs.
Schools need these chairs,
and if they can be as inexpensive as possible
the schools can spend more money on teachers
and the NGO can have lower overhead and do more good.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

And then there is the chair which is a work of
art,
a symphony in wood,
this chair is a conversation between the hand of a
chair-smith and the buttocks of the chair-sitter.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, maybe a chair is a weird example,
but you have to admit, just like we like hotels to
treat us like guests or to imagine we're buddies with
the people we pay to do things for us,
we like the idea that the commodities we buy have a
personal touch,
like those car commercials where they're like
literally carving a car out of clay,
or a chef in a white hat is cooking our frozen dinner,
We like that
idea,
but I think that just like we'd rather pay to be
treated like a guest without the reciprocal
responsibility of being a guest,
we're happy to settle for buying the illusion of a
handmade car
or frozen dinner.

So, I think my point is that we're going to have be
very careful
on both ends
in determining which are the things that a human does
better and which are the things that a machine does
better, so that
one the one hand,
we're not holding onto things that we can let machines
do
and on the other hand, we're not rushing to have
machines take over tasks that are better as human
tasks.

PART I, Section C. "Pride"

They are feeding lions at the zoo.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but what about my grandfather?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

What about him?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

We've talked a lot about the importance of journalists and artists to society. What about the importance of a guy like my grandfather who took pride in his work at the auto plant? It meant a lot to him to have that job and to do it well and to be able to support his family, to send my dad and his siblings to college. Is there a place for a guy like him in your new society?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, well first of all, it's not MY new society. Technology and global capitalism are transforming work as we know it. I'm just trying to suggest a way for us to shift the way we think about work and the idea of jobs so that we might be able to make it a change for the better.

As far as your grandfather goes, let's look at the facts. What did your grandfather do at the auto plant?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

He worked there.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, but what was his job?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

I actually don't know. I think he worked on an assembly line of some sort. But I know he worked hard and none of us would be where we are today without him.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Did he like his job?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

He was proud of it.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

See pride is interesting, because I think it's not the same as liking a job or, maybe even finding it rewarding.

He was proud because felt like he was supporting his family, right?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

No, he was supporting his family.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I don't doubt that.
But that's very abstract.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Not that abstract.
He went to work. He worked hard. He received a paycheck. He used that paycheck to buy a house, put food on the table, send my dad and his siblings (and eventually my grandmother) to college.
What's abstract about that?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Compare it to a pre-industrial agricultural society. You grandfather would have built the house, grown the food, raised the animals. You grandmother would have sewn the clothes.

Instead, your grandfather performed one step in assembling automobiles for other people to drive. His union had negotiated so that in exchange for performing that part of building a car over and over again for a certain number of hours a day he would be paid enough to buy all those other things, a house, food, college tuition, a car of his own. But his connection to those things was less direct.

The farmer's work was tangible. You could eat it. And if it didn't yield enough to sustain the family there was something to blame; the soil, too much or too little rain, a disease in the animals.

I don't know that pride entered into it.

But as those layers between the labor and the product started being added—
and don't get me wrong, I don't think it's inherently bad for people to specialize and for different roles to be carried out by different people in a community, though I think that our community bonds are incredibly weak in terms of that functioning in some sort of healthy, enriching way—
as those layers started being added,
I think this idea of pride in work started to emerge. Because the laborer was alienated, as Marx would put it, from the product of the labor, because your grandfather couldn't eat the car, he had to be proud of the number of hours he worked and the wage.

And the problem is that wages really are abstract. The conversion of his wage into the material needs of his family didn't really have to do with the value of his work or the effort he put in. It had to do with the market value of the car and the market value of the food and the house. And those things had to do with all sorts of other factors. And on top of that, like I said, the wage depended on the negotiating strength of the union.
But society sold him that pride and now it's taking it away, not from him, but those who have followed him into that business. It's telling them that their job can be done better or cheaper by someone else or by a machine.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

So, shouldn't we be fighting that?
Isn't it our responsibility to speak up for the autoworker? To say, no, you can't move your factory to another country, you can't replace these workers with machines.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Maybe.
But, what about the car buyer?
In simplistic terms, if the autoworkers' wages go up or their jobs are saved so that they can still meet the costs of living, but the contractors who build their houses have to pay more to buy their trucks,

then you're helping one group at the expense of another. So if cars can be cheaper through machine labor, that should be a good thing for everyone except the people depending on the ability to work on the car in order to support their families.

SQUARE BLUE SKY
Haven't we just come full circle?

ARMADILLO ANNEX
Well the point is,
you said your grandfather was proud of his job,
proud of being able to support his family.
But he was supporting his family because he was
building a car that people needed.
If a machine can build the car, what is he proud of?

SQUARE BLUE SKY
Oof.

ARMADILLO ANNEX
It doesn't have to be oof.
That was the point I was making before. There are all
sorts of other things we can do for other people which
we can be proud to do, whether it's the things that
your grandmother was presumably doing for her family
while your grandfather was at the factory or making
art or coaching a youth soccer team or whatever. It's
when we connect those things to a wage which is itself
connected to survival that things start to get messy.
Because then we feel like if the wage goes away, the
value goes away. But there may still be value there,
even if it's not financial.

SQUARE BLUE SKY
Ok, but who gets to decide that?
Who gets to decide if there's financial value?
The auto executives?
The government?

ARMADILLO ANNEX
Well, in some sense,
ideally,
it's something we need to decide as a society.
And I would put it like this:

I've said that we don't want people doing bullshit jobs, but I think what I haven't made clear is that as far as I'm concerned a bullshit job is largely in the eyes of the job holder. So, for a job to be a bullshit job it has to both be true that the person who has the job doesn't see the point of doing the job (independent of drawing a salary) and it has to be true that if the job holder stopped doing the job, society as a whole would not lose much of value.

But, again, both things would sort of have to be true.

If just the first part is true,
if the person doing the job doesn't see the point of it, but the society needs it,
then maybe we should be working on automating it.
If it can't be automated, then we need to find people who do see the point of it to do it,
and potentially,
in those cases,
we do need an incentive system of some kind,
financial or otherwise,
to make it more desirable,
whether it's money
or some sort of privilege or prestige,
to make people want to do it to make sure it gets done.

If just the second part is true,
if the person doing the job sees a point in it,
but it's not contributing to society
in any meaningful way,
well this is kind of a funny one,
because I'm inclined to believe that if one person sees the point of something other people will,
but then potentially there are some things that are inwardly directed,
where the purpose is clear, but it's not societal,
like jogging;
I can go jogging every day
and other people can see the point
and they can go jogging, too, if they want,
but I can't go jogging on behalf of someone else,
and short of maybe saving people money in insurance or health care or emergency room costs or whatever by staying healthy,

I'm not really serving society by doing it.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but jogging isn't a job.
Nobody has a job that's jogging.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No. But it is work,
in that it takes effort,
it expends energy.
And running is a job
for a select few
there are a handful of professional runners in the
world,
in the sense that they get paid to endorse running
shoes, or whatever.
And so, in general, what I think I'm trying to do,
which maybe goes beyond the way most people talk about
the concept of jobs, bullshit or otherwise,
is to come up with a system of categorization
of different types of human effort-related endeavors
that exists separately from the concept of financial
remuneration,
in the hopes of getting a sense of how it all fits
together and what it means
that might help us think about ways that we might
continue to exist and function and get what we need
both in terms of personal fulfillment
and in terms of living in a thriving, well-cared-for
society
that might not be driven by money the way ours is,
especially given that our money-driven system
currently
is largely failing
arguably
to provide either personal fulfillment
or a thriving, well-cared-for society
to large swathes of the population.

So, in brief,
there are things
that society needs
that people might not want to do
or see the point in doing
that we either have to mechanize or
incentivize in order to get enough people doing them.

I won't give examples,
because it's subjective
and as you point out there's probably an element of
class prejudice inherent in my perceptions of the
desirability or undesirability of certain jobs.

then there are the things
that some people may enjoy doing
or experience personal benefit from,
like jogging,
which don't provide essential social benefit
(again, public health benefit of jogging specifically
aside)

then, we haven't yet discussed
things that people enjoy doing
which benefit society
but which don't really command financial earning power
or whatever the technical economic term would be—
things it's hard to get paid for right now, but which
we need as a society
art
childcare
mentoring of young people
charity work
spiritual guidance
caring for the elderly

And then finally,
jobs that workers don't see the point of,
beside the paycheck
and which,
short of growth in corporate profit,
may not have a pronounced societal benefit.
Those are bullshit jobs
and frankly,
essentially,
those are mostly
or maybe entirely
white-collar jobs.
Where there start to be blue-collar
or service industry jobs in a similar position
is with mechanization and automation
where blue-collar workers are doing jobs that machines
could do

or are getting to do less and less of their jobs
themselves
are watching a robot build something they used to
build,
or whatever,
but here I'm out of my depths
and probably making a classist ass of myself, again.

But, to dig myself out of it,
and to come back to something I said earlier,
thinking of these four categories
worker doesn't value: society values
society doesn't value: worker values
worker & society value: doesn't pay
worker & society don't value: does pay

we have a sort of a test we can apply to a job,
Bullshit's Razor if you will
where we can separate out parts of a job that a person
should still be doing
either because we, as a society, need them to
or because they want to
from the parts which a person should not be doing
either because the person and the society don't get
anything but capital gain out of them
or because the person doesn't want to do them and a
robot can.

I honestly don't know enough about the auto industry
to know what happens when you apply this test there,
but those are the criteria I would apply.

And then, I think, we should be starting to think
about how, as a society, we get to the place where
people are only doing the things that fulfill them
and/or which the society needs,
and we let the rest go
and just make sure that everyone also has a home and
food and healthcare.
Because I think that we have the potential to reach
the point, if we're not there already, where we don't
have to hold basic rights like housing and food and
healthcare over people in order to get the things done
that we need but which people don't want to do.

PART I, Section E. "A country called productivity"

They are in the viewing stand for a military parade in The Sovereign Republic of Productive Robots

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but here's something.
We're not really losing jobs to machines right now,
we're losing jobs to China, or Mexico, right?
That's where the factories are moving.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

We're losing jobs to both.
We're losing jobs to profit margins.
That's the truth of it,
is that we're losing jobs to capitalism,
frankly.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But what does that mean?
I mean the jobs that are going overseas
or to Mexico
or whatever,
those jobs aren't actually disappearing,
right?
they're moving.
They're not being lost from the face of the earth,
they're just being lost to US workers.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Well, first of all,
manufacturing is declining worldwide.³
So it's not that manufacturing jobs are going to other
countries,
although, yes, some go there before disappearing
altogether.

But also,
it depends on your definition of "job."
Because the jobs that are going abroad
are not really jobs that US workers want,
not in the form that they land in.

³ <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/business/economy/the-mirage-of-a-return-to-manufacturing-greatness.html>

The whole reason they're being moved,
these jobs, these factories,
is to increase
(or the CEOs and COOs might say, "preserve")
profitability.
So the equivalent job in Mexico
pays less.

SQUARE BLUE SKY
But it's still a job.
Isn't a job that pays less still better than no job?

ARMADILLO ANNEX
That is the [seven dollar & twenty-five cent]⁴ an hour
question.
I would say no.
But that's the whole ballgame, right there.
Because that's how capitalism gets things done.
The fuel of capitalism is the threat of unemployment.
Because if you can leave and go to another job when
they cut your salary, they can't cut your salary.
But, if you have nowhere else to go
or you're afraid to find out
then they've got you where they want you
and anything goes.

Remember, the supposed golden age of American
manufacturing was also the golden age of the American
labor union. Those were good jobs because they were
union jobs and the union took care of you, made sure
you were making enough to support your family (of
course, that was if they let you in the union in the
first place).

But with globalization
or the form of globalization that we've got at least,
the negotiating position of the American worker is
weakened.
And this is the argument you hear against raising the
minimum wage. That if you make the American worker
too expensive you cost her her job. The company can't
afford to keep her. Which is a lot of bullshit.

⁴ insert federal minimum wage

This is the same logic which calls the anti-union stance "Right to Work," which means right to let them cut your salary if it means you get to keep your job.

What maybe is true if the minimum wage is raised is that the company won't choose to afford to keep employing Americans And will look around the world at laxer labor standards in other countries and decide that it can make more money getting its products made or having its phones answered elsewhere.

But trying to keep that job trying to chase it rather than letting it go is a race to the bottom in a capitalist system. Because if they can cut the wage once they'll cut it again (and remember, with inflation in the cost of living, every year we don't raise the minimum wage is effectively a year we're cutting it).

And from there it's a slippery slope to the point where we've lowered our labor standards to the level of China or Mexico or one of the countries that we're supposedly losing our jobs to.

But the robots are coming anyway. So why not quit while we're ahead and try to figure out what comes next?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But don't we need the things?
Don't we need the things the people are making?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Some of them.
I mean,
I think that there's a whole separate or maybe not so separate Jimmy Carter Crisis-of-Confidence-style conversation that we could probably have about which things we

really need and which things we're just using to dull the pain of our rat race existences. But without even getting into that, I think that the idea that we have to choose between having the things that we need or want and paying the people who make them a living wage is a false dichotomy.

John G. Murphy, Senior Vice President for International Policy at the US Chamber of Commerce wrote in a recent blog post on the C of C website recently that most of the manufacturing jobs lost here and abroad between 1994 and 2004 were lost to

ARMADILLO ANNEX & JOHN G. MURPHY, SVP, USCoC
"a country called productivity"⁵

ARMADILLO ANNEX

In other words,
factory output went up
while the number of employee hours necessary to
generate that output went down.
And that's true here and in China.

Now Murphy doesn't put it this way,
but that means companies making more money by
employing fewer people.

So the idea that manufacturers can't afford to pay
their workers more just doesn't hold up.
If workers are creating more value through greater
productivity today than they were ten or twenty years
ago shouldn't they be getting paid more?

Right now, companies are using technology to increase
productivity, but rather than using that productivity
to raise wages, they're using the unemployment and
underemployment that an increase of per worker
productivity creates as leverage to pay workers less.

And, again, that's true in the US and in China.
China has just used streamlined supply chains and
weaker labor protections to achieve even greater
productivity which, coupled with trade deals which

⁵ <https://www.uschamber.com/above-the-fold/the-great-american-manufacturing-myth>

favor companies over workers, has made China a really great place to manufacture and assemble products.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but the jobs are still being lost, right?
Whether they're being lost to the Sovereign Republic of Productive Robots or just to China?
It's still fewer jobs for US workers.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes, but it's not less US Gross Domestic Product.

So, I think my point is,
why worry about the job loss when we can focus instead on the income loss or even more directly on the access to food, housing, and healthcare.
Let's worry about feeding everyone
housing everyone
access to education
doctors.
If the US is producing more than ever, great.
If fewer people have to spend their time running the machines that make the stuff, that should be great, too.
Let's just make sure everyone is getting taken care of.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but now we're just talking about redistribution of wealth, right?
Is that where you're headed with this?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

You could call it that.
But I think it makes more sense just to call it distribution of wealth.

Think of an assembly line in an auto factory,
someone's putting together the chassis,
the body of the car,
someone's putting together the suspension
the gas tanks
the rear axles
drive shafts
gear boxes
steering

wheel drums
brakes⁶
someone adds a radio
and then let's say the last job is popping the hood
ornament on,
like a cherry on top.
Now that last worker has a finished car, worth tens of
thousands of dollars.
If the hood ornament affixer sells the car,
shouldn't the rest of the workers on the assembly line
get a cut?

SQUARE BLUE SKY
Of course.

ARMADILLO ANNEX
So there you go,
redistribution of wealth.

SQUARE BLUE SKY
Ok, but the other workers on the assembly line
contributed to the construction of the car.
Some of them arguably much more than hood ornament
affixer.
That's totally different from giving a share to
someone who didn't work on the car at all.

ARMADILLO ANNEX
You mean like the foreman?
Or the Senior Vice President of Manufacturing?

SQUARE BLUE SKY laughs.

But seriously,
right now, that's who decides who's getting paid what.
And it's not a decision based on whether it's harder
to build an engine or install a radio or paint the
body.
It's a decision being made based on being able to show
the shareholders—
another bunch of people who don't touch the car—
the greatest possible profit growth.

So,

⁶ MadeHow.com

instead of calling it redistribution of wealth,
with all that connotes,
let's just remember that someone watches those
workers' kids
someone cooks their food
someone teaches the kids
and writes the books they read in school
and the books the workers read
or the movies or tv shows or YouTube videos they
watch.
Someone codes the games they play on their phones.
Someone takes care of them when they're sick
and when they get old
and not just while they're in the hospital running up
exorbitant bills.
Someone has to look out her window and see a kid fall
off of her bike and invite her in and calm her down,
give her a bandaaid and a glass of water and help her
call someone to pick her up.
And someone has to come pick her up.

And right now,
not all of those people are getting enough of the
wealth distributed to them.

And that's where we should be focusing our attention,
rather than on dreaming up more things for them to be
doing instead in the name of job creation. There's
enough being done already. Let's make sure we take
care of people and give them the time to do the things
that really matter.

PART II: Basic Income

PART II, Section A. "A Human Job"

SQUARE BLUE SKY

All right, but how do we do that?
How do we distribute the wealth among everyone who is making a contribution to society?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

There are a bunch of places we could start.

If we were just talking about helping workers displaced by technology, one place to start might be patent law. The big reason that we expect that Mr. Burns would be the one to own the machine that replaces Homer is that new technology tends to be expensive. The reason it's expensive is that we've set up the law so that the inventor of the technology owns a patent on it. If we didn't have patent laws and someone invented a machine to do your job, you could just buy one. But because of patent laws, the company that owns a patent on something doesn't really have to compete with other manufacturers of that machine, which means the prices are much higher.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but if we didn't have patents, how would inventors make money off of their inventions?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Well, they could use the invention just like anyone else, but, yes, it would be much, much harder for them to make money off of their intellectual property.

But, in a sense, that would put them in good company. We already have a lot of people struggling to make money off of their IP; journalists, musicians, novelists, filmmakers, pretty much anyone whose IP can be infinitely replicated in a digital age.

And so this is where we need to start to think more broadly and think about ideas that could allow us to support the musicians and novelists and journalists as well as domestic workers, both professional and amateur, if you will, who are already doing jobs

robots can't do at the same time that we're liberating the Homers and the auto workers and everyone else from their shitty less-than-jobs that robots can do.

One of those ideas, potentially, is Universal Basic Income. At its simplest, basic income would involve taking all the money that we spend on social programs, both the money that goes out in the form of federal assistance and the money that it costs to administer these programs, and instead paying every US citizen a monthly income out of it. Personally, though, I think we'd need to go beyond that to something a little more substantial.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

How would you determine who gets paid what?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Everyone gets paid the same thing.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But how does that make sense?

Aren't you wasting money on people who don't need it which you could be giving to people who need more?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, so the short answer is yes.
But the more complicated answer is
yes, but...

because first of all, you're saving a huge amount of money on administering the programs and second, you could treat it as taxable income and conceivably this could be paired with changes to the tax code to the effect that if this income isn't making a tangible difference to an individual it pretty much all comes back in taxes.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but, again, how do you convince the American people that the government should just be giving money away to people who don't work?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Well, let's look at the Homer Simpson example.

Because I do think that when people talk about lost American manufacturing jobs there's a pretty strong consensus that we should be protecting those jobs or doing something for those workers.

But if we believe as a country, that Homer's Y/N button pushing job should be protected, that Mr. Burns should pay Homer to do a job that a machine can do, can't we agree that it would be better to let the machine do the job and Mr. Burns can pay Homer to do something else?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but what?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Anything. Any of those things that are valuable to human society but aren't valuable in our rigged pseudo-free-market capitalism. That's the beauty of it. We're not talking about Mr. Burns paying Homer to do something else at the power plant, we're talking about essentially continuing to pay Homer his salary and letting Homer decide what to do with his life.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But how would we get Mr. Burns to pay Homer if Homer isn't working for him anymore?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

In practice, it wouldn't actually be Mr. Burns paying Homer— though it doesn't fundamentally make that much less sense for Mr. Burns to pay Homer not to do a job than it makes for Mr. Burns to pay Homer to do a job that a machine could do for less.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but both of those options make less sense than Mr. Burns just firing Homer, getting a machine to do the job, and keeping his money.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Except, again, what makes it Mr. Burns' money? He's not working for it any more than Homer.

He just happens to be in the position to buy the machine, to own the company. The machine does the work. The question is who makes money off of the machine's work. And if the answer seems obvious, it's only because we're so used to the rules that we have that we seldom think to question them.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but you still haven't explained how we make Mr. Burns pay Homer if he doesn't work at the power plant anymore.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Mr. Burns doesn't literally pay Homer. But instead of doing something like giving Mr. Burns a tax break to try to keep the factory in the US, we invest in Homer directly.

That's the idea here, really, is that instead of investing in corporations in the hopes that they'll preserve or create jobs, we can invest in the workers themselves to generate value which will lead to both a healthier economy and, more importantly, a healthier society.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but won't Homer just end up sitting on the couch eating or going to the movies every day?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Maybe.
If we're talking about Homer Simpson, probably. But the point is that anything he does do, anything at all, that's productive is a net gain for society, because a machine is already doing the job that he was doing before and, if we ARE talking about Homer probably doing it better (though, to be fair to Homer, he does do the Y/N job better than the drinking bird) but if the machine does do the job better or more efficiently than Homer replacing him with the machine is already a gain in productivity,

even if all Homer does is sit on the couch and cash his check.

But, given the gift of time,
I think that, especially if we stop talking about Homer Simpson the cartoon embodiment of laziness and just talk about a real person with hopes and dreams and desires,
I think there's a pretty good chance that that person is going to end up doing something with his or her time that provides a benefit to society.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But wouldn't that person have more incentive to do something productive if they needed to earn the money, rather than if we just give it to them?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Why not?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Think about the options available to a laid-off American blue collar worker if that worker has to earn a living. If one job is automated all comparable jobs are probably automated. Which means that all the expertise and experience that the worker has acquired go out the window and they're going to have to start back at the bottom. Learning a new job or taking a job that doesn't require skill or experience and probably pays less. And the more workers are competing for the same unskilled jobs, the lower the wages for those jobs are going to be. So all our laid-off worker is doing is making it harder for other people to make a living. We don't have a shortage of people who want to do jobs that require little-to-no training and experience. And in fact, it's only the surplus of unemployed people competing for those minimum wage jobs that keeps wages low enough to prevent employers from investing in machines to automate those jobs.

But if our laid-off workers don't have to worry about earning a living, they can start to do things that don't have instant financial payoff, but have greater potential for social benefit, whether it's starting a new business or volunteering or making art. Or to come back to our earlier conversation raising children or homemaking. And some of those things, in addition to having non-commodifiable benefits for society, are also going to pay off in the long term for the national economy, whether it's a small business that takes off or an invention that comes out of tinkering or a kid who, because of the teamwork skills that she learns on the rec-league soccer team that one of laid-off workers coaches, ends up inventing the next generation of Yes-No choosing or automobile-assembling robots making transportation more affordable for someone else to get to community college classes where she learns programming— and so on a so forth. You get the idea. The point is, instead of talking about protecting jobs from robots, why not let the robots have the jobs that robots can do and provide opportunities for the people who had those jobs to do something that the market wouldn't normally be able to pay them to do.

A human job, that a human can do best.

PART II, Section B. "Parental Basic Income"

They sit on a couch playing SkyRim and eating Bugles.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, and the thing is we already kind of know how basic income works.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

How?

Have there been studies?

How could there possibly be a large enough study to replicate the effects on an economy the size of the US?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I'm not talking about studies, not studies of basic income, at least, not by that name.

(though there are some)

But there is other data that clearly applies.

Did you read the Mel Jones piece for *The Atlantic*⁷ on why minority millennials can't get ahead?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

From a while back?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yeah, November 2015.

In it, she cites a USA Today/Bank of America poll which suggests that about forty percent of millennials get help from their parents.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Mhmm.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, so that's a form of basic income.

It's just coming from parents, rather than from the government. But I think it gives a really clear picture of the way that basic income can make a difference.

⁷ <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/11/gifts-debts-inheritances/417423/>

In the long run, it might not be the difference between working and not working, but it might be the difference between having to work your way through college or having the time to, as Jones puts it, "connect with classmates who have time to tinker around in dorm rooms and go on to found multibillion-dollar companies together."

After college, or over the summer, it could mean the opportunity to take an unpaid internship or do volunteer work.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Or, you know, the ability to lie on their parents couches and eat Bugles and play Skyrim.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yeah, but what's economic pressure really going to do for those kids? Best case scenario, it sends them to a fast food or retail job or if there's some sort of parental connection, some kind of bullshit white collar work. Because then you're not talking about kids who, at that stage in their lives, have a passion that they can carry to their work. Or if they do, it's in the form of untapped potential, which is not going to get tapped in the kind of job that a college kid who clearly would rather be at home playing SkyRim and eating Bugles is going to be able to get.

And obviously, the value of hard work can be learned, but I think especially as technology moves forward there are going to be fewer and fewer productive contributions to society that are going to be made by people who are purely motivated by money.

We're running out of jobs that we need to pay people money to do for them to get done. Which means what we really need is to increase the incentives and opportunities for people who already have work that they want to do. That's the work that we really need to be encouraging, not the work that comes from being made to work.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But isn't having to have a job the way we teach people the value of hard work?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Sometimes, maybe.

But, more often these days,

I think it's how we teach people to hate working, how to aspire to a life of Bugles and Skyrim.

Because, I think that if you're going to learn the value of hard work you have to be able to recognize the value of what you're doing, which means your work has to have value,

you have to be able to see the connection between what you're doing and some value that's being created in the world,

and I don't think money is enough,

I think you have to see yourself achieving something meaningful in the world.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Even if you can go out and spend that money?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Maybe if we're still talking about the millennial living on her parents' couch.

That's pretty much the only person who can take home minimum wage and feel excited about it.

If we're talking about an adult with debts and responsibilities, it's just barely or more likely not quite enough to keep going to the next paycheck, to feed herself, put enough gas in the car to keep making it to work.

For the student, it pays part of the tuition, and yes, maybe there's a satisfaction in working your way through college, but I would argue that the real pride comes from completing the schoolwork, from being able to accomplish that work on top of working to pay for school. More importantly, though, the student working their way through school is not someone who needs to learn the value of hard work. I'd argue that that's someone whose work-ethic is really being wasted.

But to come back to the kid on her parents' couch, the reason she can appreciate that paycheck, if she does,

is that she's also getting basic income. That free room and board is what allows her to appreciate the measly paycheck, by raising its purchasing power from sustenance to minor luxuries. And it's not just movie tickets and blue jeans; as she gets older that basic income foundation will allow her to get more out of the money she makes. Jones says that "each dollar in income increase yields \$5.19 in wealth for white American households, but only 69 cents for black American households." That's because black people are more likely to have to spend that money on day-to-day needs rather than savings or asset building.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

So you're saying that we should give millennials a basic income.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I'm saying that forty percent of millennials are already getting a basic income from their parents, but that that forty percent are disproportionately white.

If we give it to everyone, we spread the opportunity that it provides. Not to mention, Jones says that on average, that support makes even more of a difference for black people. She says "every dollar in financial family support received by a white American yielded 35 cents in wealth growth. For a black individual [it's] 52 cents."

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but what's the age cutoff?
What age people are we talking about?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

18 to 34 year-olds in the USA Today/B of A poll.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

So, would basic income end at 34?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Not necessarily. I think there's plenty of reason to think that basic income could be helpful later in life, too, with the Homer Simpson example as one case.

But I just wanted to point out that we do have data to suggest that this sort of basic support can make a big difference. And that if we could get ourselves, especially those who can afford it, to care for other people's children the way we care for our own, we might be better off as a society.

PART II, Section C. "The Section Formerly Known as
Homer Simpson Layoff Tax"

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but why not,
for the sake of argument,
a new WPA,
or some sort of national guaranteed employment
program?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

I think what I'm suggesting is
why guarantee employment when instead we can guarantee
the right not to be employed,
by which, obviously, I don't mean the right for
everyone to do nothing,
but the decoupling of the right to life, liberty, and
the pursuit of happiness from the obligation to
participate in capitalism.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

No, I get that.
I guess what I'm saying
is that there are still jobs that need to get done
or that aren't getting done
that we would be better off if they were.
Jobs which might be
in your terms
future bullshit jobs
in that some day a machine might be able to do them,
but aren't yet.
Like, the jobs I'm thinking of
or the first example that comes to mind
are what we would call "green" jobs,
like jobs which would help us get on clean energy
or jobs which would help
update our infrastructure,
improve our railroads and public transportation
and like universalize access to broadband internet.

If you're proposing a situation in which
we're going to spend
or give away, really,
money trying to take care of people who lose their
jobs to robots,

why not spend that money hiring those people and
putting them to work on things we badly need
like upgraded infrastructure
and clean energy technology
(not to mention,
like education)

Why not just replace one job with another?
Why just give Homer the money as basic income when we
can pay it to him to build infrastructure for high
speed rail
or national access to broadband internet
or clean energy.
We need those things, right?
And we need people to build them.
Those aren't bullshit jobs yet.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No, they're not.
And I don't have a really good answer for you.
Which is to say,
I can't think of a reason why we shouldn't invest in
clean energy and infrastructure.
But, I don't think we can limit the public aid we're
offering to people capable of doing those jobs.
I think that the government should offer a job like
that to anyone who wants one. But I think that
there's still a benefit to and a need for a basic
income, in addition to that.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but,
first of all,
can we afford to do both?
and second,
who's going to take a job with the government if they
can get free money from the government?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Ok, second question first,
lots of people would rather have a job than not have a
job.
I think that was sort of your point about your
grandfather, right?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but my grandfather was earning a living he was supporting his family. Like we said, he took pride in that.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

And like we said, some of that pride was— I don't want to say misplaced because he was working hard— but he happened to be working hard in a way that was rewarded financially in a way that, for example, your grandmother's hard work at home was not, even though both their labor was aimed and sustaining and supporting the family. And as we've said, the kind of work that your grandfather was doing is not being rewarded financially in the same way today and so I think we have to move forward from that.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

I think that'd be hard for a lot of people to hear.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes, but it's because capitalism has reduced labor to profitability that we're in this situation.

Those people are not wrong that human labor ought to have an inherent value, but it can only really have that inherent value if we can let go of the idea that it has inherent financial value. Because right now, we have trouble seeing that things have value if they don't have value in the marketplace. That's what we were talking about with the housewives going next door. And, the fact is that, as we go forward, human work is going to have a harder and harder time competing with machine work in the marketplace, given the way we have the marketplace set up right now.

Which means we're going to have to get back in touch with another kind of value.

Which brings us back to your question.

People will take those green infrastructure jobs because, in addition to providing a paycheck, they pay off in a different kind of way. They pay off in a value to society that the people doing the jobs can see and feel proud of, just like your grandfather felt proud to provide families with a safe, affordable automobile.

The people who take those green infrastructure jobs will be helping to slow the effects of global warming. They'll be making a better country and a better world for their children.

In short, these are jobs with incredible worth even if they're not jobs that our economy is placing financial value on right now, so people will do those jobs to participate in that sense of worth.

But not everyone can do or wants to do that kind of work, so I don't think that we can tie access to things that should be considered basic human rights; food, shelter, education; to the willingness or ability to build windmills or solar panels or lay fiberoptic cable.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, but the WPA included a Federal Writers' Project and a Federal Arts Project. A new WPA could do that, too.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

It could. But, I think that when it comes down to it, if we have the choice, we don't really want or need the government in the art business, which isn't to say we don't want them in the art funding business, but that we don't want the government deciding who gets funding or what it takes to earn funding.

I think that the Green New Deal idea makes sense because I think it does take government intervention to push the kind of long-range thinking and planning involved in growing clean energy infrastructure and infrastructure in general. There's no way that that can really come from individual initiative. So it's either got to come from corporate initiative or from

government initiative and I think that there's no question that when it's in place we'd rather have that infrastructure be publicly owned rather than monopolized the way utilities like internet and mobile service have been.

But, I think that, by contrast, art and other kinds of innovation do come from unencumbered individual impulses and inspiration. Not that collaboration doesn't play an important part, but I don't think that oversight does. So, I think that we're better off lifting everyone with basic income just like the parents of forty percent of (mostly white) millennials are already doing and letting people decide for themselves what they do with that boost.

And again, not everyone wants to make art or write and no matter how many new public works projects we come up with, we're always going to be leaving people out.

Not to mention the people who just can't work who we still want to make sure we're taking care of because, as I mentioned before, the most basic plan for funding basic income would be to put the resources that we're currently putting into other social programs like social security, disability, and welfare into the basic income fund, so we have to make sure that we're continuing to serve everyone.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, so that's the argument for having both a "New Green Deal" and a basic income, but can we afford both?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Without raising taxes?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

This gets into a whole other conversation, but fundamentally, afford is not really the right word.

A government like the United States which creates its own currency can pay for anything that is denominated in that currency.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

But not without inflation, right?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Well, first of all, I think the question should not be whether you're going to cause any inflation at all, but whether there's going to be so much inflation that it impacts the end goal of making sure everyone's essential needs are being met.

But also, inflation comes about when aggregate demand (money that people are looking to spend) exceeds aggregate supply (goods and services available to be purchased). So, if the goal that we're setting is to make sure that everyone is having certain essential needs met, the question is whether there are enough human and natural resources available to meet those needs. I think there are. Take food for example. Tons of food gets thrown away every day by grocery stores and restaurants in the US. If you gave people money to buy that food, you wouldn't cause inflation, because the food already exists to be bought. Inflation only comes about when there's more money going after the same finite amount of goods, like, say, imported oil in the 70s. Yet another argument for renewable energy.

So, providing a basic level of dignity for everyone without causing inflation is really just a matter of finding the right way to manage resources.

The answer is probably some combination of basic income, socializing universal needs like healthcare, government initiatives like a Green New Deal, and affordable credit for people looking to start new businesses.

But the question is not whether we can afford it. Again, without getting into the macroeconomics of sovereign currencies, the United States can afford anything that is priced in dollars and is in the best

interest of the people of the United States of America.

The real question, at the risk of sounding glib, is whether we can afford not to do this.

EPILOGUE: "Love Made Visible"

*They're sitting on a stoop somewhere
at the end of a long day at work
shooting the breeze.*

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok, so what's the end goal here.
In your wildest dreams what are we aiming for?
A society where no one has to work if they don't want
to?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

No,
I mean certainly a society where no one has to work if
they're not able to
and a society where basic human rights like food,
housing, and healthcare aren't predicated on being
able to do a certain kind of work.
But work itself I think is important.
In fact, I think that's sort of the point.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

The point is that work is important?
But you've just spent like an hour trying to convince
me that we should let robots take over all the jobs.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes.
Take over all the jobs,
but not take over all the work.
I think that the jobs we have now
and the way we think about jobs
is getting in the way of what makes work valuable and
meaningful.

Look,

*Kahlil Gibran walks by
or the ghost of Kahlil Gibran
or someone reading Kahlil Gibran
or the ghost of Kahlil Gibran
speaking through the body
of someone reading Kahlil Gibran
or maybe just someone juggling oranges.*

Kahlil Gibran has a section of his poem *The Prophet* called "On Work" in which he writes,

Kahlil Gibran or the ghost of Kahlil Gibran or someone reading Kahlil Gibran or the ghost of Khalil Gibran speaking through the body of someone reading Kahlil Gibran or maybe just someone juggling oranges or WHOEVER it is says:

WHOEVER

Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune

But I say to you that when you work you fulfil a part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born,

And in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life,

And to love life through labour is to be intimate with life's inmost secret.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

And he goes on to say,

WHOEVER

Work is love made visible.

ARMADILLO ANNEC

Work is love made visible.

That makes work seem more than important; it makes it seem essential.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Yeah.

Ok, so then why let robots do it?

Is robot work still love made visible?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

But, work is love made visible isn't just an endorsement,

it's a definition.

Work is love made visible.

But he also says

WHOEVER

And all work is empty save when there is love;

ARMADILLO ANNEX

So, anything that isn't love made visible, isn't work,
at least according to Kahlil Gibran
it isn't part of the earth's dream for you.
So, I would argue, running fiberoptic cable so that
kids in the rural US can have high-speed internet
connecting them to the world, that's love made
visible.
Building homes for the homeless is love made visible.
A symphony
is love made visible.

Reviewing someone else's productivity
to determine if laying her off can generate greater
profitability
is not love made visible.
Talking someone into taking out a mortgage on a home
they can't afford is not love made visible.

And so,
perhaps even more than the robot job/bullshit job/
bullshit robot job categories,
this definition,
Gibran's definition,
becomes a way of distinguishing between the work we
should and shouldn't be doing.

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Ok,
but, what about,
I don't know,
cleaning toilets?
Is cleaning toilets love made visible?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

It depends on whose toilet it is,
right?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

Does it?

ARMADILLO ANNEX

Yes, it does.
Say it's your toilet.
Why do you clean your toilet?

SQAURE BLUE SKY

Honestly,
usually, I don't.
Until it gets really gross
or I have people coming over.
I know I should clean it more,
I just don't

ARMADILLO ANNEX

But when you do,
why do you do it?

SQUARE BLUE SKY

So it'll be clean.

ARMADILLO ANNEX

So, you clean it so that it will be clean.
You clean it to create a more hygienic,
more pleasant bathroom experience for yourself,
for your guests, for your spouse or your roommates.
I would argue that cleaning your own toilet is a labor
of at least a little love,
whether it's love for yourself
or your guests
or love for the people you live with who won't have to
clean it because you cleaned it.
That doesn't mean you love doing it,
if a robot could do it, that would probably be fine
with you,
but cleaning your own bathroom makes visible some love
for the users of your bathroom.

Cleaning someone else's bathroom,
though,
is not fundamentally love made visible.
(and here I'm not talking about cleaning the bathroom
of someone you love, I'm talking about bathroom
cleaning as a job).
And in fact,
that's the line,
if you love someone enough to clean their bathroom,
whether it's your child
or your significant other
or a sick friend or relative who can't do it for
themselves

or a stranger in a nursing home
or kids at an understaffed school,
that's love made visible
that's work.
The rest is not.

The rest is a punishment that capitalism inflicts on
people for the crime of needing money.
And every moment spent serving that sentence is a
moment not spent making love visible.

So when someone says

SOMEONE
Honestly,
I love this job so much I would do it for free.

ARMADILLO ANNEX
We should consider it our duty as a society to make
sure that they can do it for free.
Because that's the job we want that person doing.
And we don't want anything to get in the way of that.
That's everything.
That's what we're supposed to be doing.
Everything else is fucking us up.

Look, I really can't say it better than Kahlil.

To WHO(m)EVER.

Can you give me a hand with this?

*ARMADILLO ANNEX and WHOEVER speak together.
While they speak, they do something,
some sort of work.
Maybe someone needs a couch carried up to a fifth
floor walk-up. Or some groceries.
Someone needs help and they're helping.*

ARMADILLO ANNEX & WHOEVER
Work is love made visible.
And if you cannot work with love but only with
distaste, it is better that you should leave your work
and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of
those who work with joy.

For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake
a bitter bread that feeds but half a man's hunger.

And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes,
your grudge distills a poison in the wine.

And if you sing though as angels, and love not
the singing, you muffle man's ears to the voices of
the day and the voices of the night.

The End.

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