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A Rhetorical Analysis of Graeber's "Why Capitalism Creates Pointless Jobs"

Capitalism, a free market system with laissez faire attributes, has been part of human society since the 19th century. Famous economist and mathematician, John Maynard Keynes, was a prominent figure in the application and the fundamental aspects of capitalism (ECONLIB, 1), allowing him to theorize that over time, with the expansion of technology, capitalism would pay off in the future where people would not have to work 70 hour work weeks (EHA, T1) allowing us to work only 15 hour work weeks where in reality we still do work 40 hours a week (Ward, 1). On September 27th, 2016, David Graeber highlights these ideas and this progression of the high number of work hours, in his article, "Why Capitalism Creates Pointless Jobs." Graeber calls on the readers to realize that capitalism has allowed for a level of greed in all people where they are able to work less than the average 40 hours a week, but people decide to put their happiness and moral fulfillment behind them in order to make more money. Graeber also points out that the social constructs created by capitalism have deterred people from feeling good from not working. The social construct that exists is that if one is not working they are perceived as wasting time or lazy.

Graeber indicates the rhetorical situation as capitalism being the enemy for the moral well being of people in today's society. His audience and reader proves to be the progressive and open minded capitalist, who believes in the possibility of changes in ideology and beliefs.

Graeber is writing for people who are open to changing their way of thinking regarding capitalism and economics. He allows the reader to feel as if the capitalistic society we live in today has allowed all people to lose their sense of moral fulfillment and undergo “spiritual damage” (Graeber, 1). Graeber proclaims that with the social atmosphere that exists with capitalism, we all feel as if we need to be working or else our lives are pointless and we are wasting time. The connotation of the words he uses allow for the reader to feel as if many of the things claimed are true as we feel pity for the current human race who value their image rather than their moral happiness. Graeber claims, “And these numbers do not even reflect on all those people whose job is to provide administrative, technical, or security support for these industries, or for that matter the whole host of ancillary industries (dog-washers, all-night pizza delivery men) that only exist because everyone else is spending so much of their time working in all the other ones” The connotations of the jobs, such as dog-washers and pizza delivery men, he uses as evidence, are an attempt to connect with the average American who typically works in these jobs in their early lives, especially as highschool and college students. The use of the pathos appeal allows the reader to take into account many of the things he says as there is some sort of relationship established with the writer and the reader. Throughout the article, Graeber describes that capitalism as the downfall of happiness where people would rather work and make an extra buck and work in pointless jobs that exist only to fulfill this societal image of all people having to work; while in reality he pushes the point that, the truth is that many of these jobs only exist to allow people to feel as part of this established capitalistic society we live in today. Additionally, Graeber pushes his point across by showing the reader that many of the jobs that do exist are pointless, he claims, “These are what I propose to call ‘bullshit jobs.’” In using this

language, the pathos appeal is still in effect as the connotation of the language used allows the reader to feel as if the jobs that they are working have no point and the fact that they are wasting time in doing so is “bullshit.” By using a curse word, he invokes a feeling of surprise and attention in the reader as they connect to what is being claimed as Graeber uses this unconventional manner to communicate his ideas.

Throughout the article, Graeber also attempts to connect with the reader. He attempts to provide some sort of connection with the reader through his language and his writing style. Additionally, Graeber’s status in society also helps his credibility. Graeber is a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics. These aspects of the article allows the reader to trust the ideas being presented by the writer. These ideas are argued through using an ethos appeal where he attempts to provide credibility where he asserts some sort of connection with the reader. He claims, “Say they were hired because they were excellent cabinet-makers, and then discover they are expected to spend a great deal of their time frying fish. Neither does the task really needs to be done – at least, there’s only a very limited number of fish that need to be fried” (Graeber, 9). This statement allows for some sort of connection with the reader, as he is using a humorous tactic as he uses an extreme examples of frying fish and building cabinets to convey a relatively easily communicable idea. In doing so he allows us to view him as an equal, portraying him as trustworthy and knowledgeable about what he is writing about. This sense of trustworthiness he establishes as well as his status as an anthropologist professor at Yale, allow the reader to believe many of the things he claims and take his opinions into account.

Graeber also does not shy away from using the logos appeal, as many of his statements and ideas are backed up by historical facts. He often cites John Maynard Keynes, a famous

economist from the 20th century, throughout the article. In paragraph one of his article he claims, “In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that technology would have advanced sufficiently by century’s end that countries like Great Britain or the United States would achieve a 15-hour work week. There’s every reason to believe he was right” (Graeber, 1). The use of the theory of famous and esteemed economist, Keynes allow Graeber to seem educated and allowing the ideas he would introduce later seem more credible as they are backed up by historical evidence. Additionally, many of his claims are backed up by examples and by evidence therefore strengthening his argument.

The use of unconventional language in a professional article allows Graeber to convey his point to the average public worker as well as the average person. The connotations and denotations of many of the ideas he portrays allow him to seem persuasive and not too hostile. Especially to the target audience who is open to changing their ways of thoughts regarding economics. Throughout the article, Graeber uses all three rhetorical devices in order to convey his point; the use of ethos, pathos, and logos allow him to convey his point across despite the controversial nature of the topic.

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