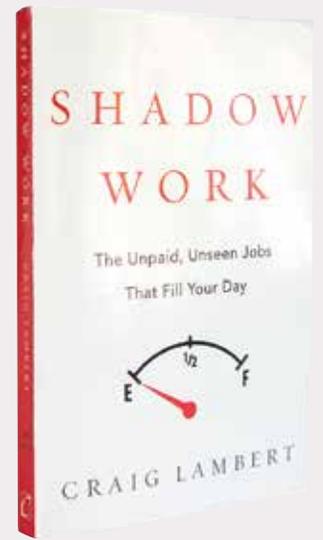


# Shelf Life



Like Marx and the exploited proletariat (or Veblen and conspicuous consumption), **CRAIG LAMBERT** (PhD '78, sociology) has latched onto a timely idea. In ***Shadow Work: The Unpaid, Unseen Jobs That Fill Your Day*** (Counterpoint Press, 2015), he describes a range of unpaid tasks that have recently been put upon us. Shadow work often reflects business efforts to boost profits by eliminating employees and shifting work onto customers: once gas station attendants checked oil, cleaned windshields, and pumped gas. Now it's self-serve.

Technology can be a midwife to shadow work. We telecommute, book our travels, etc., from computers or handheld devices. Instead of (or in addition to) visiting the doctor, we may research health questions online. There are advantages here: multiple ATMs and online banking help customers avoid the lines of pre-electronic banking institutions. But the same technology lets your boss reach you with work-related requests day or night.

Shadow work is especially evident among parents—organizing playdates or driving kids to and from school, for example. Lambert frequently contrasts today's reality with his memories of the 1950s and early 1960s (a privileged era for the American economy and white middle class). Ultimately, however, he's less concerned about corporate conniving, unremunerated work, helicopter parenting, or nostalgia than about how shadow work reduces the human nexus—offering screens rather than people and leaving us isolated.