



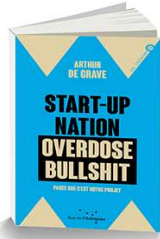
IPSE



# 4 questions to...

Arthur de Grave

Essayist and co-founder of the Stroika agency



*"Start-up nation, bullshit overdose:  
Because it is our project"*

In his book "Start-up nation, overdose bullshit : Because it's our project", Arthur de Grave looks back on the collapse of the start-up model, highlighting the foundations inequalities that underlie them, their strategy of commodifying human beings and the social regression that comes with high levels of financial valuation.

We take advantage of this opportunity to ask him a few questions and also to discuss with him the creation of the independent workers union, [Independants.co](http://Independants.co), and the stake for the SSE to move from a compensation economy to a credible alternative model.

Here are the 4 questions we wanted to ask him.

**1** The title of your book sounds like an evocation of the work of the American anthropologist David Graeber and in particular his founding study on "Bullshit jobs". Beyond emptiness and Anglicisms that characterize the communication of many start-ups, you especially underline the weakness of a business model underpinned by generally unequal schemes (the notion of "unequal imaginary"). While this well-documented reality seems to go hand in hand with a certain awareness, are we moving towards disaffection with this entrepreneurship model in the age of digital dominance?

▶ **Arthur de Grave** I would be careful not to make definitive forecasts in these days! But allow me a preliminary clarification: the inequality inherent in the start-up model, in our world where a decadent neoliberalism dominates, is not a weakness, quite the contrary. The unequal dimension of the model, this is what makes it attractive for the financial world. Moreover, in the light of recent debates on StopCovid and tracking applications, I have the impression that technological solutionism, unfortunately, still has a bright future ahead. So no, it is probably a little early to bury the start-up model. That said...

The rise of start-ups outside their original breeding ground – Silicon Valley, Israel, and a few others – has coincided with a particular monetary context, which saw central banks injecting quantities huge amounts of liquidity to stem the post-2008 recession. This situation is conducive to bubble formation. We have seen some dubious start-up projects raise millions, like the Yo app! (which allowed to send "Yo" to friends) a few years ago, or even Juicero, even outright scams like Theranos. But even on the side of unicorns born during the last decade, the future seems uncertain. Uber's profitability outlook, despite a valuation of several tens of billions, have always been problematic. So now that a global recession is on the verge of its nose... They have just laid off several thousand people, which is not really a positive signal. In short, there will probably be breakage, and in the short term, a decline in venture capital investments. Long-term? Time will tell!

But the bottom of the subject is elsewhere: start-ups have mainly served to justify the establishment of an imaginary unequal in society. And on this specific level, I think that, indeed, the final word has been spoken. On the symbolic plan, and perhaps even on the moral one, the defeat of the start-up model is consummated. Already, because for more than ten years now, their activity has been more to commodify new sections of human existence than to produce disruptive technological innovations: having burgers delivered by underpaid cyclists, that's fine, but that doesn't frankly outline a Star Trek future... As if techno-fetishism – the "wow" effect, if you prefer – were no longer enough to compensate for the social disorders caused, and that the equation of "progress" was no longer balanced.

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Added to this is the widespread awareness of climate change. It is now quite clear for everyone that there is a growing gap between the demands brought by the prospect of collapse and the activities likely to attract capital in search of extreme profitability.

**2** The French Court of Appeal recently issued a decision that requires Uber to recognize its drivers as employees. This judgment which is now a case law could obviously undermine the platform's business model. In your opinion, does this decision ring the death knell for hidden wage earners and companies that adhere to the lowest social price?

► **Arthur de Grave** : I don't think so, no. Let's say they lost a battle, but not the war. And the current social war is a war of attrition. As I told you earlier, Uber has, anyway, more pressing issues to be addressed. This is not the first time that Uber has been in trouble with the law (they have, for example, lost their right to operate in London several times), and it is clear that they take the blows. In the past, other companies in the gig economy have had to shut down following a similar judgment (from memory, the first was Homejoy in 2015). But Uber has a much thicker skin, and they have been on the front lines for a long time. To tell the truth, this is even what justifies the valuation levels – totally excessive considering a purely economic assessment – achieved by the company. The bet we make when we invest on Uber is that society will eventually succeed in fracturing the social model which has held up well since the post-war period, and which limits the expansion of capitalism. Uber is a ram. But this is a risky bet. High risk, high return, the financiers say! This explains why this company, which started out as a simple VTC application, electrifies the debate and unleashes passions for so long: we feel that through Uber, it is an existential struggle that is playing out.

**3** Indépendants.co, a recently created a trade union of self-employed workers during the current health crisis by calling for strong support measures for all freelance workers whose activity is threatened by the abrupt slowdown in the economy. In France, as in Europe, what do you think are the levers to move towards social rights and effective social protection for these workers? How can a new union prove to be more effective than the current representative organizations in moving towards more social justice?

► **Arthur de Grave** : The first lever is for self-employed workers to mobilize themselves to advance things. In itself, this is by no means obvious: modern unionism has had mass wage labour for its original matrix. The struggles first took root in the workplace, the factory, where workers could get together and talk about their situation. The front line, between capital owners and employees, was clear and clean. The independents, historically, formed a separate category of workers.

For today's freelancers, things are very different: they have not, formally at least, a boss, but customers. They form an atomized mass whose common interests are not always obvious. And above all, for them, the collective is not a spontaneous given: it must be provoked. The conviction behind Indépendants.co is that you have to start from scratch to invent new ways of mobilizing and organizing their struggle.

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**In an interview with Carenews website, you highlight the risk for certain companies in the Social and Solidarity Economy to mimic startups (the famous TechForGood) who claim a strong social and environmental impact without departing from this "unequal imaginary" or the "technological solutionism" that you denounce in your book with a certain bite. Should SSE reinvent itself and how? Or should it on the contrary be anchored ever more firmly on its original values and the alternative model it constitutes?**

► **Arthur de Grave** : In all humility, I think that it is up to the SSE actors themselves to respond to this question. I would therefore limit myself to two comments. The first is that by an optical effect, the so-called tech for good start-ups can give the impression of making a bit of progress towards the social and solidarity economy. Generally speaking, this is a fool's game: yet another avatar of "moralization" of capitalism mixed with techno-solutionism. In this context, giving in to the fashions of the moment would only increase the confusion, and we don't need that.

My second remark is that it this should not be about bracing oneself on values or statutes. Standing up to the wall, it is not enough to be virtuous: it is necessary to become a majority fact. That is, in my view, the project that the SSE world should launch today. How to move from an economic sector which lives on the fringes of the dominant capitalist system, an economy of compensation, if you will, to a credible alternative model? How do we get the economy to restore profitability to its right place and make shareholder service a secondary objective?

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