Is your job a pointless job? Does it make a meaningful contribution to the world? If your job was eliminated, would it matter to anyone? These are some of the questions that David Graeber, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics and Political Science, examines in his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (Simon & Schuster 2019). It has been estimated that across the developed world up to 40 percent of workers—especially those in administration, finance, and the legal professions—saw their jobs as a form of meaningless toil analogous to the Greek myth of Sisyphus. These white-collar workers covertly think that their jobs are not only useless, but sometimes harmful to society. With increased automation, a fifteen-hour workweek is not unachievable, but on average working hours have increased rather than decreased over the past few decades. In this book, Graeber examines this epidemic of futility, and offers a theory for human freedom and social liberation.
Loretta Lou: Can you give us a summary of how the book builds on your essay ‘On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant’, which went viral when it was first published in STRIKE! Magazine in the summer of 2013?

David Graeber: Well, to some degree, all I was trying to do was to give voice to all the hundreds of people who wrote to me with stories and reflections on their own experience of bullshit jobs. It was so clear that a substantial portion of the population, in most rich countries at least, had experienced things that to them constituted a profound form of spiritual violence, but completely lacked a language to talk about it—or, even more perhaps, did not feel that they had a right to. But also I wanted to think a little harder about why this had happened. A lot of people thought the original essay ended in some kind of conspiracy theory, since I pointed out that the rich and powerful find it very convenient that everyone else should be spending all their time working, even without a purpose of any kind, and this must have something to do with why this is allowed to happen and why no one steps in to do anything about the situation. So it is really, if anything, an anti-conspiracy theory. I wanted to explore the larger socioeconomic and cultural mechanisms that not just allowed pointless work to emerge, but which make it so difficult to talk about it openly, let alone see it as a social problem.

LL: Your definition of ‘bullshit jobs’ is mainly subjective. You define a bullshit job as one that the workers consider to be pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious. Yet, for many Chinese people, sacrificing and being able to support for their family is as important if not more important than contributing to the wider social good. It is a way of becoming a moral being. What do you make of that?

DG: What you speak of in China is not all that different from some of the attitudes I encountered in Europe or America. Paid employment, especially wage labour, has long been considered part of a life-cycle phenomenon; it is the way you learn how to be an adult, but also how you gain the means to actually become an adult capable of taking care of a family. When you talk to people who say their jobs are pointless, they too will almost always say that they are doing it for their family—or even for the family they would like to have in the future. Yet, at the same time, I do not think there is anyone in the world who, on discovering that the only way to ensure comfort and opportunity for their children was to dig a hole and fill it in a hundred times a day, would not be driven a little crazy by it.
LL: What are the differences between the bullshit jobs created in our current neoliberal moment, the make-work jobs created to fulfil the illusion of full employment in twentieth-century communist states, and the Keynesian ditch digging/refilling of the great depression period?

DG: In many ways, I think they are structurally similar. In all these cases, there was enormous political pressure for full employment. If you think about it, nowadays, the one thing the left and right in rich countries seem to entirely agree on is that ‘more jobs’ is always good—even if they argue about the best means to create them. But this also provides an insight into the differences. The left approach, typical of Keynesianism, was always to throw money at consumers, to increase ‘aggregate demand’, so that employers would hire more people to produce more cheese and televisions and swimming pools and such. The right wing, ‘supply-side’ approach, dominant since the 1980s, has simply been to shift money directly to the rich, who, as ‘job creators’, are assumed to know best how to invest. But, of course, if there is no increase in aggregate demand they are not going to hire new people to produce goods no one is there to buy, so how are they likely to respond to another huge tax break and attendant political pressure to create jobs? The logical thing to do is hire more flunkies and office minions to make themselves even more powerful and important, and that is pretty much what they do. So it is a redistributive mechanism, much like the older socialist forms, but instead of creating dummy proletarian jobs, they create dummy administrative and managerial jobs. The difference in terms of the experience of people who have the dummy jobs is that the capitalist version gives you much more prestige, but at the same time there is more surveillance: they are much more likely to force you to actually keep busy even if there is nothing for you to do.

LL: The spiritual violence of doing nothing in a bullshit job seems to be the inverse of the labour exploitation we see among workers doing precarious ‘shit jobs’ in the casualised gig economy (for instance, university cleaners; Amazon workers being fired for not working fast enough, etc.). Are these two phenomena linked somehow?

DG: I think so. There is an enormous culture of ‘lean and mean’ in the corporate world, but that is applied almost exclusively to blue-collar workers, not to white-collar ones, where the opposite logic applies. I always go back to the example of the Elephant Tea factory near Marseille, which illustrates for me a lot of what has been happening since the 1970s: in this case, workers improved the machinery and increased productivity steadily over the years. In the 1950s or 1960s, this would have led to increases in pay—there was basically an understanding
that if productivity goes up, workers get a share of the increased profits—or perhaps hiring more workers, but since it was the 1990s, the boss just hired more and more white-collar workers. At first, there had been only two: the boss and a human resources manager. Suddenly the catwalks were full of guys in suits, three, four, five, ultimately maybe a dozen of them, wandering around with clipboards watching people work, basically trying to figure out some kind of excuse for their existence. They tried to concoct schemes for greater efficiency but the place was already about as efficient as it could be. They held meetings and seminars and conferences and read each other’s reports. Finally, they decided: well, we can just fire everyone and move the plant to Poland! The place has been in occupation ever since.

LL: You argue that Universal Basic Income (UBI) will liberate people from their bullshit jobs. In China, UBI has resonances with the socialist state’s ‘iron rice bowl’ policy—something that the Chinese people have mixed feelings about. What do you think are the major obstacles to implementing UBI in former socialist states?

DG: Some people have talked instead about ‘universal basic services’ which is much more similar to what used to exist under state socialism. I think the experience of such regimes is in many ways paradoxical. In the early twentieth century, people used to remark that the socialist unions tended to demand higher wages, the anarchist unions tended to demand fewer hours: one appealed to workers who wanted a larger stake in the system, the ‘advanced proletariat’ as Marx termed them, the other, to recently proletarianised peasants and craftsmen, who could still imagine a life outside the system entirely. Marx and Bakunin had a famous argument over who were the real revolutionary classes: the ‘advanced proletariat’ in places like England and Germany, or the recently proletarianised or ‘in-threat-of-being proletarianised’ in places like Russia or Spain, or for that matter China. I think the great irony of twentieth-century socialism is that Bakunin was right, it was the anarchist recently proletarianised constituencies who made the revolution, but what they got was socialist rulers who subscribed to the idea that they should ultimately create a land of industrial and consumer abundance. However, it is doubly ironic that this was never going to happen under a command economy, and that the one benefit they did provide was precisely the anarchist one: with universal employment and a system where it was pretty much impossible to get fired from your job, people did, in fact, get less hours.

Paradoxically, owing to their productivist ideology, the socialists could not take credit for this, even though it was perhaps the most significant social benefit they did provide.
Rather, they had to refer to it as ‘the problem of absenteeism’. When workers in, say, Poland became enthusiastic about reintroducing capitalism, it simply never occurred to them it would mean they would have to actually work 8–10 hour days and ask for permission to go to the bathroom. By the time they figured this out it was too late to do anything about it. But it strikes me that we need to start by rewriting the history of what really happened in the twentieth century, to liberate it from the propaganda from both sides, before we can assess what we can do about it now. As for China, well, I do not really know, but I am aware the 996 movement is starting to challenge exactly these sorts of issues. But it is just a start. I think we need to ask how much did the two rival systems of socialism and capitalism share some of the same basic mistakes about work and production. And we should more carefully assess the extent to which the apparent flaws of the socialist system might have actually been its biggest advantages? Is there a way to make a social guarantee a way of unleashing popular inventiveness and creativity rather than stifling it?

LL: Some of your conservative readers might actually endorse your espousal of Universal Basic Income as not only an argument in favour of increased automation, but also an excuse to eliminate all social welfare programs, which would be detrimental to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in our society, such as disabled people. How do you feel about the political implications and perhaps misappropriation of your work?

DG: Well, it seems to me that there are three broad approaches to UBI: there is a liberal version which just wants to give everyone a modest amount of money in addition to their income, as a kind of cushion; there is a right-wing version, which explicitly wants to undermine the welfare state; and there is a left-wing version, which is about detaching livelihood from work entirely—to say everyone is guaranteed a modest but comfortable lifestyle, if you want more, that is up to you. I am a proponent of the latter, which is about expanding the zone of unconditionality, not shrinking it. We need free health care, free higher education, and a basic income. Things like disability support would not be affected: we would not expect people to pay for their own wheelchairs any more than we would expect them to pay for their own medical care. But reducing conditionality also shrinks the role of the state and what might be called the demi-state—say the private healthcare industry in the United States, which is entirely state enabled and regulated, or the financial sector, which has become inexorably intertwined with the modern state. Above all it reduces the most obnoxious and intrusive elements of that state, the endless
functionaries who just exist to make poor people feel bad about themselves, to monitor if they are looking for a job hard enough, or taking care of their children well enough, or really married to the person they claim to be, etc. Most of those people are pretty miserable themselves. Except for a small minority of sadists, they do not actually enjoy denying people benefits. Let them have UBI too and maybe they will form a band or something, do something that will actually enrich the lives of others.

UBI in its radical leftist version is about redefining ‘economic freedom’. Freedom is not the ability to sell yourself into your choice of slaveries, or even to invest in buying a piece of your own collective slavery: it is the ability to decide for yourself what you have to contribute to society—because almost everyone does actually want to contribute in some way—without having to worry about being punished if some corporate or government bureaucrat disagrees. I think some conservatives would like that—it would certainly free up people to have more time for church, family, and the like—but it would also very much undermine the power of private capital, since even though it would not alter property relations, it would entirely change the meaning of wage labour. Since proletarians would not be forced to sell their time and energies, they would do it only if they actually chose to, meaning employers would have to offer them a far more advantageous deal.