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Embracing Universality

Contribution to GTI Forum Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?

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If we are discussing great transformations, we need to consider deeply what it is we are seeking to transform, why, and how. For me, there are three central transformations that a well-implemented UBI approach can assist: (1) moving from extractivism to enabling, (2) moving from individual to universal, and (3) moving from binary to complexity.

(1) The extractive worldview is a dead end. This applies, of course, to the worldview that the abundance of the Earth should be enclosed, extracted, and used for private profit—an approach that is sending us hurtling towards ecological collapse. But the same worldview, with the same historical antecedents, is behind laborism, which sees the only value of each human being boiled down to what they can sell their labor for. People are to be enclosed for private profit, their value extracted. The only way to do that, given our inherently self-organizing nature, is to tie the ability to survive to the willingness and ability to accept paid labor—any paid labor, no matter how oppressive.

It has been said that UBI commodifies people's needs by focusing on income rather than services. I disagree with this because, at heart, what UBI does is decommodify us. Labor is the central commodification in our economy and society, and it commodifies everything else by ensuring that the vast majority of us are kept too busy to engage in non-market activities—growing food, sharing and repairing, building social connection, taking part in collective decision-making. If we transform that relation of power, what we will do is create space for the non-market economy to flourish. If we focus on providing services while ensuring that we ourselves remain commodified, we will not deliver a true transformation, but only make people's lives marginally better within an oppressive system.

Fundamentally, if we are to transform our society away from its extractive basis, we must sever the connection between paid labor and the capacity to survive. The clearest way to do this is through some form of UBI or social dividend. Is that the only thing we must do? Clearly not. But that severing must take place as part of the transformation.

(2) One of the most powerful ways in which the current system sustains itself is through atomizing us, dividing and conquering, convincing us that we are disconnected utility maximizers. A vital part of the transformation we need is to move towards a universalist worldview, understanding our interdependence. The assumption inherent in various critiques of UBI—that it is an individualist approach which would further atomize our society—is not borne out by any evidence. Indeed, it is contradicted by all the evidence surrounding universalist approaches not just for welfare but also for health and education. Targeted support, with the necessary punitive and surveillance-based mechanisms to apply that targeting, is inherently divisive, breeding both downwards resentment and the (correct) feeling among those at the bottom that they have been rejected.

Just as well-funded universal health and education cultivate social cohesion, so, too, have trials of UBI shown that people feel (correctly) that society wants to include them, and they repay that inclusion through contribution and participation. Universalist approaches breed trust by demonstrating trust. A UBI is an ideal mechanism for creating time in people's lives, creating capacity for self-fulfillment, and creating agency by enabling people to find their own preferred way of contributing and participating. Can it do it on its own? Clearly not.

(3) We live in a complex adaptive system. A system of systems, all of which are complex and adaptive. That ecological worldview needs to be brought into the public policy sphere. It is vital, in this context, to note that next to nobody is suggesting that a UBI is a silver bullet which can, on its own, solve all these problems and drive the Great Transition. Making the statement that UBI can and should be part of the suite of transformative policies no more suggests that it is the only required policy than making the statement that we must transform our energy sector suggests that we do not also need to transform agriculture, waste, transport, race relations, gender relations, etc. UBI has been framed as a silver bullet by its opponents, and its advocates must reclaim both the complexity it implies and its role as one part of a complex, adaptive suite of policy approaches. UBI implies complexity because, unlike labor-focused welfare, it acknowledges the diversity of ways

in which people participate and contribute and enables that by putting a floor under income. UBI cultivates an ecosystem of participation and contribution radically different from the laborist monoculture currently in place. But it must also be set in the context of a greater complexity, with mechanisms for housing, health, and education, as well as policies that support, encourage, and enable participation in all sorts of ways, from democratic participation to social inclusion.

About the Author



Tim Hollo is executive director of the Green Institute, where he focuses on ecological philosophy, practice, and policy related to the rights of nature, universal basic income, and participatory democracy. He is Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University's School of Regulation and Global Governance. He previously served as Communications Director for Australian Greens Leader Christine Milne and has been both a board member and campaigner at Greenpeace Australia Pacific. As both an environmentalist and musician, Tim founded Green Music Australia that works to reduce the environmental impact of the music scene and use its growing leadership to drive deep social and cultural change.

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