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The Beauty of the Process

Contribution to GTI Forum [Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?](#)

Robert Labaree

I feel energized by the hopeful sketch of a just and resilient society emerging from this conversation about universal basic income. Paradoxically, what I like best in all this is both the prevailing ambivalence and the lack of finality in these posts. Their incompleteness and their nagging questions are essential to the hope they project.

Whatever ends up being the somewhat more just society we achieve by (God-willing) mid-century, it will be, at best, a work in progress, a sturdy-enough platform on which to build something else which we could not have imagined building in 2020. If conclusions were actually reached in this forum, they would not be the source of my hope. I see no evidence in history that we humans or our supercomputers can simply skip over the many platforms we have to erect along the way which, when looking back, will no doubt seem embarrassingly jerry-rigged.

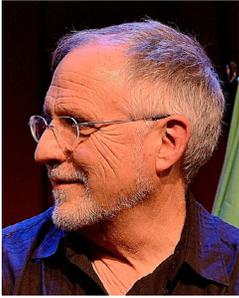
We have learned by now about the perils of perfect social planning (whether of the right or left variety), with all its unintended consequences and authoritarian residues. As an alternative model, I prefer nature, which is the most complex, incessantly changing, but enduring social system we know. There was no master plan for the multi-celled organism three billion years ago which charted the development to Linnaeus's family tree, homo sapiens, and the New York Stock Exchange. There was no master plan, but rather a ceaseless torrent of energetic experimentation with given materials and conditions, and the outcomes were at each stage unforeseeable. There was surely an order behind this riotous activity, but its laws are still eluding us. Here is where my hope lies: in the capacity of all our plan-making for fostering energetic experimentation. Is it time to revive the old maxim attributed to both Trotsky and Chairman Mao, to "let a thousand flowers bloom"?

There is also Eisenhower's homespun wartime wisdom that "every war is going to astonish you in the way it occurred, and in the way it is carried out," which is the corollary of his more famous axiom, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." He was speaking out of his experience working in some of the most complex collaborative human efforts in history, namely, the invasion of Normandy and the Cold War United States government. In our own time, the interdisciplinary developments in systems thinking, mainly derived from biology, are telling us the same thing, relying on concepts which were not in Ike's vocabulary. Nowadays, we speak of emergence, self-organization, and metastability.

The potential and depth of the UBI concept comes through in this forum, but not because a particular plan emerges as superior. The chemistry of these interactions, not the persuasiveness of one view over another, is the source of my hope, the sure sign of a healing process at work. I believe the "best" solutions will unfold, many of them in many different habitats, not because we have been clever enough to name all of their parts ahead of time, but because, as in nature, the interplay of actors and habitat and time proves them to be sturdy enough to endure. "Sturdy enough" is not the same as "correct" or "consistent" or "predictive." In the end, the enduring value of this work is not the plan envisioned but the interactive process among informed and empowered agents which the plan engenders.

I am not pessimistic about planning, only suspicious of a too-great faith in plans. If nature offers us any lessons, a multitude of UBI plans which are already in motion in a variety of habitats will each look inadequate from the point of view of another plan. But if matched to local conditions and agents, what is built there could last long enough to provide scaffolding for more work. All we can be sure of is that, as in nature, the solution which endures in spite of, or because of, unanticipated factors will become the launch site of the next stage.

About the Author



Robert Labaree is an ethnomusicologist and performer specializing in Turkish music, with writings on improvisation, Ottoman-European musical interactions, and music and biology. He is faculty emeritus in musicology at New England Conservatory, where he has taught since 1984. In 1993, he founded the conservatory's Intercultural Institute and in 2013, the conservatory's Music in 2050 Forum. He holds a PhD in musicology from Wesleyan University.

About the Publication

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