



November 2020

## A Pragmatic Utopian Demand

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

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Trying to make sense of debates on universal basic income can feel like herding cats. The arguments rush off in all different directions, revealing a thousand contradictions. The UBI will decommodify labor, freeing us from the market. The UBI will commodify our need satisfiers, binding us to the market. The UBI can build support for climate policies by recycling carbon taxes back to the public. The UBI will make it harder to transition to a low-carbon economy by growing consumption. The UBI is a mass of contradictions. In these contradictions there is power and danger.

Marxist feminist Kathi Weeks argues that the UBI is a powerful strategic demand because it marries utopian and pragmatic elements.<sup>1</sup> The UBI challenges key aspects of capitalism, opening new possibilities for how we might live (the utopian element). But the UBI has enough links to modern capitalism that it can realistically be implemented within capitalism. Without the utopian element, the UBI is just another uninspiring technocratic policy proposal.

Without its affinity to capitalism, the UBI is just another empty dream. The strength of the UBI lies in how it brings the utopian future together with the dystopian present. Viewed this way, the arguments raised against the UBI are transformed into arguments in favor of it. The UBI is neoliberal. It does enable us to meet our immediate needs through the market. It does commodify needs satisfiers. The UBI does lend itself to the lie that that private sector creates wealth. (Some tech billionaires advocate for a UBI as an act of private generosity!) The UBI slides seamlessly into the narratives and structures of neoliberal capitalism. But this is a strength. Without these attributes, the UBI would lie too far outside our social imaginations. It would seem impossible.

The utopian element also changes how we view arguments that the UBI alone is not enough. In a capitalist economy, a UBI will promote consumption and its disastrous environmental effects. In a capitalist economy, a UBI will devalue unpaid care work. The utopian hope is that the UBI lays the groundwork to transform capitalism. The ability to compel workers to take part in the market is a key dynamic of capitalism, and the UBI offers us a way to challenge this. So, yes, the UBI alone is not enough. But the UBI's contradictions give it the form of a Trojan horse: it is the way we sneak wider reforms into the capitalist economy.

What of the danger? I read the contradictions of the UBI in a particular direction: the Trojan horse entering capitalism. But we can also read the contradiction in the other direction. The UBI supports neoliberal capitalism today and promises us utopia tomorrow. Could the UBI be a capitalist Trojan horse, entering left and green circles with the promise of freedom while delivering more neoliberalism?

The key lies in the ability of the UBI to facilitate widespread rejection of the labor market. Implicit in discussions of greater freedom from the UBI is the idea that we work in the market to feed and shelter ourselves. I am sympathetic to this but see one major barrier, illustrated by a recent advertisement for Nespresso coffee machines. The advertisement features an adult child handing a coffee machine to his mother, who smiles lovingly at him. "Why do you give gifts?" the voiceover asks. "Because you are the favorite son" comes the answer. Most conceptions of a UBI would free me from the need to work to feed myself. But can they free me from my (perceived) need to work to buy love?

The challenge of the UBI is in addressing these contradictions. Can we grasp them in the way Weeks argues and use the UBI as a way to transform capitalism? Or will the cultural forces of neoliberal capitalism turn our tool against us? I do not have a good answer, so I am wary. But I still see the UBI as a useful platform. Though dangerous, its ability to connect our present and our future is, for me, too tempting to turn away from.

## Endnotes

1. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

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## About the Author



Simon Mair is an ecological economist and lecturer in circular economy at the University of Bradford. His research focuses on building narratives about what a desirable and sustainable society might look like and how to get there, including the development of ecological macroeconomic models for exploring the economic dynamics of such societies. He holds a PhD from the University of Surrey, where he served as a research fellow at the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP). His doctoral research developed and applied quantitative modeling frameworks to explore the relationship between environmental and socioeconomic sustainability in global supply chains.

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Cite as Simon Mair, "A Pragmatic Utopian Demand," contribution to GTI Forum "Universal Basic Income: Has the Time Come?," *Great Transition Initiative* (November 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/basic-income-mair>.

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