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Exploring the Utopian Potential of Unconditional Basic Income

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Redistributive solidarity? Exploring the utopian potential of unconditional basic income

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Abstract

Using unconditional basic income (UBI) as its empirical prism, this paper offers new impetus to the foundational debate within critical theory as to whether and how redistribution and recognition can relate productively to each other. We explore the possibility of redistributive solidarity, arguing that unconditional and universal redistribution may be a means of furthering the recognition of different subjectivities that are not solely defined by their productive relations of labor. Seeing such redistributive solidarity as a potential, but not necessary outcome of UBI, we develop a typology of existing UBI experiments that divides these according to whether they seek to affirm or transform the current social order based on principles of growth or degrowth. Surveying these four types of UBI, we find that the envisioned form of economic redistribution shapes the potential for social recognition. While the relationship is one of utopian potential rather than causal necessity, UBI may indeed enable redistributive solidarity.

Keywords

Unconditional basic income, redistribution, recognition, solidarity, utopianism, economic sociology

Introduction

In the midst of current reconsiderations of ‘the meaning of work’ (Chevallier, 2020), unconditional/universal basic income (UBI) has gained prominence as a means of not only securing short-term relief for those suffering the immediate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Berfield and Holder, 2020; Standing, 2021; Terrell, 2021), but also more permanent deliverance for those enduring the long-term effects of capitalism (Ayres, 2020). As an unconditional income paid by a political community to all its members (Van Parijs, 2004), UBI aims ‘...to establish conditions for all members of society to live with dignity and health’ (Kallis et al., 2020: 69). While

this goal seems ever more desirable (and daunting) as social insecurities and economic inequalities continue to surge, the immediate aim of this paper is not to contribute to its practical realization. Rather, we take a step back from existing UBI initiatives and proposals to explore the conceptual arguments that support them. More particularly, we are interested in whether and how different rationales for redistribution may afford new modes of recognition.

To prepare the ground for this conceptual discussion, we revisit the fundamental debate on redistribution/recognition as the foundational principle(s) of solidarity (see Butler, 1998; Fraser, 1995, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Harris, 2019; Young, 1997). Here, we follow Nancy Fraser in suggesting that the two are mutually irreducible, but focus on the potential of redistribution to spur solidarity. While solidarity is usually grounded in recognition (see Dean, 1996; Habermas, 2001), we will explore the possibility of redistributive solidarity. Our specific purpose, then, is to discuss whether and how UBI may enable mutual recognition among citizens who share no other bond than their guaranteed economic autonomy.

Although we remain open to the option that more radical alternatives may be more effective or, indeed, necessary, we focus our exploration on the tensions between the possible and the actual, what Erik Olin Wright (2013) terms ‘real utopias’. As Phillippe Van Parijs (2013) argues, UBI initiatives may constitute such real utopian alternatives. Observing the current and broad appeal of the utopian potential of UBI initiatives, we base the conceptual discussion in a typology of the different rationales for and goals of UBI, as articulated by its proponents across the political spectrum. As such, we identify different arguments in favor of UBI and various visions of what UBI might achieve, but are particularly interested in those positions that endow UBI with a potential for reconfiguring capitalism. While we seek empirical illustrations of our conceptual typology, the present paper is primarily theoretical and exploratory. Beginning from the typology of UBI initiatives, we will develop and discuss the concept of redistributive solidarity.

In what follows, we anticipate this discussion by, first, positioning ourselves within the debate on the interrelations of redistribution and recognition, seeking to contribute to it by re-centering and reconsidering the role of labor in conceptualizations of solidarity. That is, we establish the conceptual basis for our investigation of whether unconditional redistribution may enable synergies of autonomy and solidarity and, potentially, inspire broader systemic change. Second, we present our rationale for focusing on UBI schemes and operationalize our theoretical framework to present

a typology of UBI initiatives, which classifies these initiatives according to the rationale for redistributive solidarity they are based on. As we develop the typology, we will look for and present examples of each type of UBI. As mentioned, however, the gist of our argument is conceptual, and we focus the concluding discussion on the issue of whether and how UBI initiatives may help activate and realize utopian visions of transformative degrowth.

Redistribution and/or recognition

In their recent conversation, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi (2018: 23) identify three core – or ‘orthodox’ – features of any Marxist theory of (the critique of) capitalism: 1) the private ownership of the means of production, 2) the free labor market, and 3) the expansion of capital. This implies the well-known split of society into two classes: owners/capitalists and producers/laborers, with the latter providing the possibility of the former’s accumulation of wealth through the rate of exchange (labor for wage) as set by the market logic of supply and demand. Hence, the second principle ties the first and the third together and, as such, the free labor market be seen as particularly important to the maintenance – and reform – of capitalist society.

More specifically, the principle of the free labor market is key to our investigation, as it provides the basis for the ‘double freedom’ of the workers who are free to work but also free to starve, leaving no real choice: ‘...they [the workers] are unencumbered by the sort of resources or entitlements that could permit them to abstain from the labor market. Their freedom in the first sense goes along with their vulnerability to compulsion inherent in the second sense’ (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 24-25). In other words, workers are free *to* work, but not free *from* work. This creates the basic condition of possibility for the extraction of surplus capital from labor, as workers compete among themselves on the labor market instead of joining forces against the owners of the means of production. The ‘double freedom’, then, is ‘doublespeak’ for exploitation; by positing the worker as a ‘free individual’, the collective solidarity of workers as a group or, indeed, society as a whole is jeopardized.

While labor is the basis of exploitation, it is important to recognize that, in classical Marxist theory, it is also the source of emancipation (Braverman, 1974). Thus, the problem, as diagnosed from this perspective, is not labor as such, but labor under capitalism, in which workers are alienated through and from their own work. If and when workers collectively own the means of production, labor will become ‘...the productive activity through which human beings realize their “species being”’

(Düzenli, 2018: 156). Thus, our initial distinction between being free to and free from work may be somewhat of an oversimplification; instead, the question is one of the forms that work takes as well as the forms of work undertaken (Deranty, 2021). Or, we might say, of the conditions for participation in social as well as economic relations of production (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020).

In this context, increased focus on recognition, suggesting that labor is neither the only source of exploitation nor of emancipation, is one possible avenue for nuancing the Marxist orthodoxy of redistribution. As Fraser (1995) points out, ‘the decentring of class’ was long overdue. Meaning, as she argues in her recent discussion of ‘what socialism should mean in the 21st century’, that any alternative to capitalism ‘must invent a new social order that overcomes not “only” class domination but also asymmetries of gender and sex, racial/ethnic/imperial oppression and political domination across the board’ (Fraser, 2020: 9). Seeking to mediate claims to social recognition and economic redistribution, Fraser (1998) asserts the equal relevance of either dimension, suggesting that both recognition without redistribution and redistribution without recognition are null and void. One cannot exercise one’s cultural and political rights if they are not backed by economic resources and, conversely, one cannot fully enjoy economic prosperity unless one is socially recognized when doing so. In Fraser’s conceptualization, then, the societal spheres of economy and culture are not reducible to one another and each must be attended to equally.

Thus, both recognition and redistribution are necessary ingredients of a just society, yet Fraser insists on their analytical independence. While such analytical distinction may be warranted, we are uncertain as to whether and how both conditions can be met, if they are not treated as mutually interdependent. Conceptually, this is Judith Butler’s (1998) counterargument to the accusation that her position is ‘merely cultural’. Rather than choosing sides, Butler argues, one should focus attention on the interrelations of the cultural and economic aspects of the social order, detailing the ways in which one is always already implicated in the other. Empirically, Lotte Holck and Sara Louise Muhr (2017) show something similar in their application of the redistribution-recognition dilemma to the context of the diversification of the Danish labor market. They find that the welfare logic of economic redistribution produces a very limited space for recognition of socio-cultural difference. Such ‘unequal solidarity’, Holck and Muhr argue, is an unintended consequence of a one-sided focus on redistribution, implying their interrelation and the necessity of taking both into account. In sum, and following Christian Fuchs’ (2016: 27) assertion that economy and culture are

‘identical and non-identical at the same time’, we suggest that the principles of redistribution and recognition only work when working together.

Accepting the theoretical assumption of interdependence between the two, it is important to stress that if a singular emphasis on redistribution leads to ‘unequal solidarity’, then exclusive attention to recognition is just as likely to result in ‘solidary inequality’. Here, being ‘free to be different’ would be very similar to the classical conundrum of being ‘free to starve’. Hence, the issue of whether and how the relationship between the two principles can be shifted from a trade-off toward mutual support remains as contested and relevant as ever. It is in this context that we introduce UBI as an empirical prism through which to explore the utopian potential of redistributive solidarity.

Why UBI, why now?

The notion that an unconditional and universally guaranteed income should be an ingredient of ‘the good society’ is by no means new nor is it exclusive to any particular ideology. To the contrary, some principle of common economic security features as early as Thomas More’s (1516) *Utopia* and in as different mindsets as those of John Maynard Keynes (Sloman, 2019), Bertrand Russell (1918, 1935), Milton Friedman (1962), and Friedrich Hayek (1979). Nevertheless, UBI seems to be very much an idea of the present moment, as it is not only gaining intellectual traction, but also becoming subject to empirical experimentation on smaller and larger scales across the globe. Further, while there still are libertarian (Dolan, 2019), conservative (Gordon, 2014), and pragmatic (Rooney, 2019) cases to be made for UBI, various progressive UBI platforms have emerged and become particularly prominent in recent years.

As a case in point, even though Andrew Yang pulled out of the Democratic primary race quite early in 2020, his particular vision of entrepreneurial tech-optimism with a human touch lived on in his bid to be the next mayor of New York City – and remains high on the agenda, even after he withdrew from that race as well (Dovere, 2021; Lehrer, 2020; Zaveri, 2021). In fact, Yang’s case for the so-called ‘freedom dividend’, an unconditional monthly payment of \$1,000 to all adult citizens that is to make up for jobs lost to machines, as he presented it in the presidential campaign, provides a good prism through which to understand the current rise of UBI:

In the next 12 years, 1 out of 3 American workers are at risk of losing their jobs to new technologies—and unlike with previous waves of automation, this time new jobs will

not appear quickly enough in large enough numbers to make up for it. To avoid an unprecedented crisis, we're going to have to find a new solution, unlike anything we've done before (Yang, 2020).

As technologies are making humans obsolete, the argument goes, we must find new ways of prospering, UBI being billed as one such way.

Although the prevalent 'the robots are coming'-argument ignores a number of organizational factors that limit the speed and scope of automation (Fleming, 2019), it has found radical transformative expressions; e.g., in the vision of a 'fully automated luxury communism' (Bastani, 2019). Here, UBI is envisioned as the compensation given to people for the work done by machines, which sets humans free to do other things. In the context of rethinking work for the digital era, however, UBI may also be promoted as a bulwark against radical transformation. Thus, 'UBI could prevent a citizen's revolt against the system, which judging by today's political climate, will likely lead to socialism. [...] This is the pragmatic way to sidestep socialism and maintain a market-oriented society' (Rooney, 2019).

A further reason for the rising interest in UBI lies in increasing concerns that the growth imperative is environmentally unsustainable. Averting the climate crisis, it is becoming abundantly clear, must involve deceleration of existing economic practices, perhaps even a reversal of the dominant principle – meaning, we might come to measure success in terms of how much we are able to shrink, or degrow, the economy (Cassidy, 2020). Here, UBI is viewed as a compensation for the work opportunities that are lost in a shrinking economy, invoked by those looking for means of human sustenance under conditions of degrowth as well as by those who seek to salvage the planet without disrupting the current socio-economic order. UBI, the latter argue, may form the basis of sustainable slow-growth, thereby becoming a means of halting further change, whereas the former see it as but one element of a thorough systemic overhaul.

In sum, arguments for – and experiments with – UBI can be categorized according to two distinctions. On the one hand, one may promote UBI as a means of social affirmation or transformation and, on the other hand, it can be seen as an initiative that supports growth or degrowth. Incidentally, the first of these distinctions is identical to the one identified by Fraser (1995) for her typology of the available positions in the redistribution-recognition debate. UBI, however, is inherently a form of redistribution, wherefore a main point of contestation is whether the

redistribution is inducive of capitalist growth or not (see table 1). It should be noted that there are many other dimensions in the UBI debate, which are central to the development of the empirical field (e.g., discussions concerning the transformation of systems of valuation are particularly relevant to schemes that involve alternative currencies). Organizing the debate in the chosen way, however, enables discussion of how UBI initiatives might contribute to the practice and conceptualization of solidarity in contemporary society.

[Insert table 1]

In what follows, we use the affirmation-transformation/growth-degrowth matrix as a starting point for a typology of existing UBI experiments. That is, we survey such experiments and seek to categorize them according to their affirmative or transformative stance in relation to the principle of growth or degrowth. As fully-fledged UBI experiments are still rare, we have both included some initiatives that do not self-label as UBI, but arguably are, and some that do use the label, but arguably are not. Further, we have included initiatives, like those advocated in Yang's campaign(s), that have not actually been implemented, just as we have included suggestions that emanate from academia rather than practice.

This sampling strategy obviously calls for reflection on the status of UBI as a concept: is it a theoretical category that demarcates a class of relatively similar empirical cases or is it a practical category that might mean different things to different people? In this paper, we opt for the latter understanding and use the *Basic Income Earth Network's* (BIEN, 2020) list of initiatives as the starting point for our case selection. We have chosen this approach because our objective is to identify and discuss different ways of conceiving and justifying UBI, rather than to check whether a particular UBI experiment meets some or all criteria of a predetermined definition.

Toward a typology of UBI initiatives

Before beginning the work of categorizing UBI initiatives, a caveat is in order: useful as they may be, conceptually guided typologies are necessarily ideal typical, meaning our placement of actual initiatives in one box or another must involve some simplification. Nevertheless, we do hope that the following will not be an exercise in analytic reductionism, but, instead, a useful mapping and productive starting point for the discussion of the potentialities of UBI as an economically redistributive means of enhancing social recognition. Hence, we survey the field in search of ways

of shifting from existing trade-offs between economic redistribution and social recognition toward mutually supportive relations.

One reason to conduct such a mapping is that there is neither consensus as to the theoretical definition of UBI nor clarity as to what might count as a UBI initiative in practice. Before proceeding to the map, therefore, let us establish, first, a maximalist definition and, second, a minimalist approach. For our definition, we follow BIEN (2020) in positing that ‘a basic income is a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement.’ Conceptually, then, we position ourselves among those who define UBI as consisting of five components, all of which have to be present for a redistributive initiative to qualify as a true UBI: (1) periodic, (2) individual, (3) unconditional, (4) universal and (5) cash payment.

As mentioned above, however, our empirical sample includes initiatives that are much less ambitious. Insisting on the full definition would leave us with no actual data to work with, wherefore we have accepted partial presence of the components as sufficient indication of the ‘UBI-ness’ of an initiative. Whereas a fully-fledged UBI scheme would apply permanently to all citizens, most current experiments are carried out within specifically defined segments of the population and/or over limited periods of time. As such, the generalizability of existing initiatives in terms of the ability of UBI to foster redistributive solidarity is limited, and the typology provides a starting point for the subsequent discussion – no more, no less.

As a final note, we should mention that the UBI initiatives in most cases contain important conflicts between the actors involved (e.g., those organizing the experiments and those funding them) about means and ends (e.g., what to measure and how to measure). However, public information about such conflicts is extremely scarce. So, considering that we are for the most part without substantial documentation of internal power struggles, we will be focusing on the UBI experiments as a whole and their inherent transformative potential.

Affirmative growth initiatives

The first type of UBI initiatives is based on the logic of affirmative growth, meaning UBI is conceived as a resource for maintaining the current social order. Initiatives that are based on this rationale are mainly (or fully) operated by the governing bodies of established public institutions

(e.g., an office of an existing ministry or a new public agency, established with the explicit mandate of running the UBI). Initiatives of this type are by far the most frequent, which is, perhaps, not surprising given their redistributive nature. That is, it makes sense that public authorities should be the main instigators of UBIs, and that they should employ these initiatives in the interest of affirming the growth paradigm that constitutes their own ideological underpinning (Spies-Butcher, 2020). To illustrate this point, let us look closer at four prominent cases: the Finnish UBI pilot experiment, the recently completed Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED), the Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend (APFD), and the Minimum Living Income (MLI) in Spain.

First, the pilot experiment in Finland took place over a two-year period (2017-2018) in which two thousand Finns of 25-28 years of age who were receiving unemployment benefits before the experiment began were given €560 a month with no strings attached (Kangas et al., 2019). The primary purpose of the experiment was to study how implementing a basic income would affect employment levels and total incomes. The preliminary results of the experiment show that while there was no significant effect on those parameters, the participants did experience an increase in general wellbeing (Adkins and Ylöstalo, 2020). The Finnish experiment only targeted a very small group of a specific segment of the population and was used as a partial substitute for unemployment benefits, meaning that it cannot tell us much about the potentials of a full-scale UBI. For our purposes, however, it is significant that the participants reported better wellbeing despite (or, perhaps, because of) neither working nor earning more. As alluded to earlier, and in order to contextualize our discussion of the Finnish pilot, it should be mentioned that significant compromises between actors were made in this UBI experiment. Finland has a long history of UBI debates, which not only shows that speculations surrounding causal effects change depending on their political and cultural circumstances, but this particular initiative is also an example of the tug of war that often occurs between actors with scientific and political motives (see Adkins and Ylöstalo (2020) for a description of how the Finnish pilot came into existence).

Second, SEED took place in Stockton, California. This initiative provided an income of \$500 a month to 125 randomly selected Stocktonians over 18 years of age, residing in a neighborhood with an average income at or below the median income of the town (Martin-West et al., 2019). The experiment was initially planned to last 1.5 years, but in the summer of 2020 it was extended half a year in order to alleviate the increased economic strain of the pandemic (Holder, 2020). SEED (2020) was specifically focused on lifting Stocktonians out of poverty and helping them adjust

better to the unpredictable nature of life. Preliminary results show that participants had an increased ability to quit their second or third jobs and chose to spend most of the ‘free money’ on practical items such as ‘rent, and car payments, and paying off debt’ (Emison, 2020). Not only did participation in SEED help ‘[reduce] income volatility’ but also ‘enabled citizens to find full-time employment’ and had positive effects on physical and mental health (West et al., 2021).

Third, the APFD, while not defined by the Alaskan government as a UBI, is one of the current initiatives that comes closest to the full definition – since it is both unconditional, universal, and perpetual. The fund administers an annual payment made to all permanent residents of Alaska, including children and resident aliens, with the purpose of enabling everyone to ‘...share in a portion of the State minerals revenue in the form of a dividend to benefit current and future generations’ (Stat of Alaska, 2020). Studies have found that the APFD has helped reduce poverty and income inequality and that Alaskans view the dividend as a fair distribution of the profits from a common asset (Goldsmith, 2002, 2010). In comparison to other initiatives, the APFD is both stable and continuous, but it faces challenges in relation to maintaining the dividends, and payments have suffered significant cuts in recent years, going from \$2,072 in 2015 to \$992 in 2020 (State of Alaska, 2021). This seems to suggest that maintaining a full-scale UBI requires a consistent source of funding rather than a depletable resource.

Finally, the MLI has been implemented by the government of Spain in response to the emergency created by the pandemic. It provides between €469 and €1,137 a month to households in need, with the amount depending on how many people are included in the household. This initiative is limited to residents of Spain who are in a position of ‘economic vulnerability’ (Seguridad Social, 2021). Receiving the MLI does not interfere with other social benefits, and recipients are exempt from paying a variety of public fees. The main goal, here, is poverty reduction, and the scheme includes around 850,000 households (Casla, 2020). While it is too early to study the consequences of the MLI, there are reports of growing support for UBI in Spain, just as strong advocacy networks are forming across Europe (Bravo, 2021).

In sum, the four examples of affirmative growth initiatives indicate that UBI experiments do hold the potential to stabilize societies, but that their growth-potential may be limited – at least when combined with the ideal of maintaining the current societal order. Here, UBI recipients seem to

become more secure and satisfied, but not necessarily more productive (Adkins and Ylöstalo, 2020). In transformative growth initiatives, however, the dynamic is different.

Transformative growth initiatives

While it is by no means surprising that most established UBI initiatives fall into the category of affirmative growth, we were initially less sure of what to make of the significant subset of transformative growth initiatives that we found among existing experiments. That is, a number of UBI initiatives operate on and are supportive of the currently dominant growth paradigm yet see UBI as a means of societal transformation; how does that work and why is this category so popular? A first answer is that the majority of the experiments in this category are organized by private firms who are characterized by having more freedom than public actors with regards to how they frame the purpose and design the implementation of UBI initiatives.

The logic of transformative growth is, however, not restricted to private initiatives. Transformative growth may be difficult for political incumbents to implement, but it can be an attractive campaign platform, as most prominently exemplified by Yang's 'freedom dividend'. This category, then, is not defined by who runs it, but by its ethos of 'disruptive' entrepreneurship. The idea being to transform capitalism in order to make it work (even) better. As Robert van der Veen and Philippe Van Parijs (2015) argue, this version of UBI might even be conceived as 'a capitalist road to communism.' That is, a way of making economic growth more socially sustainable by separating the redistributive logic of communism from the ideological program of socialism. Importantly, this progressive vision suggests that economic prosperity can be freed from work, potentially enhancing social solidarity as people become able to explore their own interests without concern for their employability (Srnicsek and Williams, 2015; Van Parijs, 1995). Hence, transformative growth does not imply particular ideological underpinnings (Yang may not be the most socially minded Democrat, but he is no libertarian), but the tendency is for the transformative potential to be expressed in terms of liberation (hence, 'the freedom dividend').

Turning to empirical examples, it is noteworthy that UBI initiatives have gained considerable traction in the Silicon Valley community. Thus, current experiments, such as GiveDirectly and the completed pilot experiment of Y Combinator Research, are both cases of large companies' investments in various UBI experiments. GiveDirectly is an American charity that lists Google,

USAID, GiveWell, Good Ventures, and Global Innovation Fund among its lead funders and partners (GiveDirectly, 2020). It runs a project in rural Kenya, providing basic income to 197 villages with either a lump sum of cash or continual payments spanning over two or 12 years. The project has transformative pro-growth potential in so far as the involved rural communities undergo deep and lasting reforms whilst involved in the scheme.

Y Combinator is an American accelerator located in Silicon Valley whose president founded the non-profit research lab Y Combinator Research, which has subsequently been detached from Y Combinator and changed its name to OpenResearch. Before this organizational change, Y Combinator Research completed a small-scale, one-year pilot experiment in Oakland, California. This experiment involved less than 10 people, including the control group, who received \$1,500 on a monthly basis. In its new organizational set-up, the research lab maintains plans to conduct a much larger experiment with 1,000 recipients who will receive monthly payments of \$1,000 (OpenResearch Lab, 2020). The completed Y Combinator pilot is too small to offer any real conclusions – other than the speculation that it must have been somehow satisfactory or plans for further experiments would have been cancelled.

However, transformative pro-growth initiatives are not all tied to ‘disruptive’ business models of high-tech companies. As one complementary example, let us mention the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Casino Revenue Fund. This fund is the result of a particularly successful Cherokee-run casino, the profits of which are distributed to all members of the tribe, regardless of age, to foster growth in the community (Costello, 2016). Much like the APFD, this example is not explicitly labelled as a UBI scheme by its organizers, although it is much closer to the BIEN definition than many experiments carried out under this label. The Cherokee fund differs from the Alaskan case in so far as it grants the community increased independence from US public authorities. It is in this sense that we label it transformative; the Cherokees use economic growth as a means of gaining autonomy for their local community, which is strengthened internally in the process.

The Gyeonggi Youth Basic Income (GYBI) is another example of community-based pro-growth transformation. GYBI is paid out as a lump sum to all 24-year-olds in the Gyeonggi province of South Korea, using a local currency that can only be spent in parts of the province and has an expiration date. The program finds its justification in ‘the fourth industrial revolution’, which is mainly characterized by automation and technological developments that transform how humans

interact (Gallo and Juhyun, 2021). As such, GYBI not only serves to create more equality and help people who are entering the labor market, but also aims to protect them against the changes brought on by developments in the manufacturing industry (Gyeonggi-Do Provincial Office, 2021). The initiative is deemed successful, as ‘shops and restaurants that accepted the local currency saw their sales increase by 53.6%’, creating growth in the local community (Hyun-ju, 2020). The success of the GYBI has led to further initiatives, including a pilot of a basic income for the rural communities of the entire Gyeonggi province, just as it is speculated that basic income will become a hot topic in the South Korean presidential election of 2022 (BIKN Korea, 2021; Wray, 2021).

As a last example of transformative growth, it is worth mentioning a recent initiative that aims to support marginalized communities and challenge structural bias in California. Started in December 2020, the Compton Pledge is a two-year experiment that uses the city of Compton as its testing ground. It covers 800 families and gives them ‘several hundred dollars’, with the amount varying according to the number of dependents. The frequency of payments also varies, but recipients are informed of the intervals in order to enhance their ability to plan ahead. The aim of the experiment is to explore how reliable cash transfers can be used to promote inclusivity and transformative change in a community (Compton Pledge, 2021). Much like SEED, the Compton Pledge seeks to provide people with economic support that does not carry social stigma, but the Pledge goes beyond affirmation of the growth paradigm, seeking to use economic distribution to fight systemic racism and prejudice and, hence, to promote recognition. In light of the racial justice protests in the summer of 2020 and the increased awareness of the impact of institutionalized bias on marginalized communities that followed, a number of advocacy groups, such as Black Lives Matter and Movement for Black Lives, have begun campaigning for guaranteed income to even out injustices and create a space for solidarity. The Compton Pledge (2021) states that it ‘should be seen as Compton’s local response to these calls for action.’

These examples offer indications that UBI may, indeed, promote growth and that such growth may either be the transformative outcome in itself (as seems to be the case of GiveDirectly) or could, alternatively, be used to spur further societal change and create a system that ensures justice and freedom across race, gender, and social class (as in the case of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Casino Revenue Fund, GYBI, and The Compton Pledge). Thus, progressive conceptualizations of pro-growth transformation indicate the potential of redistribution to facilitate recognition, as economic security becomes a means to social ends of justice and inclusion.

Affirmative degrowth initiatives

In a society that is organized around the foundational principle of economic growth, it may be difficult to conceive of affirmative degrowth initiatives. And, admittedly, examples of this category in its pure form are hard to come by. However, a substantial grey area exists between affirmative growth and affirmative degrowth initiatives, where varying degrees of ‘slow growth’ or ‘no growth’ are advocated as necessary means of protecting the existing order from further change – and UBI is seen as key to maintaining prosperity as growth dwindles (Cassidy, 2020). Taken to its extreme, this argument leads to the position that degrowth is necessary, not only to protect the planet, but to sustain current socio-political organization, meaning we might have to radically reform the economy in order to maintain everything else (Kallis, 2011). Alf Hornborg (2017) offers an academic example of this rationale, arguing that complementary currencies, in the shape of a local basic income, are a realistic means of managing one of the main weaknesses of capitalism (namely, the reliance on money as a global concept), while not seeking to fully transform the capitalist system.

No existing UBI experiment is explicitly based on the affirmative degrowth argument, but it is gaining some traction as the ‘lesser evil’ in a situation that demands societal adaptation (Rooney, 2019). One example of a policy proposal that explicitly takes up this position exists in the political program of the Danish party Alternativet (which literally translates as the Alternative). Alternativet proposes a full-blown UBI scheme that aims to affirm the Danish welfare model in the face of the challenges of globalized society. Thus, the goal is to ‘...secure a basic level of security for all [...] a security to choose the life they wish and can cope with’ (Alternativet, n.d.). Further, the party suggests that UBI might support sustainable innovation that could lead to a more circular economy. Thus, the need to stop or even reverse economic growth in order to avert environmental crises is tied to the potential for personal development that economic security might entail.

Alternativet, then, offers a rationale for UBI in which economic degrowth and affirmation of the current social order go hand in hand. Here, the welfare state is invoked as the context in which (enhanced) economic equality and (increased) social freedom may enter into a mutually supportive dynamic – if supported by UBI. As mentioned, this affirmative degrowth rationale has not yet formed the basis of actual UBI initiatives, but such initiatives could very well surface as public and private actors seek to increase the environmental sustainability of the current socio-economic order.

Transformative degrowth initiatives

As indicated above, the affirmative degrowth position exists as a political and academic platform that may gain further support in the face of current developments. At present, however, it is far more common to advocate the conjoint transformation of the economic and the socio-political order – and as the demand for environmental sustainability becomes increasingly urgent, this position could overtake that of affirmative degrowth completely. Across the board, ecologists, anarcho-communists, Marxist-feminists, and other key proponents of degrowth as an underlying principle of social transformation are adopting UBI as a key instrument (see inter alia, Beckford, 2019; Blaschke, 2016; Cabaña, 2019; Flanigan, 2018; Weeks, 2011). Thus, the transformative degrowth logic is gaining intellectual and political momentum as the strongest rationale for UBI.

Full implementation of the ideas inherent to proposals of this type of UBI would entail an ‘extreme makeover’ of society, one that we have yet to see – and with which it is difficult to experiment. The ‘all or nothing’ character of this position does not lend itself easily to pilot testing, but could, potentially, be rolled out incrementally. As examples of existing initiatives that may be associated with this intellectual movement, Mein Grundeinkommen (n.d.) in Germany encourages a ‘focus on our life-goals rather than on existential needs’, and the Swiss initiative Verein Grundeinkommen (n.d.) supports ‘a more liberal way of life.’

Both of these initiatives operate on an incremental logic of building a network of participants from the ground up. Mein Grundeinkommen is a non-profit initiative organized by a German entrepreneur who distributes a basic income by crowdsourcing funds and finding recipients through a lottery that awards winners with €1,000 a month for a year. So far, the organization has distributed 650 basic incomes, and a new lottery is held each time participants have raised €12,000. Similarly, Verein Grundeinkommen runs a shared bank account and awards recipients with basic income through a lottery.

These German and Swiss initiatives show the potentials (and limitations) of raising non-corporate private funding for UBI initiatives, just as they display the difficulties (and promises) of operating as an alternative within the current economic and socio-political system. As such, both are very much ‘add-ons’ to regular sources of income (as highlighted by the organizing principle of chance), whereas more radical and radically transformative initiatives would demand the formation of

independent communities that might model social change, but could have limited potential in terms of societal influence.

Although the transformative degrowth rationale for UBI is among the least empirically developed, conceptually it represents the most radical alternative to currently dominant societal configurations, especially as regards the potential for redistribution to enhance social solidarity. In the specific feminist version of transformative degrowth advocacy, for instance, UBI is tied to notions of the informal, unpaid, and/or affective labor of which women traditionally bear the brunt. Here, paying ‘wages for housework’ could have democratizing effects, as it supports citizens’ opportunities to participate fully in society while not being employed (Macdonald, 2018; Pateman, 2004). Incidentally, this argument resonates with Fraser’s (1994) suggestion of a ‘universal caregiver model’ as the basis for social and economic justice in the postindustrial welfare state (see also, Fraser, 2016). In her recent work, however, Fraser (2020: 13) has explicitly distanced herself from UBI, taking issue with the way in which ‘that project involves paying people cash to buy stuff to meet their basic needs, thereby treating basic need satisfactions as commodities’. Thus, Fraser seems to indicate that UBIs are means to an end that could potentially and problematically stand in the way of realizing the actual ends – catering to citizen-as-consumers rather than enhancing their freedom to define and enact meaningful (work)lives.

While we agree that UBI initiatives are not inherently radical enough in their redefinition of what ‘must be provided as a matter of right’ (Fraser, 2020: 13), we do believe that they can be a step on the road to the emancipation of basic needs from capitalist logics (Harris and Kentikelenis, 2017). If solidarity is extended beyond the confines of current labor relations, then further reform may become thinkable. From this perspective, then, UBI is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in ensuring equal socio-economic inclusion for all members of society in so far as economic redistribution also expands social recognition. In what follows, we discuss the potential of such redistributive solidarity.

Towards redistributive solidarity

In turning to our discussion, let us recall our initial query; namely, whether and how different rationales for redistribution may afford new modes of recognition. Surveying different UBI initiatives we have searched for indications that redistribution could be a precondition of

recognition; if economic solidarity can be considered a given, might social solidarity follow? So, does UBI facilitate redistributive solidarity? Let us consider the evidence.

First, while there are many different rationales for and models of UBI, the dearth of empirical data continues to hamper our ability to draw any hard conclusions. Following the maximalist definition, we could go so far as to say that no existing initiative meets all the criteria of a proper UBI. Thus, our findings come with the significant caveat that the full potential of UBI has not yet been realized, meaning we are left to speculate as to what that potential might be.

Second, in surveying the field, we found that even though a strong transformative degrowth-oriented case is being made for UBI, most actual initiatives are based on the logics of either affirmative or transformative growth (see table 2). As mentioned, this is not surprising, as the actors who are in a position to conduct socioeconomic experiments on a sufficiently large scale are the incumbents of the current order; public authorities and private corporations that stand to lose if the growth imperative were abandoned and to gain from its continued enhancement. Affirmative growth initiatives, then, seek to maintain the current order by ensuring that everyone gets a decent piece of the pie, and transformative growth initiatives aim to grow the pie. Thus, in these two types of UBI initiatives, we see autonomy and solidarity replicated in the classical trade-off. It may be that a better balance is struck, as is indicated by the more successful cases (most notably SEED, APFD, and the Cherokee Revenue Fund), but it remains a balance no less.

[Insert table 2)

Among the initiatives that are based on the logic of degrowth, the affirmative variety is not very well-developed. However, the position that UBI might be the least disruptive means of making necessary changes seems quite consistent with the outcomes of actual experiments. Affirmative degrowth, then, may emerge as the practicable compromise and/or the realized effect of not implementing UBI fully.

Finally, transformative degrowth initiatives remain rare in practice, but are gaining much scholarly and activist traction, since this line of thinking posits enhanced economic autonomy as key to societal solidarity. Here, the potential for redistributive solidarity emerges as a driver of environmental sustainability as well as human dignity. The transformation of society involved is, however, so radical that we doubt that any UBI initiative, no matter how ambitious, could realize it

in and of itself. In sum, we view UBI is a potential but not (yet) sufficient means of harnessing economic redistribution for social recognition. In what follows, we will discuss how that potential may be activated and realized in the study and practice of societal alternatives.

Activating the utopian imagination with degrowth

Although *transformative degrowth* may be more of a prerequisite for than an outcome of UBI, initiatives that are based on this rationale are the most interesting for our consideration of the potential of redistributive solidarity. For instance, Giorgos Kallis (2011) argues that if we continue along the path set forth by neoliberal capitalism, the aggressive depletion of earth's natural resources will eventually render continued economic growth impossible. If we accept this premise, the question is not whether we should limit or even halt the process of economic expansion, but how declining growth rates or outright degrowth '...can become socially sustainable; i.e., a prosperous and stable, rather than a catastrophic, decent' (Kallis, 2011: 873). This is where UBI becomes relevant, as Kallis and others have emphasized, because it serves to *redistribute* residual resources more equally while also *recognizing* the societal value of 'unpaid and highly gendered care work that we all perform to sustain the life and wellbeing of households and communities' (Kallis et al, 2020: 71). In that sense, UBI initiatives could become an important ingredient in a more democratic and egalitarian post-growth society (Alexander, 2015).

At best, the project of building such a society remains unfinished, casting it in a somewhat utopian light. However, building 'real utopias' may be precisely what is needed to 'escape from the economy as a system of representation' (Fournier, 2008: 529) and, hence, develop modes of social recognition that are not predicated upon the exchange of labor for wage. In fact, as Van Parijs (2013) notes, UBI discussions have always involved a fair bit of utopianism – or rather, since More famously coined the phrase, most utopias have included a principle of generalized economic redistribution. To activate the utopian imagination with degrowth, scholars and activists alike need to enhance their capacity to contemplate a world beyond 'the capitalist imaginary of unlimited expansion of production and consumption' (Wright et al., 2013: 648).

Far too often, however, discussions of societal transformation get entangled in commonsensical questions about economic feasibility and individual free-riding that enjoy surprisingly little empirical backing (see Hanlon et al., 2010; Mathews, 2017), but nonetheless serve to maintain status quo by curbing the 'utopian imagination' (De Cock et al., 2018). Hence, to paraphrase

Frederick Jameson (2003), if it truly is easier to imagine the end of the world than to envision the final days of the growth paradigm, then we must revise that proposition and attempt to imagine the beginning of a new world by contemplating the end of growth.

Drawing utopian sketches

In this spirit, and drawing on the work of Russell Jacoby (2005), Rutger Bregman (2017) outlines two utopian ‘lines of flight’: first, the ‘blueprint’ sets the utopianist on a quest to specify the minute details of life in the Promised Land, identifying a number of ‘immutable rules that tolerate no dissension’ (ibid: 12). This approach is often associated with fascist literature that seeks to homogenize life itself through a violent disciplining of the future and its inherent potentiality, eliminating all uncertainty and indeterminacy and leaving nothing to chance. The other line of utopian thinking is what Bregman calls the ‘sketch’, which is less about plans and procedures for a distant future and more about asking the right questions (see also Wright, 2010). Here, the utopianist ponders current conditions; for instance, asking why ongoing economic growth has not resulted in a decline in average working hours but, to the contrary, in the proliferation of ‘bullshit jobs’ (Graeber, 2018).¹ Or, why so many people continue to suffer under conditions of severe poverty when we clearly have the resources to secure the livelihoods of all (Sachs, 2005). In short, whereas the blueprint is focused on ready-made answers and solutions, the sketch is concerned with open-ended and value-based contemplation. As Bregman (2017: 13) puts it, ‘if the blueprint is a high-resolution photo, then this utopia [the sketch] is a vague outline. It offers not solutions but guideposts. Instead of forcing us into a straightjacket, it inspires us to change’.

Applying the general principles of utopian sketches to UBI-supported postgrowth society, it is crucial to emphasize the *potentiality* of this societal model. Like the vision of a perfectly democratic society, the utopia we are advocating here must keep an ‘absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart’ (Derrida, 1994: 65). Even as we explore the specific potentials of UBI to offer solidarity beyond the current confines of work, the broader *promise* of conjoint equality and freedom should remain open to further reinterpretation and reconfiguration. Seeking to build such emancipatory potential, we encourage further studies of and experiments with UBI as a vehicle of transformative degrowth, as these might help us ponder difficult questions of the interrelations between redistribution and recognition. Further, we invite scholars who are concerned with the societal reconciliation of equality and freedom to

reorient their empirical interests and rethink heuristics to accommodate socio-political initiatives that work toward similar ends.

Such work might begin from the following question: *if degrowth is a necessary corrective to our current socio-economic order, and if UBI is seen as the most effective way of rendering economic contraction socially sustainable, what happens to traditional conceptions of work and work organizations?* If degrowth helps us reorient the economy away from mindless overproduction and overconsumption, and if UBI provides people with the means to prioritize work that is intrinsically rewarding and meaningful, rendering citizens able to free expressions of solidarity from the bounds of the labor market (that is, from their identities as workers), we should expect new forms of work and organization to emerge. At least, if the combination of degrowth principles and UBI practices involves some degree of freedom from wage work, it seems fair to assume the emergence of another kind of labor that is stripped of ‘gloom and compulsion’; a type of work that serves as an ‘instrument of joy, of strength, of color, of real harmony’ (Goldman, 1911, quoted in Chertkovskaya and Stoborod, 2018: 194). As researchers, we can support this development by cultivating social theories that do not rely on unsustainable premises of economic growth and outdated work ethics. As suggested by Wright (1993), these would arguably be theories that bridge the classical Marxist preoccupation with macro structures and the feminist concern for the micro politics of everyday life, seeking more ‘positive’ accounts of emancipation that are rooted in the lived experiences of ordinary people.

Empirically, we urge further studies of collectives that prefigure a world without growth and in which solidarity is not distributed according to the logics of wage work. Not only because social change often begins with the activation of *real* (Wright, 2013) and *local* utopias (Bregman, 2017), but also because we need to build political alliances between academics and activists in the pursuit of a better world (Parker and Parker, 2017). As mentioned, Fraser does not quite share our optimism concerning the specific practice of UBI, but we find common ground in the broader ambition of realizing a society in which economic transaction does not define social recognition. ‘If the job gets done (which is a big “if”),’ she accentuates, ‘it will be through the combined efforts of activists and theorists, as insights gained through social struggle synergize with programmatic thinking and with political organization’ (Fraser, 2020: 9). Only through such synergies can we begin to activate the utopian potential of redistributive solidarity.

Notes

¹ One survey found that 37% of British adults believe their job makes no ‘meaningful contribution to the world’ (Dahlgreen, 2015). Similarly, an American study reported that a staggering 50% of its 12,000 respondents found their job to have little ‘meaning or significance’ (Schwartz and Porath, 2014). Graeber (2018: 25) contends that *50% of all jobs* contain ‘bullshit tasks’ that are ‘pointless, useless, or even pernicious.’

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| | Affirmation | Transformation |
|----------|---|---------------------------------|
| Growth | UBI as means of continued (economic) prosperity | UBI as entrepreneurial practice |
| Degrowth | UBI as means of averting (environmental/social) catastrophe | UBI as revolutionary practice |

Table 1: Typology of rationales for UBI (adapted from Fraser, 1996: 87).

| | Affirmation | Transformation |
|----------|--|---|
| Growth | <p><i>Ideological underpinnings:</i> Conservative Pragmatic</p> <p><i>Illustrative case(s):</i> UBI pilot experiment (Finland) SEED (California, USA) APFD (Alaska, USA) Minimum Living Income (Spain)</p> | <p><i>Ideological underpinnings:</i> Neoliberal Progressive</p> <p><i>Illustrative case(s):</i> Andrew Yang's presidential campaign (USA) GiveDirectly (Kenya) Y Combinator (California, USA) The Cherokee Fund (North Carolina, USA) GYBI (South Korea) The Compton Pledge (California, USA)</p> |
| Degrowth | <p><i>Ideological underpinnings:</i> Slow growth or no growth</p> <p><i>Illustrative case(s):</i> Alternativet (Denmark)</p> | <p><i>Ideological underpinnings:</i> Feminist, anarchist and/or localist postgrowth</p> <p><i>Illustrative case(s):</i> Mein Grundeinkommen (Germany) Verein Grundeinkommen (Switzerland)</p> |

Table 2: Building the UBI typology