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Matthew Thompson

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Money for everything? Universal basic income in a crisis

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Abstract

This paper explores universal basic income (UBI) in relation to crisis, from COVID-19 to techno-economic disruptions to work and prospective post-capitalist transition. Critical debates around automation, wage labour and post-work are brought into conversation with emerging trends in urban political economy around foundational infrastructure, smart cities and platform capitalism. To deliver the socio-economic transformations promised by UBI's advocates, it is argued that more radical structural interventions in capitalist asset ownership and property relations, alongside democratized state investment in technological development, universal basic services and infrastructure, are necessary counterparts to any sufficient UBI – that is, if we hope to construct new systems of collective coordination capable of contending with complex epidemiological, economic and ecological crises.

Keywords: work; crisis; foundational economy; platform capitalism; state transformation; radical republicanism.

*Matthew Thompson, Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, UCL, United Kingdom.
E-mail: matt.thompson@ucl.ac.uk*

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Introduction

Across the world in 2020, COVID-19 forced fast governmental responses in emergency cash transfers to citizens facing threats to income – putting a new spin on the concept of the ‘transfer state’ (Sloman, 2019). This brought to the fore the idea of a universal basic income (UBI) – that is, an unconditional, non-means-tested, regular and sufficient cash transfer from the state to meet the basic needs of all individual citizens. By May 2020, public support for UBI reached astonishing levels: a poll of 12,000 people across EU countries, also including the United Kingdom, conducted by the University of Oxford’s European Studies Centre in consultation with the Bertelsmann Foundation, revealed 71 per cent of Europeans favoured a state-funded UBI. Yet, COVID-19 has only accelerated existing trends. UBI has been promoted for decades – largely through the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), established in 1986 as the Basic Income European Network before going global in 2004 – as a simple yet radical reform (van Parijs, 1992). In 2016, several experimental pilots of basic income were initiated around the world – including in the Netherlands, Finland and Canada – prompting leading UBI advocate and BIEN co-founder Guy Standing to herald 2016 as ‘the year of the pilots’ (Sloman, 2018). That same year, a petition for UBI in Switzerland gained enough signatories to force (an ultimately unsuccessful) national referendum (Nagler, 2018). Multiple basic income experiments are now underway or recently completed – from Barcelona and Berlin to California and Kenya – with public and private funding, including philanthropic foundations and tech entrepreneurs. These follow sustained policy experimentation with conditional cash transfers, which began in the 1990s mostly in poor rural areas of countries in the global South such as Brazil and Mexico (Peck & Theodore, 2015) and South Africa (Ferguson, 2015).

UBI is distinct from conditional cash transfers in aspiring to be unconditional if not truly universal, revolutionary rather than reformist. Most expansively, it has been characterized as the ‘capitalist road to communism’ (van der Veen & van Parijs, 1986), as a ‘real utopia’ (Wright, 2010) or ‘transformative social innovation’ (Pel & Backhaus, 2020), in the sense of radically transforming social relations to enhance autonomy in and out of work, provide security from poverty and precarity, and maximize self-determination for the pursuit of socially-productive, meaningful and un/underpaid activities such as domestic labour, social care, arts and crafts, education, political activism and collective action. UBI research tends to fall into one of two camps: either exploring the normative and ethical implications for social justice – often on the theoretical grounds of left-egalitarianism (van Parijs, 1992) or neo-republicanism (Casassas & De Wispelaere, 2015) – or assessing pragmatic, financial and administrative concerns with UBI’s viability and sustainability (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2013; Martinelli, 2019; Widerquist, 2017). To these Wright (2005, p. 196) has added a third, political question – one which guides this paper: ‘In what ways can a guaranteed basic income be considered part of a broad socialist challenge to capitalism?’ The following analysis focuses on the urban political

economy of UBI with specific reference to the United Kingdom and comparable North Atlantic polities.

Prior to the pandemic, British interest in UBI was already rejuvenating (Sloman, 2018). The Trades Union Congress (TUC) endorsed UBI at their 2016 national congress – an extraordinary move for the labour movement towards a policy that, from a Marxist perspective (Dinerstein & Pitts, 2021), dissipates the point of conflict and weakens the relationship between employer and employee. In 2019, Standing (2019) was commissioned by the Labour Party to write a report on how UBI might work, subsequently making it into Labour's 2019 national election manifesto. The devolved Scottish government is now funding feasibility studies for pilots in four local authorities, including Glasgow and Edinburgh; in 2020 the Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) passed a motion supporting UBI, through successful lobbying from campaigners associated with the growing UBI Lab Network. This globalising city-based network of UBI research, advocacy and activist collectives – branded as 'labs' to connote an experimental ethos and scientific credibility, as a 'claim to expertise' (Pel & Backhaus, 2020) – started in Sheffield in the years preceding the pandemic before spreading rapidly in 2020 and 2021. The Network now boasts 40 UBI Lab members, and counting, including 28 in localities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in Jakarta, The Hague, Bucharest and Washington DC, amongst other cities, as well as a number of groups organized around cross-cutting issues or social cleavages, from UBI Lab Arts to UBI Lab LGBTQ+. The speed of replication makes the UBI Lab Network a counter-exemplar of the fast policy mobilities characterizing conditional cash transfers (Peck & Theodore, 2015), only propagated largely by amateur activist-advocates rather than professional policy consultants. Following the launch of UBI Lab Sheffield's pilot proposal (Bryan & Leman, 2019), UBI Labs have been lobbying central government and campaigning locally for pilots in their host cities. This new generation of British UBI activists deploy pragmatic, nuanced and sophisticated strategic reasoning and ideological rationales for UBI, cohering around labour market precarity and welfare reform and cleverly marketed as 'Our Generation's NHS' [National Health Service].

Earlier generations of UBI advocates associated with BIEN likewise position UBI as a new social contract, but on grander terms. Invoking Beveridge's post-war quest to slay the five giants of his time – disease, idleness, ignorance, squalor, want – influential in the genesis of the British welfare state, Standing (2020) claims a *global* UBI can battle the eight global challenges of our time: inequality and polarization; economic insecurity; consumer debt; stress and mental illness, precarity and rising underemployment; disruptions by robots and automation; climate breakdown, ecological catastrophe and extinction; and rising populism and neo-fascism. Presented as the partial solution for a plethora of policy problems – including pandemics – there is almost nothing it seems UBI cannot help resolve. Turning the common critique of 'money for nothing' (Arnold, 2018) on its head, money is offered as a transitional, remedial solution for almost everything.

This paper problematizes such claims. It draws on an ongoing qualitative research project investigating the origins, impacts and prospects of the UBI Lab Network, building on a policy report commissioned by a Liberal Democrat Party taskforce on UBI as an emergency response to COVID-19 (Thompson, 2020). Geographically focused on British debates and on neoliberal varieties of capitalism, it situates the current clamour for UBI within a critical political-economic perspective on capitalism and its structural transformations of work and social relations, synthesising a number of recent interventions in this space (Benanav, 2020; Dinerstein & Pitts, 2021; Lawhon & McCreary, 2020; Lombardozi & Pitts, 2020; Mathers, 2020; Morgan, 2019; Spencer, 2018). One of the key arguments of this literature is that, by mobilizing the medium of money – the primary social form of capitalism (Lombardozi & Pitts, 2020) – as the means through which to tackle economic, ecological and epidemiological crises, UBI reproduces the contradictions of capital and concomitant crisis conditions. The global challenges we face are largely the product of a neoliberal fixation on competitive markets as the hegemonic coordinating institution of our era, obfuscating the link between consumption and extractive production, consolidating capital's structural domination over atomized individuals, and suppressing the innovation of alternative multi-scalar, transnationally-networked, socially-planned and democratically-organized forms of collective coordination capable of tackling cataclysmic crises such as climate breakdown.

Nonetheless, the aim of this paper is not to refute the enormous value of UBI or to evaluate the available social-scientific data on its efficacy. Through micro-simulation modelling and experimental trials, growing evidence suggests UBI would make a huge difference: eradicating poverty and homelessness, dramatically reducing inequality, alleviating stress and mental illness, reducing crime and domestic violence, improving health and educational outcomes, raising self-confidence and life-satisfaction, increasing trust in institutions, empowering employees to demand better working conditions, and providing the economic security to engage in entrepreneurial, creative and socially valuable endeavours (D'Mello, 2019; Fouksman & Klein, 2019; Standing, 2019). Trials show basic income recipients do not waste their money through 'weakness of will', as conservative critics warn, but spend it judiciously on fundamental goods and services to sustainably improve their circumstances, to pursue education and training, find a home or new vocation.

Moreover, such evidence has been gathered from basic income experiments that are far from universal; significantly limited in temporality, spatial scale and scope (Arnold, 2018). If rolled out across an entire city-region, country, or even globally, UBI would likely have multiplier effects that reinforce results and produce positive spillovers. However, money is the means to the end of meeting basic human needs – and comes with its own baggage (Nagler, 2018). UBI thus risks reifying the power of money and consolidating the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. This paper advances existing arguments (Benanav, 2020; Dinerstein & Pitts, 2021; Susskind, 2020; Wright, 2010) to consider in more depth the political-economic implications of deploying

universal cash transfers as a stand-alone policy and to think more creatively and holistically about what complementary tools might enhance its benefits without playing into the forces that necessitate it. Ultimately, I argue the value of UBI resides in its careful and contingent institutionalization as one of many necessary mechanisms, including renewed state investments in universal basic services, green and digital technologies, urban infrastructures, and place-based industrial strategy alongside more structural reforms to the distribution of property rights and ownership of capital.

In what follows, first I unpack the contradictions contained within UBI in relation to the core concept of work, focusing on automation, wage labour and the connection to crisis. Progressive interpretations of UBI insist on sufficiency to provide a liveable income, not supplement low wage employment, as a ‘foundation that guarantees a dignified living’ (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020, p. 458). Such an expansive perspective sits uncomfortably next to neoliberal demands, notably from Silicon Valley, implying UBI could act as a subsidy for tech firms refusing to pay a liveable wage.

Second, drawing upon radical republican thinking (Gourevitch, 2013; Muldoon, 2021; O’Shea, 2020; Roberts, 2017) I assess the promise of UBI to enact freedom from domination in various guises – domination by employers, by the capitalist market for wage labour, by the bureaucratic state – against claims that it paves the way for the ‘capitalist road to communism’ (van der Veen & van Parijs, 1986). I argue that travelling this road requires shifting our attention beyond questions of wealth distribution, beyond the tax-benefit system, and towards more systemic transformation of wealth generation.

Third, I highlight the dangers of implementing a compromised version of UBI in the current conjuncture, as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis into an accelerated future of digitally-mediated production dominated by platform corporations (Srnicek, 2016), in which capitalism potentially mutates into *something worse* (Wark, 2019). Here, I argue that we need to concentrate scarce resources and attentions on the public ownership and collective coordination of assets and infrastructure in the platform and foundational economies – providing the material foundations for urban everyday life – before they are subsumed within surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Universal basic services are considered as a complement to UBI, offering ways of delivering some of the same benefits without mediation by money. Finally, in the conclusion, I explore what these arguments mean for urban and regional development and state-society relations, sketching out new lines of enquiry for future research.

Working through a crisis

UBI promises freedom from work, to liberate us from drudgerous and destructive labour and open opportunities to rebuild communities and ecologies through prefigurative practices that ‘create the conditions of possibility for the emergence of alternative subjectivities’ (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020,

p. 453). Yet, it is currently deployed in multiple experiments in places facing the threat of automation – from Barcelona to Finland – to help under/unemployed people find jobs. In Finland, a country featuring regularly in UBI discourse since the 1970s, policy frames have shifted from more universalist and post-work ideas around equality and freedom towards a contemporary ‘work-fare’ idea incentivizing the unemployed to find jobs (Koistinen & Perkiö, 2014). UBI thus contains a central contradiction between supporting people back into work or enabling liberation from work.

A central contemporary argument for UBI is as a necessary intervention to provide alternatives to wage labour in increasingly automated and jobless economies (Srnicsek & Williams, 2015; Susskind, 2020). Fears of automation – alongside UBI advocacy – have been a near-constant feature of capitalist history, periodically piqued during moments of technological transition, in the 1790s, 1830s, 1930s, 1950s, 1980s and 2010s (Benanav, 2020). The fortunes of UBI have waxed and waned with the cyclical crises of capitalism, as far back as 1797, when Thomas Paine’s proto-UBI pamphlet *Agrarian justice* was published at a time of great upheaval, industrialization and primitive accumulation (Benanav, 2020; Sloman, 2018). Boom-and-bust cycles broadly correspond with the ‘Kondratiev waves’ (named after the Soviet economist) shaping capitalist history, based on technological innovations in energy and transmission (Malm, 2018): coal and steam (1770–1850); steel and rail (1850–1900); electricity and chemistry (1900–1940); petrochemicals and automobiles (1940–1970); information and communication technologies (1970–); and, potentially from the 2020s, a new wave propelled by artificial intelligence (AI), big data and green- and bio-technologies. Moments of creative destruction following each wave’s peak are often accompanied by uncertainty, violence, war, deflation, depression and mass unemployment, precipitating upsurges of interest in UBI, surges likewise described as ‘waves’ by UBI historians (Sloman, 2018).

The current conjuncture arguably marks the trough between waves, defined by an escalating crisis of social reproduction – the ‘crisis of care’ (Lombardozzi & Pitts, 2020) – caused by interlocking crises of social democracy (centre-left parties losing legitimacy to protect the welfare state); of work (labour market flexibilization, precaritization and automation undermining jobs); and of the wage (no longer sufficient to meet basic needs without utilizing credit and debt). UBI’s rising popularity is partly explained by its promising potential to tackle these crises. COVID-19 has revealed and deepened crisis conditions, bolstering calls for UBI. First, in terms of care, the pandemic throws into stark relief the gross inadequacy and injustice of traditional welfare systems, casting favourable light on UBI as both a transitional crisis measure and a more long-term policy alternative (Thompson, 2020). Second, in terms of work, COVID-19 triggers the collective revaluation of both paid ‘productive’ labour and unpaid socially reproductive work. Many undervalued and underpaid roles in social care, cleaning, logistics and retail alongside health, education and security are revalued as the ‘key workers’ that provide essential services, deliver basic goods and keep society functioning. UBI could empower underpaid key workers to turn down

extra hours and thus lower the labour supply, raise demand and raise pay. Third, in terms of the wage, COVID-19 has left millions without a sustainable income, accelerating trends towards falling real wages, with credit filling the gap in consumer spending, deepening the debt crisis (Benanav, 2020). Whilst underemployment is symptomatically caused by automation in the race by firms to increase productivity in fiercely competitive global markets, falling demand for labour, argues Benanav (2020), is more fundamentally the result of a lack of investment in new productive opportunities and the divergence between productivity and wages, with labour seeing its income share fall *vis-à-vis* capital. Credit has been extended to prop up consumer spending, but with debt at saturation point, the global economy is facing a crisis of over-accumulation and a 'productivity paradox': real output lower in 2019 than in 2010. With growth stalled, depressing investment in jobs, capitalists turn to automation for profit maximization. UBI could supplement or even replace the wage, raise incomes and clear consumer debt, sustaining continued capital accumulation and postponing economic collapse.

Although heightened fears of catastrophic mass unemployment accompany economic transitions, the latter have always created new jobs, albeit with qualitative changes, temporal lags and spatial displacements (Morgan, 2019; Spencer, 2018). For instance, the jobs replacing those well-paid blue-collar and clerical jobs lost to automation in advanced capitalist economies since 1970 – in a process of labour market polarization – are generally underpaid, undervalued and precarious jobs in so-called 'low-skilled', 'high touch', social-interactional roles resistant to automation, such as retail, social care, crop harvesting and manual construction. Debate centres on whether the 'technological unemployment' generated in some sectors by automation is merely temporary, as we transition into a new economy, or the inflection point towards permanent multi-sector 'technological disemployment' (Pierce *et al.*, 2019). Automation theorists argue that recently accelerating technological advances – especially in computing, AI and robotics – are synergistic and mutually compounding in power and progress (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014); heralding an impending 'automated feudalism' (Ford, 2016). Moore's Law has proven fairly accurate since 1965 – the doubling of computing processing power every two years – dramatically reducing costs, accelerating innovation, and incentivizing employers to substitute human labour for technology. Exponential growth in machine learning raises the danger of human redundancy with no direct claim on the profits accumulated by technology-intensive firms.

UBI is thus framed as a necessary means of survival by automation theorists of diverse ideological bent. For Britain's accelerationist post-capitalist left (Mason, 2015; Srnicek & Williams, 2015), teleological tendencies are revealed in an obscure – now infamous – passage in Marx's *Grundrisse* known as the 'Fragment on machines', which foresaw that, as capital compels capitalists to raise productivity by replacing human labour with machines, production increasingly draws on the 'dead labour' stored in machines and technology rather than on direct 'living labour' (Pitts, 2017). Over time, this liberates

humanity from wage labour and severs the connection between labour time and commodity exchange value and profitability. The rise of the digital economy further weakens this link such that information-rich goods are increasingly reproduced and replicated at marginal if not zero cost. This not only promises huge abundance, freeing workers to partake in non-commodified forms of production, but so too short-circuits the logic of capital, triggering a post-capitalist transition (Mason, 2015). These ideas have circuitously informed the British Labour Party's interest in UBI through such platforms as Momentum's *The World Transformed* (Pitts, 2017).

However, the real threat posed by automation – as we transition into the aptly-named ‘Amazonian era’ (Gilbert & Thomas, 2021), a techno-economic paradigm shift accelerated by COVID-19 – is not the quantitative replacement or displacement of jobs so much as the qualitative erosion and ‘gigification’ of work – its intensified routinization, narrowing, codification, measurement and disciplining by algorithmic and platform technologies – which undermines the skills, autonomy and value of labour, and increases the interchangeability and replaceability of individual workers (see: Gilbert & Thomas, 2021). Such pioneering empirical investigations into the nuances of the platform conjuncture contest post-work prophecies – apocalyptic (Ford, 2016) and utopian (Mason, 2015) alike – prophecies which nonetheless may have a self-fulfilling performative power in persuading policymakers that there is little they can do to intervene in teleological trends (Morgan, 2019). On this reading, UBI could be seen as a defeatist abdication of public policy ingenuity in the absence of other, more challenging interventions that attempt the difficult task of harnessing technological progress to transform labour under capitalism into non-alienating activities while revaluing and recompensing those socially valuable forms of work that will likely endure despite automation (Spencer, 2018). Such critiques underscore the need to treat UBI not as a panacea but one of many complementary policy tools – including lifetime public education, place-based industrial strategy, large-scale state investment in technological development and social innovation, democratization of algorithms and platforms, and ‘mission-oriented’ innovation policy (Mazzucato *et al.*, 2020). The policy challenge is how to capture the surpluses made by productivity gains in technology-intensive industries for redistribution into more foundational and human-centred sectors that will likely employ the vast majority, whether formally or not.

From wage slavery to vectoral domination

Even if widespread technological *dis*employment fails to transpire, UBI should, from a radical ‘labour republican’ perspective (Gourevitch, 2013; see also O’Shea, 2020), liberate people from the compulsion to work for a wage or else fail to deliver on the freedoms it promises us to pursue more politically-transformative, socially-valuable and ecologically-sustainable endeavours (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020; Wright, 2005). The (liberal) neo-republican

position holds that UBI should be set just high enough to empower people to refuse a *particular* job and seek better working conditions elsewhere, as the foundation for freedom from domination (Casassas & De Wispelaere, 2015). This stops short of seeing the capitalist market itself as a source of more abstract, structural domination in which workers are compelled to sell their labour for a wage in order to survive – the peculiarly capitalist condition of ‘wage slavery’ (Gourevitch, 2013; Roberts, 2017). Such blindness to structural forms of domination is explicable by neo-republicanism’s formal, liberal view of non-domination as corresponding closely to individual intentionality and strictly limited to freedom from interference from others. Accordingly, the market cannot dominate our actions because it cannot act from intention. But radical republican and Marxist perspectives take a subtler, systemic approach to understanding the impersonal social relations constructed through the global capitalist market as dominating of actions and constraining of choices. Under capitalism, we are driven from necessity to sell our labour, as dispossessed commoners, or to sell commodities as capitalists – a mutual condition of structural domination (Roberts, 2017). If UBI is to effect structural transformation, to lead us to a post-capitalist world of de-commodified, non-alienated, meaningful work, it would have to be generous enough to give people a genuine choice not to labour for a wage (Gourevitch, 2013).

This essential condition for realizing UBI’s socialist potential (Wright, 2005) is the crux of the problem for critics focused on fiscal, political and bureaucratic barriers to its implementation as a policy: affordability dilemmas stem from a focus on the tax-benefit system, on net versus gross cost (Widerquist, 2017); while a political impasse is presented by conservative and progressive ends of the broad coalition required to support legislation on UBI pulling in opposing directions and undermining core elements (De Wispelaere & Stirton, 2013). It is for these reasons that Martinelli (2019) highlights the intractable ‘trilemma’ between UBI’s fiscal *affordability*, material *adequacy* and administrative *simpli-city*, in which only two of these three fundamental conditions may be met simultaneously. Significantly, this literature assumes that income tax on wage labour would be the principal financial source. Following this logic, UBI is thus caught in a double-bind: if set too low, it fails to free us from wage slavery or the structural domination of the market, acting as a subsidy for continued capital accumulation; if set too high it liberates us from the necessity to work for a wage and therefore undermines the taxable income required to fund it – unless, that is, we can secure alternative funding sources.

In the post-pandemic conjuncture, these pragmatic arguments appear increasingly confounded by fast-moving events and lacking in political-economic imagination to match the policy ambition of UBI. Massive, unprecedented state investments in response to COVID-19 – bailouts to the tune of \$17 trillion globally, \$5.8 trillion by the United States alone, dwarfing the \$3 trillion global total for the 2008 financial crisis – have discredited prevailing beliefs in strict public fiscal limits and neoclassical myths that government spending is like household spending; while the controversial claims of

Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) are gaining credibility – that tax is a tool of social policy rather than revenue raiser for government expenditure (Baker & Murphy, 2020). This highlights the importance of looking beyond tax-benefit system reform to alternative financing mechanisms: from MMT-informed People’s Quantitative Easing (QE) or ‘QE for commoners’ (Standing, 2019, p. 37) to the democratization of capital and socialization of production, through municipal enterprise, inclusive ownership funds, stakeholder dividends, state investment banks and public wealth funds, in which the state and labour gain a direct stake in capital (O’Neill & White, 2019; White, 2009). This suggests that UBI is best conceived as a social dividend – a share in the surpluses produced by capitalism. It also invites us to radically rethink how the state can capture and redistribute the economic surpluses produced by productivity gains driven by technological advances in robotics, AI and big data – especially considering Silicon Valley’s impressive knack at tax avoidance (Fouksman & Klein, 2019; Mathers, 2020).

From a radical republican perspective concerned with freedom from domination by the state and capital, UBI remains an ambiguous and contentious topic. As articulated by Marxist scholars such as Wright (2005, 2010), UBI promises to strengthen labour’s power to contest capital by providing a ‘permanent strike fund’ as well as resources to seed-fund worker-owned cooperative enterprise; to subsidise socially-productive and labour-intensive though largely unprofitable activities in the social and solidarity economy; and to empower citizens to freely associate and shape economic organization, at least locally, and to agitate for political change across scales. Others, however, point to the displacement and mediation by the state of the direct relationship between employer and employee, making it more difficult to challenge the power of capital through strikes and industrial action (Dinerstein & Pitts, 2021; Lombardoizzi & Pitts, 2020). UBI is seen to erode class consciousness formed through the social relations of work and to circumvent the bargaining power of labour; to empower the state as ultimate wage payer for all, centralizing and concentrating power with which citizens have only limited, formal means to democratically control through periodic elections of their political representatives; to simultaneously reduce bureaucracy, liberating welfare claimants from state-imposed conditionalities, while making everyone more dependent on the state for their livelihoods (Lombardoizzi & Pitts, 2020). By replacing the compulsion to work for a wage with dependence on the state for money and leaving us potentially more vulnerable to the whims of markets to meet our basic needs – that is, unless we can develop alternative, decommodified, cooperative supply chains through a massively expanded social and solidarity economy – UBI may simply strengthen the power of the two fundamental mediators of capitalism: the commodity form (money) and the state (Dinerstein & Pitts, 2021). Ultimately, its progressive potential to contest and transform capitalism hinges on how effectively UBI can be harnessed by labour to democratize both capital and the state and create commons-based alternatives.

These issues take on salience following the lockdowns enforced in response to COVID-19: these have consolidated prevailing consumption trends

favouring online shopping and contactless deliveries over the high street, shifting revenue away from diverse place-based businesses towards tax-avoiding platform corporations like Amazon. Without concomitant measures to close tax loopholes, UBI would subsidise Silicon Valley and give the tech giants a free ride. It risks becoming a public subsidy for tech firms to continue exploiting gig workers and zero-hour contractors through ‘digital Taylorism’ while extracting value from the free labour that produces data (Spencer, 2018). UBI thus contains the seed of a dystopian world in which digital denizens are freed from wage slavery only to be dominated differently, as data producers for the harvesting of value by a new class of platform capitalists.

Silicon Valley currently profits from the collective confusion attendant to our transitioning to a new mode of regulation – or even production – that radically reconfigures capitalism. This goes by various names such as platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), the Amazonian era (Gilbert & Thomas, 2021) – following Fordism and post-Fordism – or even something beyond capitalism, vectoralism (Wark, 2019). This new economy – based on digital platforms and big data – was, by 2016, worth £250 billion to the EU alone and by 2020 represented over 4 per cent of the EU’s GDP (Mathers, 2020). The free labour provided by digital denizens underpins the huge profits made in Silicon Valley. As early as 2011, Facebook reported \$1 billion annual profits, with only 4,000 paid employees – but 64 billion hours of free labour from users (Mathers, 2020). By 2016, the companies with the highest market capitalization were (for the first time ever) tech firms: Amazon, Alphabet (Google’s parent company), Apple, Meta (formerly Facebook) and Microsoft. Their market dominance has grown dramatically through the pandemic: corporate earnings reported in April 2021 revealed combined yearly revenue of around \$1.2 trillion, more than a quarter higher than in April 2020; over this period, Amazon’s sales soared by 44 per cent to \$108.5 billion. These five companies are parasitically dependent not only on out-sourced under-paid precarious labour and the free labour of users but also on the free gifts of their technologies; Google’s android phones use Linux for their operating systems – an open source project collectively created and maintained as a common gift by the global free software movement (D’Mello, 2019).

If such trends continue, UBI may act as a subsidy for platform corporations to extract profits by providing data producers with an income to interact online, to create content for free or engage in collective projects for innovating new open source technologies (Mathers, 2020). No wonder Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are amongst the most vocal proponents of UBI (Fouksman & Klein, 2019). The tech start-up incubator Y Combinator is funding a \$60 million experiment in UBI in two US states; Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes is funding another pilot project; while Google’s Foundation google.org is a major funder of Give-Directly’s UBI pilots in Western Kenya, where 21,000 adults across hundreds of villages will receive around a third of average income for 12 years – the longest and largest trial ever conducted (Arnold, 2018).

The tech giants of Silicon Valley are the epitome of what Wark (2015, 2019) theorizes as ‘vectoralists’ in an emergent mode of production structured increasingly around vectors rather than capital *per se*. Vectoralism is not a direct replacement of capitalism – for it does not abolish the value form – but coexists with it, as a hybrid layer. Just as feudal landlords were subordinated by early capitalists as the dominant class, with landlords continuing to play powerful roles as rentiers in financialized capital accumulation, vectoralists such as Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg are today beginning to subordinate the traditional capitalist class. If feudalism was based on the extraction of rents from tenant farmers and capitalism on the exploitation of surplus value from labour, then vectoralism collects and controls the interest accruing from data through exploiting differentials in unequal information exchanges with ‘hackers’ – Wark’s evocative term for all those engaged in the production of data and information. Although concentrated in the urban centres of the overdeveloped world, hackers are increasingly *everyone* – that is, anyone who uses the internet and thereby produces new data from which to appropriate value.

If, as Wark (2015) connotes, feudalism was centred on *forming* matter into material goods and industrial capitalism on *transforming* matter into commodities through the application of labour mixed with new-found fossil-fuel energy sources to create industrial concentrations of capital, then vectoralism involves *informing* these flows of energy with applied knowledge into abstract vectors of data across time and space. In each of these transformations of nature, new property rights are innovated to privatize common goods and the value created. Feudalism invented forms of land ownership (freehold/leasehold), industrial capitalism invented legal institutions for appropriating labour, and labour retaliated by winning rights, often by appeal to the state to legislate, for example, eight-hour working days and weekends. There is a qualitative leap with the shift to information – abstract, immaterial and infinitely-shareable. Unlike the scarcity underpinning capitalism, information can only be made scarce through artificial impositions – new property rights like copyright and patent law – against which hackers must organize. Wark intentionally overstates her case for vectoralism as a novel mode of production precisely to dispel the capitalocentrism of Marxist categories; to get us thinking more imaginatively, as Marx did, about how capitalism is evolving with other currents and potentially mutating into something new. Whatever its merits as a coherent theory of capital, it raises an important question for anti-capitalists: Is UBI the right response to emergent vectoralist control?

According to Wark, vectoralists are not interested in owning the means of production, happily letting capitalists continue in this role; vectoralists are concerned only with controlling the material means of transmitting, storing and interpreting big data to realize its predictive potential, owning the patents that enable monopolies over technologies and, crucially, controlling the supply chains and logistical flows that realize the value of data (Wark, 2019). Many capitalist firms enrolled in the production and distribution of material goods are, argues Wark, increasingly shifting their business models away from capital towards vectors, evident

amongst the world's largest corporations, notably in retail and logistics. Walmart profits from its sovereignty over a vast global network of outsourced supply chains governed by sophisticated algorithms (Phillips & Rozworski, 2019). Amazon is the inverse example of a putative tech firm whose actual business is in material goods and distribution through infrastructural chains governed by vectors. Vectoralism thus overlays and intersects with the capitalist economy of commodity production and the foundational economy of material needs fulfilment in increasingly penetrative ways, with big implications for the governance of cities and urban life. Vectoralist power in urban everyday life is conveyed by Bratton's (2016) visceral image of the 'stack'. This is modelled on Amazon's business model: a vertical layered stack of needs fulfilment along a vector from the user's digital interface – a smartphone or Amazon Echo device – to the planet's resources and energy required to meet that need via various layers: from the physical and human infrastructures of the city – including delivery gig workers and Amazon's notorious 'fulfilment centres' – to the digital infrastructure of the cloud. The stack is governed by algorithms such as Amazon's Alexa AI mainframe enabling smooth and seamless information flows, mediated by sensors and smart devices embedded in urban environments as part of smart city agendas (Morozov & Bria, 2018).

Platform corporations are beginning to colonize the vectoralist frontier of urban infrastructure and the foundational economy, seeking to out-compete non-profit, cooperative and public providers. Uber and Airbnb utilize algorithms to sweat their assets and create a 'perpetual ride' or provide proprietors with perpetual rents to supplement falling wages. This mirrors the 'Walmart effect' of falling real incomes outpaced by faster-falling retail prices due to technology-induced efficiency savings concealing economic exploitation twice over: employing precarious and gig workers in the global North and tapping into cheap suppliers in the global South (Morozov & Bria, 2018, pp. 16–17). The logical end-point is for 'shadow welfare states' or a 'privatized Keynesianism' operated by vectoralists and built on extraction of value from hacker data and public subsidies, including, potentially, UBI. Thus, unfurls one especially dystopian thread in the basic income narrative.

Building stronger infrastructural foundations for UBI

In its acquiescent ambivalence to this emerging assemblage of vectoralist control over foundational infrastructures and smart city systems of surveillance and behavioural manipulation (Zuboff, 2019) – with deleterious consequences for democracy, privacy, accountability and equity – UBI needs to be carefully considered as a combinatory component of expanded public investments in the foundational economy and universal basic *services*, including material and digital infrastructures. Inspired by growing interest in UBI, the concept of universal basic services (UBS) was developed in 2017 by UCL's Social Prosperity Network (Portes *et al.*, 2017) to describe all those goods and services deemed essential to meeting basic needs and which should therefore be decommodified

and provided universally without monetary mediation. In the United Kingdom, this would mean extending the principles underpinning the education system and NHS to additional domains deemed fundamental to human flourishing, namely shelter, nutrition, transport, and information, with potential to extend to childcare and adult social care.

Advocates present UBS as a stronger alternative rather than necessary counterpart to UBI; although this remains a largely academic debate divorced from activism, which increasingly sees the two as complementary rather than mutually-exclusive (Coote & Lawson, 2021). Critics of UBI argue that, first, UBS more directly addresses conditions underlying the ‘crisis of care’ that separate individuals from the means of social reproduction, providing subsistence goods and providential services without the transaction costs, financialized intermediations or dominating effects of money, making UBS a potentially more effective, public and accountable form of UBI (Lombardozzi & Pitts, 2020). By providing a ‘social wage’ (Gough, 2019) in the form of free essential services, UBS minimises the need for cash spending, saving individuals money otherwise spent on housing rent, bus tickets, school meals and books and broadband. This entails less cash channelled into digital platform corporations and atomized forms of consumption; while workers are similarly empowered as their UBI counterparts to refuse work and demand better conditions, with similar socio-economic effects.

Second, UBS is argued to be ‘pro-social’ (Portes *et al.*, 2017, p. 24) – strengthening society’s ties of reciprocity, mutuality, solidarity and sociability. By pooling resources and governing shared public services as a commons, UBS would enhance social citizenship, increase interaction and raise trust. Third, renewed investment into basic services would channel resources into prevention rather than cure, resolving problems upstream before they flood frontline services with unmanageable levels of demand; and crucially enhance state capacities to respond to sudden crises such as global pandemics as well as tackle complex multi-scalar challenges such as climate breakdown.

Fourth, UBS brings the ‘hidden abode’ of production out into the visible public sphere through public provision of childcare and social care, catalysing the revaluation of care and providing the material foundations for gender equality (McKay, 2001). Whilst UBI individualizes and privatizes the problem of delivering adequate childcare, UBS seeks collective solutions through municipal enterprise, thereby also creating new living-wage employment in state-funded basic services. Thus UBS begins to effect the labour market transformation anticipated by Baumol’s (2012) enquiries into ‘*why computers get cheaper and healthcare doesn’t*’ – providing a conduit for channelling technology-derived productivity gains into people-intensive sectors such as arts and entertainment, education and healthcare.

Finally, UBS is grounded in a moral theory of human needs and capabilities underpinning the foundational economy. Basic needs are those functional capabilities that underpin agency and enable a minimum level of health, autonomy and participation in social life met through the satisfaction of intermediate needs: both material factors like water, nutrition and shelter, and non-material

factors such as security and education (Gough, 2019). Intermediate needs are not inexhaustible like consumer desires but sated at a determinate ‘sufficient’ level; they are plural and non-substitutable, cannot be aggregated and summarized as a single monetary unit or traded off against each other; with certain ‘packages’ required to reach threshold satisfaction – contrasting with the exchangeable ‘bundles’ of priced goods in consumer preferences (Gough, 2019). This suggests money is maladapted as a medium for accessing bundles of goods for meeting essential human needs. It also suggests how UBS intersects with the ‘foundational economy’ – a useful organizing concept for understanding how basic human needs are met through material infrastructures (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). This is an often overlooked and taken-for-granted economic domain comprised of those mundane and everyday activities crucial for the maintenance of human life and societal functioning. It comprises ‘material infrastructure’ – utilities, transportation and digital communications networks, retail banking and food distribution – and ‘providential services’, including education, health and social care. These broadly correspond, respectively, I would argue, to ‘material’ and ‘non-material intermediate needs’ outlined by Gough (2019) above. Together, they constitute what others have called ‘collective reliance systems’ (Schafran *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, these are delivered through a branch and network infrastructure reliant on significant state investment and coordination across scales and geographies. Foundational infrastructures and services are coordinated and delivered at urban and regional scales through the platforms and markets that constitute and govern urban everyday life.

Potential problems arising from instituting UBS over UBI mirror concerns in neoclassical economics, notably public choice theory, over delivering services through the state rather than the market: lack of service choice; universalization of diverse desires and needs; lack of competition to incentivize high quality delivery; state failure; capture by nepotism, cronyism or clientelism; bureaucratic inertia and bureau-maximizing behaviours (see Mazzucato *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, to mitigate such issues as well as the analogous threat of dependence on and domination by the state, raised by Marxist critics of UBI, it would seem the effective institutionalization of UBS comes with conditions attached – not least the radical democratization and devolution of state governance processes. The polarized choice between buying books individually from Amazon or borrowing them collectively from well-resourced public libraries need not be so binary. A state-funded foundational economy need not be delivered top-down by a centralized structure but rather devolved to place-based, democratically-governed organizations such as social enterprises and cooperatives, trading through a decentralized form of market socialism. A democratic and publicly-accountable market-socialist system for coordinating UBS might be supported through progressive public procurement favouring firms demonstrating efficient service delivery, social value creation and multiplier effects for local jobs and reinvestments in the local economy. Multiple cases of innovative coordination of foundational and social economies at the municipal scale,

in recent experiments with new municipalism and community wealth building (Thompson, 2021), suggest possible ways forward.

When set against the context of rising vectoralist power over urban infrastructure and consumption, such arguments for UBS demonstrate how UBI alone may simply play into the hands of platform corporations, in their attempts to reimagine cities in their own image and reconfigure collective reliance systems for their material interest, undermining democracy, equity and accountability. To counter vectoralism, therefore, we need *both*. Indeed, the ideological tensions between UBI and UBS are beginning to soften as advocates mutually reframe the debate from ‘either/or’ to ‘both/and’ – as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (Coote & Lawson, 2021). The question then becomes where to draw the line within a dual UBI/UBS.

Conclusion: Escaping the collective-action-problem-generating machine?

This paper has explored how UBI is inextricably connected to capitalist crisis, surging in political popularity precisely during disruptive moments of tumultuous transformations to work. Fears of technological unemployment and interest in UBI have historically oscillated together. Although new jobs have always been created, albeit with generational disruptions and geographical displacements, it remains unclear whether the fourth industrial revolution will lead to technological disemployment rather than transitional unemployment. In debating these complex issues, UBI is not simply a neutral policy proposal but a dynamic discourse with performative power to shape the future of work and capitalism.

This latest wave is swollen by the COVID-19 pandemic. No doubt UBI would prove an extraordinarily effective life-raft for those losing their incomes and businesses, eliminating poverty and homelessness, reducing inequality, insecurity and precarity, and providing a financial foundation for the flourishing of mutual aid, commoning and socially valuable work beyond wage labour. But little is known about how UBI would interact with space and place. The prospects of any UBI programme are bound up with geography. The always place-embedded nature of UBI and UBS means their impacts are determined by complex interactions with specific contextual conditions. In so uneven an economic geography as the United Kingdom’s – with polarized socio-economic problems, decoupling economies and diverging labour market trajectories – the effects of such policies would vary significantly between localities. Advocates point to UBI’s great potential to regenerate peripheralized, deindustrialized and shrinking cities and to address regional imbalances by encouraging people to move from overheated local property and labour markets to depressed economies where lower costs of living guaranteed incomes go much further (Standing, 2019). Others argue that landlords and asset-owners would simply raise their rents and prices to meet rising demand, diverting regenerative benefits away from multiplying through local

economies and into off-shored financialized flows, further inflating asset-based rentierism (Benanav, 2020). This suggests that for some goods and services, especially land and foundational goods, UBS would be more effective.

Research is required on the socio-spatial implications for regional property and labour market geographies; how combined programmes of UBI and UBS interact with devolution, place-based industrial strategies and foundational economics. Pilots have yet to be trialled across entire city-regional economies – a promising scale for future experimentation. This is precisely the agenda of the UBI Lab Network, pioneered by the fully-costed pilot for Sheffield, with three different levels of support modelled (Bryan & Leman, 2019). UBI Labs in other cities such as Cardiff and Belfast are now also exploring options for local pilots. This novel form of city-based UBI activism contains great scope for future action-research into the political potential and societal impacts of UBI. If the UBI Lab Network were successful at lobbying government for a national UBI, what of Brexit, the Irish question, and relations with the EU? What would UBI in one state territory – socialism in one country, perhaps – mean for global value chains, transnational financial flows, and uneven spatial development; and vice versa? How do such questions intersect with the power of Silicon Valley and the international regulation, taxation and flow of data?

This paper suggests that empirical investigations into UBI pilots need situating within the political-economic conjuncture. As Silicon Valley expands its reach, UBI without concomitant structural reforms would free us from wage slavery but leave us vulnerable to domination under an emergent vectoralist mode of production (Wark, 2019). With platform corporations capturing market share and taking greater control over the vectors and infrastructures coordinating production, consumption and distribution – trends accelerated by COVID-19 – they stand to gain from state transfers to the consumers of their products and producers of their data. In designing future experimental pilots, we need to examine how UBI gets spent on goods and services: how much of it sustains urban commons and flows through local economies, and with what multiplier effects, compared with how much value is siphoned away by untaxable offshored corporations. Research on UBI/UBS should be brought into conversation with that on the corporate taxes, regulations and digital property rights determining platform corporation profits (Morozov, 2019), coupled with other public policy interventions seeking to capture productivity gains from technological innovations (Mazzucato *et al.*, 2020).

A ‘transfer state’ (Sloman, 2019) foregrounding UBI would redistribute wealth, cancel debt and eradicate poverty, but would fail to resolve the inherent inequalities in political power and economic control that divide society and reproduce the very same problems. A sufficient UBI fully severs the weakening link – and then steps into the gap – between income and *wage labour*; but it stops short of separating the tightening connection between income and *asset ownership* (Benanav, 2020). A transfer state leaves unreformed the systems of ownership and control that enable grossly uneven accumulations of capital and which concentrate wealth and power, polarize labour markets, reproduce inequalities

and constrain institutional innovations in coordinated multi-scalar collective action beyond incontinent capitalist market mechanisms, capable of responding to crises from pandemics to technological transition and climate breakdown.

For UBI to effect more structural change, I argue, it needs combining with radical redistribution and democratization of ownership and control of capital—for a ‘capital sharing state’ rather than ‘income sharing’ (Susskind, 2020) or ‘transfer state’ (Sloman, 2019). Institutional innovations around a citizens’ trust, social dividends, inclusive ownership funds, public wealth funds, state investment banks, worker-owned cooperative federations, employee-ownership schemes, community land trusts and solidarity funds are its complementary counterparts. Rich seams in the history of economic thought, from socialist planning (Phillips & Rozworski, 2019) through council communism (Muldoon, 2021) to the social economy (Wright, 2010) and ‘revolutionary liberalism’ (White, 2009) – the latter referring to James Meade’s ideas on a ‘partnership economy’ (O’Neill & White, 2019) – remain a valuable source to mine for future inspiration. Development of such organizational forms enabling economic democracy may remedy the democratic deficits implicit in UBI, polarized between empowered consumer spending and only formal representative relations with the state; they are the necessary intermediate institutions bridging between the structural domination of the market and sovereignty of the state as universal wage payer and service funder.

However, a citizens’ dividend backed by a public wealth fund contains similar contradictions – between affordability, sufficiency and political palatability – as those characterizing basic income. The Alaskan Permanent Fund, for instance, a \$60 billion fund endowed with oil and gas surpluses pays out just \$1,400 as an annual dividend to every Alaskan adult and child, woefully short of a liveable income (Susskind, 2020). Moreover, such sovereign wealth funds entail additional dangers of tethering democratic wealth generation to fossil fuel extraction, locking us into cataclysmic trajectories towards ecological destruction and climate breakdown. In recognising that the ‘long waves’ of capitalist techno-economic paradigms have historically been propelled by the innovation and commercialization of new ways to harness the destructive power of fossil fuels (Malm, 2018), capital-sharing institutions can render the state and labour more or less complicit in the death drive of fossil capital. Research is required on how the institutionalization of UBI as a public dividend would play out in resource peripheries such as the indigenous territories of Alaska, Alberta and the Dakotas, as well as postcolonial contexts, such as African and Gulf states, where the violent dynamics of colonialism and nationalist citizenship imbricate with capitalist fossil fuel extraction; and how UBI might instead advance a just transition to a zero-carbon green economy.

Under vectoralism, capital redistribution implies the democratization of vectors – democratizing digital infrastructures as a ‘communicative commons’ (Mathers, 2020) and developing digital platform cooperatives, publicly-funded community-owned cloud-computing and municipally-provided broadband networks, as innovated in Barcelona (Morozov & Bria, 2018). With corporations

such as Walmart and Amazon colonizing urban everyday life through proprietary systems of logistical distribution and algorithmic coordination (Phillips & Rozworski, 2019), vectoralism contains *both* the spectre of an insidious surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) *and* novel opportunities for hackers to collectively appropriate or construct alternative ‘digital feedback infrastructure’ (Morozov, 2019) with transcalar support from municipal, national and supranational state institutions (Thompson, 2021). Designs for city-based UBI pilots need to incorporate mechanisms, and take account of the state’s limited capacity, to fund and integrate such social innovations in collective coordination. Research should interrogate the nexus between digital platform technologies, foundational urban infrastructure and shadow welfare systems and probe critical questions about how UBI and UBS might democratise otherwise privatized smart cities. By attending to the urban dynamics of these intersections, I have sought to highlight the spatial dimensions of UBI and UBS, which might be thought of as key complementary components of a new ‘*spatial contract*’ (Schafran *et al.*, 2020) beyond their conventional characterization as a new *social contract*.

This paper was written as a conceptual exploration to unpack the potential of UBI for dealing with capitalist crisis and transitioning to a post-capitalist economy. While UBI provides an effective subsidy for the development of prefigurative practices in the social and solidarity economy, resonating with discourses around degrowth and the commons (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020), there remains a price to pay in using money as the medium. I have drawn on Marxist and radical republican perspectives on the alienating and dominating effects of money as a capitalist social form to argue that while cash transfers do indeed free us from damaging personal domination, the abstract structural domination of the capitalist market weighs all the heavier. We can infer from Roberts (2017), writing about Marx’s conception of capitalism, the contradictions UBI presents:

To the extent that our contributions to society are mediated by exchange, we will find ourselves trapped in a *giant collective-action-problem-generating machine*, a machine that we have inadvertently created and from which it will be extremely difficult to extricate ourselves. (Roberts, 2017, p. 102, emphasis added)

In an age of interlocking epidemiological, economic and ecological crises, UBI would produce as many collective action problems as it solves. An immense marshalling of state resources is required to implement any sufficient UBI, only to be paradoxically dissipated amongst dispersed individuals, mediated by markets, atomized by relations of exchange, incontinently reacting to price signals, powerless to democratically decide the value of anything. On this reading, in issuing money for purchasing everything a citizen needs, UBI would not necessarily help us make progress towards collectively resolving global challenges, as Standing (2020) suggests, but rather – following the new generation of UBI activists – should be treated as a strategic, instrumental means to circumscribed ends, not least ending poverty. UBI remains a fascinating policy discourse for opening the space, after decades of neoliberal austerity and post-political inertia, to generate

new ideas for re-engineering work, welfare and wellbeing and to think the impossible about what institutional innovations in collective coordination just might tackle the complex multi-scalar challenges we now face – yet one which, without radical democratization of capital and vectors, may merely add fuel to the giant collective-action-problem-generating machine.

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ORCID

Matthew Thompson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5691-4851>

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Matthew Thompson is a Research Fellow in Rethinking Public Value at the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose at UCL in London. He is the author of *Reconstructing public housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives*.