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# **Social Form, Social Reproduction and Social Policy:**

## **Basic Income, Basic Services, Basic Infrastructure**

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### **Abstract**

Proponents recommend Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a solution to a trifold crisis of work, wage and social democracy. Synthesising Marxian form analysis with Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory, this paper suggests that these crises relate to historically-specific capitalist social forms: labour, money, and the state. These separate but interlocking crises of social form are temporary and contingent expressions of an underlying, permanent crisis of social reproduction. Mistaking the pervasive crisis of social reproduction in its totality for a temporary or contingent trifold crisis of work, wage or social democracy, UBI proposals seek to solve it by moving through the same social forms through which they take effect, rather than confronting the social relations that constitute their antagonistic undertow and generate the crisis of social reproduction. The paper considers two other solutions proposed to handle the deeper-rooted crisis with which UBI grapples: Universal Basic Services (UBS) and Universal Basic Infrastructure (UBIS) Both propose non-monetary ways past the impasses of the UBI, addressing much more directly the constrained basis of individual and collective reproduction that characterises capitalist social relations. But they retain a link with capitalist social forms of money and state that may serve to close rather than open the path to real alternatives. The paper concludes that the contradictions these 'abstract universals' touch upon are best mediated through more bottom-up and struggle-based 'concrete universals' that address the manifold crises of work, wage and social democracy that undergird them. Such alternatives would leave open dynamic tensions around work and welfare in contemporary capitalism without promise of their incomplete resolution in the name of a false universality unattainable in a world characterised by antagonism, domination and crisis.

### **1. Introduction**

What do theories of social form and social reproduction tell us about contemporary left social policy? Marxian and Marxist-feminist literatures on social form and social reproduction typically adopt a critical distance from reformist policies to mitigate and mediate in practice the contradictions each confront in theory. As Marxian form analysis and Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory gain increasing uptake among the critical scholarly community, this paper crafts a novel synthesis of the two in application to the universalising policy proposals that today populate left policymaking in an age where even the right has its 'Universal Credit': the Universal Basic Income (UBI), and two alternatives posed to it, Universal Basic Services and Universal Basic Infrastructure.

This array of options slots in within a wider policymaker interest in 'universal' solutions to the intractable contradictions of contemporary work, wage and welfare. Notably, the rollout of Universal Credit is the most notorious example of what happens when a premature claim to universality meets the stratified and complex character of our world. Occurring so far in fits and starts, its replacement of means-tested benefits and tax credits purported to decomplexify welfare benefits in response to a

perceived crisis of worklessness in the United Kingdom in the wake of the Great Recession (Pantazis 2016, Wiggan 2012). However, it has drawn criticism for the unequal gender impacts of its household structure (Cain 2016), its punitive sanctions regime (Dukelow and Kennett 2018), exclusionary forms of conditionality that set minimum income floors unattainable by the precarious and self-employed (Fletcher and Wright 2018), and its incentivisation of a competitive labour market of low-paid jobs (Hirsch 2017). The universality of the UC hence conceals the particularity of its ill effects on those in and out of work.

But what forms of universality project a better path? And are some 'universals' better than others? This paper sets out to determine between the way problems and their solutions are posed along the lines of what, loosely paraphrasing Hegel, we might call 'abstract' and 'concrete' universals (Baumann 2011).

The Universal Basic Income (UBI) is 'an unconditional regular payment to all citizens' (Sage 2018:17-18). It is an idea with increasing uptake on the left (Pearce 2015; Pitts 2018), including in the UK Labour Party, which has committed to including a pilot of the measure in its next manifesto (Pitts and Dinerstein 2017). Centre-left policymakers and think-tanks in the UK are engaged in modelling exercises around its implementation (Harrop 2016; Painter and Thoung 2016; Reed and Lansley 2016). In the UK, the idea has recently attracted support from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) (Martinelli 2017:23).

Within a gathering political consensus around the necessity of some step change in welfare provision to address technological and economic changes afoot in the labour market and beyond, left proposals for a UBI range from relatively limited financial support to effectively top up wages and replace or simplify certain benefits, to a full-blown liveable income capable of replacing the wage entirely. Fiscal limitations and knotty issues of impact and implementation accompany halfway-house schemes (Harrop and Tait 2017; Reed and Lansley 2016; Painter and Thoung 2016). Hence, it is the liveable UBI that constitutes the present frontier of left thinking on the topic, and the version of the UBI that looms largest in the popular and policymaker imaginary of widespread technological unemployment in the wake of the so-called 'rise of the machines' (Spencer 2017, 2018; Thompson and Briken 2017). Indeed, for proponents on the left, the UBI has gained a foothold partly through pop-radical ideas around post-workerism, post-capitalism, accelerationism and so-called 'luxury communism' (Mason 2015a; Srnicek and Williams 2015; Bastani 2019; cf. Pitts 2018). The liveable UBI is therefore put forward as one of the key pieces of the 'postcapitalist' puzzle, purporting to remedy the social fallout following futurist fantasies of automating work away.

Evaluating the problems and possible solutions posed in contemporary UK left policy thinking along these axes, this paper builds on previous work (Dinerstein and Pitts 2018; Pitts, Lombardozzi and Warner 2017a, 2017b; Pitts and Dinerstein 2017; Pitts 2018) to subject to scrutiny the 'problem representations' (Bacchi and Beasley 2002) active in proposals for UBI, and the degree to which the latter poses a solution to the deeper-lying factors underpinning them. We examine how the UBI is (mis-)represented as a solution to a series of interlocking problems, represented in a trifold crisis. First, a crisis of *work* sparked by flexibilization and automation. Second, a crisis of the *wage*, generated by the severed link between the wage and subsistence and simultaneous cutbacks in the welfare state. And third, related to each, a crisis of social democracy, which sees traditional parties of the left lose the legitimacy they once derived from an identifiable labour interest and the political and financial cover to enact

programmes of social protection under the name of the welfare state. Using Marxian form analysis derived from the 'critique of political economy as a critical social theory' that unites the New Reading of Marx with Open Marxism (e.g. Bonefeld 2016a; Charnock 2010; Dinerstein 2012; O'Kane 2018; Pitts 2015) we suggest that these crises relate to historically-specific capitalist social forms: for work, labour; for wage, money; and for social democracy, the state itself.

Synthesising this critical Marxist focus on social form with Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017, Federici 2019, Mezzadri 2019, henceforth SRT), we then argue that these seemingly separate but interlocking crises are all temporary or contingent expressions of an underlying, more permanent crisis of social reproduction. Many presentations of the 'crisis of social reproduction' or 'crisis of care' (Caffentzis 2002; Fraser 2016) identify it as something sparked by conditions and circumstances specific to the present, relating largely to a discrete, self-contained and typically gendered and racialized set of activities that rest upon the exploitation of the paid and unpaid labour of women, migrants and people of colour (see England 2005, Glenn 1992, Perrons 2009). Whilst acknowledging these conditions and the gendered and racialised social relations that characterise them, here we take a macroscopic view of social reproduction that moves from the local instantiation of these dynamics to the generalised totality within which they unfold.

This wide-lens focus reflects how within SRT there is a subtle distinction between, on the one hand, conceptualisations that locate 'the domain where lives are sustained and reproduced' (Zechner and Hansen 2015) within a narrower frame of reference relating to the domestic sphere and the gender division of paid and unpaid labour around which it is organised, including the exploitation of migrants and people of colour within these dynamics (e.g. Fraser 2014, 2016, Leonard and Fraser 2016), and, on the other, conceptualisations that stress instead social reproduction as the totality of relationships within which life and society themselves are generated and reproduced, and which therefore brings in moments outside both the home and the workplace such as the state and other institutions (e.g. Bhattacharya 2015, 2018).

There is no necessary opposition between the two spins on SRT. Indeed, the second progressively builds from a foundation in the former. In this paper, we use social reproduction as the totality within which human life itself proceeds. This directs our focus towards a more permanent and pervasive state of affairs whereby social reproduction in its capitalist character is always contradictory and crisis-ridden to its very core. The crisis therefore concerns the totality of the social reproduction of capitalist society as a whole, a set of antagonistic social relations mediated in the social also forms of labour, money and state, the contemporary crises of which the UBI seeks to tackle partly by means of those self-same social forms. This position within SRT implies that the crisis of social reproduction stands not for the reconfiguration of how of a finite group of actors to performs a finite set of practices, but rather represents a crisis in the totality of social reproduction as not only the reproduction of human life in its commodified mode of existence as labour power, but simultaneously the reproduction of capitalist society and capitalist social relations *tout court*.

From this perspective, the way that proposals for a UBI are framed to respond to certain 'problem representations' typically mistakes the pervasive crisis of social reproduction as a temporary or contingent crisis of work, wage or social democracy. But by focusing on the social forms for which these stand in – labour, money and the state – we can recalibrate our 'problem representations' with reference to the social relations of which these forms are the expression. Whilst the discussion centres on

the UK, this approach recognises how the organisation of work, the role of the state, dynamics of social reproduction and debates on forms of universal welfare provision in settings such as the UK are shaped and enabled by configurations of global production and international division of labour.

Deploying a distinction between ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ universals (Baumann 2011), of which proposals like the UBI and the Universal Credit present two examples, in the final section of the paper we consider two other solutions proposed to handle the deeper-rooted crisis with which UBI grapples: Universal Basic Services (Social Prosperity Network 2017) and Universal Basic Infrastructure (Industrial Strategy Commission 2017). Whilst these confer some benefits over UBI, we conclude that neither truly address a crisis in the totality of social reproduction that stands behind the apparent but ultimately contingent trifold crisis of work, wage and social democracy many conceptions of the UBI make claims to confront. This is because they, too, seek to solve them by only touching upon or moving through the same social forms through which they take effect, rather than working within the contradictions of the social relations that constitute their antagonistic undertow, and thus intervening, through struggle, on the preconditions where the crisis of social reproduction is determined. These social relations concern separation from the independent individual or collective means to reproduce the conditions of life for oneself and others; which itself concerns the character of capitalist property, the distribution of the means of production and the constrained conditions of production and consumption this distribution implies. In this respect, we end by considering the extent to which more conventional forms of labour struggle present a surer footing on which to confront the crisis of social reproduction and the social forms through which it is mediated.

## **2. Problem representations and the critique of political economy**

In evaluating the UBI and its alternatives we critically employ the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) approach (Bacchi and Beasley 2002). The WPR approach ‘focuses on policy prescriptions and uses them as a way to identify issues that are represented to be problematic’ (Bacchi and Beasley 2002:331). The method ‘works [] backwards from concrete policy proposals to reveal how problems are represented within them’ (Stonehouse et al 2015:399), and ‘the assumptions that precede this representation’ (Flacks 2018:6). These ‘problem representations’ in turn ‘shape the scope of responses that are considered possible’ (Stonehouse et al 2015:399). In this way ‘policies and proposals actually constitute or produce those problems that they are ostensibly supposed to resolve’ (Flacks 2018:6), bearing real-world implications for how policies create and confront certain social conditions. By posing UBI as a solution to the series of contingent crises identified above, proponents trade in problem representations that place a certain theoretical and political stress on resolving contradictions other representations – namely the critical Marxism deployed here – conceptualise as more intractable and deep-seated, and from which flow different practical responses.

Thus, in viewing proposals for the UBI based upon the problems they represent to be the case, we will apply the WPR approach critically insofar as we follow the critical theory tradition in seeing the world not simply as discursive and conceptual, but rather as organised around a conceptuality that conceals a *non-conceptuality* of lived material life based in subsistence and brute survival (Adorno 1973; Bonefeld 2014). Whilst it may proceed through ‘supersensible’ relationships, ideas and things, the conceptual apparatus through which the world is comprehended rests in

our relationship with 'sensuous things' (Bonefeld 2016b:72). Social and economic categories may be mystificatory and discursive, but for us it remains the case that '[t]he actual relations of life are the non-conceptual premise of the economic categories' that constitute the 'supersensibility' through which the material world is met. Focusing, on one hand, on the continuing abstract forms of social mediation and domination of capitalist society, and, on the other, their concrete 'non-conceptuality' in continuing modes of practice and coercion, we draw in this endeavour on the New Reading of Marx and Open Marxism (e.g. Heinrich 2012; Bonefeld 2014).

This strand of critical Marxism understands Marx's critique of political economy (1976) and value theory (1978) not as presenting an alternative economics reducible only to material affairs but rather as a critical theory of capitalist society capable of grasping their mediation through 'non-empirical' conceptual forms (Bellofiore and Riva, 2015). Inspired by the readings of Marx given in the work of Rubin (1972, 1978), Reichelt (2005) and Backhaus (1980), this works from a careful reinterpretation of Marx's written output inflected with Frankfurt School social theory derived from the work of Adorno, under whom many of the tradition's earliest exponents studied (Bellofiore and Riva 2015). Together they present 'a Marxism stripped of dogmatic certainties and naturalistic conceptions of society' (Bonefeld 2014:41-2), radically open to a range of theoretical and empirical applications through an expansive understanding of the constitution of abstract social forms in continuing concrete forms of human practice and domination.

The 'critique of political economy as a critical theory of society' rests on what Bonefeld (2014, 2016a, 2016b) calls 'the negative dialectics of economic objectivity' - or in other words the demystification of the social and economic categories by which humans are dominated and, contradictorily, on which they depend in capitalist society. According to Adorno (1973: 11), dialectics is the 'ontology of the wrong state of things'. It decodes the appearance of a world wherein things assume 'modes of existence' (Gunn 1987) through the forms in which they are socially mediated - forms like those encountered here: labour, money, the state. Negative dialectics critically decodes a reality in which these forms, as results of human practice, pose themselves above and against those from whose practice they spring but who subsist through them nonetheless. This process of decoding centres on what Bonefeld (2014) calls the 'ad hominem critique of political economy'. It is 'ad hominem' insofar as it deals in the antagonistic material conditions of constrained reproduction in which capitalist society itself is historically and continually constituted, but which are mediated through apparently objective social and economic forms. The ad hominem critique assesses these categories with reference to the contradictions they both conceal and carry over.

The 'incomprehensible economic forces' and social forms that rule over subjects in capitalist society by means of the assertion of their apparent objectivity, Bonefeld suggests (2016b:65-66), rest in and can be explained through human practice. These forms abstract from lived experience, but they are also a mode of existence through which the latter proceeds. In this way, they represent an 'inverted and perverted world of definite social relations' rooted in everyday life and, crucially, the social reproduction of humans as labour-power. In decoding this, Bonefeld suggests, negative dialectics opens out upon political questions about the delineation of the good and right life in a wrong world.

The critique of political economy as a critical social theory, and the negative dialectics of economic objectivity on which it centres, helps anchor a critical Marxist understanding of the limits of UBI. It brings to light why UBI represents and reinforces

modes of existence which contain and do not address the contradictions of social reproduction in contemporary capitalism. We shine a light upon the social relations the social forms of labour, money and state sublimate and express in their crises. Whereas the WPR approach suggests that the world revolves around discourse and concepts, for our approach discourse and concepts conceal real-lived material relationships which ultimately produce problems in our capacity to address their specific character.

### **3. Social reproduction and social form**

Social reproduction is 'the domain where lives are sustained and reproduced' (Zechner and Hansen 2015). As Fraser writes (2014), whereas Marx 'looked behind the sphere of exchange, into the 'hidden abode' of production, in order to discover capitalism's secrets', it is also necessary to 'seek production's conditions of possibility behind that sphere'. These, broadly, are also the 'conditions of possibility of labour-power' (Ferguson and McNally 2015). Namely: why do we have to work, and what keeps us working? According to Denning (2010), capitalist social relations begin 'not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living'. All talk of work is moot without recognition that much must happen, logically and historically, to make the society of work possible in the first place. Workers must first be deprived of the independent individual and collective means to reproduce the means of living, through dispossession, colonialism and enclosure (De Angelis, 2004). This sets them, as Marx (1976:272) suggested, doubly free: free of any fixed feudal ties and the stability that attended them, and free to dispense of their labour under the formally free contractual relationships of liberal equality before the law. This dual form of dispossession whereby workers possess no commodity to sell but their capacity to labour, reinforced by the generation of a relative surplus population, ensures the sale of this labour-power by means of the contractual relationship between employee and employer, and seals the continuity of the economic relations that both support and are constituted in and through it (Midnight Notes Collective, 2008; Federici and Linebaugh, 2018). But in order to be ready for market, this capacity must be reproduced, and with it the human being, who exists as nothing other than the sole commodity it has to its name: labour-power, the selling of which is the labourer's umbilical cord with life itself.

Whilst the concept of social reproduction suggests a somewhat functionalist argument about capitalist society, the concept implies a dialectic undertow that undermines any attempt to present it as subject to an ideal state of functioning. The antagonistic social constitution of labour-power as a commodity in the separation of humans from the independent means of subsistence, and the constrained conditions this sets for the reproduction of that labour-power, grant social reproduction in capitalist society a constantly conflictual and unstable character. But the popularity of the concept of social reproduction has been accompanied by a tendency to view it not as a contradictory totality of social relations in a state of constant crisis but rather as a set of social practices characterized at the present time by a condition of contingent crisis associated with the trifold crises of work, wage and state identified above. The focus on the circumstantial aspects of the crisis of social reproduction identify in the latter a problem specific only to the present, by way of solution to which some might suggest proposals such as the provision of free money by the state in order to support a workless world. Hence the 'problem representation' moves through the same social forms in which the true 'problem' inheres, but cannot provide a means to permanently resolve them. The theoretical and discursive construction of the problem thus conceals

a material contradiction which offers no way to comprehend or confront the root of the problem.

What helps to illuminate the true character of the crisis of social reproduction is precisely the study of social form found in the revisionist approaches to the work of Marx introduced in Section 2. Drawing on Hegelian dialectics – specifically in the guise of the aforementioned ‘negative dialectics’ of Adorno (1973) – this suggests that the unfolding of the value form as presented in Marx’s *Capital* (1976, 1978; Rubin 1978) is not simply a logical derivation but a historical process based in the forceful dispossession and separation of individuals from the means of reproducing their conditions of living in order to create a class of wage labourers (Bonefeld 2014). As such, the value-form contains within it this ‘non-conceptuality’ of real-lived and antagonistic social relations. In this respect, the analysis of social forms like money, labour and the state is able to open out upon the material undergirding of these forms in lived experience and practice, of which they are the perverse and alienated outcome. Thus, ‘[d]omination in capitalism...is rooted in quasi-objective structures of compulsion constituted by determinate modes of practice, expressed by the categories of commodity and capital’ (Postone and Brennan 2009:316).

From this perspective, Marx begins *Capital* with the commodity and goes on to ‘elucidate [] a development that cannot simply be called economic, but rather is really the development of the commodity form as it moves’, a development that takes in society as a whole and rests on the positing of successive forms which mediate the contradictions inherent in a prior form which in turn become the content of the next (Postone and Brennan, 2009:313). As such, Marx begins from the form assumed by a set of social relations he progressively unveils. The chapter on primitive accumulation, in which Marx unfolds the historical constitution of the abstract categories covered in early chapters, does not arrive until the very end of the book. As Heinrich writes, history ‘does not precede the theoretical development, but rather follow[s] from it’, and Marx uses this presentation to show that ‘the separation of immediate producers from the means of production is the central historical precondition of the capitalist mode of production’ (Heinrich, forthcoming). For this tradition of critical Marxism, the analysis of social forms opens out upon a critical confrontation with the constitutive social relations these express.

For scholars of social form the central ‘expository motive’ of Marx’s value theory is the crucial question ‘*why this content assumes that form*’ (Backhaus 1980:101). The social form tradition generalises from Marx’s presentation of the value-form in capital a wider understanding of form: just as behind the apparent ‘non-empirical reality’ of value lie antagonistic social relations that have a real-life efficacy mediated in abstract social forms, so too can the same be said for other social forms historically specific to capitalist society, such as labour, money and the state. When we remark that labour, money and the state mediate social relations in capitalist society we mean that a ‘mediation’, in this instance, constitutes the relation between things via another ‘intermediate’ thing, in the same way, as in Gunn’s apt simile, ‘a rope linking two climbers is constitutive of the relation in which they stand’ (1987:57). The thing that mediates is the *mode of existence* of that which it mediates- in other words, its *form* (1987:58).

This approach has been used by various scholars employing the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society to elucidate the formal characteristics of labour, money and the state. Postone (1993) understands labour as a mediating form which connects individuals through their private labour with the social world of things in a world where humans are separated from the individual and collective

means to produce and acquire the things they need to live. As such it mediates the central contradiction through which capitalist society is constituted. Workers can do no more than sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage.

As a waged activity, labour is therefore itself a commodified abstract mediation posed between diverse things by means of monetary exchange (Bonfeld 2010). This in turn rests on money as a form of mediation, 'as the most abstract form of capitalist property and so as the supreme social power through which social reproduction is subordinated to the power of capital' (Clarke 1988a:13-14). With regard to this socially mediatory function of money in capitalism, the work of Sohn-Rethel (1978) constructs a vital continuity between Frankfurt School critical theory and the critical Marxist scholars that follow, centring on the 'social synthesis' constructed by money through the exchange of all things for all other things, against the contradictory foundation of their specificity and heterogeneity. In recent work, Lotz (2014) takes Sohn-Rethel's insights forward to understand how money constructs a 'capitalist schema' through which the chaos of reality is rendered comprehensible in a world where things are accessible in the form of commodities.

Finally, there is a rich strand of critical Marxism (Bonfeld 1987, 1993; Clarke 1988a, 1988b, 1992; Holloway 1994; Holloway and Piccioto 1977) that elaborates from Marx's work a form analysis of the state as itself a form assumed by the antagonistic class relations that constitute capitalist society. Hence the state is not a neutral instrument that can be wielded by this party or that independently of the reproduction of capitalist society, but the political form of the social relation of capital (Dinerstein and Pitts 2018). It may 'contain the political impact of th[e] contradictions' of that social relation (Clarke 1992:136), but like labour and money acts as a mean for their reproduction along with the 'domination' they imply (Holloway and Piccioto 1977).

These social forms represent modes of existence that mediate and thus carry over in a new guise the constrained underlying conditions of social reproduction specific to capitalist society. Any policy 'solution' to problems in the latter that touches only upon the forms of mediation through which they appear therefore cannot get to grips with the real cause of the misery it seeks to confront. Labour (work), money (wage) and state are the forms assumed by these social relations at different stages and levels of capitalist reproduction, and the crises in them are the formal appearances of what is in fact a single crisis in those antagonistic and contradictory social relations. They mediate the structural antagonisms and contradictions in such a way as to assimilate them, both negating them and carrying them over in a new guise. As such the underlying instability, subject to struggle and crisis, remains. It is this that is expressed in a constant, and not merely contingent, crisis of social reproduction in a society where, deprived of the independent individual or collective means to reproduce oneself and others, humans must struggle against constrained conditions of production and consumption to survive.

The provision of money to solve the crisis of wage, and the intervention of the state to solve a crisis of social democracy propose to deploy a form of mediation assumed by the antagonistic and contradictory social relations that characterise capitalist society to solve a contingent crisis that is only the formal mediation through which the more permanent and pervasive crisis appears. This crisis sits at the level of those self-same social relations left untouched by a liveable UBI. To address the crisis we must proceed not only through those forms of mediation but against, beyond and despite them to confront head-on the social relations of separation, dispossession, distribution and property that they mediate and which lie at the crux of the represented 'problems' proponents of the UBI set out to solve.

Thus, what appears simply as a crisis of work, wage and social democracy in fact reflects a deeper and more pervasive crisis of social reproduction. These three are the social forms that mediate the antagonistic and contradictory struggle to survive in capitalist society. Combined with such a 'social form' perspective, social reproduction theory expands the theoretical understanding of the under-investigated intertwined relationship between productive and reproductive work which reproduces social inequality and hampers wellbeing. But it also poses a challenge to proposals for a UBI that claim to address the trifold crisis identified above without truly getting to grips with their antagonistic constitution in the totality of social reproduction. Hence, in debates over 'universal' policy alternatives such as the UBI, closer attention needs to be posed to the *holistic* understanding of those dimensions made possible by a focus on social reproduction.

This becomes especially clear, we suggest in the next section, in how they centre on work alone at the expense of the totality of social reproduction within which it is imbricated. Meanwhile, many of the main criticisms of the UBI similarly place a singular focus on work at the expense of the wider nexus of forms and relations on which it rests. In the debate about the UBI and its alternatives, powerful underlying forces relating to the societal crisis of social reproduction are treated as givens without social and historical foundation. By reifying capitalist social relations in their separate components, such analyses too frequently address only individual aspects of crises, without grasping their interrelation at the level of the totality of the system as a whole.

#### **4. Social policy: Abstract and concrete universals**

The prehistory of the present basic income debate on the left is a long one (e.g. Jäger 2018, Zamora 2017), but in its contemporary left form the proposal owes much to the work of scholars like Andre Gorz in the 1980s (Gorz 1989; Toscano 2014). The UBI acquires the character of 'a universalist right which will stimulate diverse and particularistic communal projects and associations' and 'as a means of sharing out the common good in a more equitable fashion' (Hughes 1996:30). By 'provid[ing] lifelong security', advocates propose, UBI would 'allow individuals real choices as to priorities' between earning more and having more time – but, importantly, 'without the threat of penury and indignity' (Ginn 2012:713). In opening up the options for different uses of time, proponents contend, the UBI 'implicitly values forms of contribution to society other than paid work, including caring and volunteering' (Leime and Street 2017:479). For some adherents, this is bound up in a philosophical appeal to a principle of 'freedom as autonomy' (Alfageme et al 2012:698).

A recent example of this line of argumentation (Sage 2018:3) contends that the 'damage of unemployment' owes not to a lack of work but rather the negative effect on wellbeing produced by the way in which the work ethic compels the unemployed to 'conform to a powerful social norm' based on the belief that 'work yields status, identity, respect and human worth'. Sage's solution to the deleterious effect of these social norms upon the wellbeing of the unemployed is the proposal of policies to weaken the importance paid work has to human identity: 'to transform how employment is a signifier of status and unemployment a signifier of shame', for which the 'starting point [...] is to consider social policy reforms that change people's relationship with work'. The UBI thus possesses the potential to 'dilute the work ethic by making it easier for people to opt out of the labour market: to take time out between jobs, retrain, gain more education, care, create or simply to enjoy more leisure' (Sage 2018:18). This, Sage suggests, would have the effect of blurring the boundaries between employment

and unemployment and create a more expansive vision of what 'work' can and should be.

On the contemporary left this way of presenting the basic income has of late been superseded by another more imbued with the promise of a workless world potentiated by automation. As Sage notes, for these advocates UBI 'is a means of maintaining social cohesion and ensuring a fair redistribution from technological progress' (2018:18). Likewise, it has been contended that the UBI supports the reconfiguration of production and consumption by means of the nascent sharing economy (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Proponents argue that it could expand the degree of freedom within the social relations of production by providing a minimum means of subsistence beyond wages (Weeks 2011). Along similar lines UBI advocates (e.g. Mason 2015b) suggest that basic income is the answer to challenges of flexibilization and automation that are undermining the supply of jobs and the adequate remuneration for work. Yet, current evidence suggests wildly divergent estimates of what the future of work will look like in terms of job losses from automation (cf. Frey and Osborne 2013; Arntz et al 2016) . As such, creating left policy programmes on the assumption that we need to adjust to some already unfolding future rather than instead make the future adjust to our demands and desires is wrongheaded. It is likely that the future of work that awaits will, as in previous iterations, turn out to be much more like the past and the present than the future after all. Hence it might be noted that at least one part of the whole 'problem representation' on which UBI is premised presents solutions to a problem that is by no means certain to begin with .

Left proposals for UBI also pose the measure as a solution to the problem of the crisis of the state *qua* social democracy. To some advocates the UBI represents a left attempt to reduce the exposure of the state to welfare expenditure at a time of declining public trust. By ensuring that 'all citizens have a minimum income', the UBI would 'eliminate the need for unpopular, stigmatising and costly to administer means-tested payments' (Leime and Street 2017:479). And, '[s]ince [it] is lifelong, it replaces not only state pensions but most other state benefits'. Hence it is championed as a 'simple to operate and to receive' alternative to the 'current benefit traps that act as disincentives to work' (Ginn 2012:712-3), whilst also circumnavigating the crisis of legitimacy afflicting the social democratic state.

As well as inspiring wider critiques in the name of a labourist or socialist politics (Zamora 2017, Jäger 2018), these approaches to the UBI have raised criticisms from those for whom work is imbued with a particular meaning or dignity (Cruddas and Kibasi 2016). Along these lines there are three mainstream social democratic arguments against the UBI, based on the work ethic, contributory principles and class struggle. Some opponents of the basic income frame their objections in terms of the dignity of labour, the loss of identity gained through work, and the erosion of a contributory principle contained in the sense of receiving something for nothing. These objections to the UBI, whilst suggestive of the danger of liquidating labour struggles, mirror the parallel obsessions of the UBI's proponents, seeing a world in which *work* sits at the centre of everything, without considering how the compulsion to sell one's labour power is the symptom of a wider set of social relations grounded as much in reproduction as production. Indeed, much of the debate on the UBI circulates around work and work alone.

More convincing and central to our argument here is a third objection made by critics of UBI, particularly in the labour movement, who point out that workers would lose the capacity to resist capital that is granted by their ability to provide or withdraw

labour (Cruddas and Kibasi 2016). Along similar lines, other critics have asserted that it would set up a direct relationship between individuals and the state as wage payer, liquidating the point of conflict between worker and employer in and beyond the sphere of production (Dinerstein and Pitts 2018). Some left-wing advocates suggest that the UBI could have a liberating or decommodifying effect that increased the bargaining power of labour (Torry 2018). But this is not a question purely of relationships at work but rather contestation over the form of money itself, and the better or worse mediation of antagonisms by and with the state.

Perspectives both for and against the basic income tend to support or oppose it largely by reference to its effect on work, whether bemoaning its erosion or celebrating the liberation from it. In this both sides of the debate miss the implication of work within a wider set of social relations centring on the totality of social reproduction as the reproduction of labour-power. Seeing work at the centre of all social relations elides the circumstances of social reproduction that make work a necessity to begin with. The critical Marxism delineated above shows that, whilst UBI claims to offer new routes for subsistence, by retaining the rule of money it implies that we would still have to secure the things we need as commodities and private property. This implies in turn the dispossession that continually guarantees the 'double freedom' through which we have to work at all. By focusing on the escape from work as the crucial step needed to break with the present in a progressive way, proponents of the UBI associate capitalism with a particular kind or arrangement of labour, to which all that matters is a politics centred on work and either its maintenance or escape. But, by looking at social reproduction through the lens of the social form, we can see its imbrication in a wider set of relations and their mediations, the contradictions and antagonisms inherent in which the basic income addresses only incompletely.

Changes in work or in the workplace do not exhaust the topic on an underlying theoretical level, and, for all austerity and other factors have inhibited the capacity of humans to socially reproduce themselves and others as labour-power, this marks only the exacerbation of an underlying state of crisis, antagonism and contradiction not incidental to capitalist society but *constitutive of it*. What the synthesis of social form and social reproduction theory presented above suggests is that, in posing solutions to intractable problems, current proposals for the UBI fail to work from and through these contradictions

In the remainder of this section we draw upon the critical resources theories of social form and social reproduction offer in the critical delineation of alternatives to the basic income by scrutinising two other 'universalising' proposals sometimes posed as substitutes or complements to the UBI by left policymakers: Universal Basic Services (Social Prosperity Network 2017) and Universal Basic Infrastructure (Industrial Strategy Commission 2017). Do these more adequately address the pervasive crisis of social reproduction and its formal mediation in and through labour, money and state? If the UBI represents an 'abstract universal', forcing particularity and difference into dominating forms of premature identity under free money and an even more powerful state, are other options available, closer in spirit to what we might call 'concrete universals', that seek to capture and not cleanse the world of specificity and contradiction?

Universal Basic Services (UBS), was developed in 2017 by academics at the Social Prosperity Network (SPN) at University College London's Institute for Global Prosperity. UBS is a proposal to take the provision of certain necessities out of the commodity sphere and provide them free of charge to anyone who needs or wants them. Applied to a UK context, the SPN report proposes to extend the free status of

healthcare, education and legal/democratic rights to four additional basic services provided to citizens for free, shelter, food, transport, and information so as to fulfil the public objectives of safety, opportunity and participation (Percy 2017:11).

For instance, the report's proposal for the UK suggests £13bn expenditure on new social housing at zero rent, £4bn on free meals for 2.2m households in food insecurity, £5bn on the extension of the free bus pass scheme to people of all ages, and £20bn on making phone, internet and the TV licence free for all (Percy 2017:11-12). Taking basic needs out of commodified relations and overcoming the crisis of 'access' to basic needs beyond the realm of waged work, the UBS revives the relevance and scope of state provision not only to ensure equitable access, but to enable economies of scale.

The problem UBS proposes to address is conceived by its proponents along economic and political axes. In the economic sphere, the sharp rise in earnings inequality owes principally to technological change. Increased manufacturing productivity displaces from production employees with easily-automatable skills, favouring those with analytical and cognitive skills suited to new information technologies. This has created, the UBS report suggests, an hourglass job market characterised by job creation at the top and bottom ends of the income scale, albeit with rising wages at the top and falling wages below (Portes 2017:18-19). Meanwhile, in the political sphere, support for redistributive tax and benefit policies capable of addressing some of this fallout from technological change has declined.

UBS proponents arguably have a more realistic appraisal of the fallout from technological change than many UBI advocates. The SPN report suggests that 'may be that automation simply functions to displace workers from one type of low-skilled employment to another, resulting in increased insecurity without any gain in wages or productivity' (Portes 2017:20). This trend bodes ill for the political feasibility of redistributive measures to address inequalities sparked by automation, of which UBI is one. The returns on any productivity gains from automation will likely go to those with 'scarce inputs' and skills who can command a higher wage. But this scarcity implies a smaller subsection of people on which to place a greater tax burden, and an attendant decrease in the capacity of the state to finance ongoing public expenditure on redistribution through the tax system.

Whilst its assessment of some of the technological dynamics purported to necessitate the measure might differ, UBS is nonetheless inspired by the UBI (Moore 2017:5). Indeed, some proposals include a UBI component. The report suggests that UBS and UBI can be 'complementary' insofar as the latter assumes the provision of social welfare services and the former the possibility that some kind of monetary provision may be necessary to allow some citizens an active part in society (Percy 2017:13). However, under the UBS model proposed by the SPN report, the UBI would only be £20 per week, so hardly at the level of subsistence proposed by some advocates of a basic income (2017:51-2).

Indeed, it might be said that the UBS can be considered as an alternative to the UBI. As suggested above, the UBI insufficiently confronts the conditions that separate individuals from the means of social reproduction in the first place. But in a more direct way than the UBI, UBS sets out to address head-on what the SPN report refers to as 'the difference between the cost of basic living and available income' (Moore 2017:6). Spending on basic services, as opposed to giving money to citizens themselves, 'dramatically reduces the cost of basic living for those on the lowest incomes.' The provision of 'housing, food, communications and transport,' on top

of some of the existing basic provision of healthcare and education free at the point of use, is 'far more effective at driving down the cost of living than spending the same money on existing services, or on redistribution,' such as that effectively posited in conceptualisations of the UBI. Taking subsistence goods and services out of the commodity sphere potentiates the overcoming of the separation from the independent individual or collective means of living on which social domination in capitalist society logically and historically rests. That being said, the UBS does not address child care or care for the elderly. Thus by overlooking the essential role of free reproductive care work in society, it does not address one of the core systemic contradictions that triggers the structural cause of the crisis of social reproduction at large. Moreover, this terrain of material social relations is still mediated through the state, a social form within which the separation UBS promises to overcome is negative-dialectically concealed as a logical and historical presupposition of its very existence as such.

There is, on the other hand, only an incomplete break made with the mediation of subsistence by money. Whilst some goods and services would be stripped of their monetary character in what the report's authors present as the move from a 'primarily redistributive model for social security to a primarily service-oriented model' (Percy 2017:10), UBS would, even where 'replac[ing] much of the current conditional benefits system [...] also preserv[e] the value of remuneration.' To this extent, the wage form is retained. But in preserving the role of the wage it bears the considerable merit of not simply proposing to conceal the social relations on which it centres within the universality of a direct state payment to facilitate the reproduction of labour-power, as is the case with the UBI. Indeed, UBS, its proponents claim, overcomes problems associated with other options like the UBI by 'satisfying differentiated needs,' and garnering political acceptability through its incremental affordability. In this sense, even while 'preserving the intrinsic value of monetary reward for contribution' it at least maintains the 'room to move' of the antagonistic social relations negative-dialectically concealed within the wage as a form of mediation (see Marx 1976:198; Pitts, Jean and Clarke, forthcoming; Dinerstein and Pitts 2018).

That being said, UBS sets itself apart from the pursuit of higher wages as the principal means through which the struggle for better standards of living progresses. UBS is presented as an alternative to a higher minimum wage because the latter 'only reduces poverty if it is set high, and if it is high work will be decreased, compliance reduced and/or prices raised.' UBS, on the other hand, in effect increases the amount of the existing wage workers are able to keep by decommodifying services so that people do not have to spend their hard-earned cash on them. This decommodifying purpose sets it apart from the UBI, whilst still achieving the outcome desired by proponents of the UBI insofar as it would make underpaid and undervalued marginal activities essential to economy and society both viable and sustainable to perform. The difference is that the UBS 'meets needs more directly' than the UBI.

As suggested above, it does so by addressing poverty as a question of access to necessities as opposed to simply granting more money with which to acquire them. It thereby focuses on the opportunities created by the right material conditions rather than the outcome of having an equal amount of money, and encourages the construction of a new civil society of collective assets through which these opportunities can be realised (Portes 2017:24). As such, rather than emptying out the 'institutional fabric' between citizen and state – as some suggest UBI does (Dinerstein and Pitts 2018) – the SPN report proposes that "UBS require social institutions and support the development of public service infrastructure' (Percy 2017:14). In this way,

where the basic income “arguably does little or nothing [...] to reverse social atomisation, UBS could be ‘pro-social;’ publicly provided services are a visible collective good, and both providing them and consuming them is at least in part a social activity’ (Portes 2017:24). In this way it may chart a route of struggle through the social form of the state more effectively than the UBI which liquidates struggle with an abstractly universal view of the relationship between individual subsistence, state and money.

To some extent UBS resonates with another ‘universal’ approach to the key political-economic challenges of the age: Universal Basic Infrastructure (UBIS). This concept is presented in the Industrial Strategy Commission (2017) report to the government, its leading proponent the economist Diane Coyle (Coyle and Macfarlane 2018). The problem UBIS proposes to solve is that the UK sustains a severe lack of investment in infrastructure. For the ISC report’s authors, ‘investment in new technologies and their diffusion’ requires improvements in the UK’s currently ‘weak’ hard infrastructure in areas like rail, energy, fixed and mobile broadband and fibre, and electric and autonomous vehicles (ISC 2018:50). Moreover, the UK’s soft infrastructure, i.e. ‘investment in human capital through universal education and health and social care services’ is not properly funded in the current political conditions and as such weakens living standards and ‘economic potential’. The current lack of these kinds of infrastructural components reduces the UK’s propensity to attract the most innovative and productive global firms.

The UBIS thus responds to deficits in both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure on the basis that it will improve work and economic life in the contemporary UK. Proposals for a UBI make similar claims vis-à-vis the requirement to adjust to a new age of technological innovation and disruption. But, for the authors of the UBIS report, the basic income may give recipients money, but does not provide opportunities to ‘buy a transport network or high-quality education system for their town or city,’ which would offer increased opportunities for better work and life (ISC 2018:50). The UBI is an individualised payment with no collective component around which to construct new civil society institutions and infrastructures sitting between citizen and state. It is, as Diane Coyle states, an individual response to collective problems (Coyle and Macfarlane 2018):

Whenever there’s fear about automation destroying lots of jobs, the idea of basic income comes back into fashion. And for me it doesn’t go far enough. It is an individual solution to collective problems, because if you’re given an income, never mind that it’s not going to be a particularly large one, there’s a lot you can’t do with your own individual income. I couldn’t take my money out and make sure the roads get mended, or that there’s a good public transport system, or there are good schools for my children to go to. So the idea of Universal Basic Infrastructure is that you give people everywhere agency by giving them the assets to make what they want of their lives. So this includes soft infrastructure but you make sure there’s a minimum standard at their school, a minimum standard in healthcare, the connectivity they need, the transport they need to travel and work wherever they want to.

Universal Basic Services, and its close relative Universal Basic Infrastructure, represent alternatives to UBI. They mitigate some issues and break the individualising link with money inherent in the UBI. In so doing they address, although not without caveats related for instance to the lack of care services, much more directly

the constrained basis of individual and collective reproduction that characterises capitalist social relations. They also retain layers of civil society mediating the relationship between the individual and the state, rather than the isolating dependence upon individuals and the state as wage payer of first resort. UBS and UBIS may therefore empower social actors without implying to quite such a degree their individual subservience to money or the state, keeping open to a much greater extent the possibility of struggle for alternatives that gesture towards other kinds of society. That is, of course, notwithstanding the presence of a number of problems that, returning to the theoretical underpinning of the paper in an analysis of social form and social reproduction, we return to in the concluding section.

## 5. Conclusion

As Sage notes (2018:17-18), UBI is ‘an old idea cutting across the political divide’, which is gaining ‘momentum in many advanced welfare states’. We would argue that the slightest brush with reality reveals UBI not to be over-optimistically utopian, but rather not utopian enough, insofar as it is increasingly seen as a measure necessary to ensure the stability of capitalist society. Whilst the UBI is suggested by some on the left who desire a radical reimagining of how we relate to work and wealth, it is also suggested, sometimes with a greater degree of plausibility, by those on the pro-market right as a means by which the contradictions of contemporary capitalism can be smoothed over and the continuity of life, consumption and commodification guaranteed (Wolf 2014).

Given the growing support for UBI across political and class divides, and in the context of its likelihood as a possible future measure implemented as much to save as to subvert capitalism, this paper is a warning about the need to link universalizing left policy within a more grounded theoretical and empirical understanding of capitalist social relations. What is most lacking is a sophisticated systematic theory of what binds and undergirds work and economic life in capitalist society, and how the space can be kept open for active struggle in pursuit of alternatives. The theory of social reproduction, twinned with a critique of capitalist social forms, provides the basis for such a systematization.

Our contribution is to open the debate about what the nature of the society the UBI helps survive or bring into being will be. We have suggested that UBS and UBIS pose alternatives or complements to the UBI that might serve to address some of the concerns we have raised here. However, both UBS and UBIS still ultimately argue for top-down support from the state without necessarily building any real capacity for collective action, collective organisation and collective struggle from the bottom up. Without keeping open the frayed ends of class struggle, they depend upon the abstract social forms of which capitalist society is constituted – not so much on money as in the UBI, but certainly the state as itself a form of capitalist social relations funded by expanded wealth and profit. In common with UBI, these ‘universal’ demands are all addressed within individual nation states, suggesting as such that this ‘universality’ is limited to an identifiable, unanimous ‘people’ that could be all too easily identified with nativist projects of national renewal.

Both UBS and UBIS propose non-monetary ways past the impasses of the UBI. But all the same they retain a link with capitalist social forms of money and state that may serve to close rather than open the path to real alternatives. In pursuit of the latter the contradictions they seek to address might best be mediated through more bottom-up, struggle-based means of addressing the manifold crises of work,

wage and social democracy that undergird them. Any alternative would also enable experiments and alternatives in how we reproduce ourselves apart from them, freeing us from reliance upon the existing system, collectively and individually. It would mediate the social relations through new forms and modes of existence rather than through labour, money and the state as we know them today. This would leave open the dynamic tensions around work and welfare in contemporary capitalism without promise of their incomplete resolution in the name of a false universality unattainable in a world characterised by antagonism, domination and crisis. Without a much wider set of interventions and struggles, a critical Marxist perspective on social form and social reproduction suggests that a social policy of abstractly universal alternatives to the current state of things may just as well mean still more of the same.

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