

The UBI-Subject:
The New Proletariat or Forgotten Rabble?

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Introduction

This essay looks at the future of the worker from a utopian perspective, one that stokes imagination through the application of *eudaimonic* and aesthetic normative standards rather than our current, supposedly value-neutral utilitarianism. What might we wish for as a society if we could democratically choose how technology is to be developed and applied? What possibilities might life offer us if our basic necessities were taken care of by technology? Would the resulting drop in socially necessary work lead to indolence, loss of meaning, and eventual social decay? Or, might it open up new possibilities for the enhancement of individual freedoms? I want to put forward the notion that both futures are possible, but the direction society takes hinges on the outcome of two important sites of conflict:

1. Who, ultimately, will define the nature, quantity, and ownership of work in the future?
And;
2. How will we utilize our increased free-time, if that comes to pass?

In answering the first question, I believe that it's important to consider who the agent of change might be in bringing about a progressive redefinition of work. Allow me state up front that it is my position that the recipient group of a well-designed and progressive BI (Basic Income) might be that new collective agent of change. In the context of a future with insufficient employment opportunities, the traditional working class will continue to shrink in number and in

power. The BI recipient, by contrast, might be granted the opportunity to develop a greater sense of agency and power arising out of their release from a primary focus on necessity.

In answering the second question, I will defend a position that work must continue to be the primary focus. Some progressive advocates for BI argue that the primary benefit of automation is the opportunity to abandon work altogether in favour of leisure.¹ My view is that a focus on leisure would run counter to the progressive goals of enhancing human freedom. A sole focus on leisure threatens a retrenchment of atomistic behaviour and consumerism. Under this scenario, it is quite possible that the BI recipient would become even more susceptible to the “repressive de-sublimation” that Marcuse warned us of: an environment of collective pacification through the manipulation and alienation of our libidinal forces.² Both Hegel and Marx recognized the important role that creative work plays in shaping our subjectivity. It is the mutual recognition of the other by means of the exchange of objects of our own creation that we come to see ourselves as true subjects; as self-aware beings with agency and a sense of purpose. Finally, I will present an argument in favour of a very specific articulation of work that has great emancipatory potential, namely, the notion of work as aesthetic play.

Current state of work under neoliberalism

Before I consider in more detail the philosophical foundations of my position, I think it's worthwhile to outline where we stand today with respect to work. Judged by current trends, work in the 21st century will undergo a dramatic shift. An increase in unemployment and precarious work is highly probable within the next few decades.³ In addition, the future will likely see the extinction of a broad range of occupations and professions due to the increasing role of robotics and AI (Artificial Intelligence).⁴

Defenders of the status quo will counter with a claim that new, more creative and fulfilling jobs will take their place. They will reference the evidence from the past where such waves of innovation did foster the growth of new jobs. However, there is a strong argument to be made that this particular moment in history might just be different. Each previous wave of innovation replaced lost jobs by drawing upon some previously underutilized human potential. Our current environment is unique in that one of the highest human capabilities—that of creative, abstract thought and problem-solving—is precisely what AI is set to perform. AI programs have been shown to perform feats of problem-solving and autonomous learning that are beginning to challenge human cognitive supremacy.

Rather than feeling hopeless in the face of these impending changes, I believe that we have reason for optimism. We are now on the cusp of a moment in history where the emancipatory potential of technology might be within our reach. Marx himself hinted at this potential at the end of the following passage from *Grundrisse*:

Capital employs machinery, rather, only to the extent that it enables the worker to work a larger part of his time for capital, to relate to a larger part of his time as time which does not belong to him, to work longer for another. Through this process, the amount of labour necessary for the production of a given object is indeed reduced to a minimum, but only in order to realize a maximum of labour in the maximum number of such objects. The first aspect is important, because capital here—quite unintentionally—reduces human labour, expenditure of energy, to a minimum. This will rebound to the benefit of emancipated labour, and is the condition of its emancipation.⁵

Technological advancement, however, is no guarantee of emancipation. Its potential is limited by who owns and controls it. This is why we need to identify the key agent of change within our current system, one that is deeply intertwined with the productive capacities of society yet is not enslaved by those very same processes and relations. While we may be beyond the window of opportunity for a working class revolutionary moment, we are not beyond our capacity to create a

new, and perhaps broader, revolutionary class. This position is supported by Hardt and Negri's posited new subject, or collective agent of change, namely the "multitude."⁶ This globalized "multitude" represents a multi-ethnic and multi-constituent group, which, while diverse and geographically separated, builds solidarity around a common interest in equality and the opportunity to pursue a happy and meaningful life.⁷ So, while the realm of work within the capitalist system has, in the past, been the primary locus of identity and social recognition, the changing context of work in our day will challenge the dominant status of the proletariat.

BI (Basic Income) offers the possibility of a cascading progression towards greater freedoms. Progressives need to take back the banner of freedom that the right has so successfully co-opted. The progressive vision of freedom, which incorporates both negative and positive freedoms, is a more complete one. Negative freedoms are the freedoms "from" coercion. Freedom from discrimination is one example of a negative freedom. In this sense, negative freedoms have no content of their own but are distinguished instead by the lack of a specific content. While important and necessary, negative freedoms alone fail to provide the greatest freedom to the greatest number of people. Positive freedoms, on other hand, have specific content. Access to socialized medicine is an example of a positive freedom. BI is another example. BI recipients gain freedom from not having to worry about procuring basic necessities. Furthermore, BI might enable an opening to other higher freedoms, such as the ability to add an aesthetic dimension to life.

This is where my second point comes in: assuming we are successful as a society in implementing a progressive BI program and in establishing a new freedom *from* traditional work, how will we use that free time? The twentieth century British economist John Maynard Keynes was also concerned about this question. Keynes suggested that once absolute needs (i.e. necessities) were fully addressed throughout all of society by means of increases in economic

efficiency and productivity, any subsequent gains would result in a shift of human activities away from work and towards “non-economic activities.”⁸ In fact, Keynes forecasted a reduction of the work week to just 15 hours by 2030.⁹

I reference Keynes to highlight the need for a critical approach when examining BI design. Many of Keynes’ policy proposals were indeed progressive. For example, one of his primary concerns was chronic unemployment. He felt that the state had a role in intervening in the economy so as to blunt the destructive effects on employment caused by the volatility of the business cycle.¹⁰ He was also concerned that the desire for the secondary satisfaction of relative needs—those needs that relate to status, and, in his words, that “. . . satisfy the desire for superiority”—would prove to be insatiable, and that they would thus derail progressive tendencies towards less work.¹¹ However, Keynes’ policy proposals for state intervention in the economy were modest and temporary, and were meant to temper capitalism, not dismantle it.¹² His main concern was the protection of civilization against the revolutionary impulses of a disenfranchised, unemployed “rabble.”¹³

Many of today’s promoters of BI have similar reformist or even laissez-faire free market agendas. It is in these agendas, in the attitude that less work and more leisure is what society should strive toward, that reform-minded tendencies working within the capitalist framework will likely fail. We can see the utilitarian, rational choice mentality at work here, as well as the assumed antagonisms between the work versus leisure tradeoff that form part of the foundation of neoclassical economics. It should come as no surprise to the student of the Marxist critique of capitalism that the majority of the incremental value arising out of increased efficiency accrues to the capitalist, in the form of higher profits, and not the worker, in the form of a shorter work week. It should come as no surprise that the shift in economic activity today is towards the cyclical creation of desire and its associated, but never-quite-sufficient, satisfaction of that desire. This

insatiable drive to consume out of an ever-present urge to satiate desire originates from repressed libidinal drives, according to Marcuse.¹⁴ These drives serve the interests of capital, but are maladaptive on so many other fronts, not the least of which includes mental health, social injustice, and environmental destruction. Work in a non-alienated form, through its sublimated, aesthetic expression, is the key to satisfying the relative needs of humans.

So, let us elaborate then. If not in leisure, how is our free time to be used? In defining the qualities of this new approach to work I will draw heavily upon the notion of play, as theorized by Schiller and Marcuse. I am guided here by a very instructive paper on play by Brian O'Connor.¹⁵ Schiller's construction of the play drive is achieved through a dialectical resolution of the sense (or material) drive and the formal drive. In Schiller's system, these fundamental human drives represent two distinct "orientations to the outer world,"¹⁶ with the sense drive moving towards sensuous engagement with the outer world, and the form drive moving towards bringing structure (and categories) to the world. In Schiller's system, the *aufheben* (resolution) of these two drives is the emergent play drive.¹⁷ The clearest example of this emergent drive is our sense of beauty, which is defined by its merger of sensuous matter and form.

While neither Marcuse nor Schiller value work for work's sake, Schiller feels that play can and should take on a work-like form, not as an instrumentality, but as a serious yet purposeless pursuit.¹⁸ It is a form of work that takes skill, dedication and attention to detail seriously, but is done solely with reference to itself and not some other end. This means-ends distinction, however, is not to be confused with the emergent property of play, where, according to Schiller, it becomes an activity linked to a higher form of necessity. Schiller's higher form of necessity includes the following:

1. Realization of an organic moral community;
2. The production and maintenance of the self; and,
3. A new way of living which realizes human potential.¹⁹

This description appears to have direct links to Aristotle's notion of *Eudaimonia* (the good life).²⁰

For Schiller, play becomes a teleological necessity.

Marcuse builds upon Schiller's idea of play, but brings Freud's psychodynamic ontology into his formulation.²¹ Marcuse builds upon the relationship and tension between Freud's "reality principle" (that form of behaviour that is driven by the repression of the Id in order to survive in civilization) and his "pleasure principle" (i.e. the original Id and its instincts), and posits two additional principles:

1. Surplus-repression; and,
2. The "performance principle."²²

One might summarize the performance principle as the form of living that is required in capitalist civilization: stratified by class, competitive, and hierarchically structured. It requires a level of repression that exceeds that of pre-capitalist civilization and is thus "surplus-repression." It goes beyond the normal repression of the instinctual drives by forcing humans into modes of living and behaviour that facilitate capitalist production. Surplus repression can be seen to operate in our daily working lives as behaviours (e.g. compulsiveness, neurosis, fantasy) that enable us to cope with the alienation, hierarchy, and the undemocratic management of our working environment. Marcuse departs from Freud's thinking with respect to pleasure. Freud believes that the reality principle is already a state of suppressed libidinal pleasure.²³ Marcuse, conversely, believes that it is only surplus repression that needs to be eliminated in order to experience a return to libidinal pleasure and the aesthetic dimension. It is not difficult to discern the implications of Marcuse's

viewpoint: release from surplus repression enables a return to the pleasure principle without the necessity of abandoning civilization.

This is, admittedly, a utopian vision; but one, I think, that points towards the emancipatory potential of a new form of work modeled after the play drive. However, the other implication of Marcuse's viewpoint is the requirement to dismantle the source of surplus repression and the performance principle, namely, the capitalist system itself.

Conclusion

It is important for us not to overstate the case for BI. There are no guarantees that it will be politically feasible to implement, particularly in its more progressive forms. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that if a progressive BI is instituted it will foster a movement towards solidarity and collective action. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that the experience that one obtains upon being granted the freedom of exit from current capitalist forms of alienated work, as well as the heightened sense of self-determination combined with the opportunity to freely choose work that is creative and yes, even playful, might foster a collective political movement to expand freedoms. This might, in other words, represent a new collective agent of change.

Notes

¹ See David Frayne, *The Refusal Of Work* (London: ZED Books, 2015).

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 56-83.

³ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 26-58.

⁴ Carl Benedict Frey and Michael A. Osborne, "The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?" *Technological forecasting and Social Change* 114 (2017): 254-280.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 701.

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- ⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 411-432.
- ⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, 396.
- ⁸ John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren (1930)" in *Revisiting Keynes: Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*, eds. Lorenzo Pecchi and Gustavo Piga (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 21.
- ⁹ John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 21.
- ¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 41-45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70344-2>.
- ¹¹ John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities," 21.
- ¹² John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory*, 331-372.
- ¹³ Geoff Mann, *In the Long Run We Are All Dead: Keynesianism, Political Economy, and Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 364-365.
- ¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 5.
- ¹⁵ Brian O'Connor, "Play, Idleness and the Problem of Necessity in Schiller and Marcuse," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 6 (2014): 1095-1117.
- ¹⁶ Brian O'Connor, "Play, Idleness and the Problem of Necessity in Schiller and Marcuse," 1100.
- ¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (1983; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 95-99.
- ¹⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 207-209.
- ¹⁹ Brian O'Connor, "Play, Idleness and the Problem of Necessity in Schiller and Marcuse," 1096.
- ²¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974), 11-20.
- ²² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 35.
- ²³ Sigmund Freud, J. and Richards, A., *Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1991), 419.