



Georgetown University

From the Selected Works of Karl Widerquist

2023

Mandatory Participation on Trial: Arguments for UBI and responses to arguments against it

Karl Widerquist



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/widerquist/142/>

Mandatory Participation on Trial:

Arguments for UBI and responses to arguments against it

Karl Widerquist
Karl@Widerquist.com

This essay is a collection blog entries, posted once per week for on Widerquist.com
between June and August, 2023

Series Contents:

1. Mandatory Participation on Trial (Introduction)
2. The essential reason I support UBI and a voluntary-participation economy
3. Knee-jerk criticisms of UBI
4. UBI and incentives
5. The “work ethic” or the money-making ethic?
6. Reciprocity and UBI
7. Exploitation and UBI
8. UBI: Good for workers
9. UBI: Good for women
10. UBI: Good for people of color
11. The false promise of conditional social policies
12. The circle of obligation and the mandatory-participation “social contract”
13. Mandatory-participation and voluntary-participation as competing ideals
14. UBI and the Human Need to Work and Contribute
15. UBI and the “natural” right to private property
16. Rescuing Individualism From Selfishness and Subordination
17. Manufactured desperation

Mandatory Participation on Trial (Part 1: Introduction)

Every time you take a breath, you use something you don’t own to meet your needs without asking anyone’s permission and without paying anyone for the privilege. Although you don’t own the atmosphere, you’ve never had to *get a job* to *earn* the money to *buy* the *right* to use the atmosphere to keep yourself alive. You simply breathe it in as if the free use of a common resource was the most natural thing in the world.

I bet you’d be pretty angry if somebody made a rule dividing the atmosphere into private property without giving you a share large enough to keep you breathing.

I don’t think you’d feel much better if these new owners somehow improved the atmosphere, say, by taking out pollutants or making it more breathable. I don’t think you’d feel much better if atmosphere-access subscriptions were “affordably priced,” so that, only a few people end up begging on the streets for breathing money. I don’t think you’d feel better, if after working for years, saving your money, and investing it wisely, you have the

chance to become one of the small portion of people who own enough of the atmosphere to rent breathing rights to other people.

If any authority tried to privatize the atmosphere, you might want to say something like this. “My ancestors and I have used the atmosphere freely for millions of years. We’re evolved to depend on it. If you interfere with our *independent* use of it, you make us *dependent* on whatever group of people owns it. If there’s some benefit in dividing the atmosphere into private property, either everybody should get a share, or we should get compensation in cash for interfering with our ability to breathe on our own.”

I don’t think you’d find it very compelling if the authority said, “You’re requesting *something for nothing*. Everyone has to work for what they get. Therefore, this atmosphere-privatization program will compensate you by creating new jobs with better wages that offer you the opportunity to *get a job to earn* the money to *buy* the *right* to breathe in your area.”

You might want to respond by saying, “*My wages are for my labor*. They can’t double as compensation for anything else. If your plan involves interfering with my ability to breathe, you have to compensate me in cash, and it has to be at least enough to buy back the right to breathe plus extra both for my trouble and to make sure I get a share of the benefits you say are coming from this atmosphere-privatization program. That compensation better keep coming as long as breathing is something me and my descendants need to do, or you’d be in a great position to take advantage of us. Once that compensation starts flowing, I’ll look at these supposedly great jobs you want me to do for you.”

If the authority insists you have to take their jobs before you get any compensation, you might be wise to doubt whether it has your best interest in mind. They say you’ll be better off once you get one of those jobs, but until then, the authority just made your starting point a lot worse than it is now. Entering the job marketing in a world where you have buy access to the atmosphere is a much lower starting point then entering the job market in a world where breathing is free even if the opportunities in the private-atmosphere economy are better.

If you’d be that angry and suspicious about needing someone else’s permission to use the atmosphere to meet your need to breathe, why aren’t you angry that you need someone else’s permission to use the Earth’s other resources you need to meet all your other needs?

I think you should be. Our ancestors used the resources of the Earth freely for hundreds of thousands of years, just as you and I use the atmosphere now. Every one of us is evolved to depend on it. No group of people “naturally” “owns” a special right to an extra-large share of the Earth’s resources. A few generations ago, governments took away the *independent* access our ancestors enjoyed. They created a system in which the resources we all need are owned by a few people who have to legal responsibility to compensate the rest of us. By doing that, they made us *dependent* on the people who own the Earth’s resources.

The vast majority of us don’t own a large enough share of natural resources or of the stuff we make out of natural resources to keep ourselves alive and thriving. Throughout the following posts, I’ll use the term, “external assets” to mean “natural resources and the stuff we make out of them.” I use the term “external” because these are the assets external to the human body—assuming we all have special rights over ourselves. It’s a little broader than the term “physical capital” (which includes only external assets used in the production

process) and a little narrower than the term “property” (which might include your body and abilities).

The vast majority of us aren’t allowed to use any resources except air and public spaces without the permission of an owner. We can’t build a shelter, hunt, gather, fish, farm, start a cooperative, or start our own business without serving (i.e., providing some service for) the people who own the resources we need to do these things. Except for the wealthy few, we are effectively required by law to *get a job* to *earn* the money to *buy* the *right* to use the resources that were here before anyone and that we’re all evolved to depend on. There is no formal penalty for violating this legal requirement, but the informal penalties include poverty, economic destitution, homelessness, malnutrition, and hunger. If you want to live, you can’t just work for yourself, the needy, or other nonwealthy people: you have to spend a substantial amount of time serving the people who own external assets.

Many people meet most of their needs through the labor market, but only the lucky few get to the point where they’re free to do something other than paid labor before they’re too old to work anyway.

The division of the Earth’s resources into property has many benefits, but if some people get a share and others don’t, the private property system has many cruel side effects, among them poverty, homelessness, alienation, fear, and hopelessness. Because most of us have no alternative to paid labor, we are willing to accept lower wages, longer work hours, and less appealing work conditions than we otherwise would accept if we had direct access to resources. Our opportunities in a society where resources are privatized might be better, but our starting point is worse than people with direct access to the resources they need to keep themselves alive and thriving.

In some situations, people are forced to accept dangerous jobs, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse from employers or spouses, because they need someone with money to keep them alive. That *need* is artificial. It was created by the way our governments chose to allocate access rights to the Earth’s resources.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) would change that situation. It would give us a starting point that would allow us to enter the labor market by choice rather than by necessity. UBI, in and of itself, it is a mild reform. If we introduce UBI without making other major reforms, it simply creates a market economy where income doesn’t start at zero. But it has far-reaching consequences.

A UBI high enough to live on necessarily creates a voluntary-participation economy. And many of us are committed to mandatory participation—at least for the poor and middle class—although we seldom reckon with absence of a participation requirement for the independently wealthy or with how different the standards for fulfilling this obligation are the advantaged and disadvantaged.

If we can free ourselves from the commitment to mandatory participation, we can have a thriving economy without poverty, homelessness, or the fear of economic destitution. Children would grow up better fed, safer, better educated, and better prepared to thrive as adults. Caregivers would be freer to pay full attention to the loved ones who need them without worrying about how they both would survive. We would make it possible for people receiving benefits to enter the labor market without the fear that they would lose eligibility if they lose or have to quit their job. We would reverse the growth of inequality through at least three channels: by direct grants, by giving workers greater power

to command better wages and salaries, and by making everyone who owns, uses, and uses up our natural resources pay for them.

What more do you need to know to conclude that we should introduce UBI? An argument that stops with the overwhelming evidence for the sustainability of UBI and for its positive effects fails to address the biggest sources of opposition to UBI: pro forma commitment to the property rights of the wealthy and to mandatory participation for everyone else. So, this series of 17 blog posts considers the significance of the choice between voluntary- and mandatory-participation. UBI supporters who side-step or playdown this issue can lose an audience to an opponent who plays the supposed responsibility of “everyone” to “work” like a trump card overriding any interest in all the practical good UBI can do.

UBI will not sneak into policy without people noticing that it creates a voluntary-participation economy. The case for UBI needs to put the mandatory-participation economy on trial and show how weak the argument for it is. That’s what I intend to do in this series.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Most of the posts in this series were written with the intention of going into my forthcoming book, *Universal Basic Income: Essential Knowledge* for MIT Press, and many, if not most, of the ideas presented here did make it into the book, but the publisher suggest I soften the wording and some of the arguments, because as is, in this version of it, “the anti-UBI crowd seems like a bunch of mustache-twirling robber barons,” and she rightly thought that the antagonistic stance would be less convincing than more confrontational one here. So, for the book, I made those changes, but I liked what was left out as well. I thought there must be a place for it. And I decided that place was on my blog. I refer everyone to the book because it has a different approach; because it benefits from peer review, copyediting, and more extensive proofreading; and because it has important ideas that aren’t here. Also, many of the arguments here are developed more fully in other books and articles of mine, most of which you can find on my website: www.widerquist.com

Karl Widerquist, Karl@Widerquist.com

The essential reason I support UBI and a voluntary-participation economy (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 2)

It’s wrong for anyone to come between another person and the resources they need to survive. No person or group has the moral authority to impose conditions on anyone else’s access to the resources they need to survive.

But that’s exactly what we do. Our rules grant control of most of the Earth’s resources and the stuff we make out of them to a privileged few. Everyone else has to buy access to external assets from that group, or they won’t last long.

Because our system denies the vast majority of people access to enough resources to produce food, shelter, clothing, and the other things humans need for themselves, we are all owed at least enough cash compensation to buy them.

In some ways, it's hard to believe the position I stated is controversial. Humans are the only animal that has to ask permission to use the Earth's resources. Carnivores don't have to ask permission to hunt. Herbivores don't have to ask permission to graze. Plants don't have to ask permission to photosynthesize. For most of the time humans have been on this planet, we didn't have to ask permission either. But over the last few hundred years, the resources of the Earth have been divided into private property, and most of us didn't get a share. Instead, we got an unofficial but very effective obligation to work for those who got shares. And for the most part, we've mistaken that starting point for our natural condition.

People will say that work is a fact of life, but that's not true in the way we use "work" today. "Work" in the sense of toil to convert resources into consumption might be a fact of nature, but "work" in the sense of spending time making money by providing services for people who have money so you can get permission to access resources is entirely the result of the rules that have been imposed on us.

UBI is both compensation for interference with our efforts to provide for ourselves and protection from deprivation. A substantial UBI removes the underlying threat of deprivation we use to effectively force people to participate in our economy and creates a kind and humane society based on positive rewards to elicit genuinely voluntary participation.

One common but phony defense of the mandatory-participation economy is to deny that it exists by claiming we all have the option of "self-employment," which sounds much freer than it is. Self-employed people need clients, landlords, and banks, or their work is for nothing. Self-employed people might not take direct orders, but they serve resource owners as much as anyone else. If they refuse, they'll eventually find themselves with no capital to work with, no shelter to sleep in, and no food to eat.

Our phrase for someone who doesn't have to work for the people who control property is not "self-employed" but "independently wealthy." That is, the only way you can be free from the need to provide services for property owners is to become one of them—and most of us never will.

Another spurious defense of the mandatory-participation economy—and of inequality in general—is to deny the role of resources and to attribute all inequality to value created by owners. People can create inequality of wealth without depriving anyone of resource access if they increase the economic value of the resources they have while other people retain access to their share resources. That can and does happen, but it's a poor explanation of why most inequality exists today and why so many people are born and live their whole lives without independent access to enough resources to keep them alive. Just the land in our cities is expensive beyond the reach of all but the wealthy few. If we wanted to embody the ideal in which people who own wealth do not deprive others of resources, we would need some universal policy, like UBI, to ensure everyone does, in fact, have legal access to the resources they need to survive and thrive.

Two simple and obvious facts, often ignored in political debate, are that human beings need resources to live and that all goods are made at least partly out of resources. You can't write computer code without a computer, electricity, an apartment or an office,

and generations of past technology. Resources we all need to survive are owned by a small number of people. You have to get the owners to part with their resources voluntarily. The only legal way to do that without begging is to provide some service for them.

Freed slaves at the end of the civil war knew this. That's why one of their spokespersons, Garrison Frazier, asked General Sherman for 40 acres and a mule. Unfortunately, the freedmen's former masters knew it too. That's why President Andrew Johnson—a former slaver—took back the land Sherman allocated to formerly enslaved people.

Our rules create poverty, homelessness, and economic destitution. We like to think of poverty as something that other people bring on themselves or as something that just happens. But in fact, poverty is a lack of legal access to the resources needed to survive and thrive. The only reason you can lack legal access to resources is that the law says somebody else controls them, and you don't. Hunter-gatherers and subsistence farmers might have difficult lives in many ways, but most have fulfilling social lives; none of them are homeless; none lack legal access to the resources they need to survive; none lack the ability to provide their own food by their own efforts without following anyone's orders; no one equates "work" with following someone else's orders.

Rules that say a few people own resources essential for everyone else's survival put the vast majority of us (90%, perhaps 99%, of us) in a position where we have to work directly or indirectly for someone in the group that controls resources. They won't jail us if we don't, but they will send us back to the contemporary economy's default position: economic destitution. If you have a good job and good prospects, your starting point fades into the background, but it is always there, acting as a threat to keep you and me working for the wages the people who control resources want to pay.

A false response to my argument is to deny that there is any force in the system because no single employer forces any single employee to work for them. The business owner simply offers employment. This is true at the individual level, but you have to think about the system. The problem is not any individual's behavior. The problem is the rules of the system. If the rules say some people own resources and others don't, the rules effectively force members of one group to work for at least one member of the other group. Whatever else you think of the private property system, it has that effect unless property owners compensate the propertyless with some universal program like UBI.

The ability to refuse any *one* employer is better than chattel slavery, but a choice of masters is not full freedom. Freedom is independence, the power to say no to any and all masters if one so chooses. We might exercise that freedom by doing something other than paid labor; we might use it to bargain for better wages and working conditions within the paid-labor system; we might use it to learn better skills and reenter the market in a way that makes a bigger contribution and receives a bigger reward; or we might decide we're happy doing what we're doing right now. But whatever we do, it will be an unforced choice, not one made to avoid the threat of destitution.

So, this essential argument includes many elements: we shouldn't have poverty and economic destitution, or at least we shouldn't create it. We shouldn't use destitution as a threat. By doing so, we threaten the freedom of the vast majority of people, forcing them to accept lower wages and less attractive working conditions than they might command if they had the power to say no to the jobs on offer. This system cruelly and needlessly forces

just about everyone to live with the underlying anxiety that they might one day fall into poverty and economic destitution.

I call this an “indepentarian” argument for UBI because it stresses respect for each individual’s independence. It is “Painist” in the sense that it relies on the observation Thomas Paine made about our property system back in 1797.¹

Knee-jerk criticisms of UBI (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 3)

Virtually any new idea meets with fallacious, knee-jerk criticisms. UBI is no exception. Some of the most common such criticisms of UBI portray it as being against paid work, property, or the market economy.

Paid work is fine if people can freely choose or refuse it. To accuse someone who is against *forced work* of being against *work* is like accusing someone who is against *rape* of being against *sex*.

This argument isn’t about private property or the market economy. If all resources were publicly owned, and individuals could not access them without permission of public officials, that system would be just as much a mandatory-participation economy as ours is today. UBI is fully compatible with the private property system. If you think the market economy is going to fall apart without the forced participation of 99% of its workers, you must think it’s a very fragile system. My book, *Universal Basic Income: Essential Knowledge*, argues that there’s every reason to believe a highly livable UBI is sustainable.

Labels such as “socialism” or “communism” are primarily used as meaningless scare words for any progressive policy. So many different ways to organize an economy are possible that it is folly to portray a continuum between “capitalism” and “socialism.” UBI is actually rather individualistic, giving power to middle- and working-class people against both private and public power structures.

UBI and incentives (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 4)

People who are introduced to UBI often ask, “What about incentives?” UBI helps fix one of the biggest incentive problems in the market today: the lack of incentive for employers to pay living wages to their least-advantaged employees or to share the gains of economic growth with most of their employees. This incentive problem is the central cause of poverty, inequality, and stagnant wages despite increasing productivity.

Of course, that’s not what people usually mean when they say, “what about incentives?” They mean they fear “lazy workers” won’t work if they can live without working.

If “everyone has their price,” the laziest person in the world will work if jobs are attractive enough. If so, every time one person offers a job that another person doesn’t want, the two parties are disputing wages and working conditions. Yet, when the subject is whether workers want available jobs at going wages, you always hear about “lazy workers” who won’t want to work but never about “cheap employers” who won’t pay the wages you

need to get people to work. No matter how unattractive wages and working conditions might be, our society judges people as bad if they don't take whatever jobs are available.

We don't usually moralize other economic transactions. If something on sale costs more than I'm willing to pay, nobody blames "lazy businesspeople" or thinks of our inability to agree on a price as an ethical problem. If buyers and sellers can't agree to a price, the deal is wrong, not the people. We only regularly moralize when the buyer is an employer, and the seller is a potential worker.

When we condemn "lazy workers," we moralize one side of a market dispute over wages and working conditions while leaving the other side free from scrutiny. We're taking sides with the most privileged and most powerful party in that dispute, acting as if morality applied only to the people expected to take orders but not to the people who want to give orders.

Yet we know that many jobs pay poverty wages. Even many well-paid jobs often have stultifying working conditions. We know that middle- and lower-class workers have been getting a smaller and smaller share of national output for decades. And a lot of jobs don't really need to be done. Can we never admit that sometimes it's right for workers to refuse until employers give them a better reason to take their jobs?

The system we have effectively uses poverty and homelessness as a threat to get bad jobs done cheaply. If we have to threaten people with a complete lack of access to the resources they need to survive before they'll take jobs at the wages we offer, maybe we are a nation of cheap employers.

We can stop using the negative threat of homelessness as our primary work inducement and still have plenty of room for positive incentives, such as good working conditions, respect, and good wages that increase with the productivity of our economy.

Remember that UBI is a *basic* income. It is not the same income for everyone regardless of what they do. It is a base to live on, but higher incomes—often much higher incomes—are available in the market for people who do work that society recognizes as useful. UBI is structured so that people always end up with more if they earn more privately.

The responsibility for work incentives belongs to employers. If they want people to work for them, it's their responsibility to offer people wages and working conditions that are better than living solely off UBI. That's how *free trade* works in a genuinely *free market*—where everyone is *free not to trade*.

According to economic theory, UBI has *no work disincentive at all*. UBI is a lump-sum payment. You get the same UBI whether you work or not. Although with a higher income, you can afford more leisure if you want, you don't have to work less to get the UBI the way you do with many conditional programs. The taxes associated with UBI, in my examples, do change the relative price of labor and leisure, but not the UBI itself. It is possible to finance UBI at least partly with lump-sum taxes, such as resource and rent taxes, which would make UBI a purely efficient transfer in economic terms. The Alaska Dividend is very close to being that efficient transfer. Yet, policy discussions about UBI almost always ignore this aspect of basic economic theory.

What UBI gives people is the freedom to choose not to work rather than an incentive to avoid work if they find wages and working conditions attractive. What people are really saying when they complain about UBI's supposed "work disincentive" is that

UBI gives people *too much freedom* to choose whether to spend time making money or not. That indicates the underlying idea is not about incentives but the supposed worth ethic.

The “work ethic” or the money-making ethic? (Mandatory

Participation on Trial, Part 5)

The “work ethic” means different things in different contexts. Probably the most relevant definition of it is the belief that everyone who can must work for what they get, but no such principle can be used to defend the existing economic system.

The science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, included an excellent response to this sort of argument in his book, *For Us, The Living*. Heinlein imagines a man from his era, 1938, time-traveling to a future America that has a UBI.

Man of 1938: “Why in the world should everybody in the country be handed money whether they work or not? ... How can you justify able-bodied men living in idleness?”

Man of 2086: “Did anyone live without working in your day ... people who might have worked but wouldn’t and lived well ... landowners, owners of capital who were not in management, idle sons and daughters of the rich? Were there none of those?”

Man of 1938: “Yes, of course, but they were entitled to be idol if they chose. Either they or their fathers had earned the money. A man is certainly entitled to provide for his children.”

Man of 2086: “All the idol of today are the rich sons of hardworking fathers.”

The last line might be restated in more contemporary terms:

All people, whether they work or not, are the rich children of hardworking ancestors.

Heinlein’s argument has two aspects. First, the children of the 99% have just as good a claim to be free from a work obligation as the children of the rich. If the children of the rich deserve it for what their parents have managed to gather under the system we have, the children of the 99% deserve it for what all of our ancestors gave up to create and maintain this system. You can describe past and current versions of capitalism in a lot of ways, but “fair” is not one of them. All of our ancestors contributed to the creation of a system that has less and less need for labor and that makes more lifestyles possible, but the rewards in that system have little, if any, relationship to fairness, merit, freedom, or incentivizing prosocial behavior. The rules of that system allow only the privileged few to take advantage of the many non-labor opportunities it makes possible.

Second, people who trot out the work ethic as an objection to UBI simply ignore that the market economy is not now, nor has it ever been, consistent with a principle that everyone must work for what they get. If you want to set up an economy that’s consistent with the work ethic, you have to throw capitalism in the trash.

The essence of capitalism is return on capital. The passive, unearned income capital provides is the system's goal and driving force. If you own a sufficient amount of capital, you and your heirs can live off that stream of income forever. Many families live off investment income for centuries. The "independently wealthy," as we call them, can work if they choose, or they can live off the stream of income our rules provide for them—just as UBI would allow everyone to do.

The current system is the worst kind of mandatory-participation economy. We have mandatory participation for about 99% of people and voluntary participation for the wealthy few. People who express work ethic views similar to that of Heinlein's man of 1938 probably think of people working for each other or for the weak and helpless or for good causes, but look how incoherently we apply our supposed work ethic.

On one hand, it is so strong that we punish people with homelessness if they fail to fulfill it, and we don't stop with the individual. We punish their children who are too young to be held to any requirement themselves. People who have little money are assumed to have failed to fulfill the ethic in some way, no matter how hard they have worked.

On the other hand, people who have a lot of money are assumed to have fulfilled the ethic regardless of how they got their income. You can buy yourself out of any genuine obligation to "work" with a lucky lottery ticket. Your parents or ancestors can buy you out of your obligation generations before you were born with something as simple as investing a few dollars in the right corporation. It doesn't matter whether they worked for the corporation or even if they worked for the money they invested.

According to George Orwell, people despise beggars not because they fail to make their own living but because they fail to make a good living: "In practice, nobody cares whether work is useful or useless, productive or parasitic; the sole thing demanded is that it shall be profitable."

Fulltime parents are disrespected if they're poor and praised if they're rich. People with "bad jobs" are disrespected along with "welfare" recipients and homeless people who are unable to qualify for redistributional benefits at all. Most of us have only one available way to fulfill the ethic: get a little money by serving the whims of people who have a lot of money—the very people who are not held to a work ethic themselves.

All this implies our society has no "work ethic." It has, at best, a *money-making ethic*, and that's a terrible basis for social interaction. Massive reform would be necessary to apply a work ethic to everyone. If that's what you want, I'd like to see the plan. Most genuine efforts to establish universal mandatory participation have been highly oppressive.

UBI does not solve all the injustices associated with existing inequality, but it solves this one: the uneven application of the mandatory-participation requirement. Instead of trying to find some fair way to hold everyone to an equal obligation to participate in economic production, it equally relieves everyone from that obligation. If we aren't going to force everyone to work and on equal terms, we have no legitimate authority to force anyone to work.

Reciprocity and UBI (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part

6)

The above discussion answers one of the most common arguments against UBI, the allegation that it provides something for nothing in violation of a principle of reciprocity under which everybody who gets something gives something back.

The phrase “UBI is something for nothing” has it exactly backwards: property-based economies without UBI are something for nothing. People who own the resources of the Earth have a government license to interfere with everyone else who might want to use those resources, and they have no legal obligation to fulfill their *reciprocal* obligation to compensate the people who have no such license.

UBI, as I envision it, is a system in which everyone pays for the property they own, and everyone gets paid for the property they don't own. That way, people who control, use, or use up more of the Earth's resources and the things we make out of them, give something back to people who, therefore, must make do with less access to resources than they would if resources were commonly available or divided equally. If you receive more than you pay, that's your reward for making a smaller demand on resources than the average person. If you pay more than you receive, that's your fee for making a greater demand on resources than the average person. That's reciprocity.

Property owners might say you can get resources if you work for them, but wages are for labor: they can't double as compensation for lost access to resources. The existing system imposes two obligations on the 99%: not only are they obliged to respect the property rights of the few, but also, they're also obliged to provide labor for the wealthy few.

You have *already* given a great deal to your betters by being forced to accept rules that give you less access to resources than others. You are due compensation for obligations that have been imposed on you without your consent. A livable UBI compensates you for the loss of access to the commons in a way that restores the independence that common land provided for your ancestors.

Compensation is always unconditional. Somebody who breaks your leg has to pay cash. They can't say, “That's something for nothing. You can take a job working for me if you want compensation for your broken leg.” A broken leg is something. Rules that give some other group of people control over the resources we're all evolved to depend on is something too. Only when we compensate people unconditionally will our system live up to the principle of reciprocity: if you interfere with other people by treating natural resources as your private property, you must pay for the obligation you are imposing on them.

Exploitation and UBI (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part

7)

The exploitation objection to UBI, which goes hand-in-hand with the reciprocity objection, is essentially the following. Most of the goods people might buy with UBI require labor. Therefore, people who receive UBI benefit from the labor of others with no obligation to contribute their labor to production. Opponents say that this feature of UBI allows nonworkers to take unfair advantage of, or exploit, workers.

This use of the concept of exploitation is very different from the centuries-old class-based conception, in which capital owners, who are not required to labor, are able to take advantage of working-class people who have no legal means to survive other than by selling their labor to capital owners. UBI relieves the source of this vulnerability by giving workers an exit option.

Once we consider giving workers the exit option they need to resist class-based exploitation, people suggest that they can't use the option without exploiting each other. It's as if the workers can't win. The exploitation objection vilifies the people with the least power and privilege in society—people who can't find a job worth taking.

Like the work ethic and reciprocity objections, the exploitation objection ignores the existing group of people who actually hold power over workers and who are allowed to benefit from labor without an obligation to contribute labor themselves. These property owners are the very people workers have to serve to fulfill their work obligation.

If people who make the exploitation objection to UBI wanted to create a society in which no one benefited from labor without contributing their own labor, they would have to find some way to ensure that every wealthy person contributes labor as well. Again, I'd like to see the plan. If not, the use of the exploitation argument in defense of the existing system is disingenuous and hypocritical.

The exploitation objection relies on the questionable belief that all employed people contribute to society while nonemployed people don't. These beliefs are clearly false. Many jobs are bullshit jobs that contribute little or no value to society. Other jobs create more social harms like pollution than social benefits. Some jobs prey on people's irrationalities and addictive tendencies to get them to eat too much, drink too much, spend too much time on social media, or take addictive painkillers. Imagine how many lives would have been saved if all the people who marketed opioids over the last several decades had lived off UBI instead.

Many nonworkers are unable to get jobs as good as yours and mine. I'm skeptical that we're good enough at ethics to apply the label "exploiter" to people who are unable to get jobs as good as ours and refuse the jobs leftover. In fact, maybe we're the exploiters if we force other people to do low-paid, low-status jobs, while we enjoy higher-paid, higher-status jobs with better working conditions.

The best way to relieve people with bad jobs from exploitation is to protect the power to quit and respect their choices.

Even if we ignore these problems with the exploitation objection, it is questionable whether UBI causes worker-to-worker exploitation at all. Although production requires work, it also requires other ingredients, such as natural resources. There is no reason all

exchanges must be labor-for-labor rather than labor-for-resources. Remember that UBI is *basic*. People who live entirely off UBI have access to a smaller share of resources and the things we make out of them than everyone else. In a world with 7 billion people and a deteriorating environment, making do with less is an important contribution.

For example, consider people sharing an island that needs a well. One person agrees to dig it in exchange for a larger share of the island's land. Everyone else who has a smaller share of land gets a UBI with which they buy water from the well. The nonworkers have contributed to the digger's reward by making do with less land. Just because the digger's contribution is in the form of labor, and everyone else's contribution is in the form of land doesn't mean the exchange is exploitive. In fact, exploitation could go in the other direction: if some authority gave the digger permanent ownership of the entire island in exchange for, say, a few days effort of digging a well, he and his successors would gain privileged control over the island's resources and effective over its people.

Furthermore, a labor-for-labor trade is not necessarily better for the digger than land-for-labor. If everybody pitched in to dig the well, the digger wouldn't be entitled to a larger share of land anymore. The digger might prefer the larger share of land rather than the help of a bunch more diggers. Appropriate compensation for working is to receive enough to make you choose work out of self-interest. Appropriate compensation for making due with less resources is to receive services from people who get to enjoy more. Both the worker and the person who lives solely off UBI are appropriately compensated.

If exploitation is taking unfair advantage, UBI creates no opportunity for it. There is nothing to be taken advantage of. If you want greater access to resources and the things we make out of them, work. If you're willing to accept less access, we offer UBI as the reward for your modest lifestyle. There must be some price at which this labor-for-resource-access trade is a fair exchange.

Now reconsider the issue of class-based exploitation. Although some people without jobs under a UBI system might happily accept services in exchange for a smaller share of resources, other nonworkers might be willing to work but are sitting out because they're unable to find a nonexploitive job in a system still tends to over-reward privileged people. If we want to build a society of equals before the law, we should keep class-based exploitation foremost in our minds.

Workers might be suspicious of an authority that is more concerned with the possibility that the lowliest individuals will exploit higher-consuming individuals than it is with the source of workers' vulnerability to class-based exploitation. People who make the rules might confidently claim they know how to eliminate class-based exploitation with labor-market regulation, but if they don't respect workers enough to let them decide for themselves, workers might be right to be suspicious.

UBI probably won't be enough to make up for all injustice against disadvantaged people, but at least it gives them the power to refuse to contribute to a system that they believe takes advantage of them. We cannot eliminate all injustice, but we can respect people enough to say: if you think the work options available to you are exploitive, you don't have to accept them. I can't imagine a better tool to fight exploitation.

UBI: Good for workers (Mandatory Participation on Trial,

Part 8)

Underlying the work ethic, reciprocity, and exploitation objections are two questionable presumptions: that UBI is somehow bad for workers and that there is a recognizable dichotomy between “workers” and “UBI recipients.”

My book, *Universal Basic Income Essential Knowledge*, shows that a modest UBI system is a direct net benefit to nearly 50% of households, and a more generous plan extends direct benefits to 70%. Even if we think of “work” only as making money, the vast majority of UBI’s net beneficiaries are workers, retired workers, underage children of workers, caregiving dependents of workers, and so on.

If the UBI system I’ve described somehow “exploits” workers, it is not the vast majority of workers; it is not the most vulnerable portion of workers; it would have to be some portion of the 30 percent most advantaged, most privileged, and highest paid workers who also tend to have the best working conditions, benefits, and autonomy on the job.

Some people in that top 30% of workers will enjoy the net benefits of UBI for part of their lives—usually the part when they most need help. UBI was there when they were in school, temporarily disabled, or unemployed; when they were taking time out to care for children or sick relatives or just taking time off to enjoy life before resuming their career; when they were working but not yet making as much money as they are now; when they were children of low-income parents.

So far, I’ve mentioned only direct benefits. The indirect benefits of the added leverage UBI gives all workers in the marketplace are likely to extend even farther—possibly to everyone who holds a job. It will give them more power in both individual and collective bargaining.

The worst thing you can do to a worker is to put them in the position where they have to work for somebody else to survive. As argued above, the more a worker needs a job, the lower their wages are likely to be and the more vulnerable they are to sexual harassment, bullying, unsafe working conditions, disrespect, and all forms of exploitation.

The number of workers who benefit from UBI increases again as one considers what portion of a person’s life must they work to qualify as a “worker?” Most people who live entirely off UBI at any given time will have worked significant portions of their lives. They might choose to take time off for training, for education, to care for children or relatives in need, to escape harassment or violence from an employer or spouse, to find a better job than the one they have, to attempt to start a business, or just to enjoy life temporarily.

The number of workers who benefit from UBI increases still more if one questions the dubious assumption that work should be understood as time spent making money. Many things that don’t make money contribute much more to society than money-making activities—e.g., care work, volunteer work, and just being a friend to someone who needs one.

Considering all these observations, the fraction of workers who do not benefit from UBI might be extremely small and very privileged. It would be made up of people who have never lived in low-income families (even as children); people who never wanted to

take months off work or who were wealthy enough to self-finance their own sabbatical; people who had enough private income to sustain them while raising children, going through training, education, or unemployment.

That is, workers who are net-contributors over their entire lives are probably the most privileged, highest-income workers. It is doubtful that many UBI net beneficiaries are able to get the kind of jobs that would put them in this category. It's doubtful that most UBI beneficiaries would turn down such attractive jobs if they could get them. And it is extremely unlikely that this group of workers would be better off if all UBI net beneficiaries suddenly became ready, willing, and able to compete for these highly paid jobs. Although there would be productivity gains for the economy as a whole, the most direct effect would be a steep decline in wages for the people who hold those jobs now.

One could concede that the UBI plans under discussion would be an enormous benefit for the majority of workers relative to the status quo, but suggest that there could be some other plan that would leave out the true noncontributors, save the money it gives to them, and benefit workers even more than they benefit under UBI.

Once again, I'd like to see the plan. I'm skeptical because UBI gives workers power and flexibility in a way conditional programs can't and because it saves the enormous expense of determining who is and is not "contributing" or "truly needy" at any given moment. Your plan maintains the market vulnerability of workers who have no choice but to take a job. You'll have to make up for that vulnerability with a whole set of market regulations. Unless you have an infallible plan, you will fail to identify all contributors, and the costs to these workers and their children will be enormous. Some authority will have to decide how many hours in a week, how many weeks in a year, and how many years in a life counts as a sufficient contribution. Your plan will have to find some way to keep the children of nonworkers from suffering along with their noncontributing parents. If your plan actually does save money after the expense of determining who is and is not contributing and compensating all the children, it will have to deliver the benefit of that savings to workers in a way that they would prefer to what they could have chosen for themselves under a UBI plan. I don't think you can do it.

If you really want to help workers, concede power to them and respect their choices.

The problem with all these efforts to portray UBI as somehow bad for or against workers is that workers and UBI beneficiaries are all part of the same group. They are the people who might be available to work if employers make attractive offers. If workers are exploited by employers, they cannot simply choose to become employers, nor in the absence of some universal policy like UBI, can they remove themselves from the exploitive situation. If workers believe they're being exploited by nonworkers under a UBI system, they are free to become nonworkers and remove themselves from the exploitive situation. UBI gives no advantages to anyone that it does not also offer to everyone.

We need to free ourselves from the inflated fear that the least advantaged people are somehow taking advantage of everyone else. Throughout the history of our country—and every other country I know of—it has been the strong who have taken advantage of the weak. It has been the upper class who have taken advantage of the middle and lower classes. Holding vulnerable people to a work condition makes all that exploitation easier.

Maybe it's time we stopped erring on the side of making sure the weak can't take advantage of the strong and decide that from now on, we'll err on the side of making sure the strong cannot take advantage of the weak. We will ask as little as possible of the weak,

and by doing that, we'll force ourselves to make them very good offers when we want their contribution.

UBI: Good for women (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 9)

All or most of the arguments above apply to women as much as they do to men. Women make up about half of the workforce, and women are disproportionately subject to harassment, low-wages, poor working conditions, and disrespect on the job. The power UBI gives people will be very good for women in the workplace as well as women who are in potentially abusive personal relationships.

One criticism of UBI is that it could reinforce traditional gender roles. When people get a greater ability to provide fulltime unpaid care for children, the disabled, or the elderly, women will be more likely to do it, and as they do, they will reinforce the social expectation that it's women's work.

Unfortunately, women are doing these things now while they and the people they care for are paying a terrible price for it. Single mothers and their children are the poorest group of people in the United States, and their position has gotten worse in recent decades. If we want to help women, the first thing we need to do is to stop punishing women who are doing this incredibly valuable work. UBI would instantly reverse the trend toward the feminization of poverty.

If we want to help women challenge traditional gender roles, we should do it in ways that empower women. There must be better ways to challenge gender roles than to condemn millions of caregivers and their dependents to years of poverty.

It is not certain that the overall effect of UBI on gender roles would be to enforce them. It's true that UBI makes it easier for women to be unpaid caregivers, but it also makes it easier for men. Maybe UBI will make it more affordable for men and women to share care work. Perhaps men and women will use their power to demand the workplace flexibility they need to hold a job and do care work at the same time. Women are sometimes suddenly thrust into a fulltime caregiving role when a man leaves them with children. By making this situation easier to handle, UBI might make it easier for women to avoid getting stuck in it, if getting back to a less traditional role is what she decides is best for her and her family.

UBI: Good for people of color (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 10)

Significant structural disadvantages for people of color exist in the United States. These disadvantages will not go away until U.S. citizens work together to eliminate them. UBI will not eliminate structural disadvantage, but it can help.

Most people of color are workers, and half of people of color are women, and so all of the arguments from sections E and F apply to people of color as much as they apply to

anyone else. In fact, those arguments might apply to people of color more than to White people because people of color are more likely to be in low-end jobs, more likely to be vulnerable in their personal and professional interactions, more likely to live in high-poverty areas, and less likely to have wealth or family wealth to fall back on during times of acute need.

UBI is not reparations for slavery or for other forms of racial and ethnic injustice, but it is money, and the net benefit of this monetary transfer will go disproportionately to people of color because, on average, people of color have disproportionately low income and wealth. Therefore, it will begin to do many of the things that reparations are supposed to do, such as helping to reduce the racial wealth gap, reduce the education gap, reduce the number of people of color stuck in dead-end jobs, reduce power differentials, and so on.

One of the main barriers to the introduction of UBI in the United States is probably White prejudice. The attitudes we have in our heads about “lazy workers” might be, in part, a vestige of hundreds of years of the racialized belief that *some people* just don’t want to work. The mere introduction of UBI will require the nation as a whole to show a little more respect for people of color.

I said at the start of this chapter that people will not introduce UBI without noticing that it creates a voluntary-participation economy. In addition, no one will fail to notice that people of color are included in the group who are relieved from the burden of mandatory participation. We have to embrace this as a good thing, as a sign of respect. The country that forced Blacks to come here as chattel slaves and made it impossible for Native Americans to continue to survive by their own efforts now scrupulously refuses to force disadvantaged people of any ethnic group to work for more advantaged people.

Note, my book, *Universal Basic Income: Essential Knowledge*, covers this issue much more extensively, and it compares the effect of UBI on workers to the effects on works of two work-conditional programs: the Participation Income and the Federal Job Guarantee.

The false promise of conditional social policies (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 11)

As my book, *Universal Basic Income: Essential Knowledge*, discusses, the traditional approach to poverty and inequality relies on conditional programs designed to make most forms of aid to the disadvantaged consistent with mandatory participation.

Programs with genuine conditions *cannot* eliminate poverty, homelessness, or economic destitution because they have to have some punishment for people who fail to fulfill their conditions. Either the conditions are phony, meaning that they are so easy no one could fail to meet them, or some people *will* fail to meet them, become ineligible for aid, and live in poverty or homelessness. Without a credible threat, the conditions will become phony. Therefore, the conditional safety net we use to fight poverty actually *requires poverty* to get people to do what policymakers—who are by-and-large, if not entirely made up of more advantaged people—want them to do.

That’s cruel.

We don’t have to be that cruel.

Do we want to be that cruel?

The circle of obligation and the mandatory-participation

“social contract” (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 12)

Most of us, of course, don't view ourselves as using the threat of homelessness to get people to accept bad jobs, low wages, and poor working conditions. The ideal of the conditional safety net is an imagined “social contract” with a circle of obligation in which everyone shares in the work and benefits of the joint project we call our economy. The implied contract for individuals is that everyone promises to work if they can; in return, they receive a fair wage if they can work and generous support if they can't. People who take this view believe that just about everyone in need can prove they're deserving in one of these two ways. Once we make them prove it, we'll feel solidarity for them and provide generous, secure support: free from stigma and invulnerable to political attack. Virtually everyone will see the benefit of meeting the real but doable conditions.

The conditional safety net has never fulfilled that promise, even for people who meet its conditions. Conditional programs have never eliminated poverty among those who work or those who meet virtually anyone's definition of genuine need. It hasn't protected recipients from stigma. It hasn't protected programs from political attack. It puts the vast majority of individuals in the worst possible starting point in the market, making them vulnerable to low-wages, poor working conditions, harassment, and so on—always trying but never succeeding in making up for those vulnerabilities with regulation. It forever holds the threat of homelessness over the heads of workers to get them to keep doing the things more advantaged people demand.

Because potential workers have no reasonable alternative, the imaginary agreement is more of a “social ultimatum” than a “social contract,” and that's part of the reason the conditional safety net has consistently failed to fulfill its promises. Social contract theorists like to pretend that democratic decisions are *everyone's* decisions. They imagine everyone agreeing on a fair reward for a fair contribution. In reality, even if everyone participates in the decision-making process, the best a democracy can do is obtain the decision of a majority. Majorities tend to be made up of relatively advantaged people; ruling coalitions inherently become insiders; and no method can ensure that they will adequately appreciate the concerns of the less powerful.

UBI would be a new kind of check on our political process, conceding real, practical power to every single individual—no matter how disadvantaged, no matter how far from the center of power. Without this check on political power, the terms of the social ultimatum are solely in the hands of privileged people—property owners and political decisionmakers.

Psychological theory and historical experience indicate that ruling coalitions suffer from self-serving bias like everyone else. Even in a perfect democracy, the ruling coalition might not have sufficient empathy for or understanding of outsiders and disadvantaged people to be capable of judging them. The farther you go from the centers of power, the more people's lives deviate from decisionmakers' expectations, the more their stories are untold, the more their situations are misunderstood, and the less weight their concerns are

given. And our democracy is far from perfect. Our government is dominated by wealth and other forms of privilege.

Many of the assumptions of the conditional system reflect the self-serving bias of this group. The ruling coalition has to believe that there are people who deserve poverty and homelessness and that the relatively advantaged people who make up the coalition have the right, responsibility, and capability to judge who deserves homelessness.

The requirement of a fair contribution for a fair wage sounds good, but fairness is subjective. Whose opinion is most important—powerful decisionmakers or the people who have to live on those wages? I don't think I am capable of deciding what is fair to people less advantaged than me. I, therefore, suggest a modest approach in which we admit the closest we can get to a "fair" wage is one that both the employer and employee agree on when both have the genuine power to say no.

Many specifics of the conditional system also reflect self-serving bias. For example, privileged people justify the participation requirement by arguing that jobs give people a sense of purpose. That's a paternalistic rationalization and a poor reason to force people to take what often turn out to be dead-end jobs. If we respected disadvantaged people, we would free them to decide whether a job provides enough sense of purpose—along with pay and other rewards—to be worth taking.

Probably the most important example of self-serving bias in the conditional welfare system is that the number one thing people are supposed to do to prove they are "deserving" or "truly needy" is to be willing, if able, to take a job. That is, they have to provide services for people who control more resources than they do.

In reality, we have not created a circle of obligation but a hierarchy of obligation. Our labor obligation is to serve the whims of property owners, who have no reciprocal labor obligation. Nonwealthy people serve each other as a byproduct of secondary importance. You have to do something for the benefit of at least one landlord and one person who owns the inputs you need to make your daily bread. If you then want to do things for other people, that's optional. Workers can make money by serving other workers, but their ability to reward you is proportional to how well they have served the people who own resources and capital.

The self-serving assumptions built into our system are, in many ways, self-defeating for most of us. Our policies promote the values they display rather than the values they demand from others. The mandatory-participation requirement is supposed to promote unselfishness. People in need of help are supposed to learn the virtue of giving back when they receive, but the principle the authority promotes by its example is selfishness: never give unless you get something back.

People in need in a mandatory-participation economy will rightly question whether the authority has their best interest at heart when the authority's first question is, "What can you do for us?"

People who have been through our conditional system have reason to think, "When I was in need, they made me work for them or prove I was unable. They gave me nothing. I will never give them anything." The authority's attempt to force others to be unselfish actually promotes selfishness for the simple reason that the authority behaves selfishly. If you really want to promote the unselfish desire to give back, you must share unselfishly and unconditionally.

Probably the most important way in which the self-serving assumptions of the mandatory-participation economy are ultimately self-defeating is that they're really only good for employers who like paying low wages. Some middle-class people believe that mandatory participation is good for them because they participate, but as argued above, you don't help workers by putting them in the position in which they can't refuse to work. Our increasingly punitive mandatory-participation policies have led to greater inequality, lower middle-class incomes, greater workplace insecurity, greater stress, and so on.

Many people have imagined a workers' revolution that cuts out property owners and establishes a true circle-of-obligation. As always, let me see the plan. Maybe it solves some of the problems I've mentioned, but no plan solves the insider-outsider problems inherent in politics. Wishful thinking about everyone becoming better people after the revolution won't make the self-serving bias of people in power go away.

This concern is beginning to take root on the left as well as in the center. As Katja Kipping says, the old left wanted to control the means of production; the new left wants to control their own lives.

Once you've introduced your plan for reform, it's not up to you to tell oppressed people when they're free: they'll tell you. Whatever your plan to eliminate oppression is, if you have to force people to participate, you're just another oppressor.

One might respond that the reality behind the circle of obligation is that, sooner or later, people really do need each other. That is true, but that doesn't mean anyone needs to force people to do things for each other. We have other tools. It's better to give every individual the power to opt-out than to give advantaged people the power to force everyone in.

A voluntary-participation society can't ensure that everyone will work, but it can eliminate poverty and homelessness. It can reduce the fear and stressfulness of middle- and lower-class lives. It's a kinder society. It invites you to do the things society recognizes as useful by offering you rewards, but it doesn't force you to do what you're told by hogging all the resources if you refuse.

Mandatory-participation and voluntary-participation as competing ideals (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 13)

Not all of the arguments above challenge the belief that a mandatory-participation economy is the ideal if, when, and where it is possible. Working for others is not always a bad; very often, it's a good thing. We all benefit from the work of others, and one might argue, in an ideal situation, we should all be required contribute to it, even if there are practical reasons to support UBI in the non-ideal situation we find ourselves in. This post addresses and rejects that argument.

The vast majority of the work done in our society is self-interested behavior; a significant amount of it is environmentally destructive or parasitic. Very little of the work people actually do is devoted to producing necessities. If there is some amount of labor we all have a duty to share, it has to be much less than the standard 40-hour work week.

Even assuming there is some labor we all have a duty to perform, a participation mandate is not the ideal way to handle it. In a truly *ideal* situation, everyone would agree

about the necessary labor, and either everyone would do it voluntarily, or everyone would agree to a set of rewards that would be sufficient to elicit everyone's participation.

Therefore, once you assert a supposed need to *mandate* participation, you have to admit we are out of the realm of the *ideal* situation. The typical response to this line of argument in political philosophy is to suppose that all people do recognize that there is a duty to work but because of weakness of will, parasitic motivation, or in short, laziness, they will choose not to work unless mandated. Even if that supposition is true, the situation remains non-ideal. The non-ideal element is the existence of these weak, parasitic, or lazy individuals.

But once we admit the possibility of this deviation from the ideal, we should consider another possible deviation from the ideal: that it is not the individuals refusing the work-requirement who are parasitic but the people setting the work requirement. Perhaps people with the power to set the mandatory-participation requirement exaggerate the duties of the lower- and middle-classes and down-playing the rewards they should get for participation.

Considering every state society, I know of, from the beginning of recorded history to the present, we have always erred on the side of demanding too many duties from and offering too few rewards to the middle- and lower-class. The power to *mandate* participation has been the most important tool to make that non-ideal situation possible. If we want to get closer to the ideal, we need to take that power away from the ruling coalition.

A UBI, large enough to create voluntary-participation economy, is not simply protection against potential abuses of powerful decisionmakers: it is an ideal in which people in society come together voluntarily, decide what needs to be done, and commit themselves to elicit rewards sufficient to get the necessary work done voluntarily. This, I submit, is a higher ideal and a kinder vision of community than one in which the majority of voters appoints a coalition with the power to decide what is and is not a duty, to determine what rewards for labor are appropriate, and to force less-advantaged people to accept those rewards no matter how much they might object.

UBI and the Human Need to Work and Contribute

(Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 14)

UBI skeptics might point to psychologists who say humans have a strong, deep-seeded desire for a meaningful life, to work and contribute to their fellow humans. People who fail to find such meaning tend to be miserable. We have all heard stories of unhappy trust-fund babies who never seem to be able to get their lives together. A critic of UBI might point to this observation and say "why offer people the opportunity to idleness, an opportunity that makes no one happy?" They might argue that the introduction of UBI would lead to a nation full of unmotivated, directionless, and miserable people.

Although I believe the psychologists who say that people have a desire to do something meaningful with their lives, I don't think this observation provides any reason to oppose UBI.

To connect this observation to a reason to oppose UBI, one has to add two additional claims. First, people are weak-willed. Although contribution makes them happy,

many won't do it unless someone forces them. Second, the threat of homelessness, malnutrition, and destitution is the best motivator for people who don't know what's good for them. These beliefs involve the same self-serving, paternalistic double-standards I discussed in earlier posts in this series. We don't apply this reasoning to privileged people, but we imagine that disadvantaged people don't know what's good for them, and we decide that what is good for them is to take jobs serving more advantaged people. We need to have more respect for disadvantaged people.

If disadvantage people don't take your job, maybe your job doesn't involve a very meaningful contribution. Most of the jobs disadvantaged people can get involve no more than serving the whims of people wealthy enough to hire them. In some jobs, one can see a connection to serving the greater society; in others, it's not so clear. Say I'm a janitor in a telemarketing firm that tries to fool old people into buying bad investments. This job won't give meaning to my life. A system that forces people to take whatever jobs they can get just to remain housed is not one likely to channel them into jobs that involve a great deal of life satisfaction.

A UBI provides not just the opportunity to refuse jobs but also resources that the individual can put toward any project they believe is meaningful to them. Many workers are so busy keeping themselves alive that they can't plan their lives. This constant necessity of taking the first bullshit job that comes along is often a barrier rather than a bridge to life-satisfaction. There are many things people with a UBI can do to build a meaningful life. They can improve their education, enhance their skills, create art, care for someone who needs help, volunteer, or look for a simple, working-class job that actually does something beneficial for society rather than taking whatever job keeps them off the street no matter how meaningless it might be. Respect for the disadvantaged means respect for their choices.

I doubt that the stories about the misery of trust-fund babies are representative of all people who are freed from the threat of homelessness. For every story you can tell me of a poor-little rich kid, I can tell you stories of rich kids who went on to become captains of industry, excel in the arts, become great scientists, or even become President of the United States of America. It's not just one or two presidents, senators, and governors who came from wealthy families: it's most of them. Who are they to lecture the disadvantaged about how bad idleness is?

To the extent that the stories of miserable trust-fund babies are true, maybe the problem is that not they have a trust fund, but that their trust-fund is too large. UBI is basic. If you live entirely off of your UBI, you will be tied for the lowest living standard in the country. Literally any job at any wage will improve your living standard, and many jobs will *greatly* improve it. That's a powerful incentive. That's not true for a lot of trust-funders. Many of their trust-fund incomes are much higher than they can foresee themselves making in business. Therefore, the incentive for the trust-funder to get a job or start a business is much weaker than the incentive of the UBI beneficiary.

What if I'm wrong? What if a significant number of people actually do become directionless when UBI is introduced? There are a lot of things we can do without forcing people into the workplace. These include counseling, better schooling, listening to their complaints, responding to their needs, a year of mandatory service for all, guaranteed job for everyone who wants one, and so on. But whatever solution we choose, we should have the same solution for rich as we do for the rest of us. If we care enough about the 99% to

use the threat of homelessness to get them into the labor force because we believe it's the only way they'll be happy, then we need to show the same care for the children of the wealthy by exposing them to the same threat. If we don't care enough about the children of the rich to save them from their own weak will by doing them the favor of forcing them into the labor market by threat of homelessness, we shouldn't do that favor for everyone else either.

I've considered the question of whether I'm wrong, so now I ask readers to consider: what if the UBI opponents are wrong? What if the mandatory-participation economy leads to tens of millions of people living in poverty and destitution? What if it leads to millions of children growing up in poverty and suffering for the rest of their lives because of it? What if it leads to millions of preventable premature deaths? What if it leads to many members of the middle class feeling like they're stuck in meaningless, bullshit jobs? We already have a mandatory participation economy (for the 99%) and it has already proven to be consistent with all of these enormous problems. I don't think it's a good idea to pass up a program that could reduce or eliminate these problems because of an imagined paternalistic fear. We've lived with the side effects of mandatory participation long enough. Let's give voluntary participation a try.

UBI and the “natural” right to private property (Mandatory

Participation on Trial, Part 15)

Rather than referring to a hypothetical social contract, some critics of UBI argue that taxation, regulation, and redistribution of income and wealth violate a natural right to private property and supposedly make people less free from interference. This argument is not specific to UBI; it rejects all forms of redistribution.

As I've argued, UBI is equally compatible with a system in which most resources are privately owned and with a system in which most resources are publicly owned. Although the argument below is critical of the existing situation, it is only an argument for sufficient taxation and regulation to support UBI. No major change in the property rights system is necessary to support UBI.

The government's power to tax, regulate, and redistribute property is recognized as legitimate in law almost everywhere. Although the property-rights-based argument rejecting all these things is an extremist position, it is worth addressing because people favoring redistribution often concede the existence of natural private property rights and their supposed connection to freedom—even if they are willing to override those concerns to achieve other goals. I argue that neither point should be conceded.

Although a private property system without redistribution would effectively establish mandatory participation for the vast majority of people who aren't independently wealthy, the private property argument feigns indifference to participation. The argument is supposedly about the relationship of owners to their property rather than between people and people. The existence of billions of people who have no other legal means to survive other than by providing services for property owners is supposedly an inconsequential side effect of our respect for the far more important natural relationship between owners and the things they've made out of the Earth's resources.

Advocates argue that an unfettered private property is a natural right that people will establish if and when they are free from interference. As Grant S. McCall and I argue in our book, *the Prehistory of Private Property*, this argument involves false claims about history and about people's wants and needs. The first people to work with resources almost everywhere in the world established common rights to property. Government-led violent interference was necessary to establish and maintain the private property system around the world.

Property rights do free owners from interference, but property rights also subject nonowners to interference. Ownership is a license for one person (the owner of a resource or something made out of resources) to interfere with another (anyone else who might want to use that resource). The natural property rights argument is not about promoting freedom for everyone but about declaring that some interference doesn't count (especially the kind that forces most of us to get a job and take orders from property owners most of our lives).

If we want to promote freedom as noninterference *for everyone*, the people who get to control the Earth's resources need to make a reciprocal payment to the people who don't, as described in the first post in this series. Without a reciprocal payment, private property is inconsistent with the basic principle of equality before the law. Under the existing nonreciprocal system, some people are born with more "rights" to this Earth than others. A system in which people are born with unequal "rights" is a system of legally enforced privilege.

A world in which one group of people controls resources essential to everyone's survival does not establish a meaningful form of equality before the law. We are all born equally subject to the whims of the previous generation of property owners. They might give, bequeath, or trade property for our labor, or they might not—their choice.

If Jeff Bezos wanted to put an elephant in space and bring it back safely to Earth, society would provide the natural and human resources necessary to make it happen. Currently, charities are trying to raise money to eradicate polio, the cost of which is estimated to be a little over \$5 billion—about 2-3% of Bezos's net worth. If he wanted it done, society would make the resources available to make it happen. It's the whim of the world's owners that matters—because "natural rights," which didn't exist before colonial governments forced the world to adopt them.

Property rights advocates will argue that the value of resources is negligible. What's important, they say, is the value that people have added to it. This argument has three problems. First, and most importantly, the question is not how much resources are worth to people who buy and sell them, but how much is independence worth to everyone who has had it taken away against their will? The answer, of course, is that independence is priceless.

Second, if it were true that resources aren't valuable, people wouldn't fight so hard to keep the world's resources in the hands of the privileged. We wouldn't be chopping down the last of our rainforests to get land for our production system. We wouldn't think twice about giving away 40 acres and a mule right on Manhattan Island for anyone who preferred it to the jobs on offer. The cost of undeveloped Manhattan real estate—to which no value has been added—is in the range of \$1,000-\$3,000 per square foot, which makes the cost of one farm about \$1.7-\$5.1 billion dollars—plus the mule. We could offer people cheaper land in faraway places, but that's not freedom—that's banishment. Besides, even

the remotest places in the United States are unavailable to people who don't want to participate in our economic system. Ask a Native American how that happened.

Third, the value added by people wasn't all added by owners. Often, past owners got land from the government and had value added to it by taking advantage of people who had no legal means to survive other than to work for property owners.

Although some workers are paid handsomely, the big rewards in our economy don't go to people who do stuff but to people who own stuff. For example, according to Thomas Piketty, Harvard's \$40-billion endowment well out-performs the market with average returns of around 12% per year, but the firm they hire to manage it receives only a 0.5% per year—1/24th of the total return. The other 23/24ths go to Harvard: it gets more simply because it has more. The property works. The owner doesn't have to.

As Piketty writes, the entrepreneur eventually becomes a rentier, meaning that people might start companies with innovative ideas and hard work, but successful companies accumulate assets, and eventually, the return on those assets swamps any value that can be attributed to the entrepreneur's work or ideas. If returns are a reward for past work, the Rockefeller family is still "earning" delayed rewards for some questionable business dealings their several-times great-grandfather conducted 150 years ago.

A theory that demands we refrain from all interference with owners' "natural right" to every cent of returns like these while being unconcerned that we interfere with other people in a way that gives them no choice but to serve the whims of owners, displays a one-sided concern for freedom from interference.

Property rights advocates argue that observations like these are unimportant because an unfettered private property system makes us all so much better off that quibbling about how to divide those benefits is unnecessary. Grant S. McCall and I debunk this claim in our book, *Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy*. It uses extensive empirical evidence from anthropology and history to show that although the average person might be better off, the least among us are worse off than they could reasonably expect to be in a stateless society with common property rights.

If it were true that everyone was better off, we could offer that multibillion-dollar subsistence farm in Manhattan, and no one would want it. But if any land at all were available for free to nonparticipants in Manhattan, we all know what would happen; it would be instantly filled with the tents or shanties of homeless people.

One thing is certain: the *starting point*—the default position—of everyone who isn't independently wealthy in society today is far worse than the starting point of someone who begins with direct access to resources. If it were true that society makes everyone so much better off, we wouldn't need to make their starting point so much worse.

Reconsider a UBI plan that compensates all nonowners with a UBI large enough to meet their basic needs and a little extra for their trouble, and then offer them jobs. If capitalism makes everyone as much better off as its advocates claim, people will gladly take all the available jobs, and the net cost of UBI will be almost nothing. If property rights advocates are not bluffing about the benefits of capitalism, they have nothing to lose. If we need to force people to participate in capitalism by lowering their starting point to one in which they have no access to the resources they need to survive, that's very strong evidence that the system isn't actually making everyone better off than they would be with direct, independent access to resources.

This post has made some harsh criticisms of private property as we know it, but the problems it discusses can be cured with well-targeted taxation, regulation, and redistribution without fundamentally changing the system.

UBI is a good deal for property owners. All they have to do is pay their taxes and bargain for labor from a genuinely free labor force—people who are available to work if you make them a good offer but have the power to say no to bad offers. That’s a freer market than the one we have, and it’s not going to break the bank of the wealthy people of the world.

Rescuing Individualism from Selfishness and Subordination

(Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 16)

For centuries, we have been presented with two political visions: centralized collectivism and a highly selfish conception of individualism, as if these two visions or something in between were the only possibilities.

By this collectivist vision, I don’t necessarily mean socialism or communism, but also social democracy, the welfare state, and most versions of “the social contract,” in which society is viewed as a collective project for the mutual benefit of all contributors. The project is supposed to take into account the individual wants, and concerns of every member. But it’s supposedly obvious that all members’ wants and needs are sufficiently met either by the existing social project or by so-and-so’s vision of what it should be. If decisionmakers knew that the social project was oppressive to anyone, they would change the rules. Therefore, once that vision is in place, there is no reason to defend a right to opt-out. Caring for others is synonymous with contributing to the social project. Anyone who opts out is rejecting their responsibility to care about others.

If a disadvantaged individual objects to the choices available to them in the project, the goals of the project, or the rewards given to them by the project’s design, they can voice their complaint, but some set of democratically chosen decisionmakers have the final say. If decisionmakers rule against them, dissenters can be dismissed as lazy, weak-willed, exploitative, or selfish. What social arrangements should you fight for if you believe disadvantage individuals shouldn’t have to subordinate themselves to any particular vision of the social project?

The alternative vision in our political debate claims to respect your individuality. It accepts the possibility that powerful government decisionmakers often don’t know what’s best, and so it offers an individualist vision in which you, the individual, owe only one thing to everyone else: the duty to passively respect their rights. But one of those rights is a highly unequal right of property in the resources of the Earth and the external assets we make out of those resources. That system was installed by powerful government decisionmakers decades or centuries ago for the benefit of insiders and over the objections of the mass of the world’s common people.

The property-rights vision delivers a lot of individualism for advantaged people who have resources that free them to do what they want and no responsibility to others except to respect the property they might or, more often, might not have. For the disadvantaged, it offers little individual freedom. Instead, it offers subordination. Years of

taking orders from the people who have more rights to the Earth's resources and the external assets we make out of them, thereby effectively making them as much or more subordinate to powerful and privileged people than they were under the contractarian version. This is sold to us as "individualism?" At least the collectives admitted a responsibility to care about disadvantaged people's wants and needs and to listen to their concerns, even if they had a bias perspective and poorly understand disadvantaged individuals.

We are presented with a false dichotomy. Supposedly, if you care about whether other people thrive, you have to accept individual subordination to the social project; if you care about individualism, freedom, and rights, you must subordinate yourself to the few people who own the Earth. Is there no system that respects everyone as an individual without subordinating them either to a privileged class or a collective project?

Of course, there is. That alternative is society with a livable UBI. In this vision, to care about others is to care first and foremost about them as an individual. To care about an individual is to care that they have the same rights and the same power of their own life as anyone else. In this vision, before we dedicate the resources of the Earth to private or to collective projects, we put in place a system to make sure everybody gets a share sufficient to meet their basic needs. We can still have collective projects, but we build our community with unforced participation of even the least advantaged person. We invite people to join our collective and private projects, but we never demand, force, or cajole them. We stand in solidarity with every other person's need to opt-out if the system isn't working for them as they see it from their individual perspective. This alternative is more individualistic than unfettered property rights and kinder to the disadvantaged of the community than a social project with mandatory participation.

Manufactured desperation (Mandatory Participation on Trial, Part 17)

According to Henry David Thoreau, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." I think it's more accurate to say the mass of people lead lives of *manufactured* desperation. We, as a people, are not in a desperate struggle to produce enough food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities of life for everyone. We can do that with ease. We worked our way out of that struggle long ago, if it was ever real at all. We are instead in a challenging struggle to provide more luxuries and leisure without destroying the environment that sustains us. Yet, the mass of people as individuals still often find themselves in a desperate struggle to maintain access to food, shelter, clothing, and other necessities of life.

That is manufactured desperation. Our legally mandated default position for all but the wealthy few is economic destitution. We have to continually work and work and work to maintain access to food, shelter, and clothing. Few of us can save enough to take significant time off before we're too old to work anyway. And some of us live in tents right in the middle of cities with more than enough vacant housing for everyone.

It's not necessary. It's not helpful. It's not healthy.

The way out is simple. Free ourselves from the belief in mandatory participation for all but the wealthy few and embrace a UBI for everyone.

¹ Paine, “Agrarian Justice.”