

TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME. AN EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

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Abstract

Contemporary research endeavors and discussions addressing the issue of Universal Basic Income are usually concerned with the ethics, economic feasibility, and social necessity of its introduction. I believe that these approaches suffer most often due to their focus on an insufficiently extensive period of time, which does not aid in the elimination of the reluctance observed concerning their futuristic and utopian character. Accordingly, I propose the use of an analytical framework developed by evolutionary anthropologists, with the help of which we can better observe the inadequacy, unjustified and potentially dangerous limitations that cultural bias still imposes on economic activities. The central thesis of this article is that all signs indicate that we are moving into a fourth evolutionary stage of civilization, and the radical nature of the changes taking place in infrastructure, structure and superstructure will inevitably force a shift in the surviving elements of the old system, especially pertaining to the relations of production and relations of distribution. According to this approach, one can better observe that proposals such as the Universal Basic Income are more realistic (and necessary) than what the dystopias that still structure the mainstream political and economic imaginary would allow us to believe.

Keywords: universal basic income (UBI), evolutionist anthropology, mode of production, automatization, motivation, work, value, ideology

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Introduction

The article aims to frame the new discourse regarding the Universal Basic Income within the other transformations that accompany it, starting from the premise that the materialist conceptual framework proposed by evolutionary anthropologists is best suitable to make such a complex puzzle intelligible. This framework allows for the opportunity to fully assess the magnitude of social change by ordering the series of events by duration and depth and thus allowing a more appropriate orientation through the over-crowded areas of knowledge where all variations steer the eye, similar to the abundance of commercial advertisement in a metropolis. At the same time, materialistic relativism, not unlike the cultural one, questions the metaphysics of human nature which governs political economy, thus providing a more neutral framework for analysis, whereby *effective reality* (and its compatible alternatives) can emerge more clearly from within the jungle of more or less utopian discourses, which describe and change the world all at the same time.

Although from the standpoint of methodology, the matter of unilinear¹ evolution and progress may seem to be obsolete, as well as oversaturated by Eurocentrism, the issue of progress can be analyzed from the viewpoint of the relationship between technological advances and the social and political changes that favor them. The comparative method, in which the various socio-political and economic systems resulting from technological revolutions are compared, can be used as a reference for the evolution of the different ways in which a system manages to store, distribute and put into operation the energy extracted from a natural environment.² In other words, it is useful to observe how human energy is complemented, augmented or replaced with every such moment of "fundamental historical discontinuity, in an irreversible form"³. Evolutionists viewed these moments of discontinuity as universal stages of

¹ Julian Haynes Steward, *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1990, p. 11.

² *Idem*, *Basin-plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups*, Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology. Bulletin 120, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997, p. 260.

³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 34.

evolution or as specific “modes of production”⁴. Moreover, even finding their universality can be proven to be useful in order to draw as many lessons as possible from the comparison between the past and the present. We can explain the universalization of a mode of production either in a materialistic manner,⁵ or in a culturalistic manner, as a result of diffusion by way of trade, cultural exchanges, migration or war. But this bears lesser importance. What is in fact important is the realization that these historical discontinuities are not only irreversible but also global, with merely a few unaffected cultural enclaves left behind.

The three classical stages of civilization

From this perspective, we can approach the three classic stages proposed by evolutionist thinkers from the standpoint of the technological revolutions that have significantly affected the ability to extract and use energy.⁶ These stages were rather uninspiringly named primitivism, barbarism, civilization – with their strong axiological connotation and the definitive aspect of their descriptions discouraging their subsequent use. (1) There are no historical documents for the first stage, still, early anthropologists have had access to numerous cultural enclaves made up of relatively isolated populations, which were minimally affected by global economy and politics. And, beyond their many shortcomings,⁷ their speculations are quite plausible regarding the historically undocumented distant past. At this stage, it seems that social relations, from the system of duties to the sources of prestige, religion and political organization were centered around the clan. In other words, we are dealing with small communities, which were adapted to a technological

⁴ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010, p. 75.

⁵ See, for example, David Landes' explanation on the expansion of the industrial mode of production by subjugating the states that have not adopted it, as well as its introduction by those governments that have tried to maintain or modify the power ratio in their favor: David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus. Technological change and industrial development in Western Europe from 1750 to present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 41.

⁶ In describing the stages, I will use the outline synthesized by Leslie A. White, *The Science of crops. A Study of Man and Civilization*, New York: Grove Press, 1949, pp. 368-385.

⁷ See the critique of “conjectural history” by Radcliffe-Brown, among others: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structură și funcție în societatea primitivă*, Iași: Polirom, 2000, pp. 58-85.

system based on hunting, fishing and gathering. The main energy source was human energy. Plants and animals were their only resource for the energy renewal of this mode of production, and this resource was not controlled. (2) With the control of these resources through agriculture and domestication came the second mode of production, which can be seen as an Agricultural Revolution. This mode of production still depends very much on human energy, amplified by various instruments or assisted by various forms of natural energy put to work. In addition, the emergence of surpluses favors long-term orientation and a certain degree of complexity in organization and planning. This mode of production has reached its energy efficiency in China in the 1st millennium BC., and if we were to take into account the size of the cities, landmarks, or engineered structures, the production and accumulation of wealth, we see that there had been no tremendous improvements up until the 18th century. We do not necessarily speak of stagnation, but of the fact that the efficiency of technological objects is slow, gradual and, inevitably, limited. Only a critical mass of discoveries that rethink how to extract and use energy are able to create a break in the rhythm that deserves to be treated as a level rupture or as a new stage. The technological system that domesticated the animals, favored also the domestication of man. By making possible the accumulation of resources, this technological system has not only changed the size of communities but also altered social systems, favoring social relationships (from the system of duties, to the sources of prestige, religion and political organization) centered around obedience-possession. (3) With the Revolution of Resource Extraction or the Industrial Revolution from the beginning of the 19th century, a new disruption of rhythm can be observed, which deserves to be treated as a separate stage.

Academic consensus is overwhelming regarding the existence of a rupture in rhythm that produced the capitalist world. The differences in approaches result from the nuances that scholars adhered to: When did the first signs emerge? When did it reach a critical mass? Or how many industrial revolutions have taken place in the meantime? I believe that the chronology proposed by Eric Hobsbawm is the most useful in order to understand the phenomenon. It links the birth of the new world to the emergence of a critical mass in the implementation of innovations that have reconciled the new industrial production capacities with the new transport

capacities (1760-1840).⁸ In other words, the bedrocks of the new technology were the coal, the steam engine, the railroad and the factory system based on investment in means of production. I believe that further innovations that have enabled the diversification and efficient use of the storable and transportable sources of energy (oil, gas, bio-fuel, hydrogen, uranium, etc.), and the new industries born on this occasion, are not worth considering as successive revolutions but rather as an acceleration and fulfillment of the same technological system. The same is true with regard to the standardization of production (e.g.: the production line) or distribution (e.g.: the tea bag), which created the consumption driven economy.⁹

The central element of this technological system that produced a fundamental historical discontinuity, in an irreversible form, was investment in means of production. This type of investment favored a significant replacement of the human energy consumed in the production process. Physical work was assisted by machines in many of the activities as well as completely replaced in certain situations (for simple, accurate and recurrent tasks). Of course, both in Marx's time¹⁰ and nowadays there still were numerous enclaves built into the system that survive the competition with technology-intensive factories, by squeezing the most of cheap locally available labor, while delaying the acceleration of the transformation process. The importance of this adaptive strategy (the continuous investment in means of production) is given by the violence with which it ultimately succeeds in removing those who do not follow its logic and cannot keep up.

This adaptive strategy has made capital the central element that structures the social system and the ideological system, for it has, firstly, taken as prisoners both the owner and the worker, and secondly, society itself, by favoring "objectual relations between persons and social relations between objects"¹¹ – in the sense that, due to competition and the specter of bankruptcy, it favored an outlook on the person who takes into account

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Era revoluției (11789-1848)*, Chișinău: Cartier, 2002, pp. 37-39, p. 56.

⁹ *Idem*, *Era imperiului (1875-1914)*, Chișinău: Arc, 2002, p. 73.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capitalul*, vol. I, in Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Opere*, Vol. 23, București: Editura Politică, 1966, pp. 468-489.

¹¹ Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

only the aspect of resource,¹² convenience and cost; while the goods, through the anarchic mode through which they circulate and sell, communicate with one another and with people,¹³ thus mediating (by way of their price) the necessity of various human activities or various types of organizing and making more efficient certain activities, starting from the maximum-acceptable amount of work crystallized within the final product. As a result of the fact that the equivalence of various commodities by their price favored the equivalence of various types of activities, this mode of production generalized an egalitarian view, which had begun to manifest a long time ago – with trade and political philosophy educating wider and wider segments of society. Hence, capitalism gradually undermined many of the old hierarchies in social relations (from the system of duties, to the sources of prestige, religion and political organization), favoring only the reproduction of those inequalities that were based on the accumulation and transfer of capital. Moreover, opportunities for social mobility and the necessity of spatial mobility, generated by the volatility of economic activities, have favored the emergence of more intimate kinships. The nuclear family becomes the standard, while the more complex kinships, which have survived in rural areas, begin to be referred to as the “extended family”.

Of course, not all transitions were equally radical. For example, the property system after the Industrial Revolution continues (and modifies) the one in the previous stage – to the same degree that the system of kinship after the Agrarian Revolution resembles (and differs) from the previous one. And, of course, on a small, temporal and local scale, the requirements imposed by the technological system have been moderated, transformed and distorted by the ideological or social system. Also, some processes have begun in a certain period, but they did not become widespread until the next stage, which made some thinkers seem more prophetic than others. Thus, just as trade, the banks, and the finances of the pre-capitalist era have proclaimed the emergence of the new system, the same way, as far back as during the time of Marx, “the machine” (which

¹² Martin Heidegger claims that technology is responsible for structuring the gaze that sees only in terms of resources, may it be in nature or human. Martin Heidegger, “Întrebare privitoare la tehnică”, in *Originea operei de artă*, București: Univers, 1982, pp. 106-146.

¹³ Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

has consistently drew the value of work out of the finished products) has opened a path into the future, heralding the end of this system, which will be brought forth by automation.

A Fourth Stage?

From the standpoint of the evolutionary stages, we can look at automation from a different perspective. This is where one can best notice the usefulness of the comparative view of the stages within the evolutionary narrative. Whether we go on with the story, describing the beginning of a new stage, whether we use it and then abandon it, the schematic nature and simplification introduced by evolutionists allow us to better learn the lessons of the past – to the extent that the simplifications are in line with the real situations described.

The obvious signs of pressure that the new technological system puts on the social system, and upon the ideological one, have come prematurely into the Western world. Since the second half of last century, the process that had begun centuries ago to make agricultural labor unnecessary has reached unsuspected levels, and today 2% of the population manages to produce all that can be sold in this sector.¹⁴ The population surplus from agriculture had been initially swayed into industry and then services. In the same timeframe, the acceleration of old types of automation, superimposed on what Eric Hobsbawm euphemistically calls the “international division of labor” (i.e. the fleeing of capital to cheaper labor areas for activities that still needed intensive work)¹⁵, made useless much of the industrial labor force in the West, pushing it towards the service sector:

“while the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy experienced rapid de-industrialization (reducing the share of their manufacturing employment in 1970-90 from 38.7 to 22.5 percent; from 25.9 to 17.5 percent; from 27.3 to 21.8 percent, respectively), Japan and Germany

¹⁴ N. V., “Difference Engine: Luddite legacy”, *The Economist*, (November 4, 2011), [<http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2011/11/artificial-intelligence>], accessed July 2017.

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, *Era extremelor. O istorie a secolului XX*, Chişinău: Editura Cartier, 1999, pp. 430-432.

*reduced their share of manufacturing labor force moderately: from 26.0 to 23.6 percent in the case of Japan, and from 38.6 percent to a still rather high level of 32.2 percent in 1987 in the case of Germany. Canada and France occupy an intermediate position, reducing manufacturing employment from 19.7 percent (in 1971) to 14.9 percent, and from 27.7 to 21.3 percent, respectively.*¹⁶

Services have remained the last bastion for most Westerners, forced to have a positive market-sanctioned activity in order to live, or for those who consider work to be an activity that offers dignity¹⁷ or gives meaning to human life. On the other hand, if we take anthropologist David Graeber seriously, many of the jobs created in the service sector do not offer too much dignity or sense, or even social utility. Many of these jobs exist to sell products for which there is no natural demand, and many of them only solve the problems created by the fact that those who still have real jobs work too much.¹⁸

I do not know how much worth it would have to precisely place the moment when the new technological innovations have entered or will come into synergy so that we can talk about a level break.

Looking at the past, we will understand that certain processes are difficult to predict. For example, cultural predispositions subsumed to the “spirit of capitalism” can be encountered centuries before the Industrial Revolution, favored by urbanization, commerce and, if we believe Max Weber, even religion; while the “spirit of technology” has been strong enough since the 16th and 17th centuries to elicit riots and laws against the use of machines that made some workers obsolete.¹⁹

If we look at the lovers of statistics and prognoses or the futurists of the last century, we can see that, after the 1970s, and especially after the 1990s, there is more and more talk about the tertiary sector (services), the quaternary sector (activities built around the newest digital technologies,

¹⁶ Castels, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

¹⁷ André Gorz, “On the Difference Between Society and Community, and Why Basic Income Cannot by Itself Confer Full Membership of Either”, in Parijs, *Arguing for Basic Income. Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 184.

¹⁸ David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, p. 81.

¹⁹ Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

that are difficult to label), the post-industrial society addressed by Allain Touraine (1969) and Daniell Bell (1974), about the third or fourth industrial revolution, while Alvin Toffler's and Isaac Asimov's best-sellers have made the elites from all over the world wonder. Beyond seeking the sensational by the researchers and popularizers who produced the new labels, it is very likely for the socio-economic reality to have gone through a significant transformation.

The main suspect responsible for the emerging disorder is digital technology – computers and communications. Digital technology has impressed and continues to impress through the pace at which innovation is taking place, as compared to the rest of the economic activities. The “Law” formulated in 1965 by the co-founder of Intel, Gordon Moore, continues to be valid today. Every 18 months, the number of components in an integrated circuit is doubled, on a similar surface and at a price that is constantly decreasing. According to Andrew McAfee (et al.), the magnitude and dynamics of these technological changes are similar to those seen at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.²⁰ According to Jürgen Schmidhuber, one of the early developers of Artificial Intelligence, the new thing that is happening (because of the exponential growth of the computing power since 1941) is not just another Industrial Revolution.²¹ Beyond being the most dynamic sector in terms of innovation and beyond producing the most spectacular examples of social mobility,²² this type of activity seems to irreversibly transform all others. And we are not referring only to the obvious productive activities. From socializing to entertainment, education and research, nothing remains unaffected. And the most interesting part is that what is affected is not each aspect in

²⁰ Andrew McAfee & Erik Brynjolfsson, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014; George Westerman, Didier Bonnet & Andrew McAfee, *Leading Digital: Turning Technology into Business Transformation*, Boston and Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

²¹ Artificial Intelligence A.I., “Artificial Intelligence(AI) Is Making Financial Jobs and Banks Obsolete!”, in *Youtube*, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzA6xxMkMhY>], accessed May 2017.

²² Kate Vinton, “Meet The 183 Tech Billionaires Who Own \$1 Trillion Of The World's Wealth”, in *Forbes*, 2017, [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/katevinton/2017/03/20/richest-tech-billionaires-2017/#5a9f46254c46>], accessed July 2017.

particular, but all at once, for we have to do with a change of state in its entirety, which alters the climate of the whole system. For example, virtual social networks make possible a dispersing of the pressure of conformism as great as the one that had taken place within the transition from the traditional community to the urban social network or the urban-rural one, because the norms, principles and even the truth of a community depend not only on what that particular truth can do, but also on what that truth is allowed to do. And the social sanctions, though potentially ingenious and painful, will be predominantly virtual in such a network of more or less anonymous individuals.

If we take the taxonomy of the neo-evolutionist anthropologist Marvin Harris as a reference point, apart from relations of production, we can see that the entire line of systems that delineate the cultural levels of infrastructure-structure-superstructure is affected.²³ Even the outline proposed by Leslie White, which focuses on the energy source that connects the system to the natural environment (which maximizes the abstract understanding of society or culture), seems to confirm its heuristic value: we can see the critical moment in which electricity irreversibly becomes the primary source that sets the new civilization into motion. At the end of the 19th century, electricity was already announced as a type of “general purpose technology”²⁴ that could be embedded in many technological products, and optimizing them. And the Digital Revolution and its products, which depend on electricity and can be embedded in most technological products, have produced a viral expansion of this form of energy, becoming a kind of a technological “meme”,²⁵ that assists and, increasingly, mediates the conversion of other known forms of energy. It is probably a process of simplification whereby an element needed for a component will tend to become universal, replacing the competing elements when the savings on operational costs in skills and knowledge

²³ Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism. The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, New York: Random House, 1979, pp. 52-64.

²⁴ Erik Brynjolfsson, “The Key to Growth? Race with the Machines”, in *TED*, 2013, [https://www.ted.com/talks/erik_brynjolfsson_the_key_to_growth_race_em_with_em_the_machines], accessed June 2017.

²⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 192.

can offset any particular inefficiencies. Now it is embedded not only in most of the technological products but also in the metaphors that mediate our understanding and explanation of the world. This form of energy, although well integrated into the old system,²⁶ comes to integrate the current system within itself. Thus, we are able to address the rationality of the new ecological discourses and the cascade of public and private investment in innovations that capture the so-called “alternative” sources of energy from a different perspective: they are feasible, optimizable and, above all, fit into the new standard.

We can speak with certainty, at least in terms of technology, about a Digital Revolution powered by electricity and, if we consider all social consequences, we may very well venture into witnessing the beginning of a fundamental historical discontinuity, in an irreversible form.

Probably the most spectacular change is currently in progress and concerns work as such. Unlike the previous industrial revolutions in which machines, beyond the temporary social damages that have provoked, have in fact increased the worker's productivity, robotization within the digital age can replace it in most fields.²⁷ According to Jeremy Rifkin, 75% of existing jobs in industrialized countries require only relatively simple and repetitive tasks.²⁸ According to the statistical calculations made by Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, 43% of all existing jobs in the US are in the process of transformation or risk being replaced by robots.²⁹ This is not just talking about industrial robots that have become more adaptable and cheaper in time (by as much as 10% per year), which removes skilled workers from production lines, but a series of sensor systems that monitor and optimize processes from agriculture to services, a whole range of simple applications that mediate purchases and transactions of all kinds, or Artificial Intelligence, which already thins the ranks of the middle

²⁶ The phenomenon is most often described as the Second Industrial Revolution.

²⁷ Willem Buijer *apud* Kif Leswing, “Citi’s Chief Economist Recommends a Universal Basic Income”, in *Futurism*, August 22, 2015, [<https://futurism.com/citis-chief-economist-recommends-a-universal-basic-income>], accessed July 2017.

²⁸ Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, p. 5.

²⁹ Carl Benedikt Frey & Michael A. Osborne, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, vol. 114, North-Holland, 2017, pp. 254-280.

management, which already relieves corporations of the burden of analysts (from the discovery of trends and fraud patterns or market opportunities, problem or disease diagnostics, to data mining in the field of law), or which are already replacing even IT employees who detect bugs in software or that detail and translate certain specifications of the programming language. The appendixes of the study conducted by Frey and Osborne outline all the jobs taken into account, depending on the likelihood of their automation. And drivers and cashiers are not the worst off, though the image of Google's driverless car or Amazon's cashier-free store have already entered the imagination of the era. Instead, bank employees have already received the bad news: 30% of jobs will disappear in the next eight years.³⁰ If we want to understand how dramatic the situation is for those who thought they are part of the upper class, it is worth considering the childish arrogance of new technology developers (Kai-fu Lee, for example) who believe that the use of man for numerical analysis was a momentary act of improvisation.³¹

In other words, unlike the "primitive" automation based on mechanics, digital automation, although starting from the same fundamental principles, is not limited to replacing accuracy, speed and muscle strength, but also most of the attributes of the human mind which could easily enter the economic circuit because they could be quantified without too much difficulty in working hours, with relatively predictable productivity. From this point of view, it is possible that the fact that the number of unemployed will become unbearable³² will be the smallest problem, if the problem is solved by the development of intuition, creativity and all those emotionally-cognitive skills that provide a competitive advantage to man. When most of the staff in the organizational chart will be composed of "poets", we will see even more clearly the arbitrariness and the unpredictability of the system. A critical mass of

³⁰ Matt Egan, "30% of Bank Jobs are Under Threat", in *CNN Money*, April 4, 2016, [<http://money.cnn.com/2016/04/04/investing/bank-jobs-dying-automation-citigroup/index.html>], accessed May 2017.

³¹ Artificial Intelligence A.I., "Half of All Jobs Will Be Replaced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 10 Years, AI Expert Kai-Fu Lee", *Youtube*, May 18 2017, min. 11:20, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Pc4HhhW0Xo>], accessed July 2017.

³² Jeremy Rifkin has been alerting people since the 1990s concerning the fact that 800 million human beings are now unemployed or underemployed in the world (Rifkin, *op. cit.*, p. XV).

economic issues will no longer be economic, because they can no longer be calculated and planned to a sufficient degree to allow for a strategic and adaptive behavior. It is hard to say when the critical mass of transformation will be reached, which will definitively decouple the price, salary and profit from the amount of human work crystallized in the product, but we are not far off from that point. Although the principle of scarcity that structures the subconscious of political economy, plus the ethics and the cult of labor are some kind of survivals of the pre-capitalist period, the rest of the current ideological system discourages taking these issues too seriously across the social spectrum (with the exception of the marginal and excluded). Let us give an edifying example: watch how, with every technological revolution, the following argument loses its power: “The one who is unwilling to work will not eat”³³: you do not toil in the fields, you do not eat; you do not destroy your health in industry, you do not eat; you are not available at the office eight hours a day, you do not eat; you are not creative and popular (on YouTube, for example), you do not eat.³⁴

It is possible for the elites to heave a sigh of relief when the arguments of the poor lose weight as the blackmail capacity due to the necessity of their work decreases. And this has already been seen in the West in the last few decades, when the precariousness of work left social-democracy in the offside. However, to a similar extent, the justification of wealth or even income discrepancies is becoming an exercise in intellectual

³³ We are not interested in the possible meanings that theology can attribute to this phrase – as found in Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians (3:10) – but rather in its daily use in the justifications of social conservatism.

³⁴ I have reached these conclusions independently, however, as I have later found out, James Livingston beat me to it by a month’s time. Moreover, in the same manner in which I have recycled and developed older ideas, it is highly probable that he has done so as well. Although his starting point is an ethical and philosophical one, in the Hegelian tradition, while mine is a political and economic one, in the Machiavellian tradition, we have reached similar interpretations regarding the politics of labor. Thus, with both of us starting from Marx’s theory of value, we have reached similar speculations that would not be appealing to Marxists as far as the detachment of labor from the product is concerned, and the arbitrariness that follows, with referring to the incompatibility of the old cult of labor with present conditions, and, the most interesting aspect of the coincidence, namely, the fact that we have both used the biblical quote. The text can be found here: James Livingston, “Why Work? Breaking the Spell of the Protestant Ethic”, *The Baffler*, nr. 35, June 2017, [<https://thebaffler.com/salvos/why-work-livingston>], accessed June 2017.

acrobatics, because it is quite difficult to revolt if you were overtaxed after winning the lottery. Creativity plays an important role, but no further rationalization can hide the fact that the accumulation of capital seems less and less like the prolonged ascesis of labor, and more and more the way in which celebrity fame is born: the luck of having developed skills that were overvalued at a particular time, the luck of getting into the good neighborhood (for example, in a real-estate investment or a career plan), the luck of finding the fortunate marriage between a product and the market segment that can put you into a position of quasi-monopoly,³⁵ the luck of getting public attention for various reasons, etc. Just as the noble elite have lost some of its privileges as soon as it no longer justified its military utility, it is possible for the capitalist elite to follow suit as it can no longer justify its economic utility. The commanding heights of the economy start to resemble more and more a casino, which is most clearly reflected in the recurrence of replacing the term “investment” with that of “betting”. Those who lose finance the winners, and as long as the house has a profit (that is, the mass of consumers get better and cheaper products, and have the means to buy them), the system has a chance to survive, but the winners of this system have lost the aura that former masters had.

On the other hand, while still ignoring the social effects of the new technical unemployment, it is worth considering its effect on aggregate demand. We do not need to be Marxists, or Keynesians, to understand that, as in the case of classical economic crises (irrespective of their causes), the general decline in purchasing power produces a downward spiral in the economy. And robots do not usually buy goods³⁶ and the small, slow and conservative market of the rich is dependent of the great market of ordinary people in terms of optimization, efficiency and testing the bleeding edge technology. If we look at economy from the standpoint of technology, we can replace the popular “trickle-down” slogan with a new one: “trickle-up”.³⁷ And if those who lost jobs due to automation in all

³⁵ How to Start a Startup, “Lecture 5 – Competition is for Losers (Peter Thiel)”, *Youtube*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_0dVHMpJlo], accessed June 2017.

³⁶ N. V., *loc. cit.*

³⁷ For example, we can generally refer to the latest technological revolutions in their entirety, with their innovations born out of the necessity (and funded by the possibility) of making it accessible for (and then manage) a huge mass of consumers. If we want to give a simple and

sectors of the economy will not be compensated (at a satisfactory pace) by some activities considered sufficiently useful by those who will still have an income to pay for them, the economic crisis will become a reality. Optimistic conservatives reassure us that we will learn to commodify new relational activities, satisfying needs that we never thought could exist. For example, a significant demand for used underwear³⁸ has recently flourished, and there are not enough altruistic people to satisfy this demand in a sharing economy. The pessimistic progressives say that this time is different. Those who are most panicked are the ones who have read the study conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute.³⁹ The study estimates “that about half of the activities that people are paid almost \$15 trillion to do in the global economy have the potential to be automated by adapting currently demonstrated technology”⁴⁰. In order to understand the magnitude of the guillotine that will annually cut aggregate demand, it is enough to look at how small the decrease of the world GDP has been during the crisis from which we are hardly recovering: \$3 trillion.⁴¹

If we take into account social effects as well, it may be worthwhile to take a look at the successful nightmares of the time, recurrently revealed in two of Hollywood's most popular forms: the genocidal Malthusian version, full of guilt, projected upon on Artificial Intelligence, in which

particular example, we can choose products such as the mobile phones for the rich, which in 2017 have had the technical specifications of an expensive, mass-produced mobile phone from 2016. See Android Central, “The Billionaire's Phone: Vertu Constellation, 2017 Review”, *Youtube*, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDeNMG9yrhc>], accessed April 2017.

³⁸ Kashmiri Gander, “Selling Used Underwear Online Becomes Money-Maker as Some Pairs for Go for as Much as 5000\$”, *The Independent*, 29 September 2016, [<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/selling-underwear-online-findom-men-who-pay-for-pants-orange-is-the-new-black-sofia-gray-a7336786.html>], accessed July 2017.

³⁹ Kevin Mieszala, “Do We Need A Universal Basic Income? – Charles Murray & Andy Stern”, *Youtube*, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIYQdHi8S-s>], accessed June 2017.

⁴⁰ Executive Briefing McKinsey Global Institute, “What's Now and Next in Analytics, AI, and Automation”, *McKinsey & Company*, [<http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/digital-disruption/whats-now-and-next-in-analytics-ai-and-automation#section3>], accessed May 2017.

⁴¹ Mark Adelson, “The Deeper Causes of the Financial Crisis: Mortgages Alone Cannot Explain It”, *The Journal Portfolio Management*, Spring 2013, p. 17.

robots will exterminate the population surplus; and the insurrectionary version, in which the gated communities always get penetrated by the zombie masses.

However, irrespective of the real or imaginary magnitude of the near future, it would appear that the enlightened segment of today's elites seems to be inclined to favor a risk-reducing approach by accepting a transformation of survivals from the age of scarcity still present within the social system. Changes in commodity production and the accumulation of wealth appear to favor a more relaxed outlook on the general draconian motivation system that, in addition to causing unnecessary suffering, can have opposite effects in a system that favors creativity-focused activities. In addition, the blurring of economic and cultural demarcations can also generate empathy, not just false class consciousness, when the suffering of individuals with whom they can identify becomes visible. Thus, the elites have recently started to speak the same language in Silicon Valley,⁴² at the World Economic Forum,⁴³ the United Nation OHCHR⁴⁴ and increasingly in the politically and economically well-connected academic world⁴⁵ or in the alternative spaces that popularize "outside of the box" ideas. Outside of the box means, in fact, the inside of the new system, in which the idea of Universal Basic Income seems to become the piece that allows us to better understand the big puzzle. Very briefly, the new discourse starts from the idea that giving a minimum amount of money unconditionally, universally and regularly will solve most of the urgent problems we are currently facing, acting as a buffer that somewhat mitigates economic failures and

⁴² Chris Weller, "8 High-profile Entrepreneurs who Have Endorsed Universal Basic Income", in *Business Insider*, Nov. 9, 2016, [<http://www.businessinsider.com/entrepreneurs-endorsing-universal-basic-income-2016-11/#tim-oreilly-7>], accessed May 2017.

⁴³ Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What it Means, How to Respond", in *The World Economic Forum*, 2016, [<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond>], accessed April 2017.

⁴⁴ The High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Basic Income Possible Solution to Human Rights Problem of Poverty", in *OHCHR*, 23 June 2017, [http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/UniversalBasicIncomeReport.aspx?platform=hootsuite&utm_content=buffer62751&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer], accessed June 2017.

⁴⁵ See Lucian T. Butaru, "Beyond or Besides Neoliberalism? The Political Economy of Universal Basic Income", *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Studia Europaea*, LX, 1, 2015.

social suffering. And the force of this approach lays in its simplicity, which can effectively overcome the old approaches, avoiding bureaucratism, paternalism, taxpayer suspicion, the demotivation of the social services beneficiary and, among other things, the future apocalypse of the consumer economy. For quieting tempers, the approach is often presented as “a possible middle road between socialism and capitalism”⁴⁶. And just in case, those who are mainly cited as the supporters of Universal Basic Income are those for whom even a middle road to socialism would be unacceptable: Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Charles Murray, etc.

The new consensus that seems to form, the shape it assumes and the arguments set in motion can create the impression of a global PR product: “A Universal Basic Income: An Idea Whose Time Has Come”. We should not neglect neither the penetrating power of simple ideas, nor the impact created by their redundancy; alongside the concerted efforts of certain platforms or networks of intellectuals such as BIEN, which have been promoting this solution for the past several decades.⁴⁷

However, there is something more here. This idea began to emerge independently and recurrently for the past 200 years.⁴⁸ Those who produced it ignored each other most of the time, while the political mainstream ignored them all. However, most often, ideas are not born out of nothing. In retrospect, we can see that the inhumane, efficient and, at the same time, defective system, which caused Marx to sense that there is a problem in the continued decline of the value that work injects in the price of goods and hence to question its conditions of possibility, it has led others to intuit an elegant solution by its simplicity. And now it is increasingly clear that the time is right for this idea, regardless of how it will be formulated on a case by case basis. Just as, after hundreds of years of

⁴⁶ Mark Walker, *Free Money for All: A Basic Income Guarantee Solution for the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 3.

⁴⁷ ***, “About BIEN”, *Basic Income European Network*, [<http://basicincome.org/about-bien/#overview>], accessed May 2017.

⁴⁸ John Cunliffe, Guido Erreygers (eds.), *The Origins of Universal Grants: An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. XIII. To my shameful ignorance, I have also produced a version of the story, believing that I discovered something substantial: Lucian Butaru, “Criza economică văzută din afara economiei”, in *CriticAtac*, August 1, 2011, [<http://www.criticatac.ro/9025/criza-economica-vazuta-din-exteriorul-economiei>].

ideological battles, gender equality came into the forefront during the very time when unpaid domestic work lost some of its necessity, it is highly possible that now, when human labor crystallized in commodities decreases exponentially, a decent means of survival to be permanently detached from the price attached to the labor force. If the threshold of decency will be conceived and maintained in correlation with social needs that are perceived to be objective, the UBI will diminish to an acceptable level the anxiety and the humiliation produced by the hard relationships of dependence within the family, the community and especially at the workplace, offering a negotiating power that will redefine the acceptable individual autonomy, and everything that derives from it. Probably, we will not see a fulfillment of social equality, nor that of equality of opportunity, in fact. Even establishing the level of decency will be a source of ongoing negotiations and struggles. The Left will still want more, and the Right will find plenty of reasons pertaining to efficiency or the loss of lovely traditions in order to maintain privileges, and possibly keep costs down.

Conclusions

All these issues demonstrate that the proposals concerning the UBI have nothing to do with utopia.

First, it is a solution to the contradiction that occurred within the integration of technological, social and ideological systems that emerged with the revolution produced by digital automation. And with each occurrence of a fundamental historical discontinuity, in an irreversible form, the contradictions were resolved by reformulating social relationships and redefining the foundations of the ideological consensus. This was done with or without bloodshed, on a case by case basis. In whichever way, in the end they have occurred.

Secondly, unlike the common projections, from anarcho-communism to anarcho-liberalism, plus the statist alternatives of the left and the right concerning the economic policy of social relations, UBI does not (naively, even unconsciously) entail an end to history, a final victory of the ideological battle, followed by a technocratic / mutualistic administration of the afterlife.

And, lastly, social changes produced by UBI will maintain the familiarity of managing certain relationships, a familiarity to which some have gotten attached. Thus, even if the de facto detachment of labor from price and that of survival from the social utility of work will be finally formalized politically and economically for everyone, the widely shared illusion that almost everything can be measured and equated will continue to produce useful effects. On the one hand, the desire that some feel in their comparison with others will still be fully satisfied. Self-esteem, pride and, for some, even the meaning of life can be fed not only with love, fame, but also by figures, reinforced by privileges and open doors. However, neither of this social feedbacks are necessarily reliable, legitimate or straight through and through. On the other hand, the waste management function will be met with great elegance. As long as it manages to limit, without riots, the number of those who want to see how far a piano can fly,⁴⁹ of those who cannot eat anything but truffles or those who do not feel fulfilled if their toilet bowl is not made of gold, etc., we will not be needing courts to judge the undermining of the national economy when someone gathers an unusual amount of toilet paper, nor will we need any political party meetings to decide the optimal amount of dildos for the current year.

And this approach may eliminate the need to resort to metaphysics to postulate a type of human nature, be it bad or good. It suffices to note that history has documented enough examples in this regard. Thus, a number of pitfalls can be avoided, and, especially, the power struggle be diminished a bit, which while it did not increase in ferocity, it has become more dangerous due to the technological means it can instrumentalize. A political economy that measures the public success of an activity and prevents the waste of resources through the market, beyond the fact that it is more positivist, it starts to become sufficiently secular to allow those who do not believe in it to live their lives according to their own values, and for others to provide sufficient motivation to drive things further. In any case, this is a future projection that leaves all doors open.

(translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi)

⁴⁹ Richard E. Meyer, "How Far Can a Piano Fly?", *Los Angeles Times*, July, 9, 1999, [<http://www.latimes.com/columnists/la-na-c1-catapult-19960609-t-story.html>], accessed July 2017.

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