

Guaranteed Income, or, The Separation Of Labor From Income

M i c h a e l H a r d t ^a

One of the most fascinating and politically significant elements in the recent public debates on welfare is the relationship between labor and income or, really, between labor and the right or entitlement to income. The 1996 welfare reform and the abolition of the AFDC program are most often cast explicitly as an effort to reinforce or repair the social connection between labor and income. In fact, the major criticisms of welfare programs since the 1960s and probably even the 1930s have in one way or another centered around the fact that welfare programs such as AFDC de-link labor from income. And indeed they do. The logic of welfare programs such as these is that specific populations for specific periods have a right or entitlement to an income despite the fact they are not working. In this sense the argument for welfare is and has always been posed as an exception to the normal link between labor and income. The 1996 welfare reform along with the various notions of workfare are in essence efforts to close such

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exceptions and re-knit the ineluctable relation between labor and income.

Resistances to workfare, that is, resistances to the mandate that all who are to receive an income must work, often accept this relation between labor and income and focus on the fate of the working poor. Some will argue, quite rightly, that the U.S. economy is not capable of providing jobs for all, that full employment is contrary to the economy's normal functioning. Others will focus on the kinds of jobs available and, quite rightly again, observe how demeaning and deadening many of these jobs are, and how poorly they are paid. This reasoning leads to an alternative political position something like this: Yes, we want to work, but we want good jobs that pay a decent wage and allow us to live a good life.

That is a logical and reasonable political position, but I want to explore a different route, one that is not based on the link between labor and income. In fact, I would revise the response to workfare programs I just presented by saying, No, we do not really want jobs, we do not really want to work; what we want is a decent income. Perhaps we do not need to accept the notion that waged labor is the only route to an income. Perhaps too we can leave behind all the moralism attached to work, with its supposedly virtuous, character-building powers.

I am interested in the proposal of a guaranteed income precisely because it represents an income independent of labor not as the exception but as the rule. That would certainly be the destruction of welfare as we know it. And furthermore it would radically change our notion of labor. I am completely in agreement in this regard with Lucy Williams when she insists that we have to understand the connection between the politics of welfare and the politics of wage work, or really the connection between the critique of welfare and the critique of wage labor.¹

The proposal of a guaranteed income is the practical result of such a critique.

The proposal of a guaranteed income might seem utopian or unrealistic to some given the present political context in the United States. We should remember that often political proposals that appear utterly unrealistic come to seem absolutely necessary in a very short period of time. There are now large debates in Europe, particularly France and Italy, about possible schemas of guaranteed income. And as recently as the Nixon Administration in the United States there were proposals of a guaranteed income within the government itself. More important, from my perspective, the proposal itself of a guaranteed income, utopian or not, serves an important ideological function—forcing us to question the work ethic, our moral attachments to work, and re-evaluate the social value and productivity of nonwork, that is, our creative activities outside of wage labor.

This is not the time or place to articulate the specifics of what such guaranteed or basic income would entail. In broad terms, I am thinking of an income paid universally to everyone in the society that is sufficiently large for a person to live decently. It might be better, then, to call it a citizenship income. The income would be paid without regard to work, so that any income derived from paid labor or other incomes would be added to it. What is important for us here, however, is not the practical specifics but the fundamental theoretical operation of any such schema: the separation of income from labor.

*Labor
and
Income*

There is, of course, nothing necessary in a trans-historical

sense about the link between labor and income. It would be interesting and useful to embark on an anthropological analysis of the schemas of the distribution of wealth in non-capitalist social formations on the basis of kinship relations, social prestige, and so forth—not to emulate their models but simply to denaturalize the link that exists in our society between labor and income. What such an analysis would reveal is that the notion that income is based on the quantity and quality of labor is proper and specific to capitalist society and capitalist ideology. Throughout the history of capitalist societies, the hierarchies of income have been understood as corresponding to levels of labor and productivity. (And we should note that socialist ideologies — from social democracy to State socialism — are perfectly in line with this capitalist notion.)

“He who does not work, shall not eat” poses the bottom limit. Labor grants us the right to an income; poverty and starvation are the threatening whips that guarantee our work ethic. And then, still according to capitalist ideology, the labor-time and the productivity of different individuals are the rationale for the hierarchy of incomes. As the old slogan goes, “for an equal quantity of labor, an equal quantity of products.” For a negative demonstration of this foundation of income on labor, we can go back to welfare as we used to know it. Welfare, as I said, was in essence an exception to this rule, which was certainly part of the ideological motivation driving its abolition.

In more general terms we can say that the right or entitlement to an income, like indeed a whole series of rights, is grounded on labor in capitalist society. Precisely because this is the functional logic that founds such rights, I think the most powerful avenue for critical legal study is by means of labor right, that is, using the logic of capitalist ideology itself. In other words, some argue for a citizenship income, or some such right to a basic income that is

separated from labor, on the basis of a logic that is *outside* of capital. Some maintain, for example, that a universal basic income is justified by our sense of charity or our social duty to the poor. Others support a guaranteed income as a form of compensation since the capitalist economy cannot provide full employment. I want to advocate a citizenship income, instead, on the basis of the notion of labor right and the logic of capital itself. In other words, I maintain that the changes in the contemporary economy—the postfordist regime of production, the predominance of immaterial forms of labor, and the consequent transformations of the social working day—lead labor right to support a basic income separated from labor. By focusing on today’s changing nature of labor and production, I want to work through the logic of capital, take it to its logical conclusion, and come out the other side.

What is needed at this point is an analysis of the recent changes in capitalist production and labor. Here I can, of course, give only a few brief indications in rather theoretical terms.² The general economic shift I am referring to can be summarized as the passage from an economy centered on industrial production to one in which the production of information and services hold the dominant position. Jobs in this new paradigm have a shorter guaranteed duration and require flexible skills. More importantly, they are characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, communication, and affect. My claim, in other words, which I cannot properly argue here, is that in today’s economy the dominant forms of labor are what I call immaterial labor—knowledge labor, information labor, communication labor, affective labor, and so forth. What this description might immediately call to mind are the high level jobs that fit in this category, such as software programmers and health care professionals: programmers deal primarily with knowledge and information and health care professionals are to a large extent

involved in affective labor, creating a sense of well-being. I intend this notion of immaterial labor, however, to apply also to low level jobs, such as fast food workers. After all, affect is clearly a large part of their jobs—service with a smile. What I want to emphasize is that as a result of this economic shift a series of traditional economic divisions have disappeared and consequently the mechanisms of economic measure have disappeared too.

Within the context of a factory regime with a clearly defined work day, the capitalist calculus linking an individual's labor-time and productivity to a specific level of income could function to a certain extent. Labor time and productivity in this context at least seemed to be measurable for each individual in clear quantitative terms. As the center of social production moves progressively outside the factory, however, and as we pass from a Fordist to a postfordist regime, toward the predominance of what I am calling immaterial forms of labor, it is increasingly difficult to delimit and measure the production of value in any such individualist framework.

In fact, we can begin to see clearly now that it has always been a mystification on the part of capitalist ideology that there is any possible relationship of *measure* between the labor of an individual and value. What we can see from the new forms of labor and production is that production is not limited to the working day. The time of production exceeds the time of labor and actually fills the entire time of life. The working day is no longer an adequate measure for the production of value. The barriers thus decline that divided work from leisure or, as I like to say, work from nonwork. Furthermore, it is increasingly clear that the production of value is not individual but collective and social, and thus cannot be located and measured in terms of the labor-time of any individual or set of individuals. Knowledge, information, communication, and affect are all produced socially

and collectively in such a way that their value cannot be measured with respect to the labor of any individual.

Consider, for example, the creation of an advertising campaign that uses a hip-hop theme. Does it make sense to locate the source of that production in an individual advertising employee and measure it in terms of the time sitting at his or her desk—when in fact the idea was based on the rap music heard at the club the night before? And it would be equally absurd to locate the production in the individual rap artist playing at the club when that music developed in a musical idiom and subculture that is produced and reproduced socially and collectively. In such a case, no relation of measure can coherently link value to the labor-time of an individual or even a set of individuals.

If the production of value is collective and social and if the time of production spreads throughout the time of life, then the notion of an income that corresponds in measure to that production cannot be limited to the working-day of an individual. The only scale on which the calculus makes sense is that of the society as a whole. In other words, if the labor is collective and social, then the income must be equally collective and social. Therefore, by pursuing the relation between labor and income to its logical conclusion, we arrive at a social income, a citizenship income, that paradoxically abolishes any relation between individual labor and income, like a ladder that we can pull away after we have climbed this far. The capitalist logic that links labor to income cannot be measured except at the most general social level—a general social income of citizenship that corresponds to the general social productivity—in such a way that income is divorced from any measure of the labor of the individual.

When I propose the objective of a citizenship income, I want also to question and deconstruct the notion of citizenship that grounds it. I want to ask, in other words, what defines the limits of this population that has a right to a guaranteed income? What logic would limit this social income to the boundaries of the nation-State? I would argue the proposal of a citizenship income should be combined with a call for global citizenship because both rely on the same conceptions of justice and equality, and moreover both follow from the same analysis of the contemporary changes in labor and production. That they follow from the same logic, however, does not mean that their combination has no new effects. Both are radical political proposals on their own, but, like certain chemical reagents, whereas they are relatively stable while kept separate, when combined they become explosive.

One can certainly argue for the right to global citizenship, like a right to a social income, on the basis of a non-capitalist logic. When, for example, Pope John XXIII in an encyclical letter claimed that we are all members of the human family and thus citizens of the world community, he grounded the right to global citizenship on our common sense of charity and fraternity.³ A stronger argument, however, must pass through the dominant capitalist logic in order to subvert it effectively. The right to citizenship, like entitlements to income, has been conceived throughout the modern, capitalist era as a function of labor and production. The wealth of a nation is produced by its citizens and conversely the right to citizenship is predicated on the contribution of labor. Immigration policies have thus closely followed labor markets and the needs of national economies. When workers were needed to build the great Western railroads in the United States, the nation

welcomed a flood of Chinese laborers and then when no longer needed barred all Chinese immigrants; similarly, workers from Magreb were welcomed in France when their labor was needed at the auto factories. The productivity of labor for the national economy has always been the foundation of the right to citizenship.

Given the recent processes of globalization and the proliferation of transnational corporations, however, it may no longer make sense to talk about *national* economies. Circuits of production extend across the globe without respect to national boundaries, so that different components of a single commodity, such as an automobile or a computer, may be made by workers in several different countries and on the basis of capital investments from several other countries. In addition, within a single national territory, workers with passports from numerous nations produce together (legally and illegally). It is no longer possible to identify any stable relation between the production of individual workers and the wealth of single nation. And this calculation becomes even more complex when we take into account the immeasurability of immaterial labor and post-fordist production. In the contemporary situation, then, when we pursue the traditional capitalist logic whereby the right to citizenship is founded on production for the nation, the only rational conclusion is that *all have the right to citizenship because global society as a whole produces wealth collectively.*

*Catastrophe
and
Utopia*

The proposals of a citizenship income and global citizenship are likely to arouse fearful specters. It will be feared that some

people will choose to live simply on the guaranteed income without working and that the residents of the poor countries will come live in our rich countries — or, in combination, that the poor from around the world will come to live idly on our generous handouts! That would be the end of our way of life as we know it! Well, the fears of these new freedoms might be greatly exaggerated. There are many reasons why people resist migration, and would continue to do so even with global citizenship. We are each tied to our local contexts by affective networks, family relations, landscape, and many other factors. Migration always has to overcome great resistances.

In the case of guaranteed income, there is no reason to assume that we would cease to create and produce when income is no longer linked to labor. There are enormous pleasures in production and creativity that all too often eclipsed by the pain and tedium of work. Here is where I think merely the proposal of a separation of income from labor would be enormously beneficial for its destruction of the ideology of work. It would force us to recognize the value and satisfaction of productive activity outside of the confines of waged labor. It would force us to blur and destroy the distinctions between work and nonwork.

Lucie White's analysis of Elaine Preston, a welfare recipient who describes herself as lazy, is fascinating in this regard.⁴ Lucie White points out rightly that laziness is a form of defense against a series of bad options facing Elaine Preston. I would say, using somewhat different terms, that laziness is an expression of the refusal of work that extends throughout a variety of social practices. Consider, for example, of Robin Kelley's description of how he and his friends working at McDonalds moved on "CP" time, colored people's time, a kind of laziness that was explicitly conceived as a refusal of work that spread throughout the Black U.S. working class.⁵

This kind of refusal of work, which I see consolidated

juridically in a guaranteed income, must be accompanied by an affirmation—an affirmation of social creativity and production outside of wage work. The proposal or even establishment of a guaranteed income would thus not be the end but only the point of departure for this most important task.

Notes

1. Lucy A. Williams, "Welfare and Legal Entitlements: The Social Roots of Poverty" in David Kairys, ed., *The Politics of Law: A Progressive Critique*, 3d ed., 581 (1998).
2. For a general perspective on the recent changes in capitalist production and labor, see Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism* (1991) and Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996). For a definition and analysis of immaterial labor, see Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy*, 133-147 (1996) and Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary2*, vol. 26, no. 2, Summer 1999.
3. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris: Encyclical Letter*, Huntington Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1963.
4. Lucie White, *No Exit: Rethinking 'Welfare Dependency' for a Different Ground*, 81 *Geo. L. J.* 1961 (1993).
5. Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (1994).