

# Critical Theory and Universal Basic Income

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Neal Harris 

Oxford Brookes University, UK

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified interest in alternatives to neoliberalism. One proposal that has been increasingly discussed by both academics and activists is the implementation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI). This would typically see all citizens awarded a regular cash payment, without conditionality attached. While UBI thus deserves considerable attention from sociologists, as yet critical theorists have not offered an extended engagement with the proposal. In this paper, I provide exactly such a critical theoretical perspective on UBI, subjecting the approach to an extended critique. When viewed through the perspective of critical theory, UBI emerges as a more problematic approach to social change, failing to offer what its most enthusiastic progressive proponents promise: ‘a capitalist road to communism’. Rather, in this article, I argue that, when viewed through the lens of critical theory, UBI appears likely to further entrench, rather than disturb, the neoliberal social formation.

## Keywords

basic income grant, critical theory, money, real abstraction, reification, universal basic income

## Introduction

Since the mid-1980s Universal Basic Income (UBI) has rapidly ‘risen up the policy agenda’ (Martinelli, 2017: i).<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has increased interest in UBI further still, both among sociologists and within the wider activist community (see Nwogbo, 2022a). It is clear to theorists studying alternative societies that the idea of UBI is ‘not going away’ any time soon and merits serious consideration (Martell, 2023; Murphy, 2019: 15). For Phillipe Van Parijs (1991, 1992), UBI’s attraction comes from the fact that it is ultimately a ‘disarmingly simple idea’. At its most basic, proponents of UBI call for a regular cash payment to be made to all people above a

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### Corresponding author:

Neal Harris, Department of Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Gibbs Building, Gypsy Lane, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK.

Email: [nharris@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:nharris@brookes.ac.uk)

certain age, without government oversight or conditionality (Lowrey, 2018: 4). The money can be spent however the recipients wish and they do not need to justify or account for their expenditures. Such an approach is increasingly gaining support across the political left (Loft et al., 2020: 2), with prominent advocates including Louise Haagh (2019), Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) and Guy Standing (2005, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

While UBI clearly deserves considerable attention from sociologists, critical theory is yet to offer an extended engagement with the idea. In this paper, I provide exactly such a perspective, presenting a left-wing critique of UBI drawing on central insights from critical theory. When viewed through the perspective of critical theory, I argue that UBI emerges as a problematic approach to social change and submit that it may actually serve to facilitate neoliberalism and entrench the central pathologies of the free market.<sup>3</sup>

For its contemporary proponents, such as Fraser and Jaeggi (2019) and Thompson (2022), critical theory can offer much needed tools for social research through its fusion of Marxian, Weberian and psychoanalytic insights. The exploration of such themes enables important, and often overlooked concerns, to be explored, such as changing forms of consciousness, rationality, and desire. Yet, to its detractors, the critical theory tradition can be associated with varying shades of Marxist dogma, obscurantism and Eurocentrism (see Allen, 2016; Bhambra, 2021). Conversely, in this paper, I hope to demonstrate the continued relevance of critical theory for accessible, reflexive scholarship, which engages with ideas that are of pressing concern within and beyond the academy.

Precisely what counts for ‘Critical Theory’ today is itself a source of contestation, with competing, and arguably mutually incompatible, insights considered part of the tradition (Thompson, 2016; see Keucheyan, 2013). Therefore, instead of simply calling my perspective ‘Critical Theory’ I am mindful to specify the particular flavour of ‘Critical Theory’ I will deploy. As such, below, I explicitly outline the insights from critical theory which I will utilise for this paper, demonstrating how this can be done in a manner that is both social-theoretically coherent and particularly apposite to researching UBI. A central aim of this paper, therefore, is to show that a productive and coherent critical theory can be used for social research today.

I start this paper by offering a brief, sympathetic reconstruction of UBI, exploring its core tenets and possible variations, before discussing attempts at its implementation (1). Having offered an introduction to UBI, I then present the meta-approach I adopt in this paper, that of critique. I explain the merits of this approach to social research and present the understanding of critical theory I work with in this paper (2). I then commence my critical engagement with UBI, presenting purported strengths from Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986); Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Standing (2005, 2017) and Haagh (2019) (3). I then engage with these claims through the framing of two critical theoretical concepts: reification and real abstraction (see Sohn-Rethel, 1978, *inter alia*). I submit that a critical theoretical approach shows that introducing a UBI risks unintentionally *perpetuating* capitalism, rather than simply ameliorating its excesses (4). I conclude the paper stating that while there are some undeniable quantitative benefits linked to implementing a UBI (in terms of healthcare outcomes and reduced inequality), a critical theoretical analysis shows that these positives must be finely balanced against less obvious societal pathologies.

### What is UBI?

The most commonly accepted definitions of UBI reinforce the centrality of each of the proposal’s three key terms: ‘Universal’, ‘Basic’, and ‘Income’ (Haagh, 2019: 1; Standing, 2017: 3; Van Parijs, 1992). For example, Haagh defines UBI as the desire to ‘give all residents a modest regular income grant that is not dependent on means-tests or work-requirements’ (Haagh, 2019: 1). Similarly,

Standing (2017: 3) introduces UBI as ‘a modest amount of money paid unconditionally to individuals on a regular basis’. It is worth exploring each of the three key terms further.

The ‘Universal’ of UBI necessitates that there are not ‘any conditions attached’ to be eligible for the payment (Loft et al., 2020: 2). That is, the income will be provided without consideration of the person’s sex, gender, qualifications, ‘race’, past-behaviour, current wealth, current income, forecast future income or future plans. Whether one has already earned twenty million pounds, whether one has spent their last few decades in prison for murder or whether one loudly proclaims their desire to spend the rest of their life surfing and never doing a day’s work,<sup>4</sup> in principle, everybody should be eligible for this universal payment. Thus, there would be ‘no means test involved’ (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017: 17) and no surveillance on how the money is actually spent. Typically, only the most basic eligibility restrictions would apply: residency within the polity and being of legal age.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘Basic’ of UBI is more controversial. As Van Parijs (1992: 4) rightly states, arguing that people should have a ‘basic income’ is not the same as arguing that everyone should have their ‘basic needs met’. In principle, a basic income could be well short of what is required for survival, or well in excess. For Standing (2017), this remains a crucial area of contention (p. 3). This is further complicated by a central fissure within UBI proponents: whether the UBI payment is meant as a replacement for all existing welfare or as an accompaniment to existing state provision (see Kela, 2016). As Martinelli (2017: 7) notes, traditionally left-wing advocates of UBI favour the retention of existing state provision and an *additional* UBI payment, while right-wing advocates propose the removal of all existing state benefits and their *replacement* by a modest UBI. The relative calculations involved, dependent on which approach was taken, can lead to the adoption of either ‘full’ or ‘partial’ UBI proposals, where ‘full’ are enough to live on and survive *in lieu* of other state support. In contrast, ‘partial’ UBI would be insufficient to survive off and would need to be accompanied by either state provision in the form of welfare or privately obtained or accrued wealth, or a combination thereof (Martinelli, 2017).

The idea of ‘income’ is the least contested. There is broad agreement that UBI should be ‘paid in cash’ (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017: 12). It needs to be ‘money’ (Standing, 2017: 3) rather than exchangeable vouchers or access to set services or provisions. UBI is agreed by all proponents to focus on putting dollars in the accounts of the population. While not agreed by all, there is widespread agreement that UBI should consist of a ‘regular’ payment (Standing, 2017) rather than being a one-off grant, awarded at birth, or irregularly, for example, once every 10 years.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with standard income practice across the wider capitalist workplace, UBI’s advocates typically suggest a monthly payment of accessible cash into the accounts of recipients.

While much of the academic literature on UBI remains theoretical and rooted in normative political philosophy (see Van Parijs, 1991, *inter alia*),<sup>7</sup> there have been several, highly analysed, UBI experiments (Torry, 2016). These trials can be divided into three groups – microsimulations, Global North trials, and trials in the Global South. Microsimulations have typically provided a larger amount of money for a longer period of time to a smaller cohort (see Martinelli, 2017: 16–17; Torry, 2016). These microsimulations have been split into two kinds based on whether the UBI is designed to replace or supplement/partially supplement existing state benefits, as discussed above (see Martinelli, 2017: 1). Typically, trials that replace socially provided large-scale provision (i.e. state healthcare) with individualised and marketised provision (i.e. private healthcare) have proved unsustainable (Martinelli, 2017: 1). To fund (often expensive) private healthcare for a large number of people would require considerably higher levels of UBI to be in place than has been accessible for the UBI trials to date. This poses a fundamental problem of the practicability of the actual implementation of UBI more broadly relative to more traditional alternatives, such as universal basic services. In keeping with Martinelli’s (2017) broader conclusions, microsimulations have

broadly shown that an ‘affordable UBI is inadequate, and an adequate UBI is unaffordable’ (p. 43). To unpack this statement: to fund people through UBI at a level where they can have access to private services is prohibitive because it costs too much. This chimes with the social democratic claim that universal basic services are simply more efficient than private service provision. While microsimulations have provided interesting data, the most discussed pilots have been more large scale.

In the Global North, three large pilots stand out: in Canada (Bennett, 2017), in the Netherlands (Groot and Verlaet, 2016) and in Finland (Kela, 2016). While these have produced important results, each falls short of the ‘ideal-typical’ UBI model discussed above. Typically, such projects are only focussed on low earners (this was the case in all three). As detailed above, ‘true’ UBI would be universal, meaning that all adult residents would be eligible, regardless of their level of income. Also, these pilots are limited by the timescale of the project. This is methodologically problematic, it is challenging to abstract meaningful conclusions about how someone would behave if they had access to a UBI *for life*, on the basis of how they live in the knowledge that they have UBI for just *three years*, for example.<sup>8</sup> However, that said, supporters of UBI herald these experiments as a success, noting improvements in the participants mental and physical health and decreased incidents of gender-based violence (Bregman, 2018: 37).

In the Global South, UBI experiments have been led by various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). The most discussed are the cases of the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India (Davala et al., 2015), Give Directly in Kenya (Matthews, 2019), the Basic Income Guarantee Coalition in Namibia (Haarmann et al., 2009) and the project by the Belgian NGO, Eight, in Uganda (McFarland, 2017). These cases all showed a dramatic improvement in the living conditions and healthcare outcomes of the recipients of UBI. However, it is difficult to draw meaningful comparative analysis as to the efficacy of UBI relative to other methods of poverty alleviation from these studies. Giving money and support to those in extreme poverty will lead to improved indicators of well-being, the question as to whether UBI would have been the optimal mode of delivery for such support would have required a comparative study, with alternative modes of service delivery also trialled. It is also worth stressing that the extent of the colonial and neo-colonial exploitation in these locales was such in the case-study countries that any financial stimulus would have brought dramatic positive outcomes.

In summary, proponents of UBI seek to provide each member of a given polity with a regular, basic, cash payment. This may be seen as a replacement for the welfare state or an addition to it. The precise definition of ‘basic’ is a matter of debate (Loft et al., 2020: 2). For many left-wing advocates for UBI, it is not just a viable means for offsetting the brutality of the capitalist system, but it provides a route towards qualitative social transformation. In the words of Van Parijs (1986), UBI offers ‘the capitalist road to communism’ and for supporters of UBI, data from the various trials can be deployed to further this position.

### *Critical Theory and Critique*

The term ‘Critical Theory’ was originally adopted by the ‘Frankfurt School’, whose principal exponents were Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin and Fromm (Held, 1980: 13–28).<sup>9</sup> Today, leading Frankfurt School Critical Theorists include Honneth (1995, 2014, 2016), Fraser (2008, 2014) and Thompson (2022). Central to all ‘Critical Theory’ scholarship across the generations is the awareness that power, knowledge, desire, and social rationality are closely connected (Rush, 2004). As such, critical theorists have developed a unique set of concepts and frameworks which enable a methodologically distinct approach for conducting social research (see Harris, 2022). Critical theoretical research, therefore, enables a valuable focus on forms of thought and of

desire, carrying insights from psychoanalysis and Hegelian-Marxism, which are not widespread within much contemporary, largely positivistic social research (see Rush, 2004). Interview data, for example, while of undeniable use to social research, can only tell us so much; for critical theorists, there are deeper striations of consciousness and desire, which need to be interrogated (Delanty, 2020; Fraser, 2008, 2014; Thompson 2016, 2022).

Yet, despite having a shared heritage, critical theory has grown in multiple directions over the decades, no longer applying merely to the work of the Frankfurt School. Razmig Keucheyan (2013: 1) notes that the term today is used to encompass approaches such as

the queer theory developed by the North American feminist Judith Butler and the metaphysics of the event proposed by Alain Badiou, as well as Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodernism, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak's postcolonialism, John Holloway's 'open Marxism', and Slavoj Žižek's Hegelian neo-Lacanianism.

While a common interest in the relationship between social-structural power, epistemology, depth-psychology and emancipation (broadly construed) can be identified within the approaches mentioned, there are clear differences of methodology and politics. Indeed, there are insurmountable incompatibilities at many levels between, for example, Foucault or Spivak's work, and that of Adorno. Postcolonial theory, or biopolitics, cannot be effortlessly elided with negative dialectics (see Delanty and Harris, 2021).

With this in mind, for the purpose of this paper, I draw on a specific cast of critical theory authors, chosen to enable me to utilise the tradition's core strengths while having clear intuitive merit for engaging with UBI. I will work with the classical framing of 'reification', which has long been a mainstay of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997; Marcuse, 1969, 1987, *inter alia*), and marry it with the work on 'real abstraction', which stems from the writings of Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978), whose importance to critical theory is increasingly being acknowledged (see Oliva, Oliva and Novara, 2020). Research into both reification and 'real abstraction' is fundamentally invested in the critique of social-structural power on the subject's cognitive capacities. They share similar convictions in anti-capitalism, methodological interpretivism, and in the meta-methodological conviction in immanent-transcendence (see Strydom, 2011). As will be demonstrated, the analysis of reification offers a broader optic through which to study the impact of social-structural power on consciousness, while the idea of 'real abstraction' enables a more targeted focus on how this occurs within the specifics of a money-based economy (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). Crucially, both insights can be utilised in tandem, coherently, to advance *critique* (see Delanty, 2020).

Critique is typically contrasted with ideal-theory (see Engelstad, 2021). Much of the existing normatively oriented literature on UBI derives from the 'Ideal-Theory' tradition (Bidadanure, 2019); from thinkers' abstract philosophising about 'just' societies. For example, Van Parijs (1991) adopts a quasi-Rawlsian methodology to advocate for the normative merits of UBI. In contrast to such 'god's eye', 'transcendent' philosophising, critical theorists prefer a sociological analysis anchored *within* existing social norms and practices (Strydom, 2011). This means that critical theorists seek to explore the relative strengths and weaknesses of an idea on the basis of the purported strengths claimed by its advocates, providing a base in existing political struggles and debates (Horkheimer, 2002; see Delanty, 2020; Schaub, 2015). While such an approach can be formalised in immanent 'normative reconstructive' methodologies (see Buchwalter, 2016: 57–88); in this paper, I adopt a less-formulaic perspective, identifying the purported strengths that advocates of UBI claim, which I then subject to interrogation to determine their coherence. The word 'coherence' is important here. Critical theory derives from the left-Hegelian tradition and is invested in a

dialectical approach to sociological research (Horkheimer, 2002; see Delanty, 2020). The instability of a contradiction is held to be the guiding force for social transition and is invested with normative and pedagogic weight (see Held, 1980).

Critical theory is also methodologically distinctive in its negativity; there is an explicit investment in the value of a *negative* ‘critique’ (Adorno, (1990 [1966]); Freyenhagen, 2013). Contrary to the ‘positivist bias’ of much sociological enquiry,<sup>10</sup> for critical theorists one does not need to suggest a ‘solution’ to provide a useful contribution to a debate: simply identifying the limitations of a proposition, or of a form of thought or desire, can be of vital importance (see Delanty, 2020; Marcuse, 1969: 11).<sup>11</sup>

The approach adopted in this paper is simple: I identify the central claims raised in support of UBI by its left-libertarian advocates and analyse their coherence. I filter the purported benefits of UBI through a conceptual arsenal rooted in critical theory. I shall interrogate the alleged strengths of UBI in light of their ability to challenge ‘reification’ and forms of pathological ‘real abstraction’. This conceptual lexicon enables an analysis which is not merely concerned with distributional justice, or optimal efficiency, but engages a wider range of socio-political pathologies (Harris, 2019; Thompson, 2022). As such, I argue that critical theory provides an important, and under-utilised, interdisciplinary-sociological perspective, which can shed new light on UBI.

### *Purported Strengths of UBI*

For many of its left-libertarian supporters, implementing a UBI would enable a progressive *qualitative* social transformation: a route out of capitalism (Haagh, 2019; Standing, 2017; Van Parijs, 1991, 1992).<sup>12</sup> By ‘qualitative’ social transformation, one can think of a fundamental change in the form of society. For critical theorists, this refers to a change in the dominant forms of thought and desire which predominate. Frankfurt School scholars have long held that the predominant forms of consciousness and desire within capitalism are deeply pathological (see Thompson 2022). A different society – a qualitative different society – would be one in which the dominant norms, forms of thought, and desire, would have changed, to enable a more flourishing, emancipatory society.<sup>13,14</sup>

For some of the more vociferous left-wing advocates of UBI, the implementation of the policy could be a crucial step in the movement towards such a qualitatively different social order (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986). This can be understood as the strong qualitative left-libertarian argument for UBI – it will enable the sublation of capitalist pathologies and the move towards a fundamentally different form of society. It must be stressed that this is *not* the only position held by left-wing advocates of UBI. Rather, there is a greater consensus among left-advocates for UBI that adopting the policy will induce a progressive *quantitative* transformation: offering a more just wealth distribution, in which basic socio-economic rights could be provided for more people (Bregman, 2018: 35–37). In this sense, the distinction between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ transition is crucial. The quantitative changes can occur within the same sets of values and norms, which dominate today. Society would not fundamentally change in the values, forms of consciousness, and modes of reproduction; it would simply be the same, but *better* or *fairer* to the extent to which quantitative progressive transformation occurs.

Left-wing advocates of UBI who see the possibility for both quantitative and/or qualitative progressive change are united in stating the policy would enable the recognition of divergent kinds of labour, providing financial reward for those who are not remunerated by the capitalist economy: such as carers, volunteers and fringe artists (Bregman, 2018: 38; Sammeroff, 2019: 22; Standing, 2011). Finally, such proponents of UBI state that adoption of a UBI would enable the ‘shrinking’



of the surveillance powers of the state as no policing of eligibility would be required: the basic income is awarded universally, without prejudice (Bregman, 2018: 33; Standing, 2017: 6).

To avoid presenting merely a 'strawman' progressive advocate of UBI I am mindful to engage with both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the literature. I stress that the more optimistic qualitative changes discussed are far from unanimously held among the advocates of UBI, however they have had a lasting impact on the broader theoretical literature and are thus worthy of inclusion (see Nwogbo, 2022b).

*Qualitative Social Change: Changing Values, Shifting Norms and Desires.* At their most optimistic, proponents of UBI, such as Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986), argue the policy can be seen as presenting a possibility for a route out of capitalism into a qualitatively different form of society. Most left-supporters of UBI suggest that more modest qualitative changes would be induced. In this section, I present both the more expansive and more tempered idea that introducing UBI could precipitate important qualitative socio-economic change.

The more commonly advanced, comparatively less expansive, idea is that UBI precipitating qualitative change focusses typically on the subjectivity of the social actor. In a society distributing a UBI the ideal-typical individualistic-atomistic capitalist actor would slowly be displaced by a more co-operative social subject, a product of a more solidaristic and co-operative society (Haagh, 2019: 5). While for critical theorists capitalism is characterised by the dominance of an instrumental rationality (Marcuse, 1969) in which subjects are structurally rewarded for adopting a game-theoretical approach to all social encounters (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997 [1944]), the implementation of a UBI would rewrite the rules of social engagement. For Haagh (2019: 5), a society which provides a UBI would necessarily value co-operation over competition. The 'existential security' (Haagh, 2019: 4) provided by UBI would, purportedly, induce a new form of sociality. In short, UBI would facilitate a qualitatively distinct form of social world, in which people are rewarded without needing to compete with each other. As such UBI has been supported as a way of providing the 'basis for co-operation in society' (Haagh, 2019: 5). People will be able to work together, secure in the knowledge that they are not competing for the basics of existence.

This qualitative change is said to flow from the 'universal' nature of the income; it is a 'right' not a means-tested 'entitlement' (Standing, 2007). Even moderate left-proponents of UBI suggest that people will readily become attuned to the new societal norm: that everyone's fundamental socio-economic needs must be met (Sammeroff, 2019: 39). Accordingly, the meritocratic ideology of neoliberalism would be somewhat displaced and the 'stigma' of accepting welfare support would fade (Martinelli, 2017: 24). For Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986: 643), this marks a crucial qualitative transformation: there would be no shame for relying on UBI to support your family; it would become an inalienable right, not a 'leaching' off productive society (Standing, 2017). From such a perspective, UBI induces a qualitative *normative* transformation, presenting a direct challenge to neoliberal values, in which co-operation, socio-economic existential security and fundamental shared humanity ascend as a common foundation for sociality. For Standing (2017), Van Parijs (1991, 1992) and Haagh (2019), the adoption of UBI would enable a qualitative transformation away from fundamental features of neoliberal subjectivity.

Some left-wing advocates of UBI go further. For example, Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986) have argued that the adoption of a UBI would support the teleological movement *into* communism. This is not a universally accepted position within the progressive left and the argument of this paper is not targeted merely at rejecting this less voiced submission. For example, Standing (2007) is clear that, while the delivery of UBI at the 'highest sustainable level' would be an obvious good, this is not presented as heralding the arrival of a communistic society.

Yet, in contrast, for Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986) this is exactly the claim which is made: UBI is posited as having an explicitly teleological function, driving society forward towards a communist horizon. Indeed, Van der Veen and Van Parijs have argued that their support for UBI on this basis is ‘fully consistent with Marx’s ultimate views on the sort of future we should struggle to realize’ (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986: 635). This is clearly a big claim being made by the co-authors: that implementing UBI will bring us closer to a communistic form of society. To support their argument, Van der Veen and Van Parijs turn to Marx’s (1970 [1875] *Critique of the Gotha Programme*). Here, Marx distinguishes between a primitive ‘socialism’ and a more desirable ‘communism’. In the authors’ reading, the normative-distributive imperative driving socialism is ‘from each according to their labour’ (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986: 636), in which each citizen enjoys the ability to work without structurally exploitative conditions. In contrast, ‘communism’, for Marx, has no reference to labour, rather the central criterion is ‘need’. As such, the normative-distributive imperative of communism is ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’ (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986: 636). In a communistic society, the basic needs of all citizens would be met, independent of the amount of labour they invested (Van der Veen and Van Parijs, 1986: 637). In the words of the authors,

Socialism, as defined, implies that ‘exploitation’ is abolished – workers appropriate the whole of the social product – while communism, as defined, implies that ‘alienation’ is abolished – productive activities need no longer be prompted by external rewards (Van der Veen and van Parijs, 1986: 637).

In such a formulation, communism is clearly superior to socialism. Socialism is reduced to an ephemeral, incidental waypoint on the trajectory to communism. Yet, in the authors’ reading of Marx, a socialist ‘stage’ is required as it plays a crucial role in the developmental trajectory of communism. This is due to two main reasons: (1) socialism enables the resocialisation of humanity so they can embrace communism and (2) socialism enables the building up of social surplus needed to facilitate the transition into communistic production (Van der Veen and van Parijs, 1986: 637). For Van der Veen and Van Parijs, UBI can function *in lieu* of socialism, which is proving impossible for progressive actors to achieve. UBI is thus presented as a possible route to communism – as a functional replacement for socialism – which can perform the essential functions of socialism along a Marxian teleology. Crucially, for the co-authors, UBI would enable a social surplus to be produced and would enable a resocialisation of the population, so they would be capable of embracing the merits of an advanced future communistic life (see Bastani, 2019).<sup>15</sup>

This more striking claim of a teleologically rooted qualitative change *into* communistic society is not one which is dominant within the literature and my paper does not focus on it as a result. It is presented here in part to differentiate the gradations of support for the idea that UBI may enhance qualitative social change, a view shared to a lesser extent by Standing (2017) and Haagh (2019). I now focus on the *quantitative* advantages which are associated with the adoption of UBI, these purported positive changes have typically been discussed at greater length within the literature.

*Quantitative Social Change: Better Outcomes Retaining the Same Norms and Values.* To reiterate, by qualitative changes I refer to changes in the forms of consciousness and depth-psychology of subjects, reflecting fundamental changes in social organisation and societal norms and values (i.e. having a less extractive relationship with the external world, being less acquisitive, egocentric). In contrast *quantitative* changes can occur within the existing framework of consciousness and desire (i.e. having more money, living longer). Typically it is the *quantitative* changes which make journalistic headlines; they can be more easily communicated to the general public and dominate the more centrist and popular literature (e.g. Bregman, 2018: 36; Sammeroff, 2019). Such claims



are also central to much scholarly work, for example, consider the work of O'Brien (2017), Dava et al (2015) and Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017). The purported quantitative advantages of UBI, in terms of the real-life outcomes, especially for the poorest in society, are held as a central boon of the proposal. This is presented as a crucial strength of UBI, both in theory and in practice.

In theory, introducing a UBI could 'ensure that everyone's fundamental needs were met' (Sammeroff, 2019: 21). This would undeniably reduce social suffering. The fear of starvation and homelessness, as much as its cruel reality, could be a thing of the past. This would enable people to escape cycles of generational poverty (Dava et al., 2015). It would enable a massive 'levelling up' as the worst off in society would be able to engage in mainstream modes of employment and consumption. The suffering caused by malnutrition, cold and period poverty, could be transcended. Such fundamental goals are presented as real possibilities, which could occur within the capitalist system, without the need for revolutionary social change. In most iterations of UBI, enough money would be put into the pockets of the poorest to ensure they can have their most basic needs met (Standing, 2017). Proponents of UBI argue that both their large-scale pilots and their microsimulations attest to these real benefits occurring in practice (Bregman, 2018). Across multiple trials, on key indicators, UBI is heralded as a 'resounding success' (Bregman, 2018: 36). This is particularly the case on the basis of the most fundamental healthcare metrics (Bregman, 2018: 37; Dava et al., 2015). The mental health of participants also notably improved dramatically across all major studies (Bregman, 2018: 36–38). Such positive results are replicated across trials globally (Martinelli, 2017).

There is also a feminist case for introducing a UBI, which is *quantitative* rather than *qualitative* in its argument. Various feminist advocates of UBI point to its remarkable success at reducing the incidence of domestic violence (Davala et al., (2015); Martinelli, 2017: 26; McLean, 2016: 284). For example, this was presented as a crucial benefit of both the SEWA trial in India (Dava et al., 2015) and the Mincome trial in Canada (Bregman, 2018: 37).<sup>16</sup> For O'Brien (2017: 49), there is also a broader safety advantage to consider: if all women have access to a UBI they do not have to work at night, away from the household, if they do not wish to do so. A further feminist case for UBI is that traditional welfare arrangements are typically 'entitlements [which] are calculated at the household level' (Martinelli, 2017: 26). In contrast, UBI is paid at the individual level, and as such, in principle, enables women to make more decisions themselves, possessing their own payment, rather than having to surrender financial decision-making to the realities of the broader 'living arrangements' of the family unit.

### UBI: A Critique

Taken together, the arguments above appear to present a powerful progressive case for introducing a UBI. In this section, I subject them to critique, drawing on the concepts of reification and real abstraction. I contend that while the quantitative advantages are undeniable, the qualitative changes UBI could bring are illusory as the implementation of UBI could in fact serve to *reinforce* the dominant modalities of thought and desire which exist within capitalist society. The adoption of the critical theoretical perspective is particularly valuable here, insofar as it enables a discussion of epistemic and depth-psychological concerns, which are often absent within traditional positivistic social research (see Delanty, 2020).

*Reification.* Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) united insights from Weber and Marx, and crucially, from Lukács, in their seminal work on reification. For Lukács (1972), reification chiefly refers to the artificial distancing between the subject and their external world which is induced by capitalism. The capitalist subject views the world in a disengaged manner, abstracted from their surroundings,

viewing others people, and their wider environment, as mere 'things', as 'dead matter' (Horkheimer, 1993: 81). For Lukács (1972), reification derives from 'the fetish character of commodities' and is 'the subjective stance corresponding to it' (p. 84). In a world which is governed by the exchange of commodities, a pathological form of consciousness comes to dominate. Reification is furthered by the market's dependence on logics of false equivalence, what Lukács (1972) calls a 'phantom objectivity' (p. 6). The capitalist subject is encouraged to reduce their external world to exchangeable, purposeless matter which can be swapped for equivalent capital. The exchange value of a human liver is now commensurate with the exchange value of a certain weight of turnips, or of plutonium. The qualitative difference between the aforementioned objects is 'written off as literature' by the reifying logics of the market (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 7). For critical theorists, the hegemony of such reified consciousness is a crucial obstacle to progressive transformation as it prevents the development of critical reason.

A fundamental concern for critical theorists, when assessing UBI, therefore, is will it help ameliorate reified consciousness? In this regard, the answer is a resounding negative. Rather than furthering a co-operative approach to all social relations, ever more domains of social life will become controlled by the market. As Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017: 12) argue, it is 'fundamental to the concept of a basic income . . . that it is paid in cash'. We would then see an attendant expansion of the commodity form, because we will see an attendant expansion of market actors. The capital relation will now become more, rather than less dominant, as more actors become 'consumers', regardless of how their capital is 'earned'. While the 'hidden abodes' of capitalism (Fraser, 2014) were undeniably irrational and inequitable in past social formations, they remained substantially immune from the reifying power of the market. For example, love, esteem and respect can be earned in a manner not mediated by wage-labour (Honneth, 1995). The introduction of a UBI would see 'recognition' taking the universal form of capital.

Recall that for Van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986) UBI could displace the socialist stage of production in the route to communism as it would enable the development of a community who are socially conditioned to more readily embrace communistic values. However, when viewed through a critical theoretical lens, UBI serves to further entrench and embed reification and false equivalence. By expanding the field of consumers, and reaffirming capital as the fundamental method of affirming social recognition, UBI serves to reinforce a reified atomistic consciousness, rather than serving to enable the transition to a more communistic form of thought and sociality. Critical theory thus offers a warning against the implementation of a UBI: by expanding the market-mediated domains of the social world, the deeply pathological reified form of consciousness associated with capitalistic societies would further proliferate, rather than recede (see Delanty, 2020). This would serve to retard prospects for qualitative socialistic transition as the reified form of thought associated with commodification and the capitalistic relation will be further enshrined, rather than challenged.

*Money and Real Abstraction.* While the discussion of reification may seem abstruse in the applied context of the discussion of UBI, Alfred Sohn-Rethel's (1978) increasingly popular work focusses explicitly on the relationship between *money* and cognition. In summary, the argument presented by Sohn-Rethel is that a society which is organised around money will inevitably reproduce logics of domination and bondage because money is at core a manifestation of petrified, abstracted labour time (Sohn-Rethel, 1978). While Adorno and Horkheimer's work focussed on the market and its relationship to instrumental rationality, Sohn-Rethel's insights enable us to focus explicitly on the relationship between money and impeded cognition. This is of real value to a critical theoretical investigation of UBI, which, as Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017: 12) argue, must be paid in the form of *money*.

For Sohn-Rethel (1978: 18–23), there is a fundamental pathology embedded within the logics of exchange which are connected to the transfer and holding of money. Importantly, this is not solely a psychological pathology, but a social pathology (see Harris, 2022). As Sohn-Rethel (1978: 20) argues the ‘economic conception of value is a real one’; while it lives only in the ‘human mind . . . it does not spring from it’. Rather, our actions, such as the everyday buying of selling of commodities with money represents a very real ‘social formation’ which induces a particular social synthetic form of cognition (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 2). The ‘conceptual foundations of the cognitive faculty’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 5) are shaped by the concrete forms of activity we take part in through our quotidian behaviour, such as buying bread or paying for petrol, whenever we hand over a note, or type in our pin. Crucially, the moulding of our cognition to that which is ‘socially necessary’ for capitalism occurs without subjects even ‘being aware of it’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1978: 20). Our use of *money* naturalises reductive ways of thinking and being, which are fundamentally in keeping with the structurally necessary logics of capitalism (Sohn-Rethel, 1978).

Expressed more formally, this means that money (the means through which UBI is to be administered) pathologically shapes the ‘dimensions of private consciousness’ (1978: 26) in a manner that denigrates the individual’s critical-epistemic and phenomenological capacities (see Thompson, 2022). As Sohn-Rethel (1978: 59) words it, ‘[a]nyone who carries coins in his pocket and understands their functions . . . bears in his mind, whether or not he is aware of it, ideas which, no matter how hazily, reflect the postulates of the exchange abstraction’. When we live in a society based on exchange we are forced to acquiesce unknowingly to forms of thought which reinscribe the abstract value of expropriated labour as the base equivalence of all social life. This occurs through cognitive processes that are connected to quotidian material acts, inescapable when living within a money-based economy. Such ‘real abstractions’ not merely serve to naturalise the capitalist system, but serve to impede efforts to disclose its contradictions.

UBI is definitionally based around money; having real, accessible money in liquid form. It cannot be operationalised in any form other than through money, and it cannot be presented through extended services, or progressive tax rates. There thus seems no way around Sohn-Rethel’s position; progressive advocates of UBI are forced to either find grounds to reject his claim, relativise it or accept a foundational weakness to the UBI approach. There is no way for UBI to be implemented without recourse to money. Indeed, advocates of UBI have claimed it is a positive that more people are awarded more money; feminists in particular have expressed support that care labour could be rewarded by *money* through UBI (see Flanigan, 2018). As such, through the implementation of UBI, a dominating and oppressive feature of capitalistic society, money, would not merely be reinforced, but its domain would be *expanded* (see Martinelli, 2017). Indeed, this expansion itself is heralded as a cause for celebration by some feminist advocates of UBI (see Flanigan, 2018).

When viewed through the lens of ‘real abstraction’, the dependence of UBI on money can be seen to further a form of domination which supports the capitalistic ‘social synthesis’ at the cost of the subject’s capacity to truly comprehend their relation to the external world (Sohn and Rethel, 1978: 60). The capitalist subject’s relationship to nature, to the Other, is hidden behind the veil of false equivalences, deeply connected to the money form. In short, UBI would further enforce an impeded cognitive capacity, which would defer the possibility of meaningful qualitative transformation.

## Conclusion

This is the conundrum of UBI for the left: there is an obvious *quantitative* gain – which is seemingly undeniable. The poorest in society will benefit from better healthcare outcomes, may live

longer and may have greater access to the market economy. However, these quantitative benefits do not signal the move to a more emancipated socialistic society. The counterpoint to these quantitative benefits is the further colonisation of social domains by capitalist forms of cognition and subjectivity. As such, in this paper, I have argued that the further dominance of pathological forms of desire and consciousness need to be factored into the discussion of whether the left should embrace UBI as a policy. As such, despite the claims made by its progressive advocates, when viewed from a critical theory perspective, it seems possible that implementing a UBI may entrench neoliberalism, rather than challenge it. Critical theory is thus of importance to this conversation, as it is through a fusion of Marxian, Weberian, neo-Hegelian, and psychoanalytic insights that reification and can be interrogated. From a critical theory perspective, one may suggest that the implementation of UBI payments could defer, rather than expedite, progressive qualitative transition.

Unlike 'Traditional Theorists', who proclaim a scholarly objectivity, critical theorists make no such pretensions towards 'apolitical', or value-free, research (Horkheimer, 2002). Critical theorists are explicit about their politics and reflexively acknowledge their research contribution sits as part of a broader political goal: socialistic transition. I have done so here: this paper is explicitly a left-wing critique of UBI. However, for critical theorists, such reflexivity is not merely limited to admitting one's positionality and political preferences. No investigation of UBI would be complete without reflecting on the political implications of introducing a UBI. A further, obvious question must be considered in conclusion: is it a good idea in the existing political world? To this end, I offer the briefest *strategic* argument as an addendum to this paper, as to why the implementation of a UBI should be resisted by progressive activists to compliment my critical theoretical rejection of UBI.

Because the idea of introducing a UBI enjoys 'support from the both the left and right' (Murphy, 2019: 13), *a la* Brexit, it is possible that a coalition of populist forces could be united to rally to the call. The promise of a left UBI would appeal broadly and the power of the neoliberal media could succeed, again, in obtaining the necessary support to propel the idea. However, once initiated, the proclaimed 'capitalist road to communism' could echo post-Brexit developments in the United Kingdom: the policy could be pushed hard right and could actually serve to normalise right-libertarian values (see Dearden, 2020). What may start as a UBI accompanying the welfare state may slowly shift to the idea of UBI enabling expedited privatisation. As Martinelli (2017: 5) notes, for right-libertarian supporters of UBI, crucially the idea is not to supplement the welfare state, but to 'replace it'. With a dismantled welfare state, the next logical step for the neoliberal elite would be the gradual reduction of the UBI payment. This would likely occur in two ways: one, creeping conditionality, through conduct policing – targeting activists and those who oppose neoliberal norms, and two, reducing the UBI level to the minimum needed to enable repressive desublimation. As the Bank of England sets interest rates in the United Kingdom today, UBI would be similarly adjusted to optimally inculcate public support and repress dissent, while providing only the smallest possible redistribution of wealth. When van Parijs was writing of UBI as the 'capitalist road to communism' in 1986, my political-strategic consideration above may rightly have been deemed deeply dystopian. However, in the populist, Trumpian world, with ever-decreasing space for critical judgement (see Thompson, 2022), such a calculated rejection of UBI on this political basis may now appear a more rational and sensible course to adopt.

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## ORCID iD

Neal Harris  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7336-1902>

## Notes

1. In this paper, I stick to the term Universal Basic Income (UBI); however, alternative formations such as Basic Income Grant (BIG) and simply 'Basic Income' have been used to refer to very similar proposals. For an analysis of the minor differences, see Standing (2017: 19).
2. It is also worth noting that UBI has a small number of vocal right-libertarian proponents, including Elon Musk (Clifford, 2018) and Charles Murray (2006). See also Hayek (1944).
3. See O'Brien (2017: 54).
4. For more detail on debates about the normative justifications presented for giving payments to those who do not wish to work, see Van Parijs (1991).
5. Those restrictions are, of course, also important, and the latter is discussed in this paper at length.
6. Although this idea has also been supported, see Ackerman and Alstott (1999).
7. In particular, within analytic ideal-theoretical political philosophy.
8. A further caveat here is that the participants may have considered the possibility of the trial ending prematurely (i.e. if funding was withdrawn), which could have impacted their behaviour.
9. It is worth noting that critical theory is internally varied, with many self-identifying 'critical theorists' far-removed from the Frankfurt School tradition. For more on this, see Keucheyan (2013).
10. Both meanings of 'positivist' are intentionally carried here.
11. This was framed by Hegel as the need to remorselessly 'look the negatives in the face' (Hegel, 1977: 36; see Marcuse, 1969).
12. The use of the terms 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' in this context derives from Hegelian philosophy, which offers an important foundation for much critical theoretical research (see Hegel, 1977). Nikolai Bukharin's *Historical Materialism: A System for Sociology* (1925) is also instructive here.
13. To further this point, critical theorists, such as Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2008, 2019) would argue that even if people all became 25% richer over-night, or lived for an extra 4 years on average; fundamental forms of consciousness, desire and cognition would not necessarily have changed. While society would undeniably have changed, the foundational logics of social reproduction would have remained the same.
14. These normatively weighty terms are of course controversial (see Allen, 2016). They have been defended, however, by contemporary critical theorists such as Honneth (1995) and Fraser and Jaeggi (2019).
15. It is worth noting that the co-authors are not ideological hard-determinists, who would believe that the implementation of UBI would inevitably lead to an emancipatory communistic world. Rather, the co-authors argue that introduction UBI could potentially provide the preconditions required for communism to *potentially* flower.
16. It should be noted that Mincome, like many of the other trials discussed in the first section, was not 'true UBI' in that payments were not given unconditionally to all people in a given area.

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