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MONEY FOR NOTHING:
A RHETORICAL HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a rhetorical history of arguments for a universal basic income. A universal basic income is a recurring cash stipend designed to establish a minimum income floor. Through three case studies, this dissertation investigates how advocates leveraged economic rhetoric to promote the idea of an unconditional guaranteed income to a skeptical public. Tracing the rhetorical history of arguments for a universal basic income provides opportunities to study argumentative topoi of welfare policy discourse, the impact of institutions like the presidency on those appeals, and the economic rhetoric at play in discourses of work and automation in modern liberal capitalism. I focus on three key texts in the history of arguments for a guaranteed income: Quaker activists E. Mabel and Dennis Milners' pamphlet "Scheme for a State Bonus," Richard Nixon's "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs," and Andrew Yang's *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income is Our Future*.

I argue that rhetors promoted the unconventional and radical policy of a universal basic income to the public by employing three main argumentative strategies. First, they continually invoked the locus of the irreparable to warrant radical policy action in response to dire circumstances, highlighting the unique and precarious nature of strategic inflection points and stressing the importance of a timely response. Second, rhetors emphasized the simplicity of the universal basic income, arguing that a guaranteed income could accomplish more than existing social welfare structures while reducing the economic and logistical burden encountered by the state. Finally, rhetors consistently called audiences to attend to the material and social precarity felt by marginalized populations and argued that universal cash stipends were the simplest way to alleviate poverty and precarity among those populations.

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To my parents, who taught me to think and listen.

To Alice, may the world we leave be one that is better to those like you.

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*To all who labor, and to all who have fought for fair wages and fair work.
We found their weakness, and it's right outside your door. Now testify.*

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CHAPTER 1: CIVILIZATION HAS AGREED: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME FROM 1918 TO 2020

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

- Isaiah 55:1

Civilization has agreed that members of modern communities must not be allowed to starve, without a chance to earn at least food or shelter.

- E. Mabel and Dennis Milner, "Scheme for a State Bonus"

In the rainy Spring of 1918, Dennis Milner left his stable job as an engineer at York confectioner Rowntree & Company to focus full-time on promoting a radical idea. He'd presented the pamphlet "Scheme for a State Bonus" to the War and Social Order Committee of the Society of Friends a few weeks earlier, but until that spring the English Quaker's activism had been relegated to part-time pacifist demonstrations. "Scheme for a State Bonus" was a proposition designed to quell what Milner termed "the social problem": a cash income, provided to all citizens, without a requirement to work. "Civilization has agreed," he and his wife Mabel wrote, "that members of modern communities must not be allowed to starve, without a chance to earn at least food or shelter."¹ The Milners drew the proposal's name from political context: Britain authorized a "war bonus" in 1917 to subsidize wages of select employees on fixed salaries as part of a larger effort to defray cost of living increases incurred during the Great War.² The bonus was contentious for its selectivity. In 1918, a large force of women went on strike, demanding the same "bonus" as men in similar industries. Milner argued in his pamphlet for a radically different bonus; one paid to all, ongoing, and destined to be "ours like the air and the sunshine."³

Despite some critical praise, warm reception from other activist organizations, and limited circulation in intellectual circles, the idea of universal basic income languished for years

after the publication of Milner's "Scheme." In the late 1960s, however, an unlikely champion emerged for guaranteed income: Richard Nixon. President Nixon unveiled his "Family Assistance Plan," a 1969 policy proposal that "represented the first attempt by an American president to place welfare reform on the national political agenda."⁴ The Family Assistance Plan (FAP) would have provided a guaranteed cash income to lower-income citizens across the country. Nixon's choice of terms, much like the Milners, reflected its time. Gone were the appeals to spiritual health, holy inspiration, and the language of "bonus," replaced by an invocation of "family," caution against excess, and appeals to streamlining government assistance programs. Nixon made clear that his goal was "encouraging recipients' independence and guarding against their potential dependence."⁵ Nixon's FAP may have failed, but the idea of guaranteed cash assistance was far from extinct.

When presidential hopeful Andrew Yang entered the 2020 Democratic primary, he made one policy the center of his campaign: the "Freedom Dividend." His campaign elaborated that upon taking office Yang would implement a "universal basic income of \$1,000/month, \$12,000 a year, for every American adult over the age of 18."⁶ Yang's campaign asserted that the grant would serve as a permanent stimulus to the American economy, promoting health, wellness, education, bill repayment, access to work relocation, and the ability to care for loved ones.⁷ Yang frequently invoked the power of the grant to do more than boost social and economic measures, going so far as to say it was necessary to prevent economic collapse from imminent technological unemployment and automation. "We have five to 10 years before truckers lose their jobs...and all hell breaks loose," he said in a 2018 interview.⁸

The universal basic income, or UBI, is a proposal that the state should guarantee an income floor for all citizens regardless of their ability or willingness to participate in a labor

market. Proponents of the UBI argue that the policy supports work not otherwise rewarded by a modern liberal capitalist economy, such as maternal labor, community involvement, family care, or activism/advocacy work. As Yang acknowledged, and proponents of the grant were quick to argue, the idea of a universal or guaranteed basic income is far from new. Traces of the thinking that led to Yang's campaign proposals can be found as far back in history as ancient Greece and St. Thomas More's 1516 novel *Utopia*.⁹ Yet despite their storied history, guaranteed income policies have remained at the fringe of economic discourse in America.

Advocates for a guaranteed income have repeatedly encountered a central rhetorical problem: promoting a "welfare" policy that relies on cash transfers without requiring work (or anything at all). American discourse closely associates the act of working and receiving income with personal value and morality. "We are citizens," wrote Judith Shklar, "only if we 'earn.'"¹⁰ Many Americans may support assistance programs, but unconditional permanent cash assistance is a significantly harder sell. This dissertation studies arguments made throughout the history of UBI to investigate how rhetors attempted to overcome that problem and promote the idea of an unconditional guaranteed income to a skeptical public. Tracing the rhetorical history of arguments for a universal basic income provides opportunities to study argumentative topoi of welfare policy discourse, the impact of institutions like the presidency on those appeals, and the economic rhetoric at play in discourses of work and automation in modern liberal capitalism.

I study arguments for a universal basic income by analyzing three twentieth and twenty-first century texts that argue for a revolutionized economic welfare system and universal grants: Evelyn Mabel and Dennis Milner's "Scheme for a State Bonus," published in 1918 in the UK and regarded as the first modern argument for a universal basic income; President Richard Nixon's "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs and the Family Assistance Plan," the

1969 televised speech in which Nixon advocated for a kind of guaranteed family income; and *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income is our Future*, a book published in 2018 by former 2020 Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang. In this chapter, I outline and justify the need for a project that studies the rhetorical history of the universal basic income. I describe the texts in focus for this dissertation, briefly overview my methods for considering those texts and their contexts, and explain their relevance to the overall project. Then I survey the existing literature in rhetoric, economics, and history surrounding these debates to justify this project's contribution to rhetorical study.

Texts and Contexts: From Quakers to Silicon Valley

This dissertation is designed to answer a central research question: how do arguments for a UBI throughout the 20th and 21st centuries warrant the necessity of a guaranteed income, and how do those appeals change or persist over time? I chose the texts in focus for this proposal based on a number of criteria: in the case of "Scheme for a State Bonus," the text is notable for its originality. "Scheme" is cited by a number of prominent scholars as the first modern appeal for a basic income grant.¹¹ Rhetors who imported early arguments for guaranteed income to the United States like Bertram Pickard (author of *A Reasonable Revolution*) largely adapted arguments from "Scheme." Others are notable because they advance arguments that have lived on in subsequent instantiations of UBI arguments, such as a focus on automation or the inherent moral compromise of working for income. President Nixon's address and Yang's campaign illustrate the important factor of scale. Andrew Yang's appeals for a basic income grant may not be very different in content than his contemporaries', but his comparatively outsized media exposure, campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, and subsequent presence in

national media when the COVID-19 pandemic thrust alternative income plans into a brief spotlight ushered his claims to a much wider audience than would otherwise have been exposed to the UBI.

The first primary text I will analyze is Evelyn Mabel and Dennis Milner's pamphlet, "A Scheme for a State Bonus." Published in 1918, it's the first modern appeal for a basic income. The Milners personally promoted it with the assistance of others from the Society of Friends in the years following its release, and the pamphlet spurred the creation of an advocacy group named the State Bonus League in England.¹² The State Bonus League was co-founded by Bertram Pickard (later Secretary of the "Friends Peace Committee" of the Society of Friends in London), who published *A Reasonable Revolution* to defend the idea of the "state bonus" in the United States in 1919.¹³ The state bonus, as laid out by the Milners in "Scheme," emerged from the principle that the State itself was "under obligation to provide a minimum of economic security to every individual member of the state." The Milners claimed that meeting this minimum level of economic security would greatly advance spiritual, mental, and physical health. The pamphlet contained a defense of the idea and some rough plans for achieving the measure, which could be accomplished by "distributing equally among all persons some fixed percentage of the National Income, say 20%."¹⁴

My analysis argues that "Scheme for a State Bonus" and *A Reasonable Revolution* framed guaranteed income as uniquely capable of resolving growing social unrest, managing social and economic inequality, and remedying spiritual decay. By dissociating the "reality" of economic precarity from the "appearance" of "the social problem," the Milners and Pickard crafted an argument that framed the problems of the early twentieth century as systemic and interconnected, avoiding the common pitfalls and historical contradictions of welfare discourse.

In *Revolution*, Pickard invoked the locus of the irreparable to argue that urgent action was needed to stem the rising tide of political unrest and revolution. By articulating a positive view of human flourishing and outlining the importance of a “state bonus” in achieving that flourishing, The Milners and Pickard were able to deploy an argument long ahead of its time.

My project’s second primary text is President Richard Nixon’s 1969 televised address concerning the introduction of the Family Assistance Plan. The Family Assistance Plan, which passed the House of Representatives but failed to emerge from the Senate Finance Committee, would have marked one of the largest expansions to social services in the history of the country, and would also have been the first major basic income plan implemented anywhere in the world. The Plan offered poor families a minimum income guarantee and was defended by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (then the Counselor to Nixon for Urban Affairs) at length in his book *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income*. The plan’s passage, wrote Moynihan, “would set a standard of social policy against which the rest of the world might measure itself.”¹⁵ Nixon’s address defended the merits of a basic income program to repair both economic distress and governmental problems. In a move highlighted by Moynihan, Nixon sought to distance his proposal from utopian ideals. Moynihan wrote that “‘Guaranteed income’ was the one label that said ‘poison.’ Accordingly, the president declared that the Family Assistance Plan was *not* a ‘guaranteed income.’” The proposals, he stated, were “addressed to the crisis of government- to adapting its structures and making it manageable.”¹⁶ Despite its failure, the Family Assistance Plan is regarded as one of the most important historical moments in the history of universal basic income. Nixon’s full-throated defense of the policy, paired with a conservative moral sensibility, created what *New York Times* columnist James Reston called “a great step forward...[Nixon] has cloaked a remarkably progressive policy in conservative language.”¹⁷

Nixon relied on historical tensions and contractions within welfare discourse to frame the Family Assistance Plan as a necessary intervention to prevent the further expansion of the overburdened national social welfare system. In my analysis I find that he employed three main rhetorical strategies to promote a (nearly) guaranteed income plan. First, he substituted “the family” as a figure of focus for the individual poor, framing the plan as a way to help needy children. Second, he invoked a discourse of health and ability to personify the existing welfare system as a lumbering, monstrous beast that consumed those it was designed to help. Third, he also invoked the locus of the irreparable to present his policy as necessary for stopping a number of looming crises. Nixon’s arguments failed to articulate what human flourishing would result from his Family Assistance Plan, instead focusing on the need for work, stability, and an economically viable government.

The third text I consider as part of this project is Andrew Yang’s *The War on Normal People*. Published in 2018, the book focused on the threat of automation and technological unemployment in the near future. Yang wrote, “The logic of the meritocracy is leading us to ruin,” because we are collectively primed to ignore the voices of the millions getting pushed into economic distress by the grinding wheels of automation and innovation.”¹⁸ Yang positioned the UBI as a prescription for an America in need of a “renewal of citizenship and humanity” that “will require a different experience at the user level of citizenship.”¹⁹ Yang claimed UBI as the beginning of a new kind of economy, driven by the demands and needs of citizens first. This “Human-Centered Capitalism,” or “Human Capitalism” for short, is Yang’s answer to the crushing wheels of meritocracy and automation.²⁰ A UBI would force the market to “serve humanity,” remedying what he terms “the most pressing economic and social issue of our time.”²¹ Yang’s call circulated widely. He was a frequent guest on talk shows and podcasts, and

his 2020 presidential campaign centered the UBI. To this day, Yang is the UBI's most famous advocate.

Andrew Yang claimed that a UBI was necessary in order to stop a social, economic, and political collapse resulting from automation and artificial intelligence. He argued that job losses wouldn't be limited to the lower class, and that workers across the middle class, knowledge work, and creative industries were in immediate danger. He premised his entire argument on the unique threat of automation, employing the locus of the irreparable to claim the current moment as a strategic inflection point warranting extreme action. He also rhetorically linked economic precarity, the election of Donald Trump, and concerning levels of disintegration and violence, arguing that a UBI's cash transfers would quell precarity and thus control the situation. Finally, he promised that evolving to a new form of market capitalism termed "human capitalism" would revitalize the idea of citizenship, turbo-charge our economy, and usher in a new hopeful future. Ultimately, however, Yang failed to articulate how "human capitalism" was meaningfully different from the system that created the problems he speaks of. Instead, his "Freedom Dividend" resembled a subsidy poorly designed to stabilize a humanity on the brink.

Rhetorical History, Methods, and the UBI

This project's starting point is David Zarefsky's "four senses" of rhetorical history. I take up Zarefsky's fourth sense, the rhetorical study of historical events, in which the critic "uses the critical tools cultivated by one's rhetorical sensibility to understand history itself."²² Robin Jensen takes up this banner as well, writing that the approach allows the critic to focus on "the messages" of texts themselves, "as in the encounters, interconnections, co-optations, and transformations that such messages undergo."²³ This approach allows me to highlight how texts arguing for a UBI operate in contexts that both enable and constrain appeals. Thus I focus less on

how “individual rhetors may have intended to use rhetoric to persuade audiences...and more on the formation of arguments, appeals, and narratives within a rhetorical ecology that includes diverse and competing variables related not just to rhetoric but also to material, social, cultural, and legal spheres.”²⁴ These broader contexts, then, inform my textual analysis as I engage the larger “symbolic processes” by which rhetors arguing for a UBI sought to overcome their main rhetorical obstacle: opposition to unconditional cash transfers.²⁵

This dissertation is a rhetorical history that utilizes textual analysis to identify key appeals, value structures, language strategies, and argument patterns and assess how those appeals change (or don’t change) over time. Because the texts in question are diverse in scope, origin, and purpose, linear comparisons between them may not always be possible—or critically charitable. Rather, I take up Bonnie Dow’s proposition that “texts and contexts are created, not discovered”; in this way I construct a text that can be studied to consider appeals for UBI not as a series of fragments or disparate acts, but as illustrations of an assembled body of discourse that crosses temporal, geographical, and spatial boundaries.

Tracing key appeals, arguments, language strategies, and argument patterns allows a critic to leverage individual texts to study the broader context of UBI arguments. I aim to identify what Zarefsky terms “cycles” in the “strength of appeals” throughout history.²⁶ As my analysis shows, arguments for UBI employ recurring topoi, strategies, and appeals that rhetors use to advance the policy. Textual analysis allows critics to study how those change over time, whether they increase in popularity, shift to accommodate changing value structures, or fade from relevance. These changes may also reveal “discontinuity in public discourse,” or moments in which previous expectations are subverted/replaced by new value structures or normative standards. I adopt Jensen’s approach to studying “historical conceptualizations” that is “less

about explicating the ways in which rhetoric *used to* construct [in her study] infertility and more about how those constructions of the chronological past, these forms, are ‘wadded up’ in the constructions of infertility in the recent past and present.”²⁷ Studying how those rhetorical “constructions” of welfare policy and UBI change over time as a result of shifting political and material conditions can explicate how rhetorical context shapes appeals from the past and into the future. My analysis will demonstrate the value of understanding the “context” of the rhetorical situation not just as an exigency for the act, but as a source of recurrent appeals, topoi, strategies, and patterns that continue to shape discourses of wealth and social support.²⁸

Economic Rhetoric, Public Policy Rhetoric, and Literature on the UBI

In his 2019 book *Narrative Economics*, economist Richard Shiller argues for an understanding of economic change informed by the importance of narrative, argument, and circulation. He writes, “Most contemporary economists tend to think that public narratives are ‘not our field.’ If you press them, they might suggest you check with other departments of the university...but scholars in those other fields often find it difficult to tread in the land of economic theory, thus leaving a gap between the study of narratives and their effects on economic effects.”²⁹ This project aims to close that gap by articulating the history of arguments for and against a specific economic policy throughout its use in various public campaigns. Economic discourse is profoundly rhetorical. More than simply animating us to save or spend, economic rhetoric influences attitudes, discourses, and trends throughout public policy and the direction of the world economy. Most importantly for this dissertation, economic rhetoric plays an integral role in shaping our conceptions of work, our expectations for profitable and worthwhile labor, and the distribution (or lack thereof) of profits and resources to workers. Economic rhetoric thus affects the lines of work open to citizens, the relative freedom those

citizens have in employment or spending, and the legislation that determines taxation and monetary redistribution.

I aim to expand what Christopher Duerringer terms “the rhetoric of economics in popular culture” to include academic, political, and social discourse on economics and work.³⁰ These include the ways in which public policy discourse and media frame citizens and workers, rhetorical distinctions between the “truly needy” and those who defraud a social support system, and how neoliberal market solutions are promoted as one-size-fits-all solutions to problems facing at-risk and marginalized populations.³¹ James Arnt Aune argued that “economics rests on ‘microfoundations,’” or broad philosophical commitments that necessarily shape the realm of the economically possible.³² I argue that these microfoundations recur just like themes and topoi within rhetorical contexts, and can therefore be observed changing, bending, and enforcing the limits of economic discourse throughout history. Principal among those microfoundations is rational choice, which Dierdre McCloskey and Arjo Klammer argue to be the “master metaphor” of mainstream economics.³³ Arguments for universal basic income are also implicated in this conception of economic action; proponents of the policy often frame its benefits in terms of individual economic choice. In this model of economic participation, the welfare state is framed as ancillary, with cash payouts sometimes cast as replacements for welfare and uplift programs. Rhetorical criticism of economic rhetoric surrounding universal basic income must primarily be aware of how those discourses legitimize and participate in the “microfoundations” upon which mainstream liberal economics rest. These microfoundations are lent legitimacy by their ongoing centrality in shaping economic discourse and narrative.

Historians and economists have written on the history of the universal basic income, although the work done pales in comparison to studies of other, more successful economic

policies such as Roosevelt's New Deal. First among the longform histories of UBI is Parijs and Vanderborght's *Basic Income*, an overview of the policy that provides a brief history before advocating for the policy through various arguments.³⁴ One classic study of early UBI advocacy is Walter van Trier's *Every One a King*, a study of the British landscape between WWI and II that includes a historical account of "Scheme for a State Bonus."³⁵ An absence in the literature is a critical account of how the logics and "microfoundations" of the modern gig economy (driven in large part by Silicon Valley investment) have both enabled and constrained the possibilities offered by UBI as an alternative vision of the economy. Studies of UBI have largely focused on the variety of its current and past instantiations, or on the details of various guaranteed income projects around the world.³⁶

Investigations of the universal basic income within rhetorical studies are scarce. A significant exception is Robert Asen's 2001 article "Nixon's Welfare Reform: Enacting Historical Contradictions of Poverty Discourses," which deals in large part with Nixon's address on the Family Assistance Plan. According to Asen, Nixon's attempt to "articulate a new approach to federal welfare policy" was frustrated by "historical contradictions of poverty discourses."³⁷ Asen frames Nixon's attitude as vacillating "between compassion and hostility, engaging categories of deservingness and undeservingness."³⁸ While Asen focuses primarily on the Plan as a site of contestation in welfare and social support discourse, I extend his analysis to consider Nixon's address on the Family Assistance Plan as an entry in the ongoing debate over the role of the state in providing income guarantees. Asen's formulation of "deservingness" is helpful, but by framing that discourse of worth in terms of the history of arguments for a UBI and contestations over citizenship I situate the Family Assistance Plan within discourses of work/work ethics and rhetorics of redistribution throughout the twentieth century.

Some arguments for the universal basic income invoke narratives about the state of the modern economy or industrial world. Some, such as Yang's, figure UBI as a continuation of economic and historical progress; a solution in line with a gradual arc of historical and economic progress, a way to mediate the fallout of technological determinism seen to its ends. Other rhetors argue for the disconnection of the jobs-through-income link as part of a broader concern for negating instability and collapse within the industrial world. Some work in rhetoric has considered the role of economic narrative as a driver of policy discourse. Jeffrey St. Onge, for example, has focused on the role of political myth and neoliberal economic narrative in health care reform.³⁹ Elsewhere, Meg Kunde has explored the ways in which Ronald Reagan extended a covenantal narrative to justify a trickle-down economic arrangement in terms of the individual freedom of expression it allowed.⁴⁰ Kunde argues that Reagan utilized appeals reliant on "morals, obligations, and relationships," which he leveraged to create "a covenantal economy in which 'impossible coalitions' made sense."⁴¹ Arguments for universal basic income as a replacement for (or often an addition to) existing welfare programs are often framed as a way for individuals to reestablish lost coalitions. In a broader sense, a UBI could also be said to be renewing a kind of liberal covenant between the individual and the state. Judith Shklar writes that the connection between work and income, and the dignity of work and personal achievement, have been central to the American civic self-identification since the Colonial era. The opportunity to work and be paid an earned reward for labor came to be seen "as a social right, because it was a primary source of public respect."⁴² This "vision of economic independence," she writes, "took the place of an outmoded notion of public virtue, and it has retained its powerful appeal. We are citizens only if we 'earn.'"⁴³ Rather than a challenge to existing economic order, UBI may be more correctly understood as subsidizing its continuation.

While economic rhetoric involves the process of making appeals concerning economics, economic policy, and economic practice, public policy rhetoric is a distinct project in rhetorical criticism. Public policy rhetoric is both the process of decision-making and argument concerning the role of policy as well as the arguments and claims made by public policy on citizens. Understanding the role of public policy rhetoric within the rhetorical history of the UBI allows my project to interrogate what Asen calls “the power of rhetoric to construct policy problems, craft solutions, and promote policies to citizens.”⁴⁴ Since public policy debates “raise issues of authorship, temporality, and polysemy differently than regular speech texts,” my project also accounts for the nature of public policy debate as temporally malleable. Debates about social welfare and social support proceed “across time...rather than appearing at a particular moment.”⁴⁵ I combine this methodology with Jensen’s “crumpled” conception of rhetorical history to analyze how rhetors employ certain recurring arguments, themes, and topoi while necessarily occluding others. This approach allows me to extend Asen’s conception of public policy as “mediation of rhetorical and material forces” by figuring recurring themes and topoi into my analysis to demonstrate how the point of equilibrium between rhetorical, political, and economic forces changes over time as a result of shifting institutional, cultural, and material contexts.⁴⁶

The Value of Rhetorical Studies of Economic Argument

Robert Shiller wrote in *Narrative Economics* that “criticism of traditional approaches to macroeconomic research is not new.”⁴⁷ As an example of these critiques, Shiller cites Tjalling Koopmans, who called in 1947 for theories “based on actual observations of underlying human behavior” instead of abstract models that presumed a perfectly rational economic actor. While many modern economists label that study as “behavioral economics,” a field that has seen an

explosion of popularity in recent years, Shiller writes that “traditional economic approaches fail to examine the role of public *beliefs* in major economic events—that is, narrative.”⁴⁸ While Shiller is entirely correct that economics often fails to consider the formation of narrative, his conception of narrative economics is decidedly narrow. He treats public sentiment as a contagion, going so far as to base a good deal of his appeal on an epidemiological conception of arguments as viruses that “go viral” as news stories and popular beliefs spread them for consumption. Shiller is right to figure the role of persuasion in economics as central to the formation of policy and public opinion, but his insight cannot be followed by economic analysis alone. He cites “a doctrine that might be called the immaculate conception of the indifference curve, that is, that tastes are simply given, and that we cannot inquire into the process by which they are formed.”⁴⁹ What he misses, however, is that many scholars have already taken up these questions, writing studies that examine in detail how tastes and public opinion are formed and reinforced.⁵⁰ Rhetorical study is uniquely equipped to investigate the role of public discourse in shaping public, economic, and social policy. I follow in a long line of scholars committed to the idea that indifference curves are far from immaculately conceived.

It’s also important to subject unsuccessful economic arguments to rhetorical criticism in order to understand the means by which arguments are changed through time and through different institutions. Economic rhetoric is a vibrant field of discussion, but often scholarship centers on successful progressive economic campaigns or conservative economic rhetoric as sites of persuasion and policy action.⁵¹ By placing a wider range of economic rhetoric under examination, scholars of rhetoric can develop a fuller understanding of historical arguments that impact American economic discourse to this day. As the effects and ethical compromises of capitalism become more prominent subjects of critique in American public discourse, it’s

become evident that one of our most vital public debates concerns the future of our working arrangements and the contested role of the state in guaranteeing the well-being of its citizens. Recent history has confirmed this urgency: the global coronavirus pandemic affirmed once more the precarity experienced by lower-class/at-risk citizens, and debates about employment (and medical insurance's ties to employment) resulting from pandemic policies and assistance programs have demonstrated the ongoing centrality of employment and social welfare programs in American political discourse.

By combining these approaches to rhetorical criticism, rhetorical history, and public policy criticism, this dissertation aims to fulfil Grossberg's 2010 call for projects that "contribute to an ongoing and collective project to take up economic questions without falling back into forms of reductionism and essentialism."⁵² In the chapters that follow, I identify key appeals like the locus of the irreparable, governing value structures, language strategies such as personification, and argument patterns within the three central texts I study. I begin with E. Mabel and Dennis Milner's "Scheme for a State Bonus," the first modern text to propose a UBI, to explore how arguments made for a guaranteed income a century ago reflect those still around us today.

¹ E. Mabel and Dennis Milner, "Scheme for a State Bonus (1918)," in *The Origins of Universal Grants: An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, ed. John Cunliffe and Guido Erreygers (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), 5.

² "War Bonuses for Government Employees in Great Britain," *Monthly Review of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* 5, no. 2 (1917): 139–42.

³ Bertram Pickard, *A Reasonable Revolution: Being A Discussion of the State Bonus Scheme -- A Proposal for a National Minimum Income* (Great Britain: G. Allen & Unwin, 1919), 9.

⁴ Robert Asen, "Nixon's Welfare Reform: Enacting Historical Contradictions of Poverty Discourses," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2001): 262.

⁵ Asen, "Welfare," 264.

⁶ "The Freedom Dividend," Yang2020 - Andrew Yang for President, December 9, 2019, <https://www.yang2020.com/policies/the-freedom-dividend/>; "The 'Freedom Dividend': Inside Andrew Yang's Plan to Give Every American \$1,000," <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-freedom-dividend-inside-andrew-yangs-plan-to-give-every-american-1000/>; "'A Game Changer': Andrew Yang Explains How He'd Give Every American \$1,000 Per Month," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/23/770962701/a-game-changer-andrew-yang-explains-how-he-d-give-every-american-1-000-per-month>.

⁷ Yang's campaign materials touted a boost of "12.56 to 13.10 percent," which would amount to a projected \$2.5 trillion by 2025.

⁸ Kevin Roose, "His 2020 Campaign Message: The Robots Are Coming," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/technology/his-2020-campaign-message-the-robots-are-coming.html>.

⁹ Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 51–52, 264. More's reference to a guaranteed standard of living is derived from *Utopia*. *Utopia* was written in Latin, but van Parijs and Vanderborght provide a translation of a relevant section: "While it would have been much better to ensure that there would be income for life and that for no one there would be such a terrible necessity first to steal and next to perish." This translation hinges on the phrase "aliquis proventus vitae," which the authors translate as "income for life." There's room for flexibility here, however, as "aliquis" could be interpreted as referring to an amount ("some") or to a duration ("for some time). "Proventus," which the authors translate to "income," might also be taken to mean "result," "yield/crop," or "outcome." Whether this phrase guarantees a right to income or a right to a "means" of income is an interesting point of dispute. More interesting, however, is the tension that this invocation of More reveals between a secular dispensation and the affordances of an imagined distributionism (the latter was the lens through which some early 20th century Christian thinkers leveraged similar ideas).

¹⁰ Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 66–67.

¹¹ Extensive information on the history of the "Scheme" can be found in the work of Walter Van Trier. Van Trier argues in his paper "Scheme for a State Bonus and the Early Roots of the Basic Income idea in the U.K." that three key factors made the proposal modern: "because 'land' or 'inheritance' did not play a crucial or even an important role in the argument, because the bonus would not be paid in kind, and because of the intention to work through a comprehensive and inclusive tax-benefit system."

¹² E. Mabel and Dennis Milner, "Scheme," 12.

¹³ Pickard, *Revolution*.

¹⁴ E. Mabel and Dennis Milner, "Scheme."

¹⁵ Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 5.

¹⁶ "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs: Family Assistance Plan," Richard Nixon Foundation, August 5, 2019, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2019/08/address-nation-domestic-programs-family-assistance-plan/>.

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- ¹⁷ Asen “Welfare,” 263.
- ¹⁸ Andrew Yang, *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America’s Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income Is Our Future* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), xix.
- ¹⁹ Yang, *War*, 211. Also, “user level of citizenship” is a horrendous phrase.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.
- ²² Cara Finnegan, “Doing Rhetorical History of the Visual: The Photograph and the Archive,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 200-1; David Zarefsky, “Four Senses of Rhetorical History,” in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 19-32.
- ²³ Robin E. Jensen, *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 13-14.
- ²⁴ Jensen, *Infertility*, 11-12.
- ²⁵ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring,” *The Speech Teacher* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 1974): 12.
- ²⁶ David Zarefsky, “The Great Society as a Rhetorical Proposition,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65, no. 4 (1979): 364-78.
- ²⁷ Jensen, *Infertility*, 5.
- ²⁸ Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968), 1-14.
- ²⁹ Robert J. Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), xix.
- ³⁰ Christopher M. Duerringer, “Research in the Rhetoric of Economics: A Critical Review,” *Review of Communication* 18, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 289.
- ³¹ Jillian Báez and Mari Castañeda, “Two Sides of the Same Story: Media Narratives of Latinos and the Subprime Mortgage Crisis,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 1 (2014): 27-41; Amos Kiewe and Davis W. Houck, *A Shining City on a Hill: Ronald Reagan’s Economic Rhetoric, 1951-1989* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 79.
- ³² James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (New York; London: Guilford, 2002), 11.
- ³³ Arjo Klammer, Deirdre N. McCloskey, and Robert M. Solow, eds., *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14.
- ³⁴ Parijs and Vanderborght, *Basic Income*.
- ³⁵ Walter van Trier, *Every One a King: An Investigation into the Meaning and Significance of the Debate on Basic Incomes with Special Reference to Three Episodes from the British Inter-War Experience*, Nieuwe Reeks van Doctoraten in de Sociale Wetenschappen, nr. 22 (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit, Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen, Departement Sociologie, 1995), 30-35.
- ³⁶ Jurgen De Wispelaere and Lindsay Stirton, “The Many Faces of Universal Basic Income,” *The Political Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2004): 266-274; Harvey, Philip, “The Relative Cost of a Universal Basic Income and a Negative Income Tax,” *Basic Income Studies* 1, no. 2, (2006). For more on comparative analysis, see: Tondani, Davide, “Universal Basic Income and Negative Income Tax: Two Different Ways of Thinking Redistribution,” *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 38, no. 2, 2009, 246-255; and Widerquist, Noguera, Vanderborght, and De Wispelaere, eds., *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013).
- ³⁷ Asen, “Welfare,” 263-64.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.
- ³⁹ Jeffrey St. Onge, “Health Care Reform as ‘Socialized Medicine’: The Formative Years of a Political Myth,” *Western Journal of Communication* 79, no. 3 (June 5, 2015): 348-66. St. Onge has elsewhere explored the role of “common sense” rhetoric in Barack Obama’s health care discourse.
- ⁴⁰ Meg Kunde, “Making the Free Market Moral: Ronald Reagan’s Covenantal Economy,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 217-52.
- ⁴¹ Kunde, “Moral,” 221-22.

⁴² Shklar, *Citizenship*, 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

⁴⁴ Robert Asen, “Reflections on the Role of Rhetoric in Public Policy,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2010): 122.

⁴⁵ Asen, “Reflections,” 124–25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁷ Shiller, *Narrative*, xv.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵⁰ Two notable inclusions are Adrian J Slywotzky and Karl Weber, *Demand: Cracking the Code of What People Really Desire* (New York: Headline, 2011); Mark Bartholomew, *Adcreep: The Case Against Modern Marketing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵¹ Some projects in this vein include the aforementioned *Selling the Free Market*, Michael J. Lee’s *Creating Conservatism*, Levasseir and Gring-Pemble’s “Not All Capitalist Stories are Created Equal: Mitt Romney’s Bain Capital Narrative and the Deep Divide in American Economic Rhetoric,” Houck and Kiewe’s *A Shining City on a Hill: Ronald Reagan’s Economic Rhetoric, 1951-89*, Robert Asen’s *Invoking the Invisible Hand: Social Security and the Privatization Debates*, and “‘Are We Going to Now Govern by Anecdote?’: Rhetorical Constructions of Welfare Recipients in Congressional Hearings, Debates, and Legislation, 1992-1996,” by Lisa M. Gring-Pemble.

⁵² Lawrence Grossberg, “Standing on a Bridge: Rescuing Economies From Economists,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2010): 316.

CHAPTER 2

OURS LIKE THE AIR AND SUNSHINE: UBI'S FIRST MODERN CHAMPIONS

“‘Great are the uses of adversity’-- but even the preacher has his breakfast.”
E. Mabel and Dennis Milner, “Scheme for a State Bonus”

A century before Andrew Yang made his debut as a presidential candidate and decades before President Nixon proffered a version of guaranteed income, what we now call “universal basic income” found champions across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1918 three Quaker peace activists from Britain with disparate backgrounds published passionate arguments for what they termed a “state bonus”: a guaranteed cash stipend, paid weekly, to all, with no strings attached. Regardless of creed, race, gender, or status, each citizen would be guaranteed a share of Britain’s “national production.”¹ The concept of an unconditional income had circulated in some communities for a few hundred years, but never had a plan been so comprehensive—or come so close to the public eye.

But when the story of UBI gets told, these important characters often get left out. Examples abound: Rutger Bregman, author of 2018’s *Utopia for Realists*, nods to the history of a guaranteed income in Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the “countless economists and philosophers” who “spanned the spectrum from left to right” in support of the policy.² But Bregman’s popular telling, like others, failed to account for those three Quaker activists and their two documents that launched modern arguments for a guaranteed income at the beginning of the twentieth century: Evelyn Mabel and Dennis Milner’s “Scheme for a State Bonus” and Bertram Pickard’s *A Reasonable Revolution*. Leaving out the Milners and Pickard is no small oversight. It illustrates a larger absence in the literature and discourse surrounding universal basic income. While scholars in history, political philosophy, and economics have considered the past and

monetary dimensions of a basic income, little rhetorical scholarship exists that contends with guaranteed income plans. Robert Asen has analyzed the contradictory appeals of President Richard Nixon in advancing the Family Assistance Plan, but no rhetorical criticism exists of earlier calls for a basic income, and Asen's work, as I show in the next chapter, focuses on situating Nixon's speech within the history of social welfare policy in America.³ In scholarship outside of rhetorical studies that focuses on UBI, scholars have by and large failed to account for the history of Quaker thought, theology, and practice that influenced "Scheme for a State Bonus" and *A Reasonable Revolution*. In doing so, a substantial impact on the development of the UBI—and progressive social activism more broadly—has been left unstudied.

I argue that "Scheme for a State Bonus" and *A Reasonable Revolution* advance arguments for a guaranteed income by framing the state bonus as uniquely capable of peacefully quelling social unrest and solving the worsening "social problem" of inequality while highlighting the ability of the bonus to promote moral and spiritual uplift. Both texts defend a guaranteed income as a simple, peaceful solution to labor and class strife while articulating a positive view of human flourishing that would be supported by the economic security the state bonus would provide. The authors advanced their position by dissociating the "reality" of what they termed economic dependence from the "appearance" of the social problem as a whole. This dissociation remedied the apparent incompatibility of a universal cash income guarantee and a society that relied on work by defining the "social problem" affecting the lower classes as "economic dependence" rather than moral failing. The authors framed the social problems of the early twentieth century as systemic and interconnected and avoided some of the "fundamental contradictions" that Asen identified in discourses of welfare policy between "categories of deservingness and undeservingness." In *A Reasonable Revolution* Bertram Pickard invoked what

J. Robert Cox termed “the locus of the irreparable” to position the Milner’s radical plan as immediately necessary for the protection of a delicate peace increasingly under threat from revolutionary violence. Rather than constitute the role of public social policy as “providing sustenance to some and deterrence to others,” the Milners and Pickard framed the poor and underprivileged instead as victims of a fundamentally unjust social and economic system that was never able to secure their physical, moral, and spiritual health.⁴ In doing so, they articulated a positive view of human flourishing that required a guaranteed income in order to become reality.

This chapter begins with a brief history of the UBI before 1918 and a short summary of the lives of the authors. Then I explore through a textual analysis of “Scheme” and *Revolution* how the Milners and Pickard engaged in “patterns of symbolic choice” that framed the state bonus as a necessary solution to the threat of economic unrest, social inequality, and poverty. I show that they did so by placing emphasis on the simplicity and universality of the policy, dissociating the “reality” of economic dependence from the “appearance” of social problems, and framing the state bonus as a necessary check against the threat of revolutionary violence.⁵ Then I turn to the tradition of Quaker theology to illustrate how the rhetors advocated for a guaranteed income on the basis of the increase in leisure time, moral uplift, and the economic security that the bonus would provide. In doing so, I focus on what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell calls “symbolic processes” that “recur in different times, in different places, and in response to different issues.”⁶ Comparing these symbolic processes between texts and contexts reveals how those processes recur (and are recurred to as a resource) across time. All political philosophies operate from an assumed conception of human nature and behavior. “Scheme for a State Bonus” and *A Reasonable Revolution* are more than historical artifacts in the story of UBI. They’re a

testament to the influence of pacifist activism and Quaker thought on the development of a policy idea that today is often thought of as a utopian pipedream, the territory of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, or an attack on existing social welfare systems.

A Mercifully Compact History of Universal Income Proposals before “Scheme for a State Bonus”

Calls for various forms of universal cash aid date back centuries. In 1796, Thomas Paine published “Agrarian Justice,” a small pamphlet that argued for a reformation of social order. He wrote that “civilization...has operated two ways: to make one part of society more affluent, and the other more wretched, than would have been the lot of either in a natural state.”⁷ He aimed to reduce that gap in social outcome through the dispersal of wealth from a “national fund,” which paid to “every person, when arrived at the age of twenty-one years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling.” This universal recompense was designed to mitigate the loss of a human’s “natural inheritance...by the introduction of the system of landed property.”⁸ These arguments would be echoed later: that systems of private ownership (and, thus, capital) deprive humans their right to land and the life they can grow from it.⁹ The funds for this revolutionary system were to be garnered from a tax on landowners and dispersed to both the young and elderly. Paine specified a provision of a “sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.”¹⁰ Paine’s proposal, while radical, was quite different from modern calls for a guaranteed income. While payments to those over fifty years would be universal and ongoing, the sums paid to young persons were only dispersed once as compensation for lost access to land and its accompanying capital.

An ocean away, English revolutionary Thomas Spence published “The Rights of Infants” one year later. To claim that “The Rights of Infants” was a response to Paine’s “Agrarian Justice” would be underselling the point. Spence’s pamphlet took aim at Paine right in its title:

“Strictures on Paine’s Agrarian Justice.” Spence’s main charge was that Paine’s system of distributing the proceeds of a land tax failed to consider the role of women and children’s welfare. Spence dedicated a table of comparisons to the finer points of difference between his plan and Paine’s before concluding with a striking call to action. Paine, he wrote, relegated the public to claiming “but a *Tenth Part* of the value of the landed property as it now exists, with its vast improvements of cultivation and building.”¹¹ Spence believed the working class deserved much more: “But why are we to be put off now with but a Tenth Share? ...May we not ask who improved the land? Did the proprietors alone work and toil at this improvement? ...It is evident to the most superficial enquirer that the labouring classes ought principally to be thanked for every improvement.”¹² By focusing on the “improvements” made to land, Spence cast doubt on Paine’s plan to compensate young adults for the value of the land they could never own. Spence contended that a much more just social system would distribute surplus product to all (including women and children) rather than splitting the yield of one tax. Until the underlying system changed, Spence argued, then no measure of redistribution would be sufficient.¹³

The middle of the nineteenth century yielded several projects central to the history of a guaranteed minimum income. Charles Fourier, one of the great utopians of French philosophy, published *La Fausse Industrie* in 1837, two years prior to the end of his life. *Industrie* was an early socialist argument for redistribution of wealth in the form of a guaranteed income. He argued that “if the civilized order deprives man of the four branches of natural subsistence...which make up the first right, the class which took the land owes to the frustrated class a minimum of abundant subsistence.” Fourier contended that the overall quality of work would increase as “the masses” reorganization required a “regime of attractive industry which would guarantee that people would keep working despite their well-being.”¹⁴ His plan for this

assistance, however, wasn't universal. While he outlined that the income should be free of the obligation to work, aid was specifically aimed at the poor.¹⁵ Fourier's argument is notable for its concern with working conditions. Paine and Spence had largely linked their arguments to the value of land rather than the material conditions of the poor, but Fourier places front and center the need for improvement in the material living conditions of the working poor.

Other thinkers followed Fourier's pattern argument for a guaranteed income. In 1848, two scandalous documents surfaced in Brussels. The first, *Project of a New Social Constitution*, was seized by police on March 28th. The pamphlet, written by an unknown author, called for the abolition of personal property and real estate rights. These goods, the author contended, should be expropriated and then rented out by the state with profits "regarded as the fruits of nature" and "distributed equally among all members of society in as many equal parts as there are people, no one excluded."¹⁶ As with Fourier's argument, *Project of a New Social Constitution* opted for continuous payment, but *Project* moved beyond aiding only the poor to extend the "fruits" of those rents to all: a proposition that closely resembles the political economic dynamics of a modern rentier state. A book published just months later in the same city, *Solution du Problème Social* by Joseph Charlier, expanded on Fourier's earlier arguments for a minimum income.¹⁷ *Project of a New Social Constitution* was confiscated by police less than a mile from his home, but no evidence suggests that Charlier knew of its publication (or seizure).

Joseph Charlier's reformist plan for ending social inequality began with a "transitional regime that would expropriate land, while granting lifelong annuities to current landowners and expropriating some proportion of each new building with each inheritance."¹⁸ These revenues would then fund providing households with enough material income to negate poverty. The amount of this dispersal would not provide riches—Charlier wrote that it would "secure bread to

all but truffles to none.”¹⁹ Charlier echoed Fourier’s conviction that this would rebalance the relationship between laborer and employer. “It is no longer the worker who will have to bow before capital,” he wrote. “It is capital, reduced to its true role of collaborating agent, that will have to negotiate with labor on an equal footing.”²⁰ By having income upon which they could rely, workers in lower classes would be able to select employment without fear of starvation. John Cunliffe and Guido Erreygers regard Charlier’s work as “strikingly similar in all significant respects to contemporary proposals” for a guaranteed income.²¹ They argue that Charlier’s key departure from Fourier was his emphasis on the unconditionality of the minimum income. While his thinking about social issues was far ahead of his time, Charlier’s ideas weren’t widely circulated. His book “seems to have been barely read at the time and his subsequent writings seem to have been just as quickly forgotten.”²²

In the same year as the Milners published “Scheme for a State Bonus,” Bertrand Russell released *Roads to Freedom*. In it, Russell described an ideal society in which “a certain small income” that was “sufficient for necessities” would be “secured to all, whether they work or not.”²³ Russell’s plan was not as comprehensive or detailed as the Milners’, but he echoed arguments that envisioned a rise in labor conditions after the beginning of that “small income.” “Making idleness economically possible,” he wrote, “would afford a powerful motive for making work not disagreeable.”²⁴ In a later essay, he authored a claim similar to the one that the Milners and Pickard would base much of their proposal on: in the modern world, “technique has made it possible for leisure, within limits, to be not the prerogative of small privileged classes, but a right evenly distributed.” His rejection of the “morality of work” was total. That “morality,” he wrote, “is the morality of slaves, and the modern world has no need of slavery.”²⁵

Evelyn Mabel and Dennis Milner, Bertram Pickard, and the “Scheme for a State Bonus”

Dennis Milner was born in 1892 to Rosa and Edward Milner. His parents were Quaker activists, and Dennis Milner took after his mother, who “gave a great deal of time and energy to work amongst the poor of Northwich.”²⁶ Milner took an early interest in engineering. After a childhood spent tinkering with cars and motorcycles, he enrolled in Bootham School at York. He graduated with degrees in engineering and civil service, and left school in 1913 to take up a position at an engineering firm in Wolverhampton. He married Evelyn Mabel Milner in 1914 and “took up voluntary work with a War Relief Agency.”²⁷ Milner later left his work in Wolverhampton for a job with the York confectioner Rowntree & Co., where he was employed until he left to focus full-time on promoting “Scheme for a State Bonus.”

In *A Reasonable Revolution*, Pickard credited some of Milner’s inspiration to *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy. *Looking Backward* was a surprise bestseller for Bellamy. The 1888 utopian novel moved millions of copies and inspired countless followers and devotees, including Thorstein Veblen.²⁸ *Looking Backward* told the story of Julian West, a young American man who succumbed to a 113-year slumber and awoke to an America transformed into a socialist utopia. Bellamy spends much of the book outlining the economic, social, and industrial character of the utopia. Bellamy’s original intention had been to set the novel in the year 3000, but he revised his frame to the year 2000 as part of a “new belief as to the part which the National organization of industry is to play in bringing the good time coming.”²⁹ Pickard wrote that Milner’s idea for the “Scheme” began from the premise of economic security, but that the main obstacle was the question of “working out in detail how the money was to be collected and distributed” after his inspiration from Bellamy. Pickard’s telling verges on hagiographic: the task was “ample scope for the inventive ability he [Milner] had shown in the sphere of

mechanics,” and Milner’s “analysis and ultimate synthesis of social and economic data was marked by the same thoroughness and imagination that had characterized his researches in engineering.”³⁰

In February 1918, Milner wrote “Scheme for a State Bonus,” motivated by “seeing signs of the approaching storm of social and industrial unrest.”³¹ By March Milner had left his job at Rowntree & Co. and presented a draft of the pamphlet to the War and Social Order Committee.³² The exact timeline of events is unclear, but Pickard wrote that he began collaborating with the Milners in July of 1918. Pickard, another Quaker born in 1892 from a similar activist background, had met Dennis Milner at the Bootham school (a private Quaker boarding school) but spent the years leading up to 1918 recovering from a health crisis that had forced him to drop out of his education.³³ Later, after realizing a need for “organized public opinion,” Pickard and the Milners formed the State Bonus League. One interesting unknown factor in the history of “Scheme” is Evelyn Mabel Milner. Very little detail about her life or beliefs is revealed in either “Scheme” or *Revolution*, despite the latter’s dedication of an entire section to Dennis Milner’s life. Walter Van Trier notes that she may have had a hand in bringing Pickard into the fold, as she was a friend of Pickard’s sister.³⁴ Regardless, no information exists to identify the extent to which she drafted text of the original pamphlet, contributed ideas and arguments, or aided in the pamphlet’s promotion. Pickard’s account centers Dennis and mentions Evelyn but doesn’t provide clear detail about the writing of “Scheme” other than the influence of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*.

The title of “Scheme for a State Bonus” had its roots in the context of 1918 Britain. Shortages and price controls had a large effect on consumption, employment, and wages during World War I.³⁵ Britain’s economy, which had been experiencing the wage effects of dependence

on “a group of long-established industries” in the decade before 1914, was rocked by the need to provide for military needs at the outbreak of war. The Great War had profound effects on British culture, political outlook, and social mores as well. Government regulations on “the use and price of labor” along with inevitable supply constraints led lawmakers to institute a “war bonus” in 1917 to defray cost of living increases for male workers on fixed salaries.³⁶ In 1918, a group of women went on strike to demand the same “bonus” as men in their industries. The Milners took this idea further: rather than temporary assistance during times of intense need, they developed a more permanent bonus that they argued could solve “the social problem” of their time.

“Scheme for a State Bonus” is a small, dense pamphlet. Its fifteen pages are filled with tables, lists, and moral arguments. It’s divided into four short sections: “**Object**,” in which the authors outline their goal of solving “the social problem” and identify the main impediment to social improvement as “economic dependence;” “**Proposed State Bonus**,” which contains a detailed breakdown of the plan and solutions to some logistical or economic concerns; “**Main Effects Claimed**,” a longer defense of the plan’s merits and effects; and “**Conclusion**,” which briefly summarizes the main arguments of the pamphlet. Much of the pamphlet’s core arguments emerge in “Object” and “Main Effects Claimed,” such as the author’s emphasis on economic dependence and their defense of direct cash assistance for the purposes of moral uplift. The Milners also included summaries of positive effects that the guaranteed income would have on the social fabric, economy, and spiritual health of the nation. The Milners’ prose is sparse, and the pamphlet’s pages are divided into numbered lists and dotted with bold font to emphasize key points. The most notable similarity between the Milners and Pickard is the three authors’ penchant for capitalization as a form of emphasis, which can be disorienting (and later, endlessly

amusing) for the modern reader more accustomed to seeing that trope deployed ironically. *A Reasonable Revolution*, by comparison, is expansive. The document is centered around advancing and defending the Milner's proposed state bonus while expanding on the arguments made in short form within "Scheme." *Reasonable Revolution* is a longer work than "Scheme," but its chapter structure largely reflects that of its predecessor. *Revolution* begins with three chapters that outline the "social problem," identify the key culprit as economic dependence, and visualize the operation of a successful state bonus ("The Problem," "The State Bonus Solution," "State Bonus in Action").

Revolution's expanded real estate also allowed Pickard opportunities to make much more detailed arguments in response to initial criticism. He did so in four chapters and two brief "sketches": "Doubts and Difficulties," in which he assuaged some common fears about cash assistance and the workability of the scheme; "Alternatives," which contained brief considerations of other social welfare solutions; "Is It A Palliative?," a compelling chapter in which Pickard rejected the notion that a guaranteed income treated symptoms while ignoring real causes; and "Is It Feasible?," a final reiteration of the simplicity of the state bonus as a solution to complex problems. Pickard's text moved beyond short descriptions of the "social problem" and focused on economic dependence's relation to moral, spiritual, and ethical challenges faced by the poor. Pickard also expanded on the moral, theological, and spiritual arguments that the Milners originated. Despite their differences, both documents advanced the state bonus as a solution uniquely capable of solving the social problem simply, fairly, and effectively. Similarly, the two arguments also defended the virtues of economic security and leisure while articulating a vision of the spiritual flourishing that security would bring. In what follows, I analyze the strategies the Milners and Pickard use to frame the state bonus.

Solving “The Social Problem” Through Dissociation

The Milners framed the state bonus as a solution uniquely capable of remedying social ills. In “Object,” they outlined their ambition to “solve the social problem” that they defined as the material disparities between rich and poor and “the widespread unhappiness of the poorer classes.” In their view, that “widespread unhappiness” had consequences. Left unchecked, the “social problem” would extend beyond the “squalor and wretchedness of the slums” into “the prevalence of industrial unrest” that had already resulted “constantly” in “strikes and even violence.” While the Milners expected to see “big reforms” in areas such as housing, education, and industry, the “social problem” had grown so large that “none of the reforms” could “deal adequately with the difficulties and dangers of the immediate situation.” In order to avoid the rising threat of industrial unrest and political violence, they advocated for a solution that could work effectively and quickly. “The question is now so pressing,” they wrote, that social and economic reform “could not be put into effective operation” before the “situation” became “unmanageable.”³⁷

The Milners advanced their own solution, one that could be “so comprehensive that it will remove the widespread dissatisfaction” and “so simple and require so little new machinery” that it could be deployed immediately. The social problem at hand, they argued, had to be solved quickly or society would risk escalating unrest. *Revolution* made this appeal explicit: Pickard’s argument positioned the threat of revolutionary violence as its primary exigence. In doing so, Pickard employed a version of what J. Robert Cox termed “the locus of the irreparable” to constitute a policy choice that, left untaken, would result in “an irreplaceable loss” of peace to the throes of violence.³⁸

What of that “social problem?” While the Milners used the term to point to an amorphous collection of economic, political, and social problems, they borrowed its usage from their contemporaries. The Milners defined the “problem” as unhappiness, poverty, and unrest, which reflected other popular assessments of “the social problem” circulating at the time. Reformers in Britain had long used the term “social problem,” and many used it to highlight the shortcomings of classical British economics and its attachment to laissez faire market realism.³⁹ The term had become so widespread in the middle of the nineteenth century that Karl Marx objected to the term’s cooptation by middle-class, “middle-of-the-road” political parties. During its initial popularity, “players on every side seemed eager to be notably engaged with “the social problem.”⁴⁰

By the time of the Great War, however, social progressivism had put the term back on the map. Charles Ellwood, an Oxford scholar (and later President of the American Sociological Society), published an influential textbook in 1910 that encouraged the term’s resurgence. Ellwood later published a widely successful book titled *The Social Problem: A Constructive Analysis* in 1914. In it, Ellwood contended that “the social problem” in question was “the decay and disintegration of civilization itself.”⁴¹ The Milners and Pickard echoed his assessment that “Western civilization is, indeed, brewing for the world something worse than a French Revolution.” That “something worse” was “more than the mere threatened overthrow of existing political and industrial institutions.” Ellwood constituted the “social problem” as “not how to avoid political revolution,” but rather how to prevent that stress from undermining civilization itself.⁴² Ellwood divided the social problem into several smaller factors: class inequality (termed “the socialist problem), international relations (“the pacifist problem”), the “relation of the generations” (“the eugenicist problem”), and “the relation of the sexes” (“the feminist

problem”).⁴³ While these inequalities and problems were important, Ellwood defined the social problem of “the century” as “the problem of the relations of men to one another...of humans living together.”⁴⁴ The Milners and Pickard echoed Ellwood’s concern that the stress of overthrowing political and social institutions would undermine “civilization itself,” and Pickard would invoke this precipice repeatedly in *Reasonable Revolution* as his version of the locus of the irreparable. But while all three rhetors cited the “social problem” as part of their work, their arguments relied on a dissociative strategy that framed “the social problem” as an issue of economic dependence.

Proposing a unique solution like a guaranteed cash income as a way of solving the imposing “social problem” created tensions. How would audiences respond to a proposal so far removed from the current social compact and its ties between work and reward? Could the Milners secure the support of those concerned with social unrest but unconvinced of an ambitious solution like redistributing the “national production”? Effective rhetors can resolve tension by dissociating it into two distinct concepts: an outward “appearance” and a transcendent “reality.”⁴⁵ The inherent incompatibility between the two is resolved by the alignment of the rhetor’s argument with the proposed “reality.” In “Scheme for a State Bonus” the Milners employed a unique strategy: dissociating tension into the appearance of the “social problem” and the reality of the harm done by “economic dependence.” By defining the social problem as stemming from economic dependence, the Milners resolve the tension in favor of presenting their solution as a remedy to underlying economic exploitation in an immoral capitalist society. An intimidating and ephemeral “social problem” is unapproachable, but a material reality like “economic dependence” offered by the rhetor’s dissociation is solvable—and with a “Scheme,”

to boot. By supplementing the wages of citizens, the hold of economic dependence (and, importantly, *immorality*) can be weakened.

Dissociative arguments resolve tensions and “incompatibilities” in a wide variety of contexts: between claims and counterarguments, incompatible ideologies, or even discordant beliefs.⁴⁶ Dissociation may take many forms, but many of them rely on the distinction between “appearance” (what *seems*) and “reality” (what *is*). Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca identified this strategy as the “Ur-form” or the “prototype of all conceptual dissociation.”⁴⁷ As I show in my next chapter, Richard Nixon employed a similar turn to differentiate between different types of needy Americans. The Milners structured “Object” around four examples that indicate “the relation of money to...personal and industrial problems.”⁴⁸ These examples enacted what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell identified as a “method of residues” in her study of Susan B. Anthony. The method of residues involves a rhetor moving through a series of arguments or propositions and calling attention to what remains (or is added) as the audience rejects claims.⁴⁹ Employing a method of residues isn’t always a process of noting rejection, however. The Milners (and Pickard) employed it to form a kind of argument by accretion: each example considered a premise in such a way that framed “economic dependence” as the culprit. These examples and their residues were also important to fleshing out the rhetors’ dissociative turn. Dissociations are divided into two general classifications: “condensed dissociations,” in which the rhetor *implies* the criteria for choosing between reality and appearance (such as “apparent peace” or “the truly needy”); and “elaborate dissociations,” in which a rhetor *explicitly* guides the audience through distinguishing between appearance and reality and provides the criteria for making that distinction.⁵⁰ The Milner’s repeated examples guided the audience through the criteria for judging between the apparent social problem and the reality of economic dependence.

The fourth “example” demonstrates this move and how it contributes to the overarching dissociative argument. The Milners conceded their belief that “the competitive system rewards individuals in proportion to the services which they render” and that this process happened by a market logic “with some reference to the disagreeableness to the tasks undertaken.”⁵¹ This fair market distribution of labor and reward, however, wasn’t reliable. Even John Stuart Mill, they wrote, had to accede in 1853 that “this principle only applied to the higher grades of employment.” The poor, they contended, were consigned to a life in which “the imminence of destitution” forced them to choose “exceedingly disagreeable employment” with “exceedingly low wages.”⁵² This resulted in the “principle” of the market being compromised due to the existence of a class with no options other than brutal labor conditions incurred from economic dependence.

These examples are central to the overarching dissociative argument the Milners built. The “appearance” of a rational market that set the price of labor in accordance with that labor’s specialization or the work’s difficulty was disrupted by the “reality” of a crushing economic dependence that forced the poor to accept their lot. Framing the reality of social issues as economic dependence is a matter of definition as well. Defining a concept (and its inverse, contesting a definition) is central to forming rhetorical appeals.⁵³ While dissociation attempts to separate an apparent condition from reality, definition is an attempt to stabilize that reality and give it a name. Definitions can be factual propositions, but they may be properly understood more as “involving claims of ‘ought’ rather than ‘is.’”⁵⁴ The Milner’s argument framed “economic dependence” as something that *ought* to be understood as fundamental to social issues: “the economic factor” in the lives of the poor, they wrote, was “at the root of all these

problems.” In doing so, they continually reinforced the “Scheme” as the problem’s obvious solution.

Holding Back “The Grim Maw of Chaos” with a Minimum Condition

While the Milner’s dissociative move resolved discursive tension, it echoed Pickard’s later defense of the Scheme as capable of resolving a tension far more material: the threat of violent revolution. In *Reasonable Revolution*, Pickard repeatedly invoked the dangers of unchecked political violence. Rather than begin with “the social problem,” Pickard opened his book with an introduction calling for a peaceful solution to “acute social unrest.” The connection to Quaker pacifism here is clear: both the Milners and Pickard were raised as activists for nonviolence, but Pickard renewed this commitment with urgency. The “unexpected power of the Socialist Idea,” he wrote, had exposed “the...weakness of those forces we had deemed invincible for many years to come.” While the socialist idea might have had power, Pickard lacked faith in the force of trade unions. He was careful to note that advocates for a state bonus were “not denying the constitutionalism of the ‘strike,’” but nevertheless felt that “in the present absence of unity and organization” relying solely on the collective action of the strike would result in “national disaster.” Pickard constituted the state bonus as an alternative to that disaster, a peaceful means of calming social unrest and “opening the gates of a new social order.” The failure of peace would only open “the grim gulf of chaos.” The state bonus, rather, was an evolution of the “well-worn path of political agitation” that would result in a “reasonable revolution” that would remedy the social problem at hand while avoiding the chaos and violence of a “traditional revolution.”⁵⁵ By separating the state bonus from other more “chaotic” methods of social reform and framing the plan as a more “reasonable” revolution than a large-scale

worker movement, Pickard constituted the bonus a more peaceful, responsible, and palatable alternative to an imagined violent revolution.

Pickard's defense of the "Scheme" is long and varied. It contains discussions of taxation, debates about minimum income guarantees, and a hearty respect for E. Mabel and Dennis Milner. Many of its arguments, however, invoked a pattern: warning against a potential threat and advising social change before violence took its toll. In doing so, Pickard leveraged the locus of the irreparable. Cox defines the locus of the irreparable as a claim "that a decision cannot be repeated," or that the decision's consequences might "cause an irreplaceable loss."⁵⁶ This warning is an effort to instill caution (and possibly fear) on the part of the audience. If what's at risk in a decision is sufficiently precious and irreplaceable, then arguments about that decision take on a more urgent emotional valence. The Milners warned of unrest, but Pickard identifies a fragile peace threatened by economic dependence that, if not considered carefully, could lead to bloody revolution and the aforementioned "national disaster."⁵⁷ In "Is It a Palliative?" Pickard considers the risks:

We would point out the folly of supposing as some extremists do that the old system can be overturned and a new one set up in a night. That way lies chaos, and chaos has never proved efficient yet. Consider the case of a lake whose semi-defiled waters permitted only an indifferent stock of fish. Would it be reasonable to empty the lake before refilling with pure water, thus exterminating the fish in the process, or would it not be better to secure a steady influx of pure water, and thus secure more gradually, but with equal certainty, a pure lake with a corresponding betterment in the stock of fishes?⁵⁸

Pickard's argument here was clear: violent revolutionaries and extremists promise quick fixes but deliver ruined lives. Pickard's care for the lives of the poor ran throughout *Reasonable*

Revolution. The state bonus, he wrote, offered a method of “transition to the present system to a new system which, when rightly understood, offers a basis for cooperation between the conflicting parties.”⁵⁹ Cox writes that invocations of locus of the irreparable can rely on appeals to what is “unique”: “the object or act which qualifies as irreparable is necessarily unique.” Cox specifically extends this to humans, writing that “human life...[is] seen in [its] singularity—as distinct, original, rare, or exceptional.”⁶⁰ Failure to act wasn’t a dereliction of duty, but leaving precious and singular human lives to the fates. This fragility necessarily brought precarity: action could also be framed a way of stabilizing a situation spinning out of control.⁶¹ Pickard leveraged this urgency to constitute the state bonus as a solution capable of remedying the underlying reason for citizens’ precarity, writing that “all of this should go to show that it is the system rather than the men that is wrong, and that to change the system we must cut at its roots, not of the capitalist’s power but of the power of capitalism.”⁶²

For Pickard, cutting at the roots of that power required providing the poor with a minimum cash income to reduce the power of capital. The severity of the problem and the rising threat of violence warranted the establishment of a radical social change. This structure also echoed Cox’s interpretation of the locus of the irreparable. But what specific argumentative purpose did the irreparable serve? Cox notes four main “strategic and ethical implications” for decision-making that result from invoking the irreparable. Rhetors may adapt to those implications in ways that “depart from ordinary decision processes” to warrant appeals for urgent action. One implication in particular bears mention, that the locus of the irreparable can be used to invoke a “minimum condition rule.” Writes Cox, “If the consequences of a course of action cannot later be reversed a decision-maker may be inclined to invoke a strategy of risk-avoidance.”⁶³ Pickard’s avoidance stems from a humanism concerned with preserving peace, but

he invokes a guaranteed income as the “minimum condition” for avoiding that risk. This minimum condition “requires that prospective actions be evaluated against a threshold criterion”: simply put, all other suggestions would have to prove more immediately effective than just giving people money. The use of a guaranteed income as a comparison tool is a common topos in UBI discourse because competing plans have to contend with the plan’s simplicity and efficacy as a threshold. Pickard constituted the state bonus as a simple, effective way to reduce capital’s power by establishing a “minimum economic condition” for human existence.

The Milners and Pickard’s definition of the “social problem” as economic dependence resulting from a confluence of material problems removed the blame for problems from those suffering their effects. This framing constituted the poor as victims of an imbalanced and unjust social order, rather than as victims of their own moral failings. Here the authors attempted a rhetorical framing similar to one identified by David Zarefsky. By changing how the material struggles at hand were symbolized, the authors characterized “the ‘reality’ of the situation” as one necessitating immediate public action and concern. This framing instituted what Zarefsky termed a “pattern of symbolic choice” and condensed many possible strategies of social/political action into one solution.⁶⁴ In gathering the many material struggles of the poor under the name of a “social problem” that required a solution outside of individual choices, the Milners and Pickard “construct[ed] the basis for understanding” the inequality at play, imbuing the problem with what Cox termed “meaning, power, and attraction.”⁶⁵ This rhetorical choice allowed the authors to position the state bonus as uniquely capable of solving the underlying inequalities that resulted in the “social problem” while also highlighting the plan’s capacity as a simple and universal solution that could prevent further unrest and violence.

The Milners repeatedly emphasized the simplicity and immediate workability of the state bonus “scheme” and linked that convenience to the universal and fair nature of the bonus itself. They did this by reenforcing through logistical explanation that the bonus would be the least disruptive (and fairest) of any possible options. The Milners never intended the bonus to be generated from thin air. The funds required to make the bonus operable would instead be collected from all in the form of a mandatory contribution from wages. This served the purpose of funding the plan while also preventing the bonus from being a “sudden net addition to wages.” The Milners also noted that this approach was equitable in that it kept “the transfer of money from rich to poor...to a minimum.”⁶⁶ In order for this approach to succeed, the contribution must first be “simple to collect,” so that it required “no new machinery.”⁶⁷ Importantly, this contribution would also be simplified to a fixed percentage (Pickard estimated 20%), thus standardizing the purchasing power of the bonus through time. Tracking the bonus to a fixed percentage also served the purpose of ensuring that the allowance would reflect the decreased productivity of a stagnant economy, encouraging continued labor participation after the bonus.

If contributions were simple, dispersal was even more so: citizens would be rewarded with an allowance “sufficient to maintain life and liberty.” In 1918, the Milners deduced that a fair allowance would be “based on the primal needs of all individuals”: food, shelter, and a “minimum of recreation.” This fair allowance would match “what could be bought before the War” for five pounds a week, or (after conversion and accounting for inflation) the equivalent of about \$40,000 per year.⁶⁸ The Milners stated repeatedly that the state bonus could be administered with little effort. Dispersal of the funds, they wrote, was accomplished “very simply through the Post Office” in a manner like other programs, which would “need not involve

any inconvenience to individuals or expense to the State.”⁶⁹ Should the money not be claimed, it could be directly transferred to a banking account at “the post.”

Pickard similarly linked the simplicity of the state bonus to its efficacy. The flat rate of contribution and the universality of the plan, he wrote, made it “much easier to understand” than “if the money was to be collected along the complicated lines of the Income Tax.”⁷⁰ This wasn’t the only benefit to the bonus’ simplicity. The “administration of the scheme” would be “enormously simplified” by using an easily understood system of contributions and the existence of “much of the necessary machinery” for administering the distribution. It is important to note, however, that the state bonus would not replace the existing income tax. The Milners and Pickard did not frame their idea as part of a broader mission to simplify or eliminate other social systems and tax structures. Pickard wrote that the burden on the state would be slim: only about two million pounds per year. This simplicity also worked in favor of the plan. Pickard wrote of the mandatory contribution that was designed to avoid an “arbitrary increase in wages.” Instead, it was within the “spirit of the Scheme” that “*all* should contribute in proportion to their capacity.” Standardizing a simple flat contribution percentage thus distributed the costs of the bonus fairly to those whose wealth afforded them more economic security while “pooling risks” for those less fortunate.⁷¹

Pickard admits that the bonus was “condemned offhand” as a palliative by critics who thought the plan bore too much resemblance to pension schemes, but he insisted that those critics hadn’t bothered to “take the trouble to look below the surface.” He insisted that the state bonus was a necessary measure, a just and reasonable alternative to the “chaos,” inefficiency, and violence of “extremists.” He advanced an argument that allowed for the interruption of capital’s power. Instead of violent revolution, he aimed to “cut” that system “at the roots, not at the

Capitalist's power so much as the power of Capitalism, i.e., the power conferred by money.”⁷²

Both the Milners and Pickard placed emphasis on the simplicity of the plan as part of their appeal to that plan's capacity for solving the “social problem” of their time in a manner that was fair while avoiding the “chaos” of violent revolution. Their argument, however, relied just as importantly on a conception of human flourishing that required economic security and leisure to promote moral and spiritual growth.

Spiritual/Moral Health, Inspiration, and the Importance of Leisure in “Scheme”

The Milners based a large amount of their argument for the Bonus on the improvements that the plan would bring to the moral and spiritual health of the nation. Quaker theology's influence on the Milners and Pickard shows most clearly here. While their *how* involved tax policy, the post office, and estimates of “national production,” their *why* was centered on human flourishing. Pickard expanded on the theme, dedicating entire sections of *Reasonable Revolution* to outlining how implementing a guaranteed income would repair damage to the spiritual and moral fabric of civilization. The Milners began their pamphlet by outlining how birth's stochastic nature necessitates social assistance. “Children cannot choose to whom they will be born,” they wrote, “so that we cannot hold them responsible for the success or failure of their fathers in earning money.” Labor under industrial capitalism made no differentiation between the life of the worker and the life of their children or family, a point that the Milners underline repeatedly. They connected this “inequality” directly to the moral and spiritual health of civilization. Allowing it to continue, they added, would be a “grave menace to the health and development of the race.”⁷³ These two arguments for the state bonus reveal a thread of religious influence absent from modern arguments around UBI. Understanding the influence of Quaker theology on the Milners and Pickard complements a recovery of “Scheme” as important to the history of UBI

with a fuller understanding of how religious arguments influenced a prominent progressive argument.

“Scheme” specifically positioned economic security as necessary for moral and spiritual health. The authors “frankly” acknowledged that “in order to produce a healthy race” all citizens must be able to “access...the primal necessities of life, namely, food, shelter and liberty.” Once these material needs have been met, they argued, labor markets and conditions would shift for the better. To “encourage work” employers would find it “necessary to offer proper inducements, such as just pay, proper conditions of labor, public opinion, patriotism, and the common welfare.” Rhetors throughout the history of arguments for a guaranteed income premised their arguments on the eventual improvement of labor conditions, but the Milners specifically connected this improvement to the emergence of a “higher” motivation for work. “The best work,” they wrote, “will still be done by those actuated by high motives, among which must be included genius and a man’s love for family.” This argument surfaced again and again in “Scheme” and *Revolution*. When a basic income floor was guaranteed, they argued, many workers would labor from their own desire to create and contribute.⁷⁴

The Milners made a deliberate effort to disentangle the moral value of economic security from the “value” of living in poverty. While some might “claim there is a moral value in poverty,” they contended that “there is abundant evidence that those who live in ‘want and the fear of want’” don’t have access to higher aspirations. The poor were thus “cramped in their spiritual outlook,” while “the few who are virtuous would be so under any circumstances.”⁷⁵ This is one of the Milner’s most important claims: they rhetorically separated individual health and morality from the health and spiritual wellness of the society writ large. Rather than rely on the spiritual constitution of the individual for uplift, they claimed economic security had the power

to make spiritual growth possible. An “economic minimum,” they wrote, “is a first step to the realization of any spiritual advance.”⁷⁶ Under the heading of the “Main Effects” of the state bonus they wrote that “the immediate result of this guarantee of the primal necessities of life” would be to “abolish the chief excuses there may be for begging, petty theft, the under feeding of children, and all the minor deceits.”⁷⁷ The individual, in the Milners’ view, was less responsible for their own misdeeds than they were guilty of taking available excuses. By reforming the system that allowed for those excuses, they contended, there would be no need for moral compromise. Pickard linked this compromised system of “public morality” to a principle “evil wrought by economic dependence,” which he termed “will-slavery, or subjection of personality.” Forcing one individual to rely on another for “the means of existence,” he wrote, resulted in the creation of a subjugated class that could not make decisions for themselves. He invoked as one example the case of a woman who, having no other option for supporting herself, was compelled to “marry the first man who offers her marriage.” These subjugations didn’t just limit upward mobility. Pickard linked the decay of public morality to the same economic dependence that the Milners identified. He concluded his assessment of the moral health of the nation by writing that while “independence of spirit is a quality that we shall do well to cultivate in our national life,” cultivating that independence required removing “the economic stumbling-block that stands across the way.”⁷⁸ Through this framing the rhetors constituted the social problem not as a matter of “indolence, sloth, and sinfulness,” but as what Zarefsky termed a “specific manifestation of a maladjusted economy” requiring immediate public action.⁷⁹

The poor were “cramped” in their spiritual outlook because of their poverty, and their poverty provided them with excuses to make unhealthy choices. This view of poverty and its impacts revealed the Milner’s conception of human nature. “Scheme” argued that the state bonus

will “make it possible for children to stay longer at school,” which “will always give the fallen man a chance to rise.”⁸⁰ Humans’ “fallen” nature necessitated a social and governmental structure that denied them the “excuses” to engage that inherent sinfulness. What’s most relevant about the authors’ moral and theological argument, however, is how it complements this view of human fallibility with an articulation of how a guaranteed income would provide for the necessary uplift: through leisure and inspiration.

Leisure and Inspiration in Quaker Thought

For the Milners and Pickard, economic dependence’s most pernicious effect was the “fear of starvation.” Without a guarantee of the “primal necessities” of life, many were driven to “minor deceits” that were “covered by such phrases as...‘a man must live.’”⁸¹ But the Milners were wary of more than petty theft. They worried that economic dependence was encouraging an obsession with wealth and material success as well. They wrote that guaranteed income would, by securing “subsistence pay” for all, allow them to “surely hope to see people less engrossed in their material prosperity.” Rather, the state bonus would encourage “the higher and nobler aspirations,” which “cannot be valued in terms of money.”⁸² Modern proponents of UBI often celebrate the policy’s ability to reward types of work not traditionally valued in a capitalist economy, but few since the Milners and Pickard have been so bold as to assert a spiritual revival at scale.

In *Reasonable Revolution*, Pickard was even more specific in naming the spiritual benefits of a guaranteed income. He wrote that there were two “essential conditions” that made the growth of a “higher nature” possible: “opportunity for inspiration and opportunity to service.”⁸³ Pickard’s use of “opportunity” is of note here, as it connected to the Milners’ ongoing concern with economic dependence and Pickard’s own warnings against “will-slavery.” While

he warned against the presumption that “a life of grinding toil” couldn’t produce “inspiration,” Pickard also claimed that “the highest inspiration is not possible without sufficient leisure for the quiet examination of the self, and for contact with Beauty, whether it be the beauty in Nature or the Arts.” In Pickard’s view, leisure was more than providing rest. The specific purpose (or telos) of leisure was the opportunity that leisure gave for inspiration, introspection, education, and spiritual growth. What set arguments for the state bonus far apart from other appeals was its coherent articulation of human purpose. Human life, the view held, was worth living not for economic and material production, but for the opportunities for spiritual and moral growth that leisure and rest provided. While the “great gifts of God and men” that Pickard outlines “may be enjoyed without riches,” obtaining the “deepest inspiration” that those gifts offer still required “a measure of economic security.”⁸⁴

These appeals to the productive uses of leisure were similar to other historical arguments for the affordance—and best uses—of leisure time. The Milners and Pickard emphasized repeatedly that leisure and rest are spiritually and morally productive. Cindy Aron characterizes the history of leisure time as a site of contestation between “complicated and troubling categories.” Aron explores the history of vacationing to contextualize historical discourses of leisure and work. The early twentieth century, she wrote, saw the “expansion of vacationing beyond the privileged middle class,” as “reformers concerned with the plight of poor women and children” joined “businessmen interested in increasing the efficiency of their workforce” advocated for leisure on the grounds that it increased both moral outlook and productivity.⁸⁵ Concerns about the uses of leisure abounded: could the poor be trusted to properly utilize the resources available to them in leisure?⁸⁶ As vacationing spread into the middle class, Chautauquas emerged in the 1870s as a space to spend leisure time in the pursuit of (socially

acceptable) knowledge. “Relaxing did not come easily to American men and women,” writes Aron. Ideally, relaxation was a space to “use their leisure in the performance of various sorts of work—religious work, intellectual work, therapeutic work.”⁸⁷ If spent in a manner thought to be “productive,” leisure time was worthwhile. In a 1934 book titled *The Challenge of Leisure*, Arthur Pack advanced the concept of “constructive leisure,” writing that “active, participatory forms of recreation” were more beneficial than “passive” leisure time.⁸⁸

Arguments about the uses of leisure time and rest intensified at the beginning of the twentieth century as “corporate welfare workers” found widespread employment. These specialists, who entered from the world of human services and religious institutions, “design[ed] and supervise[d] company-sponsored welfare and recreational activities” in America.⁸⁹ While some corporate welfare programs existed prior to the turn of the century, David Montgomery noted that “what was new after 1900 was the emphasis on recent immigrants and the prominence of men and women with social-service backgrounds in directing corporate welfare work.” These reformers were attracted to industry by “the numbers of people brought together daily by the modern corporation and the coercive authority the corporation could wield,” which seemed primed to make the workplace “appealing to many social reformers as a more effective agency through which to change popular behavior than legislation.”⁹⁰ Religious groups also customized the concept of leisure toward spiritually “productive” ends. Religious camps, which arose in the middle of the nineteenth century, provided a space for the kind of constructive leisure that the Milners and Pickard highlight. Camps “provided a vacation-like environment for people who might have felt constrained, either by financial limitations or religious principles, from visiting a summer resort.”⁹¹ Aron notes that these spaces “broadened the vacationing clientele” while allowing participants to “reaffirm their commitment to the important middle-class values of

sobriety and discipline.”⁹² The kind of leisure and rest that “Scheme” and *Revolution* forwarded focused on improvement through increasing opportunities for spiritual uplift and inspiration.

The Milners and Pickard inherited a religious tradition organized around the concept of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. While Christian religious rhetoric is often centers the presence of the divine, Brian Kaylor notes that a “significant” factor in religious speech “is the claim by a rhetor that an act or speech is inspired by God.”⁹³ Rhetorical critics, Kaylor writes, must consider the “significant influence on the message” that divine inspiration represents. He proposes three categories for considering “claims of divine inspiration”: as a motivation for the rhetorical act, a guide during the act, and a potential judge of the act itself.⁹⁴ Kaylor’s framing is helpful, but the Milners and Pickard followed from a tradition that regards inspiration both as a motivation *and* a guide for the rhetorical act. The Spirit moves one to speech, but also influences that speech. Christian rhetoric has a deep connection to the concept of inspiration. As early as the fourth century, Augustine held that “divine illumination” spurred action. In *Confessions* he wrote that “the mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, because it is not itself the nature of truth.”⁹⁵ Allowing for this divine illumination thus became “the key focal point for Augustine’s theory of human communication.”⁹⁶

Quaker rhetoric historically focused on the role of spontaneity and inspiration in improvised preaching. Samuel Bowmas, a Quaker minister and author of the homiletics manual *Qualifications*, articulated a view of preaching that prioritized openness to divine inspiration. He began his preaching ministry amid a cultural environment that “placed strong emphasis on the perpetuation of an ‘immediately called,’ basically itinerant, lay ministry” that focused on improvised and inspired preaching.⁹⁷ He argued in *Qualifications* that divine inspiration was necessary to understanding God’s word, as “divine inspiration did not end with the development

of the biblical canon.” Preachers could be moved to speech by inspiration, and their words could be inspired as well. He followed in the tradition of George Fox, a founder of the Quaker tradition, who held that just as biblical texts were inspired by the Holy Spirit, “so by [the Holy Spirit] we must come to a right understanding,” lest the mind and spirit become “as a book sealed.”⁹⁸ The Milners invoked education’s power to ready the mind for inspiration and thus give the faithful a chance to reject the temptations of their fallen nature in favor of “higher spiritual aspirations.”⁹⁹ This appeal reflected Fox’s teaching in the importance of preparing the mind and spirit to receive inspiration through education and reading scripture.

George Fox believed that scripture, patience, learning, and reflection opened a path for the Spirit to move a rhetor to act:

Fox had a specific scriptural base on which he developed the notion of inspiration. He believed that those who ‘were faithful to him [Christ] in the power and light of Christ, should come into that state in which Adam was before he fell, in which the admirable works of the creation, and the virtues thereof, may be known, through the openings of that divine Word of Wisdom and power by which they were made.’¹⁰⁰

Just as the Milners wrote that the opportunities granted by the state bonus could give the “fallen man” a chance to rise through education and moral uplift, Fox focused on the ability of the Spirit to bring the believer through inspiration to “that state in which Adam was before he fell.” This view held that a principal effect of humanity’s fallen nature was a disconnection between the individual and the “admirable” works of God’s creation that granted inspiration and called the mind to higher concerns. Through reflection, appreciation, and inspiration, “the Light of Christ held the power to reverse the effects of the fall” and “direct knowledge of creation to believers.”¹⁰¹ The Milners’ plan aimed to create what Fox referred to as “openings” for the Holy

Spirit—and both the Milners and Pickard framed the state bonus as uniquely capable of stimulating those moral “openings” through economic security and leisure. Providing those “openings” was a matter of securing the future: “every soldier is so maintained, in Peace and in War, in the sure knowledge that when the time comes he will do his best.”¹⁰²

While the “openings” to the inner light were revealing of divine will, they weren’t always reliable. Proper attunement to the spirit required patience and timing. Charles Marshall, another seventeenth century Quaker preacher, articulated in an eight-page pamphlet a theory of divine illumination with a particular focus on attending to *kairos*. Illumination and inspiration, he wrote in *An Epistle to Friends*, were less a matter of *effort* than they were a matter of *timing*. Preachers were to “wait diligently” during a meeting or sermon, “not only to know and savour every motion [of the Spirit],” but also for a way to “know the appointed time and season when the same motion should be brought forth.”¹⁰³ This allowed Quaker teaching to distinguish between a movement of the Spirit and the appropriate manner for that motion to be expressed. As Graves writes, “Marshall stresses that the message may be judged as divine, but not timely to be shared.”¹⁰⁴ Time and space were required to allow for both God’s inspiration as well as the practical wisdom to discern the particular way in which that inspiration called one to action. Later, the Milners and Pickard framed the state bonus as allowing the lower classes that same time and space for divine inspiration, works of service, and self-improvement. Pickard’s appeals reflected the importance of patience and space. The “deepest inspiration,” he wrote, was available only to those “possessing a measure of economic security” so as to ensure their removal from “a life of grinding toil” in which there was less “time for inspiration.”¹⁰⁵ With the proper health and time, citizens would be free to allow for “the quiet examination of the self” that produced moral improvement and “the highest inspiration.”¹⁰⁶

This allowance for the kairotic fits with other Quaker writings that distinguished between “active” and “passive” inspiration. In a response to an inflammatory pamphlet published in 1696 titled “William Penn and the Quakers: Apostates or Imposters,” minister Benjamin Coole defended the Quakers against a charge that the Quakers “liken their ‘inspiration’ to the voice of God ‘speaking through a cane.’” To Coole, this implied a robotic, procedural sense of inspiration, and he set out to defend the nature of inspiration against the implication that it was a “brainless, foolish act of babbling.”¹⁰⁷ He advanced a distinction between “passive” and “active” inspiration. Passive inspiration required the faithful to “submit to the Divine power and Spirit of God, to impress upon their Spirits a grateful sense of the favours received.” Active inspiration, rather, was the act of “expressing such thoughts as the Spirit shall suggest to their understanding, as suitable to the present occasion.”¹⁰⁸ Coole conceived of a notion of inspiration that arguments for the state bonus would echo centuries later: one that divided “immediate revelation” into “the personal or passive stage of waiting for a receiving what Fox had earlier called openings,” and “the active stage of expression through preaching and vocalized prayer.”¹⁰⁹

Through the state bonus, the Milners and Pickard conceptualized a positive view of human flourishing organized around the importance of divine illumination and both “passive” and “active” inspiration by the Holy Spirit and found through beauty, art, and rest. This view of human nature regarded the character of humanity as fallen and broken. To grow closer to the fruits of God’s creation citizens needed to be provided with the economic security that made “higher” spiritual development possible. Pickard specifically noted that “at the present moment the national production is not great enough to provide, for all...that leisure which [is] essential to the free growth of personality.”¹¹⁰ Poverty’s main effect, of course, was the fear of starvation, but more pernicious still was the worry that a life of permanent poverty would leave the

civilization permanently adrift. The elimination of poverty, wrote Pickard, could not be accomplished through private charity alone: charity, though “well-intentioned,” “failed to raise permanently any considerable number of the ‘submerged tenth’” up from a life akin to an “abyss where Faith is a mockery, Hope an impossibility, and Charity a byword indeed.”¹¹¹

Every Adult a Producer: Conclusion

The Milners’ “Scheme for a State Bonus” and Pickard’s *A Reasonable Revolution* are vital to understanding the history of arguments for a guaranteed income. But were they successful in their own time? Pickard included a detailed account of Dennis Milner’s August 1918 visit to the second “branch” of the State Bonus League in Mansfield, some fifty miles away from the first in Castleford. Milner spoke to a gathering of “upwards of a thousand people” that weekend in the Mansfield Market Place before meeting with “several leading business and public men” to discuss the terms of the bonus. In Pickard’s estimation, the talks were successful: two new branches of the League were established in the months following, some of Milner’s audience remained behind to ask questions for hours, and the “business and public men” demonstrated “universal interest as well as a considerable measure of sympathy.”¹¹²

The following months contained small victories and major defeats for the State Bonus. The State Bonus League, in pursuit of a national presence and wider exposure, relocated its headquarters from York to Victoria Street in London. Members petitioned the War Cabinet and press, but their attempts were frustrated by a government with “little time or inclination” for social matters in advance of armistice and a press beset by a national paper shortage. Later the League advanced Milner as a candidate in the general election called immediately after Armistice. He received 1,030 votes—a number he reportedly found “disappointingly small.”¹¹³ Despite his campaign’s failure, the idea carried on. Members of the Labour party found the idea

intriguing, which Pickard found encouraging. He wrote that “at first sight it may appear strange that a proposal which is in effect one-fifth communism should be so well received by those living in a Social Order that is dominantly individualistic,” but concluded that “although Individualism is still rampant in our midst...the communistic principle is by no means foreign to our social and economic system.”¹¹⁴

Reception to the “Scheme” in the press was mixed. One scathing critique came from C. E. Collet, writing in the pages of *The Economic Journal* in June 1919:

The authors of this pamphlet propound a scheme for an equal distribution of 5s. (pre-war) per head per week for all persons, to be provided from a pool maintained by everyone contributing 20 percent of their incomes. The demerits of such a proposal are too obvious to need enumeration.¹¹⁵

Despite the harsh rejection, Collet wrote that “the psychology and ethics” of the authors and “recognized economists” merited “a fresh examination” by the public, and that “in many respects Mr. and Mrs. Milner’s sociological views deserve careful attention.”¹¹⁶ Collet provided no further clarification about what specifically warranted that attention, and instead opted to provide a selection of interesting quotes from the pamphlet.

A number of magazines and trade circulars ran notices about Pickard’s publication of *Reasonable Revolution*, including *Monthly Labor Review* and *Business Digest*.¹¹⁷ These notices introduced the pamphlet, summarized its main points, and included a brief disclaimer: “the author, however, states that in some parts of the book the method of presentation is colored by his own personal valuation of the state bonus scheme.”¹¹⁸ In 1919 *The Friend*, a Quaker publication, ran excerpts from a letter Pickard wrote to *Friends’ Fellowship Papers* in which he defended “Scheme” and advanced the idea of the bonus. The plan’s potential was “tremendous,”

he praised, and “those who wish to know more...must read for themselves Dennis Milner’s pamphlet.”¹¹⁹ Pickard highlighted the plan’s potential for social reform, writing that “the scheme points the way to the righting of many cruel injustices, and that its adoption would mean the opening of the gateway to many of the great reforms we wish to see in the physical, mental, and spiritual life of the nation.”¹²⁰

The Nation included the state bonus in a writeup from its “Foreign Correspondence” section entitled “A Quaker Socialist Movement” on August 7, 1918. In it, Herbert Horwill summarized the recent surge in Quaker socialist organizing in Britain. The War and Social Order Committee (to which Milner had presented “Scheme”) laid “stress...on the necessity that every capable adult citizen should be a producer, in the widest sense of the term, and, as such, both qualified and free to take an effective share in directing his own labors.”¹²¹ Horwill summarized the “Scheme” as an effort “towards a social state in which all property, with the exception of such things as are necessary for personal and household use, should be owned communally.”¹²² These movements brought hope: Horwill wrote that “the group of Friends who have put [the Scheme] forward are in dead earnest and ready to take risks, and various practical experiments are already on foot.”¹²³ While Pickard continued to advocate for the state bonus, his career later moved on to issues of pacifism and disarmament. After his embarrassing electoral showing, Dennis Milner divorced Evelyn Mabel in the early 1920s and spent some of the decade traveling America with a theater troupe and writing plays. Neither published anything related to the state bonus again.

As I show in subsequent chapters, nearly all later arguments for a UBI disposed of “Scheme’s” focus on human flourishing and spiritual growth. In part, this absence was a matter of fact: none of the “main characters” in the subsequent development of UBI leveraged explicitly

religious rhetoric, and thus none of them framed the importance of moral development and spiritual growth through leisure as central to the question of a guaranteed income. Later rhetors, rather, emphasized the ever-advancing threat of automation and the necessity of streamlining a social welfare system that had outgrown its usefulness. Yet in “Scheme for a State Bonus” and *Reasonable Revolution* there remains a clear articulation of human purpose, informed by hundreds of years of Christian theology and Quaker teaching. The Milners and Pickard relied on dissociative arguments to resolve the tension introduced by the “Scheme” into two categories: the “appearance” of the social problem and the “reality” of economic dependence. Pickard also employed “the locus of the irreparable” to present the state bonus as an urgent and necessary answer to the rising threat of revolutionary violence. Rather than treat leisure as important for the health and productivity of the worker, as corporate reformers did, the Milners and Pickard approached the issue with a lens none had used before—and one that has yet to appear since. “Scheme’s” success was short-lived, but it provides a map of roads not taken later discussions of social welfare, informed by pacifism, Quaker theology, and a unique focus on the quality of human life experienced by the least fortunate among us.

While plans for a guaranteed income in the UK may have faded after the limited success of the Milners’ pamphlet, income guarantees would surface again fifty years later. The next major champion of a (kind of) UBI was Richard Nixon, who proposed the Family Assistance Plan as part of a package of government reforms in August 1969. The Family Assistance Plan was markedly different than the State Bonus crafted by the Milners, but Nixon also employed the locus of the irreparable to frame his unconventional solution as necessary for stopping a looming crisis. Nixon’s plan shed the Milners’ preoccupation with moral and spiritual health while retaining the guaranteed income’s universality as a way of assuaging a skeptical public.

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- ² Rutger Bregman and Elizabeth Manton, *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), 33.
- ³ Robert Asen, "Nixon's Welfare Reform: Enacting Historical Contradictions of Poverty Discourses," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2001): 262.
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- ⁵ David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986.), 6.
- ⁶ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring," *The Speech Teacher* 23, no. 1 (1974): 12.
- ⁷ Thomas Paine, "Agrarian Justice," in *The Origins of Universal Grants: An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, ed. John Cunliffe and Guido Erreygers (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.
- ⁸ Paine, "Justice," 6.
- ⁹ The state of Maine approved in 2021 an amendment that sanctified a "right to food": "all people have a "natural, inherent and unalienable right' to grow, raise, produce and consume food of their own choosing as long as they do so within legal parameters." The right to land and its "production" may have some hope of returning. Efforts on this front have been growing in Maine for years: I attended meetings and organized for a similar proposal in 2015. "Maine Just Voted to Become the Nation's First 'Right to Food' State. What Does That Mean?," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/11/03/maine-right-to-food/>.
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- ¹¹ Thomas Spence, "The Rights of Infants," in *The Origins of Universal Grants: An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, ed. John Cunliffe and Guido Erreygers (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 89. Emphasis in original.
- ¹² Spence, "Infants," 90.
- ¹³ J.E. King and John Marangos, "Two Arguments for Basic Income: Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and Thomas Spence (1750-1814)," *History of Economic Ideas* 14, no. 1 (2006): 55–71.
- ¹⁴ Charles Fourier, *La Fausse Industrie* (Paris: Anthropos, 1822), 49.
- ¹⁵ Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 77.
- ¹⁶ Van Parijs and Vanderborght, *Basic Income*, 74. I'm relying on the authors' own translation here.
- ¹⁷ John Cunliffe and Guido Erreygers, "The Enigmatic Legacy of Charles Fourier: Joseph Charlier and Basic Income," *History of Political Economy* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 461.
- ¹⁸ Van Parijs and Vanderborght, *Basic Income*, 74.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Charlier, *Solution Du Problème Social Ou Constitution Humanitaire* (Brussels: Chez Tous Les Libraires du Royaume, 1848), 43.
- ²⁰ Joseph Charlier, *Catéchisme Populaire Philosophique, Politique et Social* (Brussels: Vanderauwera, 1848), 47.
- ²¹ Cunliffe and Erreygers, "Fourier," 477.
- ²² Van Parijs and Vanderborght, *Basic Income*, 75.
- ²³ Bertrand Russell, *Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism* (London: Unwin Books, 1918), 80–81.
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- ²⁶ Bertram Pickard, *A Reasonable Revolution: Being A Discussion of the State Bonus Scheme -- A Proposal for a National Minimum Income* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1919): 65.
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- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.
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- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 33.
- ¹¹² Ibid., 68.
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- ¹²⁰ Pickard, "State Bonus," 382.
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CHAPTER 3
AN INCENTIVE FOR DESERTION:
RICHARD NIXON’S ALMOST-UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

“Nowhere has the failure of government been more tragically apparent than in its efforts to help the poor.”

- Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs”

“It cannot be too often stated that the issue of welfare is not what it costs to those who provide it, but what it costs to those who receive it.”

“No one is innocent after the experience of governing. But not everyone is guilty.”

- Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income*

Richard Nixon came home to a crisis. He’d spent the early days of August 1969 on a round-the-world trip to “lay the basis” for peace after Vietnam, and returning home made him realize anew “how fortunate” he was to live in a land of plenty like the United States. Citizens may have enjoyed a massive economy, stores of wealth, and relative democratic freedoms, but Nixon told the country his trip made him realize an “urgent” need to modernize the federal government. America, he claimed, faced a trinity of crises: an “urban crisis,” a “social crisis,” and “a crisis of confidence in the capacity of government to do its job.”¹ Nixon’s proposed solution was a set of aggressive reforms that included a curious piece of legislation: the Family Assistance Plan. The Family Assistance Plan was a radical solution to poverty that aimed to guarantee every family a certain amount of income, provided that they work if able.

Nixon took to the airwaves on the night of August eighth to introduce a nation wary of welfare to the Family Assistance Plan and assure them that this was most definitely *not* a “guaranteed income.” Nixon had skin in the game. He’d vocally opposed guaranteed income plans in his 1968 presidential campaign, so he had a thin line to walk. He had to sell a radical antipoverty solution to a skeptical public in a time of social turmoil. Nixon assured the nation

that, despite the costs, the reforms were urgently needed. The country couldn't "afford not to undertake" the project, he warned, as "the cost of continuing the present system, in financial as well as human terms" was "staggering if projected into the 1970s."² Nixon drew a line in the sand, invoking the locus of the irreparable to signal to voters that the crisis at hand would compound endlessly unless action was taken immediately. But the Plan wasn't successful. It passed the House of Representatives and stalled out in the Senate Finance Committee amid a flurry of warring interest groups and competing cultural conceptions of the poor and needy. Soon, the administration had bigger problems on its hands, and Nixon moved on. While he called briefly for a renewed focus on the reforms later in his presidency, no movement on welfare reform like the Family Assistance Plan emerged for the remainder of his administration.

Despite its failure, Nixon's Family Assistance Plan found renewed notoriety in the late 2010s. Andrew Yang's presidential primary campaign energized conversations about alternative income programs, and Nixon's failed welfare reform emerged as a figment of "what could have been" in U.S. domestic policy. Some, like Brian Steensland, lamented the moment as a "failed revolution" that soured future administrations' ambitions to reform.³ Others treated the failure as a curiosity to be learned from: Rutger Bregman framed the policy as a "bizarre" tale of a road not taken in his popular press book *Utopia For Realists*.⁴ Other accounts treat the close encounter with guaranteed income as a curiosity framed by its "unlikely" champion in Nixon.⁵ But popular accounts of the Family Assistance Plan often fall short. Most frame the policy as a curious detour from typical discourse concerning the poor, even though Nixon's speech advancing the policy trafficked in those very discourses. Still others reduce the history down too far by flattening the FAP into an "early UBI," obfuscating the plan's shortcomings as a guaranteed income plan and a revolutionary social policy. Telling the story of Nixon's failed welfare reforms requires a careful

attention to the history of the policy as well as equally close attention to the claims and rhetorical strategies deployed by Nixon in advancing the reforms. Taking both approaches together allows for a rhetorical history of the Family Assistance Plan that considers both the structural limitations Nixon was working within and the inherent tensions that ultimately muddled his message and waylaid his reform efforts.

Nixon faced a similar challenge to the one the Milners and Pickard faced fifty years before. In January of 1969, a Gallup poll reported that over sixty percent of Americans opposed a guaranteed income plan. How could he promote a radical social policy change to a hesitant public that disdained guaranteed income plans?⁶ What rhetorical choices would make the plan appealing to conservatives concerned about the state of welfare and liberals who desired an expansion in social protections? While plans from the time of the Milners and earlier had focused on the moral state of the poor, spiritual uplift, and averting imminent class warfare, Nixon promoted the policy as a stopgap measure to prevent the further expansion of an overburdened national social welfare system. He relied on three main rhetorical strategies in his speech: substituting “the family” for poor individuals in welfare discourse, personifying existing social welfare systems as uncontrollable monstrosities, and invoking the locus of the irreparable to present the policy proposal at hand as a necessary control against looming crises. Nixon’s rhetorical choices ultimately constrained the policy’s future. Liberals found the plan too meager and opposed its work requirements, and some conservatives balked at the idea of a guaranteed income floor for poor workers. In trying to promote an inherently polysemic and syncretic policy like the Family Assistance Plan, Nixon chose too many roads at once and paid the price. His speech engaged “fundamental contradictions” in welfare discourse that constrained the future of the policy and ushered guaranteed income plans back into the shadows for over four decades.⁷

Studying the rhetorical strategies Nixon used to promote the Family Assistance Plan is also useful for uncovering the impact various administrative influences and interest groups had on the policy's formation. While some scholars have identified the Family Assistance Plan as consequential legislation, fewer studies of welfare history reflect the impact of actors like Daniel Patrick Moynihan on the evolution of welfare policy in the United States. The Family Assistance Plan first emerged as a guaranteed income plan inherited by the Nixon Administration from policymakers in President Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity. Over the course of 1969, an ocean of interest groups, commentators, reporters, and advisors influenced the development of Nixon's failed income guarantee, but few had the impact of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Nixon's August 8th rhetorical appeal to the nation in favor of the FAP bore the mark of Moynihan's influence and guidance, and those very appeals limited the future of welfare reform discourse in the United States. Situating Nixon's address in the broader history of social welfare policy as well as within the evolving history of universal basic income discourse in the United States reveals Nixon's failed reforms to be an important turning point in the history of efforts to secure financial stability for our most vulnerable populations.

The Family Assistance Plan's Origins and the "Toryhood of Change"

The failure of Nixon's Family Assistance Plan is a definitive chapter in the history of universal basic income.⁸ In this chapter the focus of this study shifts from utopianists to policymakers and departs the realm of pamphlets for the realm of memoranda, white papers, and legislative record. The scenery of the study changes as well: from York to California. Richard Nixon was born to two Quakers in California named Frank Nixon and Jane Milhous. Frank met Jane after his time as a motorman in Columbus, Ohio came to an early end. He'd been agitating for a closed vestibule policy to protect streetcar operators in the winter, and his victory did little

to endear him to his employer. After being dismissed, Frank moved to Los Angeles and got a job driving the Red Line.⁹ The Red Line ended at Whittier, a Quaker town to the east of Los Angeles, and it was in a Friends Church there that Frank met Jane. Four months later, they were married.¹⁰

Nixon was no stranger to financial struggle. His childhood home in Yorba Linda was plagued by agricultural trouble that made life difficult for his family. Nixon, who saw in himself a parallel to Benjamin Disraeli, internalized these struggles as part of his origin story. In his presidency, he went through a period of “romantic self-identification” with Disraeli, “seeing many parallels between his own career and that of the humbly born outsider who rose by force of intellect and perseverance” to a place of prominence in conservative Victorian politics.¹¹ Similarly, Nixon fancied himself to be a reformer, and early in his presidency he set his sights on a large-scale reform of the federal government’s social welfare systems that would lead to his August 8th address to the nation.

Nixon had shunned the idea of a minimum income in his 1968 campaign, and his attitude toward domestic policy overall was generally negative. He once dismissed the running of the social welfare state as “building outhouses in Peoria.” “I’ve always thought the country could run itself domestically without a president,” he said to Theodore White. “You need a president for foreign policy.” When it came time to work on domestic policy, “Nixon was content to let the bureaucrats and policy intellectuals take care of it.”¹² In general, the policy wisdom of the time was liberal, but Rick Perlstein argues that “this mood was shifting on the ground” as “the toryhood of change was outstripping the public’s willingness to accept its nostrums.”¹³ Regardless, the idea of a guaranteed income was in the air.

The history of the Family Assistance Plan as policy begins in the Johnson administration. President Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) had entertained the concept of guaranteed income plans as measures to "ameliorate the effects of structural unemployment and inadequate wage levels."¹⁴ Plans circulated in the Office of Economic Opportunity through a variety of ideological camps. Some of a more radical persuasion, like Robert Theobald, liked the plan because it provided a shortcut to the public's decommodification.¹⁵ For Theobald, guaranteed income's true power was its ability to disconnect citizens from their reliance on the market, an argument still heard today from advocates for a universal basic income. More moderate policymakers in the Johnson administration preferred a guaranteed annual income simply because they thought a program like a negative income tax was the most efficient and cost-effective way to alleviate poverty. The Office of Economic Opportunity wrote in a 1969 report:

Our economic and social structure virtually guarantees poverty for millions of Americans.... The simple fact is that most of the poor remain poor because access to income through work is currently beyond their reach. There are not two distinct categories of poor—those who can work and those who cannot. Nor can the poor be divided into those who will work and those who will not. For many, the desire to work is strong, but the opportunities are not readily available.¹⁶

Other major economists were also on board. The idea of an end to scarcity had circulated within American intellectual discourse for some time, and the 1950s brought renewed focus to the threat of automation and "cybernetics" that some economists theorized could significantly disrupt the labor market by displacing manual labor. Social critics in turn warned of the "boredom, anomie, and alienation" that could result from such a disruption, and attention turned

to the chaos that might “follow in postscarcity’s wake.”¹⁷ Some notable conservatives agreed, including Milton Friedman, who proposed a negative income tax in 1962 to shore up incomes at the bottom. Nixon liked the idea as a method to “eliminate welfare bureaucracy,” and he asked his “new favorite” staffer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, whether the plan might eliminate social workers. Moynihan’s response was simple: “Wipe them out.”¹⁸

Moynihan was “Nixon’s iconoclast-in-residence.”¹⁹ An Irish-Catholic “striver” from New York, he shared Nixon’s penchant for exaggerating his origin story. Nixon “recruited” Moynihan by assuring him that Nixon’s reputation as a “hard-hearted conservative” obfuscated his origin as a “child of the depression” who knew the effects of poverty.²⁰ Moynihan also shared Nixon’s desire to be a reformer. He framed himself in his own writing as a corrective: “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “Catholics did not produce an intellectual class that could expound its views on a competitive basis with Protestant and Jewish publicists.”²¹

Moynihan had seen the limelight earlier in the 1960s for his controversial Labor Department study entitled “The Negro Family: A Call to Action.” Commonly referred to as “The Moynihan Report,” it argued that the primary obstacle to full economic and social participation by Black Americans was “flaws in its matriarchal family structure.” This argument endeared Moynihan to conservatives, who were happy to receive a cultural justification for the struggle of Black citizens that set economic and structural concerns aside. Moynihan was “public enemy number one” among “left-wing antipoverty activists,” however, who figured that the struggles of the Black underclass in America were the result of structural economic barriers that blocked Black participants from getting fair treatment in the labor market.²² Nixon was interested in Moynihan’s ability to forward “heterodox” ideas and brought him into his administration. There, Moynihan would have an underappreciated impact on domestic policy, as he encouraged Nixon

to consolidate the reforms of recent years into a broad package that would restructure welfare policy. By July of 1969 Nixon had reorganized the executive branch and placed Moynihan as “the Kissinger figure” of his domestic policy. One aide remarked that “the boss is in love again.”²³

Over the course of the spring and summer of 1969, Moynihan and Nixon wrote back and forth about the state of welfare in the country.²⁴ Escalating tensions between the administration and the press played an important role in pushing the administration toward acting on domestic policy. Domestic concerns were on the minds of business leaders as well, and three weeks after Nixon took office the U.S. Chamber of Commerce offered its support to the administration in the form of a “free, full-time staff person” who would help the administration develop plans for combatting the “urban crisis.”²⁵ The U.S. Chamber of Commerce sponsored a telecast on March 24 to connect members of the Urban Affairs Council with twenty thousand business stakeholders around the country. Coverage of the event was negative, and Nixon fixated on a particularly critical account from the Associated Press that claimed the event “proved that the Urban Affairs Council members have been in office for far too short a time to do much more than size up the vast problems of the cities.”²⁶ Nixon, who had a longstanding adversarial relationship with the press, was looking for a response to critiques that he had been spending too much of his administration’s efforts on foreign affairs. He turned to Arthur Burns (Counselor to the President), Robert Finch (his Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare), and Moynihan for a solution. All three corresponded with the president over the following months, but Moynihan would ultimately win Nixon’s ear with a series of arguments that pushed Nixon to deemphasize the role of reform in combatting poverty in favor of focusing on the family.

Moynihan sent Nixon a crucial memorandum on May 17. Nixon had been “disturbed” by a recent article in *New York* called “The Revolt of the White Lower Working Class,” in which Pete Hamill outlined the rise in rage and resentment among poor American whites. “They see a terrible unfairness in their lives,” Hamill wrote, “and an increasing lack of personal control over what happens to them.”²⁷ The danger of this pent-up resentment wasn’t just a wave of voting, it was violence: Hamill added that “the result” of that perceived lack of personal control was “growing talk of revolt.”²⁸ He warned that while “the working-class white man is actually in revolt against taxes, joyless work,” and “the double standards and short memories of professional politicians,” George Wallace’s receipt of nearly 10 million votes in 1968 heralded the danger of a bloody conflict. “Any politician who leaves that white man out of the political equation,” he concluded, ran a risk: “the next round of race riots might not be between people and property, but between people and people. And that could be the end of us.”²⁹

Moynihan wrote that the resentful were the same group Nixon had gestured to with “The Forgotten Americans,” adding that “they have not really found a voice in American politics, but they are indeed angry. And they have reason to be.”³⁰ He explained that one way to smooth over the problem was to continue the administration’s shift from a “services strategy” to an “income strategy.”³¹ The inherent problem with a strategy of providing services to the needy was twofold. The first problem, that the “performance was spotty,” was less important than the second: that “in the present time the service dispensing groups in the society—teachers, welfare workers, urban planners, nutrition experts...are preoccupied with the black problem and almost at times seem to resent hearing that there are whites who are in difficulty.”³² According to Moynihan, this led to the reality of 1969, in which “a services strategy tends not only to exclude working class whites, but also to set up a great many middle class whites (and blacks) [sic] in the resentment

business.”³³ An income strategy, rather, would “begin with the assumption that what the poor and near poor lack most is money...thus the government does not seem to be playing favorites by providing sumptuous special services for one group...while ignoring the needs of others.”³⁴ Income strategies might have begun as a radical way to end poverty, but Moynihan’s arguments framed income strategies as a necessary shield against class antagonism and white resentment. He added that the third tranche of Nixon’s potential income strategy reform plan, then called The Family Security System (later the FAP), would “aid the working poor as well as the wholly dependent poor” while interjecting that “sixty percent of [the working poor] are white.”³⁵ Moynihan continued his insistence on national welfare policy as a way to stem racial demographic change.³⁶ He reminded Nixon that “both whites and blacks viewed welfare as supporting mainly black families.”³⁷ These arguments later found their way into Nixon’s appeals to the white lower class throughout his address to the nation. By focusing on welfare as a problem of the family, Nixon drew a picture of social assistance that white voters could find palatable.

Nixon was enthusiastic in the early days of the plan. He wrote in his autobiography that he “urged his staff to accelerate their schedule” to send the legislation to Congress. “A year was simply too long,” he wrote, “so I pushed the Cabinet and staff to develop a program of creative and innovate social legislation as soon as possible.”³⁸ Whether the legislation was innovative is another matter entirely. It was certainly radical, and certainly outside the “Overton window” of political discourse at the time, but the policy is deeply syncretic, pulling from a number of intellectual sources, cultural discourses, and policy proposals. Its origin as a guaranteed income plan and negative income tax was fundamentally shaped by Moynihan into something

polysemous, and Nixon's engagement of internal contradictions inherent to welfare discourse ultimately sabotaged the plan.

Brian Steensland argues that scholars who have considered the Family Assistance Plan often do so while leaving stones unturned: "Scholars who focus on business influence and social movements are informed by Marx's work on political economy, while studies focusing on state actors and institutional configurations draw from Weber's and Tocqueville's writings on bureaucracy and political institutions." While these two intellectual traditions might have something to add, "neither of these orientations recognizes that systems of social provision are embedded in moral and symbolic orders (albeit contested ones) that shape their development." Steensland writes that without a sense of those moral and symbolic orders from which policy arguments emerge, "existing perspectives suffer from a variety of blind spots that diminish their ability to incorporate the influence of factors such as moral categories, symbolic representations, and public discourse on policy development."³⁹ Rhetorical criticism provides just such a toolkit for interrogating the role of moral categories, contested symbolic representations, and public discourse in policy development.

Robert Asen has considered Nixon's rhetorical appeals as part of the contested history of United States welfare discourse. Steensland argues that "guaranteed income plans failed because they challenged the cultural logic of American welfare policy, which is based on sorting the poor into different programs according to assessments of their 'deservingness.'"⁴⁰ Asen locates these contradictions within the text of Nixon's address, arguing that "historical contradictions of poverty discourses informed Nixon's FAP speech and frustrated his attempt to articulate a new approach to federal welfare policy."⁴¹ While Asen correctly diagnoses the internal moral and discursive contradictions that motivate the policy, Nixon's speech can also be located as a point

of inflection within the broader history of universal basic income. Considering the speech as an argument about guaranteed income plans reveals the inherent racial tensions, discursive constraints, and cultural conceptions of both government and poverty in American history and provides us a set of critical tools for interrogating how arguments for plans like a universal basic income can become stymied by the broader sociopolitical landscape of their time.

Start-Up Costs and Investments: A Summary of Nixon's Address to the Nation

Nixon began his "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs" with a warning. The United States, he explained, was facing an "urgent need" to "modernize our institutions." Its failing institutions had left the country in the thrall of three crises: one "urban," one "social," and a "crisis of confidence in the capacity of government." Nixon echoed those three crises with a parallel structure of three "thirds." He claimed that a "third of a century of centralizing power and responsibility in Washington" had mired the country in a "bureaucratic monstrosity," that a "third of a century of social experiment[s]" had cemented a detritus of "entrenched programs" having "outlived their time," and that a "third of a century of unprecedented growth and change" was straining governance's ability to keep up with citizens' needs.⁴²

All of these were urgent problems to solve, but Nixon gestured to one in particular. "Nowhere has the failure of government been more tragically apparent," he argued, "than in its efforts to help the poor and especially in its system of public welfare."⁴³ His address outlined four measures that he argued would stem the tide of crisis and restore faith in the system of government: a "complete replacement of the present welfare system," a "comprehensive new job training and placement program," a "revamping of the Office of Economic Opportunity," and "a start on the sharing of federal tax revenues with the states."⁴⁴ Nixon divided the main body of his

address into five sections: one for each branch of potential reform and a conclusion designed to weave the four branches together and make a persuasive case for reform.

Instituting these reforms, he argued, would be controversial and costly. “The first year costs of the new Family Assistance Plan,” he said, “would be \$4 billion.” Despite the high cost and controversy around the plan, Nixon assured the public that it was necessary. Not only would the funds be available in 1971, but the “cost of continuing the present system” prohibited any other action (or inaction) from being possible. Nixon promised the nation that the high bill for the reforms was just a “start-up cost,” a “heavy investment made in the early years in the expectation that they will more than pay for themselves.”⁴⁵ The human returns would also be high: the costs were a similar start-up cost for “turning around our dangerous decline into welfarism in America.”⁴⁶ Nixon presented these “start-up costs” to the nation by relying on three main rhetorical movements: he substituted “the family” as the figure of aid instead of the individual poor, he personified the welfare system as a greedy and monstrous danger, and he invoked the locus of the irreparable to present his solution as necessary for stemming the tide of American decline.

Nixon’s Substitution of “The Family” for the Poor

Nixon focused repeatedly on the family throughout his speech. The health of families warranted his claim that existing welfare systems had underserved the family. Nixon identified the structure of welfare itself as being unfair to families: “it is morally wrong,” he wrote, “for a family that is working to try to make ends meet to receive less than a family across the street on welfare.” These inequalities were “bitterly resented by the man who works.” Nixon agreed, stating that “the rewards are just the opposite of what they should be.” The existing structure incentivized receiving welfare benefits and thus drew “people off payrolls and onto welfare

rolls.”⁴⁷ Nixon’s references to singular individuals were rare, and typically utilized in short, declarative statements. Nixon drew focus toward the family: welfare’s ongoing failures would make families and the structure of the American family part of the “suffocating” human cost and “long-range burden” of continuing the welfare system in its existing form. Gone were appeals from earlier in the history of guaranteed income arguments to the struggle of the “poor” as a collective of struggling individuals, replaced with terms like “family head.” The principal problem of welfare was no longer the poor individual, or class strife. Instead, concerns for “the family” motivated a rethinking of welfare policy from the bottom up.

Nixon put the family at the center of the “social crisis.” He framed part of his speech as addressing the capacity of government as an institution, but a good deal of his rhetorical strategies focused on the threats to the institution of the family. “Poverty is not only a state of income,” he argued. “It is also a state of mind, a state of health.”⁴⁸ The “anguish of the poor” came as much from the impact of government assistance on the health of the family as it did from hunger or precarity. The existing welfare structure created “an incentive for desertion” that corrupted the foundation of American families as fathers left home to find jobs or “to make the children eligible for welfare.” Thus the system “denied [children] the authority, the discipline, the love that come with having a father in the home” and undermined the stability of the two-parent heterosexual family. Nixon’s appeals constituted an idealized American family: two-parent, heterosexual, able to provide and care for their children, and willing to work to do so. This idealized family was “robbed” of its “dignity” by a welfare system that “encouraged a man to desert his family” and made it “more profitable for a man not to work than to work” by denying benefits if a father figure was present.⁴⁹

In addition to the conceptions of class and ability present throughout the speech, Nixon's focus on men as breadwinners obfuscated entire categories of those with need for aid, such as single mothers and citizens in other social/romantic arrangements. The absence of women in Nixon's speech is revealing here. Despite a few mentions of "a mother" and the invocation of "mothers," women are implicitly relegated to the assumed role of caregiver.⁵⁰ Nixon's references to labor are consistently gendered: "the man who works" resents the life of luxury lived by those who shirk labor, and the fault of family deterioration is "the man" leaving home. While the discursive figure of the "welfare queen" wasn't yet present in 1969, similar attitudes are clear in other writing about working-class resentment from the time. These were early heralds of the kind of "moral economy" that promoted "discursive practices surrounding welfare" that Karen McCormack has called "stigmatizing to women receiving assistance."⁵¹ Nixon's "focus on the family" constituted those suffering from poverty as deserving family units instead of the individual poor themselves.⁵² This separated "the family" from the experiences of individuals, their material situations, and the impacts of racial stereotypes and gender biases in lives of women around the country. While it highlighted the needs of those with families and the harsh realities of life for children in poverty, this rhetorical strategy elided those without children who struggled to make ends meet, whose struggles were thus associated with their own moral failures.

Nixon's invocation of the health of the family also brought with it an urgency, invoking what J. Robert Cox's idea of the locus of the irreparable. Nixon's rhetorical appeals leveraged family health as a synecdoche for the health of the nation. A point of crisis in the health of the family therefore warranted extraordinary measures to ensure the continued success of social assistance. As I noted in the previous chapter, Cox notes that invoking the locus of the irreparable often serves as a warrant for extraordinary measures. Nixon's use of it emphasized

the Family Assistance Plan as a way to stave off social issues stemming from a supposed decay of the family. This emphasis exemplifies what Cox claims about the role of the irreparable as a warrant for measures like an income guarantee that “go beyond the usual,” “customary,” or solutions that “most people would approve.”⁵³ Nixon had countered the public’s hesitancy toward guaranteed income throughout his campaign by repeatedly disavowing it, and his later invocation of the dire health of the family warranted a measure that his audience (and, thus, his earlier self) would not have tolerated. The work requirement was central to this move. Moynihan wrote in his reflection on the FAP that guaranteed income plans were “calamitous” if they provided an amount of income that disincentivized labor participation: “A point is reached...when money gained from work becomes marginal, given the alternative availability of transfer payments.”⁵⁴

Nixon’s appeals to the health of the family also invoked racial stereotypes and fears of Black culture in the United States that had been previously expressed by Moynihan. Many of the arguments in Nixon’s advocacy for the Family Assistance Plan echoed Moynihan’s own fears of the deterioration of the Black family. Moynihan wrote to Nixon on January 13, 1969 and urged him to pay special attention to three interest groups: “educated youth,” “the black poor,” and “the white working class.” He pushed Nixon to assure Black voters that the new administration would keep the cause of civil rights going, adding that although opinion surveys revealed Black voters to be “at all social class levels, exceptionally optimistic,” they were deeply “afraid of the new administration.”⁵⁵ Part of the solution, he recommended, was to reassure the white working class that “its newly acquired, precarious, and at best relative prosperity” wasn’t going to be “sacrificed by upper middle class whites in the cause of lower class blacks.”⁵⁶

Moynihan's efforts to rebrand the policy into one emphasizing family structure and social responsibility echoed his earlier appeals to the same in "The Moynihan Report," in which he claimed that "the deterioration of the Negro family" and a rise in single Black motherhood was "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society."⁵⁷ Moynihan was eager to resist this deterioration, and even went so far as to argue to Nixon in a memo on March first that national welfare standards like the FAP would "stem the tide of the migration from the South and thereby prevent further expansion of the urban 'subculture.'"⁵⁸ Work requirements were thus a way to mitigate the spread of a culture seen as inferior and averse to labor by choice or by circumstance.

Moynihan had a close role in determining the final direction of the Family Assistance Plan. By July of 1969, the plan's focus on work requirements was cemented. Moynihan wrote to Nixon on July 8th about a *New York Times* article on a New York family allowance plan that the paper of record labeled a measure to aid "the working poor." Moynihan recommended the framing, as it described "a problem...increasingly understood to be of critical dimensions" that couldn't be "ignored by those who seek to address the problem of black, non-working, abject poverty."⁵⁹ The message was clear. "Welfare" was a system perceived as supporting Black citizens. By keeping attention on the "working poor" and the family, advocates of the Family Assistance Plan could advance their policy by appealing to white audiences who thought of welfare as a "Black" program. Nixon circled the phrase "the working poor" on the memo and added a note: "excellent theme."⁶⁰

A Monstrous Welfare System

Nixon's short, declarative sentences are interjected with evocative adjectives. Asen is right to note the monstrous shades with which Nixon paints public assistance.⁶¹ Nixon painted the welfare system as a bloated and expanding monstrosity that threatened to consume the entirety of life in the United States into "welfarism" and similar downfalls. His plan, which he presented as clean, simple, and efficient, was contrasted with the existing status quo: a "fearsome and menacing" figure that loomed over the lives of those it intended to help.⁶² In a list of the system's failures, Nixon argued that "the present system breaks up homes. It often penalizes work. It robs recipients of their dignity. *And it grows.*"⁶³

Nixon's principal indictment of the welfare system was its expansion. In figuring the welfare system this way, he personified an inanimate social construct like "the welfare system" as a lumbering, uncontrollable beast that consumed all in its wake. Jeanne Fahnestock notes personification's use as a rhetorical appeal, writing that it makes "persons out of nonhuman agents by endowing them with intentional actions and even with speech."⁶⁴ Nixon anthropomorphized the welfare state, endowing it with human qualities such as greed, gluttony, and lethargy. His system was clean and simple, the existing state was an expanding, moribund, gelatinous beast hurting the people it was tasked with helping.

In anthropomorphizing the welfare state, Nixon aligned its negative qualities with the people who sought its help. The welfare state was greedy, expanding, and consuming. Its recipients were thus greedy, expanding, and consuming as well. The expansion of welfare rolls in this metaphor is likened to the consumptive habits of the imagined poor. Nixon thus constructed the welfare state as a synecdoche for both its recipients and the entire federal

government. The nation was tasked with replacing a slow, overfed, and monstrous system with one brought more into line with values like efficiency, standardization, and lean thinking.

This system's expansion didn't just threaten the livelihoods of those who found themselves within it, it sabotaged their morality as well. By reforming the system, the system of social support would aim "at helping the American people do more for themselves" by "getting everyone able to work off welfare rolls and onto payrolls."⁶⁵ If the poor were able to work but weren't compelled to, their moral state would suffer as they became subsumed by "welfarism."

Nixon's words echoed critiques of the imagined poor, fattened on government subsidies. Pete Hamill's article on the "revolt" of the white lower class reflected these imagined welfare recipients. "Welfare recipients" evoked "monstrous images" of a "rabble: fat, well-fed, bigoted, ignorant."⁶⁶ One "ironworker friend" Hamill interviewed claimed to be feeling a squeeze made worse by the image of those receiving assistance. "I'm going out of my mind," he said. "I pick up a paper and read about a million people on welfare in New York...or some fat welfare bitch demanding—you know, not askin', *demanding*—a credit card at Korvettes...I *work* for a living...you see that, and you want to go out and strangle someone."⁶⁷ Welfare systems, fattened by years of expanding rolls, reflected their recipients, "fattened" on years of undeserved rewards and government handouts. The solution? Cut the beast off and starve it.

The "imagined poor" were also of a certain color. The nation considered recipients of welfare to be Black, even though they weren't; only 44% of AFDC recipients were. Moynihan had reminded Nixon during the development of the policy that Americans thought of welfare as primarily the domain of Black families, and thus Nixon's appeals to the grotesque underclass evoked a racial fear as well. Stemming the tide of welfare's expansion would also stem the imagined expansion and decadence of a Black underclass that wasn't nearly as well-off as they

were imagined to be. These underlying racial fears contributed to the idea of the imagined poor as a group of people to be feared.

Nixon also repeatedly invoked appeals to health: the vibrancy of the country, the leanness and “efficiency” of a social support system working well. This argument at once figured the poor as lazy, overfed, and monstrous while also invoking a fear that the underclass’ labor potential was going untapped. Thus the argument constructed a racialized, idealized, able subject, willing to work, marry, provide for a family, and achieve economic and political status through “correct” paths. Nixon warned of a “chronic failure” of government to achieve its ends, made a parallel construction out of “effective” and “efficient,” and likened government’s workings to a machine that needed to be “repaired.”⁶⁸ Ideal American citizens were able to work and provide for themselves.

These claims echo what Judith Shklar identified as an important facet of American self-identification: the dignity of work, the importance of personal achievement, and contempt for “idleness.” “The opportunity to work and to be paid an earned reward for one’s labor,” she notes, “was a social right, because it was a primary source of public respect.”⁶⁹ This aspect of work as integral to public respect is integral to the history of disability discourses as well. Kim Nielsen argues that issues of disability were often interpreted through a context of work, with work being seen as the aim of “solving” disability policy. Nielsen argues that this created an “idealized notion” of personhood, one that based social policy on “the premise that citizens are capable.” These policies divide citizens into two binaries: “independence is good,” and “dependency is bad...dependency means inequality, weakness, and a reliance on others.”⁷⁰ Similarly, the poor and underprivileged could achieve equality not through being helped, but by helping themselves through entering the world of work. As Nixon put it, they could get off welfare rolls and onto

payrolls. He contrasted the idleness and stagnancy that the monstrous existing welfare system engendered with the lean, efficient functioning of a governmental system supporting those on welfare by ushering them into work. By engaging in these “historical contradictions” by which the poor could be simultaneously constituted as helpless and idle, Nixon frustrated attempts at genuine reform by situating his plan in cultural conceptions and work requirements that would ultimately contribute to its failure in the Senate.

Constituting a Governmental Crisis

A radical reform agenda like Nixon’s would inevitably meet resistance. Of all possible reforms, why should Americans adopt this particularly aggressive reformation of the existing social welfare system? Nixon warranted his claims to urgency by invoking the locus of the irreparable. In a contingent world, two questions are paramount in rhetorical judgement: *why this* and *why now*. Nixon invoked the monstrous state of the welfare system and the endangered state of the American family to make his case for his policy, but he turned to the language of crisis to answer the question of timing. The lives and livelihoods of the poor might have been at risk, but Nixon also cautioned that the nation was approaching crises of monumental proportions: a “social” crisis, an “urban” crisis, and a crisis of faith in government.⁷¹

Invoking a point of crisis provides immense resources to rhetors. It frames a decision point as irreversible, and thus makes considering alternative or radical solutions possible. Cox writes that invoking the irreparable is a “loci commune.” functioning as “the bases for our interpretation of general values in situated moments of decision and action.”⁷² While all choices are irreparable in a strictly material sense, since we can’t return to a previous decision point and choose differently, invoking the irreparable “assists the rhetor in discovering arguments that accentuate the value or hierarchical ordering of one referent vis-à-vis another referent.”⁷³

Specifically, it aids in that ordering by organizing perceptions of a situation toward what “the *unique* and *precarious* nature of some object or state of affairs...and stresses the *timeliness* of our relationship to it.”⁷⁴

Nixon leveraged a point of welfare crisis to stress the unique and precarious nature of American moral structure and the poor, and repeatedly stressed the timeliness of resolving that crisis. His opening stressed the “fortunate” state of Americans, who lived in a time of economic flourishing, expanding rights, and increasing wealth. This state was threatened, however, by the monstrous and expanding welfare system that threatened to consume both American governance and the lives of the poor into a cycle of “welfarism” if it was allowed to continue into the 1970s.⁷⁵ The costs of not undertaking the reforms, Nixon repeated, would be catastrophic: the “staggering” human and economic costs of allowing the crisis to continue meant that Americans were being put into an impossible position. “In the final analysis,” Nixon said, “we cannot talk our way out of poverty, we cannot legislate our way out of poverty.” The only way forward from the crisis was work: “what America needs now,” he assured the nation, “is not more welfare, but more ‘workfare.’”⁷⁶ The nation was left with a choice: continue to let the social crisis spin out of control or undertake a radical realignment of the welfare assistance system that guaranteed the poor an income floor in exchange for compelling them to work.

Nixon also highlighted the precarious place of the United States in the world. Asen writes that “a context of crisis required all participants to act quickly...crisis engendered a portentous moment: if present trends continued unabated, the exemplary global position of the United States might be lost and the security of citizens threatened.”⁷⁷ By opening his speech with a description of American standing in the world, Nixon reinforced the urgency of his plans. Without a check on the expanding welfare state, the country could slide uncontrolled out of its position of world

supremacy. Thus Nixon engendered the welfare controversy with a fearful urgency: act now, or we might lose its place as a world leader. The American family was also embroiled in this crisis. The present system incentivized “desertion” as families were split up by welfare rules and father figures departed their families. Broken homes were thus a synecdoche for the coming rupture of the American welfare system, which would do to American stability what it had done to poor families: subsume them into the monstrous appetite of a welfarism thought to be linked to a Black culture.

Nixon’s later support for the Family Assistance Plan emphasized the plan’s ability to stave off crises as well. On December 2, 1969, Nixon spoke at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. He invoked the “seal of urgency” placed on “our national commitment to put an end to hunger and malnutrition due to poverty.”⁷⁸ The United States, he explained, faced an impending crisis of food security and malnutrition. His administration was determined to fight “the malnutrition that derives from ignorance or inadvertence” as well as the economic insecurity that contributed to poverty. Nixon claimed responsibility for not addressing “an urgency we all feel” and argued for a “moral imperative”: the nation’s “conscience” simply couldn’t tolerate its citizens going hungry. The crisis of malnutrition, however, extended to the health in other areas: “a child ill-fed,” he argued, “is dulled in curiosity, lower in stamina, distracted from learning.” Nixon associated this childhood malnutrition with later struggles in labor, adding that “a worker ill-fed is less productive, more often absent from work.”⁷⁹ Once again, returning the poor to productive labor was proposed to avert disaster.

In this use of personal health as a synecdoche for national health, Nixon elaborated that it was not the role of government to “dole out food and clothing and medicine.” The “task of government,” he argued, “is not to make decisions for you or anyone.” Rather, the purpose of

government poverty policy should be “to enable you to make decisions for yourself.”⁸⁰ Providing each family with income supplements would “put cash into the hands of families because they are poor, rather than because they fit certain categories.” This promise of empowerment and agency covered up the harsh reality lying underneath: in a neoliberal system of governance, the “best” path encouraged its travelers back into the free market. The market could rise to meet the supply need given the increased demand from income supplements, creating more jobs, and encouraging citizens to earn their income from payrolls. If the argument sounds familiar, that’s because it is: claims like this echo throughout UBI discourses into the present day. Andrew Yang argued in 2018 that a guaranteed income would supercharge the U.S. economy, generating billions in value. The Family Assistance Plan was designed to remedy a welfare crisis thought to be resulting from “problems of education, habit, taste, behavior, personal preferences”— in short, anywhere other than from within the existing economic system itself.⁸¹

“Ideological Anarchy:” The End of the FAP

The Family Assistance Plan died an inelegant death. Moynihan stresses that the plan “was defeated in the Senate Finance Committee by liberal votes.”⁸² Liberals objected to the amount of assistance provided and the presence of a work requirement. Public perception had also turned against the policy. In a two-day hearing on November 18-19, 1970, opponents of the FAP voiced opposition to its work requirements. The Plan, they countered, would drive them out of the home and into underpaid work.⁸³ By the 20th of November the plan was defeated 10-6 in the Finance Committee. Leonard Hausman wrote in 1973 that a good deal of liberal opposition to the plan resulted from distrust toward Nixon. Other opposition came from the content of the plan. The National Welfare Rights Organization denounced the plan as “anti-poor and anti-black...a flagrant example of institutional racism.”⁸⁴

Others denounced the plan. Influential conservative William F. Buckley, Jr., at the time editor of *National Review*, initially signaled openness to the plan, which he praised for its “directness” in attacking “the sprawling mess that has grown up around a few humanitarian postulates.”⁸⁵ Later, however, he changed his tune. He issued a “Reluctant Nay” on the Family Assistance Plan, citing the fact that the Plan added to existing public assistance programs instead of eliminating them. He also claimed that proponents of the program weren’t as keen on work requirements as they might have seemed. “Talk about the ‘workfare’ aspects of the bill,” he argued, were “merely...boob-bait for conservatives.”⁸⁶ Moynihan recalled Buckley’s condemnation as particularly troubling for conservatives, which caused “doubts in the White House.” It also revealed cracks in the ideological firmament of the administration. The Family Assistance Plan had “been the work of men for the most part strangers to Nixon’s political cadres...[who] were deeply attached to conservative ideology, and suspected FAP from the outset. When Buckley spoke, they listened.”⁸⁷ Troubled by opposition from the left and the right, the Family Assistance Plan stalled. The work of “Tory men and liberal measures” in welfare that Moynihan had described to an eager Nixon was on ice.⁸⁸

These conflicting impulses, however, are at the center of the Plan’s failure. Despite frustration with existing systems and an initially positive reception for the policy, the fight over the FAP quickly grew complicated by competing interest groups and cultural conceptions of the poor. One commentator claimed that the chaotic discourse surrounding the plan “revealed a state of ideological anarchy.”⁸⁹ Nixon promoted an inherently syncretic and polysemous policy by engaging hypocrisies and contradictions within the history of welfare discourse that ultimately stymied the plan. Appeals to the inherent worth of all children’s lives and the importance of economic security in providing for children took up residence next to arguments rooted in the

conviction that poverty results from behaviors, personal choices, habits, and tastes. This same syncretic nature led advocates of UBI to make similar contradictory claims and rely on similar historical contradictions and hypocrisies within welfare discourse in advocating a guaranteed income for the present day.

Nixon promoted the Family Assistance Plan with three rhetorical strategies: substituting “the family” for the poor, personifying existing welfare systems as uncontrollable monstrosities, and invoking the locus of the irreparable to warrant extraordinary measures in combatting poverty and the corrupting influence of “welfare.” While Nixon’s speech correctly identified the ways in which the existing welfare system put the marginalized at a disadvantage through burdensome requirements and excessive, its invocation of a work requirement and limitation to families with children undercut some of the radical potential of guaranteed income plans. These changes are especially clear when comparing Nixon’s advocacy for the Family Assistance Plan to “Scheme for a State Bonus.” The Milners and Pickard based their arguments in a moral warrant: the importance of preserving and liberating human life from servitude and wage slavery. The “Scheme” was partially a program for social support and partially a radical reorganization of the British economy away from labor commodification. For all its focus on pragmatic arguments and practical planning, “Scheme for a State Bonus” based its claims in a positive view of human flourishing that located purpose outside of work. Lost in the Family Assistance Plan is this “why,” a purpose for the liberation of the human soul from the crushing burden of poverty beyond supporting its capacity to earn and save money. Nixon’s remarks from the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health are particularly revealing. Nixon claimed that “the task of government is not to make decisions” for its citizens, but implicit in the Family

Assistance Plan is a rigged game, a predetermined choice: that the purpose of human life is to work for income.

The UBI's next appearance in mainstream U.S. politics was the campaign of Andrew Yang, who dedicated many of his public appearances to extolling the dangers of a coming employment apocalypse. Technological unemployment, he warned, was soon going to put many workers out of a job. To avert inevitable disaster, he argued, the U.S. would have to adopt a guaranteed income. Yang's appeals focused less on reforming the role of the U.S. government than Nixon's, but he retained previous rhetors' use of the guaranteed income as a method for staving off social collapse.

¹ Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs," in *Richard Nixon: 1969: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Record Service, 1971), 637.

² Nixon, "Domestic," 644.

³ Brian Steensland, *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle Over Guaranteed Income Policy* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.

⁴ Rutger Bregman and Elizabeth Manton, *Utopia for Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), 77.

⁵ David Beake, "How Nixon Was Dissuaded from Introducing a Universal Basic Income," *The Guardian*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/27/how-nixon-was-dissuaded-from-introducing-a-universal-basic-income>.

⁶ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, (New York: Scribner, 2008), 392.

⁷ Robert Asen, "Nixon's Welfare Reform: Enacting Historical Contradictions of Poverty Discourses," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2001): 264.

⁸ Most of this dissertation uses "guaranteed income" and "universal basic income" interchangeably. The two don't have much to differentiate them in modern political discourse, but in this chapter I'll be using the term "guaranteed income" to refer to the policy proposals of the late 60's and early 70's and the term "UBI" to refer to the overarching discursive history of the universal basic income.

⁹ Jonathan Aitken, *Nixon: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 3–4.

¹⁰ Aitken, *Nixon*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 393. The author extends his apologies to Peoria, which is full of very fine people.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 393–94.

¹⁴ Steensland, *Welfare*, 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ United States President's Commission on Income Maintenance, *Poverty Amid Plenty, the American Paradox: The Report of the President's Commission on Income Maintenance Programs* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 23–24.

¹⁷ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 393.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

¹⁹ Gilbert Y. Steiner, *The State of Welfare* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1971), 36.

²⁰ Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 394.

²¹ Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 23. Danny, we're still trying. All we got was Rusty Reno and Ross Douthat.

²² Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 393.

²³ *Ibid.*, 395. See also Aitken, *Nixon*, 443; and Steensland, *Welfare*, 86–90.

²⁴ Wallace Golding asserts that this is the real meaning of Bryan Adam's "Summer of '69."

²⁵ Vincent J Burke and Vee Burke, *Nixon's Good Deed: Welfare Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 60.

²⁶ Alexander Butterfield, "Memo to John Erlichman and Herbert Klein," March 27, 1969, folder 3/19/69-4/14/69, Box 1, WHCF: FG 6-12, NPM.

²⁷ Pete Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class," *New York Magazine*, April 14, 1969, 25.

²⁸ Hamill, "White," 25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ Daniel P. Moynihan and Steven R. Weisman, *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 188–89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

³² *Ibid.*, 189–90.

³³ *Ibid.*, 190.

³⁴ *Ibid.* I've been known to enjoy a little alliteration, but even I would edit "sumptuous social services."

³⁵ *Ibid.*

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- ³⁶ Steensland, *Welfare*, 90.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 91.
- ³⁸ Aitken, *Nixon*, 444.
- ³⁹ Steensland, *Welfare*, 7–8.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., ix–x.
- ⁴¹ Asen, “Welfare,” 264.
- ⁴² Nixon, “Domestic,” 637.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 637–8.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 638.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 644.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 644.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 643–44.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 645.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 639.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 639.
- ⁵¹ Karen McCormack, “Resisting the Welfare Mother: The Power of Welfare Discourse and Tactics of Resistance,” *Critical Sociology* 30, no. 2 (2004): 359. Notice the conspicuous absence of “husband” and “father” in favor of “the man” when describing family deterioration.
- ⁵² Author’s note: That’s the *one* Focus on the Family joke I allowed myself. It was a matter of restraint.
- ⁵³ J. Robert Cox, “The Die Is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the Locus of the Irreparable,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68, no. 3 (01 1982): 236.
- ⁵⁴ Moynihan, *Politics*, 249.
- ⁵⁵ Moynihan and Weisman, *Moynihan*, 174.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 175.
- ⁵⁷ Daniel Geary, “The Moynihan Report,” *The Atlantic*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>.
- ⁵⁸ Steensland, *Welfare*, 90.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 112–13.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 113. From a memo to Moynihan.
- ⁶¹ Asen, “Welfare,” 270.
- ⁶² Ibid., 270–71.
- ⁶³ Nixon, “Domestic,” 639. Emphasis added.
- ⁶⁴ Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical Style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 170.
- ⁶⁵ Nixon, “Domestic,” 638.
- ⁶⁶ Hamill, “White.”
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Nixon, “Domestic,” 638.
- ⁶⁹ Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1–2.
- ⁷⁰ Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xii.
- ⁷¹ Nixon, “Domestic,” 637.
- ⁷² Cox, “Locus,” 228.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 229.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Nixon, “Domestic,” 324.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 644.
- ⁷⁷ Asen, “Welfare,” 269.
- ⁷⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health,” in *Richard Nixon: 1969: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President* (Washington: Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Record Service, 1971), 979.
- ⁷⁹ Nixon, “Remarks,” 979–80.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 981–82.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 981. For more on the intersection of race, gender, and matters of “taste”/personal preference in historical discourses, see Helen Zoe Veit’s *Modern Food, Moral Food* and Sarah Walden’s *Tasteful Domesticity*.
- ⁸² Moynihan, *Politics*, 9.

⁸³ Ibid., 533.

⁸⁴ Leonard J Hausman, “The Politics of a Guaranteed Income: The Nixon Administration and the Family Assistance Plan -- A Review Article,” *The Journal of Human Resources* VIII, no. 4 (1973): 412.

⁸⁵ Moynihan, *Politics*, 370.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 370.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 371.

⁸⁸ Fred Siegel, “Moynihan’s Mistake and the Left’s Shame,” *City Journal*, December 23, 2015, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/moynihan%E2%80%99s-mistake-and-left%E2%80%99s-shame-9861.html>.

⁸⁹ Burke and Burke, *Good Deed*, 130.

CHAPTER 4
ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE:
ANDREW YANG’S FREEDOM DIVIDEND AND THE AUTOMATION APOCALYPSE

“We are living in unprecedented times. The future without jobs will come to resemble either the cultivated benevolence of *Star Trek* or the desperate scramble for resources of *Mad Max*. Unless there is a dramatic course correction, I fear we are heading toward the latter.”

- Andrew Yang, *The War on Normal People*

If Andrew Yang is sure of one thing, it’s that the robots are coming. He’s spent countless interviews, speeches, and Twitter characters warning of an imminent employment apocalypse.

“We have about five to ten years before truckers lose their jobs,” he told *The New York Times* in 2018. Then, “all hell breaks loose.”¹ The coming apocalypse wasn’t a market crash or global pandemic, but something more “futuristic”: artificial intelligence. Humans, Yang warned, are on the way out. After all, we’re terrible laborers. We tire, we take personal calls, we leave to eat meals, we take time away from work to birth younger, less productive humans, we sign union cards. Humans have always maintained a symbiotic and unique relationship with machines, and our great eras are often defined by technological advances. But until very recently in the full scale of our history, the idea of replacing most of humans’ physical and intellectual labor with machines was the stuff of fantasy. Andrew Yang began his 2020 presidential campaign with a warning: fantasy was becoming reality.

Yang’s campaign got a boost from an appearance on the *Joe Rogan Experience* in early 2019. “The danger here is to think of it as ‘artificial intelligence is coming,’” he warned Rogan. “It’s actually already eating up the most common jobs in our economy and it’s driving Americans into distress.” That distress had political and social consequences: “We’re going into a revolution,” he claimed. “You’d rather undertake it than undergo it.”² The revolution’s spark, a

wave of job losses from automation, was already lit. His message for Rogan was relatively simple: the end of the labor market status quo (and thus, capitalism's) was nigh. If left unanswered, automation's consumption of jobs would threaten the stability of the U.S. and world economy. His solution was similarly simple: just give people money. Yang's main policy proposal was the "Freedom Dividend," a monthly check for one thousand dollars, free to every citizen without question.

Andrew Yang may seem an unlikely champion for universal basic income. The mental image of an advocate for a radical antipoverty solution doesn't immediately include a Silicon Valley investor and entrepreneur in the prime of his career. Yang's prominence in Silicon Valley tech circles, however, helped to propel his ideas, and a good deal of UBI's early support in its mid-2010's resurgence came from the Bay Area.³ The "ideological anarchy" of Nixon's Family Assistance Plan still shadowed guaranteed income plans.⁴ Yang's monthly, unconditional checks for one thousand dollars crystallized an idea that had found fans across partisan aisles for, as before, its simplicity and supposed efficacy in addressing poverty.⁵ Yang's call for UBI came at a unique inflection point in United States history, when the advancing visibility of Silicon Valley's power to influence the politics and social lives of citizens aided in revealing just how profound the impact of automation's "fourth industrial revolution" would be. Yang's campaign for the presidency failed, but his popularity online helped to permanently boost the universal basic income into mainstream American discourse. UBI, some claimed, was ascendant.

The best example of Yang's arguments is his 2018 book *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income is Our Future*. It is partly a campaign book and partly a manifesto for what Yang terms "human capitalism," a program of social and economic changes designed to ease income inequality and make the U.S.

economy “work” for all its citizens.⁶ As with many campaign publications, *The War on Normal People* is a vessel for establishing Yang’s ethos as a candidate, but it also served to warrant an intervention as disruptive and radical as a universal basic income. As Yang rose to prominence, he made continual reference to the arguments he laid out in *War*, so it serves as an excellent case study for examining what arguments Yang made for the universal basic income and how he crafted those arguments to persuade a skeptical audience. Yang faced a rhetorical challenge: differentiating himself from other politicians and parties while promoting a radical and unconventional policy to a skeptical public. Studying his arguments for a multi-trillion-dollar spending initiative can offer valuable insight into how modern proponents of a UBI frame their policies and how their rhetorical strategies both reject and retain elements of earlier arguments for a guaranteed income.

Yang’s rhetorical challenge in the book was to sell a skeptical public on himself as an “outsider” candidate while convincing that same public of both the dangers of an automation revolution and the merits of a UBI in quelling those dangers. In this chapter, I argue that he did this in three ways. First, he premised his argument and ethos on the impending robot apocalypse, employing the locus of the irreparable to frame his situation as a strategic inflection point warranting radical change. He inhabited the role of a secular prophetic public intellectual, reading economic signs and the social text to warn of a coming reckoning with apocalyptic rhetoric. Second, he linked social, political, economic, and moral problems in the United States to income precarity, arguing that a monthly one thousand dollar “freedom dividend” would ameliorate that precarity. Third, he proposed a new form of capitalism called “human capitalism” and claimed that “evolving” to it would revitalize our world and lives. While Yang claimed this “human-centered” approach to capital could solve most of modern financialized capitalism’s

problems, he didn't reveal how "human capitalism" would operate, and his analysis fails to include any meaningful consideration of what mechanisms would manage and enforce the approach.⁷

I argue that Yang's rhetorical choices in *War* failed to answer three important questions about his UBI. First, he was unable to answer how a universal basic income like his policy would impact inflation. Second, he failed to demonstrate how human capitalism or a UBI could reverse the effects of centralization, financialization, and technological change that spurred the increased precarity he feared. Third, he never satisfactorily explained how a guaranteed income would counter the fundamentally exploitative relationships and arrangements that would threaten to undo a UBI's transformative potential by robbing the marginalized of their economic agency. Ultimately, Yang sidestepped hard questions about social policy and welfare in the United States by focusing on the appeal of a cash grant as "free money." In doing so, he failed to meaningfully address the economic woes felt by citizens in the country. Like Moynihan and Nixon before him, a relentless focus on white populace's reaction to social service expansion drove him to undercut the radical potential of an income guarantee.

Yang is right that the threat to jobs from technological change exists. Automation has swallowed up jobs with its efficiency and capacity, and large-scale economic policy changes will be required to deal with its macroeconomic impact. But Yang's main premise for his argument, that the logic of the marketplace could be disrupted with a universal basic income, is wanting. Advocates for a UBI tend to make "bold claims," as the previous chapters have proven, but modern advocates often focus on the UBI's power to disrupt capitalism's grip. Albert Wenger, a UBI activist, says that people tend to miss the "big picture" about UBI. "We're talking about divorcing your basic needs from the need to work," he claimed. "For a couple hundred years,

we've constructed our entire world around the need to work...it's as foundational a departure as when we went from an agrarian society to an industrialized one.”⁸ Arguments like these were common among UBI advocates at the time, and Yang similarly positioned his guaranteed income as part of a movement toward a kinder, more “human” capitalism. For all its attempts at radicalism, however, *The War on Normal People*'s major shortcoming is Yang's misplaced faith in the power of a stopgap measure like UBI to settle the wreckage of technological capital's endless creative destruction.

“Strange Bedfellows:” Andrew Yang and the Universal Basic Income in the 21st Century

Andrew Yang is an entrepreneur and business leader who spent his early career working in law and healthcare before taking over as the CEO of Manhattan Prep, a test preparation company. Yang oversaw its expansion and acquisition by Kaplan, Inc. in 2009.⁹ Yang founded Venture for America, a nonprofit fellowship program designed to harness venture capital for solving social problems. The program saw immediate success in its early years, and by 2012 Yang had departed Manhattan Prep and been named a “Champion of Change” by the Obama administration.¹⁰ It was a good time for Yang, who in his own words “was riding high” from the success and notoriety.¹¹ As he went from an “underdog” to “one of the guys with the answers,” he was troubled by what he called “the limitations of what was then happening in the entrepreneurship, nonprofit, and government sectors.” Yang began to wonder whether any of the investments and ideas were doing any good. “What are you congratulating us for,” he wrote, “the problems are just getting worse.”¹²

Yang wrote *Smart People Should Build Things* in 2013 and published it in 2014. *Smart People* is a love letter to the power of the creative and knowledge classes, who had for years been “doing the wrong things” by going into business ventures that didn't solve urgent social or

economic problems. Applying the efforts of young, smart creatives, he wrote, would “transform the country.”¹³ Automation doesn’t get much mention in *Smart People*. Yang seems more focused on the social stratification, financial issues, and class anxieties that keep the talents of young people from being directed to grander social problems. Later, in *The War on Normal People*, Yang focused on automation as the key driver of many social issues he wrote about in *Smart People*, and he took that focus into his campaign for the U.S. presidency.

Yang’s campaign for president began on November 6, 2017 when he entered the Democratic primary. His first rise in popularity was owed to an April 2018 press release in which he promised to give one resident of New Hampshire one thousand dollars a month, beginning in January 2019.¹⁴ A year later, he increased the number to eleven residents.¹⁵ His early campaign speeches focused on his background as a founder and the threat of automation to the U.S. economy. He appeared on August 10th, 2018 as a speaker at the Iowa Wing Ding, a Democratic fundraiser. There, he linked the job losses experienced by citizens in America’s heartland to the swing in favor of President Donald J. Trump’s 2016 election.¹⁶ The answer to Trump’s election, he claimed, was “in the numbers”:

I love numbers, so I dug in. And the most direct correlation I found was that the more manufacturing jobs were lost in a voting district due to automation, the more blue turned to red in that district. The reason why Donald Trump is our president today is that we've automated away four million manufacturing jobs in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Wisconsin, and nearly forty thousand here in Iowa...I've been in these communities right after the plant closing...when jobs disappear that's when despair takes its place, and that's when blue turns to red. So, I have some bad news. I was just in Silicon Valley last month, and this is going to get worse before it gets better.¹⁷

As Silicon Valley sought to solve “the problems of today,” Yang explained, its solutions wouldn’t benefit everyone equally. Yang emphasized this equation repeatedly in his early campaign: Trump won places in which the jobs left. Keep the jobs from leaving, or shore up the lives of those in the rubble, and Trump’s share of the “despair” vote would disappear. Yang’s narrative also fit with others circulating at the time that placed blame for Trump’s 2016 victory on the economic precarity and resulting despair of the white working class.¹⁸

Yang’s next major bump in popularity came from his appearance on the *Joe Rogan Experience*.¹⁹ “Most people have never heard of Andrew Yang,” he said, “but I’m already polling at one percent...enough for me to make the [Democratic primary] debate.”²⁰ Appearing on Rogan’s popular podcast may have helped familiarize some with the name Andrew Yang, but the appearance was also an opportunity for Yang to promote the universal basic income to a wide public. Rogan himself admitted to being skeptical: “universal basic income...my initial kneejerk reaction was ‘get the fuck out of here,’ like, universal basic income, just gonna give people money, they’re gonna be lazy, nothing’s ever gonna get done, get out of here.”²¹ He admitted to changing his mind, however, after thinking about Yang’s claims concerning automation. “Then I started paying attention to the rise of AI, and automation, and how many jobs are going to get taken away from people...once you see the numbers, it’s pretty staggering.” Yang added on, contributing that the “average” American didn’t have a college degree, and might not respond well to retraining. The problem, it seemed, could only get worse.²²

With word spreading about Yang’s “Freedom Dividend” and his position on it cementing, Yang’s star continued to rise. He garnered a committed group of online fans who styled themselves the “YangGang” and circulated memes about the UBI. Yang’s campaign leaned in, creating shirts featuring “YangGang,” “Math, Money, Marijuana,” (Yang was very

publicly pro-cannabis) and recirculating Yang “content” from throughout the internet.²³ Yang’s fans were, by and large, young and online: a February 2020 Morning Consult poll estimated that 71% of his supporters were under the age of 45, a figure that outstripped even perpetual candidate Bernie Sanders’ share of youth enthusiasm.²⁴ UBI also got a boost on the web from Yang: his showing on the *Joe Rogan Experience* spurred early donations and support that allowed Yang to clear a threshold to participating in the first two Democratic primary debates.²⁵

By August of 2019, Yang was on the rise, and surprise was in the air for *Politico*’s Michael Kruse. “Perhaps you haven’t noticed,” he wrote, “but Andrew Yang is...surging? The exhausting cluster of Oval Office aspirants...has been whittled to this: the aforementioned top four, two more senators, a mayor, a former member of Congress and...this guy.”²⁶ Yang’s campaign appeal as a “44-year old entrepreneur...who’s never run for any office of this kind before” was “fueled” by what Kruse termed “a deeply dystopian view of the near future (trucker riots, anybody?), a pillar of a platform that can come off as a gimmick (a thousand bucks a month for every American adult!), and a zeitgeisty swirl of podcasts, GIFs, tweets, and memes.”²⁷ Kruse’s quip about the absurdity of “trucker riots” doesn’t have quite the same “zip” in a world that’s seen protests and supply line disruption from major Canadian trucker obstructions amid COVID-19 vaccine mandate controversies, but he correctly identifies the strange “swirl” of online content (perhaps, “hype”) surrounding Yang on platforms such as Reddit. Content doesn’t vote, but it turned out that Yang’s penchant for “delivering a message of economic doom with a little self-deprecating humor can win over some people...even a few disenchanted Trump voters.”²⁸ Yang had won some converts, but the larger question remained unanswered: did his campaign, or the universal basic income, have the power to actually change anything?

Yang was the universal basic income's most high-profile champion in the late 2010s, but other scholars and activists had been writing about the concept with renewed vigor for years prior. The state of "ideological anarchy" identified by Burke and Burke in the promotion of Nixon's Family Assistance Plan followed guaranteed income into the new century.²⁹ Annie Lowrey, author of *Give People Money: How a Universal Basic Income Would End Poverty, Revolutionize Work, and Remake the World*, called the UBI's collective of champions a cohort of "strange bedfellows" putting forth "a dizzying kaleidoscope of arguments."³⁰

The most notable of these strange bedfellows is Philippe Van Parijs, Belgian philosopher and longtime supporter of a guaranteed income. While many of UBI's supporters in the "Yang Era" were Silicon Valley technocrats, journalists, and members of the commentariat, Van Parijs had been promoting guaranteed income programs for decades in academia and beyond.³¹ Van Parijs' influence on the study of a universal income can be seen throughout the citations and sources used for this dissertation and within the work of thinkers and advocates working in the late 2010s. Van Parijs' book *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* promoted a UBI not merely as a way to endure the "technological revolution" of automation and the internet, but also as a way to:

restructure radically the way in which economic security is pursued in our societies and in our world. In each of our societies and beyond, we need a sturdy floor on which we can stand as individuals and as communities. If we are to stem our anxieties and strengthen our hopes, we must dare to introduce what is now commonly called a *basic income*: a regular income paid in cash to every individual member of society, irrespective of income from other sources and with no strings attached.³²

Van Parijs' writings reveal a faith not just in UBI's capacity to help shore up against disruption, but in the power of a guaranteed income to disrupt the governing logics of capitalism in favor of increasing economic security for the most vulnerable.

Other writers in the late 2010s were influenced by Van Parijs' work. Andy Stern, author of *Raising the Floor*, wrote that Van Parijs prompted him to consider the power of a UBI. He "helped me understand that UBI isn't simply anti-work...nor does it discourage an ambitious person from making money...UBI doesn't lower the ceiling on what a person can earn; it simply raises the floor."³³ Andrew Yang utilizes some of Van Parijs' writing on economics in *War*, but he makes special note of Andy Stern, who he notes "proposed" the idea of a guaranteed income floor like the "Freedom Dividend."³⁴ Stern commented when he proposed the idea that "the government is not great at many things. But it is excellent at sending large numbers of checks to large numbers of people."³⁵ Stern's focus on economic precarity seems to stem primarily from fears of American workers' declining bargaining power because of decreasing union membership. Stern leveraged the concept of the irreparable, arguing that the country was approaching a "strategic inflection point" at which "our personal horizons were being narrowed by forces that we don't control."³⁶ The clearest indication of the inflection point, he claimed, was the decoupling of wages and jobs from economic growth and productivity metrics.³⁷

Another influential text in UBI's late 2010s resurgence was Annie Lowrey's 2018 *Give People Money*. Lowrey, a contributing editor for *The Atlantic* with a background in economics, wrote *Give People Money* as an exploration of an idea that, in her own words, is

an ethos as much as it is a technocratic policy proposal...it contains within it the principles of universality, unconditionality, inclusion, and simplicity, and it insists that

every person is deserving of participation in the economy, freedom of choice, and a life without deprivation.³⁸

Lowrey's reporting follows cash grants into sub-Saharan Africa to consider their efficacy, investigates pilot programs in UBI, and highlights the role of technological unemployment in prompting conversations about guaranteed income. "Analysts are warning that Armageddon is coming for truck drivers, warehouse box packers, pharmacists, accountants, legal assistants...I could go on," she wrote, citing Andy Stern's insistence that if "a tsunami is coming, maybe someone should figure out if we have some storm shutters around."³⁹

Technology columnist Farhad Manjoo popularized the UBI in the pages of the *New York Times* with a March 2016 warning that "we may already be seeing the disruptions" of technological unemployment." While "macroeconomic statistics" might have suggested that "the United States has recovered from the last recession," Manjoo argued that "surveys show that many Americans feel vulnerable about their jobs and finances." The reasons were for this vulnerability were legion: sluggish wage growth, "nonexistent" job security, and "inexorable" income inequality. Despite the plan's detractors, Manjoo wrote that his conversations with "techies interested in UBI revealed a sincerity and sophistication about the idea...they weren't afraid of automation...they see automation and UBI as the most optimistic path toward wider social progress."⁴⁰ Manjoo's summary reflected the close association with UBI throughout Silicon Valley: those most clearly responsible for what Stern called the coming "tsunami" were already proposing the UBI as a sweetheart deal to defer the consequences of the changes they themselves put into motion.

UBI also found supporters across the political aisle. Social conservative Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute told Annie Lowrey that "just giving people money is a very

natural solution. It's a way of cutting the Gordian knot. You don't need to be drafting ever-more-sophisticated solutions to our problems."⁴¹ Murray's reference to the Gordian knot invoked both the concept of the Gordian knot as an impenetrable "wicked problem" and the accompanying legend that Alexander the Great unraveled the supposedly impossible knot by simply cutting through it. The metaphor here is clear: implementing a UBI allows government to cut the wicked knot by solving social needs in the most simple and "hands-off" way possible. Murray historically favored eliminating the existing welfare state and replacing it with a simple monthly payment. "Government agencies are the worst of all mechanisms for dealing with human needs," he wrote. "They're necessarily bound by rules applied uniformly to people who have the same problems on paper but who will respond differently to different forms of help."⁴² In the abstract, Murray has a point. A primary limitation of government assistance is its insistence on applying similar plans of assistance for those whose needs might differ wildly. His invocation of people "who will respond differently to different forms of help," however, signals a concern with refusing care to those who might be "wasting" that assistance over addressing the root causes of the poverty he decries.

Of course, the UBI's rise to prominence also attracted the attention of opponents. Noah Rothman, neoconservative writer for *Commentary*, grouped the universal basic income in with a "cornucopia of progressive aspirations that masquerade as policy proposals." Rothman took particular umbrage at the claim that UBI and its partners in the cornucopia were "popular:"

The shallowest analysis of progressive tax plans and wild-eyed social-welfare proposals focuses on their popularity. Indeed, getting something for nothing is always going to be very popular. It's more than a little revealing that the national press has, for the most part, avoided the only question that matters: Will these proposals work?⁴³

Rothman's comments reflected other conservative concerns at the time: that a guaranteed income was a "wild-eyed" utopian ideal championed by a "national press" that focused on the popularity of the idea rather than its efficacy in aiding citizens from rising out of poverty. The boats, it would seem, were to be left to the rising tide. At the center of these UBI discussions was Yang's *The War on Normal People*: a distillation of arguments for guaranteed income, proffered by a presidential candidate hoping to brand himself as both a critical outsider and a breath of fresh air. Understanding how Yang constructed his appeals in *War* can offer a view into what became the height of UBI's popularity.

The War on Normal People

The War on Normal People is divided into three main sections: "What's Happening to Jobs," in which Yang describes the changes and disruptions coming to labor markets across the United States, "What's Happening to Us," in which Yang outlines the impact that economic precarity and technological change has had on social fabric and class/race relations, and "Solutions and Human Capitalism," a group of chapters in which Yang presents his "Freedom Dividend" as a method for solving social and economic issues. Yang also utilizes the third section of *War* to promote "Human Capitalism," a series of social recommendations and loose policy initiatives designed to leverage the coming employment apocalypse as an opportunity for the reformation of modern financial capitalism.

Yang makes three arguments about employment: that the threat of automation is real, that the automation's labor displacement will extend into the middle and upper classes, and that economic precarity is primarily to blame for issues of cultural, moral, and spiritual decay. These positions inform his main claims: that a coming labor apocalypse warrants urgent action in the form of a guaranteed income, that a "Freedom Dividend" can ease the economic precarity that

causes social, moral, and economic ills, and that “human capitalism” can act as a bulwark against the excesses of technological capitalism. Yang auditions some policy positions designed to support the transition to “human capitalism,” such as switching to a “value-added” taxation system (commonly called a VAT), increasing consequences for bad-faith actors in business, and investing in education, single-payer healthcare, and social investment programs like an “American Exchange Program” that promote using cross-country trips for civic education and social renewal.⁴⁴

A Technological Revelation: Economic Doom at the Robot Apocalypse

Andrew Yang faced a dilemma. How does a new political figure with an unorthodox plan and no history in governance win over voters? How could he argue for a solution like universal basic income (or a “freedom dividend”) in a way that made such a “radical” idea seem both necessary and urgent? Yang created a sense of urgency by framing the plan as the only sensible response to a coming crisis. This claim to urgency functioned like other claims investigated in this study, such as the Milners and Pickard’s invocation of a coming revolution to warrant the establishment of a state bonus. Emphasizing the grand scope and urgency of a particular moment can make a proposed solution seem more reasonable. *Politico* described Andrew Yang as “delivering a message of economic doom with a little self-deprecating humor.”⁴⁵ Headlines abounded as editors enjoyed the concept of a “robot apocalypse.” But Yang emphasized repeatedly that technological unemployment wasn’t just a dire threat to workers at the bottom of the labor market. The employment apocalypse, he warned, was coming for the middle class as well.

A wave of automation-driven unemployment was critically important for Yang’s ethos. He framed himself as a voice crying out with a warning from an industry moving faster than

“normal people” had imagined. Yang likes to emphasize his normality: he began a dinner interview with NPR in 2019 by having a casual conversation about riding his bike to the venue.⁴⁶ He warned in that interview of “the greatest economic transformation in our history” and spoke of a “fourth industrial revolution” that would swallow up jobs like the four million it had already consumed in core swing states.⁴⁷ Upwards of forty percent of workers in the country could be automated out of a job in twenty years.⁴⁸ Yang built his ethos out of his experiences in these industries, claiming often to have witnessed the devastation of job loss first hand. He also frequently referenced warnings from his contacts in the technology industry about the threat of automation.

Yang claimed expertise in the world of Silicon Valley while simultaneously projecting an image of prophetic warning. Yang’s claims fulfil the three characteristics of the “prophetic public intellectual’s identity” as described by Anna M. Young: “authenticity,” “responsibility,” and “judgment/hope.”⁴⁹ While Yang’s arguments are secular, the framework of his argument is very similar. He claims his “authenticity” through reiterating his experiences and contacts within the tech industry throughout his career “from being an underdog to one of the guys with the answers” and by emphasizing his investment in the crisis.⁵⁰ He wrote in *War* of his disillusionment in “high-level conferences or design sessions” and recalled “people who were considered the most successful in [their] field” admitting that “they didn’t believe they were meaningfully addressing the problems they had set out to solve.”⁵¹

Yang claimed “responsibility” by invoking his moral reaction to the crisis: the “sense of unease plagued me...I became consumed” by questions like “what is even happening to the United States” and “why am I becoming such a tool?”⁵² He correctly noted that “too much of our human and financial capital is flowing to just a handful of places doing things that are speeding

the machine up rather than fixing what is going wrong.”⁵³ Yang described a kind of conversion experience when he came across an article in CNN “that detailed how automation had eliminated millions of manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2015...four times that of globalization.” His “heart sank” and his “mind raced” and he thought of “what my friends were working on and what was coming down the road.” The “pieces fell into place,” and realization dawned:

Nothing will stop us. We had decimated the economies and cultures of these regions and were set to do the same to many others. In response, American lives and families are falling apart. Rampant financial stress is now the new normal. We are in the third or fourth inning of the greatest economic shift in the history of mankind, and no one seems to be talking about it or doing anything in response.⁵⁴

Yang closed his chapter titled “My Journey” with a call to action that serves as an example of how he enacted the “judgement/hope” characteristic of a “prophetic public intellectual.”⁵⁵ Rather than wallow in despair, he claimed that “my goal now is to give everyone a sense of what is coming” so that citizens could “fight for the version of the future that we want.” Joining Yang on his mission wouldn’t be easy: it would be a “massive challenge.” Yang argued that the future was in the hands of the people, and that “the market will not help us...indeed, it is about to turn on us.” Times were growing desperate, but “the solutions” weren’t “beyond us yet.” “It’s getting late in the day,” he wrote, “and time is running short. I need you to see what I see.”⁵⁶

Yang’s invitation to witness the coming crisis reflected the instrumental and constitutive effects of a secular apocalyptic rhetoric. Barry Brummett writes that apocalyptic rhetoric can appear in both “civil” and “religious” forms and that its function as a rhetorical genre is distinct from the form of the jeremiad. He writes that periods of “flourishing” apocalyptic rhetoric are “times of social and physical change, in which the old systems of meaning could no longer

explain the world.”⁵⁷ Yang hints at this larger collapse of meaning when he associates economic inequality with changing social norms and declining outcomes. Brummett notes specifically that “what makes an event or circumstance a ‘disaster’ is not the gravity of the times in an absolute sense but rather *the perception that things have gotten out of human control*.” It is “the human reaction of ‘anxiety and insecurity’ that calls forth [the] apocalyptic—not crisis itself but a failure of received ways of coping with crisis.”⁵⁸ Yang’s consistent reference to revolution, industrial revolution, crisis, and his statement that “nothing will stop us” are rhetorical choices utilized to point to the extent to which the crisis has grown out of “human” control. Of course, these developments *were* within human control. The actions of machines are directed by a certain subset of humans with the political, social, and economic power to direct those actions. Yang’s attempt to single himself out as a voice of reason fails to properly identify the material and monetary forces driving forward the disaster he fears.

Collapse is frightening, but within that warning can be a romantic valence: the chance to begin again, to stand on “the right side of history,” or to grow into a purer relationship with others, God, or society. These affective dimensions echo apocalyptic rhetoric’s roots in religious rhetoric. “Most scholars divide apocalyptic into two camps,” writes Brummett, “premillennialism (millenarianism) and postmillennialism (utopianism).”⁵⁹ Claims about the end of the world are often tied to moral judgments, and Yang’s claims leverage those roots to urge audiences to take it upon themselves and become a force for revitalizing the world. According to Brummett, a considerable amount of apocalyptic discourse is engaged in “reading...the signs of impending doom.”⁶⁰ Arguments by sign are “incredibly important to apocalyptic claims,” as “much of apocalyptic rhetoric is about interpreting signs...prophets of the apocalypse do not

merely read texts; they are also actively engaged in ‘reading’ and interpreting the phenomenal events in the world around them, what some scholars refer to as the ‘social text.’”⁶¹

Yang thus inhabits the role of a secular prophet, reading the signs of coming apocalypse throughout the economic and ‘social text’ and reporting on those signs in a way that situates his audience “at the end of a particular pattern of historical time.”⁶² Stephen O’Leary writes that this appeal can alter the “perception of time” in such a way that can lead to a “conversion experience.”⁶³ Audiences are encouraged to view, or witness, to “see what I see” in a way that structures the world so as to make the problem dire and the proposed solution seem necessary and urgent. Members of the community thus enter a “system of meaning to replace that being lost.”⁶⁴ This shared system of meaning restores “the meaningfulness of the world and also builds a sense of community among the adherents of the apocalyptic message.”⁶⁵ A community was thus constituted to support Yang’s “freedom dividend” as a way to stem the tide of joblessness, reverse the collapse of meaning, and build a renewed community in the new “millennium.”

In addition to apocalyptic rhetoric, Yang’s arguments in *War* invoke the locus of the irreparable to point out the existence of a strategic inflection point and warrant extreme intervention as a response to immediate danger. David Zarefsky writes that a “characteristic of diverse audiences is that some members will be ready to take action, others may be opposed, and a still larger number will be uncommitted.”⁶⁶ Rhetors can motivate audiences to take immediate action by claiming that a particular moment represents a point of no return past which the opportunity to protect something precious will be lost. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca argued that “the basis for the attention of the irreparable is linked to loci of quality: the unique or exceptional, a contrapuntal emphasis to what is usual, customary, or easily replaceable in human experience.”⁶⁷ Arguments that employ the locus of the irreparable to warrant

immediate action are a way of “organizing our perceptions of a situation involving decision or action [so that] its use calls attention to the unique and precarious nature of some object or state of affairs, and stresses the timeliness of our relationship to it.”⁶⁸ Yang emphasized the unique nature of the automation crisis, linked economic insecurity to precarity, and stressed repeatedly throughout his campaign that time was running out to address the problem of technological unemployment.

Yang wrote in *War* that the incoming “Great Displacement” was a unique threat to the stability of the United States.⁶⁹ He claimed that stagnant wages, changes in corporate culture, and economic inequality combined to create an employment crisis unlike any before in history.⁷⁰ Part of this crisis was social, but Yang linked deep social issues to market logics to explain that “undervaluing” humans was causing social decay.⁷¹ Yang argued that the family itself was threatened, that automation and job loss from disintegration “had already transformed millions of families and relationships across the country,” and could mean that “we’re setting up more and more people, most of them women, to face [parenting in the future] alone...when raising and educating children and forming our human capital is of the utmost importance, we’re heading in the other direction.”⁷² Disaffection among the “permanent shadow class” was resulting in a generation of men failing to provide for their families and instead retreating into worlds of consumer entertainment.⁷³ He argued that the United States was at a unique moment of inflection at which bold change was required in the form of a universal basic income. In doing so, he framed cash transfers as capable of remedying a wide swath of social issues bound up in the precarity he described.

Yang’s claim that changing work opportunities gave rise to Donald Trump extended to a very real fear of social and political violence. He dedicated an entire section of *The War on*

Normal People to the social dangers of unemployment in the trucking industry. After quoting Elon Musk on the immediacy of automation in the industry, Yang outlined a hypothetical scenario on “one of the most dramatic, visible battlegrounds between automation and the human worker.”⁷⁴ In the thought exercise, automation in trucking began with automated trucks requiring a human driver as a failsafe. Then, convoys of trucks led by one human driver would span the country quickly and efficiently.⁷⁵ Truck drivers realized the danger they were in, but not before the need for labor had dramatically decreased, leaving many without jobs and hope. “For many, their opportunities outside of truck driving will be minimal...many are ex-military...they will be proud and desperate...what might happen when the 350,000 American truckers who bought or leased their own trucks are unemployed and angry?”⁷⁶ In a fear reminiscent of Pickard’s concern for revolutionary violence, Yang notes that only one spark would be needed to set the country off. “All it takes is one out of 350,000 to lead the others. It doesn’t take a big leap of imagination to imagine mass protests that could block highways, seize up the economy, and wreak havoc...that is right around the corner.”⁷⁷ Unless voters acted quickly, true chaos could be near. Invoking the locus of the irreparable allowed Yang to warrant an extreme intervention by framing the problem at hand as unique, the matter itself as precarious, and by focusing on the lack of time remaining to address the problem.

Small moments of irreparability are with us always. None of our choices can ever be truly reversed: we live with the precarious and the contingent every day. Apocalypse, in a grander millenarian or eschatological sense, is something that happens *to you*: perhaps as a matter of judgment, time, or predestination. Yang’s title, however, admits something important. An apocalypse isn’t necessarily deliberate. You might invite one, or even welcome it, but a *war* is something else entirely. A war on “normal people” prompts two questions. First, who are the

“normal people?” Then, and perhaps more importantly: *who* is waging war, and what’s to be gained (or lost) if they win? Yang makes it clear: his friends have been waging the war, and so far, they’ve been winning.

Hanging by a Thread and Throwing a Rope: The Freedom Dividend

A lot of us, Yang writes, live in “bubbles.” We live near people like us, shop with people like us, and sometimes we write careful legislation designed to keep the neighborhood looking, well, like *us*. Yang claimed in *The War on Normal People* that this fact keeps a lot of Americans unaware of just how precarious life has become for many of our fellow citizens. “Thanks to assortative mating,” he wrote, “intellect, attractiveness, education, and wealth are all converging in the same families and neighborhoods.”⁷⁸ The rest of us, or what he calls “normal Americans,” “operate in a perpetual state of scarcity...lurch[ing] paycheck to paycheck with no financial cushion.” Work shifts became erratic, and the gig economy offered no comfort. These “mindsets of scarcity,” as Yang called them, make us think differently: “a mindset of scarcity is more than just stress...it actually makes one less rational and more impulsive by consuming bandwidth.”⁷⁹

While the benefits of automation *should* have been seen across the population, Yang claimed that automation and technological change was “activating economic insecurity in most of the population.” The lurch into precarity could even make “our culture...dumber, more impulsive, and more racist and misogynist.” Yang’s reasoning here is quite the metaphor: this rise in bigotry would be due to an “increased bandwidth tax as people jump from island to island trying to stay one step ahead of the economic tide.”⁸⁰ Tribalism and division were early symptoms of the rising tide as the country transitioned “from the land of plenty to the land of ‘you get yours, I’ll get mine.’”⁸¹ That Yang thought this had not previously been the arrangement is telling.

Yang fleshed out his ethos by claiming to understand suffering around the country, including the areas in which “geography is destiny.” Yang noted the increasing effects of mill closures, factory closures, and regional labor market decay and correlated those economic downturns with a rise in political division, tribalism, and right-wing radicalism. In a number of arguments throughout the book, Yang dedicates intense focus to the lives of lower-class white citizens. Like other commentators of his time, he took specific note of the turn toward President Donald Trump and associated that trend with a rise in the economic precarity felt by the white lower class. In a telling passage preceding fears of political breakdown, Yang wrote:

The group I worry about most is poor whites...people of color report higher levels of optimism than poor whites, despite worse economic circumstances. It’s difficult to go from feeling like the pillar of one’s society to feeling like an afterthought or failure...there is a strong heritage of military service in many white communities that will be subverted into antigovernment militias, white nationalist gangs, and bunkers in the woods...more random mass shootings in the *months* ahead as middle-aged white men self-destruct and feel that life has no meaning. As the mindset of scarcity deepens, people’s executive functioning will erode. It takes self-control to resist base impulses...racism and misogyny will become more and more pervasive even as they are policed in certain sectors.⁸²

Yang’s attention to the political byproducts of white resentment echoed the intense focus on the plight of lower-class white workers after the election of Donald Trump.⁸³ Commentators from across the political spectrum were inclined to blame economic insecurity among white voters for the rise of Trump’s brand of politics, helped in no small part by phenomena like J.D. Vance’s successful 2016 memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*.⁸⁴ Texts like *Elegy* were

often leveraged to cement the idea that Donald Trump's election was a result of liberals having ignored the plight of the white working class. Conservative columnist (and *Benedict Option* author) Rod Dreher wrote for *The American Conservative* that "Vance says his people lie to themselves about the reality of their condition, and their own personal responsibility for their degradation...hence the enormous popularity of Donald Trump among the white working class."⁸⁵ For months, columns and headlines shot back and forth: from "Stop Saying Trump's Win Had Nothing to Do With Economics," to "The Past Year of Research Has Made It Clear: Trump Won Because of Racial Resentment," and "Trump Voters Driven by Fear of Losing Status, Not Economic Anxiety, Study Finds."⁸⁶ Yang's focus on the racial resentment of white voters echoed the fear of white backlash that propelled writers of the Family Assistance Plan to focus so intently on work requirements and family support. Even as precarity, per Yang, affected citizens across racial and social lines, Yang's policy efforts were most often directed at the concerns of white voters.

Yang's comments about the working lives of marginalized communities demonstrated a focus on economic conditions as the basis for what Wendy S. Hesford, Adela C. Licona, and Christa Teston call the "affective, relational, and material conditions and structuring logics of inequality."⁸⁷ Yang's claim that claiming that "the market...systematically undervalued women and people of color" revealed his governing logic through word choice. In this argument, better outcomes for women and people of color are important market corrections, valuation adjustments designed to more accurately reflect the monetary and social potential of a group of human beings. Yang's argument about precarity thus constituted an idealized citizen-subject worthy of cash investment not merely for their humanity, but for their potential to generate economic activity in return.

Arguments that speak to human beings as assets to be correctly appraised leverage neoliberal conceptions of personhood. The tenets of Yang's argument suggest that easing precarity involves correctly valuing assets by encouraging them to be productive and healthy. Arabella Lyon writes that refugees can be framed by national and local media as "entrepreneurial saviors of the decaying city." The idealized precarious subject reverses their plight by contributing economically to their communities in a rhetorical move that Lyon argues "deny precarity and reveal the rhetorical technologies of citizen-making" as they "revitalize a city." "The refugee, no longer vulnerable, repairs the Rust Belt city" in a move not dissimilar to Yang's proposed "Freedom Dividend" and economic revitalization.⁸⁸ The poor and marginalized can be thus reframed as assets worth investing in, like the "start-up costs" Nixon evoked in his arguments for the Family Assistance Plan. These arguments reflect a market logic, concerned with efficient investments, costs, and human economic potential.

The central claim of Yang's campaign was that a universal basic income could alleviate citizens' precarity and ease the hold of markets over our future. His solution, a "Freedom Dividend" of one thousand dollars a month, assumed that a lot of "normal Americans'" everyday issues could be solved with a cash stimulus. To be clear: a cash stimulus would certainly aid millions around the country. An influx of twelve thousand dollars to even the median U.S. citizen's wages would amount to an average increase of thirty-four percent. Undoubtedly, we could figure out ways to spend it. The operative question is whether an influx of cash would cure the disease causing the symptoms it hopes to treat. Yang's consistent worry about the political and economic prospects of the white working class may be a product of his time, but that focus occludes other issues that play outsized roles in creating and maintaining precarity. Yang's dividend credits a lot of struggles to economic insecurity, but many other issues can be

impediments to economic security. Yang's title assumes a "normal" citizen, but who exactly is "normal?"

Yang's conception of "normal" is also evident in his claims about racism. His argument framed racism as a *consequence* of economic inequality and insufficient capital, not a possible *cause*. At one point, he claimed that worsening economic inequality and joblessness would aggravate racism and misogyny.⁸⁹ While precarity unquestionably exacerbates underlying prejudices, this argument implies a revealing causation which positions social ills downstream of economics. Rather than framing our economic arrangements as products of human decisions (and thus vulnerable to our biases, shortcomings, and prejudices), Yang's argument elevates the market to a prominence that welcomes monetary solutions to social problems. He presumes a "normal" citizen, but his repeated focus on the plight of poor white Americans reveals a focus on the white resentment toward those receiving aid not dissimilar from the one Nixon expressed in his advancement of the Family Assistance Plan. Rather than confront the multitude of social and historical ills that impact the everyday economic lives of citizens around the country, Yang's argument assumed one cause: economy precarity, easily solvable with a cash stipend.

The Empty Promise (or Nightmare) of Human Capitalism

Andrew Yang would like you to imagine having a robot companion. Perhaps "an AI life coach with the voice of Oprah or Tom Hanks trying to help parents stay together or raise kids."⁹⁰ Our world, he argued in *The War on Normal People*, could include such wonders, but capitalism hasn't been working for us. Rather, "resources and market incentives" for them don't exist. "While our smartphones get smarter every season," he claimed, "our voting machines, bridges, and schools languish...this is what we must change."⁹¹ Enter "human capitalism," Yang's vision for a future in which markets are "steered" to support certain categories such as parenting,

teaching, serving the poor, reading, journalism, “women,” and “people of color/underrepresented minorities.” The country had “reached a point where its current form of capitalism” was failing to produce livable standards and opportunity for all: “It’s time for an upgrade,” Yang wrote.⁹²

That upgrade was “human capitalism,” a form of market economy steered by government policy “toward maximizing human well-being and fulfilment.” This new capitalist economy would “have a few core tenets.” First, “humanity is more important than money.” Second, “the unit of an economy is each person, not each dollar.” Third, “markets exist to serve our common goals and values.”⁹³ With these changes and core beliefs, the economic system would “shift to focus on bettering the lot of the average person” by producing services and products to improve the average life. Doing this would require “the government” to adopt a wide list of “measurements such as” “infant mortality,” “health-adjusted life expectancy,” “childhood success rates,” “environmental quality,” and “public safety.”⁹⁴

The next stage of “human capitalism” would involve taking these statistics and leveraging them for the deployment of what Yang terms “the Digital Social Credit System,” in which “people who help move society in a particular direction are rewarded.” He described a world in which journalists and hackers could be rewarded with social credits for breaking stories and exposing vulnerabilities, or in which helping someone recover from addiction could warrant credits as a reward. Even someone “who maintained a high level of physical fitness and helped others do the same” could be “rewarded and recognized,” although Instagram does already exist. Yang claimed to have met scores of technologists and young people “chomping at the bit” to implement something like this already, which must have made it easy to imagine harnessing “the country’s ingenuity and energy to improve millions of lives if we just create a way to monetize and measure” the goals.⁹⁵ Yang remained silent on what the credits could be redeemed for: are

they equivalent to cash? Can they be turned in for some sort of reward? One of the core ideas of human capitalism seems to be gamifying and monetizing the human experience, marking one more frontier for the market to conquer. In a charitable view, this echoes the technological utopianism of the early internet era. At its most craven, it begins to look like transforming the vulnerable and precarious into a juicier market demographic through stimulus and subsidy. Perhaps Yang was right that the market was undervaluing humans after all.

Yang positioned his rebranded capitalism as brave step toward stopping a “slow-moving crisis” that required “drastic intervention,” but while it might resemble change, the underlying logics of the system haven’t changed. Yang’s own language reveals this: even while writing about the necessity of an evolved capitalism, his words are grounded in the old one. Core “demographics” are “undervalued,” markets require “upgrades.” Even “human well-being and fulfilment” is a metric we should be “geared toward maximizing.”⁹⁶ Yang’s strongest arguments for a revitalized economy read like market research.

Our policies and markets emerge from anthropological commitments, ideas about what kind of beings we are and what kinds of incentives we respond to. Rather than challenge the underlying incentives of technological capitalism’s “creative destruction,” “human capitalism” simply represents a reformation of the metrics by which market forces drive our lives. Yang is leaning on explanations for how his reforms would be enforced. “We shape the system,” but by what regulatory measures? He bemoans the “weak state” and longs for a stronger one capable of directing markets, but he devotes large portions of his chapter on solving government’s problems to an oddly toothless list of recommendations: arguing for pay increases (to allow governments to “compete” better with businesses), “real accountability” in the form of mild criminal justice reforms targeting the rich and powerful, technology reforms like controls for reducing screen

time or stimulation, and rituals for the “renewal of citizenship” like citizenship trips, camps, and an “American Exchange Program” designed to get young people to travel and meet new people.⁹⁷ Yang claims to take aim at capitalism, but without a sense of how his grand social reforms would be spurred or enforced, he fails to make a compelling argument for his alternative.⁹⁸

In crafting a policy that occludes the role of individual actors and decision-makers, Yang leaves the fundamental system unchallenged. If the threat of capitalism has led to the brink of destruction and employment apocalypse, then why not do more than simply subsidize human survival? Yang is right that the market isn’t an abstract force: it’s simply an aggregate, a collection of decisions. Seymour Melman writes that “‘the market’ is not a thing or an animate being, to ascribe...decision power to it is to indulge in a form of fetishism.” That fetishism “involves a displacement of categories in which human behavior is described in a way that shields the identity of the real decision-makers, whether they are individuals or social groups.” This occlusion displaces responsibility, as “endless numbers of decisions are imagined as stemming from an object, the market, rather than from the decision-power relations of managers, corporate and governmental.”⁹⁹ While Yang claims that he wants to break free of the “logic of the marketplace,” his argument fails to resolve the moral tensions and economic questions inherent to challenging capitalism at such a grand scale. Like Nixon before him, he struggled to express a positive view of human life that didn’t reflect the moral categories and incentive structures of liberal consumer capitalism. It might seem to be new, but Yang’s vision of human life is inevitably tied to market success.

**Quite the Five Years:
Yang's Campaign(s) and the Future of UBI, or, "Oops, it's a Pandemic!"**

Two things make studying Andrew Yang's campaign rhetoric particularly tricky. For one, he's remained in the news. Separating "Andrew Yang" and the UBI from the "Andrew Yang" of Twitter and political discourse post-campaign isn't easy, especially since he doesn't make it easy. More challenging, however, is what came right after Yang quit the campaign trail: a global pandemic. Yang suspended his presidential campaign on February 11, 2020. "I am the math guy," he told supporters, "and it's clear tonight from the numbers that we are not going to win."¹⁰⁰ A month later lockdowns began as COVID-19 claimed lives and spread around the globe. Talk of supply shortages, stay-at-home orders, and instructions for making masks at home out of old t-shirts began, and soon Andrew Yang's presidential campaign was firmly in the rear-view mirror. Yang later campaigned for mayor of New York City. After his loss in the mayoral bid, he founded a new political party, dubbed "The Forward Party." He left the Democratic party, claiming that "I'm actually more comfortable trying to fix the system than being a part of it."¹⁰¹

The COVID-19 pandemic changed everything about the timelines Andrew Yang described. But during the crisis, talk of guaranteed income continued. The U.S. government issued three rounds of "stimulus checks" designed to subsidize lost wages and promote spending in a sluggish economy, and soon some calls emerged for making the payments permanent or continuing them throughout the entirety of the pandemic. U.S. Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Pramila Jayapal introduced (and then reintroduced) the Automatic BOOST to Communities (ABC) Act, legislation designed to provide a one-time payment of two thousand dollars and a recurring payment of one thousand dollars per month throughout the COVID-19 crisis and for

one year following the “end” of the crisis. The plan would be funded with “no additional debt” by minting “two \$1 trillion coins” and “additional coins as necessary.”¹⁰²

The issued stimulus checks, along with other large stimulus measures designed to “run the economy hot,” ushered in widespread discussion about the impact of putting “free money” into the U.S. economy. Some like Larry Summers warned that overheating the economy would result in widespread inflation, while other experts countered that the inflation citizens were experiencing had more to do with restrictions in supply and a massive boost in consumer spending.¹⁰³ Regardless, neither side’s victory would resolve the question for a UBI. The exogenous shocks are completely dissimilar, so any discourse about the extent to which stimulus and cash transfers drive inflation has to inevitably factor in the “topsy-turvy” world of 2020-2022.

Macroeconomic issues aside, some of UBI’s appeal is simply from its syncretic and polysemic nature. In Chapter 3, I mentioned that the syncretic nature of the Family Assistance Plan allowed it to appeal to wide audiences. That appeal continues today: from Andy Stern to Charles Murray, the UBI has swayed diverse audiences with its claim to simplicity and efficacy. That syncretic nature, however, undermines the plan. Annie Lowrey writes that “many of these [guaranteed income] programs do nothing to end poverty or inequality...you have to give a much higher amount if you want to do that.” In addition, the “amount you’d have to give would never be acceptable to the broad public.” While “the *idea* of a UBI might be bipartisan...the ends and means would never end up pleasing both sides of the aisle.” This protean characteristic makes assessing a UBI plan like Yang’s “Freedom Dividend” difficult. “A UBI could be used to shrink the safety net or to expand it massively,” Lowrey writes. “It could lead to lower taxes, or to soaking the rich. It could, of course, not do all of those things at once.”¹⁰⁴

Yang deployed three main arguments to advance his Freedom Dividend. First, he leveraged the locus of the irreparable and employed apocalyptic rhetoric to convince a skeptical public that a plan as radical and unique as a universal basic income was necessary. He did this by premising his argument and ethos on his knowledge of a coming automation apocalypse, invoking the irreparable to frame his candidacy as an urgent moment of crisis that warranted extreme action. Doing this allowed him to inhabit the role of a secular prophetic public intellectual, warning the populace of a coming disaster through reading economic signs and social texts. Second, he argued that political, social, and moral problems in the U.S. resulted from economic precarity and claimed that dispersing one thousand dollars every month to every citizen would ameliorate that precarity. His third main argument proposed a reformed system of market capitalism termed “human capitalism” that would lead humanity to a renewal of hope and a brighter future as market forces were directed toward maximizing human well-being.

While the proponents of “Scheme for a State Bonus” argued that one of the bonus’ effects was decreasing reliance on labor commodification, Yang’s Dividend was specifically framed as encouraging *more* participation in consumer capitalism. With all that new cash, more of us would start businesses, we’d buy more products from those new businesses, and we’d live happily in boats floating on the rising tide of the market. It’s unclear, however, that the cash stimulus would repair the social and political decay Yang ultimately dreads. Yang leaves three important questions about his universal basic income unanswered: its effect on inflation and market stability, its ability to combat centralization and financialization, and its ability to counter exploitative arrangements.

Yang doesn’t spend much time in *War* worrying that the universal basic income would cause any inflation. Joshua Miller describes the argument to the contrary: “transferred cash goes

straight into an increase in the price level.”¹⁰⁵ Miller, writing for the UBI Center, claims that since a UBI involves redistribution, not increasing the total money supply, it shouldn’t be understood as inflationary. He dodges the ultimate question of how a UBI could avoid causing inflationary pressure through consumer demand by writing that “a suitable policy will need to be aware of the particular influence the cash transfer program has on the equilibrium path of nominal output.”¹⁰⁶ In other words, until we know if a guaranteed income causes growth, it’s hard to know how inflationary it will be, and thus a targeted policy will have to key the distribution amount so as to spur growth—at which point the increase in money supply might just cause inflation anyway.

For his part, Yang claims that the UBI “would likely result in inflation, as vendors take advantage of the new buying power of the public to raise some prices.” Costs, however, would decline “for many things, because technology would continue to lower the underlying cost of their production.”¹⁰⁷ This isn’t terribly reassuring, since Yang himself admits that the underlying incentive structure of market capitalism would ensure a level of inflation as vendors raise prices to capture more of the public’s money. And while some goods would certainly decrease in cost thanks to automation, other goods and services wouldn’t. The production of some goods can be automated, where “output per worker can be increased either by using more machinery or by investing in new equipment,” and Yang may be right to expect prices on these goods to decrease with time.¹⁰⁸ Other goods and services, however, can’t be easily automated. This effect, sometimes termed “Baumol’s Cost Disease” or “cost pressure,” explains how inflationary pressure can remain in a market even as productivity seems to increase and lower the cost of goods. Vendors have quite a lot of power to set prices, especially in industries that rely on services that can’t be compressed, like human services, fine arts, and knowledge work. It’s

genuinely hard to know the impact that a monthly cash stimulus would have on prices and wages across the country. Some preliminary studies have theorized negligible price impacts, but those studies often assume similar reactions between local pilot programs and national stimulus.

Yang also fails to explain how a monthly cash stimulus would ease market changes already in effect, such as centralization and monopolization. For instance: does a cash stimulus change the underlying incentive structure that values capital accumulation? Consider for a moment Yang's focus on polarization and tribalism, worsened every day by a bitterly polarized news media and decaying journalism. What impact would a monthly check have on monopoly control in the media industry that encourages those very trends? Media consolidation, rather than producing an informed public, encourages a "one-newsroom, company-town approach" that fails to deliver the better, more diverse coverage it promises.¹⁰⁹ Rather, "monopoly ownership is a broad structural threat to a healthy news media system, affecting everything from control of internet access to the range of voices in our news media" as expanding platforms centralize and "capture most Americans' attention."¹¹⁰ In an economy leaving more and more people without options, using your primary action to make sure they have more money to spend on those options seems a poor choice.

The exploitative relationships that endanger citizens' safety would also remain under the new structure of the "Freedom Dividend." While some employment of need would end as workers use the security afforded to them by liquid cash to change jobs and relocate, Yang himself provides an example earlier in *War* that undercuts his own argument. One of UBI's possible pernicious effects is an increase in rent-seeking. Markets designed or able to take advantage of flexibility in rents (or rentier economies) may profit from an increase in liquid cash. Early in *War*, Yang described a conversation he had at dinner with "a friend" at a high-power

real estate investment firm.¹¹¹ Yang asked him over sushi in Manhattan whether he'd bought any flashy hotels lately. Nope, the friend said, "our appetite for risk has gone down." He was getting into safer investments. "You know what we've been buying? Trailer parks."¹¹²

Yang asked why a high-profile investment firm would be getting into trailer parks. "They're good investments," his dinner partner said. "Tenants pay to keep their mobile home in a space with water and utilities. All we really have to do is keep the place clean and the water flowing." Yang's interest was piqued. After all, how did they deal with problems of delinquency? He asked, and his friend told him that they kept a close eye on things. "The delinquency rate is low," he claimed, "because first they get a late notice on the day after their rent is due...we are very diligent about monitoring and everyone knows it." The second reason, however, was a bit darker. "...There's no cheaper place to live," the investor admitted. "It's really this place or the street for a lot of people. They find ways to pay. It's a nice stable investment for us." Yang had one more question: how did the business grow? His friend shrugged. "We'll probably look at raising prices over time."¹¹³

Yang included this story as evidence of the reality that humans "maximize market efficiencies and take tolls."¹¹⁴ It's better understood, however, as a sign of the incentive and permission structures fundamental to market capitalism that Yang's UBI leaves intact. Yang never satisfactorily answers a fundamental question: why is giving everyone a monthly stipend better than guaranteeing an income floor or targeting aid at the most vulnerable? How could policy constraints curb the risk of inflation and consumer-hostile practices like rent-seeking and price gouging that could eat into the increased buying power the UBI promises? Perhaps most importantly, how would capitalism's most dangerous excesses be tamed by giving everyone more tickets to a rigged game?

Yang's plan did exactly what it said on the tin: constitute government as a company in need of revitalization and promise its citizens the "dividends" of its renewal. But governance isn't a product. It's a relationship, an obligation, a moral duty, and a power structure. It's ultimately an aggregate of the humans who comprise it, and thus like capitalism it becomes a dark mirror for our worst impulses and excesses. While Yang claimed that the "Freedom Dividend" and human capitalism would revitalize our humanity, it isn't revitalization. It's a stimulus plan to stabilize an asset class. The question in front of us grows more difficult: do we commodify the future of humanity, or do we accept that human life isn't an asset class to subsidize? Yang may not have the answer, but interrogating his arguments for a universal basic income helps us to understand one of the most consequential discourses of our present and future.

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- ¹⁰³ John Cassidy, “Is Larry Summers Really Right About Inflation and Biden?,” *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/is-larry-summers-really-right-about-inflation-and-biden>. A very large boost in consumer spending, an “anyone not taking this into account is being unethical” amount.
- ¹⁰⁴ Lowrey, *Money*, 130–31.
- ¹⁰⁵ Joshua Miller, “Universal Basic Income and Inflation: Reviewing Theory and Evidence,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2021): 1.
- ¹⁰⁶ Miller, 8.
- ¹⁰⁷ Yang, *War*, 183.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ruth Towse, ed., *A Handbook of Cultural Economics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2003), 91.
- ¹⁰⁹ Robert Waterman McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again* (Philadelphia: Nation Books, 2010), 63.
- ¹¹⁰ Victor W. Pickard, *Democracy Without Journalism? Confronting the Misinformation Society* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 105, 107.

¹¹¹ Fun game: Read *The War on Normal People* and pay yourself a freedom dividend of one dollar every time Yang references “a friend” in business or Silicon Valley.

¹¹² Yang, *War*, 93.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

CHAPTER 5 AUSTERE AND LONELY OFFICES

“Speaking indifferently to him,
Who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love’s austere and lonely offices?”

- Robert Hayden, “Those Winter Sundays”

Robot Baristas and The Anxious Future of Work

I first heard about a guaranteed income in 2013, but it wasn’t until 2022 that I was served coffee by a robot. I took a break from work one spring day to find on my walk with a friend that a small coffee shop had opened on Green Street in Champaign, IL that advertised an automated café experience. I had to try it. The shop was clean, minimal, and seemed purposefully designed to look good in social media posts. Two slim columns held iPads mounted in cases with small point-of-sale terminals attached at the side. I ordered my drink, paid automatically with Apple Pay, and then I waited as a mechanical arm inside a plexiglass case picked up a cup and started mixing my drink.

I watched the customers in front of me pick up their orders and take pictures with the automated attendant while I asked shop’s single human attendant a few questions. If she wasn’t required for making drinks, what was she here for? “I spend a lot of time recommending drinks, talking about the shop, and taking care of any problems,” she replied. I asked if she liked the work. She loved it, she claimed. People were interested in the shop, wanted to talk about the machinery, and liked that she had tried everything on the menu. In other words, I said, “it seems like it allows you to do every part of the job you’d actually like to do!” “Exactly,” she said. Automation may seem to be a question of robot baristas and self-driving cars, but even if we

haven't ridden in an autonomous vehicle we've been living with the effects of automation for years. Algorithmic, automatic processes determine what we see online, set what advertisements surface for us, and take note of our emotional reactions to stimuli. This results in many of our online media interactions taking place in a "massive global system of digital marketplaces" in which attention "has been automated and streamlined in ways we often fail to appreciate."¹

Embedded in my conversation with the café attendant were deep questions about the changing world of work. Would the automation of common tasks like drink preparation allow a smaller force of workers to work more meaningful jobs? Economists like Tyler Cowen aren't sure. The automation of menial tasks could lead to "new service sector jobs" that deal in different, more "human" skills. Cowen's been running a series on his blog *Marginal REVOLUTION* for years that details the rise of those new types of work.² If we're to take his argument at its word, then worker displacement will certainly happen, but it will be offset by a rise in new positions that specialize in "softer" human skills. By Cowen's own admission, however, the job losses will outweigh the rise in new opportunities, and there's more to the problem of labor market changes than simply automation.³ So it seems we're returned to our original question: how will we handle the future?

The automated future is often a feature of fantasy, like the technologies of a cyberpunk dystopia, the cold blue machine world of *The Matrix*, or Jonathan Coulton's 2017 concept album *Solid State*, in which disaffected human workers attempt to escape an automated city of factories amid constant surveillance. Often our fears of automation and the apocalypse reveal more of ourselves than they do of the future. We imbue the future with power and with rhetorical weight. We educate for the future, invest for the future, and grow our economy for the future. What we claim the future holds is a statement of our values, our anthropological priors, and our views of

human nature. Claims about the coming realities of the future also reveal our moral frameworks and anxieties surrounding work. Prophets of the apocalypse may worry about the property damage and chaos incurred by the end times, but the human spirit is what's actually at stake. Likewise, anxieties about the role of work in our future reveal our deep commitments to the link between citizenship and labor.⁴ What will become of *us*, the question goes, when we don't *work*?

One important aspect of this question is understanding who "us" is. Fears about work and income throughout this entire dissertation were primarily aimed at the poor and suffering, both for their material precarity and for their social/moral disintegration.⁵ The Milners and Pickard, for example, invoked the moral decay wrought by economic precarity as a warrant for a radical change like a guaranteed income. These are typically elite discourses, framing the poor as simultaneously in need of help and often incapable of knowing the correct path forward.⁶ It's true that behavior follows incentives, but it's also true that preconceptions about the moral and economic habits of the poor play a deep role in determining our policy goals and thus structuring our incentives. The broader problem is one of context: what happens when a feared future runs into a moment of definitional, social, and institutional collapse?

The question of whether our institutions are durable enough to endure a changing future emerges within every text in this study.⁷ At the same time, our work discourse increasingly focuses on the issues affecting an elite cadre of knowledge work, creative, and professional classes and ignores what Andrew Yang, the Milners, and Bertram Pickard identified as the precarious state of the lower classes. As conditions and workplace standards worsen at the bottom of the labor market, vulnerable populations lose more and more ground to the gig economy, abandonment of workplace standards, and the violation of labor laws.⁸ An accompanying "boom" in "poorly paid and precarious jobs" across the country has left more and

more at risk.⁹ Notably, fears of idleness and lethargy never haunt the independently wealthy, or the wildly rich, many of whom have never worked and never will. Their numbers may be smaller, but our anxieties about the human need to work always look down the ladder, not up. My analysis of the rhetorical history of UBI arguments reveals the extent to which our fears of human spiritual decay from leisure drive our economic and labor policy discourse. We're endlessly concerned with whether those below us are getting something that we're not.

Compressing Time, Stressing a Moment

Rhetors attempt to sway audiences toward policies in many ways. Sometimes this takes the form of humanizing a problem, associating a face or an at-risk community with a policy issue. Often advocates advance an idea by emphasizing the scale of a problem, invoking various rhetorical strategies to magnify an issue and bring it before the eyes of an audience. Another tactic rhetors use to make arguments for policies is compressing time: building a sense of urgency that shortens the window of time within which a decision can be made. These arguments about urgency invoke a sense of the *irreparable*, a concern that a specific moment or choice cannot be reversed. As J. Robert Cox notes, "all choice is irreparable."¹⁰ Rhetoric is, after all, a product of a fundamentally contingent world. Knowing the future is impossible, and every choice we make both constrains and enables us. All policy debates take place within this paradigm: if knowledge of the perfect possible future was available, then our choices wouldn't be fraught with possibility, they'd be simple risk/reward calculations. Leveraging a sense of urgency (constituting a "now") can be an excellent way to magnify the importance and irreparability of a problem.

Leveraging urgency can also be a way to respond to rhetorical challenges like those faced by the rhetors in this study. How do you promote an "abnormal" economic policy to a skeptical

public? One strategy employed by the rhetors in this dissertation is compressing the scale of time within which the challenge operates: simply put, some rhetors make a problem urgent by claiming that time is running out. Doing so can warrant a number of changes to the “normal” process of deliberative decision-making and policy analysis. Cox argues that invocations of the irreparable have “strategic and ethical implications” for human deliberation. These implications manifest as adaptations to the process of decision making that may include: “(1) an expansion of the time frame in which choices are considered, (2) heightened information-seeking, (3) invocation of a minimum condition rule, and, ironically, (4) the warranting of extraordinary measures.”¹¹ I argue that rhetors advocating for a UBI leveraged crisis to warrant a minimum condition rule (expressed as a minimum income guarantee) and to authorize extraordinary measures. These measures included UBI: a heterodox economic policy that under normal circumstances might not have been a consideration for many voters and decision-makers.

All rhetorical acts respond to specific moments in time insofar as they respond to exigencies, but stressing the uniqueness of a moment of crisis can create a kind of state of exception in which abnormal choices become reasonable. This dissertation is an exploration of how rhetors attempt to “push the envelope” of public deliberation by stressing precarity and the importance of a timely response, entering new policy ideas into mainstream discourse in the process. Arguments that successfully alter the time frame for a correct response can bring ideas into the mainstream, but those arguments can just as easily undercut claims. The audience’s role, as judges of the rhetorical act, is to assess whether the invocation of crisis is merited; whether the state of exception should be granted. Crises are inevitable, and responding to them is critically important, but a constant invocation of precarity and crisis can slow the political momentum necessary to affect long-term change. Audiences can be wary of cries of “wolf,” but the strategic

management of time and urgency are an essential tool of rhetors seeking to expand the realm of the politically possible. An audience's initial hesitancy can be overcome by successfully framing the problem at hand as uniquely timely and precarious.

The Irreparable, the Efficient, and the Precarious: Tracing Patterns in UBI Argument

As a critical approach to tracing the evolution of arguments across time, rhetorical history helps us understand what trends emerge, recur, and fade across time as rhetors argue for a similar cause. In my analysis, three main features of arguments for a universal basic income remained consistent across the entire hundred-year span that these texts occupy. First, rhetors continually invoked the locus of the irreparable to warrant extreme action in response to dire circumstances. Invoking the locus of the irreparable involves signaling the unique and precarious nature of the rhetorical situation and then stressing the timeliness of a correct response to the crisis. The Milners and Pickard drew deliberate focus to the looming threat of labor unrest and the rising tide of communism, and Pickard dedicates much of his book to the idea of the "state bonus" as a "reasonable" alternative to the revolution brewing around the globe. Richard Nixon invoked the locus of the irreparable to argue that the United States' world influence and social stability were in crisis.¹² If urgent action wasn't taken, the argument went, the U.S. would lose a generation to the maw of a consuming, monstrous welfare state that broke families and threatened social stability. Getting the poor "off of welfare rolls and onto payrolls" would alleviate the acute social and economic decay that threatened to derail the U.S. economy and overburden its government.¹³ Yang paired invoking the locus of the irreparable with apocalyptic imagery and metaphor to warrant a revitalization of humanity under the banner of "human capitalism."¹⁴ He framed the late 2010s as a unique inflection point past which action to stop an unemployment apocalypse would be impossible. He framed economic anxiety as the root of political and social unrest and

warned that unless something as radical as a UBI changed the direction of the U.S. economy, the “war on normal people” would consume jobs, livelihoods, and lives across the country. One way of convincing an audience to act can be convincing that audience at they’re about to pass a point of no return. The rhetors studied in this dissertation leveraged the irreparable as a site of urgency to rhetorically increase the scale and scope of the problem at hand, thus warranting a unique and radical solution like a guaranteed income.

All three texts also contain appeals to the efficiency and simplicity of a guaranteed income program. Social welfare systems are incredibly complex, and even books claiming to be a “brief” introduction to the welfare state span chapter after chapter explaining the various interlocking systems of monetary and social support at the state, local, and federal level. Much of this network of care also goes unseen: community organizers, activists, and religious organizations perform untold thousands of hours of unpaid labor maintaining the social and material fabric of the country. Rewarding them for their work and streamlining the social welfare state into one recurring cash transfer makes for a compelling argument. It’s popular with liberals, who often cite the transfer’s ability to reward work not otherwise rewarded in a capitalist economy, and it’s popular with conservatives and fiscal hawks keeping an eye on the growing expenditures of the U.S. government. Andrew Yang made mention of how many of America’s needs for complicated social programs would be alleviated with a simple guaranteed cash stipend. Nixon, for another example, referenced the necessity of repairing the machinery of government and invoked appeals to ability and health. Efficiency and simplicity are powerful claims because they can echo and reinforce dominant narratives of governance and social support: one, that our systems should be simple, streamlined, and efficient; and two, that the best policy is to help someone help themselves. In many ways this might be true, but social welfare

systems often serve as a stop of last resort for those unable to otherwise inhabit the idealized role of citizen-worker.

Appeals to efficiency also prioritize spending as little as possible on each individual interaction between the state and its subjects. Some of UBI's more conservative supporters imagine a world without bureaucrats, without expensive regulatory offices, without whatever a "deep state" is supposed to be. Many of these dreams are nothing more than efficiency white papers, plans for replacing the consumer experience of government with a streamlined, easy, automated process that can dispose of the costly human (and regulatory) structures of social service administration. Critiques of neoliberalism have explored these claims and how they authorize ceding territory to the market, and arguments like Yang's seem caught in the tension between critically examining the expansion of consumer markets and commodification into our everyday lives and signing over even more of our future to their grasp in exchange for a modicum of security.

This study's texts also reveal a third recurring emphasis on precarity and the ability of cash transfers to ameliorate material and social suffering. A guaranteed income is an expression of a commitment to the idea that *cash* is the best way to help struggling populations. Rather than provide the needed service outright by entering the market or covering some amount of cost, guaranteed income arguments presume that the best way to help the struggling is to provide them with the means to go to the market and purchase or earn what they need. These ideas contradict much of popular discourse on income and work, which maintains that cash can be misused, wasted, or otherwise squandered. Some rhetors, such as the Milners and Pickard, emphasized the extent to which individual material suffering was bound up in larger structures such as capitalism and labor commodification. They premised their arguments on the ability of a guaranteed income

to free individuals from the hold of the market, not to sell them back to it. In doing so they articulated a positive view of human flourishing that identified labor decommodification as part of a broader need for spiritual revitalization and moral healing. Leisure and rest, they held, were necessary for moral, physical, and spiritual health. While their concerns may have been prompted by perceived rise in left-wing radicalism and labor unrest, they proposed an alternative that attempted to meaningfully decouple individuals from the market. To this day, their proposal is still the most generous, echoing Annie Lowrey's claim that to be successful a UBI would have to be so generous as to become political suicide.¹⁵ Nixon directed attention to the plight of the family, leveraging fears about social decay in the lower classes. In doing so, his argument occluded the material precarity felt by many throughout the 1960s in favor of presenting a homogenous target ("the family") for assistance that engaged fears of the decay of the Black family.

Andrew Yang, rather, framed precarity as a cliff's edge. In his formulation, the experiences of those at the bottom of the labor market and "normal people" were about to expand into the middle and upper classes as technological unemployment and political destabilization threatened the country's stability. His argument was the most explicit about the risks of social disintegration and violence. Yang hypothesizes specific scenarios in which unemployment and white resentment culminate in street violence, shootings, and mass protests, reminding the reader of the urgency of a UBI.

Other scholars studying of the history and current state of arguments for a UBI could take these investigations further by asking questions about the online discourse surrounding UBI, the role of gender and race in arguments for a guaranteed income, and how UBI plans would impact market stability, inflation, and labor supply. Scholars of rhetoric in particular could focus on how

UBI discourse has unfolded across social networks, media networks, and journalism. I narrowed my focus in this study to three key texts, but an analysis of one short moment in UBI's history (like online comments in the days after Yang's appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience*) could yield greater insight into how members of the general public debate the concept of a guaranteed income in the context of already existing social welfare systems.

Scholars of race and gender could pay attention to how gendered work expectations and racial discrimination impact plans for a universal basic income. The specter of the white working class hangs over much of the UBI's history and could have a large role to play in arguments for its universality. Yang dedicated page after page in *The War on Normal People* to the fears and anxieties of the white lower class, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan specifically encouraged Richard Nixon to appeal to the family rather than the poor (perceived to be people of color) to stem racial resentment. The public consistently considers welfare programs to be a minority issue, despite years of evidence to the contrary, and UBI's universality can render it more palatable: sure, someone else is getting money, but you are too! Our conceptions of who receives help, who needs help, and what needs helped are perpetually bound up in gendered and racialized norms within cultures, and a universal grant may appeal simply because it "doesn't see color."

Other methodologies could also reveal more routes of study for the universal basic income today. Studies leveraging data mining and discourse analysis in their methodologies may reveal patterns in discourse though time and across platforms that evade observation in an investigation as close as mine to the text. Scholars of visual rhetoric could find a lot to learn in the wild and varied world of UBI and "YangGang" memes. Critics like myself study speeches, pamphlets, and books, but arguing in such a visual and enthymematic format would force rhetors

to choose different appeals and deploy different arguments than they might in longform arguments like the ones I studied for this project.

Love's Austere and Lonely Offices: Work, Labor, and Love

I get two general reactions when I tell people I study the universal basic income. The first is to ask me what a universal basic income is, after which point I usually get the second question anyway: “so do you think we should give everybody free money?” After a brief stop for a conversation about the difference between criticism and punditry, I usually settle for something reasonable, like “I agree about the problem, but I’m not sold on that particular solution.” My interlocuter is usually unsatisfied.

I found myself bothered by my own questions about universality, not because of the hazard of giving money to those who might waste it, but for the potential of giving money to those who don’t remotely need it. Why exactly should I choose to subsidize the incomes of those far richer than I or those like me could ever be? I recalled the excellent quote from John Steinbeck about America’s “temporarily embarrassed millionaires,” but (as usual) I kept thinking of a musical. In 1776, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania asks John Hancock why he supports John Adams’s proposal for independence. After all, Hancock was “a man of property,” so why should he support a cause that “will brand Mr. Adams and his followers as traitors?” Hancock asks in response where Dickinson’s loyalties lie (“to the British crown? Or to the British half-crown?”) and says that “fortunately, there are not enough men of property in America to dictate policy.” Dickinson chides him: “don’t forget that most men with nothing would rather protect the possibility of being rich than face the reality of being poor.”¹⁶ UBI’s universality may be its selling point, but that universality leaves unanswered questions about whose interests a universal guaranteed income serves. Why disperse an income guarantee through a cash stipend, rather than

establishing a guaranteed income floor and subsidizing incomes to that level? Why dedicate rhetorical capital to the idea of “free money” rather than to the vastly cheaper methods of targeting aid?

This echoes Bertram Pickard’s question in *Reasonable Revolution*: is a guaranteed income just a palliative? Is it a genuine corrective to an economic system out of control, or an inherently conservative solution that subsidizes survival so that a rigged game can keep running? We’re replete with stories and headlines assuring us that COVID ushered in a labor revolution, or that the trend of quitting your job publicly on social media is leading to a radical new era of labor activism. But like a UBI, many of these ideas are merely bandages on a wound. Popular books like Jenny Odell’s *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* circulate amongst the chattering classes, correctly diagnosing a problem but failing to apprehend the larger collapse of meaning and structure that caused that problem.¹⁷ In so doing, their recommendations make the problem worse, not better. Human beings do not need to be freed from the shackles of work or a “capitalism” deployed as a vague metaphor for all modern malaise. We need more dignity, honor, and respect. We need ethical treatment and fair, livable wages. We need social and economic policies that put the needs of the marginalized and struggling first.

What UBI gets right, however, is the inequality within what qualifies as work. “Work” tends to become shorthand for activities that generate income or monetary value, while all other activity becomes relegated to the vague category of “the personal life.” Addressing the problem with consumer capitalism involves appearing in public and acting outside of categories that create value. Our “working selves” risk becoming our only selves as an era of changing work expectations, atomization, and remote work combines impossible standards with increasing hyper competition, distorting the dividing line between the self, one’s work, one’s image, and

one's brand. The elite have long been comfortable with this. Their lives are lived in quiet security or as managed brand exercises designed to maximize attention and signal status. I fear that without addressing these slippages between the self and the economy, a UBI would only accelerate market dominance, encouraging more and more of us to spend our time competing for an increasingly narrow pool of attention and success. That path would do nothing to heal social division, political violence, or our deeply bifurcated and lonely society.

The core problem is that work, as it actually exists, cannot fulfill everything that makes us human. Most of the things not contained in that bucket are what make life worth living: art, music, conversation, devotion, elder care, parenting. What's the worth of a corporal work of mercy? What's the monetary value of reading a book to your child? Consider the labors of love that Robert Hayden outlines in his poem "Those Winter Sundays." He recalls the cold, "blue-black" mornings on which his father rose and "made banked fires blaze" without thanks, reflecting from later in life on how little he knew of "love's austere and lonely offices."¹⁸ He, like us, failed to recognize the value of labors of love. A guaranteed income wouldn't change us overnight. We'd still be the kind of people who fail to recognize those labors of love in front of us, and at some aggregate level we'd most likely recreate those failures in similar ways. But what proponents of a guaranteed income have gotten right, from the Milners to Andrew Yang, is the failure of consumer capitalism to reward the activities that make life most worth living. Any system attempting to challenge liberal capitalism must contend with liberal capitalism's strongest argument: that it's the best way of situating a society at a nexus of freedom and prosperity. Paradoxically, however, consumer capitalism atrophies that very freedom, commodifying it and selling it back to us. Ours is the question of how to wrest humanity from that exchange.

Despite these contradictions and limitations, the UBI is an incredibly valuable point of study. By critically examining how rhetors make arguments for extreme policy change, we can better understand the arguments we're sure to have as we navigate a technological future. UBI isn't just a policy. It seems to me now to be more useful as a way to ask an important question, one that we've debated for the entirety of human history: what do we owe each other? And, more importantly for this project—*how much* do we owe each other? It's unclear whether the automated future Yang fears will ever arrive. Regardless, the future will bring change, and that change will inevitably be felt most acutely by those without social, economic, political, or discursive capital. Whether we choose to adopt a guaranteed cash income is less important than continuing to ask that question: how much do we owe each other? If we don't figure out an answer, one will certainly be forced upon us.

¹ Tim Hwang, *Subprime Attention Crisis: Advertising and the Time Bomb at the Heart of the Internet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 13.

² Tyler Cowen, “Markets in Everything: Those New Service Sector Jobs,” *Marginal REVOLUTION*, January 4, 2022, <https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2022/01/markets-in-everything-those-new-service-sector-jobs-5.html>.

³ Tyler Cowen, “Automation Alone Isn’t Killing Jobs,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/business/automation-alone-isnt-killing-jobs.html>.

⁴ Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 66–67.

⁵ Bertram Pickard, *A Reasonable Revolution: Being A Discussion of the State Bonus Scheme -- A Proposal for a National Minimum Income* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1919), 16–17.

⁶ These trends emerge as well in the history of food education discourses. See Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food*.

⁷ Richard M. Nixon, “Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs,” in *Richard Nixon: 1969: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Record Service, 1971). Consider Nixon’s insistence that the government’s legitimacy was on the brink of collapse.

⁸ Annette D. Bernhardt, ed., *The Gloves-Off Economy: Workplace Standards at the Bottom of America’s Labor Market* (Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008), 7–13.

⁹ Marc Doussard, *Degraded Work: The Struggle at the Bottom of the Labor Market* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), vii.

¹⁰ Cox, Robert J., “The Die is Cast: Topical and Ontological Dimensions of the *Locus* of the Irreparable,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68, no. 3 (1982): 229.

¹¹ Cox, “*Locus*,” 234.

¹² Nixon, “Domestic,” 639.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 633–34.

¹⁴ Andrew Yang, *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America’s Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income Is Our Future* (New York: Hachette Books, 2017), 197.

¹⁵ Annie Lowrey, *Give People Money: How a Universal Basic Income Would End Poverty, Revolutionize Work, and Remake the World* (New York: Crown, 2018), 130.

¹⁶ “Cool, Cool Considerate Men,” in *1776*, directed by Peter Hunt (1972; Columbia Pictures).

¹⁷ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2019).

¹⁸ Robert Hayden, “Those Winter Sundays by Robert Hayden,” Poetry Foundation, May 1, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46461/those-winter-sundays>.