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Forum: Universal Basic Income

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Response to Caroline West's "From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income"

Richard Todd Stafford

ABSTRACT This reply critically analyzes the concept of "solidarity" in Caroline West's account of the role that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) could play in Central Appalachian re-development. I argue that a robust structural form of "solidarity" would necessarily play an essential role in formulating a political bloc capable of implementing an ambitious project like a UBI. In addition to this implicit role of a structural form of solidarity that can connect various communities and constituencies together into a powerful political bloc, Caroline West also articulates an important role for highly local forms of community and solidarity in this region's transformation. Given the two distinct ways that "solidarity" functions in her account, I raise questions about how the formal features of a UBI relate to both its local and more structural forms.

[Caroline West](#) analyzes how the redistribution of capital using Universal Basic Income (UBI) could address some of the economic and developmental inequalities generated by the history of extractive relationships between urban centers and Central Appalachia.¹ Looking at these historically coal-dependent communities, West uses UBI to deepen our thinking about the entrenched material and cultural legacies left in "company towns" as the coal industry declines. The UBI, West argues, may offer a way to reverse deepening economic precarity in this region and enhance residents' capacity to shape the redevelopment of their communities. The implementation of a UBI, West proposes, could help to reshape these historically-constituted conditions by weakening the hold of capital over labor and, by priming the local economies with resources, could encourage the emergence of a more diverse set of economic opportunities and discourage emigration in search of work. West's analysis concludes with the suggestion that communitarian cultural residues that have escaped the pressure of the "company town" system offer social connectivity and a sense of solidarity that can facilitate a "bottom-up" refiguring of Central Appalachian life. In this response, I will take up the connections between these concepts of "community" and "solidarity" in relation to the Universal Basic Income West proposes. Though West's analysis focuses on Central Appalachia, I will additionally bring into the foreground a question that hovers at the periphery of West's account: how might we think about solidarity in the context of ongoing energy transitions more broadly?

West may have good reasons to avoid using the moral framing of "justice" in this account, but nonetheless, this analysis might be understood as a way to advance conversations about what a "just transition" could look like for historically fossil fuel-dependent communities.² As West observes, long-term patterns of impoverishment and emigration from the region were driven by the confluence of automation, the ongoing search by the coal industry for lower labor costs, and the pressure of growing environmental, occupational, and public health regulation.³ Looking towards the present and immediate

future, we might add to this list the competitive pressure exerted by alternative power sources that have made employment dependent on coal extraction particularly precarious.⁴ West's analysis of the recent history of Central Appalachia thus offers an early case study of the local impacts of energy transition that we might fruitfully relate to some other fossil fuel-dependent regions where we can anticipate similar transitions in the relatively near future.⁵

West observes that, as early as the 1960s, political rhetoric and actual policy constructed poverty in Appalachia as a problem to be solved from the outside, rather than a set of local issues to be addressed through the agency of those who live there.⁶ By West's account, the shortcomings of policy responses have generated skepticism towards top-down solutions. Since the publication of "From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income," Phillip Lewin has built on earlier research by Rebecca Scott, Shannon Elizabeth Bell, Richard York, and others, substantiating the claim that the hegemonic cultural politics of coal in the region are supported, in part, by a sense that the federal government is a neglectful or even actively hostile force representing urban sensibilities that devalue and marginalize the region's residents.⁷ Understandably, then, West attributes importance to identifying opportunities for "bottom-up" responses that emphasize local agency and draw upon the strength and vibrancy of local communities when constructing a future in which coal plays a significantly reduced role.⁸ By critiquing the actual state of affairs in these communities from the perspective of UBI's potential, West challenges us to think clearly about how political projects in the present and near future will need to engage with the particularities of such historical legacies while nurturing the specific forms of agency capable of taking them on.

Even so, by drawing on Marxian critical geography, West argues that the geographical relationships between cities and rural areas like Central Appalachia should be understood as "class phenomena."² Given that this calls on us to see the problems of Central Appalachia as exemplary of broader structural features of capitalism, I ask how might we understand the connections between the specific concerns of this region and those of others who are positioned quite differently. Many fossil fuel extracting regions will engage on cultural and environmental terrains shaped by very different histories, but will face similar kinds of economic disruption in the coming years. To understand Central Appalachian social and economic conditions in terms of broader analytics of class and capitalism, rather than exclusively in terms of the region's exceptionality, particularity, singularity, or uniqueness, is to suggest that there may be meaningful ways to articulate the circumstances West observes in Central Appalachia with those found elsewhere.

But what role could West's UBI proposal play in mediating these kinds of differences? How might we make sense of the functions West attributes to "community" and "solidarity" in this mediation? To begin speaking to these questions, I will ask whether the UBI functions in West's analysis as a speculative narrative, thought experiment, or horizon towards which a politics might be constructed—or if, instead, West is describing it as a practical political project.

Is the UBI a practical political goal or a speculative narrative about the future?

West understands the Universal Basic Income to be "universal" in the sense that it is unconditional, "basic" in the sense that it provides for "shelter, food, and clothes," and an "income" in the sense that it uses periodic cash payments to achieve these ends. Drawing on existing initiatives in the region, West gives concrete examples of how redistributing

financial resources to people could enhance capacities for self-determination and local economic control. West points, for instance, to the ways that a UBI could increase opportunities for people to pursue education, as in the example of BitSource, or facilitate the creation of small local businesses, as in the example of a local restaurant. West argues that by redistributing capital to a region that has the necessary cultural and creative resources to transition away from coal but not the means to do so, a UBI could shift power to shape the region's future away from absentee capital controlled by owners in the metropole, who have had an essentially predatory relationship to the region.

But where on the spectrum from "practical political goal" to "thought experiment" is the UBI proposal West offers? Is UBI an ambitious but relatively practical political proposal that might be added to a list of other ambitious political projects that have been taken up in recent years? Alternatively, is UBI a speculative narrative about the future that West proposes as a political horizon towards which we might orient other, more immediate projects? In the conclusion, West acknowledges some of the limitations of a UBI: "I make no claim that, in isolation, a UBI has the ability to end all poverty or create the conditions to overthrow the capitalist mode of production." West suggests that instead, we should understand it as a way of "level[ing] the playing field" and enabling poorer Appalachians to take a more active role in generating a more "diverse economy."¹⁰ Thus, West distinguishes the ostensibly practical UBI from what is characterized as a less immediately achievable political horizon: the possibility that we might address all want or begin to "overthrow the capitalist mode of production." Juxtaposed with a revolution that eliminates all poverty, the UBI seems like a tenable triangulation between progressive political commitments and the politics of the possible.

Though she positions the UBI as a realistic political project that triangulates between the ideal and the possible, West may downplay the scope of mobilization and transformation necessary to arrive at this goal. West suggests that solidarities are already emerging among those who seek to envision a life after coal in the region, focusing on how these social connections could generate community-based redevelopment if there was a UBI in place; however, creating a UBI will require a political bloc with wider geographical scope than the social connections that characterize families and local communities can achieve. Rather than starting my evaluation of the UBI by asking whether or not it is a means to "create the conditions to overthrow the capitalist mode of production," I begin by asking what it would take to implement the UBI itself. My contention is that a UBI that provides for the basic necessities would require that we have already made significant progress towards transforming the capitalist mode of production before we could even begin making payments. This seems especially true if we are imagining that other existing government-provided social supports would be maintained, rather than cannibalized by this proposal.¹¹

A universal income that could cover basic needs would require a significant enough political mobilization that economic modeling is likely less to be important to our evaluations of West's proposal than consideration of the basic political orientations and values of the polity the proposal would seek to bring into being. Even so, I offer a fairly crude set of numbers just so that we can begin to imagine the scale of the proposal. Using a figure just under the 2019 HHS federal poverty guidelines, we might imagine a UBI payment of about \$12,000 per year per person, so with 304 million US citizens (2017), the annual payment would be around \$3.65 trillion, exclusive of administrative costs.¹² For reference, total annual projected federal government revenues are currently around \$3.33 trillion per year, so we are talking about a pretty radical expansion of the scope of the federal government, no matter how we might achieve this kind of expenditure.¹³ At around 18 percent of US GDP (\$19.39 trillion), the scope may initially appear to be similar

to something like Medicare for All, but the important distinction is that the Medicare for All would be transforming already-existing transfers of wealth from everyday people to the healthcare industry to payments to the government in taxes, likely with some redistribution of the burden to those most able to pay.¹⁴ The scale of a UBI is not so large as to seem unthinkable, but the proposal involves an extraordinary change, to be sure.

We might imagine a UBI of this scale funded by direct taxation, with government incomes and payments in a given year somewhere close to balanced, but this would certainly require finding many new kinds of taxation, not just a progressive adjustment of marginal rates.¹⁵ Carbon fee-and-dividend schemes that tax emissions simply could not generate payments close to this size, much less net benefits of this scale.¹⁶ We might imagine that we could fund a UBI simply by expanding the money supply, but even under very sympathetic assumptions, this would require a degree of public intervention much larger than that to which we are accustomed.¹⁷ In any case, a very different balance in the struggle over how the federal government represents the interests of the working and precarious classes versus private owners, financial capital, and the like would likely be necessary to achieve these kinds of changes to taxation or monetary policy. While it might not require an entirely different “mode of production,” it very well might require a political bloc with enough power that it could re-configure some of the essential social relations of production, circulation, and consumption, if those were the goals towards which it was oriented.

Among the most persuasively developed mechanisms for funding a UBI are proposals to make it a dividend from a consortium of state-owned enterprises, a sovereign/social wealth fund, or some combination of the two. These proposals offer a clear “on ramp” towards a full-scale UBI and could allow some degree of democratic control over a significant segment of the productive economy. Matt Bruenig, for instance, has done remarkable work envisioning how a national-scale social wealth fund could be implemented in the United States in order to pay a universal basic dividend.¹⁸ In his proposal, which he calls the American Solidarity Fund, he looks towards the relatively small dividend paid by the Alaska Permanent Fund to state residents.¹⁹ Alaska’s payments, to be clear, are not nearly as large as what West is proposing: at \$1100–\$2072 per person annually, they are one-sixth to one-twelfth of being a “Basic Income.” But how much capital is necessary to produce dividends of this size? Bruenig estimates Alaska’s sovereign wealth fund at 113% of the state’s Gross Domestic Product, so scaling an Alaska-type scheme to national scale, he suggests, would entail having a fund of around \$22.6 trillion. To get to a scale that is more like a “Basic Income,” we must begin imagining a fund measured in hundreds of trillions of US dollars.

The state might accumulate this kind of capital through all manner of different mechanisms, but a social wealth fund of this scale would generate a fundamentally different class dynamic: present day struggles of workers and the dispossessed against privately-held financial capital would, to a significant degree, become struggles against the state. As the proportion of production democratically controlled by the social wealth fund grows, it would eventually cease to be rational to engage in such struggle, except under very local conditions. Which is to say, while this may only constitute “socialism” under very contemporary and capacious ways of using the word to include mixed economies, we would definitely be looking at different social relations of production than the ones we have now. It is for these reasons that I argue that a UBI, especially of the scale suggested by West, would entail a radical political mobilization and/or presuppose a significant social transformation has already occurred.²⁰ Even so, West has used UBI to good effect to generate a mode of critique that holds open the possibility of change and makes visible some of the structural challenges associated with energy transition.

How are “solidarity” and the UBI connected?

Since the UBI as a practical political project neither seems to have a political bloc capable of exerting the power necessary to make it real in the immediate future, nor a short-term mechanism through which a vast amount of socially owned wealth could be accumulated to support it, I am going to treat it now as a kind of speculative narrative about a possible future or an idealized political horizon. This reorients my response to the fundamental values that this narrative presupposes or represents. As a speculative narrative about a possible future, then, the UBI calls on us to imagine a future in which we put a significant proportion of the economy under democratic control. In this narrative, we imagine choosing to transfer these resources back out of democratic control and into the private economy. In West’s account, this would enable us to enhance local control and autonomy, encourage economic diversification, and reduce control of absentee capital in communities that have been historically dominated by energy extractive industries. Further, it would help stem the tide of emigration from this region. Of the role of community in this transition West writes,

Actualizing a bottom-up approach to economic development in Central Appalachia would need to be grounded in the cultural traditions that preceded industrial production, namely, the strengths of community and familial relationships that can be used as a counter-weight to class stratification. Despite all the challenges Appalachian residents face with a crumbling infrastructure and few economic resources, the people in former coal mining towns have been imagining life beyond coal despite the lack of progressive governmental support.

She continues, “Solidarity is being formed through social culture and identity and the labor of the community,” giving as an example a restaurant that buys locally. Based on West’s reference to emigration, this kind of localism might both build social ties within the community and prevent the kind of generational fragmentation that has occurred in many rural communities due to emigration. Using interviews in a coal-mining town and a demographically similar town that is less directly dependent on coal, Shannon Elizabeth Bell has previously found that depopulation has significantly eroded social ties, reduced trust between neighbors, decreased the likelihood of giving or receiving mutual aid, and negatively impacted other indicators that sociologists take as representative of “social capital.”²¹ West’s emphasis on the ways that a UBI could help stem the flow of people out of these coal-dependent communities is absolutely fundamental to understanding how the themes of community, solidarity, and the UBI are connected.

This is important because West emphasizes the role of existing social connectivity in the transition. It seems possible that, in many communities affected by energy transitions, there are residues of preindustrial community and family formations that could be the building blocks for more robust forms of solidarity, as West does. We can also observe that there are a variety of forms of community and kinship that have developed within the context of the dominant industry that help to bind people together and are not reducible to the needs of these industries. While these modes of solidarity would be inadequate to form a political bloc capable of implementing a UBI on their own, that does not seem to be West’s focus here; instead, she invites us to imagine one possible future and to think carefully about how an already implemented UBI would intersect with these forms of community and solidarity.

In accepting this invitation, I am reminded of how Raymond Williams treats the positive and negative content of “solidarity” as a concept of community. In the conclusion to his early work *Culture and Society*, he distinguishes between “the ladder,” “service,” and

“solidarity.”²² For Williams, “the ladder” is the familiar form of individual striving with a community. It essentially denies “social conscience” to the individual; it both “weakens the principle of common betterment” and “sweetens the poison of hierarchy.”²³ Though the notion of “service” complicates liberal notions of individualism in the community, Williams suggests that it naturalizes the roles and functions of different individuals. Thus, while there is a certain degree of “personal unselfishness” involved with service, he argues that it exists “within a larger selfishness” that preserves the “status quo” but which remains unseen because it is “idealized as the necessary form of a civilization.”²⁴ It is in contrast to this that Williams develops the notion of “solidarity” as a concept of community characterized by “mutual responsibility.” Solidarity, for Williams, is a mode of cooperation that sees “the common interest as the true self-interest” and finds “individual verification primarily in the community.”²⁵ While Williams desired to bring these aspects of solidarity into a “fully democratic” future, he recognized the ways that solidarity has been historically constituted by a reactive relation, a recognition of shared conditions and experiences born of subordination within the class structure, but also often conditioned by contrasts between what is held in common and an image of an “outsider” or enemy who may not actually be identical with the ruling or owning class. Williams views the negative content of the concept of “solidarity” as something that must be overcome on the path to “a fully democratic society.” There is, on this basis, a great ambiguity in communitarian appeals to tradition: the dynamic that binds a community together often has a negative content that involves resistance to outsiders. This negative content may prove to be a barrier to articulating local struggles across space or particular conditions together. But, the “fully democratic” speculative future that Williams narrates has appeal, since it calls on us to imagine a promiscuous solidarity that transcends different particular conditions and simple modes of identification towards a more capacious “mutual responsibility.”

When West cautiously praises solidarity among those seeking to imagine futures for their communities as the era of coal comes to an end, we can see how they might be motivated by a sense of identity, shared conditions, and common sensibilities drawn from similarities of experience and geographical proximity. But Williams’s insights might caution us to be wary of a potentially dangerous countercurrent often found in this kind of communitarian social tie. A sense of regional class consciousness, which in West’s account is attributed to the historical role of urban capital in the region and partially justifies imagining a “bottom-up” transition, could under some conditions also encourage reactionary cultural insularity or even foster social exclusion. As we think about the structural similarities between Central Appalachia and other communities facing energy transitions, the question about how we might build bridges between narrower forms of local community solidarity will be crucial, if we aim towards what Williams describes as a more “fully democratic” community. While a sense of regionalist “bottom up” redevelopment doubtlessly will play a role in many of these transitions, regional or local solidarities may, on one hand, bind people together with mutual concern on the basis of what they have in common, while on the other hand, dividing them from those perceived as outsiders or blocking the articulation of shared interests between social groups who are situated quite differently, but facing structurally similar problems.

When Bruenig describes his vision of a national-scale sovereign wealth fund paying out a universal basic income as the “American Solidarity Fund,” we can see how the concept of “mutual responsibility” functions as the governing principle that connects different places and groups. Likewise, in West’s account, the UBI is the structural element that passes beyond the particular experiences of labor and precarity in a given community and addresses not just these specificities, but the broader political economic structures and tendencies highlighted by her theoretical framework. Indeed, the UBI offers an image of solidarity that includes not just workers, but also people with disabilities and the retired.

In this sense, it may indeed foster a sense of solidarity that transcends immediate social ties towards a broader sense of a shared social project that extends beyond the region and beyond the particularities of a given circumstance. Arguably, it matches the already-existing social basis of production in advanced economies with a social basis for consumption, even if the proposal does not inherently necessitate putting the social basis of production under social control. The social basis for consumption it offers is considerably more *universal* than conservative appeals to “trickle down effects,” the developmentalist focus on “rising standards of living,” and liberal means-tested welfare programs.

Even so, it strikes me as consequential that the kind of connection it offers is mediated through the market: what we share, in this narrative, is the freedom to privately choose at an individual or family-unit level from a selection of goods and commodities. In this speculative future, the universal project will be experienced in the moment of purchase. I praise West, Bruenig, and others for taking seriously the need to imagine a common cause towards which we might orient heterogenous conflicts and the needs of many communities, but I wonder what other narratives of similar ambition we leave behind if we center our attention on this story?

By preserving the structure that mediates basic survival through the mechanism of market exchange of commodities for dollars, UBI might be anticipated to underscore or even deepen the hegemonic common sense that market exchange is a natural extension of human nature—and associated ideas about what it means to be a social subject. This common sense is where “solidarity” is no longer strictly continuous with a community and something like it appears predominantly in smaller and more private social spheres: when necessity is mediated through the market, the community’s reproduction through time depends upon exchange between atomized individuals. Many participate in forms of limited community, as in the forms of sociality found among extended families, some neighbors, and some church groups. These relationships are often more characterized by care than by market relationships. But, even within a community, the proportion of relationships minimally mediated by market exchange tends to be few. Under such an arrangement, mutual responsibility to others often extends not much further than these small private spheres without an inducement to do so; indeed, the market itself may be an inducement not to do so. All of this remains speculative, though: the experiences of want, necessity, and community might emerge in new constellations in a community refigured by a UBI. These are details in the narrative that remain to be written.

I want to be clear that when we are talking at the level of envisioning possible futures, something like a UBI clearly looks superior to our current arrangements and could, I think, at least temporarily address the very serious economic precarity experienced by many in Central Appalachia and regions like it. I would also say that, if there was a political bloc capable of implementing it, UBI might offer something like a bridge, both for energy transition and towards addressing fundamental questions about how to deal with automation, how we might fairly compensate unpaid and underpaid gendered and raced labor, how to include people with disabilities and the elderly, and more. But, as we work to construct these bridges in the present, I would argue for the importance of taking stock of the alternative narratives of similar ambition and what they might mean for building and sustaining the alliances necessary to achieve lasting change.

Conclusion: Alternative speculative futures

The kinds of sociality and subjectivity associated with a society organized around UBI might be qualitatively different than those associated with other institutions of similar ambition. As a speculative narrative about the future, it offers a relatively laudable vision:

in the future, we could extend participation in the market to those who have previously been excluded. The need to orient ourselves towards a future in which we are able to address the ongoing energy transition is quite clear: the many ways that this transition calls on us to work together across many communities to refigure our cultural, sociotechnical, and political economic arrangements are, perhaps, the defining challenges of our time. Central Appalachia gives us a case study where energy transition—at least in terms of production—is already underway, but in the coming years, the energy transition will need to extend both to the rural areas that have been directly dependent on fossil fuel extraction and, quite possibly, to the urban ones where the fabric of everyday life has been predicated on the promise of ongoing access to cheap fossil fuel energy.²⁶

Perhaps a UBI could play a part in this, but several of West's examples strike me as particularly salient to this question: what are the alternative pathways that we might choose, and what speculative narratives about the future offer the most to our understanding of the present? West points, for instance, to miner-to-coder initiatives like BitSource as “innovative” examples of how this region is already undertaking necessary economic transitions, even if it is doing so while “remain[ing] steeped in the logic of capital.” A UBI presumably would give individuals money they could choose to spend on education or help them defray the opportunity costs associated with taking lower-paying jobs that promise retraining: BitSource initially pays \$15/hour, which is below the median salary in the region and, at best, half of what the few remaining coal industry jobs in the region have, in recent years, paid.²⁷ BitSource's training is fully federally funded, then the income for jobs provided to those who complete the training is paid with a mix of public and private funds.²⁸ In this respect, BitSource is comparable with other the publicly subsidized, privately controlled coding bootcamps in the region, like Interapt's TechHire Eastern Kentucky and Mined Mines.²⁹ Though a few failures in this sector are not necessarily dispositive, Mined Mines, in particular, has come under fire for failing to place participants in jobs.³⁰ Despite this, we certainly can imagine how a UBI could help individuals afford retraining. We might nonetheless contrast this approach with programs that would seek to radically extend access to publicly provided education. There are significant differences in the kind of community implied by hoping a UBI will expand the provision of post-secondary education by enabling people to pay for it as a private good – whether provided by public-private partnerships like these coding bootcamps or tuition-funded traditional educational institutions – versus the kind of community implied by envisioning post-secondary education and training as a universally accessible social good that is free at the point of use.³¹

Likewise, West's anecdote concerning the Heritage Kitchen restaurant illuminates the questions I am raising as they apply to food. Perhaps a UBI could facilitate the growth of a range of locally-sourced restaurants and similar businesses; I certainly can see the appeal of this kind of small-is-beautiful localist communitarianism.³² In West's account, the locally owned restaurant contrasts with the kinds economic control by absentee owners that characterized the “company town” era. Indeed, Sana Saeed's documentary video for *Al Jazeera*, which West is citing, juxtaposes these local enterprises with regionally-popular transnationally controlled fast food restaurants. Underscoring the barriers to local control, West notes that Sheppard and Royse, the owners, needed to undertake “corporate labor” in the metropole to gather the capital necessary to open their restaurant.³³ By this account, it sounds like a major barrier for would-be local business owners is an inadequate supply of start-up capital in the region. The proliferation of artisanal restaurants competing for UBI dollars might cultivate a sense of local connectedness and the UBI might inject the capital necessary to get these kinds of enterprises off the ground. This small example helps us imagine a community structured around a robust localist market communitarianism. By way of contrast, I might try to

envision the kind of community that could be cultivated by socialized kitchens or grocers. Since the UBI involves dreaming big, are there alternative ways to deepen solidarity and address food insecurity that could help connect people across space, situation, and preference? What would they look like? I would pose the decommodification of food as a possible substitute vision. Since both alternatives are distant from material realization and are operating at the level of *narratives about possible futures*, which is the one we would prefer to work towards?


It seems plausible to think a UBI would help people in Central Appalachians access adequate housing on the private market. This is a genuinely praiseworthy goal. It could even help inject the kind of liquid capital necessary to renovate existing sub-standard housing. But is there an alternative pathway oriented towards the decommodification of shelter, perhaps in the form of high quality publicly owned housing? How might the community implied by this alternative pathway differ?


I would return to Daniel Zamora's critique of the UBI, wherein he answers the question "Isn't the best way to fight capitalism to limit the sphere in which it operates?" by reminding us that capitalism has made

market exchange the nearly exclusive means to acquire goods necessary for our reproduction. In doing so, it turned money into almost the only valid medium of exchange and it made the majority of the population dependent on capital, enforcing a fundamentally asymmetric power relation between the boss and the worker. This profoundly unequal relationship not only subordinates people within the sphere of labor, but outside it as well, through the powerful influence economic power exerts on politics, ideology, and culture.³⁴

This is not to say that decommodification of necessities is somehow an easier goal to achieve than the UBI; it may in fact be harder. But given the scale of the social transformation envisioned by a UBI, we should think carefully about which parts of social reproduction we want inside the market and which ones we do not. I am sensitive to the way that, at their best, conversations concerning the UBI draw on the incisive analysis of Marxist feminisms, "wages for housework" activism, and studies of disability and aging.³⁵ Much of the care work necessary to social reproduction has been historically set outside of the market, with the effect of cheapening it and appropriating it. But what these struggles have made clear is that we are constantly renegotiating the boundaries between the formal economic sphere and those parts of the web of life in which it is embedded and on which it depends.³⁶ The UBI offers one vision that takes this seriously and seeks to offer a more humane world in response. But an alternative narrative that could be just as a humane might seek to constrain, rather than expand, the role of the market in mediating social reproduction.

Notes




1. Caroline West, "From company town to post-industrial: inquiry on the redistribution of space and capital with a Universal Basic Income," *Lateral* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2018): <http://csalateral.org/issue/7-2/basic-income-company-town-post-industrial-west/>. 
2. Linda Lobao, Minyu Zhou, Mark Partridge, and Michael Betz, "Poverty, Place, and Coal Employment across Appalachia and the United States in a New Economic Era: Poverty, Place, and Coal Employment," *Rural Sociology* 81, no. 3 (September 2016): 343–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12098>. Peter Newell and Dustin Mulvaney, "The Political Economy of the 'Just Transition,'" *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2










(2013): 132–40. Tim Forsyth, “Climate Justice Is Not Just Ice,” *Geoforum* 54 (July 2014): 230–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.12.008>. 

3. Like many other explorations of Universal Basic Income, this suggests that we take seriously the challenge posed by automation. But where questions concerning automation often take on a relatively abstract form and address possible future waves of automation, West implicitly suggests that the history of automation and employment in the coal industry gives us a historical case study relevant to this strand in UBI conversations. In Central Appalachia, the conditions that UBI proponents often suggest will make a UBI necessary may already exist. Of course, these arguments have been in circulation for some time, at least since André Gorz suggested UBI as an alternative to the then-dominant models of social citizenship in the France. Calls for a UBI have had to contend with the fact that, despite increasingly sophisticated and widespread automation for several decades, there is still relatively high employment. Arguments for basic incomes often suggest that the potential productivity gains of automation are masked by the creation of a panoply of “bullshit jobs” that have little social necessity. This tends to preserve the existing social order, rather than reshaping our lives around increased leisure time or encouraging us to acknowledge the importance of socially beneficial work that occurs outside of formal economic exchange. If these arguments hold water, the relative lack of economic diversity in coal dependent regions might illuminate something quite important in relation to UBI proposals: in these regions, rather than a rise in “bullshit jobs” we have seen significant numbers of unemployed people, people whose primary labor is uncompensated domestic labor, partially employed people, and emigration in search of remunerative work. West points out that we must understand the role of automation in this industry in relation to changes in global political economy and in relation to the impacts of environmental and public health regulations. Since climate change poses a global political economic challenge of possibly unprecedented scope, regulation is likely to drive fundamental transformations in carbon-intensive industries in coming years throughout the nation. We might add that unemployed demographics, such as elderly people and disabled people, make up a disproportionate part of the population in much of Central Appalachia. Thus, West’s emphasis on the importance of buffering people against unemployment in the region while generating alternative economic opportunities seems quite justified. While debates about the role of automation, global capital flows, and energy transition are often treated separately, West’s case study demonstrates one of the many ways that these questions are articulated together, intensifying the stakes of each. It is, I would argue, one of the merits of West’s use of UBI that it enables us to take seriously these interconnections and begin considering paths forward. André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (New York: Verso Books, 2010). David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.) 
4. “Lazard’s Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis—Version 12.0,” 2018, <https://www.lazard.com/perspective/levelized-cost-of-energy-and-levelized-cost-of-storage-2018/>. 
5. We might contrast this situation with the work done by Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, whose work was initially motivated by the acceleration of oil extraction in Canada. Lynn Badia, Darin Barney, Ruth Beer, Emily Carr, Brent Bellamy, Dominic Boyer, Adam Carlson, Ann Chen, Ian Clarke, Jeff Diamanti, Rachel Havrelock, Olivia Heaney, Cymene Howe, Bob Johnson, David J


Kahane, Jordan Kinder, Richard Kover, Ernst Logar, Graeme Macdonald, Negar Mottahedeh, Michael O'Driscoll, Fiona Polack, Sina Rahmani, Jerilyn Sambrooke, Jackie Seidel, Mark Simpson, Lucie Stepanik, Janet Stewart, Imre Szeman, Kevin Taft, Michael Truscillo, Aaron Veldstra, Carolyn Veldstra, Caleb Wellum, Sheena Wilson, Saulesh Yessenova, *After Oil* (Edmonton, AB: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016).






6. As West observes, the “War on Poverty” represented an effort to treat the effects of ongoing extraction of resources, exploitation of labor, and appropriation of land in the region, but it did so while only glancingly acknowledging these structural facts, using top-down decision-making, and mobilizing a pathologizing biopolitical imaginary to justify its actions. This tended to position the “deserving poor” of the region as lives to be managed, rather than as agents shaping and reshaping their own lifeworld. In efforts to imagine a just transition in the region, a negative reaction to this kind of approach has been quite evident. Take for instance, the website for the “Sustainable Williamson” project, an expansive community redevelopment project in the heart of coal-dependent Central Appalachia that is jointly supported by local government, a local health clinic, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and other entities. Today, it emphasizes a robust range of social goods, ranging from economic diversification (sustainable tourism), to public health, food access, sustainable infrastructure construction, improved education, and energy optimization. But, just a few years ago, the website explicitly articulated hostility towards federal government intervention, offering critical evaluations of the “War on Poverty” and framing its efforts with a quotation from Milton Friedman on its front page. See, for instance, para 6 and 7 in West’s essay. For Sustainable Williamson’s engagement with the War on Poverty, federal intervention, and Milton Friedman, see: “Sustainable Williamson: A gateway to sustainability in the heart of the billion dollar coalfields,” Sustainable Williamson, archived page from April 19, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130419194235/http://sustainablewilliamson.org/>. Contrast this with the current page: “Sustainable Williamson: A sustainable future for Central Appalachia,” Sustainable Williamson, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://sustainablewilliamson.org/>. 
7. Phillip G. Lewin, “Coal Is Not Just a Job, It’s a Way of Life’: The Cultural Politics of Coal Production in Central Appalachia,” *Social Problems* 66, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 51–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx030>. See also Rebecca Scott, “The Sociology of Coal Hollow: Safety, Othering, and Representations of Inequality,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 15, no. 1/2 (2009): 7–25. Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Richard York, “Community Economic Identity: The Coal Industry and Ideology Construction in West Virginia: Community Economic Identity,” *Rural Sociology* 75, no. 1 (January 19, 2010): 111–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2009.00004.x>. 
8. Thus, the communitarian dimension of West’s understanding of Central Appalachia resonates much more with, for instance, Elizabeth Catte’s emphasis on radical collective agency than J. D. Vance’s emphasis on pathology and individual agency. Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2018). J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016.) 
9. This analysis reflects one of the well-established approaches among scholars looking at Central Appalachia, for instance the approach taken in Austin and Clark’s account of surface mining as a metabolic relationship. Kelly Austin and Brett Clark, “Tearing Down Mountains: Using Spatial and Metabolic Analysis to Investigate the Socio-




10. West, “From company town,” final paragraph. 
11. Of course, there are variants of UBI proposals that explicitly seek to reduce the scope of other publicly-provided social supports. Milton Friedman’s support of Negative Income Taxes (NITs) imagined this as a way to cut social spending. UBIs function basically as NITs when there is a progressive income tax, even if there are philosophical differences between them. 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate Andrew Yang has made providing a choice between UBI and traditional social welfare programs a key theme in his campaign. “What Is Universal Basic Income?” *Andrew Yang for President* (blog), accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.yang2020.com/what-is-ubi/>. 
12. Census Bureau, “American FactFinder—Results,” American Community Survey, 2017, accessed April 19, 2019. HHS Federal Poverty Level: “Poverty Guidelines.” ASPE, November 23, 2015, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>. 
13. Congressional Budget Office, “Budget Projections Based on The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2019 to 2029,” January 2019, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-01/51118-2019-01-budgetprojections.xlsx>. 
14. Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “National Health Expenditure Accounts, Historical,” December 11, 2018, <https://www.cms.gov/research-statistics-data-and-systems/statistics-trends-and-reports/nationalhealthexpenddata/nationalhealthaccountshistorical.html>. 
15. Matt Bruenig offers a list of taxation possibilities for creating a Social Wealth Fund capable of paying a UBI. Matt Bruenig, “Social Wealth Fund for America,” *People’s Policy Project*, August 28, 2019, <https://peoplespolicyproject.org/projects/social-wealth-fund>. 
16. Kevin Ummel, “Impact of CCL’s Proposed Carbon Fee and Dividend Policy: A High-Resolution Analysis of the Financial Effect on U.S. Households,” *Citizens Climate Lobby*, April 2016, 48, <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/laser-talks/low-income-households-and-carbon-fee-and-dividend/>. 
17. Proponents of Modern Monetary Theory generally suggest the use of a Job Guarantee to ensure that there is an adequate supply of goods to meet increased demand. 
18. Bruenig, “Social Wealth Fund for America.” 
19. The Alaska Permanent Fund, as it happens, is a fruitful example in another sense: not only does it help us imagine the scale of the transformation that West is proposing, but it also can help us clarify our thinking about how the specter of energy transition shapes the political horizon. The Alaska Permanent Fund involves taking a percentage from the total production of oil and placing it into a diversified pool of investments. Like Alaska, Central Appalachia has long seen energy extractive industries as ways to provide for social welfare. This provides a much more material reason that residents may resist or resent energy transition than accounts of the cultural politics of coal operating only at the level of identity and ideology allow. For instance, in the portions of Central Appalachia located in West Virginia, locally-provided social services (such as education, town and county roads, and local water systems) receive significant revenues from the Coal Severance Tax, the Coalbed Methane Gas Severance Tax, and the Oil and Gas Severance Tax. In the Alaskan case, a portion of fossil fuel revenue is paid into a fund, which then pays a dividend to

those who live in the state. While energy transition in the two regions is happening on very different timelines, we may observe that without a clear plan, energy transition threatens not only jobs in these communities, but also many of the social services and public goods that bind them together. Alaskans might reasonably anticipate that they will see continued profitable oil extraction for many years to come. In contrast, by many accounts, Central Appalachian coal is only economically recoverable today due to the presence of extensive already-operating fixed capital that makes it a competitive source for metallurgical coal and source for thermal coal at facilities that cannot be readily converted to cheaper fuels like natural gas; some recent accounts suggest that other energy producing technologies may have already become cheaper to install than the existing coal-based infrastructure is to operate, which would indicate that it is only a matter of time before the energy transition in this region accelerates. This is not to say that coal production is going to disappear overnight, but the time horizon across which we might imagine coal to be able to contribute indirectly to the social good is relatively short. Like Bruenig, West suggests we think of UBI at the national scale. In the context of this comparison, this is sensible: the accelerating transition to other energy sources makes vivid the need to transfer capital to such communities. Bruenig, “Social Wealth Fund for America.” West Virginia State Tax Department, “Severance Taxes: Tax Data, Fiscal Years 2015-2018,” 2018,

<https://tax.wv.gov/ResearchAndGovernment/Research/SeveranceTaxHistoryAndData/Pages/SeveranceTaxHistoryAndData.aspx>
“Lazard’s Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis—Version 12.0.” 

20. If we looking for material and pragmatic projects to facilitate a “just transition” in Appalachia, we might focus instead on strengthening existing institutions and providing targeted investment in new capacities, which could help to cultivate a sense of participating in a shared social project: expansion of publicly funded healthcare, post-secondary education and training, childcare, food programs (like USDA The Emergency Food Access Program and Commodity Supplemental Food Program), and housing assistance would be immensely helpful. Somewhat more ambitiously, but well keyed to the needs that West identifies, we might invest heavily in green public works programs, perhaps not unlike the RECLAIM Act that West mentions or something more like a Green Tennessee Valley Authority—or, we might, incentivize new regional industries with targeted “Big Green Buys.” These proposals may lack the ambition of a UBI, but might be seen as small steps in the right direction. Matt Bruenig, “Fight Climate Change with a Green Tennessee Valley Authority,” *People’s Policy Project*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/GreenTVA.pdf>.
Christian Parenti, “Make Corporations Pay for the Green New Deal,” *Jacobin*, March 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/03/green-new-deal-private-investment-energy>. 
21. Shannon Elizabeth Bell, “‘There Ain’t No Bond in Town Like There Used to Be’: The Destruction of Social Capital in the West Virginia Coalfields,” *Sociological Forum* 24, no. 3 (September 2009): 631–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01123.x>. 
22. Raymond Williams. *Culture & Society 1780-1950* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 350. 
23. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 350–351. 
24. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 349. 
25. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 352. 
26. Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group encourage cultural studies scholars to take seriously the ways that everyday lives, subjectivities, ways of making meaning, and other traditional objects of interest are predicated on fossil fuels. Toby

- Miller has emphasized the importance of considering energy and other environmental dimensions in media systems, art, sport, and more. Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 805–23. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-047>. Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On Lessons of Darkness and Black Sea Files," *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 3–15. Szeman et. al., *After Oil*. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Toby Miller, *Greenwashing Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017). Toby Miller, *Greenwashing Sport* (London: Routledge, 2017). [↗](#)
27. Erica Peterson, "From coal to code: A new path for laid-off miners in Kentucky," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, May 6, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/05/06/477033781/from-coal-to-code-a-new-path-for-laid-off-miners-in-kentucky>. Lauren Smiley, "Can you teach a coal miner to code?" *Wired*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.wired.com/2015/11/can-you-teach-a-coal-miner-to-code/>. Kelvin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen, "The Appalachian region: A data overview from the 2013-2017 American community survey" Population Reference Bureau, prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission, May 2019. [↗](#)
28. Peterson; Smiley. [↗](#)
29. Hope Reese "A \$2.75M US grant plants a tech seed in eastern Kentucky," *Tech Republic*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/a-2-75m-us-grant-plants-a-tech-seed-in-eastern-kentucky/>. Elizabeth Catte, "In Appalachia, coding bootcamps that aim to retrain coal miners increasingly show themselves to be 'new collar' grifters," *Belt Magazine*, January 11, 2018, <https://beltmag.com/appalachia-coding-bootcamps/>. [↗](#)
30. Catte, "In Appalachia, coding bootcamps." [↗](#)
31. On the social and non-market benefits of higher education, see Walter W. McMahon, *Higher learning, greater good: the private and social benefits of higher education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). On the consequences of focusing exclusively on higher education as a private market good, see Christopher Newfield, *The great mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) and Tressie McMillian Cottom, *Lower ed: The troubling rise of for-profit colleges in the new economy* (New York: The New Press, 2017). [↗](#)
32. From an aesthetic standpoint, I certainly understand the attraction of a small Appalachian downtown populated with nice restaurants and small businesses. Maybe we could sand off some of the sharp edges of the commodification of basic necessities with a UBI while encouraging the growth of these kinds of consumer experiences. Perhaps with a UBI, we could have our small-is-beautiful localism and address want to a satisfactory extent; however, Leigh Phillips has argued that that small-is-beautiful localism can contribute to false consciousness of the scope of the environmental challenges in front of us and the need to for large scale coordination and planning to address them. Again, the question may not necessarily be an either/or choice, but I do think that we should take seriously the ways that a UBI tends to encourage a bottom-up approach to transition at a moment when, at very least, bottom-up redevelopment needs to be matched by ambitious top-down proposals. Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defence of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff* (Alresford, Hampshire UK: Zero Books, 2015). [↗](#)
33. Sana Saeed, "In Appalachia, Some hope for a future without coal," *Al Jazeera America*, March 1, 2017,

34. Daniel Zamora, "The Case Against a Basic Income," trans. Jeff Bate Boerop, *Jacobin*, December 2017. <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/12/universal-basic-income-inequality-work>. 
35. On relationships between UBI, Marxist feminisms, and "wages for housework" activism see, Lindsay MacDonald, "We are all housewives: Universal Basic Income as wages for housework," *Lateral 7*, no 2 (Fall 2018). Silvia Federici, *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*, (San Francisco: PM press, 2012). Toru Yamamori, "A feminist way to unconditional basic income: Claimants unions and women's liberation movements in 1970s Britain," *Basic Income Studies* 9, no. 1-2 (2014): 1-24. Sara Cantillon and Caitlin McLean, "Basic income guarantee: The gender impact within households," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 43 (2016): 97-120. On the UBI in relation to people with disabilities, see Jennifer M Mays, "Countering disablism: An alternative universal income support system based on egalitarianism." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 18, no. 2 (2016): 106-117. In relation to the elderly, relevant empirical work has mostly focused on social pension incomes, for instance in Phillipp Hessel, Mauricio Avendano, Carlos Rodríguez-Castelán, and Tobias Pfitze, "Social pension income associated with small improvements of poor older men in Colombia," *Global Health Policy* 37, no 3 (March 2018). 
36. For this formulation, I am indebted to Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2015). 

 [Bio](#)

Richard Todd Stafford

Richard Todd Stafford is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. His dissertation research examines the relationships between the discourses concerning "clean coal" and the material practices and technologies used for risk management and pollution mitigation in the coal industry. In the past year, he's been working on the [GMU Cultural Studies Colloquium podcast](#) on "Capitalism, Climate Change, and Culture," conducting interviews with Jason W. Moore, John Cook, Leigh Phillips, Christian Parenti, and doing audio work for interviews with Merlin Chowkwanyun, Toby Miller, Ashley Dawson, and Sheila Watt-Cloutier. He has previously published and presented about the politics of visual culture, especially in artistic and popular cultural engagements with the coal industry of Central Appalachia.



