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**Citation for published version:**

Lawhon, M & McCreary, T 2023, 'Making UBI radical: On the potential for a universal basic income to underwrite transformative and anti-kyriarchal change', *Economy and Society*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 349-372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278](https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Economy and Society

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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To cite this article: Mary Lawhon & Tyler McCreary (2023) Making UBI radical: On the potential for a universal basic income to underwrite transformative and anti-kyriarchal change, *Economy and Society*, 52:2, 349-372, DOI: [10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278](https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2022.2131278>



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Published online: 06 Mar 2023.



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# Making UBI radical: On the potential for a universal basic income to underwrite transformative and anti-kyriarchal change

Mary Lawhon  and Tyler McCreary 

## Abstract

Cash transfers as a response to poverty and unemployment have moved to mainstream political practice. From global south developmental policy to pandemic payments, there is growing concern with relying on employment for income. Many on the left have been sceptical of, and at times opposed to, such transfers, instead urging direct state provisioning, improved employment, or economic

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transformation beyond the state. Here, we develop an alternative position, rooted in cautious optimism about the open-ended implications of cash transfers. We consider the possibility that providing a durable, redistributive universal basic income might enable escape from unjust economic relations, underwrite diverse economies, and free time to expand democratic practice. We frame this not as an assured outcome but as a possibility, one those concerned with radical, anti-kyriarchal politics might engage in creating.

Keywords: cash transfers; universal basic income; post-capitalism; modest statecraft; politics of distribution; COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

Cash transfers, long derided as a system of unearned entitlements, have moved to mainstream political practice in recent years. They gained popularity in the global south in the wake of the failings of mainstream approaches to development. Across the south, many have long considered poverty not as the result of personal moral failure but as a product of unjust systems. In this context, citizens have been trusted with the direct provision of cash to spend (Ferguson, 2015; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010). Contemporary conversations in the global north, where un(der)employment has been less prominent, have been rooted differently: cash transfers are often framed as a strategy for responding to a more precarious and/or automated future (Stern, 2016; Yang, 2018). There are, however, deeper roots here, including anti-racist and feminist scholars and activists that have long argued for cash transfers as means to redress socio-economic inequalities produced through capitalism, exploitation, patriarchy and other unequal relations (Bidanure, 2019; Boggs, 1968; Federici, 1975; King, 1967; Weeks, 2011).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a rapid growth of discussions about and experiences with cash transfers. Swift and unanticipated changes in labour and spending were identified as justification for unprecedented degrees of peacetime state spending (Braun & Ikeda, 2020; Gentilini *et al.*, 2020). Radical scholars have largely supported these pandemic expenditures. More broadly, however, scholars on the left have often been sceptical and, at times, overtly antagonistic towards cash transfers (e.g. Bergmann, 2004; Clarke, 2016; Coote, 2019; Rozworski, 2021; Zamora, 2017; for a review and rebuttal, see Calnitsky, 2017).

In this paper, we first review the history and rationale of cash transfers, including one particularly well-known version: a universal basic income (UBI). We then identify two key concerns that radical scholars have with cash transfers, concerns rooted in two very different visions of what radical political economic change entails and how it ought to happen. The first, drawing largely on socialist and social democratic theories of the just state, supports direct state provisioning and/or employment instead of cash transfers. Here, modern statecraft is deemed to hold the potential to be normatively good: a democratic state is assumed to be capable of knowing the needs of, and justly

providing for, its citizens. The second set of arguments is based on a theory of political economic change that emphasizes autonomy from the state and community self-determination. It draws on wide-ranging critiques of modern statecraft and assumes the state cannot justly operate as a total institution that provides for citizens. Change, here, is imagined outside the state.

After this review, we undertake our core task for this paper: to develop a third position on cash transfers and radical politics in conversation with other radical advocates (e.g. Weeks, 2011; Wright, 2006, 2019). Like many, we see cash transfers as neither inherently radical nor inherently conservative and emphasize that the political economic potential of cash transfers is not given, but to-be-created (Battistoni, 2017; Fouksman & Klein, 2019; Molyneux *et al.*, 2016; Weeks, 2020). The position we develop here draws on critiques of capitalism and modern statecraft *and* takes seriously the voices of many marginalized by existing economies who support cash transfers (e.g. Dennis & Dennis, 2020; Forde, 2020; King, 1967). It recognizes the difficulties of mobilizing resources to build more just economies without harnessing state power, and suggests that cash transfers are a politically palatable means for economic redistribution. Cash transfers that are redistributive, durable and sufficient to meet basic needs are not a silver bullet but can aid struggles to escape hegemonic, unjust economic relations and underwrite alternatives.

This paper advances ongoing discussions about the radical potential of cash transfers in three important ways. The first is to frame cash transfers as a ‘modest’ approach to statecraft, making clear its potential congruence with counter-hegemonic politics that seek to un-make racist, patriarchal, colonial, capitalist and broadly kyriarchal relations without increasingly the biopolitical power of the state. The second is to position cash transfers as a politically tenable means through which to harness the state’s power for redistribution, to free time, to facilitate escape from unjust relations, to support counter-hegemonic economies and to enable more embedded, regulated markets. Finally, we specify why a UBI, as a particular form of cash transfer, is most aligned with the radical anti-kyriarchal political position we develop here.

Whether the money provided by cash transfers – and particularly an actual provisioning of a durable, redistributive UBI – *would* be used to underwrite just economies is not given. Cash transfers do not directly undermine capitalism, nor do they necessarily undermine racism, sexism, (neo)colonialism or other forms of social injustice. Existing markets are undoubtedly unjust and need to be re-embedded within broader social and ecological responsibilities. However, uncertainty about outcomes ought not to make radical scholars dismissive or disinterested: all radical politics and pathways are difficult in the world we have. Instead, as cash transfers are becoming increasingly popular and possible, we argue there is strategic utility in considering their radical potential, including how they can be deployed most equitably and effectively to further the pursuit of justice. Thus, we urge more practical and theoretical engagement with the already-ongoing redistribution of wealth by the state as we work to understand and direct these initiatives towards radical ends.

## Cash transfers: From peripheral policy to mainstream practice

Cash transfers are increasingly popular, have a long history, and come in many forms. They are defined, as their name implies, as the direct provision of money to recipients. In this way they are distinct from most ongoing social welfare practices in and outside the state that are oriented to the provision of material goods, services or employment. There are many varieties and related concepts; we use the term cash transfers for this wider phenomenon and UBI for unconditional regular payments sufficient for a dignified material life to everyone. In this section, we first review dominant narratives, then consider how radical scholars might continue to critically engage with this literature.

### *Dominant narratives and analysis of cash transfers and basic income*

The past century has seen an expansion of state apparatuses to provide cash support to particular populations, such as the unemployed, retired and primary caregivers. In the global south, many state policies have expanded to provide cash to particular low-income populations. All of these have involved some form of *conditionality*: most policies have criteria for who qualifies, including considerations of age (typically seniors and children), and activities (actively seeking work, going to school, starting a business) (for reviews, see Ballard, 2013; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010). These policies have often been temporary (for a few months or years), are spatially confined (typically to a community or city), and rarely considered sufficient to live on.

Estimates suggest that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, between 750 million and one billion people received cash transfers (DfID, 2011). This number has more than doubled during the ongoing pandemic as new programmes with very different conditionalities emerged (Gentilini, 2021). These massive national cash transfer programmes have launched a global discourse about rendering basic income both more permanent and more universal, at least at the scale of the nation (see Braun & Ikeda, 2020; Gentilini *et al.*, 2020). Given their popularity and expectations of slow economic recovery, many believe there will continue to be ongoing struggles to increase and sustain such practices (Gentilini, 2021; Lansley, 2020). For instance, during the pandemic, mobilizations in South Africa have drawn on existing efforts to expand the population eligible for cash transfers (Webb, 2021). In the United States, commentators have noted that the Child Tax Credit may be a politically difficult policy to abandon, given its widespread popularity (DeParle, 2021). Here, we briefly review the longer history of cash transfers with a particular emphasis on why they resonate so strongly with people who have been marginalized by existing economic practices and experienced more conventional forms of welfare.

Development initiatives have largely failed to equitably distribute resources and secure the well-being of the population of postcolonial nations. In this context, cash transfers have become increasingly common mechanisms for

redistribution in the global south (Ballard, 2013; DfID, 2005; Ferguson, 2015; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010; Seekings, 2012). Brazil and South Africa, two middle-income countries with high inequality, provide important examples of widespread programmes that give money directly to particular populations. Early programmes were (and their successors continue to be) conditional: like many welfare programmes in the global north, they prescribe appropriate behaviours or create populations who would then receive social grants (Ballard, 2013; Hall, 2008; Seekings, 2008). Global development advisors often recommend against such transfers, instead urging more conventional approaches to economic growth through a globally connected economy, yet they continue to be widely popular with states and citizens in many countries (Hanlon *et al.*, 2010).

Attention to cash transfers has also been renewed in the global north. The mainstream narrative here is rooted differently, concerned primarily with the gification and automation of labour, and is generally disconnected from longer-standing conversations in the global south (e.g. Stern, 2016; Yang, 2018). Cash transfers are often associated with a 'Silicon Valley' narrative in which labour can and will be made insecure through automation. In this imagination, a basic income is necessary to provide a foundational livelihood that people can then supplement with irregular work in a 'gig economy'. Media attention has often focused on the support for UBI from well-known heads of major tech enterprises, reinforcing this narrative. While the broader political-economic milieu is rarely clearly elucidated in these narratives, the future that they project is one in which capitalist relations remain intact. As Morgan (2019, p. 372) describes, rather than examining the potential that 'the many may be liberated from work', the prevalent concern has been moderating structural underemployment for the many in the context of technological disemployment (see also Pierce *et al.*, 2019). In this version of UBI, the focus is ameliorating a crisis of underemployment within capitalism – even if poverty is eliminated, this remains a future of vast inequalities (Fouksman & Klein, 2019). There is resonance between this contemporary vision and conservative advocacy for a guaranteed income in which the inequality and unsustainability of capitalism is to be moderated, in part, through cash transfers (Gordon, 2014).

Crucially for radical scholars, while the Silicon Valley framing is popular in media coverage, it is a deeply partial view of how wealth transfers have been theaterized and promoted. The transfer of wealth by the state to individuals has long been envisioned as part of wider progressive political change. Advocates of cash transfers have capacious political orientations, but, 'Like most proposals to expand the safety net, UBI has roots in social democratic, anarchist, and socialist thinking' (Bidadanure, 2019, p. 482; see also Birnbaum, 2016). That there is, at present, a conservative (or at least, not radical) version of basic income in the popular imaginary of the global north should not be taken as grounds on which to dismiss cash transfers. Such an argument, suggests Calnitsky (2017), is like dismissing proposals for state involvement

health care or education because there are conservative versions of doing so. Instead, he argues, the left needs to *deepen our understanding of the distinction between more and less just policies, and more deeply consider the range of implications of cash transfers* (see also Fouksman & Klein, 2019; Molyneux *et al.*, 2016; Weeks, 2020).

The ongoing cash transfer experiments and programmes across the north and south have been the subject of extensive, although far from conclusive, study. Most evaluations of existing cash transfer programmes, for example, have deployed classically developmentalist techniques of analysis, using statistical population-based studies to evaluate the consequences of these programs (e.g. Bastagli *et al.*, 2016; De Brauw *et al.*, 2015; DfID, 2011; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010). Studies of cash transfers have demonstrated a range of positive impacts, including reduced stress, improved health, a more positive outlook on life, and increased social trust with others and the state (Kangas *et al.*, 2019; Widerquist, 2018). Some have found ‘negative’ impacts, such as reduced hours of waged labour, increasing time spent on, for example, care work activities, education and explorations of self-employment possibilities (Calnitsky & Gonalons-Pons, 2021). The task for critical and radical scholarship, as always, is not to accept the conclusions offered from mainstream analysis but to rework the assumptions, questions and conclusions, points we consider further below.

Broadly, the conclusions generated through such research suggest that giving cash has positive consequences, but is no substitute for the state. In other words, cash transfers are most effective when combined with a distinct role for the state in assuring the availability of services like healthcare, infrastructure and education. And reciprocally, people are more able to make use of state services when they have a basic income (DfID, 2011; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010).

In contrast to these empirical cash transfer studies, writing on UBI is typically theoretical, often rooted in political philosophy (although authors do at times work to extrapolate from findings about cash transfers). Underlying much of this writing has been a broad humanism, subtended by universalized notions of freedom and the good life, at times leaning towards libertarian imaginaries of individualism (see Haagh, 2019). There has been some engagement from scholars interested in the racialized and gendered implications of a UBI (e.g. Bidadanure, 2019; see Hagen-Zanker *et al.*, 2017, for implications of cash transfers), yet the majority of this work does not draw on anti-racist or feminist critiques of modernity, universalisms, humanism and categories such as gender, race and ability, as well as the ways these constructions entwine to characterize normative visions of a good future (Weeks, 2011, is a notable exception which we draw on throughout this paper).

Cash transfers and UBI are, it appears, increasingly supported by people who have been marginalized by existing economic systems (Dennis & Dennis, 2020; Forde, 2020; King, 1967; Webb, 2021; Widerquist, 2019). Movements in support of cash transfers often draw from and are led by people with direct experience as recipients of conditional cash transfer programmes, and surveys have demonstrated that cash transfers have much greater support at



the social-spatial-political-economic margins: people of colour, lower income people and young people, for example, are more likely to support cash payments (Balibouse, 2020). In some places where conditional transfers already exist, there is political mobilization around their extension and the reduction of conditionality: the most vocal critiques of cash transfers from those who have experience with them is against their conditionality, not in favour of replacing them with more state action. Such opposition is evident both in political mobilizations to reduce conditions (Institute for Economic Justice, 2021) and indirect actions to subvert conditions (Garmany, 2017).

In South Africa, for example, calls for a universal cash grant are framed as an expansion of successful programmes rather than a new demand.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has increased attention and spurred new alliances such as the #PayTheGrants campaign (Forde, 2020; Webb, 2021). Extensive public works projects to increase employment, as well as state support for private economic development and free basic housing and services, have had some positive impacts; nevertheless, widespread unemployment and profound inequality remain the norm in South Africa. In this context, cash transfers are widely seen as a largely successful mechanism for reducing poverty (Ferguson, 2015; Seekings, 2008). These transfers were initially limited to those deemed unable to work (Fouksman, 2020), a consequence of the historic and ongoing valorization of labour during colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid times (Barchiesi, 2007; Ferguson, 2013; Lawhon *et al.*, 2018). Yet, there does seem to be a growing rejection of this narrative and ongoing effort to rework this moral economy, and in line with critiques elsewhere, attribute poverty to the failings of the economy rather than individual (Ferguson, 2015; Forde, 2020; Seekings, 2008).

*What does this mean for radical politics and scholarship?*

How might radical scholars and activists understand this increased practice, analysis and political demand for cash transfers? At this stage, it is somewhat difficult to tell. Few on the left have criticized *pandemic* cash transfers. For example, in his wider attack on UBI, Rozworski (2021, n.p.) makes clear that ‘income supports during the pandemic are unambiguously good’. Beyond this specific case, however, cash transfers have received substantial criticism from the left. As we detail below, some radical scholars have condemned cash transfers as palliatives that misdirect state resources and/or ensure the continuation of injustices.

A more open-ended approach to understanding the relationship between cash transfers and wider political economic change, however, requires radical scholarship that both theorizes differently and deploys alternative measures and judgments. For example, reduced work hours and increased divorce rates have often been identified as ‘negative’ consequences of cash transfers. Yet, if delinking incomes from labour and patriarchy helps free people from unjust economic and/or domestic relations, radical scholars ought to frame

these as *benefits* of cash transfers, benefits that might well be enhanced by the provision of a durable basic income (Weeks, 2011). Given ecological concerns with overproduction, reduced productivity in some sectors of the economy is also better understood as a social good (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020). This is not to suggest that metrics are not useful: they are powerful ways that we gauge conditions and direct political interventions. But we must think carefully about what is being measured and what normative assumptions underpin evaluations. Radical scholars need to examine the implications of cash transfers through a more capacious set of indicators, including ones that consider its radical potential. We elaborate on this point below.

Radical analysis, we suggest, also ought to more deeply engage with the political demands of recipients who experience benefits. Popular politics can be short-sighted, focused on immediate, ameliorative demands. And yet, as we discuss below, there is reason to think there is more going on here. Rather than seeing cash transfers as a final outcome, in the text below we work through ways in which cash transfers – and particularly a UBI – might be a uniquely compelling policy for *inducing* radical change. Before doing so, however, we first review why some radical scholars have opposed cash transfers.

### **Radical concerns with state-facilitated cash transfers**

This section outlines two distinct radical approaches to social change and why many concerned with economic justice have opposed or omitted cash transfers from their strategy for political economic change. The first is an approach to justice based on *increasing and improving the role of the state* in providing employment and material goods. The second is an approach to justice that suggests *state power should be subverted* and counter-hegemonic community economic practices extended (see Holloway, 2002; Pierce & Williams, 2016). These positions, however, do not exhaust the horizon for analysis; many radical thinkers have long written in favour of some kind of wealth transfer, a point we return to below.

#### *Capture and expand state power instead*

Within leftist thought, there has been substantive debate over the relation between the state and economy. For some, the state is an apparatus simply serving dominant class interests, establishing the legal basis for regimes of exploitation and dispossession. For others, it is a site of strategic struggle and compromise, which maintains capitalism through mediating between the interests of capital and counter-movements fighting to ameliorate oppressive conditions (Jessop 2007). These competing accounts of the state configure distinct visions for change.

Whether in its social democratic or revolutionary communist incarnation, most socialists have conceptualized the state as capable of justly managing

distribution. Despite consensus on the injustice of the unfettered market, however, the task of defining an alternative logic for just distribution has proven difficult. The left has long sought to empower the working class through a variety of mechanisms, from regulating the length of the working day and minimum wage to empowering unions and worker collectives. Ultimately, the ambition has been decreasing rates of labour exploitation and increasing worker control over the means of production, regulating exploitation with the private sector while expanding the domain of public enterprise to ensure full employment. Most recently in the context of concerns over technological disemployment as well as just sustainability transitions (although not without previous precedents), many have advocated for a renewed role for the state as a provider of employment and guarantor of jobs (Aronoff *et al.*, 2019; Stephens, 2020).

Alongside the reorganization of the relations of production, the Marxian left has simultaneously sought to reduce the role of the market in basic provisioning and expand the role of the state as a direct provider. This has typically involved the development of state bureaucracies capable of defining productive capacities and social needs to organize economic systems, including determinations of who lacks the capacity to independently meet their needs. Struggles over public space and housing, where anti-poverty and anti-gentrification movements seek to control processes of urban land development and ensure that everyone has a right to a home, have been central to both radical urban movements and scholarship for decades (Mitchell, 2012 [2003]). There has also been growing interest by both social movements and critical scholars in questions of infrastructure and basic services, including critiques of privatization and inquiries into alternatives modes of ownership and financing as well as the provisioning of free or subsidized basic needs (Coote & Percy, 2020; Gough, 2019; Stephens, 2020). These proposals are based on a normative evaluation of specific behaviours, and reward those who conform to such expectations (e.g. Galey, 2014; Smith, 2010).

Drawing on this wider approach which works to capture and expand state power, many explicitly identifying with socialist thinking have condemned cash transfers, including a UBI. Zamora (2017, n.p.), for example, writing in *Jacobin*, tells us, 'UBI isn't an alternative to neoliberalism, but an ideological capitulation to it'. He, like many, positions a trade-off between cash transfers and state funding for other purposes (see also Bergmann, 2004; Clarke, 2016). Rozworski (2021) similarly tells us 'we need to invest in collective solutions, not just cut individual checks'. In short, many socialists and advocates of social democracy believe that providing state services are preferable to cash transfers. This is often justified through a narrative of a limited tax base and, for some, a need to preserve (rather than undercut) wider patterns of economic development (Bergmann, 2004). Why and under what circumstances are collective state-provided goods seen as preferable is not typically detailed in these shorter reviews, but Zamora's (2017) summary is indicative: he tells us that the notion that individuals

might know better than the state how to spend money is one only conservatives can believe.

In sum, the socialist and social democratic vision of social change described here is not only to shift the state towards the interests of a diverse but unified working class (a mission we strongly support) but to *capture and expand state power* (see Pierce & Williams, 2016). However, the organized public distribution of basic necessities and employment opportunities, as an expression of a collective, social will, necessarily relies on a form of socialist governmentality (Kipnis, 2008; Palmer & Winiger, 2019; Sigley, 2006). While critiques of neoliberalism have challenged the normalization of market ideals, socialist programmes are themselves entwined with circumscription of social life to their own set of normative ideals. It may well be that the majority of policies advocated for above disproportionately benefit low-income citizens. This is no small thing. And yet, as we consider below, many have deeply rooted concerns with what a more powerful socialist state has, can and will do.

*Subvert modern statecraft, build new relations instead*

Radical scholars have not only sought to induce political economic change through the state: many have argued, instead, for working beyond it. In this section, drawing on critiques of modern statecraft across a range of anti-kyriarchal literatures (with a particular emphasis on anti-racist, postcolonial/post-development and feminist), we review arguments that even a democratic state cannot justly provide for its citizens. This literature is harder to neatly capture with a label, but it is often also framed within a broad socialist tradition and draws on and beyond Marx. It might be best understood as a combination of anti-essentialist critique accompanied by community economies and/or post-development visions for the future (see Gibson-Graham, 2007; Kothari *et al.*, 2019). Central to these ideas is a concern with universalisms and essentialisms, including in the idea that a state can justly provide for its citizens. State power is imagined to be something to *subvert* rather than take control of (Holloway, 2002; Pierce & Williams, 2016).

State power has shifted over time, and scholarship has demonstrated the emergence of modern statecraft that deploys ‘biopolitics’: a fluid and decentralized mode of power in which society would be governed through instilling ‘appropriate’ drives (Mitchell, 1991; Weheliye, 2014). Much work on biopolitics is genealogical, exposing the history and construction of social norms (Foucault, 1978, 2008; Rose, 1999; Scott, 1998). Many postcolonial, queer, feminist and anti-racist scholars have taken this a step further, persuasively demonstrating the injustices produced by modern statecraft and condemning its use. For example, scholars have shown that modern statecraft was prominent in colonial contexts: ‘civilizing’ campaigns defined the ideal attributes of citizenship, including the appropriate behaviours and needs of citizens. These techniques of governing were later imported back to Europe, reconstructing notions of

the proper bourgeois subject and new approaches to governance (Driver, 2001; Stoler, 1995).

This type of welfare and governance of the poor within and beyond postcolonial nations has continued long after the formal end of colonialism, often perpetuated through regimes of development and the allegedly good intentions of states, corporations and international aid agencies (Agrawal, 2005; Escobar, 1995; Li, 2007). Many have demonstrated that various restrictions on aid recipients – including what they may spend on housing, where they should live, what types of food are permitted, whether they can take on additional work or what an appropriate clothing allowance is – degrade those living in poverty, simultaneously imposing behavioural norms and judging recipients’ ‘inability’ to effectively internalize externally defined ideals. Critical analysis of the effects of the history of state improvement projects demonstrates how idealistic programmes routinely become sites of injustice, as state knowledge and calculations regularly fail to account for the complexity of social and ecological life, demonstrating their limits in their tragic results. Programmes for improvement have proven ineffective at reducing poverty, failed to actually redress root problems, engendered political resistance and require costly bureaucracies to manage and monitor populations that sap public resources without effecting positive change (Funciello, 1993; May *et al.*, 2019; McDowell, 2004; Peck, 2001; Poppendieck, 1998).

Radical critiques of the modern state differ in important ways from the radical platforms for capturing state power in the name of justice. They emphasize the centrality of difference, and the limits of state knowledge, instead insisting on partial truths and situated knowledge as counters to the false universals of modernist hubris. Further, they question the conceptualization of justice on simple material terms. Problematizing these concepts, they examine the violence of imposing universal solutions on a diverse population, power relations enacted through defining idealized forms of justice and equality, as well as pathways for their pursuit. Broadly, this has led to challenging the normalization and universalization of policy initiatives through the state as the vehicle for change.

Many critiques of modern statecraft do not directly point towards more just alternatives, yet there is much congruence between them and the affirmative agendas of postcapitalist and post-development approaches. These economies are built and nurtured beyond the state, capitalism and other hegemonic relations (e.g. Escobar, 2011; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). There is much compelling about the future imagined in such literatures, a future in which economies become increasingly localized and re-embedded in social and ecological relations. Yet, this wider political economic agenda has struggled to effect widespread change. Many find the vision of relocalized material life underwhelming, especially when compared to modern visions of stability and consumption (even if, in practice, modernist visions remain unfulfilled for the global majority, see Ferguson, 1999). Creating new enterprises, particularly ones that involve more just economic relations, involves risks and costs that

many are unable or unwilling to undertake. Goods produced through such economies are often, quite reasonably, more expensive (Lyon, 2014). Moreover, critics have highlighted that ‘postcapitalist’ community economic approaches lack redistributive mechanisms to address entrenched inequalities (Kelly, 2005; Samers, 2005), a concern that also applies to post-development thinking. Whether at the global or local scale, they are unable to remedy the patterns of uneven development produced by capitalism. How to catalyze change, ensure economic security, overcome exclusivity, and redress inequality remain crucial, unanswered questions in these literatures.

We have not found scholars writing along these lines directly considering the merits of cash transfers or UBI. It is, we think, reasonable to extrapolate from this silence a disinterest or scepticism towards state-facilitated wealth transfers, a position in keeping with a view that valorizes community economies beyond the reach (or penetration) of the state or capital. Implicit within such discussions is an assumption that the state is essentially modernist and co-opted by the commodity relations of capitalism. And yet, as we elaborate below, this is not the only way to understand the state, nor the only possible implications of cash transfers.

### **A radical position in support of a UBI**

In this section, we articulate a third position that draws on the critiques of both capitalism and modern statecraft above. It differs, however, in providing a more capacious, less deterministic, reading of the literature on cash transfers. First, we position cash transfers as a different form of statecraft, what we call a ‘modest’ statecraft that enables redistribution without increasing the biopolitical power of the state. Cash transfers do not predetermine needs but allow people (within the constraints of markets) to choose how funds are spent. A UBI takes this modesty a step further by removing conditions on ‘who’ is deemed to be an appropriate recipient of cash transfers. Second, we suggest that cash transfers may well not be palliatives that produce contentment, but the inverse: additional resources which can be used to support radical political economic change. This might entail using funds to support diverse economies, reducing reliance on capitalist economies, and freeing time for participation in democracy. It also may contribute to new imaginaries of what the economy is, and who it belongs to. In this context, we argue that durable, redistributive cash transfers that assure material sufficiency may be used to underwrite radical political economic change.

Importantly, in accordance with southern development scholarship as well as longstanding socialist and social democratic arguments, this third position does not consider cash transfers as a full *substitute* for the state. We mean this in two vital ways. First, cash transfers are a more just substitute for many, but not all, forms of conditional welfare. Deciding which services ought to be provided by whom and how they are to be funded will be an ongoing subject of political

debate and need not have the same answer everywhere, but some form of collective remains necessary to regulate and assure access to collective goods (some of which may be paid for). Generally speaking, what Hickel (2020) calls the 'welfare purchasing power' of money is higher in places with greater collective support; a UBI could be proportionately lowered with free or substantially subsidized services. There are good reasons to consider the provision of many collective services and basic income working together (see also Coote & Lawson, 2021). Second, the position here we develop builds on, and is compatible with, radical views that insist on the need for markets to be regulated and embedded, subsuming markets to the needs and desires of the local public, rather than those of global capital. As we have previously argued (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020) and further elaborate below, a UBI might well contribute to enabling such regulation and embedding.

#### *Cash transfers and UBI as 'modest' (not modern) statecraft*

Critiques of modern statecraft reviewed above have often been used to justify working beyond the state to create political economic change. This is a reasonable response. While in agreement with critiques of the ills of *modern* statecraft, crucial to our argument is that states operate in many ways and that there is analytical and political utility to differentiating modes of statecraft. Here, we lightly describe 'modest' statecraft, a mode that does not presume to know what citizens ought to want and be, but is instead focused on enabling possibilities (see Lawhon *et al.*, 2021, 2023). It is, thus, based on, and produces, a fundamentally different relationship between the citizen and the state than conventional welfare. In what follows, we explain why providing cash, and providing unconditionally, exemplify modest statecraft.

Welfare has typically provided material goods rather than cash because recipients are, explicitly or implicitly, framed as morally delinquent and, therefore, not trusted to spend money appropriately. Arguments for giving cash, rather than providing material welfare, invert this frame. Many cash transfer programmes in the global south explicitly refuse the label of moral delinquency: poverty is instead seen to result from a grossly unequal (neo)colonial political economic system (Hanlon *et al.*, 2010). There is, thus, no longer a need for a paternalistic state to guide recipients towards the right material goods. In stark contrast to colonial, developmentalist and orthodox socialist positions that reify the authority of experts to direct economic activity, the politics of cash transfers assumes that recipients are better able to assess their needs than the state and responsible enough to adjudicate how best to meet their own needs with available resources (Ferguson, 2015; Hanlon *et al.*, 2010). This position, on both counts, forms a sharp contrast to Marx's derogation of surplus populations (Ferguson, 2019).

In other words, cash transfers are a mode of economic redistribution rooted in a recognition of the limits of the labour market, the value of citizens and the

diverse and unknowable needs of people – and trusts citizens to make decisions about their own welfare. This is neither a fundamentally neoliberal nor a conservative position, but *accords* with an anti-essentialist, non-universalizing radical politics. Some, like Zamora (2017), claim that the belief that individuals know their needs better than the state is inherently conservative. Such claims can only be made with a practiced ignorance to the long histories of state paternalism, suppression and violence towards the needs and aspirations of marginalized and counter-hegemonic populations. Cash transfers, instead, can harness the power of the state for redistribution without determining what material forms well-being ought to take.

As noted above, cash transfers are, thus far in practice, always conditional. Conditionality is often deemed to be culturally important as a means to separate the ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving poor’ (see Steensland, 2008, on the failure of proposals for a guaranteed income in the United States). A shift to unconditionality can also function as a form of modest statecraft, undoing such normative judgments. The conditionalities of other cash transfers here can be distinguished into two broad types: as an inducement for ‘good behaviour’ and as an income for those deemed unable to work. Both are underpinned by deeply problematic modernist assumptions.

In the case of payments for certain behaviours, the state retains biopolitical power to induce ‘improvements’. We on the left might well agree with some of these behaviours. (Schooling is good! Health clinic visits are good!) Our point here is not *whether* some of these behaviours might be good or not. Instead, it is a fundamental rejection of the ethics of an ‘enlightened’ vanguard state withholding access to basic material needs in order to induce ‘good behaviour’. In other words, coercive and paternalistic means (making access to basic material needs dependent on particular behaviours) are not justified by ends we believe are good (e.g. school attendance and health clinic visits). Instead, the position we develop here advocates for a world that ensures the accessibility of services and reduces the economic constraints that are part of what prevents some people from schooling and using health services. It also means recognizing the imperfections of the world we have, and that sometimes there are good reasons for avoiding state facilities.<sup>2</sup>

Conditionality-linked workfare or a jobs guarantee operates on a different set of assumptions. We are not opposed to state employment where there is a need for such labour. Yet a UBI differs notably from workfare and guarantees in which *work is created so as to justify* providing people with an income. The unconditionality of basic income pushes back against the modernist idea that work is *inherently* good (see Barchiesi, 2007; Lawhon *et al.*, 2018; Weeks, 2011).

*Universal and unconditional* basic income, therefore, embodies a modest approach to statecraft. Like conditional cash transfers, it enables people to spend their money as they see fit. A UBI takes an additional step in removing the conditionality of these cash transfers, meaning a centralized state apparatus does not rationally determine who deserve basic incomes (whether based on labour contributions, demographics or right behaviours). It also recognizes



that ‘unemployment’ can be a product of an unjust political economy rather than an individual failing. A UBI may be understood as ‘modest’, then, for not assuming the ability of the state to know what recipients need nor to limit who is deemed worthy of receipt.

*Cash transfers underwriting radical change*

The second key distinction we work to make here is that cash transfers, and particularly a durable, redistributive UBI, might well induce much greater political economic change. If cash transfers were merely ameliorative, reducing economic inequality, this might be reason enough to support them. The argument we make here, however, is that the impacts of cash transfers go beyond this, and that a redistributive UBI might well be used to underwrite postcapitalist economies. Greater economic security and improved relations with the state and each other might well *increase* many people’s willingness and ability to participate in political economic change. Further, progressive scholars and activists might well be able to shape practice, highlighting the benefits of using increased funds and time to underwrite radical political economic change.

What might the securing of a state-provided universal, unconditional basic income do? In what ways might embracing modest statecraft, changing relationships between citizens and the state, rework how we see and interact with the state and each other? We point to four interrelated possibilities here: (i) freed time might be used to participate in democracy, (ii) increased incomes might be used to support diverse economies, (iii) reduced reliance on the capitalist economy might enable greater regulation as well as social and ecological re-embedding, and (iv) reconfigured state-citizenship relations might also transform how people collectively understand themselves and the possibilities for change. These impacts are not given, but might be created as part of a radical politics.

First, it is easy to imagine that a UBI might free up time and that this might well enable citizens to be more informed, active and engaged with politics (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Further, cash transfers – especially those with limited conditions – have not led to docile populations, but often to more politically engaged citizens who, at the very least, fight to keep these benefits. The position we develop here advances the idea that freeing up time is politically useful, building on this towards understanding the role of a UBI in enabling a different type of politics, and a different type of economy.

Leftist scholarship has suggested that a UBI might enable improved bargaining power for labour by providing a ‘permanent strike fund’; even the threat of striking may increase the overall gains for workers (Calnitsky, 2017; Stern, 2016). In this version, a UBI is seen as a tool for enabling iterative change towards a more empowered working class: change can be demanded through the threat of labour withdrawal. We see value in such a position, but also emphasize the potential of a basic income as *a means for the actual withdrawal*

from capitalist relations and *a resource to be used to build new political economic relations*.

Above, we noted that most studies of cash transfers have deployed developmentalist lenses, yet there are some exceptions. Exploring the politics of Seminole gaming in which cash is transferred to community members, Cattellino (2008; see also Lewis, 2017) observes that money enables a degree of material autonomy. This economic independence has provided the conditions for indigenous cultural revitalization, freeing people from dependency on conditional government programmes. It also enables monetary supports for members to engage in activities, such as language instruction, that remain culturally meaningful although undervalued in the capitalist economy. More broadly, we can also reinterpret existing data through a critical lens. Studies of cash transfers have suggested that money is often spent locally and enables the creation of new businesses (Gertler *et al.*, 2012; Ribas, 2020; Yang, 2018), and such practices might well shift funds away from corporations towards more embedded enterprises.

In short, people often use the money from cash transfers to do just the kinds of things that many advocates of diverse economies would want to see: end their reliance on capitalism for income, start small businesses, spend money locally, and devote more time to socially valuable practices. There is already a substantial community of practice in and, primarily, beyond the academy devoted to building postcapitalist community economies; a UBI might well underwrite these economies that have proven difficult to sustain and expand in the unequal world we have. It might make it easier both to spend time as scholars and activists working to build these alternative relations and garner increased public participation.

Further, separating incomes from local economies might well subtend particular political economic conflicts, enabling increasing regulation and embedding of markets. Elsewhere, we have argued that a UBI might enable a reworking of longstanding conflicts over environment and development by reducing the reliance of particular states and citizens on extractive developments (Lawhon & McCreary, 2020). Such reworked spatialities and dependencies might enable new pressures, a point that could be extended for other kinds of political economic conflict.

Finally, while a single policy may not substantively change the state, there is evidence from studies of cash transfers as well as wider social theory to suggest that cash transfers can change how citizens think about and interact with each other and the state. One shift that we find compelling is that cash transfers (sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly) reframe the economy as, at least in part, collective. Ferguson (2015), for example, suggests thinking of cash transfers as 'shares' of the economy. Others have argued for cash transfers as a recognition of common ecological inheritance (Ranalli, 2020; Standing, 2019; Van Parijs, 1992). More broadly, it has been demonstrated that recipients feel a greater sense of social trust (Kangas *et al.*, 2019). This enriched sense of collectivism might well shape willingness to participate in social change.

### A pair of caveats

Undoubtedly, the ideas we have sketched above are far from convincing evidence that cash transfers *would* be used to build postcapitalist worlds. Broadly, building and expanding non-capitalist economies is a political project, one that requires sustained attention and political engagement. The redistribution of wealth is, emphatically, no substitute for politics (see Weeks, 2020), but might instead be seen to underwrite such politics. There are risks associated with this strategy of political economic change, as there are to all radical proposals for change. Whether cash transfers *would* be used to build this postcapitalist political economy is related to two key concerns.

The first is whether radical scholars and activists can mobilize public support and shape public discourse and practice towards creating this vision. This story of change relies on people choosing to engage in non-capitalist economies and build different forms of community. There are no guarantees that this is how people will choose to spend the cash that they receive, but radical scholars may well be able to work with recipients and encourage such investments.<sup>3</sup> There are, importantly, just enough hints embedded in the ongoing theories of and experiments with cash transfers to make us think there is political potential here. Further, ongoing crises including the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change have exposed fault lines and created an even greater awareness of the need for change. The question of ‘how’ change might be instigated and supported remains pressing and, in practice, unanswered, but cash transfers might well be used towards this end.

The second point is related, although not quite collapsible into the first: it is whether this envisioned world is one that a global majority are (or might be) excited by, see themselves in and want to build. The theory of change we adopt here is one reliant on the actions of people working outside of the state, actively fashioning economies beyond capitalist hegemony. Our advocacy for cash transfers as a means of making radical change is founded on a belief that a more just world, one in which people have greater autonomy over their time and their lives, is preferable to most people (see Fitzpatrick, 2004; Scott, 2014). As Calnitsky (2017) neatly articulates, whether to support a UBI might be best conceptualized as a wager. Redistributing wealth through the state makes it easier for people to build more just worlds and makes it easier to imagine making time to create the politics that would underpin such economies. But, he notes, ‘if they don’t then they don’t’ (Calnitsky, 2017). Radical scholars and activists ought not force the making of such a world. We would add, if radical scholars and activists fail to articulate a compelling vision, and people do not freely choose to participate in counter-hegemonic economies when provided economic security, it seems unlikely that any other democratic means of creating that radical change would be more successful.

We are, however, hopeful – dare we say even optimistic, given so many actively searching for change – that we live in a world ready for such alternatives.

In this context, we urge radical scholars towards a sense of possibility about the politics of cash transfers and more critical inquiry about their more-than-ameliorative-potential. Whether cash transfers, and particularly a UBI, will translate to a more radical politics is not knowable, as these sorts of questions have not been the focus of cash transfer studies. More might be learned by adding politicized questions into ongoing studies. Scholars might ask, for example, under what conditions, are new funds used to support socially embedded diverse economies? Does economic security increase political participation and/or willingness to demand more just labour relations? If a permanent UBI were assured, would many leave the capitalist workforce to become full-time artists, community activists or care workers? Would they build the types of diverse economies that seem so difficult to support in the world that we currently have? Whatever these results might tell us, crucial to our argument here is that the politics of cash transfers are not given but can be created.

## Conclusion

It is a difficult time to imagine a just future. There has been no shortage of trenchant critique of the world we have. Yet, the left has struggled to produce a widely compelling alternative, a clear and convincing vision of what we are for and how to get there (Ferguson, 2010). In this context, we urge a deeper consideration of the politics and possibilities associated with cash transfers, and particularly a UBI. To understand the possibilities of a UBI, in combination with radical imaginaries and action, scholars must ask how cash transfers can themselves transform relations between citizens and the state, and what broader changes this economic security might underwrite. We are not alone in making such a call, but work here to clarify congruences and conflict with an array of lines of critical argumentation.

Expanding radical engagements with the politics of cash transfers requires rethinking the questions and analysis that underpin much ongoing research, reading this literature differently. It involves a different judgment about the merits of withdrawing labour, undoing of dependencies and possibilities for participation in new non-capitalist economic processes. It means calling for studies of cash transfers that attend to different dynamics, ones that indicate possibilities for life outside capital. It also means not accepting these impacts as given, but considering the potential of radical scholarship and activism to shape and guide how time and money are spent.

In this paper, we position cash transfers as a politically tenable mechanism for wealth redistribution that accords with anti-kyriarchical, anti-essentialist politics and might well be used to underwrite more radical socio-economic ends. This position suggests that, in contrast to provisional welfare programmes directed by the state or creating political economic change outside the state, cash transfers and particularly a UBI hold unique potential. Rather than increasing the power of the state to induce particular behaviours, it is a politically tenable way to appropriate and redistribute resources from

hegemonic powers. These funds may be invested in, and may be encouraged to be invested in, the types of socially and ecologically embedded economic development supported by advocates of diverse, non-capitalist economies.

Whether they will, or will not, is not given, but subject of future struggles.

## Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticisms to help us clarify our arguments. The authors also want to thank James Ferguson, who provided valuable feedback and encouragement on an earlier draft of the paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes

1 Although see Torkelson (2021) on the problems with implementation and less-than-basic cash transfers.

2 As but one example, sexual harassment and abuse have been repeatedly documented in schools and health services across the globe. *We should undoubtedly work to end such offenses.* In the meantime, in the world we have, requiring attendance may well make it more difficult for individuals who experience such harassment and abuse to avoid such encounters.

3 One could, in theory, imagine giving cash with postcapitalist conditions attached, but this is surely not a tenable strategy for significant wealth transfer in the world we have. Providing individuals with unconditional cash, however, is already politically tenable.

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