

The Case for a Universal Basic Income: Transcript of Charles Eisenstein's Talk  
<https://charleseisenstein.org/video/the-case-for-a-universal-basic-income/>

Ever since about 1790, economic philosophers have puzzled over a question, which is: "What are we going to do with all the surplus labor that we are going to have when machines do all the work?" They have long believed this was an imminent crisis because, "look at the steam engine! It can do the work of a thousand men! Therefore very soon we will only have to work one thousandth as hard."

That didn't happen. Nor did it happen with the age of electricity; nor with the age of the computer, which was supposed to finally make that vision come true by replacing mental labor the same way that machines had replaced physical labor. But somehow it seems that we keep working just as hard as ever.

There is a reason for that. The reason is that instead of choosing to work one thousandth as hard, instead we chose to consume a thousand times more. And that's kind of kept capitalism going. But that option is no longer available to us. We can't keep consuming that much more because we have planetary boundaries and also social limits to the amount of life we can monetize. So we face this crisis that was foreseen by 18th and 19th century economic philosophers: the crisis of capitalism. If you need to work in order to earn the money to live, and fewer and fewer people are needed to work, then how are you going to avoid poverty? How are you going to avoid concentration of wealth? Mass unemployment? Social unrest? A marxist revolution? This has been the crisis that gets pushed into the future every time we think of more things to consume.

Another option, of course, is that we stop working so hard. For that to happen, there must be another way for money to come to people besides that they go and earn it making more stuff. One way to do that would be simply to give it to everybody. A basic amount that some people call a Universal Basic Income. I use another term for it sometimes, which is a "social dividend," because it basically says, "why is it that we don't need to work so hard? It's because of the inventions of James Watt, and Nikola Tesla, and Thomas Edison, and et cetera, et cetera, and the scientific achievements of many, many, many generations of scientists, and inventors, and entrepreneurs, all of this; it's the whole culture that has given us this kind of wealth." A limited kind of wealth, but it is a kind of wealth.

So who deserves the benefits of the inventions of James Watt? We all equally deserve it. He lived, what? A hundred and fifty years ago, right? Two hundred years ago, I don't know, I wasn't paying attention in school. But no one alive today deserves the wealth of culture and nature simply by being born in a different place than anyone else. We are equally deserving of it. Therefore we all deserve an equal share of this cultural inheritance. That coincides with a Universal Basic Income. It's a little bit different in conception, but the idea is "everybody gets a payment." It's not means based. You don't have to prove that you're needy. No. Bill Gates gets his, I don't know what it would be, maybe \$12,000 a year, \$15,000 a year, just like everybody else, and Bill can spend it on anything he wants.

So the idea of a Universal Basic Income goes against a lot of our cultural assumptions about human nature and about a life well lived. One of those is that, "if you didn't have to work for money, then you wouldn't be productive." In other words, you only contribute to society because you're paid to, and if you

had your way you'd just sit in front of the TV all day, eating potato chips and playing World of Warcraft. Or I don't know, I'm a little bit dated here in my video games. Basically the idea is, "I know you. You're just in it for yourself. You don't want to contribute anything. You don't want to create anything, you have to be paid to do it."

Is that assumption true? Well, you could look at yourself. Is that true of you? If you made your fortune -you have a billion dollars - are you going to retire at age 35 to a life of tennis and golf? People who do achieve that don't retire to a life of tennis and golf, or not for very long. They do it for a while and then they get sick, or they want to get back into business. They want to do something that's exciting to them, they want to create something.

The same thing happens when they've done these experiments where they actually do give everybody a living wage, a universal basic income, without payment, without them earning it. And what happens? They don't quit their jobs. They don't stop being creative and productive. In fact, people are liberated to do things that might contribute to society that don't create saleable goods and services. There might be things that you want to do that call to your heart, and that the world really needs, but there's no money in it - because our economic system is not set up to reward those things, because the economy is not very well aligned with the common good.

A universal basic income allows people to do the creative, beautiful, necessary things that the world needs the most right now. And there's no money in it. In a lot of fields, what the world needs the most, there's no money in that. Why is there so much money if you're a petroleum engineer as opposed to one of these guerilla ecosystem restoration engineers? I know guys who do this. They go into state parks, they sneak in there, they alter waterways, and they plant native species, and they build swales, and they whatever it is to restore the land, and they don't get paid for it. They even are at risk of prosecution. But they are doing it because it needs to be done.

So one reason that I support a universal basic income is to allow people to act on their creativity and act on their care, even when the existing economy does not pay them to do it. But it really comes down to a different vision of human nature. And you can look at yourself. I bet if we instituted a basic income, a lot of people, some people would just party for a while, or would just do nothing for a while, or do nothing very visible to us. Maybe that's because they need to do that. Another thing that would happen, and this is the real threat of universal basic income, is that it would be very hard to get people to do degrading, dangerous work. The kind of thing that no one would do unless you paid them to do it. Or no one would do for very long or very much unless you paid them to do it. Unless they are so threatened with survival that, "ok, I'll flip burgers eight hours a day, five days a week for the rest of my life with no opportunity for advancement. Ok, I'll drive the shuttle bus between the terminal and the parking lot, every day for the rest of my life."

In a world with universal basic income, we would have to engineer jobs like that out of existence. If you were an industrial engineer, or if you were an entrepreneur, from the get-go you would have to think, "how do I create an enterprise where the work is meaningful? Where the work is rewarding? Where the work is attractive enough that people who aren't desperate to survive, desperate to pay the rent, desperate to feed the children - will still do that work?"

So it would change the whole structure of the economy. It's not that we would have no hotel maids, and no shuttle bus drivers, and none of those roles anymore. But there would be a lot less. People would not be trapped in those things. I've had summer jobs where I washed dishes. I've had phases in my life where routine manual labor was a balm; it was a refuge. Those are not bad things. But today we have an economy that structurally demands millions and millions of people to do degrading labor.

It's only degrading if you have to do it, if you're forced to do it, and you have to do it the rest of your life. I mean imagine; look at that shuttle bus driver, look at that hotel made. Once upon a time she or he was a young person full of ambition, full of hope for life, wanting to do great things. And look what happened.

Do you really want to live in that kind of world? Do you want your affluence to be built to the humiliation of other people? It's not necessary. In a world of universal basic income we would have a different kind of affluence. We would have a world where everybody is doing things out love. Because it's their passion. Imagine how beautiful the world would be if people poured their creativity and passion into what they made.

So you might have to clean your own toilet when you stay at a hotel. You might have to carshare a lot more. Everything would change. Universal Basic Income is profoundly revolutionary. Some people say, "oh it would just preserve capitalism as we know it." It would revolutionize capitalism as we know it. Because the basis of it is that you are forcing people into labor. If you are not forcing people into labor the whole equation changes.