

DISSERTATION

THE ECONOMIC AND THE REAL:
REFLECTIONS ON JUSTICE, METHODOLOGY, AND ONTOLOGY IN ECONOMICS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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The role of perspective is often overlooked within economics. While the scale and scope of economics has expanded greatly in the last decades, less and less time has been devoted to introspection. Yet, as economics grows, so does the need for introspection, in order to explore the origins and relations of, and between, our own perspectives. This dissertation is an attempt to turn our gaze inwards in three different themes: justice, methodology, and ontology. Chapter Two reassesses the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiments (1970-1976) seeking to correct many misconceptions that have been taken as conventional wisdom about the experiments. Chapter Three expands on Martha Nussbaum's capabilities list through the inclusion of negativity and a "zeroth" capability. Chapter Four redefines the nature of economic pluralism through the use of parallax ontology.

DEDICATION

For Mariela and Nora, always.

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“Arren was silent, pondering this. Presently the mage said, speaking softly, ‘Do you see, Arren, how an act is not, as young men think, like a rock that one picks up and throws, and it hits or misses, and that’s the end of it. When the rock is lifted, the earth is lighter; the hand that bears it heavier. When it is thrown, the circuits of the stars respond, and where it strikes or falls the universe is changed.’”

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore* (1972)

Chapter One: Some Perspective on Perspectives

“And these are the people I love – the Dionysians, the unmediated ones, those drawn to what’s different and new, seeking movement and inspiration over dogmas and immutable statues. The innocents, in other words, the speakers of truth.”
– Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, *Comradely Greetings* (2014)

We will take our first step by stepping backwards. Perspective, or rather our perspective *on* perspectives, will be our focus. In this way this dissertation can be read less as a cohesive whole and as more of an anthology, united by a common inquisitorial spirit; the drive to understand the economist’s gaze. Namely, how the economists see themselves in relation to the world, others, and themselves.

These were always the questions that held the greatest import for me, those that sought to look behind and beyond to find the hidden (or so often obscured) machinations and motivations in the thought and words of economists. “Economics is scientific,” as Deirdre McCloskey claims, “but literary too.” (McCloskey 1998, 23) The field of the rhetoric of economics, founded and championed by McCloskey herself, has long sought to do this through literary analysis of economics. (McCloskey 1985, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1994; just to list a few) I am not here, however, to convince one of the importance of rhetoric, and the power of words, though my aim is not wholly dissimilar.

The role of perspective, the economist’s gaze, is what is being investigated. In this rhetoric is an important component, but here is where we shall differ from the work of McCloskey and others. A core component of this dissertation is its interdisciplinary nature,

weaving together insights and language from philosophy and psychoanalysis to better illuminate the perspectives, and the perspectives *on* perspectives, of economists. This will be done across three differing levels of scope; how the perspectives of individual economists effected the perception of the first large-scale public policy experiment and changed the course of the United States welfare state, how the COVID-19 Pandemic has changed our perception of our capabilities, and the necessity of taking a new perspective on universal basic income and boredom, and finally, how our perspectives within economics itself are shaped when confronted with the concept of parallax ontology, and the consequences for economic pluralism.

Chapter Two offers a reexamination of something that has long been remembered as a noble but failed experiment by the larger economics community; the Income Maintenance Experiments in the United States (1968-1979). Noble in their novel experimental methodology, as a way to randomly “treat” and “control” economic behavior in the field while simultaneously fighting poverty, comparing, in essence, two alternative technologies for delivering public assistance. At the same time the income maintenance experiments are recalled as a dull failure, empirically speaking; a failed experiment which undermined the very concepts the policy sought to explore. Critics of the Income Maintenance Experiments worried about causing family dissolution but economists have pointed strongly towards a labor supply reduction as one of the primary failures of the policy tool, forgetting about the wage- and freedom-enhancing gains achieved by low income Americans, and especially by households headed by women and people of color, who directly benefited from the policy. Here the data design and experimental evidence from the final and largest of the negative income tax experiments, the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiments (SIME/DIME) is reassessed in a more nuanced light. One that acknowledges a more nuanced definition of “success.” As a result, little evidence of a labor

supply reduction among households is found, the primary catalyst for the “failure” of the experiments. Rather, I find that SIME/DIME had a positive effect both on total real wages and on the real wage rate, results that, while unevenly applied, are consistent across different household structures, and by gender, race, and ethnicity. These results call into question the conventional narrative that the income maintenance experiments of the 1960s and 1970s failed, a story that shaped public policy for years afterwards, and seeks to rehabilitate it.

Chapter Three explores how the inadequacies of our capitalist system have been laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the capabilities approach, as outlined by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, may now be re-examined in the light of this new viral reality by the contributions of Slavoj Žižek and Byung-Chul Han. The capability approach, as it stands, suffers from two missing pieces: that of an acknowledgement of the necessity of negativity as a foil to positivity within the capabilities as articulated by Nussbaum, and the existence of the material root of all capabilities, namely the need to have the capacity to be capable. A “capability for boredom,” and a “zeroth capability” are discussed as solutions, means by which to fill these gaps. Finally, a universal basic income is discussed as a means by which to support the functioning of a “zeroth capability,” the goal being to avoid a descent into bare life during this time of pandemic capitalism. A perspective, which ultimately, strengthens our capabilities beyond the pandemic itself.

Chapter Four asks what is seen when one’s gaze falls upon the plurality of thought within economics. If one gazes from the perspective of Slavoj Žižek, of Kojin Karatani, and of Jacques Lacan what is found is a pronounced parallax within the differing perspectives of economic reality. Here is explored the application of parallax ontology, as primarily discussed in Žižek’s *The Parallax View* (2006), to economic pluralism. Parallax ontology acknowledges that our

conception of reality, economic or otherwise, is riven through with parallax gaps, to be thought of as irreducible gaps, or minimal distances, between perspectives. I argue that one should consider these parallax gaps to exist within economic pluralism and to be subjects in and of themselves. A new perspective that acknowledges the failure to grasp the Real as the very wellspring of the disparate schools of thought within economics. A brief coda, with some concluding thoughts on utopia and a yin-ward turn in economics concludes this dissertation.

Chapter Two: When the Experiment Ends
Reassessing the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiments

“But poverty is tractable only if treated as a problem.”
– Robert A. Levine, *The Poor Ye Need Not Have With You* (1970)

Poverty in the United States is frequently described as a choice. Poverty is a choice, typically not of the individual or family or neighborhood, but of society and government. Poverty is a social and political problem, and can be solved by social and political means (see Darity and Mullen 2020; Nussbaum 2006, 2007; Atkinson 1999). In the United States and throughout the world, a new enthusiasm for universal basic income guarantee (BIG) has prompted a wave of investigations into income maintenance programs past and present (Banerjee, et al. 2017; Gilbert and Murphy 2018; Jones and Marinescu 2020). Most of the new and older studies alike argue *against* the negative aspects of income maintenance programs rather than arguing *for* the positive aspects; in this way the new economics repeats the old, a dusty clash of narratives transfixed by family dissolution and work disincentive-hypotheses, on the one hand, versus “character” or virtue-based hypotheses on the other (Banerjee, et al 2017, 155-156).¹

Robert Solow, when reflecting on the income maintenance experiments of the 1970s, remarked that “the prevalence of small effects opens the way to alternative implications of the research findings. The interpretation adopted will depend a lot on the interpreter’s ideological and doctrinal preconceptions and only a little on the detailed experimental results themselves.” (Solow 1983, p. 220). That sentiment was echoed by Gary Burtless, who would postulate that

¹ For discussion of the history of public assistance since colonial times, and a test of the “character”-based hypothesis, see Ziliak (2004, 1997) and Ziliak and Hannon (2006).

“they [policymakers and policy analysts] seem far more impressed by our certainty that the efficient price of redistribution is positive than they are by the equally persuasive evidence that the price is small.” (Burtless 1986, 48). Solow concluded that what happened was akin to “those personality tests in which you are shown a picture of an ambiguous scene and different people, interpreting the same picture, will tell you the story of their own lives.” (Solow 1983, 220) The income maintenance experiments, and their results, amounted to a Rorschach test of income maintenance, policy makers found within its results whatever answer they sought. (Widerquist 2005). What ended up being told was a “simple story of lazy poor people and family decline.” (Levine, et al. 2005, 105).

This paper reassesses the last and the largest of those income maintenance experiments of the United States in the 1970s, the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiment (SIME/DIME), with an emphasis on labor market conditions and outcomes for program participants. Did income maintenance experiments substantially improve the conditions of impoverished people? If so, then why was the boldest, most promising policy tool and welfare system in America hastily ended, abandoned, and disparaged for the next four decades?

The first section of the paper provides historical context and background for these first-of-their-kind experimental trials in public policy and probes the question of what the experiments were truly trying to measure. The second section reviews the consensus on the income maintenance trials that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and highlights recent scholarship questioning many long-held assumptions made about the experiments. The third section presents the original data from the Seattle and Denver Income Maintenance Experiments (SIME/DIME) to examine a subsample of “stable” households that maintained their composition throughout the experiment. The fourth section reports the results from a series of difference-in-difference

regressions, with an emphasis on the race, ethnicity, and gender of heads of households participating in the experiment. The paper concludes with a discussion around transforming the narrative around income maintenance.

I: Historical Context

Field experiments in economics got a big boost (and millions of dollars) more than a half century ago, to “experiment” on a newish social policy, “income maintenance” (Committee on Finance [COF] 1972, General Accounting Office [GOA] 1981). Income maintenance experiments were one of the novel policy tools to emerge from President Johnson’s War on Poverty. The War on Poverty was the touchstone of President Johnson’s vision of a Great Society, a successor to the New Deal. Anti-poverty programs during the New Deal had as their ethos,

improving the economy so that the vast majority of the majority groups could make it on their own, for using Social Security so that those who were left behind because of age, accident, or economic fluctuation could continue the standard of living to which they were accustomed, and for mopping up the presumed random remainder with Public Assistance. (Levine 1970, 33)

The War on Poverty differed in its approach. The problem that had escaped the New Deal was that the “remainder” was not random “but concentrated very highly in groups characterized by unequal opportunity.” It wouldn’t be until the 1960s, and the War on Poverty, that poverty as a “specific separable problem” would become a concern to US policymakers. Though, it was still

very much the image of white poverty, “the majority groups” that Levine spoke of, often in the form of the poor man in Appalachia, that would motivate these concerns, when in later years the focus shifted towards combating issues of racial disparities within urban settings the policies would suffer politically as a result. (Levine 1970, 33-34)

The renewed focus on group poverty and unequal opportunities would give birth to a whole host of new policies and programs. As a result, “by 1965, the suggestion of extending cash help to the poor via a negative income tax was surfacing in many quarters and in many guises. Some called it a social dividend; others called it a guaranteed minimum income, an income-conditioned family allowance, a demogrant, or an income supplement.” (Kershaw and Fair 1976, xiii). While the popularity of income maintenance measures may have been at a fever pitch at this time, buoyed as it was by the unusually harmonious voices of economists and public policy figures, it was by no means a new idea. One can trace back the concept of income maintenance as far back as the 15th century within the pages of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*. (Teather-Posadas 2021, 14). What was new however was the method by which it was being explored, that of a large-scale randomized controlled trial in public policy.

The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), Johnson’s flagship department for the War on Poverty, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) would begin to explore the idea of income maintenance programs in the early and mid-1960s. By 1965, the OEO would include a negative income tax as the “centerpiece of a comprehensive national antipoverty plan” that it sent to the Bureau of the Budget. (Kershaw and Fair 1976, xiii) The impetus for the experiment itself would come from a then Ph.D. candidate in Economics at MIT, Heather Ross, who came forward in 1966 with a plan for an experiment with Negative Income Taxation. The plan was “turned down at HEW but was sympathetically received at OEO.” (Kershaw and Fair

1976, xv) The next proposal would come from Mathematica, Inc., a for-profit research firm, this proposal was again written by Heather Ross alongside Princeton University Professors William Baumol and Albert Rees. The “OEO research staff were disposed to accept and fund this proposal, but Sargent Shriver was unwilling to award so large a contract to a private, profit-making firm.” (Kershaw and Fair 1976, 4) So a compromise was reached where in 1967 the grant was given to the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, which then subcontracted with Mathematica. The income-maintenance experiments had become a reality, with the original New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment (NJIME) serving as a blueprint for the subsequent ones. In the US, subsequent experiments would take the form of the Rural Income Maintenance Experiment (RIME), the Gary Income Maintenance Experiment (GIME), the Seattle/Denver Income Maintenance Experiment (SIME/DIME), while in a parallel fashion the Canadian government would authorize the Manitoba Basic Annual Income Maintenance Experiment (MINCOME).

The idea of experimenting with negative income taxation was captivating to the social scientists and policy-makers at the OEO and elsewhere who had long had to look for “natural experiments” to be able to discern the effects of legislation. The idea that they could *create* the circumstances of the legislation was a new one. In their eyes:

In the years since World War II, there had been a strong trend toward introducing new quantitative precision into the social sciences, with the hope of gaining predictive power over social events. Empirical scholars used data from natural experiments and from cross sections, as reviewed above. They developed new survey techniques to collect more useful data, including the use of continuing panels of individuals so as to trace changes through time. But the model for uncovering *causal* relationships was always that of the natural scientist, who has control not only of the stimulus to a subject but also of all other factors that might contribute to a response.

OEO was looking for new ways to establish the cost-effectiveness of alternative negative-income-taxation patterns, and academic econometricians were eager to take social science over the threshold into the realm of controlled experimentation (Kershaw and Fair 1976, xvi).

The social scientists (chiefly economists, faculty of Princeton, Wisconsin, and others) were captivated by the level of control; they might be able to tease out causal relationships, and a large-scale experiment gave them a chance at it. As Robert Levine put it, they “wanted to try ‘science’ to find out something very specific” (Levine, et al. 2005, 97). An attitude not surprising given the strong positivist nature of economics departments at the time, after all “in 1964 all the good people were positivists” (McCloskey 1989, 225).

But being positivist does not make one immune to politics. As the Johnson Administration gave way to the Nixon Administration, the focus and scope of the experiments would change. Indeed, the very form and function of the experiment itself, its very nature, would be affected. These income maintenance experiments were first conceived of as a test of a public policy, something to be implemented for a common betterment. Yet, as the experiments progressed a shift occurred, one that changed the directive of the experiments from a test of a public policy to that of pure experimentation.

The major impetus of this shift was due to changes in the political theater, a frequent source of strife within these experiments. Robert Levine², in particular, recounts that:

² Robert A. Levine served as Assistant Director for Research, Plans, Programs, and Evaluation for the Office of Economic Opportunity from 1966-1969.

After Nixon's election in 1968, it was generally felt within OEO that he was going to kill the poverty program when he took over from Johnson. He didn't; he appointed a new head of the program named Don Rumsfeld who brought in an assistant named Dick Cheney. Rumsfeld systematically invited OEO folks to talk to him in his congressional office. My impression was that he attempted to preserve the program by shifting it in a Republican direction — *experimentation rather than action*. This put a focus on the NIT experiment. (Levine, et al. 2005, 98; emphasis added)

Experimentation rather than action. Form over function. What we are left with is an obvious question; what were the income maintenance experiments actually testing?

The true question being asked dealt with a labor supply response. The shift within the experiments had within it a subtext, a discussion of *costs* rather than of *benefits*. The question was not “how beneficial will this program be” but rather “what would be the costs imposed by such a system.” This can be seen reflected within the very motivations and structure of the experiments themselves:

The central question the New Jersey experiment hoped to address was the cost of a nationwide guaranteed annual income *as determined by the extent to which families would reduce their work effort in response to cash payments*. (Kershaw and Fair 1976, 3; emphasis added)

The primary objective [of the Rural Income Maintenance Experiment] is to measure the effect of alternative tax rates and minimum guarantees *upon the work incentive of rural residents* and to compare and contrast these findings with those of the urban experiment. This issue is of paramount importance because of the commonly held belief that payments, even with the negative tax, will significantly reduce the work effort of able-bodied males. (Bawden 1971, 39; emphasis added)

Since labor supply response is the critical effect to be evaluated, SIME/DIME were designed *with the effect of the program on hours of work as their central measurement objective*. Therefore, while other effects also were measured, the experiment is not

designed to measure them with maximum efficacy. (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 5; emphasis added)

The central question of the income maintenance experiments became one of a question of labor supply. Would these experiments cause a costly decrease in the labor supply? Could that cost be justified, whether economically or politically?

These political and academic machinations were done against a tumultuous backdrop, both locally and nationally. On the national level, the throes of stagflation, the hitherto inconceivable combination of high inflation and high unemployment, had sent the predominately Keynesian-minded policy makers reeling. (Peterson 1980; Foley 2012) This was seen by some, but by no means all, as the “second great crisis of capitalism,” second only to the Great Depression of the 1930s. (Harbeler 1986) A failure at a structural, not just cyclical, level.

Seattle’s own economic turmoil would mirror that of the country-at-large. The start of the Seattle portion of the SIME-DIME Experiment would coincide with the “Boeing Bust,” as it was locally known. Starting in 1969, the Boeing Company, the largest employer within Seattle, faced a sharp downturn in sales and in turn began rounds of layoffs (35,000 in 1970, and another 15,000 in 1971) furthering Seattle’s plunge into economic turmoil. Indeed:

“As the hard times continued, unemployment benefits were exhausted, extended, then exhausted again; federal food stamps and local Neighbors in Need food banks met basic human needs. Seattle’s Crisis Clinic phone volunteers counseled men and women coping with the despair of joblessness. As the area’s birthrate fell, the suicide rate rose dramatically; an anti-suicide net was deployed on the Space Needle, and there were calls for a similar safeguard on the Aurora Bridge.” (Boswell and McConaghy 1996)

This era of Seattle is encapsulated in a stunt performed by two Seattle-area relators, who in 1971 erected a billboard over the Pacific Highway South which read “Will the last person leaving SEATTLE Turn out the lights.” (Connelly and Hindsley 2018) Though the Seattle economy would find itself rebounding by the end of the experiment, in the late 1970s. Denver fared perhaps better than its Pacific Northwest counterpart. The 1970s oil crisis was a boon for Denver and its surrounding area (due to its proximity to oil shale deposits) leading to an economic boom for much of the 1970s, only to end with the fall of oil prices in the early 1980s. This led to a “flurry” of construction, with skyscrapers rising over Denver, so that by the early 1980s over 20 million square feet of office space had been added to the Denver area. (Murray 2004, p. 284) The 1970s boom in Denver would go on to inspire the hit 1980s television soap opera “Dynasty,” which would follow the lives of the oil-wealthy Carrington family in Denver. A tale of two cities indeed.

II: The Poverty of Conventional Wisdom

Conventional wisdom claims that these income maintenance trials were a failure, but how exactly did they fail in the eyes of policymakers and politicians? Most critics point at two results that were repeatedly raised immediately after the trials, the existence of a labor supply reduction and an increase in marital dissolution, but it was the labor supply disincentive that would capture the attention of economists.

The story of a negative effect on working hours was told from many quarters. (Robins and West 1980, Moffitt 1981, Robbins 1985, Burtless 1986) Table (1) shows a sample of papers

and their estimations of the effect of the NIT experiments on working hours. The conclusions, by and large, being that “NIT programs induce participating families to reduce their labor supply.”

(Robins and West 1980, 522). But certainty can be a troublesome thing. Burtless notes that:

The negative income tax plans tested in the experiments were expected to reduce work effort among participants, and they did so. The work reductions were probably smaller than most opponents of a negative income tax had feared, but larger than advocates had hoped. In comparison to predictions of work effort response based on prior nonexperimental research, the actual response to the tested plans was small.” (Burtless 1986, 46)

Small but precise, what these experiments were lacking, in a word, was “oomph.” (McCloskey and Ziliak 1996; Ziliak and McCloskey 2004, 2008) Going further, Burtless explains that:

The experiments have confirmed that good deeds are not costless. Income redistribution to the poor has an efficiency price. The price is far lower than pessimists predicted, but it certainly exceeds zero. The reaction of policymakers and policy analysts to this set of findings is interesting. They seem far more impressed by our certainty that the efficiency price of redistribution is positive than they are by the equally persuasive evidence that the price is small. (Burtless 1986, 48)

Burtless, as Solow said, has hit the nail on the head with this statement. With the small sizes of the results and the ill-defined limits of what was acceptable costs, policy makers could “find what they are looking for.” (Solow 1986, 220) A Rorschach test indeed. While economists may have acknowledged the small effect sizes within these experiments, they were not careful with their rhetoric. Their reports, when seized upon by politicians and policy makers, were interpreted just by the sign, the direction, of the results. Size matters, but nuance was lost in translation.

Consequently, any labor disincentive, no matter how small, was perceived as a failure and an indictment of the program as a whole.

The question of marital stability within household heads was one that caused an uproar when the initial findings of the income maintenance experiments were released. It was in no small part due to this that Senator Moynihan questioned his earlier advocacy of income maintenance. (Elmore 1986, 209) Evidence was put forward by economists and sociologists that claimed that the SIME/DIME experiments (as well as the other income maintenance experiments) undermined marriage stability, increasing the likelihood of divorce. (Hannan, Tuma, and Groeneveld, 1977; 1978, Hannan and Tuma 1990) Though these results would be challenged (Cain 1986, Cain and Wissoker 1988; 1990), and the experiments themselves were noted to be “inadequate and thus, inconclusive data sources about the issue,” it was too late (GAO 1981, 20). The story had escaped the halls of academia and taken root in the public’s imagination. George Gilder, in testimony before a congressional hearing in 1980, said:

...the guaranteed income plans tested in Denver and Seattle... showed some sixty percent increases in family breakdowns... What the HEW experiments showed was that many of the yet unreached [intact] families are vulnerable... [and] millions of jobs and marriages would be in jeopardy if placed in the midst of a welfare culture where the dole bears little stigma. (Gilder 1980, quoted in Cain and Wissoker 1988, 2)

True, one can say this is just another iteration the “Malthusian Vice,” the idea that welfare is morally corrupting and that its abolishment would “uplift the character of the poor” (Ziliak 1997, 449). However, the rhetoric is a persuasive one. As Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, an early and vocal supporter of income maintenance, would exclaim in a 1978 hearing “We were wrong about guaranteed income! Seemingly it is calamitous. It increases family dissolution by 70 per cent,

decreases work, etc. Such is not the state of science, and it seems to me we are honor-bound to abide by it at this moment.” (Moynihan 1978, quoted in Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 93) And so was income maintenance relegated, for the most part, to an academic curiosity. Though the pressures of our current epoch, inequality, racial and gender disparities, pandemics, automation, and the like, have returned it to the public’s imagination.

Over the course of the last decade, several studies have returned to the income maintenance experiments, offering both praise and blame for these interventions. Evelyn Forget (2011) analyzed the data from MINCOME, the Canadian income maintenance experiment, which had sat untouched after a change in the “intellectual and political climate” in Canada cut short the analysis after the conclusion of the experiment. (Forget 2011, 8) In her results Forget finds a number of positive public health outcomes stemming from the MINCOME intervention and, most surprising for American detractors, cannot substantiate the claims of US researchers of “increased family dissolution rates” due to income maintenance. (Forget 2011, 22) Riddell and Riddell (2021) examine the income maintenance experiments (SIME, DIME, GIME, and MINCOME in particular) with an eye to the nature of the randomization used within the trials. Riddell and Riddell find that randomization appears to have failed in SIME and in GIME with, on average, the treatment groups working less, and being more likely to be on welfare prior to randomization. (Riddell and Riddell 2021, 3) Despite this when looking at single parents using a difference-in-difference approach, Riddell and Riddell find no evidence of a substantial labor supply reduction and, in fact, find evidence that the income maintenance trials may have increased labor supply for single parents on welfare (Riddell and Riddell 2021, 5). Casting more doubt, again, on the conventional wisdom regarding the income maintenance experiments.

The issue with randomization within the income maintenance trials does not stop with the imbalance shown by Riddell and Riddell. Starting in the NJIME, the economists and public policy makers designing the experiment sought to study the labor supply disincentives that they feared would result from any income maintenance scheme. To do this, they sought to draw out the disincentives themselves. Kershaw and Fair reflect that:

Accounting for these cost differentials in the design led to an uneven allocation of household across experimental plans. It also led to the fact that the probability of assignment of a family to a particular plan was not independent of income – the higher the family income, the higher the probability of being assigned to a generous plan. This led to substantial numbers of families being assigned to plans with breakeven points below the families' incomes (and consequently receiving no payments). Basic principles of randomization were retained because all households within a given income stratum (that is, all households identical in terms of stratification characteristics) faced the same set of assignment probabilities. (Kershaw and Fair 1976, 12)

And a similar set of motions is apparent in the SIME/DIME experiments as well. Namely, that:

The assignment model resulted in a sample in which families with low normal-income levels (*E*-levels) were more likely to be assigned to treatments with low guarantee levels (or low-breakeven levels). Persons with high normal incomes were more likely to be assigned to NIT treatments with high guarantees and breakeven levels. Low normal-income families were less likely and high normal-income families more likely to be assigned to control status. (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 20)

Simply put, the higher the income of the participants the more likely they were to be sorted into the most generous of the treatment plans. The experiment was set up in such a way as to encourage a reduction of labor hours, to elicit the very cost that ended up sinking the program as a whole. The issue was perhaps summed up best by Solow who remarked that “the main

disadvantage of the social experiment as a policy tool that it may often leave us having to explain to ourselves why we do not do the right thing, when it is costly but not terribly costly.” (Solow 1986, 222).

III: The Seattle and Denver Income Maintenance Experiments (1970-1976)

The focus here is on the Seattle and Denver Income Maintenance Experiments (SIME/DIME). SIME/DIME was, as has been mentioned, the “most comprehensive of all the urban experiments” (COF 1972, 6). The administration of the experiments was complex, spanning several organizations (both public and private) and several universities, “combining the efforts of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW); the states of Washington and Colorado; two major research institutions – SRI International (formerly Stanford Research Institute) and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc, (MPR); and community colleges in Seattle and Denver” (Bell 1980, xvii-xviii). The design contained 12 NIT treatments and control groups, along with three levels of a “manpower program,” and two different time durations (3 and 5 years)^{3,4} Within these twelve possible treatments were three different guarantee levels and four different tax rates. (See Table 2 for Household Sample Characteristics)

³ A 20-year version of the experiment would later be approved and implemented, but would be canceled before it ran its course.

⁴ The Manpower Training Act of 1962 introduced work-training as a major component of social welfare prior to the Equal Employment Act of 1964 (Ziliak and Hannon 2006, Table Bf, “Important legislation and events affecting social welfare policy, 1601-1997,” pp. 695-698. Dr. King was a critic of work training and advocated a job guarantee program, now gaining steam (Tcherneva 2019; Forstater 2002).

The lowest level of guaranteed income (\$3800) was chosen because it was “just sufficient” to bring a family of 4 with no income sources to the official poverty level. In addition, it generally matched the alternative guarantee available from a combination of AFDC and food stamps (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 6-7). The middle level (\$4800) was equivalent to the highest amount paid in the NJIME. The highest level (\$5600) was chosen in order to “widen the range of feasible support payments.” (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 7) The tax rates, which varied in magnitude, could be divided into two categories: constant and declining systems. The constant tax rate was simpler to administer and for participants to understand. The declining tax rate was thought to “push people to work either more or less than they would under a constant tax system, depending on their basic orientation to market work.” (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 7) The first treatment in the Table 3 below can therefore be read as a guarantee of \$3,800, with a tax rate of 50%, applied at a constant rate.

The income maintenance program for SIME/DIME can be represented by Figure 1. The NIT payments themselves are comprised of two forms of payment: the NIT grants and tax reimbursements. A family of four with a gross income of A' would normally see a disposable income of A , but with the NIT payments the family would receive a disposable income A'' , through a combination of NIT grants and tax reimbursements. When gross income is equal to zero the NIT payment is equal to the guarantee level (in this treatment example the guarantee level is \$5600). As the family increases their gross income two breakeven points emerge; a grant breakeven (G) and a tax breakeven (B). At the grant breakeven point (G), the family no longer receives grant payments, but still benefits from the program through tax reimbursements. At the tax breakeven point (B), the family's income (B') is high enough that they no longer qualify for

tax reimbursements and so receive no payments. (See Table 3 for SIME/DIME Treatments and Average Corresponding Payments)

Unique to the SIME/DIME experiments was the implementation of a “manpower” treatment, which provided job counseling and training subsidies. The “manpower program” was applied at three levels: (M1) which was comprised only of counseling services, (M2) which provided counseling services in addition to a 50% subsidy of the “direct costs of any training taken over the life of the experiment,” and (M3) which was counseling in addition to a 100% subsidy for training costs. (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 10) This was implemented in an attempt to counteract the work disincentives of the income maintenance program. It is worth noting that “by the end of 3 years, 45% of eligible persons had availed themselves of the counseling services.” (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 11)

i: Data

The data utilized here comes from two primary sources: The SIME/DIME Monthly Composite Principal Person Records (henceforth the Principal Person Record) and the SIME/DIME Monthly Composite Family Records (henceforth the Family Record), both are parts of the original datasets collected during SIME/DIME⁵. The Principal Person Record contains employment and earning data for all household heads across 72 months, while the Family Record contains demographic, benefit, expense, and asset data from all the family records for which the principal person was ever a household head across the same timeframe.

⁵ Two additional datasets, completing the full records of SIME/DIME, exist, namely the Spouse Record and the Other Person Record, but were not utilized for this study.

For the assignment of families to treatments, stratification was performed along four basic characteristics (for a total of twenty strata): location (Seattle or Denver), race (in Seattle this consisted of Blacks and whites, while in Denver it was extended to consist of Blacks, whites, and Chicanos⁶), family structure (whether the family was headed by a single adult or a couple, whether married or cohabitating under certain circumstances), and length of the experimental treatment (3 or 5 years for Seattle and Denver⁷). Pre-experimental normal income was also used as a means of stratification. This was classified as:

The expected income excluding the NIT payments and other income-conditioned transfer payments (e.g., AFDC and food stamps) assuming normal circumstances both for the family and for the regional economy in which the family worked and lived. It was measured as the projection of preexperimental [sic] income after removing the effect of unusual occurrences such as surgery and pregnancy. (Keeley, Spiegelman, and West 1980, 15)

⁶ A brief note on the use of the term “Chicano.” Chicano is used to denote individuals of Mexican-American heritage (the term “Hispanic” has since eclipsed it in usage), but during the time period of the DIME also carries within it connotations linked with the broader Chicano movement, the struggle for Mexican-American rights and identity. In Colorado in particular the *Cruzada*, led by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, was a potent force for the Chicano movement. (Lopez 1992) It is not surprising then that the researchers for DIME would choose “Chicano” as their moniker, even though it is a cultural/ethnic identity rather than a race, alongside “Black” and “white.” As other income maintenance experiments used different identifiers, the NJIME used “Spanish-speaking” as a racial category, one must consider whether or not the population here is strictly “Chicano” or whether or not “Latino” might be a more apt descriptor.

⁷ It was stated earlier that the DIME also included a 20-year treatment, but that treatment was not present at the start of the experiment; it was ultimately cancelled a bit later.

The data were then reduced to six possible income classes.

In order to avoid the rhetorical pitfall regarding marital stability that engrossed the researchers in the 1970s and 1980s (after all, “dissolution” meant for many women and children, freedom from a violent or abusive spouse or parent), this paper restricts the sample to those household who remained intact for the duration of the experiment, namely those families who experienced no “marital dissolution” as was the preferred term of the time. While this has the effect of ignoring intra-household effects, those outcomes are not the focus of this study. The focus here is to revisit the original experiment in much the same way as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but with a clearer eye towards considering the race/ethnicity and gender of the household heads and the possible benefits of the program. For practical purposes, this restricted the sample to four distinct types of households. The following four household types were preserved: always a female head of the same husband-wife family and only in one family, always a male head of a husband-wife family and only in one family, always a male head of a single parent family and only in one family, and always a female head of a single family and only in one family. This restriction allows us to preserve the families with the longest consistent observations.

IV: Empirical Analysis and Results

The results presented here are the result of a series of fixed effect difference-in-difference regressions estimated in the following form:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 Treatment_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where Y_{it} takes the form of multiple outcome variables, α_i is a household fixed effect, and λ_t is the time fixed effect. The three forms of this equation are regressed over the sample as a whole, then again over each individual household category (by gender and race/ethnicity of the household head). In this analysis, the twelve possible treatments available in SIME/DIME were reduced to the three composite guarantee levels: \$3,800, \$4,800, and \$5,600 ($Treatment_{it}$). (General results are shown in Table 4, whereas results reported by guarantee level are shown in Table 5) The prevailing question of the income maintenance experiment was “how big is too big and how small is too small?” when it came to effect size (Table 6 reports this by comparing estimates against pre-experiment averages). In addition to looking at absolute dollar changes in total wages we can also consider those changes in percentage terms. The “% Δ ” column in Table (6) reports the effect sizes of the estimates as a percentage of their pre-experiment averages.

Evidence across the income maintenance trials suggested that many participants did not fully understand *how* their benefits were calculated, but were knowledgeable about the eligibility requirements for the program. Surveys administered to families after their first year within the SIME/DIME program showed that “the mean percentage of correct answers for understanding the calculation of grant payments was 38 percent in Seattle and 46 percent in Denver.” Though some discussion questioned whether or not this might be understated, that people are better able to act than they are to answer questions correctly. (Blum 1986, 237). Nevertheless, this raises an

issue when it comes to the treatment variations that rely on varying the tax rate. There is a strong suggestion here participants were impacted by the guarantee level, more so than the tax rate⁸.

For simplicity, the analyzed sample was reduced to the “stable” households, namely those households whose composition did not change for the course of the experiment (which amounts to 55% of the original sample). The sample was further reduced to exclude those people who were self-employed, as their labor decisions are decidedly different than those within the more standard labor market. The regressions are therefore run estimating the impact of the program on employment and total wages, and then, for employed workers exclusively, estimating its impact on work hours and wages. Two groups within the sample warrant further attention, the single male household heads and the Chicano households. The immensely small amount of single male household heads within the sample (n=20) makes drawing conclusions for their results difficult at best, with regards to the Chicano households the difficulty with them lies in the fact that these participants were recruited solely from Denver and their estimates may be driven more by the somewhat better economic situation in Denver compared with Seattle. (COF 1972, 6; Riddell and Riddell 2021, 3) The variables in question are taken from the original dataset for SIME/DIME: ‘Total Hours’ (the total number of hours worked per month by the household head), ‘Wage Rate’ (the computed hourly wage rate in dollars of the job recording the longest hours each month), and ‘Total Wages’ (the monthly total dollars in real terms earned each month from wage-work) and ‘Total Wages (+NIT)⁹’ (total wages for the month in addition to any NIT program payments).

⁸ As a robustness check, the analysis was run using all twelve possible treatment levels in the original experiment as well.

⁹ Author calculation by summing total wages with the NIT grants.

Overall, the NIT programs seemed to have been a great boon for their participants. For a relatively small decrease in working hours (an estimated 1.38 hours a month across all households) and in employment (a 3% decrease across all households), the people taking part in the NIT trials saw an increase in their wages (\$0.08 – 0.14 per hour), total wages (across both employed and unemployed households), and when coupled with the NIT payments a great increase in income for the household (see Table 6). A result in which the negative outcomes (a reduction in working hours, according to the NITs critics) seem to be greatly outweighed by the positive ones.

The unescapable result is the obvious one, that in almost every iteration we observe a decrease in working hours across race/ethnicity, gender, and treatment (with the notable exception of Chicanos who show slight, though insignificant, increases in the first and second treatments) as well as a decrease in employment. This was the outcome most feared, and, in many corners, expected by the originators of these trials. This is unsurprising, however, with what we know about the composition of these experiments. The experiments were set up in such a way as to encourage a reduction in labor hours, is it any surprise then that employment would fall as well? The difference in local economic status, namely the “Boeing Bust” in Seattle and the Denver oil shale boom, must be considered here. For Seattle, across all the guarantee levels, the employment estimations are negative and smallest at the first guarantee level and largest at the final guarantee level (-1%, -3%, and -3% respectively). Denver exhibits a similar pattern, albeit with a larger spread (-1%, -1%, and -6% respectively). Yet, these results need not be interpreted negatively, particularly when viewed in light of the changes in wage rates and working hours.

The findings reported here, in terms of the reduction in work hours, are much smaller than most of the reported results from other studies; which report reductions as low as 2 hours a month to as many as 17 hours a month (see Table 1 for a wider accounting). Moffitt offers an interesting possible explanation to this issue, namely that:

One interesting finding that has emerged from the experiments relates to the form which work reduction has taken for me. There are strong indicators that reductions in total hours of work most often reflect reductions in likelihood of being employed at all, rather than marginal reductions in the hours of those who remain employed. That is, the reduction in total work hours shows up as a decline in the employment rate of the experimental sample relative to that of the control sample. (Moffitt 1981, p. 25)

When the changes in employment is added to the decrease in total hours, the results reported here become closer, but still smaller than those reported elsewhere. Moffitt continues, raising the point that:

the policy implications of this finding are ambiguous. One the one hand, withdrawal from the labor force is a major change in work effort, one that society is not likely to accept. One the other hand, this also implies that the total reduction in work hours stems from a rather large responses by a small number of men. Therefore, the negative income tax does not appear to have a pervasive effect on the work ethic of the low-income male population; in fact most of the men do not respond at all. (Moffitt 1981, p. 25)

Moffitt's statement begs a conversation over the nature of people's withdrawal from work, and the societal response to it.

As to Moffitt's first point, the question of withdrawal from the labor force, it is the *nature* of that withdrawal that is of importance. Is one withdrawing from the labor force to live on the

“dole,” as critics are quick to clamor about? Or is one’s withdrawal more of a retreat in order to reorganize? Some evidence from the income maintenance trials in general suggests that people spent longer periods searching for jobs. (Levine, et al. 2005) The increase in wage rates seen across the various groups, ranging from \$0.09 - 0.14, would seem to support this possibility. People may choose to stay unemployed for longer periods of time, supported by the NIT payments, in order to procure *better* employment, rather than just *bare* employment. Namely, that instead of seizing upon the first job to be offered, regardless of the wage and fit, a person would be able to wait until they found a position that they could choose freely. One note of interest here is the status of women within these trials. The wage rate for women grew compared to pre-experiment averages (by \$0.10 for female headed two-person households and \$0.06 for single women), while working hours showed more variability in the direction of the change (Table 6). Some of these changes may be due to the nature of the work done by female household heads, namely part-time work (as perhaps shown by the lower total working hours compared to their male counterparts). This is perhaps an unsurprising result, especially given the role of women in care work both within and without the home, necessitating time and devotion beyond numbered ‘working’ hours. (Gordon 1994)

For Moffitt’s second point, that the change in hours stem largely from large decisions made by few people (men being his focus), this seems to be correct. As he goes on to state, there is a “difficulty in reducing work hours while remaining employed.” (Moffitt 1981, p. 25) Most jobs, save for few exceptions, have institutionally fixed working hours, that are most often set by someone other than the worker. One cannot simply “reduce” one’s working hours to optimize their labor-leisure trade off, or to optimize their NIT payments for that matter. While some options remain, taking less overtime hours and the like, the choice is often simply a binary one,

work or quit. This goes a long way in explaining why unemployment rates increase across all categories, while changes in working hours is relatively small and benign. Hardly, the great calamity that many felt would be wrought by an income maintenance program.

Returning to the larger question, were people better off under the NIT program? The results for related to the total wages of the household, both with and without considering the NIT payments, would seem to suggest so. For households in which the household head is employed, total wages increased by an estimated \$40 - 53, even when unemployment is considered total wages still increased by an estimated \$12 - 23, a remarkable result considering the economic turmoil in Seattle and the larger issues of stagflation across the US. An increase in total wages should be a cause for celebration of the NIT program. Even those groups who saw a fall in total wages (single female and male household heads across all treatments, respectively, and female headed two-person households in the highest guarantee) more than made up for it once the NIT payments are factored in. Indeed, once the NIT payments are factored in every group, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, or treatment, are seen to have a marked improvement in their total income.

Should that not be the hallmark of any successful welfare program? That it helps support them? That it opens up opportunities and possibilities for its participants that they did not have access too before? Higher wages, higher income, less working hours; what more could one ask of a program? It brings to mind a letter written during the New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment (NJIME), a thank you note written by a participant to the organizers of the experimental trials. The letter contained the following message:

I am writing to let you know how much we really appreciated being a member of the [experiment]. It was just three wonderful years. It was something we had never expected to happen from the beginning and it is now something we regret very much to know that [it] is coming to an end. We sure wish it could have lasted forever. With the great help of these checks we bought a mobile home. And without the checks we never would have been able to think of buying one. This is the reason we feel we put the money to good use. Now with the checks ending we will miss them tremendously and we also will have quite the struggle until we pay it off, but we can always look back on the three wonderful years we had with the great help of the [experiment]. Without you wonderful people we wouldn't have what we have today. I know I can't thank you people enough, but I do want to say *Thank you, Very, Very Much*. (Kershaw and Fair 1976, p. 193, emphasis in the original)

Experimenters, economists, policy-makers, or otherwise, rarely receive letters of thanks and gratitude from their subjects. The transformative effect that the NIT experiments had on their subjects should be recognized. Small, and often statistically insignificant, decreases in total working hours for households receiving income guarantees coupled with increases in bouts of unemployment, balanced against meaningful and statistically significant increases in total wages and wage rates looks more like a success than a failure for an anti-poverty program. When thinking about the well-being of poor households it is hard to conclude that even moderate decreases in hours worked can be considered a failed policy. Reduced working hours can mean more time for rest, for play, for family, for the self. Activities that we should not lament about the poor having more access too. Overall, the results from this study seem to challenge the narrative that has persisted since the 1970s regarding the failure of income maintenance. Indeed, the consistency of these results, across gender and race/ethnicity, also serves to challenge some of the rhetoric of welfare dependence that have dogged the interpretation of the income maintenance results and have stigmatized poor women and people of color.

V: NIT Experiments Did Not Fail

So what are we to take away from the lessons of the income maintenance experiments of the 1970s? In the case of the experiments in Seattle and Denver (SIME/DIME), the results show a far more complex story than the “simple story of lazy poor people and family decline.” (Levine, et al. 2005, 105). Ignoring intrahousehold dynamics and focusing on labor market outcomes for households that remained “in-tact” over the experimental period, the empirical results show evidence of success rather than failure; higher monthly real wages, higher real wage rates, with minor reductions in monthly working hours, all this despite the economic turmoil of the 1970s. These results are consistent across households by household composition and by race/ethnicity and gender of household heads. On the central question of this paper, did the income maintenance experiments in Seattle and Denver improve the well-being of the poor, the answer appears to be a robust “yes”.

This work has shown that the conventional wisdom regarding the failure of income maintenance programs warrants revisiting. While much has been written about the income maintenance programs across the decades, new insights have not found their way into public discourse until relatively recently. The supposed “failure” of the income maintenance experiments is as much a failure of rhetoric as it is any issues with the experiments themselves, or the very idea of negative income taxation and income guarantee more broadly defined. Economists, both as academics and as policy-makers, wield tremendous influence and a great capacity for good or harm, both material and immaterial. In the 1960s, around the time of Heather Ross’s first design proposal, there was notable consensus that the core idea was solid, including economists such as Abba Lerner, Milton Friedman, F.A. Hayek, James Tobin, and

John Kenneth Galbraith. President Nixon was impressed by the unique consensus and opportunity, a political fact which might, in the end, have hurt the agenda. As a distinguished historian of poverty and welfare, Alice O'Connor, has put it, we ought to start “using the experimental findings to tell a different story, and the importance of working harder to change this prevailing narrative with a more complex alternative” (Levine, et al. 2005, 105).

The story is important. Narratives matter, both in economics and in public policy. The income maintenance experiments were hastily ended, abandoned, and disparaged because a simplistic narrative was able to take root in the American consciousness. A correction is long overdue. Income maintenance needs to be recast, the dusty narrative shook off. We should be focusing on its transformative potential. It is a relaxing of constraints, an opening up of capabilities, an expansion of opportunity. Robert Solow, when talking about the experiments, asked whether we may have to explain ourselves as to why we did not do the right thing when it is costly, but not terribly so. We now have to ask ourselves whether we can afford, economically and morally, to continue with the alternative.

VI: Tables and Figures

Table (1): Historical Experimental Results for SIME/DIME

Author	Sample	Total Hours
Robins and West (1978) ¹	Table 16 (pg. 36)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano; qts. 5 - 8
Keeley, et al. (1978)	Table 5 (pg. 14)	Male household heads, black and white, qts. 5 - 8
	Table 5 (pg. 14)	Male household heads, black and white, qts. 3 - 10
	Table 5 (pg. 14)	Female household heads, black and white, qts. 5 - 8
	Table 5 (pg. 14)	Female household heads, black and white, qts. 3 - 10
West and Steiger (1979) ¹	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano; qts. 5 - 8
	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano; qts. 5 - 8; 3-year
	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano; qts. 5 - 8; 5-year
	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano, qts. 5 - 8
	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano, qts. 5 - 8; 3-year
	Tables V3, V4 (pg. 19-20)	Single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano, qts. 5 - 8; 5-year
Robins (1985)	Table 2 (pg. 574)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano
	Table 4 (pg. 576)	Single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano
Burtless (1986)	Table 2 (pg. 26)	Male household heads; black, white, and Chicano
	Table 2 (pg. 26)	Single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano
Riddell and Riddell (2021)	(Pg. 27)	"Welfare recipients"; single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano
	(Pg. 27)	"Workers"; single female household heads; black, white, and Chicano

Notes: All hours converted into monthly estimates (from either weekly or annually). ¹Reported in Keeley (1981).

Table (2): Household Sample Characteristics

	Female-Headed Two-Person	Male-Headed Two- Person	Single Female	Single Male
Household Members	4.41 (1.44)	4.39 (1.45)	3.60 (1.37)	4.09 (1.19)
Children Under 16	2.08 (1.39)	2.06 (1.40)	2.05 (1.278853)	2.01 (1.21)
Education (yrs)	11.04 (2.19)	10.87 (2.64)	11.13 (1.96)	10.17 (2.58)
Total Wages (\$/mth)	110.80 (186.57)	518.96 (342.90)	205.54 (245.82)	454.64 (351.41)
Wage Rate (\$/hr)	2.23 (0.90)	3.72 (1.21)	2.53 (0.87)	3.82 (1.03)
Total Hours (hrs/mth)	48.94 (73.95)	143.99 (78.94)	80.03 (84.98)	125.95 (81.98)
Pre-Exp Income Level	\$5k-7k/yr	\$5k-7k/yr	\$3k-5k/yr	\$5k-7k/yr
# of Black	487	643	530	9
# of White	659	984	324	6
# of Chicano	249	409	158	5
# in Control	683	931	386	9
# in Guarantee (\$3800)	209	350	296	3
# in Guarantee (\$4800)	282	459	218	6
# in Guarantee (\$5600)	221	296	112	2
N	1395	2036	1012	20

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

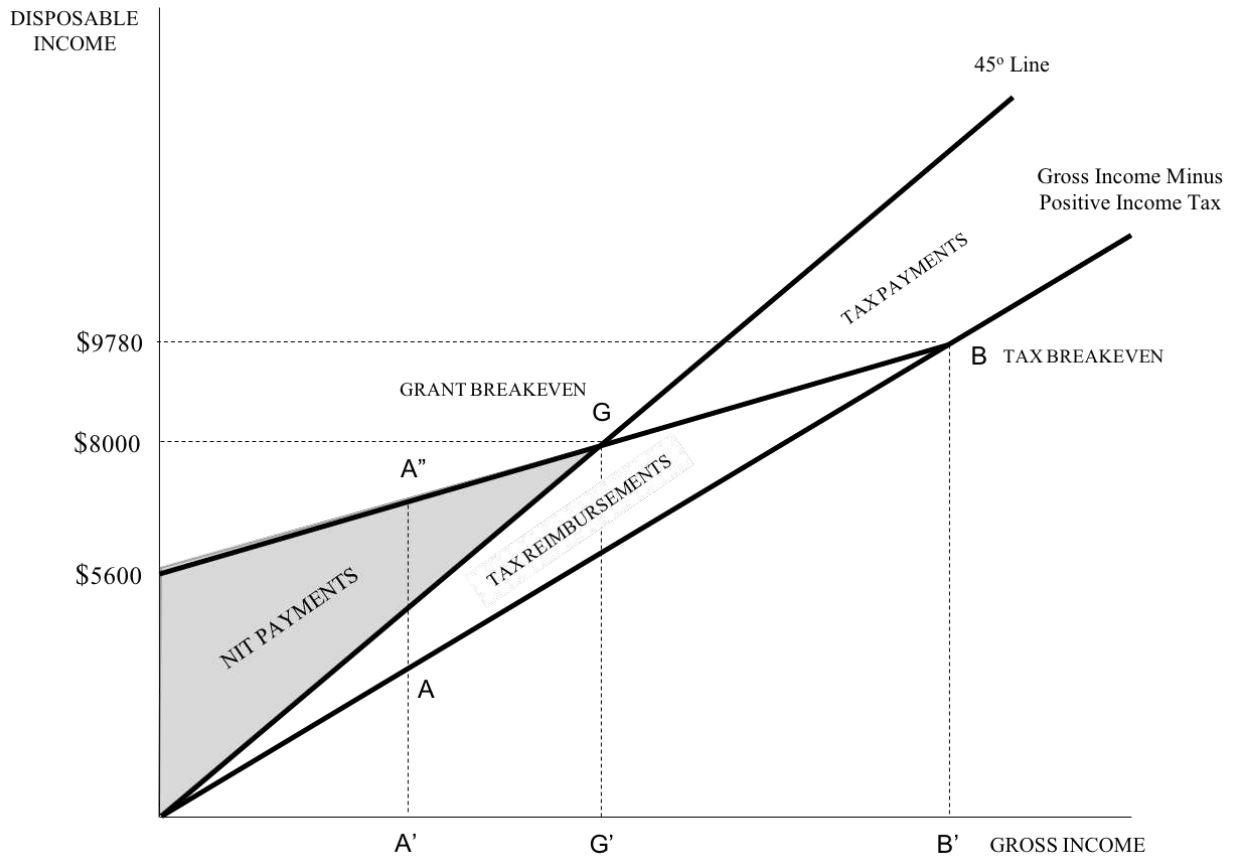


Figure (1): NIT Program Dynamics

Notes: Figure assumes a family of four and the following treatment parameters: guarantee level = \$5600, initial NIT tax rate = 0.07, and the rate of decline of the NIT tax rate = 0. (Corresponds with Treatment 10 in Table (2)) Figure in 1971 USD. Adapted from Keeley, Spiegelman, and West (1980).

Table (3): SIME/DIME Treatments and Average Corresponding Payments

Treatment	Female-Headed Two-Person	Male-Headed Two-Person	Single Female	Single Male
\$3,800 @ .50 @ 0	51.34 (86.48)	50.97 (88.47)	71.88 (108.10)	10.53 (9.26)
\$3,800 @ .70 @ 0	29.55 (64.19)	33.48 (69.17)	71.85 (114.936)	—
\$3,800 @ .70 @ .000025	59.57 (94.61)	52.56 (87.71)	65.41 (96.58)	73.42 (37.19)
\$3,800 @ .80 @ .000025	58.85 (106.31)	47.42 (96.39)	59.40 (101.64)	—
\$4,800 @ .50 @ 0	85.88 (115.46)	84.02 (115.95)	175.84 (161.116)	157.12 (167.58)
\$4,800 @ .70 @ 0	49.14 (99.23)	52.89 (105.99)	117.41 (142.76)	10.92 (11.77)
\$4,800 @ .70 @ .000025	85.00 (104.66)	85.13 (103.99)	116.96 (142.70)	—
\$4,800 @ .80 @ .000025	79.71 (122.81)	72.42 (119.04)	122.13 (145.01)	—
\$5,600 @ .50 @ 0	130.81 (138.22)	125.43 (137.03)	141.04 (154.78)	—
\$5,600 @ .70 @ 0	75.55 (130.98)	74.04 (131.97)	153.93 (183.87)	190.92 (199.40)
\$5,600 @ .80 @ .000025	90.37 (117.10)	90.14 (116.38)	177.06 (165.61)	12.63 (8.65)
N	1395	2036	1012	20

Notes: Standard Errors in parentheses.

Table (4): General Effect of Income Maintenance on Employment, Wage, Wage Rate, and Working Hours

Dependent Variable	Person-Months	Employment	Person-Months	Total Hours	Wage Rate	Total Wages (Em.)	Person-Months	Total Wages (All)	Total Income (+NIT)
All Households	307868	-0.03 *** (0.01)	172268	-1.38 * (0.68)	0.11 *** (0.01)	46.9 *** (3.35)	307868	17.64 *** (2.75)	117.51 *** (2.95)
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>									
Female-Headed Two-Person	114600	-0.02 * (0.01)	39569	-0.07 (1.59)	0.10 *** (0.02)	41.35 *** (6.03)	114600	5.45 (3.08)	94.69 *** (3.82)
Male-Headed Two-Person	115179	-0.01 (0.01)	93126	-0.87 (0.89)	0.14 *** (0.02)	60.42 *** (5.08)	115179	47.74 *** (5.95)	134.59 *** (5.87)
Single Female	76992	-0.06 *** (0.01)	38795	-3.59 * (1.41)	0.06 ** (0.02)	21.07 *** (5.33)	76992	-4.12 (4.58)	126.04 *** (5.40)
Single Male	1097	-0.07 (0.07)	778	1.04 (4.79)	0.25 * (0.10)	16.82 (13.94)	1097	-27.45 (26.98)	60.72 (36.63)
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>									
Black	111792	-0.03 *** (0.01)	64903	-2.27 * (1.13)	0.08 *** (0.02)	45.58 *** (5.60)	111792	16.01 *** (4.78)	117.61 *** (5.01)
White	138195	-0.02 * (0.01)	76387	-1.71 (1.11)	0.10 *** (0.02)	56.51 *** (5.57)	138195	25.09 *** (4.37)	114.03 *** (4.60)
Chicano	57881	-0.04 *** (0.01)	30978	0.89 (1.25)	0.20 *** (0.25)	29.54 *** (5.54)	57881	5.21 (4.94)	124.43 *** (5.85)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table (5): Effect of Income Maintenance on Employment, Wage, Wage Rate, and Working Hours by Guarantee

Dependent Variable	Person-Months	Employment	Person-Months	Total Hours	Wage Rate	Total Wages (Em.)	Person-Months	Total Wages (All)	Total Income (+NTI)
Guarantee (\$3800)									
All Households	307868	-0.01 (0.009)	172268	-0.46 (1.20)	0.14 *** (0.02)	33.31 *** (4.70)	307868	14.09 ** (4.31)	81.26 *** (4.43)
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>									
Female-Headed Two-Person	114600	0.01 (0.015)	39569	-0.76 (3.38)	0.16 ** (0.05)	27.98 * (10.95)	114600	7.38 (5.29)	67.61 *** (5.91)
Male-Headed Two-Person	115179	0.01 (0.01)	93126	0.27 (1.80)	0.15 *** (0.03)	43.91 *** (7.48)	115179	41.18 *** (10.03)	97.22 *** (9.86)
Single Female	76992	-0.05 ** (0.02)	38795	-1.32 (1.82)	0.11 *** (0.03)	21.43 ** (6.89)	76992	-2.275 (6.40)	79.98 *** (6.90)
Single Male	1097	-0.02 (0.06)	778	-2.11 (9.51)	0.57 * (0.27)	7.19 (22.56)	1097	-16.29 (51.56)	14.87 (62.01)
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>									
Black	111792	-0.04 ** (0.01)	64903	-1.13 (1.95)	0.1 ** (0.03)	25.81 *** (7.53)	111792	3.27 (6.81)	81.33 *** (7.01)
White	138195	0.01 (0.01)	76387	-0.37 (2.06)	0.14 ** (0.04)	42.87 *** (8.20)	138195	26.86 *** (7.62)	83.14 *** (7.81)
Chicano	57881	0.01 (0.02)	30978	0.57 (2.18)	0.23 *** (0.05)	31.2 *** (8.36)	57881	11.2 (7.11)	77.69 *** (7.57)
Guarantee (\$4800)									
All Households	307868	-0.02 ** (0.008)	172268	-0.32 (1.11)	0.11 *** (0.02)	52.84 *** (5.95)	307868	19.73 *** (4.74)	131.19 *** (4.96)
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>									
Female-Headed Two-Person	114600	0.00 (0.01)	39569	1.84 (2.39)	0.1 ** (0.04)	50.27 *** (10.13)	114600	11.54 * (5.01)	104.79 *** (6.15)
Male-Headed Two-Person	115179	-0.02 (0.01)	93126	0.93 (1.44)	0.15 *** (0.03)	66.95 *** (8.86)	115179	44.74 *** (10.25)	136.60 *** (10.01)
Single Female	76992	-0.05 ** (0.02)	38795	-5.61 * (2.47)	0.02 (0.04)	19.77 (10.25)	76992	-2.23 (8.20)	161.40 *** (9.00)
Single Male	1097	-0.12 (0.14)	778	7.80 (4.65)	0.12 ** (0.04)	40.09 ** (13.63)	1097	-35.33 (48.02)	46.27 (34.03)
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>									
Black	111792	-0.03 * (0.01)	64903	-0.57 (1.84)	0.09 * (0.04)	55.85 *** (9.96)	111792	20.96 * (8.47)	129.83 *** (8.39)
White	138195	-0.02 (0.01)	76387	-1.78 (1.71)	0.09 ** (0.03)	54.76 *** (9.47)	138195	20.73 ** (7.20)	121.23 *** (7.40)
Chicano	57881	-0.01 (0.02)	30978	3.80 (2.24)	0.21 *** (0.05)	41.85 *** (10.71)	57881	15.11 (8.71)	157.59 *** (10.83)
Guarantee (\$5600)									
All Households	307868	-0.05 *** (0.009)	172268	-3.60 ** (1.23)	0.09 *** (0.03)	52.30 *** (6.24)	307868	19.10 *** (5.24)	143.76 *** (5.69)
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>									
Female-Headed Two-Person	114600	-0.07 *** (0.01)	39569	-1.85 (2.69)	0.05 (0.04)	39.26 *** (9.76)	114600	-4.168 (5.70)	107.46 *** (7.39)
Male-Headed Two-Person	115179	-0.01 (0.01)	93126	-3.9 ** (1.45)	0.12 *** (0.04)	65.3 *** (8.96)	115179	58.14 *** (10.26)	168.62 *** (9.85)
Single Female	76992	-0.12 *** (0.02)	38795	-4.84 (3.68)	0.01 (0.05)	22.63 (11.75)	76992	-13.27 (10.29)	173.16 *** (13.60)
Single Male	1097	-0.04 (0.03)	778	-8.82 (9.98)	0.02 (0.02)	-18.95 (26.42)	1097	-25.36 (18.20)	139.96 (80.61)
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>									
Black	111792	-0.03 (0.02)	64903	-6.06 *** (2.05)	0.04 (0.04)	53.94 *** (11.06)	111792	29.03 ** (9.97)	157.81 *** (10.92)
White	138195	-0.04 ** (0.01)	76387	-2.68 (2.03)	0.1 * (0.04)	69.41 *** (10.11)	138195	29.71 *** (7.75)	137.23 *** (8.46)
Chicano	57881	-0.09 *** (0.02)	30978	-1.83 (2.04)	0.15 *** (0.04)	15.13 (9.25)	57881	-12.77 (9.71)	138.14 *** (10.57)

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table (6): Effect Sizes from Pre-Experiment Conditions for Total Wages, Wage Rate, and Total Hours

Variable	Employment			Total Hours			Wage Rate			Total Wages (Employed)			Total Wages (All)			Total Income (+NTI)		
	Estimate	Average	%Δ	Estimate	Average	%Δ	Estimate	Average	%Δ	Estimate	Average	%Δ	Estimate	Average	%Δ	Estimate	Average	%Δ
Guarantee (\$3800)																		
All Households	-0.01	0.46	-2.84%	-0.46	158.58	-0.29%	0.14 ***	2.68	5.22%	33.31 ***	401.04	8.31%	14.087 **	180.96	7.78%	81.26 ***	180.96	44.90%
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>																		
Female-Headed Two-Person	0.01	0.19	4.41%	-0.76	141.42	-0.53%	0.16 **	2.05	7.80%	27.98 *	258.07	10.84%	7.38	47.30	15.61%	67.61 ***	47.30	142.93%
Male-Headed Two-Person	0.01	0.72	1.01%	0.27	167.99	0.16%	0.15 ***	3.23	4.64%	43.91 ***	501.72	8.75%	41.181 ***	356.12	11.56%	97.22 ***	356.12	27.30%
Single Female	-0.05 **	0.47	-10.23%	-1.32	152.28	-0.87%	0.11 ***	2.18	5.05%	21.43 **	317.25	6.75%	-2.2753	148.17	-1.54%	79.98 ***	148.17	53.98%
Single Male	-0.02	0.63	-2.82%	-2.11	165.30	-1.28%	0.57 *	3.44	16.57%	7.19	639.62	1.12%	-16.285	405.91	-4.01%	14.87	405.91	3.66%
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>																		
Black	-0.04 **	0.48	-7.94%	-1.13	158.13	-0.71%	0.10 **	2.63	3.80%	25.81 ***	380.50	6.78%	3.27	182.09	1.80%	81.33 ***	182.09	44.66%
White	0.01	0.43	2.62%	-0.37	155.98	-0.24%	0.14 **	2.79	5.01%	42.87 ***	406.63	10.54%	26.86 ***	169.94	15.81%	83.14 ***	169.94	48.92%
Chicano	0.01	0.47	2.47%	0.57	163.87	0.35%	0.23 ***	2.60	8.84%	31.20 ***	432.97	7.21%	11.198	199.11	5.62%	77.69 ***	199.11	39.02%
Guarantee (\$4800)																		
All Households	-0.02 **	0.56	-4.01%	-0.32	162.34	-0.20%	0.11 ***	2.92	3.77%	52.84 ***	426.92	12.38%	19.728 ***	234.52	8.41%	131.19 ***	234.52	55.94%
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>																		
Female-Headed Two-Person	0.00	0.30	-1.28%	1.84	134.89	1.36%	0.10 **	2.20	4.55%	50.27 ***	253.47	19.83%	11.538 *	73.89	15.61%	104.79 ***	73.89	141.81%
Male-Headed Two-Person	-0.02	0.83	-2.64%	0.93	172.41	0.54%	0.15 ***	3.40	4.41%	66.95 ***	519.34	12.89%	44.742 ***	427.55	10.46%	136.60 ***	427.55	31.95%
Single Female	-0.05 **	0.53	-8.84%	-5.61 *	160.01	-3.51%	0.02	2.37	0.84%	19.77	347.48	5.69%	-2.23	180.77	-1.24%	161.40 ***	180.77	89.28%
Single Male	-0.12	0.93	-12.93%	7.80	209.00	3.73%	0.12 **	3.28	3.66%	40.09 **	644.49	6.22%	-35.333	596.75	-5.92%	46.27	596.75	7.75%
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>																		
Black	-0.03 *	0.62	-4.89%	-0.57	160.36	-0.36%	0.09 *	2.87	3.13%	55.85 ***	407.00	13.72%	20.96 *	248.44	8.44%	129.83 ***	248.44	52.26%
White	-0.02	0.52	-4.01%	-1.78	162.79	-1.09%	0.09 **	3.03	2.97%	54.76 ***	430.50	12.72%	20.725 **	219.60	9.44%	121.23 ***	219.60	55.21%
Chicano	-0.01	0.54	-2.22%	3.80	165.75	2.29%	0.21 ***	2.74	7.66%	41.85 ***	463.46	9.03%	15.106	245.45	6.15%	157.59 ***	245.45	64.21%
Guarantee (\$5600)																		
All Households	-0.05 ***	0.62	-8.08%	-3.60 **	167.71	-2.15%	0.09 ***	2.96	3.04%	52.30 ***	433.70	12.06%	19.10 ***	268.20	7.12%	143.76 ***	268.20	53.60%
<i>By Household Head's Gender</i>																		
Female-Headed Two-Person	-0.07 ***	0.36	-18.00%	-1.85	140.67	-1.32%	0.05	2.17	2.32%	39.26 ***	264.98	14.82%	-4.1682	95.35	-4.37%	107.46 ***	95.35	112.71%
Male-Headed Two-Person	-0.01	0.90	-0.59%	-3.90 **	181.55	-2.15%	0.12 ***	3.48	3.45%	65.30 ***	533.43	12.24%	58.144 ***	476.29	12.21%	168.62 ***	476.29	35.40%
Single Female	-0.12 ***	0.60	-19.31%	-4.84	158.14	-3.06%	0.01	2.32	0.24%	22.63	326.84	6.92%	-13.27	195.04	-6.81%	173.16 ***	195.04	88.78%
Single Male	-0.04	0.41	-10.84%	-8.82	173.58	-5.08%	0.02	2.95	0.80%	-18.95	510.50	-3.71%	-25.36	211.24	-12.00%	139.96	211.24	66.26%
<i>By Household Head's Race</i>																		
Black	-0.03	0.65	-4.96%	-6.06 ***	173.09	-3.50%	0.04	2.95	1.23%	53.94 ***	409.80	13.16%	29.025 **	265.46	10.93%	157.81 ***	265.46	59.45%
White	-0.04 **	0.61	-6.66%	-2.68	166.96	-1.61%	0.10 *	3.11	3.22%	69.41 ***	440.61	15.75%	29.708 ***	265.15	11.20%	137.23 ***	265.15	51.76%
Chicano	-0.09 ***	0.61	-14.84%	-1.83	160.89	-1.14%	0.15 ***	2.71	5.54%	15.13	456.98	3.31%	-12.768	278.12	-4.59%	138.14 ***	278.12	49.67%

Notes: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Chapter Three: To Thrive in These Times
Capabilities, Negativity, and the Pandemic

*“With the forest trees cut,
The lake lies naked and lost
In the bare hills.”*

– Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World* (1998)

The viral threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread far beyond our bodies of flesh-and-bone. We increasingly find ourselves in a reality where “we can expect viral epidemics will affect out most elementary interactions with other people and objects around us, including our own bodies.” (Žižek 2020, 43) Byung-Chul Han wrote that we have left behind the viral and immunological ages as we entered the 21st century, no longer were they the “signature affiliations” of the age. Now, we find ourselves in an age characterized by neurological fears and afflictions, ones that are “not infections, but infarctions; they do not follow from the *negativity* of what is immunologically foreign but from an excess of *positivity*.” (Han 2015, 1) ADHD, depression, and anxiety are the hallmarks of our age, rather than influenza. One cannot help but wonder that now, with the global spread and (mis)management of the novel coronavirus, whether or not we will be haunted now by a double-spectre, one of viral and neurological fears. A malaise of both the body and the mind; infections and infarctions in tandem. A crisis that transcends the economic and the political; an existential crisis. (Barria-Asenjo and Žižek 2020, 3)

The defining feature of the times we are in now, in relation to the pandemic, is the idea of “social distancing.” A paradoxical state of being where the greatest act of love that we can show is to be physically distant from the object of our affection. (Žižek 2020, 1-4) The most visceral change that many have felt, regardless of their actual exposure or lack-there-of to the virus itself,

is the widespread use of “stay-at-home” orders. The virus has expanded even to our language itself, rarely it seems has language spread from the academy to the general public so quickly with the phrases “flattening the curve” and “contact-tracing” appearing on everyone’s tongue. Perhaps most bizarre of all has been a return to the language of capitalist animism. (Žižek 2020, 44) The market and the economy are being once again anthropomorphized at a dizzying rate. Pundits and journalists speak of the “health” of the economy and that markets are in “panic” in an attempt to elicit empathy and sacrifice for a formless abstraction. While it may be true that “spirit is a bone,” as Hegel teaches us, the same cannot be said for the economy; the economy is not a body. (Hegel 1977, quoted in Žižek 2006, 76)

What we are seeing around us, with the cries for “open the economy” gaining momentum as “stay-at-home” orders and their lesser incarnations remain, is just how closely our capabilities, of the sort discussed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, are connected to our material reality. (Sen 1979; Nussbaum 2006) The capability approach, it would seem, rests upon the necessity of a material base. Individuals have been ordered in many cases to “stay-at-home” but they lack the capability, through a deprivation of material means, to “live-at-home” much less “thrive-at-home.” The virus may be “democratic” in its spread, but it is not in its effects. Žižek warns of the possible existence of a not-to-distant future which mirrors Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a tale in which a group of young men and women withdraw to a villa outside of Florence to wait out a plague effecting the city. Our risk, through the deprivation of capabilities to those who must work and endure the viral reality, is that reality will mirror art in this instance where “the financial elite will similarly withdraw into secluded zones where they will amuse themselves by telling stories in the manner of *The Decameron*, while we, ordinary people, will have to live with viruses.” (Žižek 2020, 77) In light of these, and many other, possible situations one is compelled,

as was Marx, to “face with sober senses his [sic] real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 476) Something is needed to ensure the flourishing of human capabilities through this and future calamities, both natural and artificial.

Our project here is twofold: first, one must acknowledge that, with the double-spectre of the pandemic looming, that one needs to be given the freedom *not to be*. For this the capability approach, as articulated by Martha Nussbaum, must be injected with a clear strain of *negativity* (in the sense of Han and Žižek). One must be allowed to *not* be capable, if they so choose. The capability approach, as it stands, is one that is motivated by incessant positivity, driven by what one “can” do, negativity is needed, an appreciation for what one may choose not to do, if one is to endure. The second issue arises is one in which we hear echos of the question that was posed to John Rawls, who was asked whether his conception of “justice as fairness” required the presence of an unconditional floor, to which he famously proclaimed “no.” (Rawls 1971, 11; Rawls 1998) In revisiting that particular debate, the question will be redirected towards the capability approach as a methodology and as a means of justice. Namely, if one’s capabilities are intrinsically tied to one’s own material base, then does the capability approach, as a means of acquiring a manner of economic justice across individuals, require something of an unconditional floor as well, in the vein of an “universal basic income”? The expansion of capabilities would seem to require, or at least strongly suggest, the necessity, but not sufficiency, of the existence of an unconditional floor to ensure a basic level of human flourishing, particularly in light of the reality of pandemics present and future. To exorcize our double-spectre we must give people the tools by which to flourish, mentally and physically, by “thriving-in-place.” To have to capacity to seek something more than the “bare life” afforded to them by mere capitalist survival, even while under the shadow of pandemic. (Han 2015, 18)

I: Finding the “Can” in Capabilities

Byung-Chul Han writes that we have entered what is to be called an “achievement society.” (Han 2015, 8) One that is characterized by a relentless positivity, not in the sense of any normative measure of goodness but rather of additivity. Where the “unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form—the affirmation, ‘Yes, we can’—epitomizes achievements society’s positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation.” (Han 2015, 8-9) Nowhere in economics, as a discipline and a perspective, is this more apparent than in our measure of growth. Within the relentless drive for limitless growth and the over reliance on GDP-based measures of growth. The capability approach of Nussbaum, though while still impregnated with the positive modal verb “*Can*,” offers the possibility of a step away from this maddening path, with some modification.

The capability approach was first articulated by Amartya Sen in his 1979 Tanner lecture. Sen sought, in part, to “construct an adequate theory of equality on the combined grounds of Rawlsian equality and equality under the two welfarist conceptions, with some trade-offs among them.” (Sen 1979, 217) In this Sen sought to break away from the “fetishism” inherent in Rawls conception of primary social goods, the heaping of undue importance to material things. Turning attention from the material goods themselves to the relationship that these goods have with the individuals utilizing them. From this perspective it becomes clear that:

“It is arguable that what is missing in all this framework is some notion of “basic capabilities”: a person being able to do certain basic things. The ability to move about is

the relevant one here, but one can consider others, e.g., the ability to meet one's nutritional requirements, the wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered, the power to participate in the social life of the community. The notion of urgency related to this is not fully captured by either utility or primary goods, or any combination of the two." (Sen 1979, 218)

In this way the system of Rawlsian social justice is expanded into a new transcendent horizon, one that deals with relations rather than brute commodities.

The question remains however, what exactly do these capabilities entail? Rawls includes into his list of primary social goods "rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth." (Rawls 1971, 62) Sen however is more cautious, arguing that one should not "freeze" a list of capabilities "for all societies for all time to come, irrespective of what the citizens come to understand and value." (Sen 2005, 158) But that is not to say that no such list exists, or that the creation of such a list could not be of some use to both theories and activists. Martha Nussbaum has created a list of capabilities that, in an Aristotelian sense, provides for a minimum core of social entitlements that "is compatible with different views about how to handle issues of justice and distribution that would arise once all citizens are above the threshold level" in this it also does not "insist that this list of entitlements is an exhaustive account of political justice." (Nussbaum 2006, 75-76) Even the skeptical Sen sees the narrow application of this particular list of Nussbaum's as a "powerful use of a given list of capabilities for some minimal rights against deprivation." (Sen 2005, 159)

Since our concern is for the deprivation of individuals due to the double-spectre of the pandemic, we will be using Nussbaum's list of capabilities as our foundation. The list, called the "Central Human Capabilities," is reproduced in its entirety here:

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily Integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's own mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.
5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)
6. *Practical Reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)
7. *Affiliation*.
 - a. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)
 - b. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.
8. *Other Species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. *Control over One's Environment*.
 - a. *Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.
 - b. *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising

practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.” (Nussbaum 2006, 76-78)

The issue with the list that is put forward by Nussbaum is that it is still hopelessly *positive*, in the sense of Han and of Žižek. Though Nussbaum does acknowledge the difference between capability and functioning, there is still more to be found by going into the void. (Nussbaum 2000, 44) For this list to be more complete, it must include an aspect of negation. The capacity to choose *not to be capable*.

II: Being Able Not To Be Able

Why is it necessary to expressly include the ability to *not* be capable? Namely because “the power of negativity lies in the fact that things are enlivened precisely by their opposite. Mere positivity lacks any such power to animate.” (Han 2017, 13) Here we do not mean a negative capability in the sense of a un-capability, or the lack of a capability. Instead it is more of “a kind of bodily gesture of (self-)mutilation, the introduction of a minimal torsion, of the curved space of drive, for the void around which a drive circulates.” (Žižek 2006, 84) A negativity that enlivens by opening up space; room to breathe amidst relentless positivity. This negativity can be expressed within the radical act of saying “no” or, more specifically, the ability to say “I would prefer not to.” (Žižek 2006, 381)

In this one can turn to the character of Bartleby from Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, The Scrivener* (1853), story often alluded to by Žižek. In the short story Bartleby refuses many an instruction from his boss to the tune of “I would prefer not to.” This seemingly innocuous phrase is, in fact, a “gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a

purely formal minimal difference which opens up the space for the New.” (Žižek 2012b, 1007)

How is such a thing possible? Namely, since Bartleby’s response is to be taken quite literally. As Žižek stresses, Bartleby is careful to say “I would prefer not to,” not “I don’t prefer (or care) to.” In this Bartleby does not “negate the predicate; rather he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he *doesn’t want to do it*; he says that *he prefers (wants) not to do it*.” (Žižek 2006, 381; *emphasis in original*) The important twist that occurs as a result of this is that Bartleby, though his assertion of a non-predicate, starts not at a point of abstract negation, which would then would have to be overcome through an application of positivity, but rather “a kind of *arche*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: far from “overcoming” it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives body to it.” (Žižek 2006, 382)

How does this relate to the insertion of negativity into Nussbaum’s capability approach? Here we are not saying that “I don’t want that capability” but rather, in the guise of Bartleby, we are saying that “I would prefer not to do that capability.” The choice is in not expressing the capability, in a way not wholly dissimilar from Sen’s conversation on the choice of fasting, that there is a fundamental difference between involuntarily starving versus fasting. (Sen 1988, 290) Yet, the differing gesture here, the (self)mutilation, is a constructive one. The cut, as it were, is a necessary act. The act of being able not to be able, or *nicht-können-können* to use Han’s original formulation, represents the ability to go beyond mere impotence. (Han 2017, 11; Han 2015, 24)

The necessity of the cut comes from the cacophony of positivity that surrounds us within Han’s achievement society; a moment of peace is needed within the maelstrom. For, as Han describes it, “if one only possessed the positive ability to perceive (something) and not the negative ability not to perceive (something), one’s senses would stand utterly at the mercy of rushing, instructive stimuli and impulses.” (Han 2015, 24) The capabilities outlined by

Nussbaum all represent positive aspects, namely additive ones, things that are driven by the positive modal verb “Can.” One must be able to work, to be able to participate, to be able to play. In Han’s conception of our current achievement society, the issue is, in part, that the subject is a “subject of affirmation.” (Han 2015, 36) The concern is that individuals, as “entrepreneurs of themselves,” are not given the freedom to not be, and so breeds depression and other neurological ills. As Han articulates it the “complaint of the depressive individual, ‘Nothing is possible,’ can only occur in a society that thinks, ‘Nothing is impossible.’” (Han 2015, 9-11) For individuals who find themselves isolated and disconnected from their normal routines by our double-spectre of the pandemic this complaint becomes all consuming. One can see this manifesting in the many social media posts and blogs that question how are you improving yourselves within this pandemic, or within the academy that asks how are you improving your research productivity during this pandemic (the irony of which is not lost upon the author). As if keeping one’s self happy and safe is not enough during this time is not enough.

What shall we call this new capability, this ability not to be able? Perhaps we will call it the capability for boredom, in retaliation to the self-exploitation that comes with achievement society. For is not boredom one of the great transgressive acts (and perhaps one of the most decadent of luxuries) in our multi-tasking and achievement-driven society? The allowance of a negative, contemplative, space could curb some of barbarism of the achievement society. (Han 2015, 15) Boredom, as a negative antidote to the positivity of can, is in many ways can be conceived of as the void as a pregnant pause. As Žižek describes it “...boredom is a form of the reflected void, it signals that we have reflexively noted the limitations of what is given [in this case the relentless positivity of the achievement society], of our situation. Therein also resides the link between boredom and *creatio ex nihilo*: boredom is the *nihil* out of which we create.”

(Žižek 2014, 86) Boredom is a necessary component to any future and possible change. It is from this “profound idleness” that creativity is given its space to act. This capability is increasingly lost in our achievement society, where “without such contemplative composure, the gaze errs restlessly and finds expression for nothing.” (Han 2015, 13-15). Hyper-attention, the roving gaze going from point to point endlessly, is the predominant form of awareness in the achievement society. Boredom, as a contemplative state, is needed as a foil. A means of utilizing the negative modal verb form “I would prefer not to” as a foil to the positive modal verb “can.”

Yet, in the midst of the pandemic, held in place by our double-spectre, we see that our capabilities, positive or negative, are eroding. Individuals faced with prolonged quarantines and “social-distancing” find themselves in need of some form of material support to ensure the continuation of the capabilities that we do have. Which bring us to the question of, what is to be done of a capability (or capabilities) that can regress?

III: No Exit Through the Gift Shop

Albert Hirschman, in his work *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), puts forward the idea of “exit.” Exit refers to the ability to be able to exercise an “exit option,” namely to disentangle one’s self from a situation and become removed in such as ways as to make the motion “uniquely powerful: by inflicting revenue losses on delinquent management, exit is expected to induce that ‘wonderful concentration of the mind’ akin to the one Samuel Jackson attributed to the prospect of being hanged.” (Hirschman 1970, 21) One might naturally suppose that our conception of a “capability for boredom,” or even the idea of “being able not to be able,” to be something akin to Hirschman’s exit. For are they not fulfilling a similar purpose? Yet, upon

closer inspection one would find deviations, or perhaps flaws, in Hirschman's conception of exit that leave it incompatible with our capability for boredom.

The primary flaw that emerges out of our reading of Hirschman is that of the necessity of a place to exit to. While this may hold true on the market, or even the national, level it reaches an impasse when applied to the level of systems. Here we are confronted by the dilemma of an almost Fukuyama-esque reality of the "end of history," namely is it possible for one to exit from capitalism? (Fukuyama 2006) The issue here is that the hegemonic force of capitalism is itself a limiting horizon of sorts. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, society has founded itself inscribed within a state of "capitalist realism," a "persuasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action." (Fisher 2009, 16; *emphasis in original*) Nothing, and by extension no-where, is seen as *outside* of capitalism. There is, in effect, no exit from capitalism.

The 'reality' of this is notwithstanding, capitalist realism functions at the level of ideology. It posits itself as the natural order of things, a situation upon which we should cast a discerning eye, since, as Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches us, one should be "suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural." (Fisher 2009, 17) This is, in a way, the "highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact or (biological, economic) necessity." (Zupančič 2003, quoted in Fisher 2009, 17) The essence of the issue is that as long as one embraces the ideologically-mediated reality of capitalist realism one will accept that there is nothing outside of it, therefore rendering any "exit option" for them to be impotent, or perhaps worse, non-existent. What we find is that our moment of clarity at the end of the rope, to expand on Hirschman's metaphor, is that there is nowhere else to go.

This reality is reflected in the story of Bartleby as well. Even as he intones “I would prefer not to” he makes no effort to leave the building, instead merely gazes at the wall, while the narrator eventually comes to the realization that Bartleby is living within the building as well. Even as the ownership of the building is transferred to a new business, Bartleby remains, sitting upon the stairs and sleeping in the doorway. Bartleby does not leave until he is forcibly removed. What we see is that Bartleby was unable to (willingly) remove himself from the confines of the business he inhabits, the wall upon which his gaze rested hemmed him in. It is no big leap here to read into this something of the reality of capitalist realism; one cannot see beyond the confines of the ideologically-mediated horizons of capitalism, and so must make their gesture within the boundaries it establishes. One cannot exit, but one can gesture.

If one was to confine our discussion of “being able not to be able” and a capability for boredom into the duality of economic/political movements that Hirschman envisions, one might find something of a kindred-spirit in Hirschman’s conception of “voice.” Voice being defined by Hirschman as “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion.” (Hirschman 1970, 30) For Hirschman, “no-exit situations” (of which he chiefly identifies monopolies) can be improved if “voice can be made into an effective mechanism once these consumers or members are securely locked in.” (Hirschman 1970, 55) One can imagine a situation where the capability for boredom, or “being able not to be able,” may fall under this aegis, however imperfectly.

One final lesson, however, can be drawn from Bartleby's tale in regards to Hirschman's duality of exit/voice. Hirschman's assertion of an exit option (as well as, it can be argued, his assertion of voice) still belies an underlying reliance on the positive modal verb "can." The assertion of "I can exit this situation and so choose to do so" is necessary. It is a positive motion, rather than a negative gesture, that is being expressed. With an exit motion we find ourselves asserting the negation of a predicate, in the form of the exit, which requires then an application of positivity to overcome it, namely that one must then exit into something different, and arguably better in Hirschman's logic, than where they started. Exit relies on the negation of the predicate; the capability for boredom, in the spirit of Bartelby, rests upon the invocation of a non-predicate. In this we are attempting to resist, through a negation of the "can" of the achievement society, that capitalist formulation, which we can express as a rephrasing of George Bataille's famous dictum, that capitalism is assenting to work up to the point of death. A phrase that gains a new level of accuracy in our viral reality. One cannot help but empathize with the narrator's final exclamation of "Ah Bartelby! Ah humanity!" (Melville 2013, 30)

IV: I, Economist or the Positronic Social Theorist

Even with the introduction of negativity into the capabilities approach, in the form of our capability for boredom, something is left unresolved. The issues at stake here are twofold: the impermanence of our capabilities and the materiality of capabilities. The impermanence of our capabilities recognizes them as a transient state, one that an individual can move in and out of depending on their circumstances. One can lose a capability just as one can gain a capability. This is due, in part, to the second issue: the materiality of our capabilities. One's ability to act

upon, and utilize, one's capabilities is tied closely to their material well-being. Reflecting upon Nussbaum's list, we can see this to be true in terms of capabilities such as education, political involvement, and the like. This is what is meant when it is said that we must *be capable to be capable*. As much as we are given the freedom to act, we must also be able to express those actions. The pandemic has certainly thrown this into a new light, as individuals have, some for the first time, seen their capabilities erode before their eyes. Something is needed in order to preserve our ability to be able, a capability that lies within and before the others in Nussbaum's list. This brings to mind the stories of Isaac Asimov, where his positronic-brained robots conceive of a "Zeroth Law of Robotics," a law that is suggested and hidden within the original three. (Asimov 1985, 397)

As with the positronic-brained robots of Isaac Asimov, we can conceive of a Zeroth Capability, a capability that acts beyond and behind all others. An *ur*-entitlement that allows for the subsequent existence, and protection of, all other entitlements. The Zeroth capability must therefore be that we have the capability to be able. We must be able to be able to begin with. This, in some ways, can be seen as a perversion of the Nussbaum Lemma, in the sense of an aberration, a twist in the original weave. The Nussbaum Lemma states that it is "implausible to suppose that one can extract justice from a starting point that does not include it in some form." (Nussbaum 2006, 57) Or, as Deirdre McCloskey so eloquently puts it, one cannot pull a just rabbit out of a purely prudential hat. (McCloskey 2011, 7) Here is put forward that one cannot have capabilities, if one does not first have the material support to ensure the continuation of those capabilities. You cannot grow in a barren field.

The creation of a fertile material base from which our capabilities can spring would seem to require "a change of social attitude so profound that we must think deeply about both the

dangers and the opportunities.” (Goodman and Goodman 1947, 193) The positronic social theorist need not strain too hard to consider what the change maybe be since the solution, or rather a solution, has existed in one form or another for the last five centuries. We see it first written in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) in which the Portuguese traveler Raphael Nonsenso, recounting an earlier conversation, claims that:

“Upon this, I (who took the boldness to speak freely before the Cardinal) said, ‘There is no reason to wonder at the matter, since this way of punishing thieves was neither just in itself nor good for the public; for, as the severity was too great, so the remedy was not effectual; simple theft not being so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his life; no punishment, how severe soever, being able to restrain those from robbing who can find out no other way of livelihood. In this,’ said I, ‘not only you in England, but a great part of the world, imitate some ill masters, that are readier to chastise their scholars than to teach them. There are dreadful punishments enacted against thieves, *but it were much better to make such good provisions by which every man might be put in a method how to live, and so be preserved from the fatal necessity of stealing and dying for it.*’” (More 2016, 40: *emphasis added*)

This idea, often referred to as “Raphael’s solution to theft,” is deceptively simple: if people have enough to live, they will not need to steal. The modern positronic social theorist however would recognize this more familiarly in its modern incarnation as a universal basic income.

A universal basic income is a form of income maintenance, one of many that include such deviations as a negative income tax, or a wealth dividend. The definition used here will be the one invoked by Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, in which a universal basic income is “a regular income paid in cash to every individual member of a society, irrespective of income from other sources and with no strings attached.” (Van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017, 4) The universality of an universal basic income, that fact that it is given to all within society and with no stings to hold one down, is precisely what makes it applicable to our Zeroth Capability.

Haunted as we are by the double-spectre of viral and neurological fears within this old-made-new “pandemic economics” it is becoming increasingly clear that our capacity for capabilities is eroding. Nussbaum’s list of capabilities, with the addition of our injection of negativity, is supposed to represent “central requirements of a life with dignity” anything less would reflect an undignified life and any society which cannot guarantee even these minimum entitlements “falls short of being a fully just society, whatever its level of opulence.” (Nussbaum 2006, 75) Yet, as one can see within the United States, with the closure of schools and the movement of classrooms to online platforms one’s education becomes a function of one’s internet speed, or as we’ve witnessed within some of the state’s primary elections that people are not participating in the democratic process, not out of apathy, but rather out of a concern for their own safety. A universal basic income, in the guise of our Zeroth Capability, would allow for the fitting of an unconditional floor beneath our capabilities, creating a situation where our capabilities have the material capacity to be utilized. Making it so that our human dignity, to borrow from Nussbaum, is not subject, as directly, to the whims and often capricious nature of our material conditions.

V: John Rawls Doesn’t Surf, But We Should

The conversation of whether or not a universal basic income fulfills the role of a necessary “Zeroth Capability” in any serious application of the capability approach mirrors a debate that occurred in the late 1980s with John Rawls. When confronted with the question as to whether or not his theory of “justice as fairness” required, or at the very least justified, the existence of an universal basic income that was irrespective of one’s capacity to work, Rawls

famously struck out against the surfers in Malibu. Leisure, Rawls would argue, can be argued to be part of one's primary social goods. This results in a sort of exchange where "this extra leisure time itself would be stipulated as equivalent to the index of primary social goods of the least advantaged. So those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds." (Rawls 1988, 257)

Rawls's response is emblematic of a capitalism that prioritizes the bare life over the good life, the primacy of mere survival over flourishing. (Han 2015, 50) The surfers have chosen to embrace leisure, and in doing so, in the eyes of Rawls, have chosen to push away all other social goods. They have chosen their basket, and it is full of leisure with room for nothing else. This, Žižek warns, is the problem of all universalists in the vein of Rawls and even Habermas. The universalists problem is that they are always everywhere too narrow. Their contractual position one that is "grounded in an exception, in a gesture of exclusion (it represses the *différend*, does not even allow it to be properly formulated)." (Žižek 1999, 172) The rules are already established (for Rawls ever since the mythical original position), so that there is no room for negotiation. This leads to a maximin criterion that is based not of the desires of the individual who finds themselves allowed their primary social goods, but rather on the index of the primary social goods itself. (Sen 1979, 214)

Returning to the conception of "bare life" under capitalism, Han argues that capitalism "absolutizes bare life. It's telos is not the *good* life." (Han 2017, 21; *emphasis in original*) Rawls, in a not entirely dissimilar gesture, absolutizes the index of primary social goods. The surfers, by embracing leisure, have in a way rejected the Rawlsian "just" allocation of primary social goods, and in doing so have tacitly rejected the Rawlsian allocation system as a whole. The surfers then find themselves on the outside, clutching only their leisure to their breasts. They are unable to

articulate and create a life, or in the abstract an allocation of primary social goods, that fits their own conception of the “good,” rather they are bound to the “bare” life offered by the Rawlsian allocation, or exclusion.

The capability approach, as articulated by both Nussbaum and Sen, goes beyond the Rawlsian formulation in that it allows people to form their own conception of the “good,” and, by extension, of the “good life.” Nussbaum in particular enshrines this in her capability of “Practical Reason” which entails “being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.” (Nussbaum 2006, 77) Here now we can redirect (and re-articulate) the question posed to Rawls and the difference principle onto Sen, Nussbaum, and the capability approach: does the Zeroth Capability, the necessity of an unconditional floor, hold for the capability approach? The list of capabilities articulated by Nussbaum represent a minimum of basic human dignity, to fall below them is to find oneself in a wholly unjust position, in this way we can conceive of them as equivalent to the “bare life” of Han, synonymous with mere survival as a human person. Our Zeroth Capability, in its formulation as an universal basic income, then allows for a minimum threshold to be maintained, a level of bare life, of survival, that it is reasonably impossible for one to fall beyond. This gives our surfers a firm, dignified floor upon which to stand, allowing them to exercise their choice in capabilities beyond that of their mere threshold level. Bare life becomes the floor, not the norm. In this we are in resonance with Nussbaum’s desire that her minimum core social entitlements be “compatible with different views about how to handle issues of justice and distribution that would arise once all citizens are above the threshold level.” (Nussbaum 2006, 75) Once their capabilities fluctuate beyond their guaranteed threshold, the surfer are able to truly define for themselves what is the “good life.”

Being able to forge one's own conception of the good life, as well as having the capability to reach for it, is vital in the era of pandemic that we find ourselves embroiled in.

Returning yet again to Han, he argues that capitalism is:

“sustained by the illusion that more capital produces more life, which means a greater capacity for living. The rigid, rigorous separation between life and death casts a spell of ghostly stiffness over life itself. Concerns about living the good life yields to the hysteria of surviving. The reduction of life to biological, vital processes makes life itself bare and strips it of narrativity. It takes the *livingness* from life, which is more complex than simple vitality and health.” (Han 2015, 50; *emphasis in original*)

In our time of pandemic economics, or more appropriately pandemic capitalism (used here as perhaps a more temporally specific notion of Naomi Klein's “disaster capitalism”), no where is this more apparent. (Klein 2007) In the quest to exorcise the double-spectre we must not yield to calls for “barbarism with a human face,” what Žižek describes as “ruthless survivalist measures enforced with regret and even sympathy, but legitimized by expert opinions.” (Žižek 2020, 86) One cannot substitute the good life for a bare one, without the loss of some of the livingness from life.

VI: Pandemic Capitalism

Žižek discusses how ethics, as a system of norms, is “thus not simply given, it is itself the result of the ethical *work* of ‘mediation,’ of me recognizing the legitimacy of others’ claims on me.” (Žižek 2006, 126; *emphasis in original*) We are confronted by this ethical reality in much the same way that we are confronted by our new viral reality. Those who have been deemed “essential workers,” more often than not those in the most vulnerable socio-economic positions,

have been entangled in an one-sided application of this definition. The general populace has asserted the legitimacy of their claim upon the labour and bodies of the essential worker, yet has in many cases repaid them in only applause. The same ethical work has not gone in reverse, the essential worker has not been able to lay legitimate claim to the labour and bodies of those that they have served. Yet, the Zeroth Capability and in many ways the capability for boredom, requires that we recognize the legitimacy of the claims of society, as a whole, upon ourselves. It asks us to give some of ourselves for that of the whole. This is perhaps the truest reason why a universal basic income requires of us “a change of social attitude so profound that we must think deeply about both the dangers and the opportunities.” (Goodman and Goodman 1947, 193)

The double-spectre of our viral-immunological epoch, this *geist* of infections and infarctions, hangs above us much like the starless planet in Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*. In *The Agony of Eros* (2017) Byung-Chul Han notes that the characters within the film are enlivened by the approaching apocalyptic rogue planet, it is in their “catastrophic fatality” that they find their salvation. (Han 2017, 8) This sentiment, within the confines of our very real pandemic, is echoed in a sense by Žižek as well, who extols that:

“This is what those who deplore our obsession with survival miss. Alenka Zupančič recently reread Maurice Blanchot’s text from the Cold War era about the scare of nuclear self-destruction of humanity. Blanchot shows how our desperate wish to survive does not imply the stance of ‘forget about changes, let’s just keep safe the existing state of things, lets save our bare lives.’ In fact the opposite is true: it is through our effort to save humanity from self-destruction that we are creating an new humanity. It is only through a mortal threat that we can envision a unified humanity.” (Žižek 2020, 105)

No “quinoa socialism” is desired here, instead Žižek invokes a “new communism” that can, or perhaps must, rise out of the pandemic. (Galarsoro 2020, 4; Žižek 2020, 97) A premise that is, as Žižek himself reports, mocked by Han, amongst others. (Žižek 2020, 97) Our other potentialities,

however, appear to revolve around a masked barbarism-with-a-human-face. A pandemic capitalism made permanent. The invocation of the Zeroth Capability, and the addition of explicit negativity to the capability approach, does little to curb this vision. It is perhaps a necessary, but by no means a sufficient, step towards resisting the worst of all possible worlds. In this one must be very clear, a universal basic income, as a mechanism by which to support a Zeroth Capability, is no panacea. Neoliberal tools can never dismantle the neoliberal house. Its goal, such as it is, is to follow the ethical imperative that we should reduce suffering wherever we are capable of doing so. To stave off a descent into the “bare life” of survivalism by allowing people the chance to thrive in pandemics present and future.

For it is the pandemic, this illicit double-spectre, that has thrown all of these concerns into sharp relief. The labour here has been to reveal two aspects of the capabilities approach made clear by this; the necessity of the clear inclusion of negativity, of “I would prefer not to,” into the “can”-motivated list of Nussbaum’s capabilities, as well as the underlying necessity to be capable of being capable, of the material base necessary for our capabilities, in the form of our Zeroth Capability. While there exists a multitude of policy prescriptions that could fulfill the criteria for our Zeroth Capability, an universal basic income seems to be the most direct and the most possible, in a way a job guarantee and the like perhaps could not be, in this current state of pandemic capitalism, one that is also, arguably, permissible, if we are to embrace cynicism for a moment, within the confines of capitalist realism.

Perhaps our “catastrophic fatality” may not lead to a new communism as Žižek imagines, but nor does it necessarily have to lead to a strengthening of existing capitalist structures. Embracing a universal basic income as our means of supporting our Zeroth Capability can fulfill a dual role: one that allows for individuals to “thrive-at-home” during this pandemic in order to

avoid falling into the “bare life,” as well as strike a blow at that first link in the capitalist chain, that of subsistence work. Divorcing our subsistence from our work has perhaps never been more urgent than now, in a reality where your very means of subsistence threatens to introduce the viral threat into your home. In this the Brothers Goodman had an interesting perspective, where one could “divide the economy and provide subsistence directly, letting the rest complicate and fluctuate as it will. Let whatever is essential for life and security be considered by itself, and since this is a political need in an elementary sense, let political means be used to guarantee it.” (Goodman and Goodman 1960, 191) Capabilities are essential for life, that being a life worthy of the dignity of the human person, let them be supported directly, so that we can allow the catastrophe to fluctuate as it will.

Chapter Four: Taking the Parallax View
Žižek, Karatani, Lacan, and the Plurality of Economic Thought

“We count ourselves among those rebels who court storms, who hold that the only truth lies in perpetual seeking.”
– Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, *Comradely Greetings* (2014)

In *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius writes that “the world is not formed of solid substance, since there is an admixture of the void in things...” (Lucretius 2011, 147). Reality, such as it is, is incomplete. All that is solid does indeed melt away, as Marx taught us, but it is also cracked, riven with gaps and rifts. This lies at the heart of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s *The Parallax View* (2006), a book which owes no small debt to Kojin Karatani’s *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (2003). Here Žižek accounts his theory of parallax ontology; that reality, and our own perspectives, are characterized by the existence of “parallax gaps,” a void between two points over which no mediation or synthesis is possible. This parallax gap, while appearing as a form of “Kantian revenge over Hegel,” almost paradoxically allows for something far greater, it situates the void it creates as a subject allowing for a revival of dialectical materialism through a Hegelian-return-to-Marx-by-way-of-Lacan (Žižek 2006, 4). To our ends, taking a parallax view will allow for a reimagining of the nature of economic pluralism.

Uskali Mäki argues that “the attempt to understand economics as a scientific discipline requires the examination of its ontology.” (Mäki 2001, 7) The question of an ontology of economics, and its relation to heterodox economics, and pluralism in general, is by no means a new discussion, with much of the work done in relation (or opposition) to the idea of critical realism. (Lawson 1999, 2006, 2009; Mäki 2000; Blaug 1998; Hodge 2008; Hausman 1998;

Slade-Caffarel 2019) The realist, and other ontological approaches within economics, asserts that:

“a world exists beyond our perceptions. Realists uphold that, to be adequate, sciences including economics should not be self-contained logical games but attempts to address and understand aspects of the real world. Accordingly, there is no room for a philosophy of science in which ‘anything goes’. There is a shared realist imperative: to understand the real world.” (Hodgson 2004, 9)

And rightfully so. However, here is where we shall begin to differ; there is a ‘real,’ a ‘truth,’ but this truth is the minimal distance between our perspectives, the gap itself. (Žižek 2006, 18) The parallax Real is that which accounts for “the very *multiplicity* of appearances of the same underlying Real.” (Žižek 2006, 26) Our focus is then on this traumatic core around which our perspectives gravitate, differing from other works on economic ontology by focusing just as much on what is not-said as what is said. To this end we require an interdisciplinary perspective beyond that which economics has to offer, to which one must draw upon philosophy and psychoanalysis, specifically Lacanian psychoanalysis.

For Jacques Lacan there is no sexual relationship, an axiom with “radical ontological implications” which “posits the antagonistic (incomplete, ‘flawed’) character of reality itself, the impossibility of grasping it as a Whole; and subjectivity can arise only in a reality that is ontologically incomplete, traversed by an impossibility.” (Žižek 2017, 1) This “impossibility” (void, gap, cut, parallax) asserts itself in the lack of a “meta-language” within “Marxism proper”; there stands nothing between economics and politics that allows one to “grasp the two levels from the same neutral standpoint, although—or, rather, because—these two levels are inextricably intertwined.” (Žižek 2006, 320; emphasis in the original) Intertwined, as it were, like a Möbius strip, encircling a central void or tension. (Žižek 2020, 228) The practical

consequences of this, as Fredric Jameson says, are “startling.” (Jameson 2006) The question then becomes: what if we were to “take into account the irreducible duality of, on the one hand, the ‘objective’ material socioeconomic processes taking place in reality as well as, on the other, the politico-ideological process proper. What if the domain of policies is inherently ‘sterile’, a theatre of shadows, but nonetheless crucial in transforming reality? So, although economy is the real site and politics is a theatre of shadows, the main fight is to be fought in politics and ideology.” (Žižek 2006, 315)

The economist need not look far, but rather finds themselves already immersed in a “theatre of shadows,” within the multitudes of schools of thought that make up economic pluralism. Economic pluralism is here defined, for our purpose, as a pluralism of multiplicity; a general acknowledgement of the branching, often contradictory, perspectives that comprise economic thought, rather than an adherence to a monolithic Economics-with-a-capital-“E.”

Our project here is to—by the creation of a “short-circuit” in the Žižekian sense, or perhaps in the words of Adam Smith, to “entirely disjoint the whole frame of the imagination”—shock the perspectives of economic reality, in the guise of economic pluralism, with that of philosophy and psychoanalysis, specifically that of Slavoj Žižek, Kojin Karatani, and Jacques Lacan around the notion of parallax ontology. (Žižek 2019, ix; Smith 1967, 32) To show that this “theatre of shadows,” and therefore economic pluralism itself, can be articulated as the result of a discipline characterized by a pronounced parallax within it. In doing so one opens a new avenue of discussion on the nature, *née* ontology, of economic pluralism; one that deals with the convoluted spaces that arises from the ontological differences, the parallax gaps, within the economic world-view as subjects themselves which give birth to its multitudes of perspectives.

I: The Ironic Core of Dialectics

Before continuing in a discussion of the dialectical process, itself a core point of this parallax ontology, a point must be made about the nature of dialectical materialism. It was Marx who famously proclaimed that in his inversion of Hegel that it is now a matter of “ascending from earth to heaven.” (Marx and Engels 1998, 42) Here we follow a similar path, best described by Žižek as an attempt to “explain the rise of an eternal Idea out of the activity of people caught in a finite historical situation.” (Žižek 2014a, 73) Yet, that is not to say there is not an idealist strain within this project. Žižek’s materialism is sometimes described as a form of transcendental materialism. (Johnston 2008) Where “transcendental idealism is—or better, must be said to *always already spectrally refer to*—transcendental materialism, the difference between them being only that of a parallax shift... so that an idealism must convert itself into a materialism and vice versa if subjectivity is to be fully explained.” (Carew 2014, 23; emphasis in the original)

The dialectical process is often described in a form of a caricature, that of a thesis, an anti-thesis, and the resulting synthesis. This only scratches the surface of dialectical process of Hegel, and if we are not careful can lead us astray. (Mueller 1958; Žižek 2014b, 89) More accurately it is a system of negation and the negation of negation (*aufhebung*). Žižek describes the dialectical process as:

“An inconsistent mess (first phase, the starting point) which is negated and, through negation, the Origin is projected or posited backwards, so that a tension is created between the present and the lost Origin (second phase). In the third phase, the Origin is perceived as inaccessible, relativized—we are in external reflection, that is, our reflection is external to the posited Origin which is experienced as a transcendent presupposition. In the fourth phase of absolute reflection, our external reflexive movement is transposed back into the Origin itself, as its own self-withdrawing or decentering. We then reach the triad of positing, external reflection, and absolute reflection.” (Žižek 2014a, 149)

The dialectical moment therefor begins with negation, an Origin (starting point, idea, image, shape) that is transformed (negated) from one state to another, a liminal passage from one form to another, creating a tension between its current and transformed (transcended) self. Our reflection is then cast as external from this newly-inaccessible Origin, from which in a moment of absolute reflection is reflected back upon itself. (Žižek, 1999) The point to take away is the reflective nature of the dialectical process. That it reflects the abstraction, the theory, the idea, the logic, back upon itself. Negation upon negation. Hegel refers to this moment as “*absoluter Gegenstoss*,” absolute recoil, absolute reflection, which “stands for the radical coincidence of opposites in which the action appears as its own counter-action, or, more precisely, in which the negative move (loss, withdrawal) itself generates what it ‘negates.’” (Žižek 2014a, 148)

Following the importance of negation, we can discuss the dialectical process in another way. A rhetorical way. An ironic way.

Žižek states that “irony is negational.” (Žižek 2014a, 102) and irony is one of the four master tropes of the philosopher and literary theorist Kenneth Burke, who as well reaffirms the dialectical nature of irony. Irony, according to Burke, is an interaction, a development. The creation of a total form comprised of the perspectives that assisted in its development (a “perspective of perspectives”) in which none is precisely right nor precisely wrong, but rather each perspective is one note in a greater whole. (Burke 1941) Think, if we are to continue with Burke’s dramatic interpretation, of it as a play; the sub-perspectives are the characters necessary for the total form and execution of the play as a whole (our “perspective of perspectives”), which in its turn is a perspective itself, both of the characters and of the audience. The epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the German socialist playwright, would be the premier example of this dialectical

(and reflective) form of theatre and language, in a materialist strain. Where the actor must convey an event through himself and himself through an event, but never so much as to erase the difference between the two. (Benjamin 1998, 11) This process of reflection and mediation reveals itself time and time again within language and literature. Returning to Burke for a moment allows a brief discussion of a series of other dialectical processes within language, in poetry the use of shifting metaphors allows “us to contemplate the subject from the standpoint of various objects.” (Burke 1945, 33) The most pronounced form is an “agon” which is a situation wherein the protagonist is motivated by the existence, and the very nature, of the antagonist itself. (Burke 1945, 33) Such as socialist movements being arrayed against capitalism, or (the slightly incomplete) conceptions of the economic heterodoxy as being defined/opposed by the mainstream. The falsehood that would be easy to fall into here, would be to dismiss the dialectical process as mere semantics. As Henri Lefebvre wrote “a dialectical movement never takes place entirely within language.” (Lefebvre 2014, 551)

To our eventual end of describing a parallax ontology of economic pluralism, let us point out that Bigo and Negru (2008) are correct in their assertion, and the key placement of the role of perspective, that “pluralism can be opposed to monism when one is referring to conceptions of the nature of social reality. As a pluralist, it is possible to hold there to be a plurality of, or several, parallel realms, which may or may not be complementary or compatible.” (Bigo and Negru 2008, 131) It is within this tangled web of parallel, or even overlapping, perceptions of social, or economic, reality we can find a multiplicity of dialectical movements. For there are “as many or more dialectical movements in social consciousness as there are waves on the surface of the sea.” (Lefebvre 2014, 550) We see this within the multiple schools of thought that exist within economics, separated as they are by differing conceptions of what the economic reality is.

Why, because “man [sic] is an infinitely complex being and his [sic] knowledge entails a multitude of aspects, investigations, techniques, all organically linked by dialectical method.” (Lefebvre 2014, 201) Yet, within these dialectical processes and within these differing conceptions of economic realities there exists incompatibilities, irreducible viewpoints. These unintelligible voids can be conceived as, and described as, parallax gaps.

II: On the Shoulders of Giant(s)

Parallax is a term more often associated with physics or photography, where it is the apparent displacement of an object when viewed along multiple lines of sight, or by a change in a line of sight that provides a new perspective on the object. The philosophical turn is that the observed difference is not simply a ploy of subjectivity, instead as Žižek puts it “it is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently ‘mediated,’ so that an ‘epistemological’ shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself.” (Žižek 2006, 17) But before we explore Žižek’s more Hegelian conception of the parallax, let us first consider the Kantian turn taken by Kojin Karatani.

In *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (2003) we are confronted again with the idea of reflection, or more specifically in Karatani’s case, the “Kantian reflection as a critique of reflection” which is “engendered by “pronounced parallax” between the subjective viewpoint and the objective viewpoint.” (Karatani 2003, 1) For reflection, or perhaps more appropriately oscillation, lies at the heart of Karatani’s conception of the parallax. Karatani gives a wonderful metaphor for the parallax that is well worth repeating here:

“Reflection is often spoken of by way of the metaphor of seeing one’s image in the mirror. In the mirror, one sees one’s own face from the perspective of the other. But in today’s context, photography must be taken into consideration. Compare the two. Although the mirror image can be identified with the perspective of the other, there is still certain complicity with regard to one’s own viewpoint. After all, people can see their own image in the mirror as they like, while the photography looks relentlessly “objective.” Of course, the photograph itself is an image (optical delusion) as well. What counts then is the “pronounced parallax” between the mirror image and photographic image.” (Karatani 2003, 2)

The parallax gap that exists is between our image of our self (the mirror’s reflection) and the image produced by the camera (the photograph). Both are optical delusions, both are attempts to see the *same object* from different perspectives, which we then have difficulty in reconciling. It is then the space *between* that gains significance. Or rather the goal becomes to “see things neither from his [sic] own viewpoint, nor from the viewpoint of others, but to face the reality that is exposed through difference (parallax).” (Karatani 2003, 3) The mirror is not false *per se*, and neither is the photograph, yet we struggle to come to an agreement between the two and it is in this gap, this space between them, that we find a glimmer of the Real.

From Karatani and Kant we can progress to Hegel and Žižek, whose perspective we will be inhabiting. While Karatani used the metaphor of mirrors and photographs to discuss the parallax gap, for Žižek it is better to consider the gap in the form of language. That the parallax gap is, in a sense, untranslatable. Our perspectives, while focused on the same object, are unable to fully inhabit one another. We lack the ability to fully translate, or fully embody, the perspective of the Other.

For Žižek, the Swedish author Henning Mankell is a “unique *artist of the parallax view*.” (Žižek 2006, 129; emphasis in the original) Mankell’s Wallander novels follow a parallax formula where the introduction includes a prologue in a poor developing country (the Other) before it moves to the story’s location, frequently the Swedish town of Ystad, a move which in

some ways mirrors Mankell's life himself, since he splits his time between Sweden and Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. (Žižek 2006, 129) The defining parallax here is that:

“The two perspectives—that of the affluent Ystad and that of Maputo—are irretrievably “out of sync,” so that there is no neutral language enabling us to translate one into the other, even less to posit one as the “truth” of the other. All we can ultimately do in today's conditions is to remain faithful to this split as such, to record it... Aware that there is no common denominator between Ystad and Maputo, and simultaneously aware that the two stand for the two aspects of the same total constellation, he [Mankell] shifts between the two perspectives, trying to discern in each the echoes of its opposites. It is because of this insistence on the irreparable character of the *split*, on the failure of any common denominator, that Mankell's work provides an insight into the *totality* of today's world constellation.” (Žižek 2006, 129; emphasis in the original)

The oscillation from Ystad to Maputo, from perspective to perspective, is what shows us the shape, or topology, of totality. This is what Karatani means by “transcritique,” a form of “multidimensional oscillating engagement.” (Karatani 2003, 98) Yet, again at the same time, while we can attempt to oscillate between the two perspectives, while never being able to fully “inhabit” the view of the Other, we instead see that “the gap between the two versions is irreducible, it is the “truth” of both of them, the traumatic core around which they circulate; there is no way to resolve the tension, to find a “proper” solution.” (Žižek 2006, 19)

It is much like two distinct river banks, the river banks (our perspectives) give shape to our understanding of the flow and reality of the river (the Real), and yet the two can never intersect without ceasing to be and ceasing to frame. This metaphor allows us to return full circle to Žižek's original conception of the parallax in Hegelian terms. Any effort to move from one bank to the other (an attempt to inhabit a different perspective) represents not just an epistemological shift, in that we have gained some, if imperfect, insight on a new perspective,

but that we have also experienced an ontological shift in the very nature of the river. Lending truth to that old adage, you can never step into the same river twice.

It is important here to know that for Žižek, and indeed our purposes as well, that “there is a truth, everything is not relative—but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortions *as such*, not the truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective.” (Žižek 2006, 281; emphasis in the original) Relativism is not what is being argued here, yet at the same time “there simply is no three-by-fives that lists the rules by which economic scientists can distinguish true theories from false ones.” (Klamer 2007, 88) Here it would be appropriate to apply Deirdre McCloskey’s notion of pluralistic tolerance, that is should be a pluralism that promotes a critical exchange of ideas rather than blind acceptance. (McCloskey 1998) Persuasiveness should be our metric, with an ear to proper rhetoric of the kind of Cicero and of Burke. This is not an open invitation to relativism, this is “machine-building, not machine-breaking” so that we “leave the irrationality of an artificially narrowed range of argument and to move to the rationality of arguing like human beings.” (McCloskey 2006a, 168)

The “truth” then, as it stands, is the truth of perspective, the “truth is not the ‘real’ state of things... but the very Real of the antagonism which causes perspectival distortions.” (Žižek 2006, 281) As with Žižek, we shall hold that the “Real” “functions precisely as an anchoring point, at the same time this Real is not a deeper dimension or a traditionally conceived type of truth, but rather the abyssal gap between appearances and our very presuppositions that there is a deeper, true reality.” (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 182) This is the Lacanian definition of the “Real,” the gap which exists between the One and itself, which is itself a parallax gap. (Žižek 2005a, 10) In this sense then, we can never reach the truth, or the *Ding an sich*, save through

perspectival distortions. For the truth, the Real, is in a sense “precisely the ontological appearance of this distortion.” (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 182)

III: Lacan is in the Picture...

It is through Lacan, or more precisely Žižek’s reading of Lacan, that we can further articulate the parallax gap. It is Lacan who says “no doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture... And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot.” (Lacan 1978, 96) Taking up the path of Žižek through Lacan, we can use this phrase to create a new definition of parallax in which we “put it [the definition of a parallax] in Lacanese—the subject’s gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its ‘blind spot,’ that which is ‘in the object more than the object itself,’ the point from which the object itself returns the gaze.” (Žižek 2006, 17) But here, despite our conversation revolving around optics, it is important to note the materialist strain that inhabits it. Materialism, in this way, means that reality revealed to the observer is never “whole” but rather “it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.” (Žižek 2006, 17) It is materialistic because the observer is the witness to their own inclusion in the material world, or to put it in Lacan’s terms “*I see myself seeing myself.*” (Lacan 1978, 80; emphasis in the original)

Returning to the blind spot, we find the “pure parallax object” that of the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire in Lacanian thought. (Žižek 2006, 18) For Lacan, reality is embedded in language, a symbolic order. Our subjectivity can only be maintained within the “limits of this framework.” (Krishner 2005, 86) The limits of our language creates a disconnect, a break,

between the symbolic order and the real. For “a symbol, after all, refers to an abstract concept, so that language can only allude to a concrete external referent without totally capturing it. For Lacan, the inability of the symbolic to totally encompass its referents and to represent fully what has been lost creates a constant gradient of desire, a perpetual reaching out for the pure reality behind representation.” (Krishner 2005, 86) It is in this search for the Real that the *objet petit a* rests.

In this way we can conceptualize the *objet petit a* as the reason for the parallax gap. Our inability to grasp the real beyond the symbolic order creates a space for the *objet petit a* where “it exists—its presence can be discerned—only when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective.” (Žižek 2006, 18; emphasis in the original) This void stems from the One that is barred from itself, and in doing so becomes Two. Not Two as the sum of one and one, but rather Two as One plus our intelligible void. The One, by stint of being barred from itself, is therefore impossible to actualize, it exists outside its own impossibility and in its oscillations shakes itself into multitudes, creating a scenario in which “this failure is the subject.” (Žižek 2020, 120 - 124) This understanding is key of our conception of the parallax gap, this failure, this void; *it is a subject itself*. Here one could approach something close to Adorno and his conception of “negative dialectics.” (Adorno 1973) The dialectics of Hegel are one of positivity, Adorno’s of negativity, or so Adorno “(mis)perceives.” It articulates a position into which its own failure is included, a re-articulating of the gap onto itself. In one’s attempt to grasp the object of thought, failure occurs, and the repeated failures serve to encircle and inscribe the object itself, giving it shape. (Žižek 2020, 54)

This failure is the very wellspring of the many disparate schools of thought that we see within the economic discipline, formed within that “unfathomable X which forever eludes the symbolic grasp, and thus causes the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives.” (Žižek 2006, 18)

IV: ...And the Picture is in Lacan

In a gesture that contains a shadow of Lacan, Kenneth Burke—himself no stranger to psychoanalysis *a la* Freud—describes humanity as “the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal.” (Burke 1966, 16) This has a certain resonance with Lacan’s conception of a symbolic order, the “big Other” amongst the Lacanian triad of real-symbolic-imaginary. (Žižek 2007, 145) The issue is that the symbolic order—that realm of sign, symbols, and language—is incomplete, it “ultimately always fails.” (Žižek 2020, 126) One is also reminded here of Burke’s statement that language is a form of “symbolic action,” where we must recognize just “how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by ‘reality’ has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems?” (Burke 1966, 5) The limits of language create a disconnect, a break, between the symbolic order and the Real; for “a symbol, after all, refers to an abstract concept, so that language can only allude to a concrete external referent without totally capturing it. For Lacan, the inability of the symbolic to totally encompass its referents and to represent fully what has been lost creates a constant gradient of desire, a perpetual reaching out for the pure reality behind representation.” (Krishner 2005, 86) It is in this reaching, this straining towards the Real from our symbolic order, that comes up short, and in doing so creates the *objet petit a* as the “Void, the gap, filled in by its fantasmatic [sic] incarnations.” (Žižek 2006, 61)

It is these “fantasmatic incarnations” that comprise our “theatre of shadows.” The economist is, after all, at their heart a “teller of stories.” (McCloskey 2006b, 209) Rhetoric, language, is the economist’s trade. The speech of the economist is like the “poetic speech” discussed by Paul Goodman which “alleviates an inner problem by bringing it into the public forum and then reconstructs the world in words.” (Goodman 1971, 15) The ‘reconstruction’ of the world in words is the symbolic order of Lacan, a situation where reality itself is “always-already symbolized, constituted, structured by symbolic mechanism.” (Žižek 2012a, 21) The symbolic fails, inevitably, to encompass the whole, leaving a gap, a void, a traumatic center which becomes a site for the struggle of ideology. It is no great leap to consider the many and varying schools of thought within economics to be different perspectives on the symbolic order, namely different architectures for economic reality. All see the same truth through perspectival distortions.

To simplify the multiplicity of viewpoints within economics, let us discuss in terms of a duality, the simplest possible form, between mainstream and heterodox economics. Each represents a unique viewpoint, a unique perspective, a unique language. Imagine them to be like a photographer and a painter. Both the photographer and the painter seek to elevate a subject or event to the level of Art. But they differ in both their form and method. Even if they depict the same event or the same subject, let’s say the portrait of an individual, their perspectives will be different. Even the most photorealistic painting will not be like a photograph, even the most artfully developed photograph will not be a painting. One cannot be reduced to the other, neither can be supposed to be a deeper truth than the other. What can say which, the painting or the photograph, has captured more of the essence of the individual. Even if the painting includes a photo, or a photo is touched with paint, at no point do they become synonymous. They are

always one or the other, never both. Yet, they continue to be linked through an “impossible in-between” that cannot be bridged. (Carew 2014, 23)

The same can be posited about our split between heterodox and mainstream economics, and more broadly between all schools of thought within economics. Neither can be reduced to the other, they are untranslatable to one another. Not by any semantic trick, but by their very constructive being. The language of Marx is not the language of Samuelson, nor are either of them the language of Hayek. Despite some claims to the contrary neither can claim to be a deeper truth than the other, each serves as a perspectival symbolic distortion. Each gives us a glimmer of totality, but fail and by failing create their very multitudes. In this way we should be conceiving of economic pluralism as being an incomplete view of reality—a symbolic order hoisted upon the real—riddled with parallax gaps. As a series of differing perspectives that give shape to the Real by the very gaps they create. Gaps between methodology, between the very conceptions of reality held by the economists, and the simulacrum of reality posited by the varying schools of thought, just to name a few. It is only then by accepting these gaps, by acknowledging that these voids are in fact subjects in and of themselves, can we begin to articulate a fuller conception of economic pluralism.

V: Janus at the Margins

What is to be done then of an economic ontology characterized by parallax gaps giving birth to ideological phantasms? The monism of economic theory, that the mainstream is the only stream worth traveling along, is an ideal directly opposed to the parallax nature of economic reality. When we actually take note of the existence of parallax gaps within economic

perspectives, we know that any “pluralism” that has as its end-point the unification of all disparate parts of economics under a single banner is a flawed project. These gaps are irreducible, whether it be through brute ideology or other means. The perspectives within economics are always-already dialectically balanced, revolving around a “pre-ideological ‘kernel’ of ideology” that gives birth to “the *spectral apparition that fills up the hole of the real*.” (Žižek 2012a, 21; emphasis in the original) The spectral apparitions being, in the case of economics as a discipline and as a perspective, the competing ideological schools of thought that comprise economic pluralism.

One can pretend to a unification, with the aid of a *salto mortale*, a Kierkegaardian-esque leap of faith, but this is only a false synthesis. (Žižek 2005b, 238) Karatani gives an example of such a leap of faith when he discusses the parallax gap within the concept of the commodity as developed by the Classical economists. The Classical economists saw a commodity as a synthesis between use-value and exchange-value, but this isn’t only an “ex post facto recognition.” (Karatani 2003, 8) The moment of commodification requires a tension between use- and exchange-value to be mitigated, but it is never removed. Macherey articulates this contradiction, this gap, by remarking that:

“It is in this way that contradiction makes its appearance in *Capital*: simply in so far as it is the appearance of a contradiction. At the same time that the contradiction is formulated (it is what structures the expression: value of commodity), the knowledge is given that the contradiction is an apparent one. The aim of the analysis is to go beyond contradiction; and to do so, *it will have not to resolve it (an apparent contradiction does not have to be resolved)*, but to *suppress it*.” (Macherey 2015, 195; emphasis added)

What is the process of going “beyond” the contradiction than a *salto mortale*? The contradiction cannot be resolved, it cannot be reduced, it can only be suppressed or ignored. What we find is

that the contradiction cannot be resolved *in its original space/position*, it must shift its standing, and therefore its perspective, elsewhere to find a resolution of sorts. This calls back to Žižek who says that the “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological shift” in the object itself. (Žižek 2006, 17) The contradiction is “suppressed” by shifting the perspective of our object, in this case the nature of the commodity, which represents a change in the nature of the object itself (therefore an ontological change). Instead of the end results of a system of reflection and development, the synthesis-which-has-no-clothes has to rely on an “irreducible external element,” that us to say a reframing, or more appropriately a repositioning, of the perspective of the subject to the object. (Žižek 2005b, 238) *A salto mortale*—a fatal leap—is just that, a leap, it does not build it only transverses.

A continuing story of traversal, rather than mediation, can be found in the history of ontological debates on the nature of capital itself. (Endres and Harper 2020) One moment in particular, that of the Cambridge Capital Controversies, begs particular attention; here it was Joan Robinson, who, as she said, had Marx in her bones if not her mouth, who took the lead in pointing out inconsistencies within the neoclassical conceptions of capital. (Cohen and Harcourt 2003; Pasinetti, et al. 2003) While shrouded in a technical debate on the measurement of capital, the controversy itself mirrored in many ways a debate on the nature of capital itself; appearing in the guise of a “‘black hole,’ we might say, rather than a black spot” within the neoclassical theory of capital. (Pasinetti, et al. 2003, 228)

The Controversies themselves, the “tempest in a teacup” that raged within economics journals from the 1950s well into the 1960s, centered began as a debate on economic growth and expanded into a “clash of views on the correctness and relevance of the marginal theory of value and distribution for these issues.” (Cohen and Harcourt 2003, 200; Harcourt 1972, 1) But more

so than this, these debates were rooted in methodological and ideological differences within the schools of thought vying for the collective soul of economics. Our focus will be on the criticism posed by Robinson herself: that of the measurement and meaning of capital. (Cohen and Harcourt 2003, 200) Robinson herself quips that:

“The student of economic theory is taught to write $O = f(L, C)$ where L is a quantity of labour, C a quantity of capital and O a rate of output of commodities. He is instructed to assume all workers alike, and to measure L in man-hours of labour; he is told something about the index-number problem involved in choosing a unit of output; and then he is hurried on to the next question, in the hope that he will forget to ask in what units C is measured.” (Robinson 1953-1954, 81)

It is the language that Robinson invokes that is of interest here, the metaphors what she wielded as “tools of ontological critiques.” Robinson describes capital at various times as “leets” or “ectoplasm” or “mush”; formless, shapeless things, born of physical substance but themselves lacking in it. (Endres and Harper 2020, 1082-1083) This opposed to the terms favored by Paul Samuelson and others of the orthodoxy, that of “sand” or “bricks” or “shmoos,” which had a structure to them, an identity born of a common indistinguishable, but static, form. (McCloskey 1988, 44; Endres and Harper 2020, 1082) These metaphors, but more truly the perspectives they represent (and the ontological presuppositions therein), are irreducible and irreconcilable with one another; form and formlessness, shape and shapelessness. These inconsistencies could not be subsumed, or mediated, into the already-existing perspectives within neoclassical economics. There exists a void, a “black hole,” that resists resolution. The contradiction, such as it was (and is), was suppressed rather than resolved; as it was put by Cohen and Harcourt, “the controversies

were but the latest in a series of still-unresolved controversies.” (2003, 200) It is this suppression that lends itself to a two-step symptomatic reading of the controversy.

In this instance the symptom is the “symptom of normality itself,” a symptom that pertains to an imbalance in the normal order of things. (Žižek 2020, 250) The reassertion of ontological debates on the nature of capital, from Böhm-Bawerk and Clark, Hayek and Knight, to Robinson, can be read in this symptomatic way. As the antagonisms within economists’ conceptions of capital reasserting themselves; a resurgence of the inherent tension, of the parallax gap, that lies at its core. In this way the differing conceptions of capital, be they “ectoplasm” or “shmoos,” are not merely “fragmentary,” or one-sided perspectives on a whole, but rather are emblematic of the failure of the symbolic to grasp the real. (Endres and Harper 2020, 1088)

The second step that one can take in our symptomatic reading, is that of going from a symptom of normality to normality as a symptom as such. Normality, in this sense, always arises as a “symptomal compromise-formation,” a way in which contradictory forces are balanced so as to allow “normal” functioning. (Žižek 2020, 251) Here we can be reminded of Robinson’s (prophetic) words that “sloppy habits of thought are handed from one generation to the next.” (Robinson 1953-1954, 81) Those “sloppy habits of thought” here can be conceived of as an attempt for economists to orient themselves amongst the contradictory mess that had reasserted itself amongst their world-view. These habits themselves are a symptom-formation that obscures the return of the repressed antagonisms of the ontological incompleteness of capital and the parallax gap that sustains it. Žižek’s example of heterosexual norm(ality) can be repurposed here, with the recognition that what is normal doesn’t emerge in a “smooth ‘natural’ process” but rather is the result of “brutal cuts, repressions and returns of the oppressed.” (Žižek 2020, 251)

Such as it is within economic pluralism. One can pretend to a synthesis, but may end up, like with the Neoclassical Synthesis, in believing in it because “we [economists] wanted to believe it.” (Stiglitz 1991, 8) As Stiglitz puts forward:

“It [the Neoclassical Synthesis] is not a deductive proposition. Samuelson did not formulate a general theory which explained unemployment, and from which it followed that the elimination of unemployment would lead to Pareto efficiency. He did not have an explanation of wage rigidities or other factors that might lead to Keynesian unemployment.”

The deductive path is not the only path, but with no ties to bind it, no bridges to span it, the gap between Keynesian and neoclassical economics was unified under a “dogma, an article of faith.” (Stiglitz 1991, 8)

This is the “unification” most often espoused by those who tend towards a monism of economic thought, such as it is with the idea of “inside-the-mainstream heterodoxy.” (Colander 2009) Fred Lee recognized, in part, the dangers of such a project when he criticized such calls as saying that “the price of survival is submissive, deferential civilized language that broaches only the mildest of heretical views. Thus, for the critics of heterodoxy, the survival of heterodox economics necessitates that heterodox economists prostrate themselves on the altar of mainstream economics.” (Lee 2012, 348) What is needed for progress is an acceptance of the limits of economic monism. Our rhetoric of pluralism-as-parallax needs to revolve not around blind unification but rather make our subject the void, the minimal distance, that exists within the parallax gaps between the disparate ideological schools of thought. Our pluralism should be a pluralism of multiplicity, of the not-All, rather than a pluralism of reduction. Monism has no place within the Žižekian Real which is only reached by the “self-shattering of perspective itself, through the internal splitting of the field of phenomena into a series of incommensurable

parallaxes,” which in turn bars us from unifying our perspectives within a consistent One-All. (Johnston 2008, 245) What we are left with then is a recognition of the branching paths of economic perspectives, which in their multiplicity, allows us to better frame the ‘fantasmatic incarnations’ that spring from the void.

VI: The Silence of the Economists’ Sphinx

Now would be the time that one may bring up that old Hegelian riddle, often alluded to by Žižek, that “the riddles of the ancient Egyptians were also a riddle for the Egyptians.” (Žižek 2014a, 331) Or perhaps, to rephrase it for our purposes, are the riddles *of* economists also riddles *for* economists? The gaps within economic pluralism that separate the disparate perspectives within the profession, as different perspectives on reality as a whole, are they known to the very people who skirt the edges of them, or leap across them? Methodological and technical issues abound, and can be identified, but the gaps perhaps lie deeper still, within the very conception of reality harbored by the economist-as-truth-seeker. The oscillating nature of parallax perspectives allows us to give shape, to give form, to what has otherwise been an unknown and formless gap. A crack in the façade of being that is ignored. Looking at language, in its limiting form, one can see that what is not said, or even un-said, has, at times, more weight and explanatory power than what is announced. It is in the quiet that ideology can most often be found. (Eagleton 1976, 89) It is in these spaces (silences, gaps, and so forth) then that the work of articulating economic pluralism can be done.

This of course may be a bitter pill for some within economics to swallow, fixated as much of the discipline is with the twin concepts of positivism and modernism, with the ever-

looming shadow of *wertferi*. (McCloskey 2006a; McCloskey 2006c) Economics is a *science*, they claim, one that is value and ideology free. Here one may be tempted to quote the old dictum from Marx that “‘*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*’—‘*they do not know it, but they are doing it.*” Žižek, to account for the cynical nature of modern ideology, takes up the proposal of Peter Sloterdijk which proclaims, in a seeming reversal of Marx’s dictum, that “‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.” (Žižek 2008, 24-25) Economists know very well what they do is incomplete, but they do it anyway.

One should bear in mind the intent that was laid bare from the beginning, in the quote that started this chapter, that here one will find no transcendent truths or final answers. Just perpetual seeking. (Tolokonnikova and Žižek 2014a) One may not be able to find or articulate all the parallax gaps that lie within economics, and the ideological manifestations that rise from them, it is unobtainable for one work alone. There may well be as many parallax gaps as there are possibilities for dialectical movements within economics; some as small as a word, others as large as a concept. Here is more a call for a new line of inquiry, taken from a short-circuit of the work of Žižek with modern economic thought, one that deals with negation rather than the relentless positivity of modern economics. Our economic ontology, such as it is now, is an ontology built upon a refusal to see the cracks and fissures that spider-web across it. Our pluralism is a pluralism built upon blind faith taken in a series of fatal leaps. It is only by acknowledging the parallax gaps within our perspectives, and indeed the very value of disparate perspectives, that we can begin to learn from these gaps. The void is not empty, but filled with fantasmatic possibilities.

CODA: Following Le Guin to No-Where

*“We must learn to keep the balance. Having intelligence, we must not act in ignorance. Having choice, we must not act without responsibility.” – Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Farthest Shore* (1972)*

A few final thoughts on utopia and economics by which to conclude. Utopia is no-where at no-place, but we know *what* it has been. Ursula K. Le Guin, the celebrated science-fiction author, argues that utopia has been:

“Euclidean, it has been European, and it has been masculine. I am trying to suggest, in an evasive, distrustful, untrustworthy fashion, and as obscurely as I can, that our final loss of faith in that radiant sandcastle may enable our eyes to adjust to a dimmer light and perceive another kind of utopia.” (Le Guin 2016, 177)

For Le Guin utopic thinking has, since Plato in one guise or another, been one “big yang motorcycle trip.” It has been “bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot.” (Le Guin 2016, 180) Le Guin suggests instead that we imbue our utopia with yin, alongside yang. What then would a yin utopia appear like? It would be “dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold.” (Le Guin 2016, 181)

What I am here to suggest is that economics, as a discipline, could benefit from this form of yin-thinking. Economics has been European, and it has been masculine. It has been bright, dry, clear, strong, firm, active, aggressive, lineal, progressive, creative, expanding, advancing, and hot. It has been unabashedly and unrelentingly yang. It needs to be more, it must also be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold. This dissertation has been an attempt, in three different veins, to

do just that; through justice, to reflect on the claim of others upon ourselves; through methodology, to reflect on the power of our words to shape our understanding; and through ontology, to reflect on the shifting, often contradictory, nature of our perspectives and the tensions therein. To turn the gaze of economics inward, or yinward as Le Guin might say.

The yinward turn is a necessary one. At the heart of this project lies the acknowledgement of the role of perspective, and our perspectives on perspectives, within economic thought: past, present, and future. Economists are one of the myth-makers of our capitalist realist age, imposing straight lines and harsh edges over an incomplete and shifting reality. We must have a perspective on our perspectives, to be able to look past the bright, hot light of economic positivism and adjust our eyes to the darker, cooler realities that have been obscured. The importance of this is paramount; if economics is to be of help to this world, it must be of this world, in all its multiplicities.

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