Living differently? A feminist-Bourdiesuan analysis of the transformative power of basic income

Hanna Ketterer
Institut für Soziologie, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Germany

Abstract
This article examines the idea that basic income has transformative power. It does so by scrutinising Erik O. Wright’s theory of transformation from a feminist-Bourdiesuan perspective. Rather than assuming a direct link between basic income and actors’ turning away from the capitalist labour market, this is a perspective that emphasises conditions of possibilities for practices beyond paid work and employment. To explore actors’ practices, I analyse how basic income would interact with both the objectified social structures and incorporated dispositions – above all, with actors’ dominant disposition to paid work. I argue that for basic income to transform capitalism, a transformation of the habitus is needed.

Keywords
basic income, Bourdieu, capitalism, feminism, habitus, transformation

Introduction: Transforming capitalism through basic income?
Climate change, social inequalities, the rise of new nationalisms, and the appalling state of public health systems exacerbated by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 are but a few of the symptoms of the multidimensional crisis of financialised capitalism. While social scientists have long conducted extensive and systematic analyses of capitalism, from which we know that capitalism is a system that is inherently prone to crisis (cf. Fraser, 2014), they have largely failed to do the same with alternatives to capitalism. An exception to this is Erik O. Wright’s (2010) Envisioning Real Utopias, which offers a systematic enquiry into possible pathways out of capitalism undertaken in an emancipatory spirit that ‘we [also] need at least a little optimism of the intellect to sustain the optimism of...
the will’ (Wright modifying Gramsci; Wright, 2019, p. 105). For Wright, basic income is a viable pathway with particular emancipatory potential: through the partial decommodification of labour, basic income would increase actors’ autonomy of action, which could be used for counter-hegemonic practices, encompassing a variety of unpaid activities and the reorganisation of the capitalist economy according to socialist ideals. Eventually, this may lead to the transformation of capitalism.

Such a social transformation, however, rests on the premise that a great number of people want to actually make use of basic income to turn away from the capitalist labour market. Rather than accepting this premise, this article adopts a feminist-Bourdiesian perspective and critically scrutinises the assumption that basic income has transformative power by deconstructing the premise’s conditions of possibility. Arguing that counter-hegemonic practices are predicated on a shift away from the capitalist way of life centred around paid work, this analysis is interested in how a basic income may contribute to this shift. To this end, I analyse how basic income, conceived as a material and symbolic structure of opportunity (Ketterer, 2019), interacts with both the objectified social structures and incorporated dispositions – above all, with actors’ dominant disposition to paid work. I argue that for basic income to transform capitalism, a transformation of the habitus is needed. This is a praxeological intervention aimed at refining Wright’s transformation theory.

This article has four parts. First, I provide a historical overview of the different justifications of basic income. Second, I situate Wright’s theory of symbiotic-interstitial transformation in the context of the wider basic income debate. Third, I critically examine Wright’s assumption on actors’ practices when they are given a basic income. I do this from a feminist perspective since feminism has a strong tradition in investigating social change in relation to patterns of (un)paid work in capitalism. While Wright assumes a direct link between basic income and counter-hegemonic practices, feminists point towards both potential and impediments for counter-hegemonic practices with regard to the existing material and symbolic structures inside capitalism. To explore how exactly basic income may interact with these structures, I draw on Bourdieu’s theory on the field, the habitus and masculine domination.

**The market functionalist, social integrationist and transformative justifications of basic income**

According to the international Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN), basic income ‘is a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all without means-test or work requirement’. While the idea of decoupling income from labour may appear straightforward, over time, a highly complex debate has evolved around basic income and its consequences. When evaluated against the BIEN definition, most proposals given the label of basic income actually do not comply with the defining criteria: (1) periodic, (2) cash payment, (3) individual, (4) universal, (5) unconditional. Depending on the ideological standpoint of the advocate or observer, basic income proposals do not only differ in their proposed model, but also in their justifications and assumed effects. Wright’s proposal of a life-long individual unconditional basic income that allows people to exit from the
capitalist labour market, on the other hand, does not only meet the criteria set out by BIEN, but also stipulates a substantive amount of basic income (Wright, 2006, p. 8; 2010, p. 217).

In the basic income debate, as it has gradually emerged since the Second World War (properly after 1983, see below), I observe three principal lines of justification: the market functionalist, the social integrationist and the transformative justification of basic income. The market functionalist justification considers basic income a perfect means to unleash the productive forces of the market economy. The social integrationist justification vindicates basic income as a necessary moderniser of the welfare state. The transformative justification views basic income as an instrument for a profound transformation of the structures of capitalism. In the following paragraphs, I shall outline the history of the basic income debate on the basis of the justifications mentioned above and give examples of previous and current political manifestations of basic income.

The origins of the idea of unconditional income can be traced back to the 18th-century works of Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence.¹ In the 19th century, there was strong interest in unconditional (though not universal) income in utopian socialism (following Charles Fourier), but it was only after the First World War that the idea became more widely popularised (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 78). In the UK, interest in unconditional income rose due to the publication of Bertrand Russell’s (1918) Roads to Freedom and the State Bonus League’s demand for a weekly unconditional citizens’ income. The idea was also promoted by Oxford economist James Meade (1988 [1935] quoted in van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 190), who considered basic income an essential element of a just and efficient economy. Yet, with the institutionalisation of Beveridge’s model of social welfare geared towards the full-employment society (Beveridge, 1942), the idea of unconditional income disappeared completely. Instead, social security became narrowly defined as a fall-back mechanism in the absence of income generated through paid work and employment.

Interest in unconditional though means-tested income support rose in the US during the 1960s as the country faced racial tension, urban unrest and civil disorder. This is when the Johnson government set out on a ‘war on poverty’ in the spirit of free market idealism. In Capitalism and Freedom (1962), economist Milton Friedman proposed a negative income tax (NIT) to support households (not individuals) with an income below the poverty line. As an anti-poverty policy, the NIT was also meant to dismantle what Friedman perceived as an overly patriarchal, bureaucratic and inefficient welfare state. From the market functionalist perspective, the NIT is seen as a clearing market wage which would abolish all unemployment and lead to the market forces’ free play. The scheme was implemented under the Nixon government in five large-scale social experiments (1968–1980) and in the Canadian MINCOME Manitoba negative income tax experiment (1975–1978). The experiments showed a small drop in labour supply and a range of positive side effects on health and well-being (Widerquist, 2005).

With the founding of the BIEN network in Louvain-La-Neuve in Belgium in 1983 by a few European scholars and activists working on basic income independently of each other, the institutional grounds were laid for an intensification of academic and political exchange on basic income in a transnational context. This occurred at a time when the welfare state was undergoing a major structural crisis characterised by mass
unemployment, the deregulation of markets and the end of the Bretton Woods system. It was in this context that basic income was explored as ‘a new social policy’ (Goodin, 1992) potentially better equipped to deal with unemployment and poverty than existing social policies. In the context of the social integrationist justification, basic income is endorsed for its expected superior target efficiency compared to traditional means-tested social assistance (Goodin, 1992; Vobruba, 1986). Since a universal basic income does not differentiate between ‘the needy’ and ‘the non-needy’, it is considered better placed to counter the stigmatisation connected with social assistance. Moreover, basic income is endorsed as a preventive rather than reactive anti-poverty policy, and as a way to ensure social participation more broadly (Vobruba, 1986). Specifically, it is seen as a solution to the so-called unemployment and poverty trap built into existing social assistance: a basic income would encourage the take-up of paid work by abolishing the up to 100% marginal tax rates that apply when income is earned on top of social assistance. There is some recognition of unpaid work in this strand of the debate, especially where basic income is explored as an element of a non-productivist welfare system (Offe, 1992). Generally, however, the social integrationist justification stresses paid work and employment as a fundamental organising principle of modern society (cf. Dahrendorf, 1986) to the point it is detrimental to the unconditionality principle. This can be illustrated by Tony Atkinson’s (1996) ‘participation income’ or by Beck’s (1999) ‘citizen income’. Both proposals closely tie receipt of basic income to citizens’ volunteering activities in their communities.

Some have critiqued that the social policy view of basic income may prevent one from seeing basic income’s more radical transformative potential for capitalist society. The latter is at the heart of the transformative justification. In ‘A Capitalist Road to Communism’ (1986), van der Veen and van Parijs suggest that basic income represents a move towards a communist system in which the social product would be distributed on the basis of need rather than profit. Similarly, it is argued that basic income may foster the common good that is the voluntary social cooperation of actors to their mutual benefit (Jordan, 1992, pp. 161–162). A transformative justification of basic income is also adopted by André Gorz. Having struggled with the idea of basic income out of concern for neoliberal co-optation and reciprocity throughout his life, Gorz eventually comes to embrace a basic income that he calls a ‘social income’ in Misères du présent, richesse du possible (1997). As a constitutive element of the ‘multi-activity society’, he argues that a ‘social income’ would redistribute, in a more egalitarian manner, the shrinking number of jobs that grant social inclusion and help develop ‘voluntary, artistic, cultural, family and mutual aid activities’ in the autonomous sphere, i.e. the realm beyond both the state and the market (Gorz, 1997, pp. 140–149).

In its current shape, the basic income debate can be read as a reinvigoration of these earlier debates. The prolonged rule of neoliberalism has left intact the general ways in which basic income is being justified; the debate has simply been updated in relation to the aggravated political, economic and social trends of our time (cf. Standing, 2017; van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). What is new, however, is the growing interest in the idea by market actors, civil society and the state. Since the Swiss (2016) people’s referendum on the introduction of a basic income, we have witnessed a global proliferation of basic income trials initiated by civil society and by the state.
Arguably the most prominent example of state interest is the Finnish government’s so-called basic income trial (2017–2018). Like in all other ‘basic income’ trials we know, many of the criteria for basic income as stipulated by BIEN were not met. Most importantly, the trialled income guarantee remained means-tested and participant selection, rather than aiming to model universality, targeted a specific group. Run on a representative national sample of 2000 unemployed jobseekers aged 25–58 each receiving €560 per month (excluding housing and child benefits), the goal of the Finnish centre-right government was to experiment with a measure which would streamline the existing social security system by cutting bureaucracy, resolve the poverty trap and activate labour supply. While the experiment has produced little evidence neither for a rise nor a fall in labour supply due to basic income, a range of positive psychological well-being effects have been found (Kela, 2020). The Finnish trial represents a good example of the overlap of market functionalist and social integrationist arguments.

Another important expression of basic income in the political landscape at present is the controversy between ‘basic income’ and ‘basic services’, e.g. in the UK’s Labour Party. Advocates of universal basic services view the latter as an anti-poverty measure more cost-effective than basic income (Institute for Global Prosperity, 2017). However, the very juxtaposition of the measures has been sharply criticised (cf. Standing, 2019). Instead, emphasis is placed on the respective strength of each measure to decommodify a certain area of life (Ketterer, 2019, pp. 341–343): while basic services from public mobility to housing to health aim to guarantee a minimum level of material and social provisioning, a basic income aims to abolish economic insecurity and to enable autonomy of action. Beyond the realm of politics, social integrationist arguments today are voiced by proponents in the high-tech industry, especially Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, who demand basic income to foster social cohesion based on the ‘end of work’ argument. However, it may be argued that actors like Y Combinator in the US finance new large-scale basic income trials primarily out of interest in securing demand for their products.

The transformative justification of basic income has equally been reinvigorated in face of the current multidimensional crisis. Sparked by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, there have been several calls for basic income, one of them by the ‘degrowth community’ which demands a ‘care income’ to socially recognise and financially support people’s care activities. The proposal is embedded in a ‘care-full degrowth’ strategy that calls for the fundamental restructuring of COVID-ridden economies according to criteria of social-ecological sustainability. It advocates shrinking fossil fuel-intensive industries and improving critical infrastructures of care to ensure the flourishing of livelihoods and ecosystems (Paulson et al., 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, building on Gorz’s concept of the autonomous sphere, Pinto (2020) suggests that an ecological basic income can be a vehicle for a post-productivist republic. Basic income is justified as a cornerstone of a post-growth society for its assumed capacity to overcome fear of existence (Rosa, 2016, pp. 722–737). It is further seen as part of a strategy towards fully automated luxury communism (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). The most detailed and systematic account, however, of basic income’s transformative power for capitalism is provided in the work of Erik O. Wright (2006, 2010).
**Wright’s vision of a symbiotic-interstitial transformation**

Starting from the observation that much of the human suffering that we see in the world today has its origins in institutions within capitalism, Wright sets out to examine distinct forms of social organisations that may provide alternatives. Ranging from Wikipedia, participatory budgeting and public libraries to worker-owned social cooperatives and basic income, these organisations develop within capitalism but prefigure more radical emancipatory alternatives which could ‘substantially reduce human suffering and expand the possibilities for human flourishing’ (Wright, 2013, p. 2). Wright’s anti-capitalist social vision is grounded in a normative theory built on egalitarian social justice, democracy and sustainability (Wright, 2010, 2013). The key to realising Wright’s vision lies in changing the power relations within capitalism, that is in limiting the ‘economic power’ vested in the private ownership of the means of production. An emancipatory alternative to capitalism would involve the expansion of ‘social power’ by giving people the power to control production processes. According to Wright, it is through the gradual and non-linear emergence of real utopias that power relations will be changed in this direction.

There are two kinds of transformation of power relations. Symbiotic transformation consists of mutually beneficial forms of cooperation (Wright, 2010, p. 361) between the state and civil society actors, e.g. positive class compromise in postwar social democracy (Wright, 2010, p. 338). Symbiotic strategies facilitate the long-term metamorphosis of social structures and institutions ‘when increasing social empowerment can be linked to effective social problem-solving in ways that also serve the interests of elites and dominant classes’ (Wright, 2010, p. 361). This form of transformation relies on an opening-up to collective action and popular mobilisation when elites are blocked within institutions and therefore forced to collaborate in problem-solving experimentalism.

Interstitial transformation describes practices that seek to build new forms of social empowerment and cooperation in the niches and cracks and at the margins of capitalist society, where they often seem to pose no danger to dominant classes and powerful elites. Interstitial transformation’s ‘strategic problem is to imagine things we can do now which have a reasonable chance of opening up possibilities under contingent conditions in the future’ (Wright, 2010, p. 327). Although interstitial strategies may turn out to be dead-ends in a highly adaptable capitalism, they may equally have a positive long-term trajectory for emancipation. As Wright elaborates, symbiotic and interstitial strategies are in fact mutually reinforcing:

Interstitial transformations are limited to restricted spaces; and symbiotic strategies, when they are successful, strengthen the hegemonic capacity of capitalism. The optimistic view is that we don’t know what system challenges and transformative possibilities there will be in the future: interstitial strategies today can strengthen popular understandings that another world is possible and contribute to moving along some of the pathways of social empowerment; symbiotic strategies can potentially open up greater spaces for interstitial strategies to work; and the cumulative effect of such institution-building around expanded forms of social empowerment could be to render ruptural transformations possible under unexpected future historical conditions. (Wright, 2010, pp. 364–365)
Basic income is considered a paradigm case of the interconnection between interstitial and symbiotic transformation: it represents a viable real utopia because it solves a problem for the capitalist market economy and the ruling class as it would assumedly stabilise purchasing power and demand for consumption of goods and services as well as secure investment. However, it would do so precisely in a way that expands the interstices, the decommodified spaces of freedom, in which actors benefit from greater autonomy of action, which could again be leveraged through the state. A basic income that is both not instrumentalised for welfare retrenchment and sufficiently high would essentially attack the power relations within capitalism by giving people an exit option from the labour market. This could lead to what I term counter-hegemonic practices. First, basic income would improve the bargaining power of workers and unions because it could be used as an ‘unconditional and inexhaustible strike fund’ (Wright, 2006, p. 8). Second, basic income could indirectly lead to the strengthening of the social economy, which comprises a broad range of social services that are largely organised and controlled by civil society (2010, p. 220). Social economy organisations are usually notoriously under-funded and would thus benefit if their members pooled their basic incomes for necessary investments. Hence:

Basic income can be viewed as potentially [emphasis by the author] a massive transfer of social surplus from the capitalist market sector to the social economy, from capital accumulation to what might be termed social accumulation – the accumulation of the capacity of society for self-organization of needs-oriented economic activity. (Wright, 2006, pp. 4–5)

Third, basic income would work as a subsidy to all kinds of unpaid activities for which people need time and energy, that is, care work, volunteering, political activity, community organising or participation in social movements (Wright, 2010, p. 219).

The analysis of the basic income debate shows that basic income and its consequences are essentially contested: basic income is seen as an alternative social policy, a perfect complement to the market economy and a means to transcend capitalism at the same time. In the absence of empirical data which would allow for a test of diverging hypotheses, what is left for the social scientist to do is to examine the plausibility of different scenarios. In my view, this entails, above all, an analysis of how people would appropriate basic income. As I aim to show in the next section, appropriation depends on a number of factors beyond basic income. Posited from a critical realist perspective, the following question needs to be addressed with regard to Wright’s transformative scenario: ‘What must the world be like for basic income to be emancipatory?’ As feminists have pointed out, here ‘a look at the world’ is to engage with the capitalist way of life centred around paid work.

**Feminist perspectives: Taking stock of the hegemony of paid work, unequal recognition and gender constructions**

The feminist literature offers a critical perspective on Wright’s envisioned shift towards activities beyond the capitalist labour market. While feminists regard basic income as an enabling mechanism shifting activities beyond the capitalist labour market (emphasising
The potential of a new sociosymbolic order, they also draw attention to important impediments to change in actors’ practices in the short- to mid-term (emphasising capitalist relations as they are): the hegemony of paid work, unequal recognition of unpaid versus paid work and traditional gender constructions. These impediments have their roots in capital’s ‘primitive accumulation’, that is, the transition processes from feudalism to capitalism: these were marked by the dispossession and expropriation of the peasantry, violent divisions among the working class and the witch-hunt, all of which aimed ‘to transform life into the capacity to work and “dead labour”’ (Federici, 2014, p. 16). Since the accumulation of capital necessitated massive labour inputs, the human body ‘as the primary means of production’ (p. 138) needed to be disciplined and women subdued to perform the function of reproduction and procreation.

The result was the institutionalisation of a separation structure, distinguishing ‘economic production’ as confined to the market site from ‘social reproduction’ comprising nature, human reproduction and public power (Fraser, 2014). This dichotomous classification has introduced a hierarchy amongst (work) activities with the high valuation of ‘productive male labour’ and the devaluation and exploitation of ‘unproductive unpaid female labour’ (and nature, public power) as a result. Paid work and employment have thus emerged as the central reference point for the construction of biographies and identities, while care work from cooking, cleaning and child-rearing to taking care of the elderly has been devalued. The devaluation of care work, in turn, has been fortified through the male breadwinner model by the modern welfare state (Lewis, 1992).

Wright’s argument that basic income enables autonomy of action must be scrutinised against this backdrop. It is in fact unclear whether a basic income, introduced into a deeply gendered and unequal capitalist society, would indeed increase individual autonomy. This has been discussed as the discrepancy between basic income as formal freedom as opposed to real freedom (cf. Fitzpatrick, 1999; Robeyns, 2007). That is, for people to be free in real terms (so as to engage in activities otherwise foreclosed by the double-necessity to earn an income and to be a respected member of society), basic income’s formal freedom must be translated into real freedom. Hence, it does not follow that actors with a basic income will automatically engage more in unpaid work, be it care work, voluntary work, political engagement or hobbies; nor is it certain what basic income implies for the ‘total social organisation of labour’ (Glucksmann, 1995) that is the division of labour between the domestic sphere, the market and other institutions.

Nonetheless, there is potential for basic income to challenge the capitalist way of life centred around paid work. Justified as a gender-neutral citizenship right, basic income may create the material and symbolic conditions for a collective turn away (by all sexes) from the capitalist labour market and towards a way of life oriented towards caring, i.e. ‘everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” [our bodies, ourselves and our environment, added by the author] so that we can live in it as well as possible’ (Fisher & Tronto, 1991, p. 40). From this perspective, basic income would be a symbol of the equal value of paid and unpaid activities to social welfare (Robeyns, 2001, p. 84 ff.), and basic income would acknowledge that people need support to engage in these activities. Even more so, basic income amplifies the antiproductivism of the 1970s Wages for Housework campaign which demanded wages for housework as a first step towards the refusal of housework, to reject housework as women’s ‘natural task’ and to prejudice surplus production (Federici, 2012 [1975]). Basic income would extend these
insights to include all types of unpaid activities and foreground the idea that ‘to “have time” means to work less’ (Dalla Costa, 1971, p. 15). This time could be used to experiment with ‘different kinds of lives, with wanting, doing, and being otherwise’ (Weeks, 2011, p. 145), because

Basic income can be demanded as a way to gain some measure of distance and separation from the wage relation [italics added by the author], and that distance might, in turn, create the possibility of a life no longer so thoroughly and relentlessly dependent upon work for its qualities. (Weeks, 2011, p. 145)

The basis of Weeks’ (2011) *The Problem with Work* is a normative critique of the work ethic. Weeks utilises Weber’s protestant work ethic to explain why in modern capitalist society we devote our lifetimes to ‘organized worldly labour’ (Max Weber quoted in Weeks, 2011, p. 83) as if it were a calling by God (p. 39). She claims that this has effectively led to the invisibilisation of the wage-relation as a power relation, to the depoliticisation of work and to the constitution of identities and subjectivities in relation to productivist norms. From this point of view, Weeks concludes that much of the opposition towards basic income arises from fear of loss of identity (2011, p. 170).6

Finally, it is argued that basic income would create the social and economic conditions conducive to Fraser’s (2013) ‘universal caregiver model’ which expects men to take over more of the care work mostly done by women,

Because no one has to choose between being a *worker* or a *caregiver* to receive income, basic income has the most potential of any compensation scheme to transform over time the relation of both men and women to the provision of care and to the world of paid employment. (Zelleke, 2008, pp. 5–6)

In so doing, the ‘universal caregiver model’ would part with the former strategies which, assuming the ‘autonomous male worker citizen’, expect women to work more like men and rely on the commodification of care work (Zelleke, 2008, pp. 2–3). Yet, like most feminists, Zelleke holds that there is no guarantee that men would increase their time spent in care work at the expense of income-generating work. Rather, for basic income to be emancipatory, it ought to be complemented by other policies that would strengthen its emancipatory power, e.g. a reduction in working time, a variety of leaves, affordable and high-quality care services and adaptable school schedules and measures aimed at the deconstruction of male and female norms of citizenship (cf. Elgarte, 2008; Robeyns, 2007).

While the feminist debate highlights important potential and impediments for counter-hegemonic practices, it says little about how exactly basic income may interact with and affect the existing material and symbolic structures within capitalism. One approach to this is offered by Bourdieu’s theory on the field, the *habitus* and masculine domination.

**The labour market as a field, the *habitus* and masculine domination**

When we cannot assume that actors will automatically appropriate a basic income for counter-hegemonic practices, *what can we imagine?* The following offers a Bourdieuian
framework that engages with the processes that mediate between basic income and capitalism’s separation structure in the generation of actors’ practices.

For Bourdieu, actors’ everyday life practices – that is, the ways in which actors perceive, judge and act (in) the world – can only be understood in relation to their position in the social world. An important element of the social world are fields, e.g. the arts, literature and education. These are structured by invisible field forces that impact actors who take part in the field and stand at its borders. Each field has its specific logic in terms of its objective and ‘rules of the game’ and is thus relatively autonomous. All fields are built from power relations that spring from differences in actors’ social positions inside the field.

In financialised capitalism, the labour market is increasingly becoming a field, where actors struggle for access to a (suitable) job (Eversberg, 2014, p. 108). The labour market constitutes a field of forces whose effects determine whether and how people gain access to positions of paid work and how they move between them. While field forces work like gravitation – ubiquitously effectual although invisible – actors are united by the incorporated belief, Bourdieu’s illusio, that participating in the ‘game’ which is played in the labour market is worthwhile. As the labour market is the site where material security and thus life chances are largely distributed in capitalist society, it is of existential importance for actors to engage in it, particularly as actors cannot bind material security either to themselves or to their positions (Eversberg, 2014, p. 122).

What is peculiar about the illusio that drives actors’ participation in the labour market is its reach. As the labour market overlaps with the family, the field of education and retirement, its logic does not only affect those actually in the labour market, but also those at its borders, e.g. students, pensioners and the unemployed. Arguably, the labour market constitutes the sphere of meaning-making in capitalist society. Due to its ubiquitous field forces, the labour market is practically unperceivable for people in their everyday lives, so much so that paid work and employment are effectively naturalised. Moreover, the originally labour market-related illusio is transformed into an unperceivable generalised illusio of work society (Eversberg, 2014, pp. 130–132). This generalised illusio is constantly being reproduced through subjects’ practices and incorporated into a dominant disposition to paid work, a pre-reflexive and libidinous inclination to (do) paid work. This disposition is part of the habitus, system of enduring and transposable dispositions which functions as a matrix of action and perception (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 169).

As a ‘product of history’ that generates history (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 182), the habitus interrelates structure and subject in the production of social practices. The generation of the habitus is a long-term biographical process that starts with the experiences in early childhood and is shaped by the social and economic constraints in which children grow up (Bourdieu, 1976, p. 168). The concept of the habitus was developed in Bourdieu’s early study on late colonial Algeria (Kabylia) to explain the discrepancy between socioeconomic structures and people’s ordinary practices. In the context of destruction and uprooting from the war against French colonial power, the economic and social practices of the Algerian people did not fit the newly established exterior structures. In Kabylia, pre-capitalist, subsistence-based and clan-centred practices clashed with the newly imposed capitalist system of production which demanded not only a complete overhaul
of actors’ dispositions to work but also of the entire organisation of their social lives. Hence, in this early case study, Bourdieu was able to bring to the fore the taken-for-granted and pre-reflexive, otherwise invisible elements that drive actors’ practices.

Bourdieu coined the term *hysteresis* (lag) to describe the inertia of incorporated exterior structures, i.e. past experiences sedimented inside human bodies, which he observed in Kabylia8 (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 59). *Hysteresis* illuminates the habitus as a system of enduring dispositions. At the same time, the habitus is a ‘malleable entity’ (Hilgers, 2009, p. 737). It is always mutating in relation both to the situation it faces and to the actor’s inventive capacities. Therefore, the habitus indicates tendencies in actors’ practices whilst leaving leeway for autonomy of action. Importantly, *hysteresis* creates dysfunctions when the ‘interior’ and the ‘exterior’ are non-simultaneous, which leads to historical dynamics, movement and constant destabilisation (Eversberg, 2014, p. 194).

Essentially, the capitalist mode of production, i.e. the mass integration of men into the factory system and the confinement of housework to spouses, introduced an understanding of work as waged work hitherto unknown. The primacy of male attributes in general and male wage labour in specific – ‘historical transcendentals which, being shared by all, impose themselves on each agent as transcendent’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 33) – constituted the basis for a symbolic order that began to sediment inside human bodies. What appear as ‘natural’ distinctions between man and woman, are essentially social classifications which, mediated via the habitus, impact actors’ practices. What results is masculine domination: a social relation that reproduces itself through symbolic violence which encompasses women’s consent to their oppression as much as the oppression of men (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 33–42).9 How these theoretical considerations can be applied to actors’ practices when they are given a basic income is outlined in the following section.

**Basic income practices in capitalist society**

To explore the kinds of practices that basic income, immersed into capitalist society, may generate, it is important to understand the labour market as a field of potential forces. Its dynamics can be analysed as a result of basic income’s effects on the interactions between actors’ dispositions and positions on the one side, and existing power relations and field-specific ‘rules of the game’ on the other side.

A basic income would change the ‘rules of the game’ of the labour market by changing the conditions of access to a job, because actors’ material security would no longer depend on their supply of labour power to the labour market. As a material piece of exterior structure, a substantive basic income, distributed to each and every member of society, would in fact enable a relative distance to the labour market. However, because of the dominant disposition to paid work, most actors are likely to continue orienting themselves towards the labour market. That is, the freedoms built into a decommodifying basic income are likely to meet with dispositions that impede actors from perceiving, considering desirable and acting upon new openings of action (cp. experimental evidence on basic income). As a result, *hysteresis* or an ethically unquestioned orientation towards paid work rather than a shift towards voluntary, political, care work or the social economy will be the result, at least in the short- to mid-run.
Agents of change are most likely newcomers who tend more towards subversive practices compared with situated actors in a field (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 109). This is because the structures of a field are less incorporated with newcomers, e.g. graduates who enter the labour market. They may conform less with the generalised *illusio* of capitalist society which sets participation in the labour market as a primary objective. However, whether new ‘rules of the game’, e.g. a shift from profit- to needs-oriented production, can be forged is a question of relative power. It depends not only on the effective increase in the power of newcomers, but also on that of all those who today are unemployed, in precarious work, in poverty or voluntarily outside the labour market. Moreover, the question of relative power is not a question that is settled in the labour market alone. Rather, its outcome remains contingent on power relations in other fields and between fields. Above all, it is linked to dynamics of the financial field. While basic income may contribute to greater equality between social positions, if its funding mechanism erodes existing power concentrations, e.g. through a tax on financial transactions or wealth, the outcome depends on political regulation in these areas more broadly.

What remains as a generic impediment to counter-hegemonic practices is the collective belief in the desirability of the accumulation of cultural and economic capital. As long as this accumulation is key to symbolic capital, the recognition by others, the labour market allocating such capital will continue to constitute a central field in modern society. Hence, what is at stake here and needs to be created anew is the nexus between social position and symbolic power. Justified as a democratic citizenship right or as a symbol of the equal value of paid and unpaid work, basic income proposes an alternative social order. Yet, for basic income thus justified to generate counter-hegemonic practices, it must become incorporated into actors’ dispositions so as to dismantle the dominant disposition to paid work. Furthermore, this process of incorporation would need to be complemented by a complete overhaul of all the institutions that help maintain the existing system of symbolic violence rooted in the hegemony of paid work. In short, for counter-hegemonic practices to turn hegemonic, both the dominant and dominated need to be liberated from the conditions of their domination. As Bourdieu noted on the emancipation from masculine domination:

> The relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves. (Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 41–42)

**Conclusion: Prospects of capitalism’s transformation through basic income**

Wright’s symbiotic-interstitial transformation of capitalism through basic income relies on actors engaging less in paid work, more in unpaid work and in building up organisations that produce in a way that is needs- rather than profit-oriented. Basic income may be seen as a material and symbolic opportunity structure for such counter-hegemonic practices, but to achieve the transformation of capitalism that Wright envisions, actors must also desire to make use of basic income in precisely these ways. As I have argued,
for this to happen, a *habitus* transformation is needed. This pertains to overcoming actors’ dominant, pre-reflexive and naturalised disposition to paid work.

How can this happen? Important sites, where the *habitus* may be exposed and irritated, can be found in interstitial spaces. These are, for example, small-scale de-growth initiatives, e.g. solidarity agriculture, where the productive contribution of each and every human (and of nature) is foregrounded and forms of cooperation are being practised that are needs- rather than profit-oriented. In such spaces, people experiment with alternative ways of doing and living, both physically and emotionally, which may enable them to turn self-reflexive and affect their classifications of ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’.

Yet, for a whole way of life to change radically, the deepest layer of the *habitus* needs to be transformed and new practices must be exercised continuously. While the latter pertains to actors’ entire social trajectories, the former, above all, pertains to fundamental change in the conditions of primary socialisation. For as it is,

. . . the rupture cannot result from a simple awakening of consciousness; the transformation of dispositions cannot occur without a prior or concomitant transformation of the objective structures of which they are the product and which they can survive. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 122)

Thus, a *habitus* transformation ought to be seen as a prerequisite for a successful interstitial-symbiotic transformation in which social empowerment would not only *potentially*, but also *effectively* push towards replacing capital accumulation by what Wright calls ‘social accumulation’. This is how, by way of a practical logic, basic income may eventually cease to stabilise, but subvert capitalism.

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**Notes**

1. Thomas Paine (1796) argues in *Agrarian Justice* that ‘personal property is the effect of society’ and must therefore ‘on every principle of justice, of gratitude, and of civilization’ (Paine quoted in van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 73) be redistributed. To this end, Paine proposed a radical alternative to the poor laws of his time, a national fund out of which every man and woman aged 50 or more were to receive an obligation-free individual cash payment. Equally convinced that the earth is mankind’s common property, Thomas Spence soon stretched this idea to cover the entire adult population in his (1797) *The Rights of Infants* (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 72).

2. With the Finnish at-risk-of-poverty rate at €1185, the trialled income neither secured one’s livelihood nor did it allow for social participation (Statistics Finland, 2016).

3. This rests on the assumption that the state is a heterogeneous body of citizens who have multiple roles in social life. Thus, a citizen who knows about the importance of a stable income, due to experience in organisations that run on the precarious work of volunteers, may channel her interest in a (substantive) basic income in her job as government official.

4. The empirical basic income literature draws largely on experimental data from income schemes which deviate strongly – they remain means-tested, are paid out to the household and
not the individual, etc. – from the ideal-typical definition of basic income let alone Wright’s basic income which would allow exit from the labour market. Further, experiments have inherent shortcomings, e.g. the temporary nature of the experiment limits actors’ potential response; the experiment cannot account for long-term normative or structural change which would affect actors’ practices. For these reasons, experimental data are of little reliability and external validity as far as the implementation of a partial or decommodifying basic income at the nation-state level is concerned.

5. Thanks to Bob Jessop who has inspired me to state the research problem as this kind of question.

6. Because I agree with Weeks that much of the effectiveness of the modern work ethic springs from its internalisation (Weeks, 2011, p. 54), the interest of this analysis is in how the pre-reflexive or unconscious bears on actors’ appropriation of basic income. This is why I draw on Bourdieu’s habitus theory which focuses on how internalised dispositions structure actors’ practices. For a critical work sociology perspective on ‘work identity’ and what some call the ‘end of work’ debate, which this article references via Weeks (2011), but also via Gorz (1997), Beck (1999), Srinicek and Williams (2015) compare Strangleman (2007).

7. I adopt Bourdieu’s use of Freud’s libido to denote psychological energy that is ‘striving towards something’.

8. One of Bourdieu’s examples are peasants turned proletarian workers who complain that their wage does not rise proportionately with the number of children they need to sustain in the household. Another is women who continue gathering in groups to hike long distances to traditional water fountains despite the fact that they were given access to drinking-water in the camps they were located in.

9. It is important to note that pre-capitalist societies knew masculine domination, it was simply not expressed through the dichotomy of ‘productive male labour’ and ‘unproductive female work’.

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