Basic Income, sustainable consumption and the ‘DeGrowth’ movement

Sustainable Consumption

I recently went to a fascinating conference organized by SCORAI, the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative. This organization is dedicated to interdisciplinary study of consumption and the ecological impact of that consumption. They take seriously the threat of climate change and posed strong questions about the ways that our consumption decisions are driven by corporate culture and social planning. I went to presentations on transportation, automation, and ideology. Topics included driverless cars, e-bikes, downshifting, ecological footprints, mindfulness, and consumer wisdom. The topic of sustainable consumption pushes the research into posing hard questions about how humans are living and how they can live well. The conference had a blend of policymakers and scholars that you do not often see. I was reminded of the Basic Income Earth Network and US Basic Income Guarantee Network Congresses where I see activists, policymakers, and scholars listen to each other. Readers here should also consult SCORAI and keep their future conferences in mind.

Getting the Word Out about a Carbon Tax and Dividend

There was a sense of urgency given what we know about the amount of resources we are using and using up. Carbon taxes came up often. After all, they could impose the real ecological costs of consumption and manufacturing. I am a strong believer that a carbon tax is one of the ways we should fund a dividend for all.

We have heard about the “Limits to Growth” since the Club of Rome put out a now famous report bearing that title in 1970. Dr. William Rees, the inventor of the term “ecological footprint” pointed out to the conference that their projections have proven accurate in the 46 years since publication. This report predicts a series of economic collapses as consumption outpaces resource availability. So far, so scary. Rees calls for carbon taxes but also for cities to plan around local sustainability.

However, I was daunted by how often I found myself explaining what basic income is to participants. Most participants had heard of it recently but a surprising number looked curious when I mentioned it. If you are reading this, you have likely seen quite a few articles on a universal basic income and you may think “everyone else” has heard of it as well. We are not there yet. These are very clever and concerned people. Most were sympathetic. Not everyone thought a basic income was part of the topic of sustainable consumption just like not everyone at a basic income gathering would think the environment was a central part of the struggle against poverty. But we have to keep talking.
Concerns about Basic Income and ‘what the neighbors will think’

Those who were not on board (or at least not enthusiastic as me) came from many different angles. Many were speculating about how well basic income would “play” among the general public or in Congress. Some just wanted to know if the issue would hurt or help the Democrats in the upcoming election. These are the hardest people to convince. They are not actually asking themselves what they believe. We hear these sorts of things often elsewhere. These concerns will be met once a greater portion of the public has heard of basic income. Again, we have to keep talking. We have got a long way to go.

Direct Concerns about Basic Income

Some participants raised some very strong reservations about a basic income and I want to share them here and pose an initial response to them and a slightly longer one that includes an introduction to “degrowth.”

Most participants who were considering basic income were earlier proponents of a carbon tax to be used to fund ecological initiatives like public transportation, ecological energy production, and enforcement of environmental laws. Would a basic income squeeze out the budget for these things? That is a very real concern. Basic income is often sold as replacing other government functions. We have to acknowledge that this is a large budget item and all budget items can be seen as competing with other governmental functions. The best solution for this is environmental organizations writing bills with basic income in them. In the US, we have Citizen’s Climate Lobby and the Healthy Climate and Family Security Act, which has several congressional and organizational sponsors.

Another concern was raised as a research question. There is a strong link between income and ecological destructive impact. Worldwide, and in the US, the larger one’s income, the larger one’s “ecological impact.” Would a basic income turn every low-income American into a middle-income American? Would it turn middle-income Americans into Hummer-driving suburban developers? That would be an environmental disaster. I want to stress that this was posed as a research question. I heard no one straight out submit this as a rebuttal of basic income.

Income Now Drives Carbon Output

Jean Boucher’s research, presented at SCORAI, gave me another reason to think a carbon tax is important. He interviewed people who believe that climate change is a serious problem and those who do not. He compiled other research into climate beliefs and consumption patterns. He showed that people who believed climate change was a threat still used more carbon as their income increased. They used as much carbon as people with similar incomes who did not believe climate change was a threat. He noted that “liberals” tended to use up the carbon they save elsewhere with travel.

The fact that income makes people more dangerous as consumers is a strong argument for carbon taxes and other ecological regulations. Boucher, who supports a carbon tax dividend, shows that convincing people that climate change is real will not generate a sufficient amount of vegetarians with solar panels to actually make an impact. Carbon must be made more expensive.

Boucher has campaigned for a carbon tax through the Citizen’s Climate Lobby, which seeks a dividend.
But could a basic income or any dividend reverse the benefits of the carbon tax? Would we just eat more cattle and travel more and ruin the planet?

We Cannot Build a Better World on the Backs of the Poor

If the ecological movement were to adopt this sort of reasoning, that would be a political disaster. They are already accused of forsaking jobs and prosperity for the sake of natural preservation. A basic income is a way to get around this. It also offers something to someone who has good reason to doubt they will be getting one of these new high-tech ‘green’ jobs preserving the environment. Can you really tell a coal miner to become an environmental engineer or an organic farmer? Do we not owe people something for pulling out the rug from under them, like that coal miner, even if we needed to?

We need to understand why depressed communities do not believe movement leaders who promise them jobs. They have been told this sort of thing before. They have been told jobs were created and they have been unimpressed. As I write, I just saw the Democratic National Convention run a video claiming Bill Clinton created millions of jobs. There is a whole belt of communities that just are not seeing it. A dividend would be a visible support for them and their communities. And a new sort of job creator. And it would reach the invisible and despised. Without a dividend, we give the opponents of environmental regulations a better opportunity to recruit votes from the less powerful.

We do not have the right to use deprivation, or the threat of deprivation, to promote even the best outcomes. It is very bad when the privileged argue that we should keep the threat of poverty in play so that people will work bad jobs for less money. It is still bad to leave people in precariousness even if our intention is to promote ecological sustainability. To talk that way is to combine a political disaster with our current moral one. After all, we are using the threat of deprivation to organize large sections of the population.

Basic Income and Degrowth

Giorgios Kallis’ keynote presentation steered me towards my provisional answer to these questions. He supports a basic income alongside the promotion of universal access to low-consumption versions of public transportation, education, and health. He sees this as a way of shrinking the destructive aspects of our economy, driven by capital, and increasing other parts of economic that we value, though ignored by capital.

Kallis’ main project is combining political ecology and ecological economics. These are two separate movements that he draws from in an attempt to take more seriously the material conditions that undergird our economic activity. We have a very long history of a link between growth in gross domestic product and a growth in carbon emissions. Kallis has called for “prosperity without growth” and is part of a “degrowth” movement. We have a finite planet and we cannot keep growing in the ways we have measured growth.

I have to admit that I have often presented a basic income as a vehicle for growth in those communities too invisible for current markets and current public planners to take action. Because I found this ecological argument for degrowth plausible, I wondered what this would mean for how I see basic income working.
The Gibson Graham Iceberg Model

In the course of presenting his argument, Kallis’ showed us was this drawing of an iceberg devised by feminist economists Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham. I have not been able to get it out of my head. Let us look at two examples, talk about them, and then get back to basic income and degrowth.

Drawing by James Langdon
They published under a combined name of “J.K. Gibson-Graham” and their work can be found at a website called “Community Economies.” Almost all economics, they argue, only looks at the “tip of the iceberg” which consists of capitalist markets and wage labor. Above the “water-line”, we have the sort of things that our market economy sees. If a price can be put on it, then someone with money to invest (a capitalist) or to consume (a customer) can make an offer for it. These are the things that our economics and our politics (and increasingly our culture) value.

Below the water-line are things that we do value but capital markets do not value in the same way we do. I went with two examples because the whole idea of the iceberg model is to get you thinking about the things you value and see where they stand. Think about how important so many of these “underwater” items are. We value culture, charity, education, health, and family life. We should not give these up in exchange for money. They have a value that is hard to reduce to a cash amount.

The list is not complete. Also, every item below the line has capital and wage versions. People pay for schools and policymakers do assign a monetary value to them. There is an art and music market. Lots of economic activity that used to take place in households are now taken care of with wage payments.
The problem is that we live in a world in which all of our decisions are being pressured to work using the terms we see above the line. Libraries and schools, when they submit their budgets, are asked to justify their existence in terms of capitalist markets and wage labor. Maybe we just want to learn. Environmental organizations are told to think about the “economy” as if we do not assign value to what we breathe, eat, drink, and look at.

Many of the terms below the water-line point to ways of belonging, to spaces where we recognize each other’s talents. Families are a large space and a lot of us would like to be able to work more with open-source technology and cooperative enterprises because we place a value on their less dominated character.

Markets and workplaces can also be such value-laden spaces but the values we use when we assess a market or a workplace must come from somewhere below the water-line. If all you thought about was money in evaluating health care at any level, you will not get to the goal of health. But so many health organizations’ decisions are driven only by the tip of the iceberg.

Giorgio Kallis shows us the Gibson Graham Iceberg Model in order to point out that the “degrowth” movement seeks to contract what is at the top of the iceberg in order to grow what is low on the iceberg.

**Basic Income and Values Growth**

Perhaps I am too indoctrinated by growth-oriented language but I cannot help but push against the word “degrowth”. Their adherents seem to be talking about “real growth” or “values growth” (“Values Growth” is a phrase I just invented). I suppose they need to be very clear that they think the earth can only be sustained if capital markets are organizing less of the planet’s resources. That part of the economy needs to shrink.

Giorgios Kallis makes it clear though that he is not talking about a sparser existence. Degrowth for him would not mean tightening our belts. He supports a carbon-tax-funded basic income precisely because he hopes people will opt out of the hurly-burly lives of wage-work and consumption of consumer goods. He actually hopes people opt out of the economy as it is right now. But they would live better as they see it.

Those who decide to try to live on just their basic income are, by definition, deciding they can live better with more time and less income than they would with the jobs they see available. These lives will consume less of what the capitalist market steers us now to consume. The lives they build will promote options for others as well. When we look around, we will see more than just the lives that corporations want us to value. It does not all have to be shopping between shifts at work.

When we present basic income, we are often called upon to prove that people will not opt out of the workforce. I often point out that a basic income is still yours when you take on a job. Right now, people dependent on disability worry about losing that support if they try out a job. (I am often referred by policy analysts to very complex regulations. MBA’s and lawyers disagree over the meaning of these rules. I hold a couple of degrees but I couldn’t tell anyone what would happen to them. Disability recipients, whether educated or not, are expected to understand how these policies will be interpreted. Basic income gets around all that.) Many start-ups will be buoyed by basic income.

But Kallis calls for a rethink here. For Kallis, this nightmare scenario is no nightmare at all. People who
opt out of the wage-labor market simply will use up less of the earth. Everyone who opts out of the labor market in order to live more sparsely is buying the planet time.

**We Do Not Need to Consume to Live or Live to Consume**

Consumption becomes more expensive while we are empowered to give care and creativity the time they deserve. This answers Jean Boucher’s concerns about increased income and consumption. There are not a lot of low-consumption options now when we look at what to do with our income. There will be more with basic income, which will create new kinds of social actors.

Let us look back at the iceberg again. A basic income means that you have a property-like claim on an income. You do not have to please someone with money to have an income. You do not need a job or a patron. This means you can spend more money and time on things you care about besides capital markets, wage labor, and the people who run those things.

Basic income moves resources from the top of the iceberg to the bottom. We can see that markets are pushing their values onto other things we care about. A basic income large enough to live on is one that enables us to say “no” more often to the world on top of the iceberg. As we look around in order to build a life that we want, we will survey the values that are below the line. We will be more confident than ever that we know what we want.

We will have more examples of people living lives they value. These will include investor and entrepreneurs and job-holders but they will also include lives focused on culture, experience, ethics, and values. A basic income will increase the number of people who organize to promote what they consider to be good, fair, and true. We need more organizations besides for-profit corporations competing for our attention and time. We depend on people negotiating between their needs and wants and the beliefs and power relations that they have inherited. This new world may be more contentious, more diverse, than our current one. It also may be more deliberative if persuasion becomes a more important means to organizing people now being organized by capital and wage offerings. Combined with making environmental destruction more expensive, a basic income funded by taxing pollution will make less-destructive lives more meaningful.

Edit (August 13, 10:40 pm EST):

A line was changed by the author. The new version makes it more clear that many people with disabilities are highly educated.