

The Job Guarantee: *Gatekeeping and Popularization*

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Abstract: Among DIY musicians, one often hears support for a Universal Basic Income on the logic that if rent and food are covered, one could spend more time on music. In some formulations, a cultural job guarantee aims at this explicitly: liberation of creative energies through guaranteed employment. However, technological innovations that allow the nearly zero cost creation and transmission of recordings have moved gatekeeping downstream from production to publicity and audience development. In order to address this, and implicitly challenge the anti-democratic notion that individual preferences are best expressed through markets, any culturally-focused Federal job guarantee must include provision for popularization. Starting from both Michal Kalecki's proposition of a "political business cycle" and Alan Lomax's idea of "cultural equity," I argue that a cultural job guarantee must be a self-consciously left project to restructure the social system of cultural production. I follow Fred Lee's assertion that consumers choose from available goods, rather than making production decisions. I also affirm Modern Monetary Theory's vision of money as a boundless public utility. With these in mind, I argue that a cultural job guarantee should democratize American culture, rather than provide the private sector culture industry with a reserve army of unemployed artists. Instead of making it possible for anyone to become a Taylor Swift, a cultural job guarantee should look to the models of Smithsonian Folkways and John Peel to dismantle the cultural form of Taylor Swift itself.

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*Oh, it's just your precious American underground
And it is born of wealth
With not a writer in the lot
Destroyer, "Rubies"*

Having spent years as a touring musician, a recording technician, and a music librarian for a company that sells the tracks that you have all heard, I have noticed a few things about the market structure of the music industry, and its impact on how mainstream culture is constituted. My background is in Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and indie rock, a self-consciously anti-money and anti-market approach to cultural production, and as such, my focus is on its shortcomings as a system relative to a job guarantee program. In the following I will argue that any federal job guarantee program that extends into the sphere of cultural production will also need to provide distribution and popularization networks for these new works. The recent democratization in music production technology provides a way to understand that private gatekeepers will move downstream in response to expanding access to the means of production – from choosing who makes records to choosing what records get heard – rather than simply disappearing. DIY as an ideological apparatus and approach to cultural production presumes to solve this problem with loose associational bonds instead of money and administration. However, from an equity perspective, these replacements are insufficient. As economics is simultaneously political and technical, my argument will be split into a short political section and a longer technical section. Both explore cultural equity and democratization in the context of Modern Monetary Theory's keystone job guarantee program, as well as paving the way towards a critique of the voluntarist institutions implied by a universal basic income.

Politics

It is crucial to distinguish between a federal job guarantee conceived of as an essentially apolitical technical fix – the job guarantee as an innovative way to fight inflation and juice employment numbers – and one that is thoroughly and self-consciously political. To understand why the first is ultimately a doomed endeavor, we turn to Michal Kalecki. In *Political Aspects of Full Employment*, he summarizes the objections of the capitalist class to full employment as, “under a regime of permanent full employment, the 'sack' would cease to play its role as a disciplinary measure. The social position of the boss would be undermined, and the self-assurance and class-consciousness of the working class would grow” (Kalecki 1942). What is at issue, as always, is labor discipline. Kalecki argues that capitalists won’t countenance a program of full employment – such as a federal job guarantee – that has negative effects on overall labor discipline, even if it is advertised as merely tinkering at the margins. Capitalists know their interests. A corollary to this is that any program acceptable to the capitalist and ruling classes will not provide full employment.

This means the federal job guarantee is not a problem of building a better mousetrap and then convincing the powers-that-be to use it. The implementation of a federal job guarantee is a political project that can only come about through organization, mobilization, and struggle that shifts the balance of political power in favor of the working rather than capitalist class. Once we accept this, we must also accept that to organize people around a full employment program requires us to address wider concerns than those encompassed by macroeconomics. To paraphrase Keynes, we must change labor’s direction, and not just its quantity (Keynes 1953). Kalecki touches on this, arguing that the success of the fascist program was built on its ability to provide full employment while retaining the disciplinary power of the sack at the point of a bayonet (Kalecki 1942).

We must consider our job guarantee holistically, as a leftist project focused on equity and democracy in addition to employment. As Kalecki notes, full employment by means of the production of armaments is not the same as full employment through the production and maintenance of the public goods necessary to foster a democratic culture. This democratic culture, in the tradition of John Dewey, finds its artistic analogue in Alan Lomax’s idea of “cultural equity,” which he succinctly explains as the moral fact that “all cultures need their fair share of the airtime” (Lomax 1977). A democratic culture requires that all people be able to participate meaningfully in all areas of life, and a job guarantee can provide the administrative and market structure to make that possible within cultural production. Beyond that, in a leftist conversation that is open to both a universal basic income as well as a federal job guarantee, we must take care to emphasize the unique benefits made possible by the institutional and administrative structure of the job guarantee.

Technique

The culture industries show clearly that a federal job guarantee offers more institutional possibilities for the creation of an equitable society than does universal basic income. A job guarantee that extends to culture workers is not a novel idea, as both the construction of, infrastructure for, and performance of, public art, music, and theater were crucial components of the New Deal (Quinn 2008). Rohan Grey's work has made substantial headway into outlining the intellectual property laws that would be necessary to undergird a new cultural job guarantee and prevent the privatization of its fruits (Grey 2017). What I would like to explore here is how the institution of the job guarantee can leverage its administrative power to change the market structure of the culture industry so that it is more democratic, more equitable, and materially better for culture workers.

The impact of market structure on both cultural representation and labor conditions is paradoxically clearest in DIY and indie rock. Here, we are conceiving of these designations as a unique social system of cultural production and not merely a genre, canon of works, or musical approach. DIY as a system is best characterized as an attempt to create a cultural environment outside the market. It attempts to do this by vociferously rejecting – in broadest possible terms – the use of money and of firm-like organization in cultural production. To do this, it emphasizes self-reliance for artists in all affairs – writing, recording, administration, marketing and public relations – and a spirit of loose-ties voluntarism in everything else: the running of record labels, concert venues, fanzines and the like (Dale 2008). While a similar dynamic operates in other artistic disciplines as well, for the sake of brevity and specificity, we will only be looking at its implications for music scenes.

This odd mixture of the Romantic auteur's vision and a Juche-like total material self-reliance creates a number of unstable dynamics. Most importantly, it structures an ambivalent relationship to the larger culture industry, one articulated through the system of marketing and public relations. A number of interesting studies and first-person narratives have been made in the past 15-20 years, from Henry Rollins' *Get in the Van* to substantial engagement from UK cultural studies departments that focus on perceptions of "authenticity" in DIY cultural production (Strachan 2007; Gordon 2005; Dale 2008; Rollins 1994). However, DIY's ambivalent relationship to the material and administrative basis of publicity and distribution structures impedes its ability to achieve its stated goals of democratization and equity. The central argument of this paper is that the administrative and institutional accountability that attend a federal job guarantee will be more effective in achieving these ends than a universal basic income that simply validates existing structures of cultural production.

Having spent the last decade in this scene, I have observed the way that the DIY social system of cultural production interacts with the larger culture industry. The basic narrative is as follows. First, a group of people form a band and use their existing social networks to book a few months of unpaid to low paying shows in houses, cafes, or small bars. Eventually, they release a home recorded album and use the same social networks to secure what little public relations coverage they can. Owing to the progressive democratization of recording equipment through cost reductions – a workable studio can be constructed in an apartment for as little as five hundred dollars now – these records cost little to record, and nothing to distribute digitally. If none of the public relations hits work, they never get big enough to book a tour large enough to make money. They repeat this cycle for one or three or five more years and then burn out or fade away. As we see in Pete Dale's *It was easy, it was cheap, so what?*, this narrative has a long history as well as an intimate connection to the politics of DIY (Dale 2008).

Since the popular assumption – increasingly true as recording equipment becomes cheaper every year – is that a band faces only labor costs as an enterprise, it is often assumed that a universal basic income could stand in for the wages band members currently receive from outside employment. The logic behind this is that without labor costs as a limiting factor, more people would be able to spend more time playing in bands. Most advocates assume a straight-line path from this to a new cultural efflorescence, however in so doing they ignore the process by which bands become popular, recognized, and able to sustain a career as well as those by which scenes, canons and traditions are established (Guillory 1995).

The core of this process is contained within the last part of the record cycle: public relations. All bands, more or less, want to make it big. Whether they want to express their unique and uncompromised truth, or correctly arbitrage popular taste, or simply run a profitable going concern, the path to any of these is to sell lots of records and perform on big, well-attended tours.

There is something of an established process for achieving this, despite the constant talk in arts and tech media of “the long tail,” “disruption,” and the persistent belief that streaming will one day represent a viable revenue source for musicians. At the outset, bands collect clippings from small media that are run as passion projects or on a voluntary basis: blogs, student papers, fanzines. Access to these derives from the same social networks as show bookings: bands ask other bands who provided their publicity, and appeal to those people in turn. Clippings from volunteer outlets are not enough to sustain career growth. This early form of coverage can only be a stepping stone to the kind of major publicity required for a successful tour or album launch. Write-ups in large publications like Pitchfork, Rolling Stone or NME are needed for this; the campus paper is not enough. Bands bring these clippings to sometimes quite costly public relations teams and ask for coverage in the major magazines, websites and radio stations. All of this is necessary but not sufficient for coverage in a major publication, and that coverage itself is necessary but not

sufficient for a career. In a manner partly anticipated by Bourdieu and the Frankfurt School, the ultimate authority to grant a career to a band rests in these institutions of popular taste.

This situation creates problems for cultural producers as workers as well as for consumers of cultural products. The social networks that grant access to show bookings and write-ups in small outlets are by their nature not sensitive to equity concerns or accountability, as they are often just groups of likeminded friends with the financial capacity to sustain an arts network (Gordon 2005). Power radiates down an ad hoc pecking order from those closest to major bands and publications to the furthest without ever being reified into anything near the clarity of an organizational chart (Freeman, 1973). The decentered administrative structures that arise from a voluntarist system of loose ties and dimly demarcated centers of relative power preclude the development of meaningful avenues of accountability with respect to equity or labor rights. Here, Kalecki's "disciplinary power of the sack" returns, inverted into a kind of monopsony retained by whomever is capable of providing the shows and write-ups that will help advance a career (Kalecki 1942). Owing to DIY's ideological refusal to explicitly constitute itself administratively, DIY's system of free, voluntary, non-market relationships winds up producing a Marxian reserve army of labor analogous to those of gig economy companies like Uber and Taskrabbit. A job guarantee focused on cultural equity would intervene here, by bringing in an administrative superstructure that is simultaneously legible to workers and participants as well as equitable and democratic.

For the consumer of cultural products, participating in a culture outside the mainstream requires a substantial outlay of time and effort that has been reduced only slightly with the advent of the internet (Strachan 2007). The monolithic status of mass media after the 1997 Telecoms Act and the end of the Fairness Doctrine ensures that, to paraphrase both economist Fred Lee and singer Paul Weller, "the public wants what the public gets" (Lee and Jo 2018). The private companies who decide what it is the public wants have little concern for the representation of marginal communities – we see this in the straight line from Elvis Presley to Eminem – nor the maintenance of the artistically marginal styles that both tie us to our pasts and fuel innovation by presenting genuine cultural alternatives. Their ability to selectively grant or deny careers to any individual band maintains intense labor discipline within the cultural labor market. Bands are squashed between the inequities of social networks that provide coverage in the voluntarist publications and the capriciousness afforded to major publications by virtue of their ability to make or break careers.

A cultural federal job guarantee that does not also provide institutional support in the form of press, public relations, and distribution would be indistinguishable from a universal basic income as it would leave unchanged the market structure of the culture industry. While more individuals may be able to participate at low levels in cultural production if they are paid a wage to do so – whether in bands or by running voluntarist show spaces or publications – the mechanism by which a band ascends to the cultural canon is still in the hands of capitalists and major publications. Under this system, one may not need to be the scion of three generations of bank presidents or purchase a

record label to become Taylor Swift, as Taylor Swift did, but one would still have to make the same kind of music (Timberg 2015). A truly left solution is one that challenges the structure that creates Taylor Swifts in the first place.

In a chapter titled “*Who owns the intellectual fruits of job guarantee labor,*” Rohan Grey notes that, “It is trivially cheap to infinitely reproduce digital knowledge goods that are already in existence” (Grey 2017). We know from a long history of litigation spanning from Napster to The Pirate Bay that the digital audio file is the paradigmatic infinitely reproducible digital knowledge good. However, despite this, and despite the increasing accessibility of recording equipment as its cost falls, the system of cultural production has yet to meaningfully democratize. Voluntarist institutions has failed to achieve this, and gatekeepers have been able to retrench themselves downstream at the level of popularization in order to retain control over how popular culture is constructed and to maintain labor discipline in the music industry. While a universal basic income may make it so that one can participate in this system without a background of family wealth, it fundamentally does not challenge the system itself.

This argument about digital knowledge goods is particularly strong in the context of the present crisis created by COVID-19. Digital arts and culture play a greater role than ever in both private consumption and cultural togetherness in times of crisis. However, as it stands, culture workers in the digital space face a haphazard payment and administrative system with no public alternative. Patreon and Kofi offer subscription services, Bandcamp and others offer points of purchase, but no equivalent to public radio or television exists online. At present, the digital media environment forces all participants, of whatever size, onto privately-owned platforms. Even C-SPAN, a channel dedicated to providing access to the operations of government, requires one contract with a private company for online access. While some have bemoaned the inadequacy of past government websites, a cultural job guarantee would necessarily extend to online distribution and media as well. In order to promote a democratic spirit, and ensure cultural equity, not-for-profit distribution and popularization systems within the cultural job guarantee must extend to spaces online.

Although the outlining of an administrative system or definitive set of programs is beyond the ambition of this paper, some contemporary government arts programs provide useful starting points. In Australia and Canada, laws around the distribution of cultural products slant the field in favor of domestic content producers. Australia’s parallel importation laws focus on dissemination at the point of publishing, requiring a certain percentage of all books published by a given publishing house to be from Australian authors (Papadopoulos 2000). Meanwhile Canada’s program focuses on radio and television distribution: in order to preserve a unique Canadian cultural identity and support domestic culture workers, 30% of all content broadcast must be of Canadian origin (Etling 2002). John Peel’s BBC was able to support generations of innovative British and international musicians who were unable to find or were uninterested in a place in the market but who made important music nonetheless (Long 2006).

My suggestion is that the cultural federal job guarantee be conceived as not only supporting artists at the level of wage labor, but also as creating an alternate material and administrative framework within which the art of every culture can receive “its share of the airtime,” as in Lomax’s framing. I advocate a ‘public option’ for culture, where the job guarantee provides for democratically organized cultural institutions at a local and national level. As a rough sketch, I imagine these institutions for the music industry constituting an interlocking network of John Peel’s BBC, free public concert halls for job guarantee bands staffed by job guarantee employees, and vibrant reviews and discussions in job guarantee-supported local and national papers. America’s widely diverse range of cultural practices could be supported and encouraged in real time, rather than retroactively documented in the way Smithsonian Folkways and the American Anthology of Folk Music and others have done in a long series of releases culminating in the full online availability of Alan Lomax’s archival recordings.

As I have demonstrated, the only viable federal job guarantee is a self-consciously left project that extends beyond an infrastructure program. A cultural job guarantee is an important part of this, however the continuation of the voluntarist administrative system of cultural production that would arise from a universal basic income is unacceptable. Once we recognize that money is a boundless public utility that can be used to structure arts administration, it is incumbent upon us to chase market mechanisms out of our cultural decisions and ensure that the principles of cultural equity and democratic equality guide our construction of cultural canons.

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