1. Introduction

There was a grassroots feminist movement that demanded an unconditional basic income (UBI) in 1970s Britain (Yamamori 2014). The movement has been erased from the written history and no academic literature recorded these facts either in basic income studies or any other disciplines. Three important reasons (among many) why I believe it should have not been excluded from our history are: that the movement finely distinguished an unconditional basic income from broader concept of ‘guaranteed income’, long before academics did; that there were sincere discussions on feminist argument for UBI which academic feminists started to discuss two decades later; that the movement succeeded to make a basic income as an officially endorsed demand of the British Women’s Liberation movement.

Academic historiography of UBI has tended to focus on what people in the ivory tower wrote. We can learn a lot from this type of historiography, but also as far as I believe, we can learn from the history of the basic income movement which happened outside of the ivory tower. With this occasion, I wish to propose the need for historiography of the basic income movement by showing what we can learn from it with an examples of the working class women’s struggle in 1970’s Britain. I believe we can learn many things from this movement, due to the time constraint, I focus on one particular topic: on the recent argument on technological progress and UBI.

2. The inevitability of UBI as a consequence of technological progress

In Davos in January this year as the World Economic Forum took place, robots were dancing on the street with a demand for UBI. Inside carton box robots, there were activists from the Swiss initiative for UBI. The message behind this artistic installation is clear: the inevitability of UBI in the age of technological progress that is replacing human labour with robot labour.
This voice in the street echoes a discussion inside the Forum building. A Silicon Valley entrepreneur and a Nobel prize-winning economist expressed their supports for UBI at the session entitled ‘A World Without Work’, one of the debate sessions of the World Economic Forum at Davos, on 20th January 2016.

Dileep George, an AI researcher and a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, explained that UBI is becoming possible:

Machines … get better than humans. And we will be able to produce more, with much less humane effort. … We have new technologies – which create new forms of careers and jobs. What will probably change is our definition of ‘what earns you an income – what earns you a living?’ But probably our meaning of life – of ourself can be detached from how much money we make from our work. … in the sense that you don’t have to work to get a basic income …. And you work because you like work – and not because it’s a necessity to earn a living.

Sir Christopher Pissarides, a Nobel Laureate and the Regius professor at London School of Economics, added that it is not only possible but also necessary:

The pie is growing bigger, there is no guarantee that everyone will benefit if we leave the market alone. In fact, if anything, we think that not everyone will benefit if we leave the market alone. So we need to develop a new system of redistributions, new policies that will redistribute inevitably from those that the market would have rewarded in favour of those that the market would have left behind. Now, having a universal minimum income is one of those ways, in fact, it is one I am very much in favour of, as long as we know how to apply it without taking away incentive to work at the lower end of the market. [Transcribed by Toru Yamamori from the official video provided by the World Economic Forum. Any inaccuracy belongs to him.]

This line of reasoning for UBI is getting popularity recently, with AI and singularity argument. However, it isn’t a new argument. For example, some argued for UBI with similar reasons since late 1960s (Theobald 1966; Galbraith 1969; Robertson 1985; Dore 1987). Roughly speaking, these arguments can be charted as: (1) Technological progress makes our society wealthier so that the economic issue such as poverty being solved. (2) It also makes number of jobs significantly fewer. (3) While the first makes UBI being possible, the second makes UBI inevitable. Let me call this rationale as ‘Technical unemployment case for UBI’. The prophecy on the first and second part of the case was categorically expressed by one of the most influential economists in the last century: John Maynard Keynes. Before uncritically endorsing the case, let us examine the Keynes prophecy and whether it stands.

3. Keynes’ s prophecy and Economists’ re-examination

In his essay entitled ‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren’, Keynes introduced the concept of ‘technological unemployment’, by which he meant ‘unemployment due to our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outrunning the pace at which we can find new uses for labour’ (Keynes 1930, pp.20-1). It is mainly the accumulation of capital that has made huge technological progress has been taking place. The bright side of technological unemployment is, according to Keynes, that ‘this is only a temporary phase of maladjustment’, and ‘[a]ll this means in the long run that mankind is solving its economic problem’. The negative side of it is that ‘the age of leisure and of abundance’
would pose ‘a fearful problem for the ordinary person’ because ‘we have been trained too long to strive and not to enjoy’ (p.23).

Keynes’s short run remedy to this negative side is ‘to what work there is still to be done to be as widely shared as possible’. Then people in 2030s will work only for three hours a day. For long run Keynes envisioned ‘great changes in the code of morals’. Because we are now free from mobilizing people for the accumulation of capital in order to satisfy our (absolute) human needs, ‘[w]e shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles’ such as ‘the love of money as a possession’ (p.23).

All kinds of social customs and economic practices, affecting the distribution of wealth and of economic rewards and penalties, which we now maintain at all costs, however distasteful and unjust they may be in themselves, because they are tremendously useful in promoting the accumulation of capital, we shall then be free, at last, to discard. (p.24)

With this change of moral codes;

[w]e shall honour those who can teach us how to pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well, the delightful people who are capable of taking direct enjoyment in things, the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin. (p.25)

Keynes did not offer us what a new distribution would look like. If he did not think three hours work could give us a decent wage, he probably assume some way of distribution other than the one via wage. It might have been a basic income as the result of socialization of capital as his contemporary economist James Meade advocated (Meade 1972).

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We are nearly Keynes’s grandchildren though another 14 years to go for 2030, so that we are in a good position to evaluate on his prophecy. It seems almost correct on economic growth and technological progress. However, it seems not correct on working hours and the change of moral code and of distribution. In 2008, a book in which 18 ‘leading economists’ discuss why such a talented economist made (at least partially) wrong prophecy (Pecch and Piga 2008). I do not repeat their reasonings here. Instead, I would like to learn from our history of basic income. A past feminist UBI movement will tell us some reasons why Keynes went wrong – reasons all these 18 economists (happen to be all men) don’t even mention.

4. A working class feminist movement for UBI

A resolution for UBI was passed with a majority vote at the National Women’s Liberation Conference in 1977. The resolution was raised by working class women in the Claimants Unions movements. The Claimants Union (CU) is a union by / of / for welfare benefits claimants. The first union was formed in Birmingham in 1968. As the news of their struggle and small victories ran across Britain, many other CUs were also spontaneously formed. These CUs gathered and launched the National Federation of Claimants Unions (NFCU) in 1970. Members of a local CU ranged from 5-10 to 400. The number of CUs is recorded as around 90 during 1970s.

Claimants unions functioned in the following three ways: First, as unions defending their rights for social security by collectively negotiating with welfare officers. Secondly, as self-help peer groups which empower them through consciousness raising and many collective activities. Thirdly, as a
prefigurative movement which articulated and envisioned new conceptions for the good society, and reflected these ideals with the way of their own organizing collectives.

Since its beginning in Birmingham, more than half of members were women, and majority of long-standing active members were women as well. Women vis-à-vis men disproportionately faced harassment by welfare officers. These women were suffering by so called ‘cohabitation rule’ which eventually asks claimants women to be dependent on men, or to give up friendship with people in the opposite sex. They detected institutional sexism behind these practices by welfare officers.

There were also trans-gender claimants, many of who were considered unemployable by employers, but considered not entitled to the benefit by welfare officers.

These experiences of discriminations led them to advocate individuality, universality (without means-test) and unconditionality (without work-test): UBI. They had UBI in their 4 main demands in their charter that adopted in 1970, and kept it (at earliest) till 1987 as far as being verified by the written documents. While they called it a ‘guaranteed adequate income’, or ‘guaranteed minimum income’, what they meant by these terms is clearly what we now call UBI. The internal document in 1972 clearly distinguished two different conceptions which later UBI academics called a ‘basic income’ and a ‘make-up guaranteed income’ (van Parijs and van der Veen 1986), and argued that their demand should be the former.

5. Feminist re-examination of Keynes’ prophecy

Let me first look at commonality between Keynes and women in the CU and Women’s Liberation movements.

- change of current system of distribution
- change of moral code behind it

In both cases, for Keynes, these changes are historical due course in 100 years. For these women, these changes would be actualised by their active intervention with the demand of UBI. For them UBI was ‘an important transitional demand’. The introduction of it would change both the system and moral codes behind it.

What are major differences between Keynes and these women? First, Keynes took for granted existing waged work as naturally the same as socially necessary work. In contrast, Claimants women did not. Rather they also tried to redefine the meaning of work:

In this society we are brought up to believe that ‘work’ and ‘employment’ are the same thing. When people ask you ‘What do you do?’ they mean ‘What is your job?’ Social status is closely linked to occupant hierarchies. People without employment usually say they ‘don’t do anything’ whereas in fact most people without jobs are busy working hard bringing up children, caring for sick relatives or neighbors, or simply digging the garden. (NFCU c.1977-8, p.5)

They not only included unpaid work in socially necessary work, but they also excluded some of waged labour from that category:

Most hardworking people in jobs are supposed to be contributing to the general welfare of society. But in fact many people are working against the interests of their friends and neighbors.
In Britain for instance, £2,000 million a year is spent on making weapons to kill people with. Other employees act as agents of social control—.(NFCU c.1977-8, p.5)

So they recognize what is counted as work is socially constructed, unlike Keynes. Second, while both of them despised the existing moral codes, a new moral code that Keynes envisaged is different from a new moral code that Claimants women prefigured. For the former it is the one that honours ‘the lilies of the field who toil not, neither do they spin’. For the latter, it is the one that honours people who work for people who need care and for communities. Third, Claimants women knew what is needed for women’s liberation is not just hand-out money but autonomy, which Keynes seemed not understand. He wrote:

We already have a little experience of what I mean – a nervous break down of the sort which his already common enough in England and the United States amongst the wives of the well-to-do classes, unfortunate women, many of them, who have been who cannot find it sufficiently amusing, when deprived of spur of economic necessity, to cook and clean and mend, yet are quite unable to find anything more amusing. (Keynes 1930, p.22)

According to Keynes’s diagnosis, those women suffered because they were free. Claimants women along with other women in the Women’s Liberation movement thought those women were not yet free from patriarchal moral code and practice that confined them. Finally, they themselves were living counter-example against the naïve hypothesis that technological progress reduce working hours. Many people including economists have argued that technological progress in housework reduced women’s unpaid working hours at home so that they participated to waged labour market. For example, a Cambridge economist writes:

[In terms of the consequent economic and social changes. The internet revolution has (at least as yet) not been as important as the washing machine and other household appliances, which, by vastly reducing the amount of work needed for household chores, allowed women to enter the labour market. (Chang 2010, p.33)

Many of those working class women were themselves the counter-example. Many of them could not afford such new household appliances, but enter ‘the labour market’ far earlier than middle class women who could afford those appliances. Many women in the movement told me that their participation to waged labour market was nothing related to technological progress in household appliances. This point is backed by an academic study by a historian of technology (Cowan 1983). According Cowan’s study on the subject in the case of the United States, technological progress in household appliances did not reduce hours of unpaid work conducted by housewives. Why? According to Cowan, first, ‘[t]he technological systems that presently dominate our households were built on the assumption that a full-time housewife would be operating them’. Second, there are ‘[m] any of the rules that tyrannize housewives’. Cowan suggests that while those rules ‘are unconscious and therefore potent’,

[b]y exploring their history we can bring these rules into consciousness and thereby dilute their potency. We can then decide whether they are truly useful or merely the product of atavism or of an advertiser’s “hard sell”, whether they are agents of oppression or of liberation. (Cowan 1983, p.219)

So at least, in the case of domestic unpaid work, technological progress would not
automatically reduce working hours. There are other variables we have to consider: social norms, ways new technology is developed, etc.

So what can we say now?
As we could shown in the circle on the right, there would be 5 types of work. How a particular work would fall in which category would be socially determined. The amount of work in each category would be surely affected by technological progress, but also would be socially constructed. What kind of technological progress we would have is also socially determined. Surely technological progress case for UBI has something in it to which intuitively we are attracted. And we have freedom to use the case. But we could make the case more accurate from what we can learn from the grassroots feminist movement for UBI, so that we could fight our struggle in a more constructive way.

Note.
1) For the more detailed history, see Yamamori 2014. This section only partially recaps facts that are needed for the argument here.

References
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