

Basic income, AI and 'post'-work politics

MARTIN FORD

RISE OF THE ROBOTS

TECHNOLOGY AND THE THREAT
OF A JOBLESS FUTURE

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WEAPONS OF MATH DESTRUCTION



HOW BIG DATA INCREASES INEQUALITY
AND THREATENS DEMOCRACY

CATHY O'NEIL

Unpacking automation debate

- Role of government, families and markets as risk managers. Care and control.
- Purpose of schooling, VET & higher education (curriculum, equity and access)
- Who or what should be shaping the future (techno-utopians, citizens, corporates)
- What makes us human ('augmented age' – cognitive, but other forms emerging)
- Redistribution and recognition: *bounty* (benefits of new technology) and *spread* (increasing inequalities from new technologies) (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2014).

Welfare states

Traitional Risks (risk pooling, risk shifts)

- Retirement
- Disability
- Unemployment
- Sickness
- Care

Emerging risks (refurbish the welfare state)

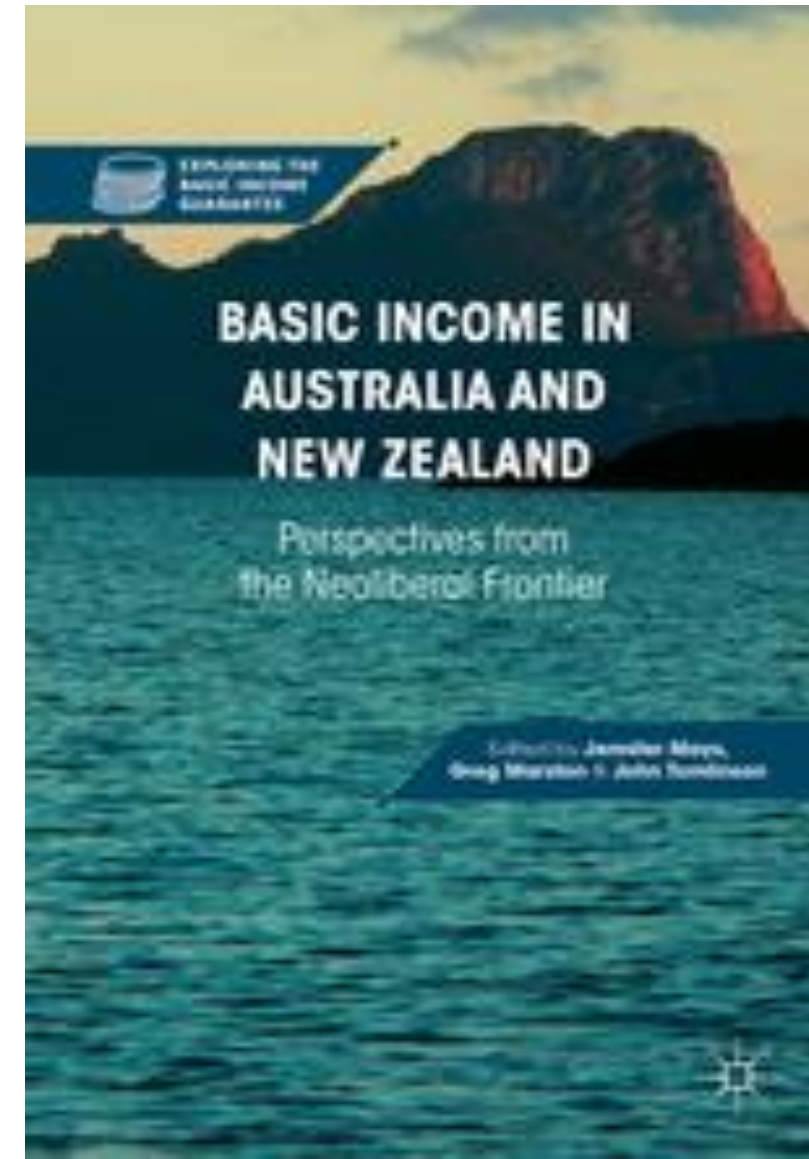
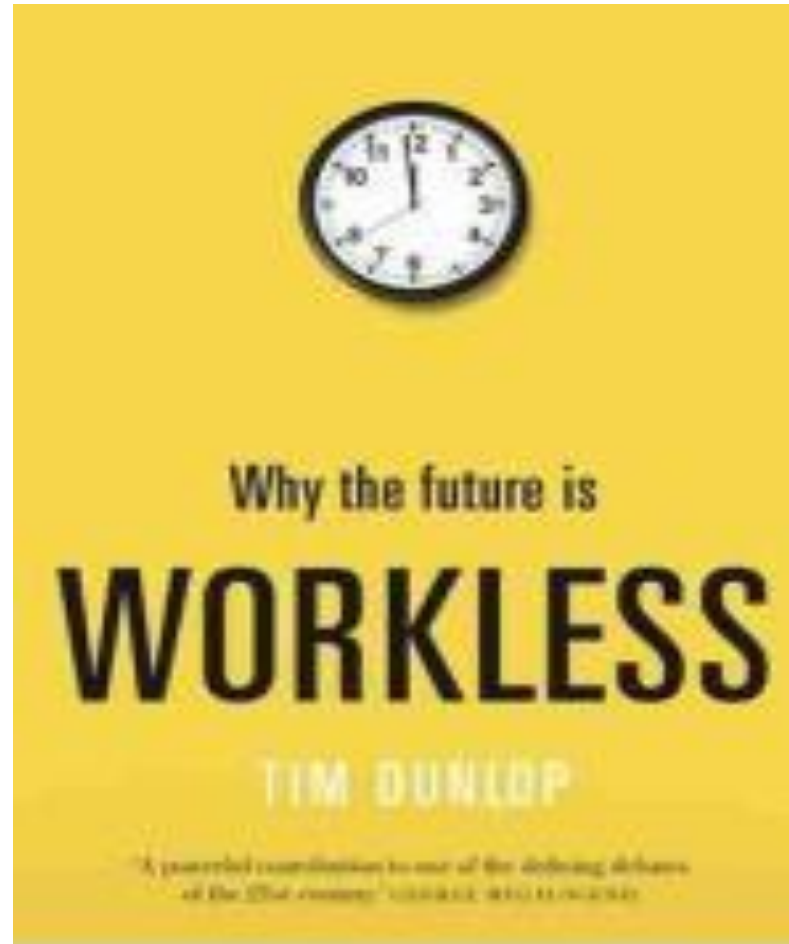
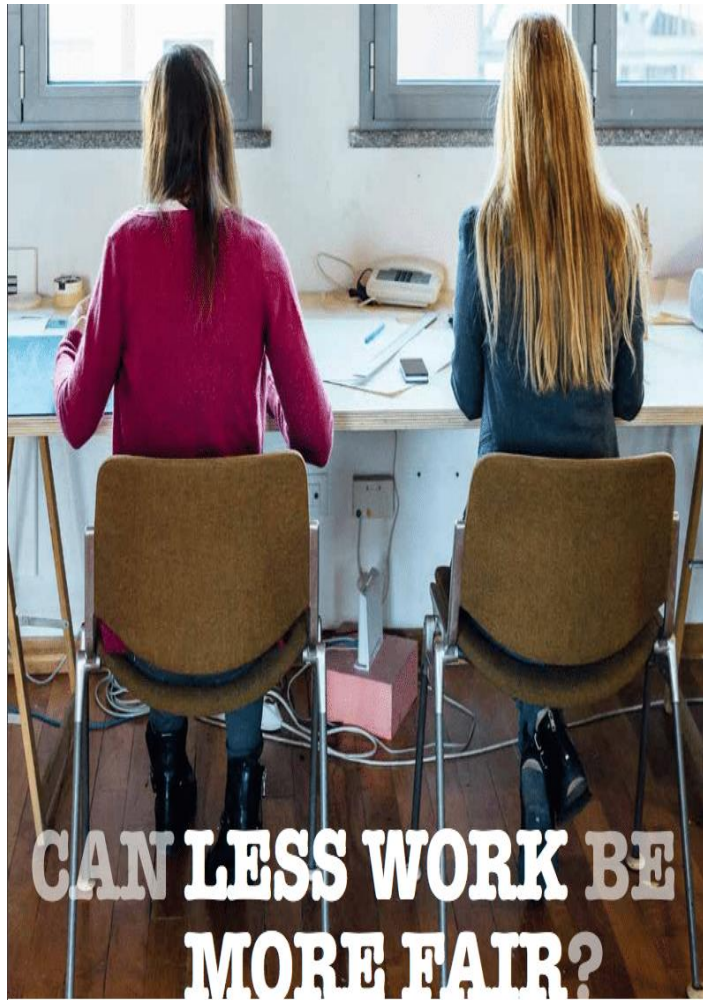
- Demands for care increasing (children, ageing population)
- Environmental hazards and risks (climate change)
- Greater diversity in family form (growth in single headed households)
- Link between education and employment tightening (credentialism)
- Expansion of private services (cost increases, benefits of choice and competition exaggerated)
- Rewards from productivity gains tipping more strongly towards capital. Political consequences of entrenched inequality and economic insecurity
- Tech-unemployment: Will humans go the way of horses?



Work and welfare: continuities and discontinuities

- Work-welfare nexus has a long history ('lesser eligibility', discipline on labour).
- New forms of conditionality given up on adults 'failed subjects' (health, school att.)
- Conditionality (increasing so-called 'liberal welfare states'), while at the same time paid work is becoming a less reliable source of income and security.
- 'Paid Work' ethic continues to be eulogised (hard work = moral work).
- Turning political problems like unemployment into technical problems ('screen level bureaucrats), shift from supply to demand side approaches. 'Digital poorhouse'.
- Productivity benefits, less going to labour, more to capital.

Recent forays into basic income & 'workless' futures



Tech-dystopians!

'Age of the algorithm':

Models are constructed not just from data but from the choices we make about which data to leave out. Those choices are not just about logistics, profits and efficiency. They are fundamentally moral (O'Neill, 2015).

'Robo-debt' controversy in social security Originally designed to identify; underpayments to Centrelink recipients. Minister Tudge (2016) on automated debt recovery to the national press: *"We will find you, we will track you down and you will have to repay those debts and you may end up in prison"*



Public policy response: what is on the menu?

- Do nothing! Supply and demand will work out in the long run. The ‘Luddite fallacy’.
- Better regulate AI (socio-legal approach) – embed ethicists & social scientists in tech companies.
- Human capital - Skills and training agenda to maintain human advantage.
- Recalibrate higher education (civics, ethics, digital, science literacies).
- Increase accessibility to education (those who need education and retraining the most tend to give up first).
- **Universal basic income** - an ‘economic floor’.
- Redistribute working hours to address overemployment/underemployment.
- New tax models to capture a fair share of the capital gains/profits. Difficult to do across borders

State of basic income policy debate in Australia

- From no debate to crowded agenda setting: first principles (freedom and security), fear of automation, libertarian and egalitarian, 'greening the economy'. Technically simple, politically difficult.
- Unconditional or universal? ('stepping stone approach', young people & older workers). 'Job guarantee' +/- basic income (Getup social media campaign).
- The politics and methodology of basic income trials (yes, but no)
- Coalition Government: "It's catastrophic impact would see the biggest tax in Australia, the banking sector would become unprofitable and see our nation bankrupted in a matter of years"
- Labor Party, Chris Bowen: "We have the most targeted welfare system in the world. A universal basic income is a rather large diversion from that. Paying an annual payment to millionaires - I don't see the benefit of that" (March, 2017).
- The Australian Greens call for a UBI in National Press Club address (May, 2018) Media label Greens 'fairies at the bottom of the garden'. The Australian, May 2018). Public media engaged in a more serious conversation (tv, panels, documentaries).
- Adequacy of basic income to increase 'exit' and 'voice' in labour market in order to change power relations. Refrain from generalising about exit, as it isn't straightforward (Wilderquist, 2016).

Can our politics enable a 'just transition'?

- Politics is still perhaps the most important invention of the human race, but parliamentary politics 'becoming toxic for prosecuting ideas' (Stark, 2011; Klein, 2015)
- 'Slow down' scientific reason & 'thicken' democracy (discretionary time) for co-production of preferable, rather than possible or predictable futures (Urry, 2011)
- Get beyond slogans and defending the status quo in Australia's labour market.
- Economic insecurity and high levels of income inequality result in less than ideal democratic conditions for making big public policy decisions.
- Framing matters – 'crisis talk' not enough, a bigger discussion about the 'good life'.

Finally!

1. Need to distinguish between jobs and work; decent and low quality employment, Jobs and tasks.
2. A basic income may not be the right answer, but gets us asking the right questions about redistribution. And something like it may become a necessity.
3. Economic security and risk taking are two sides of the same coin (experiment with new forms of income generation).
4. How new technologies will affect employment and income is not predetermined, it is a function of individual and collective choices (politics) and many other complex factors.
5. To take full advantage of automation we will need to reorientate society towards a 'worthwhile ethic' (Frayne, 2016), valuing care and 'intelligent leisure' (Russell, 1932).

In Praise of Idleness

Modern methods of production have given us the possibility of ease and security for all; we have chosen instead to have overwork for some and starvation for others. We have continued to be as energetic as we were before there were machines. In this we have been foolish, but there is no reason to go on being foolish for ever.

Bertrand Russell, 1932.

