

Universal Human Infrastructure

(UHI)

A Post-Labor Social Contract for the AI Economy

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Abstract

The transition to an AI-driven economy challenges the labor-centered social contract that has historically structured income distribution, social legitimacy, and civic inclusion. As automation expands, productivity gains increasingly accrue to capital while wage-based purchasing power contracts, producing structural surplus concentration and systemic inequality. This paper proposes Universal Human Infrastructure (UHI) as a new institutional framework for post-labor societies. Unlike Universal Basic Income models that prioritize monetary redistribution, UHI establishes a rights-based architecture guaranteeing access to automated infrastructure, universal basic services, and a universal income floor. The framework is structured as a three-layer system: Infrastructure (automated public commons), Support (universal basic services), and Sovereign (self-directed human activity supported by income security). The economic logic of UHI is grounded in automation windfall allocation, aligning funding mechanisms with the structural characteristics of each layer. Normatively, UHI is grounded in the Right to Flourish—the institutional guarantee that every individual possesses the material and social conditions necessary to realize their inherent potential. The paper positions UHI not as a welfare reform, but as a foundational architecture for post-labor civilization.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Structural Challenge of Automated Economies

The emergence of artificial intelligence as a general-purpose technology marks a qualitative discontinuity in the history of labor and production. Unlike prior waves of mechanization, which displaced specific task categories while generating compensating demand in adjacent sectors, AI-driven automation exhibits the potential for broad-based substitution across cognitive as well as manual labor. This distinction has significant implications for the distributional assumptions embedded in existing social and economic institutions.

Labor-centered economies distribute purchasing power, social legitimacy, and civic inclusion primarily through employment. When structural demand for human labor contracts—not cyclically but as a consequence of sustained productivity substitution—the mechanism fails. The result is not merely unemployment, but a systemic decoupling of economic productivity from broad-based human welfare. This paper proceeds from the premise that such a decoupling is underway, and that existing policy frameworks are structurally inadequate to address it.

1.2 The Limits of Existing Frameworks

The dominant policy responses to automation-driven displacement fall into two broad categories: labor market adjustment and income redistribution. Labor market adjustment frameworks operate on the assumption that displaced workers can be redirected toward labor that automation cannot easily replicate. While such interventions retain value at the margins, they do not address the structural dynamics of an economy in which the frontier of automatable work continuously expands.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) proposals address the distributional dimension more directly, providing unconditional cash transfers as a floor against poverty. However, most UBI models are premised on the replacement of existing welfare expenditure rather than the capture of automation-derived surplus, raising

unresolved questions of fiscal sustainability. More fundamentally, cash redistribution alone does not address the infrastructure conditions that determine whether income translates into genuine capability and human development. Neither framework is adequate to the civilizational scale of the challenge. A systematic comparison of UHI with UBI and existing welfare models is provided in Appendix A.

1.3 This Paper's Contribution

This paper introduces Universal Human Infrastructure (UHI) as an alternative institutional framework. UHI reconceptualizes the policy problem from income redistribution to *access architecture*: the systematic guarantee of the material, social, and infrastructural conditions necessary for human flourishing in an automated economy. Three contributions are advanced: a three-layer institutional architecture; a multi-channel funding model grounded in distinct economic logics; and a normative foundation articulated through the concept of the *Right to Flourish*.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

Section 2 establishes the conceptual framework. Section 3 presents the three-layer architecture. Section 4 develops the economic logic of automation windfall allocation. Section 5 examines ethical and political implications. Section 6 elaborates the Right to Flourish. Section 7 concludes with implementation pathways and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework: UHI as Access-Based Social Contract

2.1 From Income Distribution to Access Architecture

Industrial-era social contracts were organized around the distribution of income through labor markets. UHI departs from this paradigm by reframing the policy objective. In an automated economy, the critical question is not solely how income is distributed, but how access to the infrastructures that sustain human life and capability is guaranteed. An access-based social contract ensures prioritized and universal access to essential systems, including energy, healthcare, education, compute and AI systems, and automated logistics and production.

2.2 Infrastructure as a Rights Platform

UHI conceptualizes infrastructure as a rights platform: a shared civilizational substrate that guarantees baseline access independent of market position. When access to large-scale technical systems is mediated exclusively by market pricing, structural inequalities in capability emerge even in conditions of formal income equality. Near-zero marginal cost technologies—particularly in energy, computation, and information—make universal access economically feasible at scale.

2.3 From Welfare State to Capability Infrastructure

UHI advances a capability infrastructure model that shifts policy from remediation to enablement. Rather than compensating for market outcomes, it constructs the conditions under which individuals possess the real freedoms necessary to pursue valued ways of living. Universal Basic Services within the Support Layer form the developmental foundation for human capability, converting abstract rights into practical freedoms.

2.4 Social Legitimacy Beyond Labor Participation

As automation reduces the structural demand for human labor, continued reliance on employment as the primary marker of legitimacy risks producing a stratified society divided between economically necessary and economically redundant populations. UHI rejects labor-market participation as the sole basis of social membership, recognizing multiple forms of contribution including caregiving, cultural production, civic engagement, and community stewardship.

2.5 Toward a Post-Labor Social Contract

UHI constitutes a post-labor social contract: infrastructure ensures baseline access, services sustain human development, income security protects agency, and free time enables self-directed flourishing. Rather than treating individuals as instruments of economic production, it treats economic production as a means of supporting human potential.

3. The Three-Layer Architecture

UHI is not a single policy instrument but a systemic architecture. As illustrated in Figure 1, it comprises three interdependent layers. The lowest layer, Infrastructure, provides automated public commons. The middle layer, Support, delivers social reproduction systems. The uppermost layer, Sovereign, represents the domain of human agency, supported by a universal income floor. This architecture reflects a deliberate inversion of conventional welfare logic.

3.1 Infrastructure Layer

The Infrastructure Layer constitutes the material and technological foundation of the UHI architecture. It provides automated public commons—energy systems, compute infrastructure, and logistics networks—that exhibit near-zero marginal cost characteristics at scale. Access to these systems is guaranteed as a rights-bearing domain. The economic rationale is grounded in the natural monopoly characteristics of large-scale technical systems: high fixed costs, declining average costs at scale, and network externalities that make competitive duplication economically inefficient.

3.2 Support Layer

The Support Layer constitutes the domain of social reproduction. It provides universal basic services—healthcare, education, childcare, and housing—that sustain human development across the life course. UHI replaces the reactive, means-tested welfare model with a universalist approach: services are guaranteed as a matter of right. The economic logic is grounded in broad-based taxation, reflecting the recurrent and population-wide nature of social reproduction.

Functionally, the Support Layer performs three roles: capability formation, providing developmental inputs that enable individuals to exercise agency; risk mitigation, buffering individuals from life-course contingencies; and social stabilization, reducing inequality at its source.

3.3 Sovereign Layer

The Sovereign Layer represents the apex and philosophical center of the UHI architecture. It constitutes the domain of self-directed human activity: the space in which individuals exercise agency, pursue non-market value creation, and inhabit the *Right to Flourish*. The primary instrument is a universal income floor, funded through automation windfall redistribution—calibrated not to subsistence but to agency.

The Sovereign Layer performs three structural functions: agency protection, ensuring individuals engage in activity by choice rather than compulsion; non-market value enablement, expanding viable human activity beyond market exchange; and the reconceptualization of free time as a civilizational resource. Together, the three layers form a complete institutional system: Infrastructure guarantees access; Support sustains capability; Sovereign protects freedom.

4. Economic Logic: Automation Windfall Allocation

4.1 The Structural Surplus Problem

The transition to an AI-driven economy generates a fundamental distributional challenge. As automation displaces labor, productivity gains accrue disproportionately to capital owners, producing *structural surplus concentration*: aggregate wealth expands while broad-based access diminishes. UHI addresses this through the capture and reallocation of *automation windfall*—the measurable productivity surplus generated by the substitution of automated systems for human labor.

4.2 Three-Channel Funding Architecture

UHI is financed through three distinct channels. Strategic Public Investment funds the Infrastructure Layer, reflecting its public goods character: high fixed costs, near-zero marginal costs at scale, and non-excludable benefits. Corporate and Consumption Taxation funds the Support Layer through broadly distributed mechanisms that grow naturally with economic output. Automation Windfall Redistribution funds the Sovereign Layer via a dedicated levy on AI-derived productivity gains and automated capital returns, creating a direct link between automation benefits and the social contract it obligates.

4.3 Fiscal Sustainability and Macroeconomic Stability

UHI's three-channel architecture addresses fiscal sustainability structurally. By grounding the income floor in automation windfall, disbursement capacity ties directly to productivity growth—a self-reinforcing rather than self-depleting dynamic. By delivering substantial social provision through services rather than cash transfers, monetary demand pressure is mitigated. The near-zero marginal cost character of automated infrastructure means expanding access does not require proportional expenditure increases.

4.4 Automation Windfall: Definition and Measurement

The automation windfall refers to the net productivity surplus generated by substituting automated systems for human labor, after accounting for capital depreciation, operational costs, and reinvestment requirements. It decomposes into three components: labor substitution surplus; compute-driven productivity gains from AI inference and autonomous decision systems; and capital concentration effects representing structural shifts in income distribution toward owners of automated capital and data infrastructures.

Operationalization relies on measurable proxies including task-level measurement, sectoral total factor productivity accounting, and capital income decomposition. The legitimacy of windfall redistribution rests on a prior normative claim: automation technology is cumulative, built upon publicly funded research and shared infrastructure. The windfall levy functions as a return on collective investment—society reclaiming a share of the value it contributed to producing.

5. Ethical and Political Implications

5.1 The Post-Labor Social Contract

Industrial-era welfare states were constructed around a labor-centered social contract. In an AI-driven economy, this premise no longer holds. Continued reliance on employment as the gateway to social membership risks institutionalizing exclusion. UHI proposes a post-labor social contract in which material security and meaningful participation are decoupled from labor market status, recognizing individuals as civic equals whose entitlement derives from membership in a technologically productive society.

5.2 Freedom Beyond Market Participation

A substantial share of socially valuable activity occurs outside formal markets: caregiving, community stewardship, creative production, open-source collaboration, and civic engagement. By guaranteeing material security through an income floor and universal services, UHI expands the domain of legitimate human activity. The Sovereign Layer supports *positive freedom*: the real capacity to act, create, and contribute according to one's abilities and aspirations.

5.3 Democratic Legitimacy in the Age of Automation

When economic returns of automation systems accrue narrowly to capital owners, a legitimacy gap emerges between technological progress and democratic fairness. Automation windfall redistribution functions as a mechanism for aligning technological productivity with social membership, reinforcing the principle that gains of systemic productivity belong in part to the society that enables them.

5.4 From Welfare State to Flourishing State

UHI represents a shift from a welfare state to a *flourishing state*: a system designed not merely to prevent deprivation, but to enable the full development of human capabilities. The objective is not dependency management but capability expansion. Security becomes the foundation upon which autonomy, creativity, and social contribution can emerge.

6. The Right to Flourish

6.1 Defining the Concept

The Right to Flourish is the institutional guarantee that every individual possesses the material, social, and infrastructural conditions necessary to fully express their inherent potential—regardless of labor market status, economic productivity, or social utility as conventionally measured. It differs from subsistence rights and welfare entitlements in being unconditional and expansive: it concerns not merely survival, but the positive conditions for a self-authored life.

6.2 Foundations in Capability Theory

The framework draws from the capability approach of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Sen distinguishes between *functionings*—what a person is able to do or be—and *capabilities*—the real freedoms to achieve those functionings. UHI operationalizes this institutionally: the three-layer architecture converts abstract rights into actionable freedoms. Nussbaum's central human capabilities—including affiliation, play, practical reason, and control over one's environment—require positive institutional support, which the Sovereign Layer is designed to provide.

6.3 Uniqueness as a Social Value

Every individual configuration of ability, interest, and potential constitutes a form of value that cannot be fully captured by market metrics. Labor-market-centered social contracts implicitly perform eugenic selection: those whose capabilities align with market demand receive security; those whose do not are marginalized. UHI rejects this logic, recognizing non-market contributions—caregiving, cultural production, community stewardship, speculative inquiry—as central expressions of human civilizational capacity.

6.4 Free Time as a Civilizational Resource

Bertrand Russell, in *In Praise of Idleness* (1932), observed that the reduction of necessary labor should be understood not as a social problem but as a civilizational opportunity. UHI treats free time as a primary social good, inverting the conventional policy instinct that treats labor force participation as the terminal objective. Free time is the domain in which the Sovereign Layer operates: self-directed inquiry, relational investment, creative production, and civic participation.

6.5 Synthesis: UHI as Institutional Philosophy

The Infrastructure Layer exists because flourishing requires commons. The Support Layer exists because flourishing requires sustained human development. The Sovereign Layer exists because flourishing ultimately requires freedom. Together, they constitute a *civilization architecture*: an institutional design in which technological productivity is placed in service of human potential—the foundational inversion that UHI proposes.

7. Conclusion: Toward a Civilization Architecture for the AI Economy

7.1 From Social Policy to Civilizational Design

This paper has argued that the transition to an AI-driven economy presents a structural transformation in the relationship between productivity, income distribution, and human well-being. UHI reconceptualizes social provision as an access architecture: a layered system guaranteeing the infrastructural, developmental, and economic conditions necessary for human flourishing. UHI is not a welfare reform but a shift from social policy to civilizational design.

7.2 Structural Coherence of the Three-Layer Model

The three-layer architecture aligns institutional function with economic logic. By grounding each layer in a distinct funding mechanism—strategic public investment, broad-based taxation, and automation windfall redistribution—the model enhances fiscal resilience while preserving democratic legitimacy.

7.3 Democratic Claim on Automation Dividends

UHI establishes a transparent democratic claim on automation-derived productivity. This approach does not penalize innovation; rather, it recognizes that the productivity frontier is a collective social product and that its gains should expand the conditions of human freedom.

7.4 Free Time, Human Agency, and Social Stability

By treating free time as a civilizational resource, UHI protects the domain of self-directed human activity. Societies that decouple material security from employment shocks are more resilient to technological disruption and less vulnerable to political polarization driven by economic precarity.

7.5 Implementation Pathways

UHI's implementation can proceed incrementally: expansion of universal basic services, public investment in renewable energy and compute infrastructure, taxation frameworks targeting AI-driven productivity gains, and pilot programs linking automation dividends to income floors.

7.6 International Applicability

High-income economies may prioritize automation dividend mechanisms and compute commons, while middle-income economies may focus first on infrastructure access and universal services. International cooperation is essential in preventing regulatory arbitrage and ensuring automation gains contribute to global human development.

7.7 Directions for Future Research

Further research is required in: quantitative modeling of automation windfall capture; macroeconomic simulations of inflation and labor market effects; governance models for compute and infrastructure commons; political feasibility studies; comparative analysis across welfare regimes; and ethical frameworks for AI-era social contracts.

7.8 Final Reflection

Technological civilization has reached a threshold at which the capacity to produce exceeds the necessity of human labor input. Universal Human Infrastructure proposes one answer: that the gains of automation should be institutionalized as expanded human freedom; that material security should be unconditional;

and that the ultimate measure of economic systems should be the extent to which they enable human beings to flourish.

If the industrial era organized society around production, the AI era must organize it around possibility.

Appendix A: Comparative Framework

UHI, UBI, and Welfare State Models

Dimension	Welfare State	UBI	UHI
Primary instrument	Targeted transfers	Unconditional cash	Access architecture
Eligibility	Need / employment	Universal	Universal
Funding	General taxation	Replacement / taxation	Three-channel
Fiscal logic	Expenditure-based	Replacement or additive	Self-reinforcing
Inflation risk	Low–moderate	Moderate–high	Mitigated
Capability dimension	Partial	Absent	Central
Labor assumption	Full employment	Labor optional	Labor decoupled
Normative basis	Risk mitigation	Income security	Right to Flourish
Non-market value	Minimal	Partial	Central
Long-run scalability	Constrained	Fiscally uncertain	Structurally scalable