

On Sustenance

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I. The Question That Stalls Everything

Ask anyone what worries them most about artificial intelligence and work, and you will get, beneath whatever sophistication the answer is dressed in, the same question: *how will I earn my keep?*

It is the right question to ask first. Not because it is the deepest question – it is not – but because it is the one that blocks all the others. You cannot think seriously about purpose, community, status, or meaning while you are worried about rent. Abraham Maslow was not wrong about the hierarchy.¹ The material question is foundational. Until it is addressed, everything built above it is unstable.

In a companion essay, *What Remains*, I argued that the anxiety surrounding AI and human value is rooted in three false equations embedded in our language: work as purpose, value as scarcity, contribution as output.² I suggested that when these conflations are stripped away, what remains is not diminished but clarified – that the substance of a well-lived life was never located in productive output. That essay deliberately left the material dimen-

sion underexplored. It named sustenance as the first of five dimensions requiring reconstruction, and moved on.

This essay does not move on. It stays with the material question – not because money is the most interesting dimension of a post-work society, but because it is the dimension on which all the others depend, and the one on which most people, reasonably, get stuck.

II. The Myth of Proportional Reward

The sustenance question – “how will people meet their needs if machines do their work?” – assumes a prior question has been answered: that the current system distributes resources in rough proportion to contribution, and that this proportionality is both fair and functional. If it does, then removing the contribution (human labor) naturally removes the reward (income), and we have a problem to solve. If it does not – if the proportionality was always an illusion – then the problem is older and different than it appears.

The proportionality is an illusion. It has always been an illusion. But it has been a useful one, and AI is making it impossible to maintain.

In 2018, physicists Alessandro Pluchino, Alessio Emanuele Biondo, and Andrea Rapisarda published a study using agent-based modelling to simulate the distribution of success across a population.³ Their agents were assigned talent on a normal distribution – most people moderately capable, a few exceptionally so, a few exceptionally not. The agents then encountered random events – some lucky, some unlucky – over the course of simulated careers. The result was striking: the distribution of talent was Gaussian (a bell curve), but the distribution of wealth and success was Pareto (a power law). The most successful individuals were almost never the most talented. They were moderately talented people who had encountered the most fortu-

nate accidents. Luck – not effort, not skill – was the primary variable that converted ordinary ability into extraordinary outcomes.

This is not a contrarian finding. It is consistent with decades of research on income and wealth distribution. Thomas Piketty’s central observation – that the return on capital consistently exceeds the rate of economic growth ($r > g$), producing mechanical concentration of wealth independent of any individual’s merit – describes the same phenomenon at the structural level.⁴ The talent-to-outcome pipeline is noisy. Signal is weak. Variance is enormous. The rags-to-riches stories we tell ourselves are not representative. They are survivorship bias elevated to mythology.

Consider the specifics. Did the founders of any given AI startup “deserve” a unicorn valuation? They were smart, certainly. They worked hard, presumably. But thousands of equally smart, equally hardworking founders built similar products at slightly different moments, in slightly different markets, with slightly different networks – and did not become billionaires. The difference is not merit. It is timing, positioning, and chance. Did Elon Musk “deserve” his fortune? He is intelligent and driven. He is also a man who was born into wealth in apartheid-era South Africa, arrived in North America at a moment when the internet was about to reshape commerce, and made a series of bets that happened to pay off in a particular market environment. Change any one of those contingencies and the outcome changes entirely. The narrative of desert – “he earned it” – is applied after the fact to make a stochastic outcome feel like a logical one.

There is a revealing asymmetry in how people respond to different forms of wealth. Research in behavioural economics has consistently shown that people are more accepting of windfall wealth – lottery winners, inheritance recipients – than of equivalent wealth accumulated through corporate leadership.⁵ This seems paradoxical. The lottery winner did nothing to earn the money. The executive, whatever one thinks of executive compensation, at least worked. Why is the unearned wealth more socially tolerable?

Because the lottery winner makes no claim of desert. The windfall is understood as luck, and luck is something that could have happened to anyone. The executive’s wealth, by contrast, carries an implicit assertion: *I deserve this and you do not*. It is not the money that people resent. It is the narrative – the claim that the distribution reflects a moral order rather than a stochastic one. The resentment attaches to the false story, not the account balance.

This matters for sustenance policy because the entire architecture of resistance to redistribution rests on the desert narrative. If market outcomes are proportional to contribution, then redistribution is punishment – taking from those who earned it and giving to those who did not. If market outcomes are substantially stochastic, then redistribution is a different thing entirely: a correction for variance in a system that distributes rewards according to luck and then tells a story about merit to justify the result.

III. We Have Done This Before

The idea that a wealthy society might guarantee its citizens’ basic material needs regardless of their employment status is not new. It is not even untested. It was, in fact, the central project of twentieth-century social democracy – and both its achievements and its failures are instructive.

In Sweden, the *folkhemmet* – the “People’s Home” – was articulated as a political vision by Per Albin Hansson in 1928 and built, brick by institutional brick, over the following half-century.⁶ By the early 1970s, under the leadership of Tage Erlander and then Olof Palme, Sweden had constructed arguably the most comprehensive welfare state in history: universal healthcare, universal education, generous parental leave, active labour market retraining, and public spending approaching 60% of GDP. Income inequality dropped to among the lowest ever measured. Poverty, by conventional definitions, was effectively eliminated.

Britain pursued a parallel project. The Beveridge Report of 1942 identified five “Giant Evils” – Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness – and Clement Attlee’s post-war government set about slaying them.⁷ The National Health Service, launched in 1948 under Aneurin Bevan, became one of the most popular institutions in British public life. In the United States, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programmes reduced the poverty rate from 22% in 1959 to 12% by 1969.⁸

These were not utopian experiments. They were implemented in functioning market democracies, during peacetime (mostly), by elected governments. They worked – in the specific sense that they achieved what they set out to achieve. The material floor was raised. People were fed, housed, educated, and cared for.

And then the projects stalled, and in many cases retreated. It is important to understand why, because anyone proposing a new sustenance architecture is proposing, whether they acknowledge it or not, a continuation of this work – and the failure modes have not disappeared.

Three problems, in particular, recurred across every major welfare state experiment.

The funding model was fragile. The twentieth-century welfare state was funded primarily through payroll taxes on wages, which assumed full employment in a labour-intensive economy. When the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 produced stagflation, and when the Swedish banking crisis of 1990-93 sent unemployment from 2% to 12%, the revenue base contracted precisely when demand for services expanded. The economist Assar Lindbeck, initially a Social Democrat supporter, diagnosed the resulting strain as structural: the system could not sustain itself at its existing scale through wage taxation during economic turbulence.⁹ This is directly relevant. If a wage-funded welfare state could not survive the oil shocks, it certainly cannot survive a structural decline in the wage share of economic output.

The delivery could be inhuman at scale. Sweden's Miljonprogrammet – a million new homes built between 1965 and 1974 – is the most instructive example.¹⁰ The housing shortage was eliminated. The physical standards were high. But the later phases produced vast concrete suburban estates – Rosengård in Malmö, Tensta and Rinkeby on the outskirts of Stockholm – that prioritised industrial efficiency over human-scale urban design. Within a generation, these neighbourhoods became synonymous with social isolation, economic segregation, and the concentration of immigrant poverty. They are monuments to what happens when sustenance is optimised for efficient delivery rather than community. The homes were adequate. The neighbourhoods were not. This is the warning for any sustenance system: material sufficiency, delivered without attention to the social dimensions it is supposed to enable, can produce isolation rather than security.

The capture mechanisms were politically lethal. Rudolf Meidner's 1975 proposal for wage-earner funds – a mechanism to redirect excess corporate profits to employee-controlled investment funds – was economically coherent and politically catastrophic.¹¹ On October 4, 1983, somewhere between 75,000 and 100,000 people marched through Stockholm against the proposal – the largest demonstration in Swedish history. The funds were introduced in diluted form and abolished within a decade. The lesson is not that capture is wrong. It is that capture which looks like expropriation will be fought with everything available, even when the alternative – ever-increasing concentration – is economically unsustainable.

Tony Judt, writing in 2010 as he was dying of motor neurone disease, offered a corrective to the narrative that these projects had failed: “We have been told that the past was one of failure, that it is time to move on. But what if the past was actually an era of remarkable achievement, and the present is the failure?”¹² The welfare states did not fail at providing sustenance. They failed at sustaining the political conditions under which sustenance could be guaranteed. These are different problems, and the second is the one that a new sustenance architecture must solve.

IV. The Concentration Problem

The classical defence of concentrated wealth, whatever its moral merits, has always had a practical one: the wealthy create jobs. Capital investment funds enterprises, enterprises hire workers, workers earn wages, wages are spent, and the cycle sustains itself. Henry Ford understood this with unusual clarity when he paid his assembly-line workers enough to buy the cars they built.¹³ The logic is circular and self-reinforcing – as long as human labour is a necessary input to production.

AI breaks the circle. Not immediately, not completely, but directionally and acceleratingly. If productive output can be generated with dramatically less human labour, then the wages that funded consumption shrink. The wealth does not disappear – it concentrates in the hands of those who own the systems that generate it. But the distribution mechanism that moved wealth from producers to consumers – the wage – weakens. Piketty's $r > g$ becomes not a slow historical tendency but an accelerating structural feature. Capital earns. Labour earns less. The owners of AI systems capture an increasing share of the value those systems create.

This is not hypothetical. Daron Acemoglu, one of the most rigorous economists working on automation, has warned that technology can be “so-so” – replacing labour without producing proportional gains in output or broadly shared prosperity.¹⁴ The risk is not mass unemployment overnight. It is a gradual compression of the labour share of income, a thinning of the middle, and a concentration at the top that existing tax and transfer systems are not designed to handle.

The existing mechanisms for wealth capture – progressive income tax, capital gains tax, corporate tax – were designed for an economy in which value creation passed through human labour and was captured as wages. You cannot fund public services from income tax when income is increasingly concentrated in capital returns and platform rents. The plumbing no longer

connects supply to demand. This is not an argument for or against any particular tax instrument – robot taxes, AI output levies, compute taxes, data dividends, sovereign wealth funds capitalised from automation gains are all being discussed, and the design work is ongoing.¹⁵ The point is that the existing collection architecture is becoming structurally obsolete, and the question is not *whether* to redesign it but *how*.

The word “redistribution” is politically charged because it implies taking from those who earned it. But if the desert narrative is substantially false – if the correlation between effort and reward is as weak as the evidence suggests – then what is being redistributed is not earned income but accumulated variance. The framing shifts from punishment to system maintenance: the plumbing is broken, and fixing it is not theft.

The greatest resistance, of course, will come from those who benefit most from the current arrangement. This is where the Meidner Plan’s lesson applies. The resistance is real, it is powerful, and it cannot be wished away. But the counterargument is also structural: if the consumption base erodes because wages no longer circulate wealth, the owners of productive capital will find themselves with extraordinary capacity to produce goods and services and a shrinking population able to afford them. The concentration problem is not only a justice problem. It is a market-failure problem. Ford’s insight, inverted: if no one can afford the cars, it does not matter how efficiently they are made.

V. The Expanding Floor

There is a particular irony in the way modern economies treat essential services. The internet began as a military research project, was developed with public funding, and became the indispensable infrastructure of contemporary life – and yet it is priced as a commodity.¹⁶ Electricity follows the same pattern. So does water, in many jurisdictions. These services pass through a

predictable lifecycle: luxury, convenience, widespread adoption, assumed necessity, essential infrastructure for participation in society. But the pricing model remains stuck at an earlier stage. They are treated as market goods long after they have become social prerequisites.

The consequences of this mismatch become visible during supply shocks. During the European energy crisis of 2021-2023, electricity spot prices in southern Sweden reached five to eight times those in the north – for identical electrons on the same grid, differentiated only by zonal market design.¹⁷ Low-income households in southern Sweden were spending 8-12% of disposable income on electricity, compared to 2-4% for median earners.¹⁸ In Germany, the lowest income quintile spent 12-15% of disposable income on energy, compared to 3-5% for the highest.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Equinor posted \$74 billion in profit. Shell: \$40 billion. The windfall profits were the arithmetic mirror of the energy poverty – a direct transfer from the poorest consumers to the wealthiest producers, mediated by the market mechanism.

The policy responses were telling. Germany allocated approximately EUR 100 billion for emergency price caps. Sweden spent SEK 17-20 billion in emergency electricity subsidies.²⁰ The European Union imposed windfall profit taxes and revenue caps through emergency regulation. Every intervention implicitly conceded the same point: market pricing of essential utilities is not socially sustainable when supply is disrupted. The question, then, is not whether governments will intervene to guarantee access to essential services – they already do, every time there is a crisis – but whether they will do so structurally or through panicked ad hoc patches after the damage is done.

The argument for expanding the floor of guaranteed services is straightforward. Running water was not a public good until cities made it one. Roads were not public infrastructure until motor vehicles made them necessary. The boundary between “what the market provides” and “what society guarantees” is not fixed. It moves as technology changes what counts as baseline participation in society. In 2026, connectivity, energy, and basic computing

are participation requirements. Treating them as luxuries subject to market volatility is an anachronism.

AI changes the feasibility calculus. The 1960s-70s vision of universal public services was constrained by the labour costs of delivering them – and, as the Miljonprogrammet showed, delivery at scale often sacrificed quality for efficiency. But many of the service-delivery functions that were expensive in human labour – administrative processing, care coordination, routine legal and financial guidance, educational tutoring – are precisely the functions that AI can perform at dramatically lower cost. The technology that threatens to displace workers from production also reduces the cost of providing the services those workers need.

This reframes the sustenance question. The conventional UBI debate asks: can we give everyone enough money? But money is only one mechanism, and in many cases the least efficient one. A small cash transfer combined with publicly provisioned, AI-enhanced services in healthcare, education, legal assistance, and essential utilities may provide a higher effective standard of living than a larger cash transfer in a fully marketised environment. The cash component handles what must be purchased privately. The service component handles what can be delivered more efficiently, more equitably, and more dignifyingly as infrastructure.

The dignity dimension matters. Nobody feels stigmatised by driving on a public road or calling the fire brigade. Public services, when they are universal and competent, are experienced as infrastructure, not charity. This is Bo Rothstein's central finding from decades of comparative welfare-state research: universal systems generate the social trust they depend on, while means-tested systems erode it.²¹ The Swedish welfare state, at its best, operated on the assumption that most people would contribute if given the means and opportunity, and that the cost of the few who would not was lower than the cost of surveilling everyone. The contemporary welfare state has substantially inverted this – designing systems around the suspicion that people will

exploit them, and in doing so creating the very stigma and dependency it claims to address.

The administrative cost of suspicion is not trivial. Means-testing requires verification, verification requires bureaucracy, and bureaucracy consumes resources that could have funded services. The UK's Universal Credit system spends approximately 6-8% of programme value on administration and compliance.²² Finland's basic income experiment (2017-2018) found that unconditional recipients reported significantly better wellbeing and modestly higher employment than the control group – but the political debate remained fixated on whether unconditional payments would make people lazy, rather than on the evidence that they did not.²³

The question is not whether a private or public delivery model is correct – that is an implementation detail that will vary by country, culture, and institutional capacity. The question is whether the state's role shifts from safety-net-of-last-resort to something more like an equaliser: ensuring that the baseline of material participation is met regardless of employment status, using whatever mix of direct provision, regulation, and market mechanisms works best in context.

VI. The Foundation, Not the Building

This essay has deliberately confined itself to the material dimension of a post-work society. It has not addressed the questions of daily structure, social status, community belonging, or meaning – not because they are less important, but because they cannot be addressed while the material question remains unresolved. You cannot build on a foundation you have not laid.

But the confinement should not be mistaken for completeness. Money in the bank, or even comprehensive public services, does not give a person a

reason to get up in the morning, a community to belong to, a sense of standing among peers, or an answer to the question of what their life is for. The Miljonprogrammet proved this with bricks and concrete: adequate housing without adequate community is not adequate living. A sustenance architecture that solves the material problem and ignores the others will produce a society that is fed, housed, connected, and adrift.

What sustenance does, when it is properly designed, is remove the obstacle. It clears the ground on which the other dimensions – structure, status, belonging, meaning – can be built. It answers the question that stalls everything, so that the deeper questions can finally be heard.

The material question is solvable. The resources exist. The precedents exist. The delivery mechanisms are, if anything, becoming cheaper and more capable. What has been missing is not the means but the story – a narrative that makes sustenance legible not as dependency, not as charity, not as a consolation prize for technological displacement, but as the foundation on which a society of genuinely free people might be built.

The old story – you earn your keep, and your keep is proportional to your contribution – was never accurate. It was useful, for a time, as an organising fiction. That time is ending. The question is not whether we will write a new story. It is whether we will write it deliberately, informed by both the achievements and the failures of those who tried before us – or whether we will let it be written for us, by the same forces of concentration and chance that the old story was designed to obscure.

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