

Prologue: Why Webfare?

Webfare, a form of digital welfare, seeks to initiate a Copernican revolution that places need instead of merit at the center of society. Need acts as an equalizer among humans, while merit serves as a differentiating factor. Furthermore, merit entails controversial choices and rests on criteria that are more often than not evanescent while there is no doubt that the thirsty are thirsty and that the hungry are hungry. Every human, just like every organism, must reckon with the empire of metabolism. Born as an organic dimension, need possesses the extraordinary capacity to evolve and become complex. It can transform into desire, will, intention, or taste thereby shaping the character of individuals and, most importantly, introducing the only possible infinity into a finite being. For it is indisputable that while even the most sublime merits are subject to limitation and finiteness, need and will are infinite and insatiable in humans, and they only end when life itself ends.

Consumption (to be differentiated from “consumerism”) is the particular manner in which metabolism is embedded within the human form of life. In a society that focuses on production, the principle ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ will always tip the scales in favor of abilities. Needs will be taken care of, at best, by charitable agencies. It is precisely the ancient democratic nature of consumption, that is, of need, coupled with its modern productivity that entails an epochal change in how we view the world. For as long as abilities have been distinguished from needs, the latter have always taken a backseat. But in a world where production is increasingly automated, needs—that which cannot be automated and constitutes

the ultimate goal of production—become decisive. Indeed, they are the only thing that matters. In this sense, at a time when the Web seems to be interested not in what we do as bearers of strength, intelligence, and ability, but in what (rightly or wrongly) we desire, focusing on needs is not just the heart's desire but a fundamental economic law.

The idea that underlies twentieth-century welfare and has allowed the Left to socialize the surplus value of industrial capital was to consider saving and investment as two sides of the same coin. If we view capital as a whole, we must overcome the moralistic belief that those who put money in the bank are rewarded because they save. This is not the case: they are rewarded because they make money available for investment, thus supporting long-term consumption that represents the ultimate goal of all production of goods. Investment represents the royal road to achieve what—in an era of imperfect automation—constituted the fundamental objective of welfare: full employment. For this to happen, “the gay of to-morrow are absolutely indispensable to provide a *raison d'être* for the grave of to-day.”¹ In other words, saving today is done only to spend tomorrow, and savings without spending is meaningless. If I put money into a mattress and this mattress is found centuries later, it was never a capitalizing gesture but rather an unconventional way to stuff a mattress. Similarly, **in twenty-first century welfare, consumption and production will be considered as the two faces of the same reality.** We produce for future consumption, and the only animals truly capable of consumption are human animals.

The possibility to create new value is precisely what sets Webfare apart from traditional welfare. The latter involved the fair allocation of existing value, thus demanding difficult choices (healthcare or social support?). Furthermore, in the long run, it could not shield against those forms of ‘equality restoration’ such as wars, in which humans become equal in destitution because they cannot share abundance. Wars, in fact, cannot be stopped by eliminating weapons. To argue, for example, that investing 2% of the global GDP by reducing military spending would

¹ John M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 105f.

solve the environmental crisis is to propose a misguided option, both on factual and legal grounds. It is not feasible in practice and therefore not a solution. From a factual point of view, while we all wish for war to disappear from the theater of human affairs, I doubt that this wish has the remotest influence on the course of the world. From a legal point of view, even if humanity were to disarm itself in a unique historical event, leaving itself at the mercy of the bully of the day, it would be a regressive solution as it would affect existing value (a morally problematic value, but a value nevertheless) instead of creating new value. By contrast, Webfare can rely on a capital that did not exist twenty years ago, even though its content, the variety of human life forms, have existed as long as humans have. From time immemorial, humans have been making deals, consuming goods, cultivating interests, thereby manifesting specific forms of life. However, for a couple of decades now, these forms of life solidify automatically by transforming into data, which are not merely a reflection of human needs, thoughts, or behavior, but generate a new autonomous territory, a rich and promising one.

