



Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy

Philippe van Parijs , Yannick Vanderborght

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Providing a basic income to everyone, rich or poor, active or inactive, was advocated by Paine, Mill, and Galbraith but the idea was never taken seriously. Today, with the welfare state creaking, it is one of the world's most widely debated proposals. Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght present a comprehensive defense of this radical idea.

Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy Details

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From Reader Review Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy for online ebook

Otto Lehto says

A good and comprehensive overview of the basic income debate. Though it promises to be a "radical proposal", it actually offers a cautious and nuanced take on UBI, which leaves (almost) no stone unturned.

Unfortunately it likely won't win any awards for being a popular best seller. It's not a compulsive page-turner. The book's exciting title belies its dry and scholarly content, which will alienate 70-90% of the potential audience. Lay readers lured in by the title might be disappointed if they were expecting something similar to, say, Rutger Bregman's recent hit, "Utopia for Realists."

But this has its advantages. Unlike many of the flashier titles on the market, the book is written in a careful and comprehensive manner that doesn't distort any of the facts or ignore any of the complications. The focus is wisely on a careful comparative analysis of potential reforms in terms of multi-dimensional feasibility. Utopias are measured and weighed within the bounds of the path-dependently possible.

The authors emphasize that UBI should be pursued on multiple levels: the national level, the regional level (e.g. the EU) and the global level, in increasing orders of difficulty. They likewise claim that partial or non-ideal UBI reforms should not be shunned as important milestones towards future reforms.

So, should we then start modestly, partially and suboptimally, and expand from there, as the authors claim? This seems like a viable strategy, but it's not without its dangers either. Imperfect reforms can stay permanent and undermine the idea of UBI, so it might make more sense to wish for bold and comprehensive one-off reforms.

The authors are the world's leading authorities on basic income, and it shows. Recommended for educated readers who need a scholarly compendium on the vagaries of the global UBI debate.

Tvrtnko Bali? says

Whenever the authors personal views were visible I felt a little irritated, but the book is still very objective and that as well as other complaints I might bring up are just nitpicks. In the end this is simply a great book explaining what basic income is, how feasible it is, what different people and ideologies think of it and how close or far away different places are at implementing it. I would definitely recommend it if you want to know more on the topic.

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eilasoles says

Unconditional basic income or UBI is basically "a regular cash income paid to all, on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement." UBI entitlements are characterized by being individual, universal and obligation-free, and this book makes the argument that an UBI is an instrument towards substantively increasing real freedoms for everybody. The individuality addresses issues relating to the distribution of power within the household, universality precludes (1) exclusion errors, (2) unemployment trap issues (the problem with means-tested programs being that if a job - however precarious - might disqualify you from public assistance, you might prefer to not take the risk) and (3) reduces administrative costs of means-tested programs. The freedom from obligations means absence of employment trap - people needn't choose jobs that are characterized by terrible working conditions. To the extent that the UBI can replace some part of means-tested public assistance and save on reduced administrative costs, it is self-financing.

I thought the book discussed the rationale for an UBI really well. All I'd known about why we needed the UBI was the Silicon-Valley argument that automation means a decrease in the demand for human labor and hence loss of opportunities for work. And if work opportunities are lacking, then the jobless population must be provided with something to live on in order to stave economic or social or political collapse. The inequality and precarity that have increased so dramatically in the West because of automation, globalization and neoliberal policies, are arguably already coming close to triggering the collapse of Western economies and Western liberal democracy. This is the somewhat "conservative" argument in favor of the UBI.

This book made me aware of a second, deeper argument: seeing UBI as a social dividend flowing from "common ownership of the earth," an argument as old as Thomas Paine's 1796 *Agrarian Justice*. If the UBI is accepted to represent a process that redistributes, in a fair manner, the natural and social and institutional resources that belong to everybody, the base that comes to us from nature or past generations but which none of us individually are responsible for, then there is a direct link between the UBI and taxes on carbon, on oil

and minerals, on property and land, on financial transactions, and even, on citizenship. This is distinct from the Marxian vision of redistributive justice where production really belongs to the current producers but is partially appropriated by the capitalist class. Rather, the UBI vision sees what is produced today as the result of historical processes of institutional and technological development and capital accumulation, and of unpaid care work and natural resources. In this broader vision, everybody - whether currently engaged in paid production or not - is entitled to a fair share in what is produced.

As they put it, "what a basic income does is ensure that everyone receives a fair share of what none of us today did anything for, of the huge present very unequally incorporated in our incomes."

Van Parijs and Vanderborght are at their best when they discuss political support for the UBI. They astutely explain the puzzle of labor unions' attitudes towards the UBI: in general, it is one neglect if not outright rejection. Why is the working-class movement opposed to something that increases the bargaining power of all workers? I completely agree with their assessment that it definitely has something to do with the split between organized labor (that usually forms union membership) and unorganized or part-time labor and that it also has everything to do with gender and race. They write,

"Probably the most general and fundamental reason for labor union's lack of enthusiasm is simply that they believe the introduction of a basic income would not be in the best interest of their core membership, often largely made up full-time, make workers with stable contracts and decent pay."

While the implications for gender and racial inequality is not something that the book examines directly, I think that the UBI has the potential to reach workers that neither labor unions nor minimum wage laws can reach. As membership in the formal or full-time or unionized labor force is structured by both race and gender, the UBI is arguably likely to have a genuinely redistributive effect in favor of non-whites and women. The UBI addresses the paid work bias of social protection schemes as they now stand. UBI might also address the administrative difficulties or humiliations faced by those in means-tested or conditional public assistance programs - and such experiences are likely to be gendered, racialized and classed.

Another lacuna of the book is that it focuses on the implications of an UBI for developed countries - what about developing countries? I believe that in a developing country context, people's needs are overwhelming centered around things that a UBI cannot typically provide. These are things like provisions for good-quality education and healthcare, public infrastructure like roads and electricity and so forth that are acknowledged to be public goods and are hence unlikely to be provided because of UBI (this is distinct from the West where a majority of the population has lost access to such services, even though the capacity to provide them still exists). Lack of development itself is now seen as a failure to develop institutions that sustain growth. And if low living standards are the primary problem, it seems unlikely that a UBI would kick off a virtuous cycle towards access to good living standards for all.

In the case of India for instance, the UBI is proposed as a substitute for existing government spending on social protection which is argued to be inefficient. In particular, the UBI is seen as an effective replacement to India's PDS system (subsidized foodgrain that is procured from farmers at support prices and then distributed across the country to around 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population). It is argued that the PDS has large leakages due to inclusion errors and that a cash transfer is better. I believe that this argument is flawed. Access to grain is not equivalent to access to cash transfers especially as grain is sold in markets where prices fluctuate, creating unbearable risks with a fixed cash transfer. Not many have bank accounts, and the poorest are likely to find harder to negotiate cash transfers than the wealthy. Thirdly, India has ration shops in every village, but only a handful of villages have banks. Finally, if anything, the PDS is subject to exclusion errors and this is best addressed by a universal PDS and not a universal cash

transfer. Attempting to replace the direct distribution of foodgrain with cash transfers in the Indian context might result in food insecurity for the most vulnerable.

Of course, the above arguments only apply if the UBI were to be funded with the country's own fiscal resources, in which case I'd say they would be better spent on public goods - but what if they were to be funded from the outside? If we think about global transfers (which currently take the form of aid), the obvious issues are that they're vulnerable to being directed into projects that have little or no impact on the lives of those in developing countries. Or even worse, if given to undemocratic regimes they hold the potential of empowering such regimes. UBI therefore presents an excellent opportunity: if the nature of these transfers could be formalized in an international treaty and then collected and pooled by international body, they could be effectively distributed in developing countries as individual, unconditional, universal grant to their citizens. This would be both a simple solution to ensuring that the redistributive transfers occur in a transparent, democratic and (probably) highly effective manner.

So I think that the book doesn't talk as much as it could about the (positive, I think) implications that UBI would have for inequalities based on gender, race and citizenship. But on the whole, I think it is an incredibly thorough and rigorously-argued book. A couple of chapters were tough going, especially the one containing philosophical arguments about the ethics of an unconditional basic income; I couldn't care less if Rawls's theory or Dworkin's theory justifies a basic income or not. On the other hand, the chapter on whether an UBI is politically achievable or not is fascinating. Their almost encyclopaedic grasp of the history of almost every UBI proposal every made is positively intimidating (which isn't really surprising, given that van Parijs is brilliant and has worked on UBI for ages). But even if I did skip stuff, I know I'm going to want to come to this book to read it more carefully. It's hard to find a book that's this clear and accessible and yet so meticulously argued.

Jenny Taylor says

If you are a layperson looking for basic information on the concept of a basic income, like I am, you would be best served by finding another book. This one seems to be written for academics and economists. I do consider myself to be an intelligent person, but I found the language to be unnecessarily academic.

Large portions of the book also felt like a waste of time:

- multiple chapters on the historical background that led to the idea of basic income
- attempts to justify the ethics of a basic income scheme according to various political philosophies that one may or may not subscribe to
- Regarding sustainability, the authors introduce several basic income experiments only to conclude that "two major limitations, intrinsic to any basic income experiment, prevent us from drawing any firm conclusion about the economic sustainability of a lifelong basic income funded from within the community that enjoys it." (140)

Before reading *Basic Income* I had not yet formed an opinion on the idea of an unconditional, universal basic income. After reading, I still don't have an opinion on whether such a concept is feasible, but I believe it deserves more consideration.

Hadrian says

Description of the 'basic income' welfare program - that is, a regular cash payment made to every citizen without means-testing or other obligations. The authors cite benefits of the program would be reductions to unemployment or underemployment, and reducing income inequality.

The authors make comparisons to other welfare programs (EITC, basic endowments, a negative income tax, working-time reduction), and describe its historical antecedents, and discuss possible objections - the free-rider problem, economic sustainability, political resistance. They note that it would be difficult to institute the program in one go, and any legislation would have to be implemented in steps, or possibly in local areas first as experiments before taken on a national level.

For readers interested in the topic, or those with a background in economics and want to engage with the arguments seriously.

Michael says

My review, as well as my other thoughts on reading, also can be found on my blog.

Scholarly and detailed, *Basic Income* is less of an introduction to the idea and more of a thorough defense of it, from a firmly leftist point of view. Published by Harvard University Press, the book is meticulously sourced, and it contains a wealth of information on the subject. After overviewing the history of public assistance, social insurance, and Universal Basic Income (UBI) in the West, the authors consider everything from how UBI might be funded, to why it should be preferred over its "cousins" (e.g. negative income tax). The book seems written for those who are interested or involved in debating the policy, but even if it is dense and sometimes inaccessible, *Basic Income* makes for a highly stimulating read.

Andrés Ramírez says

Necesario y completo. Altamente recomendable.

Jose Sierra says

Un buen libro para entender lo fundamental sobre el tema. Bueno para reflexionar sobre las implicaciones de la implementación y de sus consecuencias tanto positivas como negativas en cualquier sociedad. Es una lectura muy recomendable para quienes se interesan por la parte conceptual, filosófica y ética del UBI.

Craig says

Great overview of the basic income concept, tackling the idea from many different standpoints. Nice historical development too. Only negative is that I would have liked to have seen a section about how basic

income could be beneficial for ethnic minorities

Coan says

Basic Income by Phillippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght.

As automation takes greater and greater attention in the media, I've noticed a proportional increase in the discussion surrounding the establishment of a uniform minimum income floor for all people.

Fun fact – the discussion of such income floors started in the 1700's during the industrial revolution, and has ebbed and flowed ever since!

If you are interested in a history lesson around basic income, this book can provide a sound background. The first part of its analysis (from the poor laws of England, to the modern day welfare state and perhaps its next evolution) is its strongest.

The description of basic income and its economics is also reasonably detailed without being tedious, however I did find the authors' base assumption that a basic income not replace current welfare poorly explained (typically I have seen basic income explained as a replacement for social security payments).

Where the book falls down is in its rather boorish descriptions of income (which could be improved by case study type stories) and little detail on studies conducted in the past save some high level description without results. Layout could also be improved through use of summary tables of major points.

Lastly, readers who enjoy purely theoretical arguments will likely enjoy the material more than I did. I found the armchair theory approach to describing how basic income could become a reality, rather uninspiring and dry.

A fascinating first third, undone by its later parts.

2 stars.

Rhys says

A very well written book and compelling argument for unconditional basic income (national and, even, global).

I went into the book sympathetic with Foucault's argument that 'basic income' was simply another means by which capitalism tries to exceed another barrier (with technology replacing human labour resulting in greater unemployment and a growing chasm between the lives of rich and poor). I still think Foucault was in principle correct, but the authors of this book make a compelling case for basic income providing greater freedom for all, greater 'happiness', and the potential for addressing environmental 'externalities'.

Mike Stolfi says

All of the excitement of a dry economics read.

I'm already convinced, & there's a fair amount of solid data here, but if you're looking for emotional inspiration this really isn't going to do it unless you're Sheldon Cooper....

Peter McLoughlin says

An idea that would be a game changer for the better in the free world in the face of automation. Production because of machines is becoming untethered from labor. we will have to restructure the economy in such a way to fit this momentous change where labor is no longer the primary input because a large part of this displaced labor force still needs a livelihood if want to keep any kind of decent functioning society. A basic income could be an answer. This book explores the idea which has been around since the 18th century whose time has come.
