

BEYOND OR BESIDES NEOLIBERALISM? THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Lucian T. Butaru*

Abstract

This article intends to present comparatively the theoretical and political debates, past and present, on the universal basic income. The purpose of this comparison is to highlight the potential of acceptability of such a program, and the respective reticence and barriers it stirs. The potential of acceptability and implementation stems from the fact that the program was conceived before the split of the old left and continues to manifest itself in an area where the ideological consensus of liberalism and socialism is still possible. The reluctance seems to be due to the leftist radicalism, which remains quite strong, despite the ease with which such programs can be translated into the language of right. Reticence and concealment continue even today, despite the logical consistency of the solutions proposed and despite the evidence brought in using the tools of social sciences.

Keywords: universal basic income, negative income tax, Austrian and market socialist economics

Introduction

In this article, I intend to show how those who decide politically the fate of economy have ignored a pretty simple and old idea, and also sound enough idea for it to be supported by respectable thinkers: the idea of unconditional income.

What is this all about? The idea was present over time under different names.¹ In addition, there are numerous nuances regarding the precise

* Dr. Lucian T. Butaru, Lecturer in the Department of European Studies at Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania.
Contact: lbutaru@yahoo.com

¹ Universal Basic Income, Citizens' Dividend, Social Wage, Demogrant, Negative Income Tax, Basic Capital etc.

form of the benefice to be granted, but whether it is regarded as income or as capital, or as an annual or monthly pay, in all the variants, we find a common ground: granting this benefice should not be conditioned by the recipient's ability or willingness to work. At present, the formula that is most often used is UBI (Universal Basic Income). By "universal" we understand the fact that it is paid to any individual, regardless to the person's willingness or ability to work, regardless to the person's contribution to the social security budget, and even more interesting, regardless to the person's financial situation. This means that from the poorest to the richest resident of a state, everyone would benefit from this type of income. Besides the supplementary sense of universality that such a measure ensures, thus appalling the common sense of those accustomed to the exclusive assisting of the poor, this provision radically eliminates the bureaucracy involved in the allocation of benefits. Moreover, this does not seem to undermine the financial motivation to work since the benefit is received at the same level regardless to the increases of other sources of income of the beneficiary - unlike the competing formulations of the idea or any other anti-poverty policy, when such support is gradually cut as new sources of income appear. Therefore, we deal with an *ex ante* inequality correction applied to individuals caught in the game with diverse markets of capitalism at the expense of the *ex post* correction handled (or dealt with in the past) by the welfare state.² In order to realize the extent of the unequal treatments that the measure corrects we must define the term "basic":

The UBI is called 'basic' because it is something on which a person can safely count, a material foundation on which a life can firmly rest. Any other income – whether in cash or in kind, from work or savings, from the market or the state – can lawfully be added to it. On the other hand, nothing in the definition of UBI, as it is here understood, connects it to some notion of 'basic needs'. A UBI, as defined, can fall short of or exceed what is regarded as necessary to a decent existence.³

² John Cunliffe, Guido Erreygers (eds.), *The Origins of Universal Grants: An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. XI.

³ Philippe Van Parijs (ed.), *What's Wrong with a Free Lunch?*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2001, pp.

How old is the idea and who are its supporters? The idea in question precedes the appearance of the *Communist Manifesto*.⁴ As an intellectual product of the old left, for which the principles seemed to matter more than the means required to implement them, the idea is likely to please both the liberals (who in the meantime became the flagship of the right) and the followers of the new left. "It is not uncommon to find champions of Basic Income among people who would never have even flirted with the idea of thoroughgoing change in the societies in which they live"⁵. Among those who promoted, reinvented or even mentioned ideas that can be included in this current we find names that reflect the entire contemporary political spectrum: Milton Friedman, James Tobin, John Kenneth Galbraith, Emmanuel Saez, Jonathan Grube, Erik Olin Wright, Peter Frass, Carole Pateman, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Philippe Van Parijs, etc.⁶

Consequently, UBI should be placed beyond or even aside from the cleavages produced by the current positionings towards the neoliberal policies. Coming from an old consensus that goes beyond the divergent visions of Maximilien Robespierre and Thomas Paine, the idea at the heart of UBI reconciles both the formal liberty and equality preferred by the liberals and their effective variants favored by the leftist. "Liberty, equality, and efficiency"⁷ could become the basis for a renewed consensus that abandons the opposition between evolution and revolution, going on a road that does not exceed them, but simply takes a different direction. However, the possible cross-ideological consensus, as revealed by various supporters, does not seem to be enough.

So, what's wrong with a free lunch? The only problem with the idea was (and still is) that it is counter-intuitive in a context in which the cult of work and the motivation systems based on coercion define the cultural

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⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁵ Daniel Raventós, *Basic Income. The Material Conditions of Freedom*, London: Pluto Press, 2007, p. 154.

⁶ Dylan Matthews, "Basic Income: The World's Simplest Plan to End Poverty, Explained" in *Vox*, [<http://www.vox.com/2014/9/8/6003359/basic-income-negative-income-tax-questions-explain>], 8 September, 2014.

⁷ Philippe Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All. What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 28.

systems. This is visible in all the writings, old and new, which address the issue. Most of these texts provide generous space to the battle against the prejudices of the time, although the idea was mostly ignored rather than disputed. The most striking aspect of the proposals on UBI is that the wheel has been reinvented since the dawn of capitalism, most of the early formulations remaining "in the dark corners of our knowledge"⁸.

Historical perspectives⁹

The history of the proposals of this type, stemming from different social contexts, consists of isolated and episodic occurrences, which often ignored each other over the last two hundred years. In trying to find remedies to the misfortunes caused by industrial capitalism (sometimes conflated with the term "civilization"), philosophers and social reformers of different backgrounds and political orientations independently formulated proposals on guaranteed basic income / capital.¹⁰

What is interesting in the early formulations is that both the economy and the justice were considered political rather than technocratic. In this regard, citing just a few of the most concise statements made at the time, we learn that: "lands that have been reduced to private property are all usurpations"¹¹; that "the privileged estates as well as their ascending humble imitators [the bourgeoisie], [...] have stripped people of their work"¹²; and that a society that is based on ownership is "a society that is not constituted of the entire population, but only of the rich"¹³ and its sovereignty relies on force.

From this perspective, which calls under relativity any social order, any social reform that allows for those forced to sell their labour and those who did not even have the privilege of being exploited to gain dignity *within the system* is possible. In the words of cosmopolitan revolutionary

⁸ Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. VII.

⁹ For an extended version of this historical perspective on UBI see Lucian Butaru, „Dezbaterea despre venitul minim garantat. O perspectivă istorică” in *Vatra*, nr. 10/2014.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. XIII.

¹¹ Allen Davenport, "Agrarian Equality—To Mr. R. Carlile, Dorchester, Gaol (1824)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 93.

¹² Thomas Spence, "The Rights of Infants (1797)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹³ Agathon De Potter, "Social Economics (1874)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Thomas Paine, the law could be reformed so that "to maintain the benefits of what we call civilized life and at the same time to cure the evil that it produces"¹⁴. One interesting story of the time is the one that puts together the Enlightenment's mythology of the good, free and dignified savage in its natural state with Paine's observations on the "Indians" of North America. It matters less how much of it is projection and how much is observation, what matters is the existence of an alternative model of society that makes it possible for the poverty and misery visible "in any city and street in Europe" to be put forward as a product of social order rather than as a product natural order. This observation is important because society can be restructured, unlike the natural order that can not be negotiated.

On the other hand, the relativization of social order and, in particular, that of private ownership of land opens ways to design plausible technical solutions that are economically sustainable in "guaranteeing a salary or, in old age, a decent minimum income below which one can not fall"¹⁵. Since the legitimacy of ownership of land is questioned, the land belongs to anyone (for atheists) or to God (for believers) and, therefore, "its fruits belong to all"¹⁶. This opens a whole range of financing solutions, i.e. of payment for that minimum income that ensures the decency of a civilized life. I will not enlarge here on authors or traditions and their respective solutions but I will try to include everything in a global synthetic description: (1) the land and its resources can be viewed as a source of rent, and for the right to deprive others of its fruits one must pay a fee large enough as to ensure the subsistence of the deprived; (2) the land is a means of production that can be distributed to all in order to ensure a decent living for everyone; and (3) a more conservative or at least more prudent solution which, in order to avoid the problems of categorization (private property/ personal property or property obtained through hard work and thrift / property obtained from a privileged situation) considers taxing the right to inheritance - in various percentages,

¹⁴ Thomas Paine, "Agrarian Justice (1797)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Charles Fourier, "Letter to the High Judge (1803)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁶ Joseph Charlier, "Solution of the Social Problem or Humanitarian Constitution, Based upon Natural Law, and Preceded by the Exposition of Reasons (1848)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 106.

ranging up to 100%. As payment for the decent living, we find two variants, "basic capital" or "basic income", both paid in kind or in money.

Like today, regardless of the technical solution they adopt, supporters of UBI spend a lot of time battling with the economic prejudices of the era. Even the presentation of the "mathematical"¹⁷ or accounting side of the political proposition is a form of preventive legitimization. The same line is followed by the explanations relating to the fact that such expenses are already in place and basic income would just be a decent replacement of "all aid offered by the Poor Law"¹⁸ or other similar policies; and in contexts where no such regulations exist, some authors call for the "abandoning of the bizarre convention" which argues that charity and private insurance would be more entitled to provide subsistence means in critical moments.¹⁹ However, the most interesting critical battles are those that question the existing socio-economic structure. For example, Joseph Charlier notes that the hardest jobs, dangerous or socially menial, such as mining, waste management and any kind of "dirty work" are disproportionately paid in relation to their socio-economic utility and that a guaranteed basic income would correlate better utility with value, since it would leave aside despair as a form of motivation to work.²⁰ Similarly, but from a different perspective / context, Charles Marshall Hattersley foresees a balancing of forces in the sexual division of labour.²¹

Contemporary perspectives

Contemporary debates on the idea of an income not conditioned by labour are mere resummptions of recurrent discussions. As long as it remained at the boundary between economic reform and political utopia, the issue of unconditional basic income has been reinvented under

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

¹⁸ E. Mabel, Dennis Milner, "Scheme for a State Bonus (1918)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹⁹ Juliet Rhys-Williams, "Something to Look Forward To. A Suggestion for a New Social Contract (1943)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 166.

²⁰ Charlier, *loc. cit.*, p. 112.

²¹ Charles Marshall Hattersley "The Community's Credit. A Consideration of the Principle and Proposals of the Social Credit Movement (1922)" in Cunliffe, Erreygers (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 144.

different names and under multiple forms and variations with reference to technical solutions, ethical explanations or economic purposes. This mutual ignoring favored a sort of ideological ecumenism on the idea, knowing that ideological differences are not solely the result of incompatibilities of principles, but they also involve a serious dose of calculations based on strategic positioning on the market of political ideas. Nevertheless, ever since the idea has penetrated the academic circuit (at the end of the twentieth century), it ceased to be reinvented, and the conceptualization effort became repetitive rather than cumulative. Current synthesis of similar solutions achieved in different contexts and coming from different ideological directions, although seemingly irreconcilable, gave the idea additional momentum in the public space:

More or less recently, at least in the European arena of political philosophy, an old proposal has gained renewed attention and, indeed, approval [...] but in our days, as is observed with some satisfaction by its adherents, it is no longer just an academic issue for philosophers of justice and political economists.²²

What is interesting in the current academic formulation is that this idea, which incorporates the radical left ideals regarding economic emancipation, is formulated in the terms of the radical right, in its democratic version (neoclassical liberalism). The situation is explained by the fact that political economy and therefore any political approach to the economic components of society are dominated by the neoliberal ideology which is in a dominant position since the 1980s.

From this perspective, which challenges the effectiveness of any action on socio-economic issues, old proposals are reformulated in terms that, although preserve the solution intact, cause fewer adverse reactions in both ideological camps. Most of the texts on the issue focus on the benefits of reducing the bureaucracy dealing with health and social security. And if the economic benefits seem rather hypothetical the moral benefits can be tailored to seem very tangible. This form of poverty eradication is more moral than others. First, it is more moral because it eliminates paternalism

²² Gijs van Donselaar, *The Right to Exploit: Parasitism, Scarcity, Basic Income*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 102.

and other forms of social control caused by the welfare state and because it lays on thorough checking before granting assistance or other social benefits.²³ Secondly, it is more moral because it is universal in the sense that no criterion of discrimination operates in providing the income. Therefore, unlike the forms of support focused exclusively on the poor, the universal basic income does not generate the shame accompanying like a shadow the privilege of being granted a benefice.

The issue of economic efficiency slips quite plausibly in this type of analysis. For example, we may consider the issue of motivation to work determined by retaining the "marginal utility" in accumulating income exceeding the basic income. Similarly, the futility of any future settlement of the minimum wage can be taken into account. On the other hand, at the risk of upsetting some liberals, we could also address the possibility of eliminating the shortcomings masked by the excessive exploitation of the workforce hyper motivated by the spectrum of poverty.²⁴ This masked inefficiency can be extremely harmful in the context of a global market where, for example, some highly productive and innovative competitors can be removed by others, operating in a more permissive social-political setting, allowing them to reduce prices exclusively by under remunerating labour, thus neglecting innovations that increase the efficiency (not just in terms of accounting) of resources management. But if we do not wish to offend anyone, we can translate the whole story in ethical terms, as follows:

*Like marriage, the employment decision should always be 'truly voluntary' in order to reduce, if not eliminate, the potential for coercion in the employment relationship.*²⁵

In line with such principled formulations, "real-libertarians can side with the old critics of alienation"²⁶ – because the story is about reducing

²³ Guinevere Liberty Nell, Daniel Richmond, "A BIG Paradigm Shift for Society: A Speculative Look at Some of the Implications of Introducing a BIG" in Guinevere Liberty Nell (ed.), *Basic Income and the Free Market. Austrian Economics and the Potential for Efficient Redistribution*, New-York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 184-192.

²⁴ Lucian Butaru, „Criza economică văzută din afara economiei" in *Critic Atac*, [<http://www.criticatac.ro/9025/criza-economica-vazuta-din-exteriorul-economiei>]

²⁵ Theodore Burczak, "A Hayekian Case for a Basic Income" in Nell (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁶ Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All...*, p. 34.

state's impact on individuals' private sphere or because it concerns the conditions of possibility for free exchange:

Mises and Rothbard stress that exchange in the market should be strictly voluntary. A BIG [Basic Income Guarantee] could transform the labour market into a truly innovative dynamic system of social exchange by ensuring work and consumption are truly voluntary. [...] The choice between a given job and starvation is not a voluntary choice; and the culture that fuels the "work ethic," productivism, and materialism out of many individual's fears that their loved one's preferences will not otherwise be filled, or that their children will starve, is a culture bred not out of preference but out of necessity.²⁷

Everything can be redefined so as to ease the ideological digestion of ideas. That is why most of the texts abound in references to Rawls, Nozick, Dworkin, etc – which on the other hand hinders, in terms of readability, the digestion of many academic texts addressing the issue. From this point of view, in a contest of boredom inducing readings, academic texts addressing universal basic income are strong competitors to texts on multiculturalism. Even the question of ownership of land, which has exhausted much of its economic stakes, could be redefined in the new key, which is acceptable even for the "Austrian economists":

instead of nationalizing the land or taxing it and using the land to fund a BIG, it might make more sense to simply use the land as a way to estimate the appropriate size of the BIG. [...] The BIG could be funded with a tax upon the wealth that the economy as a whole has produced for individuals. Although the tax would be on the whole economy, the tax would be set to only raise the amount of the value of the land.²⁸

However, in the synthesis and academic redefinition process that we have witnessed lately, the radical relativist perspective of the past has

²⁷ Guinevere Liberty Nell, "Welfare in the Austrian Marketplace: Bridging Austrian and Market Socialist Economics" in Nell (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

²⁸ Nell, "Who Owns the Land? Land as the Basis for Funding of a BIG" in Nell (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 179.

not been definitively abandoned. Ideas such as those claiming that work and individual merits can not be dissociated from natural resources seem to have sufficient moral authority and argumentative efficiency: "Let us now turn things round. It is easy enough to imagine what humans would produce without natural resources to work with: nothing"²⁹. From here on it is just a step up to recalling the Marxist social contribution incorporated in any work, in any type of accumulation, however meritocratic or unusual it may be. Although not explicit, a rhetorical question haunts most of the texts: What would be the economic viability of any activity if it should pay for the historical acquisitions that allow it to function or if it was not possible to outsource the most expensive part of it: from the reproduction of labour force to the cost of repairing the damage caused by that business to the ecosystem in which it operates? Leftist radicalism that surfaces even in the most libertarian formulations of UBI could explain the reluctance that still reigns in the political environment - despite considerable theoretical advances, especially in the part concerning the financing, "one of the areas of Basic Income research where most progress has been made in the last ten or twelve years"³⁰. EU structures seem to expect more noise from citizens mobilized around projects like European Citizens' Initiative for an Unconditional Basic Income³¹ or Basic Income Earth Network³². Switzerland seems to advise its citizens to vote against the referendum on UBI to take place soon.³³ USA ignores the solution Milton Friedman³⁴ proposed decades ago, despite the fact that between 1968 and 1980³⁵ four

²⁹ Philippe Van Parijs, *Arguing for Basic Income. Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 15.

³⁰ Raventós, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

³¹ [<http://basicincome2013.eu>].

³² [<http://www.basicincome.org/bien/aboutbien.html>].

³³ Karl Widerquist, "Switzerland: Government Reacts Negatively to UBI Proposal" in *Basic Income News*, August 29, 2014, [<http://binews.org/2014/08/switzerland-government-reacts-negatively-to-ubi-proposal>].

³⁴ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 190-195.

³⁵ Robert A. Levine, et al. "A Retrospective on the Negative Income Tax Experiments: Looking Back at the Most Innovative Field Studies in Social Policy" in Karl Widerquist, Michael Anthony Lewis, Steven Pressman, *The Ethics And Economics of the Basic Income Guarantee*, Cornwall: Ashgate, 2005, p. 95.

extremely serious experiments scientifically proved the viability of the whole project. Results showed a very moderate reduction in labour supply (13% reduction of work effort)³⁶ due to work-incentive effects, and significant positive influences in school grades, teacher rating, and directly on test scores.³⁷

Conclusions

As presented above, we can see that UBI does not contradict the liberal principles or the socialist ones for that matter. UBI seems to be some sort of solution, which originated and remained within the ideological framework of the old left, and that brought together and can still (contextually) reunite liberals and socialists. Moreover, this is not a very complicated solution, technically speaking; it is financially feasible and does not require any form of coercion to be implemented. The current system of preventing wasteful spending or the system of allocation of genuinely rare goods remains in place. Even the social hierarchy remains unchanged. The only element that exits the system is suffering - specifically, we refer mainly to the physical suffering (hunger, cold, sickness) that reinforces traditional social suffering. So, what's wrong with a free lunch?

To some extent, the reluctance towards this proposal is understandable, because any change implies efforts to adapt and possible difficulties. If it becomes reality, UBI will change the rules of the economic game. This is a certainty. Basic Income could generate unforeseeable situations. The motivation system will be reconfigured. The relation between the less desirable poorly paid jobs and the much-needed well-paid jobs will also change. It is also certain that UBI will not solve all the internal contradictions of the current economic system. But it is silly to "disparage Basic Income for not attaining objectives which it is not designed to attain [...] is a bit like sneering at a malaria vaccine because it does not put an end to infant mortality."³⁸ Furthermore, the consensus the theme meets across the entire political spectrum is at least questionable (I refer only to the

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

³⁸ Raventós, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

parties who are accustomed to governing): it is either ignored because it is unsatisfactory, or it is deemed irresponsible or populist.

Every time it came to the attention of those leading political battles, UBI has been considered either too much (for the right) or too little (for the left), without taking into consideration the theoretical arguments or social experiments already performed and analyzed. This means that somewhere along the way, the old radicalism that could unite the new camps lost some of its force and that both liberals and socialists of today have absorbed a significant dose of conservatism, beyond the natural progress that both camps made on their journey. In addition, that dose of conservatism comes from the common sense that currently seems to be out of phase, because it is structured by premises that are in fact mere remains of an outdated means of a production. Logically speaking, the cult of labour, social inclusion based on mutual obligations³⁹, Malthusian fear and the ideology of scarcity cannot peacefully coexist with apocalyptic visions foreseeing the futility of humans in an economy increasingly automated, with global demand in decline due to unemployment and crisis of overproduction. If we compare today's fears and reluctance to proposals on universal basic income with those from the dawn of capitalism we see how much they are similar, although, in the meantime two hundred years of technological progress had passed. The only plausible explanation for today's reluctance, which could also emphasize the coexistence of old and new fears, is demagogy - a demagogy that uses the contradictions present at the time in the cultural system called "common sense" to legitimize a greater degree of social control.

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³⁹ André Gorz, "On the Difference between Society and Community, and Why Basic Income Cannot by Itself Confer Full Membership of Either" in Parijs, *Arguing for Basic Income...*, p. 184.

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