

Does the world owe us a living?

Danny Dorling lauds an exposition of the benefits of obligation-free income and how to attain them

Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy
By Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght
Harvard University Press
400pp, £23.95
ISBN 9780674052284
Published 30 March 2017

This is a book about multiple emancipations. What would it take for all women to be free – by unshackling the countless numbers who are financially dependent on men? What action would free up enough people, men and women, to care for others who might otherwise live in fear, especially in countries where much more social care will be needed in the very near future?

Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, an economist and a political scientist, respectively, explain how the academic arguments for a basic income have been growing in strength since they were first made in the late 1700s. Since then, it has become clear to a still small (but growing) group of people that with so many of us no longer able to earn a subsistence income from the land, and with growing automation and ecological limits to sensible consumption, social progress without a basic income cannot be not sustainable. Today the vast majority of our food is grown and harvested through automation, and robots make more and more of our goods; but we cannot use machines to care for each other. Not yet – and, if we are to stay sane, hopefully never. A concern with sanity in a book on economics is refreshing.

A basic income would allow people to care for each other more and to work for others (for whom they would rather not work) less. However, say the authors, “we very much doubt that a generous unconditional basic income will ever be introduced anywhere as a result of a big triumphal revolution. It is more likely to enter through the back door.” By the

back door they mean the gradual adaptation of existing complex benefit regimes, via thousands of adaptations following hundreds of experiments.

The authors agree with the late Sir Tony Atkinson, the economist and inequality studies pioneer, that a basic income is likely to be introduced gradually, by compromising primarily on the payment being unconditional. In one such scenario, anyone working in education, or caring for children, the sick or the elderly for 35 hours or more a week (which includes a vast majority of working-age adults) would receive a basic income proportionate to their length of contribution in any tax jurisdiction. It would later be extended to all adults, not least because this approach so dramatically cuts administration costs.

The introduction of basic income would result in less production within firms and more within households. As production within the household is not included in gross domestic product, GDP volume would thus appear to fall, although entrepreneurship should rise as more people would be free to dabble. Van Parijs and Vanderborght explain all this patiently, providing argument after argument as to why its introduction would be “economically clever” and why it is the next logical step to take in a long history of social policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. Their proposals are not only clear, but also extremely pragmatic.

Van Parijs and Vanderborght suggest that after the introduction of basic income, payments should rise to £740 a month in the UK, or about £25 a day, and eventually be given to all adults. For the rich this amount is nothing, but for most people it is a significant sum and for many people it would represent emancipation. The immediate effects would be greatest for those currently navigating the hoops of claiming benefits.

And for people on low incomes but no benefits, the income would offer a huge boost to both their standard of living and their freedom to choose what paid work to do, rather than being obliged to take any work they could find.

A basic income must be paid in cash, and it must be paid to individuals, in order not to dissuade people from living together. Because it is not meant, it is much better for the poor than the benefits that are currently aimed at them and intended for their benefit. To date, this is a paradox that has been hard for many to understand. The value of this book is that, more comprehensively than any other study yet, it explains why an obligation-free income for all would be so beneficial, and it also charts how this could be incrementally attained.

A basic income would replace only those benefits of a lesser financial value. There will always be a small minority whose disabilities are so great that the cost for them of a minimally decent life will be higher. Moreover, a basic

income is no substitute, warn the authors, for the “public funding of quality education, quality health care, and other services”, which in any decent society always includes the public provision of housing.

The strongest argument against a basic income is that work is good for you and any discouragement from taking any paid work is morally objectionable. A weaker form of this argument is that it is not fair that people should be able to choose not to undertake paid work. However, for centuries we have tolerated many of the very rich not working. More importantly, a basic income makes it possible for people to choose to do the paid work they wish to do, and not have to take only that which is offered. If some people are willing to simply subsist on what the basic income provides, then they help all the rest of us by consuming the least. Ecologically, we cannot carry on consuming more and more material goods.

Taxing wealth more and labour less would fund basic income.

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However, for the minority of people on high incomes, income tax would have to rise. That in itself has a social benefit, as it discourages avarice among a small but very greedy minority. The authors of this study rule out consumption taxes as a means to fund basic income, other than eco-taxes on fossil fuel use, because of their inefficiency.

If I have one complaint about this book, it is that it misses out

the growing demographic case for a basic income. While children do not stay children for long, the elderly can be in need of care for many years, even if they are healthier in old age than their parents were because they live so much longer. The demographic transition we are now experiencing is only just beginning. It is changing what we will need more of in future – namely, people with more time.

Very few babies were born in the UK and similar countries in the 1920s and 1930s. The baby boom came in 1946. Most of those babies have just turned 70. There are 7.1 million people in their sixties today in the UK, and 8.5 million in their fifties, but fewer in their thirties than their forties. We have not yet had to deal with an ageing population – but we are about to. The introduction of a basic income could be one of the ways in which we deal with this new change.

The first trials of a basic income in the UK will begin in Scotland this year. Many other trials are already under way else-

where in the world. But for their results to be assessed and for such initiatives to spread, in “addition to visionaries, activists are needed – ass-kickers, *indignados*, people who are outraged by the status quo or by new reforms or plans that target the poor more narrowly, watch them more closely, and further reduce the real freedom of those with least of it”. The road to a basic income for all may well be paved with unholy political alliances, but eventually it will lead to a fairer, more sustainable society. Although the aim is utopian, the means proposed in this book are pragmatic, and even, by the authors’ own admission, Machiavellian.

The case for basic income has become serious politics. Ask yourself: who will willingly and happily care for you in your old age without it?

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, University of Oxford, and author of *A Better Politics: How Government Can Make Us Happier* (2016).