

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Books

Income for All

By Philippe Van Parijs & Yannick Vanderborght

Review by Juliana Bidadanure

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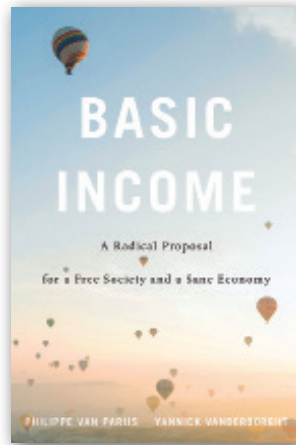
then what matters is a more equal distribution of opportunity to influence policy. I would have liked to hear more from Callahan on these big-picture questions. Are we chasing better outcomes or a more equal distribution of power? Are elite philanthropists a counterweight to other, self-interested elites—or to democracy itself? For now, these fundamental questions remain buried under the wealth of information in this book. ■

Income for All

REVIEW BY JULIANA BIDANANURE

In times of economic austerity—when the welfare state is shrinking as an ideal and an institution; access to childcare, healthcare and education are increasingly contested as rights of all; and the paradigm of individual responsibility rules—it is easy for progressives to give up on big ideals. If we can't even protect Planned Parenthood or affordable healthcare, pushing for anything more visionary seems based on mere wishful thinking. But for these same reasons, it may be more urgent than ever for progressives to propose radical utopias with the potential to federate otherwise divided societies. That's the view that Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght take in their fantastically comprehensive book.

Universal basic income (UBI) is a simple proposal to give every single member of a community a monthly cash grant, without asking them to opt in, and with no strings attached. The authors propose setting UBI at one quarter of GDP per capita—so in the US, each person would receive \$1,163 per month, whether they're rich or poor, working or unemployed. Their UBI is designed to go alongside publicly funded services, such as quality healthcare and education, and would be given to all fiscal residents of a country. UBI would help increase economic security for diverse groups—from the precariat, to care-workers and volunteers, to the working poor, the unemployed, and those at risk of becoming displaced from the labor market by technological changes.



BASIC INCOME: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy

By Philippe Van Parijs & Yannick Vanderborght
384 pages, Harvard University Press, 2017

Over eight insightful chapters, Parijs and Vanderborght trace back the roots of the policy proposal in the history of public assistance and social insurance, as well as in utopian thinking from Thomas Paine to Charles Fourier, James Meade, Milton Friedman, and Martin Luther King. They offer a powerful defense of UBI as an instrument of freedom and argue that it can be economically sustainable and politically achievable—especially if political communities consider starting with a partial UBI.

One of the most exciting promises of basic income is that it can help us see a way out of the current dominant regressive mindset on public assistance. Existing benefits systems often condone an obsession with screening out a supposedly undeserving underclass: the “welfare queens” and benefits scroungers. At worst, politicians take advantage of this paradigm to get elected, promising to screen out the free riders. At best, they address the problem in a shortsighted way, making benefits even more conditional to show that they are preventing scroungers from abusing the system. In doing so, they strengthen the myth that benefit claimants are indeed undeserving of assistance. UBI proponents propose to try out the opposite strategy to help rebuild the welfare state: doing away with conditionality to avoid benefits traps while also rejecting means testing, so that more workers also benefit from public assistance.

One important theme that the book could have addressed more is how UBI also can be an instrument of racial justice. One should not forget the long tradition of Black thought in the

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United States on guaranteed income, from the Black Panthers’ Party Manifesto to the recent endorsement of the policy by the Movement for Black Lives. As Dorian Warren has argued, those at the bottom of the US economic ladder, disproportionately people of color, stand to benefit most from basic income. In doing away with conditionality altogether, UBI also can circumvent many paternalistic restrictions on benefits that rest on racist tropes.

For this reason, as well as for all the reasons advanced by the authors, UBI can help us rethink much of what we take for granted, including the centrality of jobs and growth and our traditionally timid solutions to poverty. As the authors demonstrate, it can free us from the need for survival that forces us into jobs no matter how badly paid, useless, dangerous, or demeaning they may be. By turning existing narratives on their heads, UBI proposes a solution to bring us closer to a world where, the authors write, “the real freedom to flourish, through work and outside work, will be fairly distributed.”

Sound utopian? Not long ago, UBI did seem like a fantasy. Critics asked: How would people who believe that work is a moral duty and see the welfare state as a moral hazard ever agree to a system that doesn't even require a willingness to work?

Yet the basic income movement is growing and strengthening. Experiments have been conducted or are ongoing in countries as different as Finland, Brazil, Kenya, India, Canada, and the United States. In the United States, more and more personalities have expressed their interest in the policy, from progressive former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich to National Domestic Workers Alliance director Ai-jen Poo to futurist Martin Ford. The fear that automation may displace workers from the labor market at unprecedented rates is one of the many drivers of the renewed interest in UBI. The tech incubator YCombinator is currently testing basic income in Oakland. Notably, the Economic Security Project has also devoted \$10 million to research basic income over the next couple of years. UBI may be a utopia, but it is starting to look like a realistic one. ■