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Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy, by Philippe van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght

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

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Source: Alamy

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 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 so many current -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 means-tested, 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 dis-abilities 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 modern 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. 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 will likely 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 elsewhere 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?

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The authors





Philippe van Parijs, professor of economic and social ethics, [Université Catholique de Louvain](#) (top photo) was born in Brussels. “I grew up in Molenbeek, where both my parents were born. Molenbeek is a part of Brussels that used to be called Little Manchester (because of its factories) and is now called Little Marrakesh (because of the concentration of Moroccan immigration).”

“My maternal grandfather was active in local politics and convinced me of the importance of fighting for the rights of those who were both exploited economically and despised culturally,” he says. “The situation of North African immigrants today is not that different from that of Flemish workers at the time of Little Manchester.”

His parents, van Parijs recalls, encouraged his love of learning. “My father had done less well job-wise than his siblings, and for both my parents the school results of their children was a source of pride and self-esteem. Enthusiastic teachers also played a role, but for me as for so many others, no one made as much of a difference as my mother.”

Van Parijs has written about linguistic justice, and has mooted the possibility

of a tax on English-speaking countries for the benefit they derive as free riders in a world in which theirs is the lingua franca. Does he believe, then, that there should be a tax (or other kind of sanction) on francophone Belgians in Wallonia, and particularly in Brussels, who do not make efforts to speak Dutch, the other major official language of Belgium?

“No. But a multidimensional effort must be made to make young Walloons and Brusselers far more competent in Dutch and in English than they currently are,” he says. “As regards both Dutch and English, this is both more important and less difficult for Brusselers than for Walloons. The [Marnix Plan for a multilingual Brussels](#), which I co-founded, tries to contribute to this task in the Brussels context.”

Van Parijs initiated a series of urban events, Picnic the Streets, aimed at reclaiming spaces traditionally reserved for cars in Brussels, Europe’s second-most congested city. The social movement that grew out of those events was a key factor in the partial pedestrianisation, beginning on a trial basis in 2015, of the city’s Boulevard Anspach/Anspachlaan.

Was he surprised that Picnic the Streets led in such a short time to the pedestrianisation of the street – and does he feel it has been a success? Should more of Brussels be pedestrianised?

“Yes to all three questions,” he replies. “The pedestrianisation of Boulevard Anspach covered a larger territory and was implemented more quickly than I thought it would be. The space thereby liberated from car traffic will still remain ugly until all the work is done, and this will take a while. More squares and streets are in the process of being pedestrianised elsewhere in Brussels. Here and elsewhere, this trend must continue. Enjoyable immobility is no less important than sustainable mobility.”

Many proponents of universal basic income come from Belgium and the Netherlands. Does he believe that UBI is a distinctly Low Countries notion? “It is true that [BIEN](#), now a worldwide network, was founded in Belgium, but I would not say that Belgium stands out in the basic income discussion. The Netherlands, by contrast, certainly does. It is the only country in which there was a genuine public debate about basic income as early as the 1980s. This may be surprising in a country with a Calvinist majority. But the background socio-economic institutions — including a universal basic pension, universal child benefits, universal student grants and a relatively generous and general conditional minimum income system — certainly played a role, including in fostering the rise of part-time work.”

What does he believe is the best short answer to give when someone argues that “universal basic income encourages people to be lazy, because everyone is selfish – if I could have money for nothing I would do nothing”?

Van Parijs responds that under UBI, “material incentives will remain in place, and for some people they will increase: the jobless keep their basic income

when they find a job. But above all a basic income makes it easy for people to do something they really want to do, something they will therefore do with more enthusiasm and creativity, and keep doing for longer.”

If he could change one thing about the [Université Catholique de Louvain](#), what would it be?

“Reduce the average length of the initial block of studies for young adults and help transform the bulk of higher education into lifelong blended learning, ie, the local critical and imaginative appropriation by people of all ages of the mass of knowledge cheaply available on the web.”

And what gives van Parijs hope?

“The ability of members of the human species, despite all their differences, to communicate with each other, to empathise with each other and to really listen to each other's arguments.”

His co-author, Yannick Vanderborght (bottom photo), is professor of political science at the Université St-Louis in Brussels and a visiting professor at the [Université Catholique de Louvain](#).

“I was born in the small Belgian town of Ottignies, not far from the campus of Louvain-la-Neuve, where the [Université Catholique de Louvain](#) is located,” says Vanderborght. “I was raised in the countryside, and perhaps this contributed to increase my awareness of environmental issues, which are still one of my central concerns today. I now live in a large city, which is very convenient and more environment-friendly, but I miss the landscape.

He was, he says, a studious child, “and this was especially due to my parents. My mother had been a high school teacher before moving to another job, and my father spent his whole professional life teaching history at a Brussels high school. They actively encouraged the love of learning (and respect for teachers) in my sister, my brother, and myself. Our house was full of books, but at the time I never thought that I one day I would be able to write one myself.”

Of the genesis of his collaboration with van Parijs, arguably Belgium’s most eminent public intellectual, activist and scholar, Vanderborght recalls:

“Philippe became my PhD supervisor after a brief job interview, during which I told him that I found that whole basic income idea very unpromising.

“Despite this statement (or, perhaps, and this is typical of Philippe’s love of contradictory debates, precisely because of this statement), I got the research grant and started to explore basic income in further detail. I had many opportunities to discuss it with him at length, and of course I quickly became aware of the huge potential of this ‘radical proposal’. After my PhD was completed, Philippe and I published an introductory book on basic income, in 2005, in French. Since then, we thought of writing some sort of expanded version in English, but we really started to work hard on a new manuscript in early 2014. It became an entirely different book, as no single sentence was

left unchanged, and a huge amount of new material was added.

Vanderborght adds that “working with Philippe is a true privilege. As everyone in academia knows, he is a great mind, but he is also laid back and funny, and not at all self-important. At the same time, he is also very meticulous in his work. We double-checked every single fact mentioned in this book, and all chapters were rewritten several times. We worked hard, including on weekends and holidays, but the relaxed atmosphere and mutual trust really helped to move the book forward.”

Does he believe that arguing for the adoption of universal basic income is a job for philosophers and political scientists such as himself and his co-author, rather than economists?

“In libraries and bookshops, books on basic income are often found in the economics section,” Vanderborght acknowledges. “Obviously the economic aspects are of key importance: can we finance it? Who will be a net beneficiary? Who will be a net contributor? But the normative justification for basic income should come first: is it fair to distribute money on a totally unconditional basis? We need sound justifications before we can deal with economic and, for that matter, political feasibility. Political science helps to look at all kind of institutional constraints, and helps us to be more clever in shaping windows of opportunities.”

Vanderborght’s areas of research interest include social policy and trade unions. Is universal basic income a proposal that has strong support from the trade union community?

“For a long time unions were very sceptical about basic income, if not actively hostile to it. They saw it as antithetic to the interests of their core membership: male workers with full-time jobs. Increasingly, however, in European countries such as France, Belgium and even more clearly the UK, they have started to take the idea more seriously. The labour market is changing, jobs are disappearing, new types of activities and new aspirations emerge, and unions gradually start to adapt to this new world.”

If Vanderborght could change one thing about his academic institutions, what would it be?

“For the [Université Catholique de Louvain](#), I would change its name to Université de Louvain,” he replies.

“As for the Université Saint-Louis in Brussels, where I have my main affiliation, we have mainly bachelors’ students and a few doctoral students. We have one master’s degree in European studies, but not in political science, sociology, economics, etc. I would like to see Saint-Louis offering those master’s degrees, for various reasons including the fact that it could help professors to connect their teaching to their research interests. But there are legal and financial obstacles to this move, unfortunately.

Does he see universal basic income as a Low Countries notion?

“Honestly, I do not think that Belgium has been especially important in the debate. It is true that BIEN was founded here, but it had to do with Philippe and some of his Louvain colleagues, not with Belgium as such. Some Belgian scholars, like Jurgen De Wispelaere, are very actively involved, but this is true of many other countries.

“The Dutch discussion has been much more intense, especially in the 1990s and recently again with [Rutger Bregman’s book](#),” he observes. “Basic income was even discussed at governmental level in 1994. This has to do, I believe, with the fact that Dutch people like to experiment with new ideas, and tend to be very pragmatic. If basic income can be a solution to the welfare mess, why not try it? Besides, the Netherlands already has a basic pension and a universal child benefit, so the very idea of a universal grant might be more familiar. On the other hand, the Dutch work ethic is very strong, and I do not think that basic income is around the corner there.”

What gives Vanderborcht hope?

“The optimism of my students!”

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