Editor’s Notes

Welcome to the third issue of Imprints. Two themes dominate this issue: basic income and methodology. Basic income figures prominently in the interview with its most distinguished advocate, Philippe Van Parijs, whose work came under the critical scrutiny of Ian Gough in our first issue. That project also receives some attention from Adrian Little in his study of flexible working and from Ruth Lister in her searching engagement with the work of Bill Jordan. Van Parijs also figures as a member of the September Group, whose character and history are recounted by G.A. Cohen. The methodology of the social sciences, so central to the Septemberist project, has also been the subject of recent work by the American philosopher John Searle. Elizabeth Frazer casts a critical eye of Searle’s work. Finally, the LSE school of nationalism and its view that nationalism is a quintessentially modern phenomenon, of European origin, is put open to question by Philip Gerrans.

Producing Imprints for a year has been a hard, but rewarding, experience. We should like to thank our readers, subscribers and contributors for their support. We hope that support will continue and welcome any feedback. We are also keen to receive submissions on any topic that falls within our stated aims.

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Interview:

The Need for Basic Income: An Interview with Philippe Van Parijs

You are perhaps best known for your advocacy, both political and academic, of the proposal that an unconditional basic income be granted to all citizens. Let us first ask you to set out that proposal.

Basic income is a particular form of guaranteed minimum income – a scheme which gives all people access to some income irrespective of their current work performance or their past work performance. A guaranteed minimum income in this sense is something which has existed in several European countries for a number of years, but basic income differs from the existing guaranteed minimum income along three dimensions: first, basic income is strictly individual, given to all people on an individual basis irrespective of their household situation; second, it is given to all irrespective of income from other sources (labour income or capital income); third, basic income is not subject to whether people are willing to work. It is not restricted to the involuntarily unemployed, but it would be paid to people who choose to not to engage in paid work (for example, housewives, househusbands, students, and tramps).
Costs and Benefits of Basic Income

What sort of level would you envisage this basic income being paid at?

It is very important to distinguish the long-term objective from the proposals that are immediately implementable. In the short-term we are thinking of a basic income that would correspond to roughly half the current guaranteed minimum income for a single person. That’s the sort of level we have to think of. I don’t know how many pounds a week that is in Britain, but in a country like Belgium or France it would be around £200 a month.

And what do you think would be the economic effects of bringing such a measure in?

The main economic effect would be on the labour market. It’s an essential part of the proposal that it would make a number of jobs possible – for example part-time jobs – which are currently not viable because the net income from undertaking them is less than people currently get from benefits. However, because basic income would not initially be at a level that would altogether replace means-tested benefits, the possibilities of these low-paid jobs would still be restricted by the existence of those benefits. Nevertheless, a number of paid occupations that are presently unviable would become possible. What is very important – and something substantial in the proposal – is the differential effect on pay levels. It does not follow from what I have just said that there will be a massive or significant decrease in the pay for the jobs that are currently being done. It is essential to understand that the impact on pay levels will not be unambiguously to lower pay. For one should bear in mind that basic income is given unconditionally, so that it won’t work simply as an employment subsidy to lower labour for the employer. It can be used that way by the beneficiaries of basic income, who are enabled to accept jobs which pay less than those that are currently available; but they will do so only on condition that these jobs are sufficiently attractive to them, compared to the alternatives on offer. They may be more attractive because of some intrinsic feature, or because of the training they provide. For other jobs that are unattractive and provide little training, the long-term impact will be to raise the amount of money that employers need to pay.

One source of scepticism, particularly from the right, is going to be over the cost of the proposal. Will it be unfeasibly expensive to implement? Will it lead to large tax increases?

The notion of cost is very ambiguous, and it is important to distinguish various senses of cost. There is a sense in which the cost of an unconditional scheme is significantly lower than a conditional scheme. It is administratively less costly simply because everyone has basic income ex ante rather than benefits being paid in a targeted way to people who satisfy certain conditions. Given the kind of payment technology we have now, the administrative cost of the payment system stems far less from the payment itself than from the application and enforcement of the conditions that claimants have to fulfil in order to have access to various benefits. In this first sense, therefore, basic income is cheaper.

But of course, this is not what people typically have in mind when claiming that it is not. It is rather that the sheer mass of benefits, and hence of taxes, would be far larger.

When we move to the system in which benefits are not given just to the needy, but also to people who don’t need the money, we have to distinguish between three categories of people.

First, there are people who currently claim benefit: for them basic income would be self-financing. Whatever is to be be given to them in unconditional basic income would be withdrawn from them in conditional benefits. So, for example, people with pensions would have an unconditional floor to their pension, and the net amount they receive in addition to that would simply be adjusted downwards (so that on average they would receive more or less the same as at present).

The second category consists of people who are currently at work. Of course the purpose of the scheme is not to increase the total amount of money that people who are currently at work get: so whatever they get in the form of basic income would also be taken away, for example through the adjustment of their income tax. So households in this category would also be in roughly the same situation as before.

The third group consists of those who don’t presently have any income from benefits or earnings; most of these people are in fact housewives. As the number of people who are permanently in this category decreases, so the problem of financing their basic income also decreases. Moreover, many tax systems currently have an arrangement such that the employed
partner or spouse of a non-working person enjoys an increased tax allowance. Such an arrangement would lose its rationale if a basic income were paid directly to each partner. This would go some way – in some countries a long way – towards financing a basic income for people who presently have no income whatsoever.

So that if one thinks about what the cost of basic income would be, meaning by that how much the average taxpayer would lose, or how much various categories of households would lose, in net terms, the answer is that some types of household would lose a little (especially so as to pay for the people who currently have no income); some will gain at little, but the cost on the whole will be negligible.

The way we’ve been talking up to now presupposes that the basic income is paid in a national political community like Britain or Belgium or France, but in the long term, I believe you favour extending the idea of an unconditional basic income internationally. How do you see that working?

Well, I think that even though for moral reasons and also sustainability reasons one may want to think about it on an international level, in terms of short-term proposals one must keep thinking on a national level. I don’t believe though, that there is any argument against the viability of basic income within one country that does not also apply to the sustainability of the current guaranteed minimum income of the sort we know. However, I do think that there are serious threats to any sort of general solidarity system as a result of the way in which the globalisation of the economy puts pressure on national states. Therefore, even if, in the short term, we must think about the national level, at the same time we must start thinking (even if not in terms of specific proposals) about ways in which something like a basic income could be introduced at a level higher than the level of the nation, for example at the level of the European Union.

How could it be financed?

In the case of a European basic income, it might be coupled to a significant European tax on energy consumption. It is often said that there are two major objections against taxation of energy that would match the environmental cost of energy used – one of them is that single nations cannot do it individually because of competition with neighbours, and the other one is that significant taxation of energy would involve a serious cost to the worst off, who spend a disproportionate amount of their income on the consumption of energy. Now we could solve these two problems by levying this energy tax at a European level, and redistributing this energy tax in the form of a basic income given to all. Although the energy tax on its own would be significantly regressive, the net effect of an energy tax coupled with universal redistribution – and an equal redistribution – would be strongly progressive.

Origins of the Proposal

What was it that led you to start thinking along these lines in the first place?

Two things of a very different kind that happened in the early 1980s. The first point of departure, and the most concrete one, is that it was becoming clear that we in Europe were beginning to experience a kind of mass unemployment which could not be interpreted as conjunctural or cyclical in nature but which rather resulted from central features of our socioeconomic system. The preferred remedy for unemployment at that time (and a number of years afterwards) was growth. But, along with a number of other more or less Green-oriented people on the left, I felt that this could not be the right solution. So the pro-growths consensus or ‘grand coalition’ of the left and right had to be broken by providing a solution to the unemployment problem that would not rely on a mad dash for growth. One approach was to try to attack the poverty trap into which many people fell by permitting them to keep benefits if they started working. At the same time, this pro-employment policy would place a soft brake on growth because some of the benefits of growth would be distributed equally among all, irrespective of people’s contributions to growth. This concern came together with another source of inspiration: starting with a left critique of capitalism and thinking about what the alternatives to capitalism could be. Having realised a number of defects of socialism as an instrument for achieving the ultimate of a liberated communist society, I began asking (along with other people, including Robert van der Veen): why not skip socialism? After all, in classical Marxism, socialism is just an instrument for achieving the society in which people can work freely according to their abilities but still get enough according to their needs. If we now see a number of problems with socialism – threats to freedom,
problems of dynamic efficiency etc. – then why not harness capitalism to achieve the very same objectives? Why not go for a capitalist road to communism?

And so somehow these two very different sources of inspiration came together: one of them was rooted in what I was witnessing around me in Belgium; and the other one in a grand reflection about the fate of mankind and the way mankind should be heading. They led me to this idea, which struck me as bizarre initially because I hadn’t seen it anywhere else, but at the same time it was very simple and very attractive in many ways. And so I started, together with a number of other people, to think about it more systematically. Later, we gradually discovered that many others had independently come to the same idea.

I was struck there by the fact that you recalled the title of that early paper – ‘A Capitalist Road to Communism’. Would you continue to characterise a society where a basic income had been introduced as a capitalist society, or do you see it as an alternative to capitalism?

Well it’s clearly a matter of definition. If capitalism is defined as a regime in which the bulk of the means of production are privately owned, then a market society where the means of production are essentially privately owned but where there is a basic income, even a very high basic income, would still be a capitalist society. But of course private ownership is a matter of degree, and the very fact that there is a forced universal redistribution of a significant part of the social product in a uniform way, means that private ownership of means of production, and indeed people’s private ownership of their own human capital, is restricted in an important way. So such a society would certainly not have unrestricted private ownership of means of production even if you could say that in many senses private ownership continued to prevail.

Justifying Basic Income

You’ve talked up to now about basic income as an instrument of social and economic policy. In your recent book Real Freedom for All, you also explore a number of normative reasons underpinning the proposal.

When I first set about putting the arguments for basic income – the economic argument and the ‘capitalist road to communism’ argument – I found I was confronted first and foremost not by technical, administrative and economic arguments, but by moral ones. The main moral objection was that basic income would be giving people something for nothing, and that it amounted to systematic legitimation of free riding on the part of the idlers at the expense of the hard workers. And so that forced me to spell out why, fundamentally, I thought this was such a good and fair idea. Just saying ‘well this is a good strategy for fighting unemployment without relying on growth’, or saying ‘this is a way of achieving in the best feasible way a society in which a great part of the national product would be distributed according to need’; this was not enough to face that objection. One needed a coherently articulated plausible conception of social justice in order to tackle it. That led to the whole project which issued in the book. You can see it both as an attempt to answer these objections, and also as an attempt clarify what must have been implicitly in my mind when I found this idea attractive. I couldn’t do this by simply discussing in turn the various alternatives to basic income, and by giving a number of ad hoc arguments against them. I had to try to spell out in a systematic way a fairly abstract conception of justice, and then show that, at least under certain circumstances, A significant basic income would be justified by it. That was the whole project of the book. It led me to examine many variants in the ever-expanding set of so-called liberal theories of justice and to try to locate my own views among them.

The core conception of justice defended in the book is that we should seek to maximise the amount of what you call ‘real’ freedom available to the least free, the least ‘really’ free, member of society. Can you explain what you mean by ‘real’ freedom? What led you to favour that conception of justice?

‘Real’ freedom is a term drawn from an old Marxist tradition. In that tradition there is often a contrast drawn between formal freedom, which is just a right to do as one might wish, and real freedom, which includes this right, but goes beyond it by also taking account of the means that are required in order to do what one might wish to do. So real freedom is related to the means for doing what we might wish to do. What the conception of justice derived from this requires us to do, is to distribute in a fair way all the resources at our disposal, whether those be in the form

of external objects or of human powers and abilities. By ‘fair way’ is meant a ‘maximin’ or ‘leximin’ way: in other words a distribution such that those who receive least receive more than what those who receive least would receive under any alternative arrangement. Another way of expressing what I have in mind is that we have very different life chances because of our having different parents, because of our being the beneficiaries of greater of lesser amounts of gifts or bequests from other people, and above all because of the jobs and professional possibilities to which we have access in very unequal ways. According to my view, all these things which we receive in very unequal amounts should be distributed in such a way that those who have the least of them should have as much as possible. That is the essential notion.

The connection between that conception of justice and basic income seems to be a contingent one, in the sense that it might be that in different societies different specific social policies or tax and transfer regimes would better achieve the objective of leximinising real freedom than the basic income proposal would. But you’ve also explored other normative justifications which seem to have more of an entitlement basis, for instance, justifications which assert the natural right of people to the earth’s natural resources, and the idea of a rent on them. How do you see those two approaches as combining?

Well, I don’t think they can be combined, but I think that in some respects they look alike. The view defended by some left-wing libertarians, such as Hillel Steiner, consists in saying that there are some basic entitlements, and among these entitlements is an entitlement of each member of society, or of mankind, to an equal share in the natural resources. They claim that this leads to the justification of a basic income at a level that would match the competitive value of an equal share of these resources. Now this would have the same implication as the view I defend in the very simple world of an island in which there are no resources except for natural resources and in which we consider that all that is given to people (people who are equally endowed with skills) are these natural resources. Under those circumstances, my own conception of justice, and the view of justice that is based on these equal entitlements in land plus the ownership of each person by herself, would lead to exactly the same result.

But as soon as we get into a more complex world, the implications are different, and it becomes clear that the rationale behind the entitlement argument is quite different from my own. My view is not that we have specific entitlements to things that were not produced by anyone. Rather, I believe that all the things we might receive and, indeed the opportunities open to us — even those produced by people who are now alive — are up for fair redistribution between us. So my starting point is not a view that justice consists in respecting pre-social entitlements. My conception of justice is an equal-concern conception. What is primary is a fair consideration of people’s interests, not their entitlements. But it is opportunity-oriented (rather than outcome-oriented): people should be made responsible for their choices, and society’s responsibility is just to provide them with fair opportunities. But I have a very strong notion of what these opportunities consist in, and so that leads to my saying that what we have to do is to maximin the value of what people receive. That leads to basic income, but a basic income set at a level that is more generous than would typically be justified according to the entitlement perspective, because it allows us to consider far more things for redistribution than just natural resources. In certain circumstances, though, it could also justify a lower level of basic income than the libertarian view. This is because I regard what people have or lack in terms of talents and abilities as also providing a basis for legitimate redistribution. That could imply a lower level of basic income to allow for some targeted redistribution to the people who are less talented than average, or who are disabled.

It sounds then as if the system that you favour is quite similar to Rawls’s system of justice, with two important differences. First of all, that you have a different currency for justice: you favour real freedom or opportunities, as opposed to his ‘primary goods’; and secondly, that while he sees society as a co-operative venture for mutual advantage you include within your distributive scheme even those unwilling to cooperate to produce the social product. Is that a fair way of characterising the difference between you and Rawls?

I think there are more differences than that. The second of the two differences you mentioned has more to do with Rawls’s later adjustments to the theory rather than the initial formulation in A Theory of Justice. The notion that beneficiaries must also be cooperators is left rather vague
by Rawls in his first book and not incorporated in his principles. Where there is of course a difference is in the 'currency' of the primary goods governed by his difference principle, in the sense that I lump together a number of elements that are listed separately in his principles into a very strong notion of opportunities. I propose steering the distribution of external resources according to a unified metric which takes account of both social and economic advantages and opportunities. A third difference is that I try to deal with inequalities in people's internal endowments, inequalities concerned with the distribution of talents and abilities or disabilities. Rawls leaves this to one side, for methodological reasons, but he never goes back to deal with it systematically, as I aim to. Finally there is also a significant difference between the content of Rawls's first principle which guarantees the basic liberties and my constraint of formal freedom or self-ownership. For example, I do not regard universal suffrage as a constraint on the fair distribution of resources. Universal suffrage is extremely important, but it is justified only instrumentally as an essential component of those institutions which will safeguard the closest possible approximation to social justice.

One persistent line of criticism that you have already referred to comes out of both the liberal and the socialist traditions, and it's rooted in the hostility that both of those traditions have to the idea of free riding — the idea that there might be people who benefit from a co-operative scheme but aren't willing to contribute towards it. Many people's opposition to a basic income scheme has been on just those grounds, that it appears objectionable from the point of view of justice because it allows some people to exploit those who do the work in society.

That's an objection that I found highly relevant and which needed to be tackled and in a way drove the writing of the whole book. The basis of my justice-based answer to that objection is to point out that part of what looks like the product of a person's labour, part of the income, simply consists of the value of those scarce resources which that person has to appropriate in order to produce what she or he produces, and in order to earn the associated income. People fail to realise that much of the income that goes to labour in fact derives from our common inheritance of resources. Most of the income that is generated by labour in our society is generated within the context of jobs. Now jobs are very unequally accessible to people and even if everyone had a job there would still be many jobs that are restricted to a small number of people because many people do not have the talents that are required in order to perform them. Even more obviously, in a situation in which there is mass involuntary unemployment, one can see that the possibility of generating income is subject to the condition that one first appropriates those scarce resources which belong to the institutional structure of society, i.e. the jobs provided by various sorts of organisations. Even self-employment can only exist because of the complex organisation of our markets. So what I ask people who make this free-rider objection to realise is how large this background of 'gifts' that we receive in all sorts of forms, actually is. These 'gifts' are appropriated to a very unequal and unfair extent by the people who happen to be able to 'contribute' by having the best paid and most attractive jobs.

And therefore participation in production is not required to justify access to an income?

I am not at all against promoting the participation of more people in production, even in a fairly narrow sense. I think it's a tragedy for our society that so many people are excluded from such participation, and have to try to adjust their ambitions and their wishes to take account of this. But we will only be able to fight against this in a fair and effective way by first admitting that this should all be done on the basis of a fair distribution of these resources that will empower people: especially those at the bottom of the talent and human capital hierarchy. This justice-based reply to the objection is then combined with more pragmatic arguments that have to do with an acceptable way of fighting unemployment.

Let me press on to some other criticisms of the basic income proposal. One line of criticism that might be made is concerned with the effectiveness of the proposal. You favour a scheme of unconditional basic income, but it might be that the situation of the worst off in society would be better served by a conditional transfer system — a welfare state with capitalism, such as the West European countries have at the moment. Would you think that a serious possibility?

I have never denied that one may conceive of a targeted guaranteed minimum income system that would provide everyone in a society with an income that is higher than a basic income system could ever provide. But
for me, what matters is not to provide as high an income as possible to those with the smallest income; and consequently, high purchasing and consumption power to the worst off in society. Rather, what concerns me is to provide them with as large an endowment of resources as possible in order to permit them to conduct their lives as they wish. Doing this involves a number of things besides considering their income. It requires us, for example, to provide some free health care and education. But most significantly, it also requires that we give them the other means available to them in an unconditional fashion. We don’t just wish to maximise the value of the consumption bundle which they can buy at the supermarket, but also to extend the life opportunities that are open to them. That means, for instance, enabling them to take on paid activities (if they attach great importance to taking on paid activities) by buying themselves into a job, by accepting some sufficiently attractive low-paid activities which they can accept because of the unconditional nature of basic income. But it also involves giving them the chance to choose to work at less than a full-time job, to devote their time to other non-paid activities: looking after their family; deciphering Sanskrit manuscripts; or getting involved in political or social affairs. This broader conception of what is important from the perspective of distributive justice means that even if the targeted benefits of a conventional welfare state provided a higher minimum level of income than a basic income scheme, that would not be decisive from the point of view of justice. This should, however, be qualified: where a basic income system could not guarantee a level of income sufficient to meet basic needs, then a targeted guaranteed minimum income system would be justified, in conjunction with a low basic income.

One of the features of John Rawls’s theory of justice is the importance of the possibility of the constitutional rules by which the society runs being made public, being made accessible to all, and being open to political argument, political debate. Now many of the arguments you put forward in favour of a basic income are highly technical in nature. I wonder whether you think there is any conflict there between the rationale you favour for basic income and the liberal principle of legitimacy?

I think that the precise justification of any of our institutions against the various alternatives quickly becomes highly technical, so that’s not an argument against having those institutions. It is an argument in favour of trying to present the arguments in a way that’s understandable to a very wide audience. The basic rationale behind basic income isn’t that complicated. The central notion is that there are so many things we receive in life in a very unequal way: wouldn’t it be fair to distribute as much as we can (so long as doing so is not counterproductive) so that those who receive least receive as much as possible? There are various ways – by examples, anecdotes, stories – in which you can make these things intelligible and plausible and persuasive to a large number of people. This is especially easy with those who have themselves experienced, or who know people who have experienced, what unemployment means: what it means to want to do jobs you see you could do, but cannot because other people already have them. We can bring people who realise the seriousness of this problem to accept the idea of basic income, in a way that is consistent with requiring a public justification of what we are proposing. And indeed being forced to work out a theory of justice that can appeal to a wide spectrum of people with varied conceptions of the good in a pluralist society is directly related to this requirement of having to provide a justification in the public realm.

The Politics of Basic Income

How do you now see the connection between your work and the Marxist and socialist traditions. For many years now you have been associated with a current of thought broadly known as Analytical Marxism – through the September Group – and yet the proposal you favour is also supported by many people who don’t have any historical or biographical association with Marxism or the left?

For as long as I remember, for as long as I have been interested in social and political questions, I have defined myself as being in some strong sense on the left. I have always found it extremely important for someone on the left to look at Marxism very closely, in a critical way, but I have never defined myself as a Marxist. Yet, I have always felt extremely comfortable within the September Group because it included fellow travellers and not just Analytical Marxists.
Nevertheless, you titled a collection of your essays Marxism Recycled? I hope the preface of that book makes clear the nature of my relationship to Marxism, which is that I regard it as a very important part of our intellectual and historical tradition. It is something we have to think about, to draw lessons from, seek insights from. But we have to check out the parts that are no use and we have to combine what remains with a number of elements that are alien to the Marxist tradition. At the same time I am very strongly in favour of maintaining interest in, and introducing new generations to, Marxist literature. But I have never regarded our task as being one of reconstructing Marxism or reinterpreting Marxism in such a way that it would be a relevant theory for our time. Our task is rather to try to keep doing the kind of work that Marx was doing in his time, which is to combine a deep analysis of the realities of the times with an ethical commitment to fighting against injustice. For this purpose there are still some very useful tools in the Marxist tradition. A typical example is the notion of class, providing it is freed from a narrow interpretation limited to the relationship of capitalists and workers.

That reminds me of a point that came up when we interviewed G.A. Cohen. He said that one thing that characterised the Marxist and socialist movement in the past was a conjunction of certain ethical beliefs – albeit sometimes suppressed – and the self-interest of a vast number of people. And so you could get a tremendous movement for ethical progress, social progress, off the ground without relying on very much more than the self-interest of an organised class. I wonder how you see the connection between political movements and ethical commitment as far as basic income is concerned? What kind of social movement do you think could successfully agitate to bring the basic income proposal into life?

The first way of trying to answer that question is by looking at which movements have been most sensitive to the appeal of basic income. From the very beginning of the discussion it has been the Green parties that have been most receptive to the idea, that have discussed it and have incorporated it into their platforms. Now, I don’t think the Green movement will succeed in imposing basic income, if only because I don’t think they have the strength to become the major party in any country. But as with many of the things they have promoted – eco-taxes, slowing down traffic in cities, etc. – there is the possibility of their ideas being taken up by those in power. While some impulse may come from the Greens, we might also hope that organisations of the unemployed might adopt and agitate for the idea. However, given the intrinsic difficulties of organising the unemployed and those excluded from society, we should not expect too much from that quarter. In the end, however, it is through political discussion that this idea must prevail; and of course every political discussion involves ethical elements that do not reduce to the self-interest of specific categories. For example, a number of Christian groups have been very active in pushing for the proposal on account of their explicit commitment to a number of values which they believe would be better served this also holds for people in the socialist movement, for whom the advantages of basic income include preserving and strengthening solidarity. These ethical considerations then combine with a defence of basic income on the basis of self-interest: at the same time, we want to advance social justice and we don’t want society to generate massive criminality, we don’t want society to waste a number of skills that could be used in an effective way. In practice it is inevitable that there will be some complex mixture of ethical and self-interested arguments.

And what about the traditional organisations of the working class – the trade unions in particular – and also the social democratic parties. Do you think there is a chance that they can be won over to this programme, or do they represent too much the narrow interests of those who are in stable and permanent employment?

On the whole it must be said that the organised working class has been rather hostile to the idea. However, there are a number of remarkable exceptions to this: there are a number of trade unions in various European countries that have been receptive, especially those with a large proportion of women, and with a large proportion of lower paid people. They have realised that their members would benefit from it: that it would enhance the market for unskilled labour, would increase their bargaining power, and also possibly increase the net income of people working part-time and of people working for minimum wages. But on the whole the strategies of unions defending the interests of well-protected workers have not been favourable to proposals that might erode their privileges. Even those unions that organise workers from both weak and strong sectors have tended to prefer policies that seem less threatening to the centrality of work, such as employment subsidies given to employers.
This, despite the fact that such policies give more bargaining power to employers than to employees. They prefer such policies because they are more in tune with the idea that you can only get your income through work, and, of course, income from work is partly controlled by the trade union movement. They see that as better than having income some being dispensed by the state without any role for trade unions. Basic income is really a citizen’s right and not specifically a worker’s right, and that is unpalatable to some trade unionists. I have the sense that in so far as this is a live debate in the political community, it is very much a debate at the moment that is confined to West European society. Is that correct, or is there some interest in the idea of a universal basic income in, say, North America, or in Far Eastern societies?

I have never seen the slightest trace of any debate about it in Far Eastern countries. In the United States, there was an active discussion in the 1960s and 1970s and McGovern proposed something very close to basic income as part of his electoral platform for his disastrous campaign in 1972. But, if anything, the United States has moved away from the possibility of basic income. In Canada, by contrast, there have been a number of more recent proposals along these lines (in Quebec, for example). What I have been surprised by is the level of interest in Latin America. There has just been a collection of essays on basic income published in Argentina, and I understand that it has had quite an impact on the public discussion. And a Brazilian Senator from the Workers’ Party, has been defending a proposal for a guaranteed minimum income for Brazil. This was actually adopted by the Brazilian Senate with the support of a large number of parties. The President of Brazil has said that he is in favour of moving in that direction, by first introducing a guaranteed minimum income for the elderly. And there has also been an impulse to the debate as a result of the killing of landless people by the police. After all, if you can’t distribute land so that people have a basis to earn, what can you do in a modern society? A guaranteed income is one solution that you can turn to.

**Future Directions**

Real Freedom for All came out in 1995 and has made quite an impact. What are your future plans? How do you see your work going from here? Are there other projects in the pipeline, or do you intend to concentrate on developing and defending the themes from the book?

There are three things which I’m already engaged in and will occupy me for the rest of my working life. The first is related to one of the matters we have discussed: I want to produce something on basic income that could be read by people with all sorts of levels of education; a work that would cover the ethics of the proposal, but also the economics, the history, and the politics of it. Second, I want to broaden my focus out from basic income, which is only one of the important issues for the future of the welfare state. Another concerns intergenerational transfers: pensions, family allowances, the funding of education, etc. Yet another important area is the fair funding of health care: we have the technology available to prolong our lives almost indefinitely, but is it just to allocate resources to doing this rather than to other things? And of course there are many interdependencies, both among these two sets of issues and with the transfers that go on within the active population, such as basic income.

And the third project?

My third project is about ‘democratic engineering’: how should we design our political institutions so that in the long term, or at equilibrium, we can get as close as possible to social justice? This concerns, for example, the design of political institutions in federal states like Belgium: how should we organise the electoral system, how should we structure the allocation of competences between the various levels and types of political organs in such a way as to preserve national solidarity in economic transfers. But this has to be balanced against the need for the various communities and regions in the country to define or to express their own identity. Also, at the European level, how should we design institutions in such a way that we can gradually move towards a stronger union whilst preserving the solidarity that existed in each country, and also whilst building a stronger European social solidarity? Beyond that: how should we design institutions like the ILO, the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade
Organisation? How should we give them enough power, but not too much? All three projects are journeys into new areas which I find fascinating to discover; but they are also intimately related to what I have done before and firmly rooted in my basic ambition: to contribute to the committed but unprejudiced thinking that is urgently needed to guide our struggles.

A Basic Income Bibliography


Reynolds, Brigid and Healy, Sean (eds), *An Adequate Income Guarantee for All* (Dublin: Cori, 1995).


**Commitment Without Reverence:**

**Reflections on Analytical Marxism**

G.A. Cohen

SECTION 1 of this piece says what analytical Marxism is, in general terms. It then describes the formation of the Group that has promoted it. Section 2 is a personal interlude: it recounts how I, in particular, became an analytical Marxist. In section 3 the analyticality of analytical Marxism is delineated in greater detail, and section 4 addresses the irrepressible question: is it Marxist? Section 5 defines ‘bullshit’ (the *bête noire* of analytical Marxism), and section 6 lists some analytical Marxist research achievements.¹

1. Analytical Marxism and the September Group

I shall not try to define ‘Marxism’.² As for ‘analytical’, it has two relevant, and relevantly different, senses in the present context, a broad sense

¹ This paper was originally prepared for a Chinese audience that was largely unacquainted with analytical Marxism. I apologise to those readers who might have hoped for something less introductory.

² But see section 4 for some effort in that direction.