

# Rethinking basic income

Federico Chicchi and Emanuele Leonardi

For what is possibly the first time in history, we have been living for the last few years in a social system that could easily provide for its own needs by working considerably less than in the past, if it was equipped with fair modes of distribution and was reasonably planned. Why is it then that, despite the fact that labour today no longer ensures social integration and the diminishing of inequalities, we are increasingly pushed to transform the time of life into a productive time? It is in relation to this question that our own proposal for basic income becomes meaningful and acquires its practicability.<sup>1</sup>

Basic income is an unconditional money transfer financed through taxes. It is distributed to all the residents of a given political community and the recipients can spend it according to their own preferences. Ultimately, it aims to guarantee them a sufficient sum of money in order to live an autonomous and dignified life. Yet this is still not exhaustive enough as a definition. Basic income takes on different meanings according to the context in which it is situated: it is not desirable in itself, but it becomes so only if it is lodged within a process of de-commodification of capitalist society. In this sense, first, basic income is not to be superimposed upon or confused with the different public policies to fight poverty. Rather, it must become an instrument of struggle against new forms of exploitation of socialised ‘industriousness’,<sup>2</sup> where this term is to be understood as the whole set of cooperative and/or productive practices that are performed without necessarily being formally regulated and remunerated by a work contract. If adequately designed, basic income could become an effective weapon to be deployed in trade union struggles in defence of workers’ dignity. Equally, as already claimed by feminist movements such as Ni Una Menos [Not One Woman Less], it can promote subjective self-determination and freedom of choice. Moreover, it retains an extraordinary and inherent vocation for convergence in an era characterised by a heightened fragmentation of work and subjects, as

it provides a common ground on which it would be possible to link together numerous anti-capitalist struggles which break out every day and everywhere, locally and globally.

In other words, what is at stake in basic income does not solely affect the quantitative relation between poverty and wealth in a specific community but concerns the opportunity to modify, qualitatively, the relations of force [*rapport di forza*] between exploited and exploiters in contemporary society. Its main purpose is thus to foster the autonomy of producers, their ability to have an impact (from below) on the *qualitative composition of production*, which is to say their ability to exert an influence on how, what, where and for whom one produces. In the following we will attempt to present, genealogically, the terrain on which such a project should be shaped.

## The wage-institution in Fordism

Capitalism is a mode of production whose end-goal is the creation of a *surplus* of value, that is to say, the presence at the end of the economic cycle of a quantity of money which is higher than what had been advanced in order to set in motion capital’s production process. The spasmodic hunt for surplus value, in fact, requires that the organisation of production privileges the accumulation of capital at the expense of the use value of commodities (i.e. of the needs they satisfy). What is more, the quantitative logic of value – according to which ‘everything has a price’ and thus could be bought – is altogether indifferent to the qualitative one of real wealth – grounded in the multifarious experiences of well-being which different communities, autonomously and in every specific case, decide to pursue. Put differently, when the capitalist decides what to invest money in, the fundamental criterion that directs the decision is not the product’s utility but rather its profitability. ‘Do weapons bring good business? It matters little that people die.’

For a long time, however, the search for the logic of value partially overlapped with the multiplication of the logic of wealth. This is not to say that it was a linear process; on the contrary. More than ever, it is evident today that capitalist development necessarily entails the depletion of the two sources of every wealth, nature and human labour power,<sup>3</sup> not to mention leading to the colonisation of, and genocides in, the so-called New World. On the other hand, it is nonetheless undeniable that, with respect to previous modes of production, capitalism has significantly improved the life conditions of a broad population strata across vast areas of the planet.

This double-sidedness of capitalist development emerges clearly in the Fordist period – in Western Europe, from the Marshall plan to the oil shocks of the 1970s – and the social compromise by which it was distinguished, between productive capital and wage labour (obedience in exchange for security, salary increase offset by the surrender of decisional autonomy, and, hence, relative prosperity exchanged for discipline). This process can be defined as the *wage-institution*, since integration, in the form of social rights and access to mass consumption, was ensured to the working class by means of acquiring the status of ‘wage-labourer’.<sup>4</sup> But it should also be noted that (predominantly female) domestic work, slave work and a concern for the environment were excluded from the Fordist pact.<sup>5</sup> Actually, the pressure on the planet dramatically increased with the paradigm of growth, which transformed the political conflicts around income distribution into technico-managerial issues concerning ways in which to increase the GDP.<sup>6</sup> Instead of struggling over an increase in wages to the detriment of an increase in profits, the workers’ movement found itself endorsing in this way the cause of a quantitative growth that would make everyone happy – aside from the biosphere, that is.<sup>7</sup> Such a social pact based on the centrality of wage labour could be termed a *productivist syndrome*, which hinges on the link between social redistribution and value-oriented economic development.<sup>8</sup>

And yet reality never perfectly corresponded with this model. Particularly in Italy, the Fordist period was a time of terrific attacks upon the endurance of the wage-institution. The legendary struggle of the workers in the electromechanical sector in Milan in the 1960s, for instance, sparked a cycle of conflicts – the so-called Red Decade – which came to a close with the extraordinary

creativity of Bologna’s 1977.<sup>9</sup> The feminist movement was fundamental to this, with its refusal of the social ‘reproductive’ role invented for women by capital. More specifically, a catalyst was provided by the Wages for Housework international campaign which, behind the ostensible request to participate in the Fordist compromise, revealed the invisible foundation of the latter in its violent subordination of the sphere of reproduction. ‘Rewarded’ by care labour, the angel in the house was denied any autonomy.<sup>10</sup> A further catalyst could be found in the ecological crises whose discussion had become inescapable after the 1972 publication of the Club of Rome’s report, *The Limits to Growth*, and which was forcefully brought to public attention by environmentalist groups that often belonged to the workers’ movement. Consider, for instance, the important season of struggles against the harmful effects of heavy industry on health and the environment.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it is important to stress the centrality of the working class politically exercising its power, as negotiations around salaries were coupled with claims for freedom, against the capitalist organisation of labour and for a less dehumanising pace of work and tasks. Even more radically, other struggles would not settle for the sole objective of emancipating labour, but rather argued for its refusal in the name of an unwillingness to produce value for capital and the experimentation with new forms of autonomous activity and cooperative production of wealth.<sup>12</sup>

Though very different from one another, these struggles shared an anti-capitalist aspiration and the backdrop of the wage-institution. Did they succeed in modifying relations of force? Certainly they did not. Capital is still alive and kicking and the waged labour force, while very shrunk in size and shattered in the West, has not globally decreased in number. Nevertheless, this was a peculiar, ambiguous defeat. On the one hand, it brought about the progressive dismantling of the welfare state while, on the other, it involved a radical reconfiguration of social practices for the extraction of value, namely, of those very processes that found their defining model in the factory.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that the factory became extinct. Rather, the crisis of the link between employment and citizenship determined the dissemination of the factory beyond its gates and into urban spaces, and, later, its transfiguration within the digital universe of the Internet.

## The separation between value and wealth

In the 1980s, the socialisation of the factory – the expansion of its productive logic in new social spaces and temporalities – allowed capitalism to widen and, at the same time, reconfigure its base for the extraction of value chiefly in a *post-* and *neo-*waged sense. Put differently, what was radically transformed were the social mediations that presided over the encounter between labour and capital. In this regard, the most significant issue is the thinning out of the boundaries between production and reproduction. In the neoliberal society these two social spheres – work and life, one could say – immediately take part in the new dynamics of valorisation. This is exactly what the phenomena of precarisation and feminisation of labour point to: the *becoming productive of social reproduction*. It is here that capitalist exploitation pours out beyond the limits maintained, for better or worse, by the wage relationship and invades even the most intimate aspects of subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, basic income could easily be termed *reproductive income*.<sup>15</sup>

Industrial society produced commodities and made them social; post-Fordist capitalism produces society at once in the form of a commodity. One should refer to the ways in which so-called big data have been transformed in an immense commercial enterprise transforming people into providers of unpaid and continuous information (24/7).<sup>16</sup> But let us consider, more generally, how absurd and symptomatic is the existence of an expression such as *human capital*. How can we comply with the fact that affects, relationships, skills and talents are recognised and supported *if and only if* the performance society can extract value from them?<sup>17</sup> In the straitjacket of success-at-all-costs, which is validated by economic triumph, women and men in the flesh become crippled subjects, lose their sense of solidarity and of a passion devoid of second aims. They lose the sense of being gentle, as Brecht would put it. We are facing an actual paradigm shift: driven by the logic of value, economic growth is no longer accompanied by an increase in social well-being. Private profits and collective wealth take inexorably different paths.

This situation is evident, for instance, in the sectors of scientific and cultural cooperation. Knowledge could freely circulate at insignificant costs, and partially it does

thanks to peer-to-peer networking and information piracy. In addition, since it is a non-rival good – which is to say that its sharing does not diminish its quality but rather increases it – knowledge would by itself encourage cooperative practices more than competitive ones. It could easily create new forms of sharing rather than destroying social bonds.<sup>18</sup> Only the coercive imposition of copyright and other property devices enacted by big editorial groups ensures the profitability of these products. Capital resolutely creates scarcity when there is none. Still, this is at the expense of the good, as nowadays the promise of more efficiency and quality inherent in the transformation of objects in commodities is often not maintained. Therefore, the logic of value does not overlap with that of wealth, not even partially. The confirmation of their divorce is definite.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to imply that, as Gorz optimistically believed, capitalism is on the edge of the abyss or that we are already starting to get out of it. Unfortunately, at present, nothing prevents the logic of value from flourishing. However, it seems clear that the driving force of such logic is withering away, and that the political space for a new social compromise within it is growing smaller. Why? It is because wage labour lost the centripetal force establishing it as the model towards which all the other forms of socialised industriousness had to lean, in order to be recognised at the institutional level. The global economic crisis accelerated this deflation. Indeed, the growth registered in some countries, which was achieved thanks to austerity measures implemented on the shoulders of more fragile economies as in Greece or Italy, not only has not markedly raised the rate of employment but, rather, it fed itself with a further multiplication of inequalities.

For these reasons, it is somewhat bizarre to discuss basic income solely by asking whether it would be technically feasible. Of course, it is of necessity to make precise calculations, put in place intelligent experiments, accurately calculate the risks of failure and, if need be, arrange plans for dealing with it. Yet these discussions become ridiculous if we detach them, for instance, from the scandal of the public bail-out of different American banks which, between 2008 and 2016, had a cost to the tax-payer of an ‘investment’ of thousands of billions, whether one counted them in dollars or in euros.





## Labour and income: a rapidly transforming relation

Basic income is thus a political mechanism that is adequate to the ways in which value is currently produced and, therefore, appropriate to the transformations of labour. The latter is increasingly more fragmented and under attack – to the point of normalising the figure of the *working poor* – but also increasingly more interconnected, both as regards the digital world and within global value chains. Nonetheless, the adequacy of an instrument by itself does not confirm the extent to which such an instrument is desirable. For instance, the idea of full employment was very appealing in the golden age of the wage-institution, yet it yielded positive results only where the effects of its partial realisation were foisted from below through struggles – just to refer to an example from Italy, one should think about the Statute of Workers in 1970.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, in those instances when

it was lowered from above, full employment generated conformism and social passivity. Those who oppose basic income on the grounds that it would weaken the exercise of political class conflict are confusing causes and effects. As with any other measure, basic income works well when snatched through struggles, and badly if it is capital granting it.<sup>21</sup> We would argue that, in this context, there are three possible scenarios for a potential implementation of basic income.

First, there is a *digital-capitalist* scenario, recently advanced by the tycoons of the Silicon Valley and whose argument could be approximately expressed as follows: if manufacturing work is fading away under the blows of automation, collective online activity produces data from which the monopolists of the web and digital platforms are extracting astronomical amount of profits, thus it would be only fair to let a few crumbs end up feeding the actual producers. This is a proposal which seems to be founded on a specific claim or could even be regarded as progressive, but which instead confirms the

parasitic model of digital capitalism. This would be a case of accepting a meagre gratuity from terribly rich entrepreneurs in return for the renunciation of decisional power on society's modes of life and labour.

A second option could be termed *social-democratic 2.0*. Finally recovered from the neoliberal hangover, the State would come back and do its job, which is to reduce the ratio of exploitation in order to stabilise the regime of accumulation (driven by finance, in this case). Once again: obedience in exchange for social peace, validation of the new forms of diffuse productivity, integration by means of consumption patterns always more apparently personalised yet always more identical to themselves, no autonomy and insufficient power over the qualitative composition of production. This would lead to a new social compromise based on a *post*-waged mediation presumably managed by a yet-to-be-imagined *post*-representative democracy. We are dealing with an attempt of high reformism to which we wish the best of luck but which we believe will be difficult, if not impossible, to realise. The divorce between the logic of value and logic of wealth substantially reduce the room for manoeuvre. How much economic growth can the planet still endure and, most importantly, how much commodification can still be inflicted upon the social body?

It seems to us that democracy and autonomy of the producers are to be found elsewhere, and could be built based on a third kind of basic income, a *conflictual* one. In any case, such basic income cannot be considered as an alternative to the traditional welfare state. Whereas the latter redistributes a part of the value produced by the waged labour force, the former directly distributes a part of the value produced by diffused socialised industriousness. This is the value originating from undisputedly productive social labouring activities which are however not framed in a wage labour contract, and which these days remain an exclusive prerogative of network capitalism and platform monopolies. Consequently, those who reject basic income because, as they argue, it would end up demolishing the tools for social protection that are currently still available, albeit gradually diminishing, are making a grave mistake. The funding of the *conflictual* basic income, for instance, does not involve a transfer of the resources that today still guarantee social rights. On the contrary, it would be a matter of levying taxes

on the lords of the boundless digital revenues (Google, Facebook, Amazon, and so on), so as to limit new exploitative practices and in order to find in social equality an indispensable goal.<sup>22</sup>

After forty years of the socialisation of costs and privatisation of earnings, it is time to reverse this tendency. This is a difficult yet necessary challenge. Only a strategy that is capable of articulating welfare and basic income can hope not to be defeated. Their relationship must be set in terms of complementarity, never in terms of substitution. In this sense, basic income must be understood from the start as a device which makes visible concealed social productivity in order to then remunerate it in the form of primary income.

For all these reasons, it is clear that the classic objection to basic income – ‘nobody would be doing anything anymore, freeloaders will get by on the efforts and struggles of those who still work’ – goes dangerously around in circles. This is so not only for the pathetic moralism of the wealthy person devoted to luxury, who also brands as lazy or a slacker the poor who refuse to have their own life eaten away by work. But, chiefly, it is because such an objection is incapable of recognising that contemporary accumulation relies always more consistently on non-waged and non-remunerated activities. *Already now* there is nothing passive in the socialised industriousness that would be at last recognised by basic income.<sup>23</sup> And this is not even the whole story. By weakening the blackmail of *poor labour* – that is, the obligation to accept humiliating salaries rather than no salary at all – basic income would open a crucial space for social mobilisation. This space would be radically other to the punitive and blameful version put forward by neoliberal workfare, which markedly affects the economic support given to the actual and active search for employment.<sup>24</sup> *This* way of living and taking action in collective participation claims for itself the right to autonomously decide ways of being together, in addition to what is to be involved in producing in order that everyone may enjoy freedom from need.

In a nutshell, the conflictual basic income does two things. It frees the right to a dignified life from participation as a wage-labourer (or ‘entrepreneur of herself’), as well as defuses the sense of guilt affecting many among us when the labour market hands us over to precarity. It reminds us that we are collective producers, not inad-

equate individuals as we are usually depicted, and improves the conditions of our lives. The overall effect is that of some fresh liberty.

Yet, it is not for these reasons that basic income can lay claim to a strategic centrality. For example, it would be just as useful to introduce a minimum wage which is transversal to different economic sectors so as to avoid the devaluation of labour and, thus, in order to effectively and efficiently reduce the workers' chances to be blackmailed by companies. In sum, basic income plus welfare equals the production of a society beyond the maximisation of profits. What is more, these two measures could also reinforce each other.

This is not just a marginal issue, and it appears to us that it is the same point Guy Standing is emphasising when he insists on the necessity of an 'integrated approach' between contrasting precarious conditions of work and supporting income.<sup>25</sup> When the blackmail of poor labour drops in intensity, the deserters of the industrial reserve army multiply and trade union consultations can become more effective in their negotiations and gain organisational creativity when facing the new scenarios of the post-industrial urban economy. ('Let's stop production!' means very different things depending on whether it is shouted in factories that are increasingly emptied of labour, in logistic warehouses progressively filled up with commodities, or in hospitals, universities and shopping malls). Furthermore, basic income can function as a solidarity fund in cases of prolonged and harsh strikes, that is to say, it can serve as an immediate and concrete resource that reinforces the resistance capacities of workers and the communities they belong to.<sup>26</sup> Besides, a more just labour market multiplies the possibilities of using this income. It also fashions into practicable diverse forms of co-existence between waged and socialised industriousness labour, forms which would be freely experimented with by different individuals within their collective groups. From this standpoint, basic income is an important yet not self-sufficient element in a rudimentary programme to fight exploitation. Such a plan, besides a minimum wage, must introduce a cap on unreasonably high salaries<sup>27</sup> and a drastic reduction in working hours. This is the way forward to enforce the autonomy of producers and thus the democratic exercise of the right to decide how, what, when, where and for whom one produces.

There is, however, a further aspect of basic income that contributes to making it both an important social claim to be used in conjunction with others and a political catalyst for an anti-capitalist plural strategy. We are referring here to basic income's ability to seize time from the logic of value and thus represent a cure for the aforementioned *productivist syndrome*, which is leading us to an ecological and social collapse. That which the feminist movement Ni Una Menos calls 'self-determination income' is the picklock whereby the plural voices of the social conflict can *interrupt* their forced participation in the perverted mechanism of capitalist accumulation. It becomes easier from there to talk to each other, recognise each other, fight together and design non-predatory forms of production and reproduction of wealth. Here the analysis must stop, and the conflictual practice be turned back on.

## Conclusion

Today, social integration and the satisfaction of basic needs is no longer required to pass exclusively through the wage-institution, that is, through the access to income provided by *labour*. This terrain is still important, but it must be flanked by a new social and political space where the experimentation with alternative forms of work allows for the multiplication of the ways in which each individual and their collectivities experience well-being.

This is a possibility. In order to actualise it, however, a broad social conflict must necessarily be re-activated, a social conflict which works towards inverting the tendencies that inequalities have to spread. The word 'conflict', coupled with the idea of an unconditional basic income, serves the purpose of reiterating that this is not a 'reasonable' option for everyone, as the advocates of the digital-capitalist scenario would want us to believe. These, indeed, while with one hand conceding a minimal access to the shining world of consumption, with the other steal labour and social security from the many. In reality, basic income as presented and understood in our contribution here, is 'reasonable' only for a part of society – those whose socialised industriousness is being exploited – as it must be snatched collectively, not meekly requested. An impressive process of redistribution from the financial elites to the proletarianised masses is the



necessary condition so that basic income may sustain the production of social wealth against the capitalist imperative of profit at all costs.

### Translated by Yari Lanci

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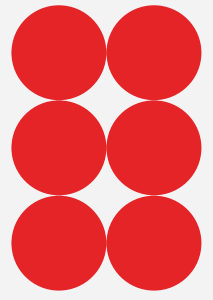
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### Notes

1. This text is a revised and updated version of Chicchi Federico and Leonardi Emanuele, *Manifesto per il reddito di base* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2018), with a postface by Marta Fana and Simone Fana. Many thanks to the publisher for permission to translate it here.
2. Federico Chicchi, Emanuele Leonardi and Stefano Lucarelli, *Más allá del salario. Lógicas de la explotación* (Montevideo: Azafran Editorial, 2019).
3. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990; reprint of Pelican Books edition, 1976).
4. Robert Castel, *From Manual Workers to Wage Labourers* (London: Transactions, 2003).
5. Emanuele Leonardi, 'Bringing Class Analysis Back In: Assessing the Transformation of the Value-Nature Nexus to Strengthen the Connection between Degrowth and Environmental Justice', *Ecological Economics* 156 (2019), 83–90.
6. Mathias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
7. André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980).
8. Claus Offe, 'A Non-Productivist Design for Social Policies', in *Arguing for Basic Income, Ethical Foundations for a Radical Reform*, ed P. Van Parijs (London: Verso, 1992), 61–78.
9. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (London: Verso, 2017).
10. Silvia Federici, 'Social reproduction theory', *Radical Philosophy* 2.04 (Spring 2019), 55–57.
11. Lorenzo Feltrin, Book review of *Quando il potere è operaio: autonomia e soggettività politica a Porto Marghera (1960-1980)*,

- Toxic News* (2019), <https://toxicnews.org/2019/05/28/book-review-quando-il-potere-e-operaio-autonomia-e-soggettivita-politica-a-porto-marghera-1960-1980-edited-by-devi-sacchetto-and-gianni-sbrogio-2009-roma-manifestolibri/>
12. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
  13. Andrea Fumagalli and Cristina Morini, 'Life put to work: towards a life theory of value', *Ephemera* 10:3-4 (2011), 234–252.
  14. Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby, *Clinical Labour: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
  15. Giacomo D'Alisa, 'Towards a Reproductive Income', presentation at the conference *Ambientalismo operaio e giustizia climatica*, Centro Studi Movimenti, Parma, June 14th 2019.
  16. Burkhardt Wolf, 'Big data, small freedom? Informational surveillance and the political', *Radical Philosophy* 191 (May/June 2015), 13–20.
  17. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (London: Verso, 2016).
  18. Andrea Fumagalli, Alfonso Giuliani, Stefano Lucarelli and Carlo Vercellone, *Cognitive Capitalism, Welfare and Labour: The Commonfare Hypothesis* (London: Routledge, 2019).
  19. André Gorz, *Ecologica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
  20. In 1970, Italian laws partially incorporated radical demands advanced by the Labour Movement during the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, especially pay rises. Shortly after, most pay scales were indexed to inflation for wage and salary earners. Jobs were virtually guaranteed in the official economy, and trade unions became influential on a host of planning bodies. The firing of workers became difficult in many sectors.
  21. For this reason, too, basic income must necessarily be *unconditional*, as Guy Standing maintains in his interview in this issue.
  22. Antonio Casilli, *En attendant les robot : Enquête sur le travail du clic* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).
  23. Basic Income Network, *Big Data, WebFare e reddito per tutti. Siamo in rete, produciamo valore, vogliamo reddito*, Quaderni per il reddito 9 (2019), <https://www.bin-italia.org/quaderni-reddito-n9-big-data-webfare-reddito-tutti/>.
  24. Ursula Huws, *Labour in Contemporary Capitalism: What next?* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).
  25. On this, see the first part of the interview with Guy Standing elsewhere in this issue.
  26. Erik Olin Wright, 'Basic Income as a Socialist Project', <https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Basic%20Income%20as%20a%20Socialist%20Project.pdf>
  27. Hubert Buch-Hansen and Max Koch, 'Degrowth through Income and Wealth Caps?', *Ecological Economics* 160 (2019), 264–271.

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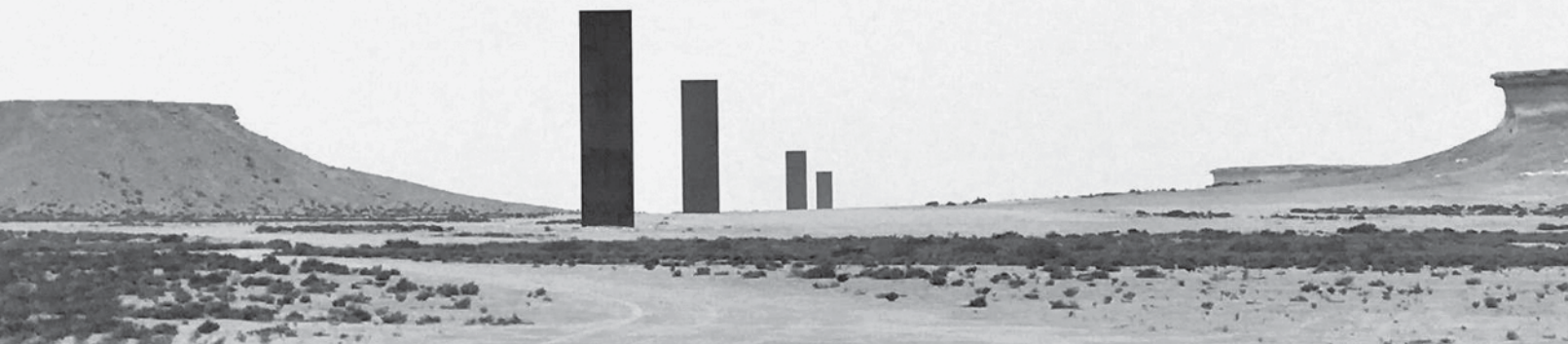
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