

Dossier: Universal Basic Income

From forced labour to creative work

Guy Standing with Martina Tazzioli

Martina Tazzioli: I would like to start with a general question about your work: how does your theorisation of basic income connect with your reflections on precarity and on the emergence of ‘the precariat’ as a class?*

Guy Standing: Well, I’ve been working on both subjects for many years. When we set up BIEN, the Basic Income Earth Network, in September 1986, of course that was a period when Thatcherism and neoliberal economics were coming into the fore. They were pushing for flexible labour markets. And what flexible labour markets meant to me, when I was working in the International Labour Organisation, was increasing insecurity for workers. I was convinced that the whole strategy of neo-liberalism would increase inequality and increase economic insecurity. So I initially favoured a basic income, way back then, for moral reasons, for ethical reasons, and as a way of giving people security and freedom.

So I had this philosophical approach to basic income, but at the same time I was working on labour markets, as I’m a labour economist. And I was convinced that what would happen is that a more fragmented society would develop, as a result of neoliberal policies. And while I didn’t call it ‘the precariat’ back in the 1980s, by the 1990s, and since then, I’ve been thinking that what’s been happening is a fragmentation of the old class structures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as understood in Marxian terms. What’s happened is that we now have a plutocracy at the top, then a salariat with employment security, in the middle; but below these two strata, the old proletariat (the industrial proletariat that people analysed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) was shrinking, while the precariat was growing. This was clearly going to increase insecurities for many people.

I wrote the book *The Precariat* in 2011, but actually I’d been discussing the growth of the precariat for many years before that. And it seemed to me that this growth was one of the major reasons for expecting that more and more people would come to support a basic income. If you’ve got a growing precariat, with all the insecurities and problems that come with that, then you should come to realise that the only way forward is to have some sort of basic income system that *guarantees* income security. So the two come together, as an integrated approach.

MT: In your book you argue that basic income should be unconditional – it is not just for precarious, impoverished people, it’s for everyone, right?

* This interview was recorded in June 2019.

GS: Yes. But the difference is that members of the old working class enjoyed some degree of labour security. They had full-time stable jobs, they had pensions, relatively stable wages, and so on. Therefore to get *them* to support a basic income was harder than it is with the precariat. With the precariat you have volatile wages, you have insecure jobs, you don't get access to state benefits that give you some security, and so on. For these reasons the precariat will be inclined to support a basic income more than the old proletariat ever was, and I think that this prediction is coming true.

MT: As you argue in your book, basic income should be unconditional and should not depend on citizenship status. Does this mean that someone who arrives as a migrant and is in the country temporarily could get access to basic income payments?



GS: The payments should be unconditional in behavioural terms. In other words you shouldn't have to do X or Y or Z in order to get the benefit. I think for pragmatic reasons we have to say that we can give the basic income to usual resident citizens and to migrants who come into the country legally and who have been in the country for some time. That's a pragmatic criterion, not a philosophically grounded one, but if we don't have some sort of rule like that, we will never get the political support for introducing a basic income because the neo-fascists will play the standard xenophobic alien/stranger anti-migrant arguments. This does not mean that we should neglect the needs and aspirations of migrants. I believe in an open society and that people should be treated with dignity and support. I just think that when migrants come to a country they shouldn't automatically and immediately start to get the basic income; they should be treated well and given support, but other forms of support, not the basic income system.

MT: How do you see the role of the state in relation to basic income? And how do you respond to the criticism that has been raised by some people towards basic income theory, regarding the central role played by the state and citizens' dependency on the state?

GS: Philosophically, and from an economist's point of view, I think we need to re-examine what we mean by the state. And that means obviously more than government, it means the institutions

in our society that govern the processes of life. What has happened in the neoliberal era is that the state has been turned into an instrument for creating a general neoliberal environment, and among many other terrible things this has involved the privatisation of the commons, of all amenities, our land, our water. Every part of life has been privatised. This has all intensified the sense of insecurity. The irony is of course that as a result the state has become far more coercive. It dominates life through institutions that favour capital, that favour profit making, that favour the privatisation of everything. So I think we need a different type of state.

Now a basic income is a way of giving people a sense of justice, sharing in the proceeds of society, from inherited wealth to everything else. It's an instrument for giving people a sense of personal freedom and particularly republican freedom – the sense that you're not dominated by authorities and by people in unaccountable positions of power. It doesn't do it totally, but it moves in the right direction: it gives people some sense of republican freedom. And it also gives security, which we need as human beings to function. By giving out a basic income, I don't think we'd be creating what is derided as a 'nanny state'. What we've got at the moment is a sort of punishing paternalistic state, and that is certainly something to be afraid of. The state is presuming to tell you what you need and to look after your needs, and if you don't accept that paternalism then it becomes punitive and coercive. We need to move away from that, away from behavioural economics, away from state paternalism to having a state that enables people to have a sense of freedom, where they can create or recreate real communities and recreate social solidarity.

And I think that we all ought to be looking at basic income not as a panacea, not as something that is a standalone policy, but as part of a new progressive politics, a new progressive way of saying we need to recreate society because the neoliberal project has been to atomise society, to break society, to reject society. I have just written a book called *Plunder of the Commons*, which came out in August 2019. It's an attempt to complete the circle of my analysis of the precariat and of basic income, by showing how the commons have been taken by commodification and privatisation, how they have been colonised by financial capital in particular. We need to recapture the commons for society if we are to have a new progressive politics.

MT: How do you engage with theories of cognitive capitalism and with authors who argue that in a post-Fordist economy we are all productive, we all produce, even if we don't work? I'm thinking of economists such as Christian Marazzi or Andrea Fumagalli, who approach the question of basic income slightly differently. They justify it by saying that, in reality, we all produce value, value which results from social cooperation, even if we aren't paid for waged work. They justify basic income by insisting that we are all productive, even if they conceptualise production more broadly.

GS: I've discussed this whole subject with Andrea Fumagalli many times over many years. He is an old friend and I think that you will find that his view and my view are very close. In our discussions we have sometimes used the word *common-fare* instead of welfare. But I think that the idea of cognitive capitalism is probably too abstract for most people to engage with, and I believe that the word productivist is also problematic. You can go back to the Marxian distinction between exchange value and use value. I think that what the technological revolution is doing is increasing the amount of unremunerated work, i.e. that has no exchange value. Take what we're doing right now, you and me, for example: you're not paying me of course, I'm not earning anything. We're doing more and more unpaid work in relation to paid labour. We're working more and more outside of workplaces, outside of formal labour-time, and though we cannot

easily distinguish work and paid labour we know that many forms of work we're obliged to do are not remunerated.

So for me the whole essence of a basic income, or, if you like, common dividends – paying people out of the common fund that we should create, along the lines that I've proposed in my new book – is a way of merging this sense of common-fare and the nature of modern capitalism, where particularly if you're in the precariat you have to do a lot of work that is not labour, a lot of work that has use value but no exchange value. At the same time, if you had a basic income *system*, you would enable people to spend more time doing community work, care work, the sort of work we're doing right now. You would enable people to have a greater sense of control over their work, and that would therefore strengthen social solidarity, and strengthen the sense of society, because it would give you that basic sense of security. If we have no security and no distribution system then a lot of people are more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression.

MT: What do you think about the proposition advanced by feminist groups – such as Ni Una Menos in Argentina and Non Una di Meno in Italy – to introduce a self-determination income that expands the idea of basic income by including social reproduction? More broadly do you think that there is a need today to expand the meaning of 'production' in the sense of social reproduction?

GS: I don't know where I stand on that particular issue. I'm obviously a feminist because one has to stand for equality in every sense and one has to enable everybody to realise their potential. My position is that the wealth of our society is very largely being created by the past and by our commons, and we all have an equal right to share in the production of history. The sense of social justice is what motivates me in supporting the building of a common fund from which dividends are paid out equally to everybody. This would enable people to spend more time looking after each other, on all the dimensions of care and social reproduction, and it would give us all more creative and productive time too. It would also help us pursue the ecological objectives we want to set. I think that this is consistent with what you've just said about radical feminism, so I feel quite comfortable with it.

MT: Do you see any difference in the way in which basic income is understood and implemented in wealthy countries and in the so-called developing countries, i.e. in countries that have a more or less functioning welfare state and those that do not, or that don't yet have one?

GS: In a sense it's easier to introduce a basic income in a developing country because you don't have all the complex institutions at play in social welfare states. I recently produced a report on this for the Labour Party and we're proposing pilots in various parts of the country – and to do a pilot where you introduce a basic income you have to replace some other things. In the British context, in 2012 the Tories introduced their 'universal credit', which is a disgrace, a terrible system, and it makes implementation of a basic income more complicated. It's difficult to phase it in and you need quite a lot of institutional support from a central government to make it possible. We've done pilot projects in India where we introduced a modest basic income without replacing existing welfare systems. We found improvements in nutrition and health and schooling and women's status, the status of the disabled and so on. I'm sure that if we had a system introduced in Calabria or in Manchester it would have very similar effects.



My report for Labour took some of its inspiration from William Beveridge and the Welfare report he drafted in 1942. Beveridge justified the system that he wanted to introduce by saying that it would defeat a number of big diseases: idleness, ignorance and squalor. He thought that the Social Security system he was promoting would help overcome those giants, as he called them. I'm also trying to link the idea of a basic income to the idea of a good society. The giants that we have to defeat today are inequality, insecurity and huge private debt, all of which create enormous amounts of stress. Technological changes, automation and artificial intelligence are also increasing inequalities and insecurities. I don't think that any of these things are reducing or replacing work. I think we're having to do more work rather than less, and for many people it's unsustainable.

The next thing that may help us win the public debate on basic income is the threat of extinction. The extinction that stems from the ecological crisis is going to require us to move away from a production-based future of endless economic growth, commodification, the manipulation of desires, and so on. I think that we will need to impose eco taxes, and we will only be able to implement them if we distribute fairly the revenue they generate. The further danger that may prove equally important among politicians and social elites is the threat of neo-fascism. In situations dominated by figures like Boris Johnson in Britain or Donald Trump in the United States, progressive politicians should offer people some security through a basic income. If they don't have security more people may turn to fascism, and this is an argument that we should be using more effectively on the Left.

MT: You have spoken of the emancipatory effects of UBI schemes. But is this emancipation anti-capitalist, or does it ultimately serve to oil the wheels of capitalism? Wouldn't the provision of a basic income on its own simply preserve the class system as it is?

GS: I do think a basic income is emancipatory. It means that anybody whose position makes them more vulnerable to being oppressed or exploited or both has a greater ability to say no, to refuse to be subjected, to be dominated. I think no particular policy can by itself enable full emancipation, of course, but I think a UBI is far more emancipatory than any other social policy that exists. I would say to those people who are critical of basic income, please name another policy that is more emancipatory, rather than more paternalistic. I think that the essence of a basic income is to oppose paternalism of all sorts, whereas many forms of welfare or Social Security that are more directly contribution-based are in fact more paternalistic – the central argument being that if you behave in a certain way then we will provide you with something and you will be grateful. By contrast, I think the whole philosophical tradition behind the thrust of basic income is emancipatory and non-paternalistic.

MT: Do you think that the idea of basic income might appeal both to the right and the left wings of the political spectrum? And, if so, does basic income preserve the class system or might it be used for fighting unemployment?

GS: I think that a meaningful right to work – and I agree with Marx on this – is a bourgeois impossibility. A right to work only means something if you have the right to say ‘no’, the right to refuse a job that you don’t want. And therefore you must have a basic income in order to have the right to work. These two are not in contradiction to each other, they are both necessary components. The duty to labour is not the right to work. The obligation to go out and get a job that you don’t like but that you have to do because you’re desperate is not the right to work. I also don’t believe that there is a risk of mass unemployment now or in the near future because there’s plenty of work to be done. We have more people in jobs now than at any time in history, at a time when technologies are also more advanced than at any time in history. So I don’t believe that suddenly we’re going to have no work to do.

There’s an infinite number of things we might genuinely want to do: caring for each other, caring for society, caring for ourselves, doing things that help rather than deplete the environment, and so on. So I don’t buy the argument that we’re all going to become redundant. As human beings, we should reduce the amount of labour, of necessary or imposed labour, I’m all in favour of that; and that should allow us to increase the amount of time we can use for genuine work and leisure as creative activities.

Guy Standing is Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and co-founder of the Basic Income Earth Network. His books include Beyond the New Paternalism: Basic Security as Equality (2002), The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class (2011), A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens (2014) and Basic Income, and How We Can Make it Happen (2017).