



If universal basic income is the answer, what is the question?

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Abstract

Universal basic income (UBI) has become the rallying cry for a growing international movement seeking redistribution and equality through direct cash payments by governments to all its citizens. Advocates have promoted UBI on multiple grounds: efficiency, equality, as an alternative to traditional anti-poverty aid programs in very poor countries, or even as the foundation for small “c” communist societies. Numerous small-scale experiments of cash transfers have been conducted across the globe purporting to test UBI’s plausibility. In this essay, I explore the multiple agendas of UBI, and consider whether recent scholarship suggests that it might provide a superior path to achieving the historical goals of the political left than that of social democracy and contemporary welfare states. I also raise questions about the political foundations of a movement seeking to end mandatory work, while noting the future possibility of massive job losses that might alter the social, economic, and political possibilities for UBI.

Keywords Incomes · Equality · Welfare · Postindustrial · Employment · Politics

A discussion of:

- Rutger Bregman, *Utopia For Realists: How We Can Build the Ideal World*, translated by Elizabeth Manton (New York: Little Brown, 2017).
- Lane Kenworthy, *Social Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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- Annie Lowry, *Give People Money: How a Universal Basic Income would End Poverty, Revolutionize Work, and Remake the World* (New York: Crown Books, 2018).
- Malcolm Torry (ed.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Basic Income* (London: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2019).
- Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is having a moment. The idea of a governmental provision of cash grants to all individuals and/or families sufficient to insure something approximating a minimum standard of living has been around in various forms for at least 300 years. Its more famous advocates have included Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence in the 18th Century, Charles Fourier, John Stuart Mill, and Henry George in the 19th, Bertrand Russell, Martin Luther King, John Kenneth Galbraith, and many others in the 20th (including, notably, a few right-wing thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Charles Murray). In recent years, it has captured a good deal of attention in the anti-poverty/development community in some of the poorest parts of the world, as an alternative to conventional forms of foreign aid. Experiments have been launched in rich and poor countries alike, to test its “feasibility,” recalling the famous negative income tax (NIT) experiments in the United States launched at the tail-end of the Great Society era. A wave of countries in Latin America and elsewhere have adopted “conditional” cash transfers which, while neither universal nor providing a true minimum income, are built upon and influenced by UBI principles. A growing number of party politicians in Europe and the United States have begun to propose UBI schemes. National and local referenda have been held (mostly unfavorable for UBI), as well as a growing number of surveys and poll-testing of UBI frames in many countries. Surveying this landscape, it is clear that what was once a set of utopian musings is edging towards the social policy mainstream.

That UBI is gaining traction in recent years is surprising. Austerity politics and other massively expensive emerging societal challenges abound (e.g. global warming, rapidly rising health care costs, population aging in the rich countries) that will have to be addressed in coming decades. Traditional social democratic parties have, by and large, abandoned their historic commitments to radical redistribution. In this environment, UBI represents a breath of fresh air. Nevertheless, especially in the “maximalist” version that most UBI advocates hope to get to, where work becomes truly optional, it would represent a fundamental reorientation of capitalist economic institutions and contemporary forms of social provision via the welfare state. So how can we understand UBI’s continuing and indeed growing appeal?

A good place to start is to note that what makes UBI distinctive is that it is a single policy bullet (guaranteed cash with no means-testing or strings attached) that promises to solve a very wide range of societal problems in one fell swoop. What are the problems and issues that UBI has been seen as potentially solving? A partial catalogue: Worried about the disappearance of jobs as technology makes many forms of human toil obsolete and threatens mass unemployment? UBI can address that problem, by insuring everyone has adequate income available when or if they

cannot find work. Frustrated with the inability of the welfare state to address rising inequality in the 21st Century? Throwing cash at the bottom and lower-middle of the income distribution while taxing capital income (as some suggest) could be a significant component of achieving more egalitarian societies (for example, this where Thomas Piketty [2020, pp. 1000-04] lands in his recent work). Concerned that welfare states are wasteful and paternalistic, and that no one knows better how to spend their own money than the people themselves? UBI could provide a partial or even complete substitute for the welfare state without throwing masses of people into poverty (while absolving libertarians of the taint of complete heartlessness).¹ Worried that corporations exploit powerless workers at the bottom of the labor market, and that declining union strength leaves those workers at the mercy of their bosses? Providing a cash alternative *before* workers agree to perform low-wage jobs could well provide an alternative source of (exit) power to enable workers to hold out for better working conditions and/or opportunities (and thereby force employers to upgrade the worst types of jobs). Angry about unpaid care work, a rapidly increasing burden with population aging and inadequate and underfunded long-term care facilities in most countries? UBI could be viewed as both supporting and providing compensation for such work. Worried that excessive economic growth is unsustainable for ecological reasons? UBI might provide a solution, at least insofar as it could encourage growing numbers of people to live simpler lives with lower work effort (with reduced consumption and, presumably, a corresponding reduction in their carbon footprint). Finally, if you are an aspiring anti-capitalist revolutionary intellectual in despair over socialism's future prospects, UBI potentially provides a road map to a utopian alternative to contemporary capitalism. It is seductive. There is something for everyone. Or so it seems.

The contemporary global movement towards UBI is admirably charted by the journalist Annie Lowrey in her provocatively titled *Give People Money*. Many of the national and international experiments and campaigns, as well as the philosophical and economic foundations, can be tracked in the 27 chapters in the *Handbook of Basic Income*, edited by long-time UBI advocate Malcolm Torry. Lowrey takes readers around the world to report on the sites of cash grant experiments in places like East Africa and scattered trials in rich countries, and UBI-like conditional cash programs in Latin America. She also effectively covers the contemporary social science and policy debates, although readers wanting more scholarly details can find them in the relevant chapters in Torry's *Handbook*. Among the most interesting and possible immediately actionable are systematic tests of small cash grants in parts of the world where large numbers of people are still living on less than \$2 a day. Funded by a variety of nonprofits (with the remarkably ambitious GiveDirectly global initiative in Kenya the largest and most academically rigorous), and in some cases local or national governments, these experiments are generally thought to be showing very promising results (in contrast to the decades-long struggles of traditional aid programs to truly dent deep poverty). Lowrey amusingly reports on the scene in which

¹ This, of course, is the source of its appeal to libertarians such as Milton Friedman (1979) and Murray (2006), who have been explicit in their advocacy of UBI-type schemes. For these authors, UBI would replace all other social obligations to the poor.

one poor village in Kenya selected for a multi-year UBI experiment, where the village chief and UBI program administrator explain to an entire village in which most households survive on less than \$1.50 a day, that for the next *12 years* everyone man, woman and child in the village would receive \$22 a month to do whatever they want with, and there is no work required of any kind. Jaws dropped. (Unfortunately, Lowery does not report the reactions of neighboring village chiefs whose villages were not selected for the experiment).

In the developing world, frustrations with traditional aid programs have encouraged a search for alternative approaches to reducing poverty. But UBI is hardly a policy proposal aimed at poor countries. As frustration with rising inequality and insecurity grows in the rich capitalist world, it has gained many new supporters in recent years. The American writer Lowery also considers UBI in the context of her own very rich country that has (as yet) failed to implement the kinds of anti-poverty programs found in European welfare states. The patchwork of assistance programs in the U.S. makes universal cash grants especially attractive for plugging some of the gaping holes in the American welfare state. But not all rich countries have as many safety-net holes as the U.S. Most, in fact, have grown to the point of getting very close to covering entire national populations with something approximately “cradle to grave” protection, even as they vary to some degree in how that protection is achieved.

In the comparative welfare state literature, the sociologist Lane Kenworthy’s ambitious body of work has provided considerable evidence that advanced welfare states are already achieving most of the goals sought by UBI advocates. In his most recent work, *Social Democratic Capitalism*, he presents a fairly exhaustive data analysis across every major social policy domain that demonstrates the most advanced welfare states have, in fact, dramatically transformed market capitalism in favor of greater equality and family security. Further, he argues, they have done so without sacrificing much, if any, economic growth (the big spenders have performed just as well, if not better, than the less generous Anglo-American welfare states over a period of decades). How did they achieve this? Key are the extensive investments in human capital and full employment to practically insure everyone who can work access to a job. Contemporary social democratic welfare states provide a sufficiently wide array of programs to enable almost everyone to earn enough through a combination of work and income subsidies to be above half of the median income. These long-established welfare state programs have produced a kind of capitalism – what Kenworthy calls social democratic capitalism – that has evolved into a unique, popular and sustainable hybrid model. Even European right-wing populists generally support these programs, so long as their benefits are limited to citizens. At a time when many on the left have come to believe that social democracy is in the doldrums, Kenworthy’s optimistic account provides a vigorous defense of the social democratic project.

That the Anglo-American countries do less well on many of these welfare state measures than their European counterparts, with the United States standing out as the extreme outlier, is well-known. But Kenworthy persuasively argues that there are no plausible reasons, of either economic necessity or existing institutional design, that would prevent any country – including the United States – from eventually getting to the same place as Scandinavian social democracies. What blocks such a development

is politics, not economic or financial necessity. But even here, Kenworthy is optimistic in a novel way. In the second half of the book, focused on the United States, Kenworthy estimates that devoting an additional 10% of GDP to social programs would be required to bring the U.S. up to Scandinavian levels. The vast increase in income security this would provide could be funded, as all European countries do, with a range of taxes including a value-added tax on consumption and other under-taxed forms of income and wealth (and perhaps, he might have added, a significant reduction in the exceptionally high levels of military and counterintelligence expenditures unique to the U.S., which spends 2–3 times as much of its GDP on the military as any European country). Middle class households would pay more in taxes than they do at present – Kenworthy correctly notes the unpleasant fact that although it is very popular right now, new taxes on the rich will not generate nearly enough revenue – but they would also receive far more security and roads to opportunity for themselves and their children than they presently do (as Democratic Party politicians continually struggle to convince voters).

Kenworthy makes two critical claims about the overall direction of welfare states in rich countries, which also link in important ways on UBI proposals for a radical restructuring. First, he notes, that even the most laggard advanced welfare state countries (including the U.S.) are all moving in the same direction, adding programs or extending existing measures over-time. Once established, programs may be restructured, but rarely are eliminated altogether. Nowhere is this more surprising than in the United States. It is very startling to note the two dozen small and medium sized program expansions or enhancements in the last 50 years, including under multiple Republican Presidents. Virtually no programs have been eliminated, with the partial exception of unconditional cash assistance – “welfare” – for poor families. Although the pace of welfare state development in the U.S. has been painfully slow compared to other rich countries, still leaving large numbers of poor people with little or no support, the direction of change is clear (much to the distress of American right-wingers, who may grasp the logic of welfare state expansion better than their centrist and left opponents). The challenge – as the failed presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders have recently demonstrated – is to convince enough people that they would have more income security and live in less unequal society if the lessons elsewhere could be applied (and more immediately) in the U.S. Second, Kenworthy views the demonstrable success of social democratic capitalism as providing a better political foundation for getting to where UBI advocates want to go than a UBI model untested on a national scale anywhere. He writes, “we know social democratic policies yield very good outcomes, whereas basic income’s effects are uncertain” (p. 117). Why, he asks, when we have sophisticated knowledge about how advanced welfare states succeed would we opt for the radical uncertainties of a UBI-alternative?

UBI as the utopian future of capitalism?

One justification for a UBI is that it might offer a new agenda for a 21st Century left. Kenworthy’s diagnosis of social democratic capitalism may be convincing as it stands, but it also lacks any significant utopian ambition to move significantly beyond

the Scandinavian welfare states. UBI, by contrast, not only at least potentially provides material well-being for all, but also could unlock a pathway to fundamentally rewiring capitalism. Key to the radical ambitions of UBI is the provision of an *ex ante* benefit, more or less the opposite of what social democratic benefits provide in filling gaps for those who cannot earn an adequate market income. Some of the most attractive defenses of UBI focus on its transformative, even utopian, possibilities. A particularly inspiring and beautifully written defense of the utopian aims of UBI is provided by the Dutch journalist Ruger Bregman (in his *Utopia for Realists*). Bregman advances the case for UBI with an impressively informed reading of the relevant social science literature and data on both contemporary labor markets and the threat of job displacement from technological advances associated with artificial intelligence. Unlike the gloom that motivates some supporters of UBI (e.g., a fear of a jobless future), Bregman starts from a refreshingly optimistic position about human progress: “Let’s start with a little history lesson. In the past, everything was worse” (p. 1). For Bregman, UBI is a “realist” utopian option precisely *because* technological advances and economic abundance (at least in the rich countries) have reached the point where we could, indeed, should be celebrating the declining need for human labor (and stop pushing every able-bodied person into the labor force, as even the most generous social democratic welfare states do). Instead of dreading the arrival of AI and job displacement, Bregman suggests the opposite: this is a great thing for human freedom, not something to be feared (whereas for social democrats, massive job losses would alter the welfare state formula in significant ways). If we don’t need the same levels of human labor to sustain contemporary lifestyles in the future (at least average ones, if not those of rich people), UBI would serve as the best mechanism to distribute the fruits of technology more fairly. Bregman suggests job sharing, with something like a standard 15-hour workweek. The greatly reduced importance of work in individual lives would, he thinks, have all sorts of other implications. For one thing, we will need to *prepare* as much for the productive use of leisure as the world of work. For example, educational systems might stop obsessing about producing ever more STEM graduates, and return instead to the classical ambition of a liberal education to “spend time on the things that genuinely matter to us,” such as “art, history, and philosophy” (p. 172). Now there is a plan to save the humanities!

The full utopian vision for UBI is most rigorously defended in the many writings of the eminence grise of the contemporary UBI movement, Philippe Van Parijs. A charismatic Belgian philosopher and one of the core members of the legendary “analytical Marxism” group in the late 1980s, Van Parijs and a small group of collaborators first convened in the mid-1980s what they called the Basic Income Europe Network (which has more recently gone global, with “Earth” as the new “E” in the acronym) to consider UBI as an alternative strategy for a left egalitarianism. BIEN has since served as a central node in the dissemination of UBI ideas, news, and policy and political developments.

Van Parijs’ first major intellectual statement in English, co-authored with Robert van der Veen, was a stirring blast entitled “A Capitalist Road to Communism” (published in 1986 in *Theory and Society*, followed by several skeptical comments and

a vigorous reply).² As with Bregman, the starting premise of the paper was a bold puzzle: why, as abundance in the rich countries of the world, had reached unprecedented levels compared to a century earlier, has the demand for human toil barely changed? Why, they asked in the mid-1980s, had Soviet-style socialism as well as European social democracy both largely failed in their historic mission to be a vehicle for achieving equality and reduction of working time? They suggested a shortcut – a universal basic income grant in the context of a capitalist economic system – that might serve as the ratchet to finally achieve the most utopian goals of the left. Freedom from mandatory toil was, after all, Marx and Engel’s ultimate vision for the communist future (in which humans would be free to “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.” UBI could be funded in large measure, they argued, by eliminating most of the “paternalistic” and service-oriented welfare state programs built around work and labor market earnings.

Van Parijs has pursued the case for radical and less-radical “partial” versions of UBI across a series of books since then, with greater eye to empirical and philosophical detail. His most recent and comprehensive statement, co-authored with Belgian political scientist Yannick Vanderbought, covers the history of UBI, the economic, philosophical, and political case for it, and a detailed analysis of how globalization alters how we think about UBI proposals typically pitched at the level of individual nation-states. Van Parijs and Vanderbought (VPV) suggest that we might think of a long-term transformative goal for a “full” UBI as requiring about 25% of GDP, meaning (they calculate for individuals) somewhere around \$1250 per month in the United States per person, \$910/month in Britain, and \$130/month in India. These payments would then increase as real economic growth occurs. But bowing to political realities, they also allow that a smaller sized “partial” UBI in any of these countries might be a more feasible as a starting point. So they devote considerable discussion to how a partial UBI could operate as wedge to get from here to there. But the long-term goal would be to get enough of total economic output distributed in the form of full UBI in order to realize its’ full potential.

VPV walks readers through (in separate chapters) the history of the UBI idea, how it differs from closely related policy ideas (such as the NIT), an analysis of its economic feasibility, and a rich and robust presentation of the ethical issues UBI presents (are UBI recipients who do not work “free riders,” and if so, how can their receipt of the benefit be justified?). Each of these chapters dives deeply into its subjects, with thoughtful and appropriately nuanced conclusions. An extended dialogue with the great egalitarian liberal political philosopher John Rawls engages the question of why Rawls did not intend his “maximin” principle (i.e. insuring the highest possible living standard for the very poorest members of society) to exclude direct cash grants to full-time loafers (or “surfers” as Rawls put it to van Parijs). This fairness question directly confronts a critical piece of the UBI debate, as Kenworthy highlights: that income grants might indeed turn some of us into surfers (of waves, or channels) or more dedicated consumers of, perhaps, cannabis products. In this way, there is a basic unfairness in responsibilities for the public good (or to put in

² The basic income symposium in *Theory and Society* appeared in.

sociological terms, the norm of reciprocity). VPV counter this view by recasting UBI as an opportunity-enhancing policy, which would maximize the range of choices available to the poorest and most disadvantaged member of society (in other words, the maximin becomes the foundation for freedom, not just material survival). Those who fail or chose not to take advantage of such opportunities (for example, for flexible part-time work) will be left with just the basic income grant. But that should be viewed as socially acceptable, VPV argue, as it leaves opportunities for others to cash in on. UBI might also be linked with a renewed questioning of whether paid employment is the only way to contribute to the public good; perhaps some members of a non-working hippy commune pooling their UBI grants to survive would also volunteer time at the local public school?

In the chapter on the economic feasibility of UBI, VPV give a comprehensive and fairly authoritative overview of the various experiments with cash grants (and one can find more detailed discussions of specific experiments in Torry's *Handbook*). VPV suggest two entirely plausible conclusions from these experiments. First, although there have been some mixed results, there is nothing in any of the properly controlled experiments that definitively cuts against the economic feasibility of UBI. Indeed, many of these experiments have produced modestly positive evidence in favor of UBI (such as its impact on labor supply, with results showing that getting a grant either has no or very small impacts on how many hours recipients devote to paid work). Second, they note, the state of our knowledge about the ultimate impact of UBI on human behavior is ultimately inconclusive. Only much larger and longer experiments would provide better information. Jumping to UBI on the basis of conclusive proof may never be possible – a point which raises some doubt about the utility of further experimentation. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing for UBI's prospects, though, is largely left to the reader to decide. In his conclusion to his handbook, Malcolm Torry – in spite of his general enthusiasm for UBI – reaches a similar conclusion.

UBI experiments, in spite of their claimed rigor, raise multiple objections. . Field experiments are in vogue in the contemporary social sciences, and there are no shortage of knowledge about how to implement them. When it comes to testing narrow policy designs or tweaks, , experiments which hold constant everything except the treated condition, can be informative. But field experiments are fundamentally limited in their ability to test whether radical reforms such as UBI can be sustained when extended (i.e. scaled up) to an entire population with lifetime income guarantees. In other words, the ultimate limitation of all of the small-scale UBI experiments is that they cannot fully simulate the range of micro and macro consequences of fundamentally altering the logic of income distribution in the way that devoting 25% of GDP to UBI would.³ It is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, to truly “test” what would happen in a world where *everyone knew* before they even begin to develop long-term plans about careers and how much effort to put into paid employment that they could rely on a UBI grant. UBI capitalism is just a fundamentally different system that is not remotely simulated by existing experimental designs (even those last a dozen years as in the Kenyan example noted above – eventually the money always

³ For more on these limits, an important discussion is provided by Jackson (2020).

runs out). Giving a few people a time-limited grant, with no expectation of permanency, is hardly the same as a “test” of UBI capitalism.

The political sociology of UBI

The discussion of the policy and politics of UBI is by far the weakest part of the entire UBI literature. Torrey’s *Handbook of Basic Income* essentially punts on the question, never interrogating closely evidence of the unpopularity of UBI whenever it has been put to the test. VPV’s chapter on the politics of UBI reduces to identifying major societal groups – employers, unions, precariat, Christians, Socialists, Liberals, Greens, European bureaucrats – and cleverly asserting all *should* find rational reasons to support UBI (and VPV rely on examples of statements or other support for UBI from some leading figures in each group as confirmation). The *Handbook* repeats this, with chapters exploring possible inroads and UBI enthusiasms among some members of various political groupings that sound plausible (Christianity requires taking care of the poor; socialism means to each according to their need; liberals like a less paternalistic welfare state; and so forth). This game might be extended endlessly; indeed, it is hard to think of *any* politically organized group or ideological position that has utterly *no* possible reason to support UBI. VPV even seem to believe that employers [!] might prefer UBI as a vehicle to create more flexible employment (see VPV, p. 183, where the authors declare that “when basic income is clearly part of a deal that couples the firmer basic security [UBI] provides with greater labor market flexibility” employers can be won over).

If democratic politics worked in this way, with rational calculations (at least as defined by VPV and several Handbook authors) governing the policy positions of social groups and their members, this type of analysis might make sense. Unfortunately, it does not. We could easily pick apart each group’s allegedly rational attachment to UBI. Consider employers: Why would savvy business groups and companies favor empowering their workforce with new exit options they have not previously had? (Perhaps the recent COVID experience of labor withdrawal and the problems that has caused for employers provides a clue to the underlying issue). VPV then suggest that small employers might be especially persuadable. But any serious investigation of the fate of most small businesses, especially family-run businesses, will find that they are precisely the kinds of enterprises that can least afford to absorb higher wage bills should labor market tightening occur as a result of UBI. VPV’s reasoning is ultimately circular and unpersuasive, as they want to have it both ways: the good bits of UBI for employers or any other targeted group somehow means more to them then reasons why members of the group might not be so enthusiastic about it.

The misreading of public attitudes towards unconditional cash grants is the most telling. VPV cherry pick a few survey results which seem to indicate there could be some support, but none of the surveys they mention contain rigorous experiments with counter-framing to test the robust of these responses. In the abstract, if survey respondents are asked if they would like a cash handout and not have to work, they will endorse it; but when more sophisticated designs that employ counter-frames of the kind UBI’s opponents would inevitably raise (higher taxes for working people to

support the lifestyles of non-working people!) support inevitably plummets. Indeed, where guaranteed income schemes have become the subject of broad public debate, they have been deeply unpopular. In the late 1960s, the Nixon Administration's proposed guaranteed minimum income for families in the U.S. was polling in the low 30s even as it was making its way through Congress, and the more visibility it attained in public discourse the less popular it became, until Nixon killed it.⁴ More recent confirmation of just how far UBI is from mass support can be seen in a national referendum on UBI in Switzerland in 2016, which after a vigorous campaign and much excitement in the UBI community garnered just 23% of the popular vote. It is hard to imagine a vastly different result in similar countries around the world any time soon.

To put this point slightly more formally (and more in line with the models VPV sometimes favor), we can simply note that if we make the entirely reasonable assumption that for (reasonably) rational voters in a democratic society, the median (and working) voter would be made worse off under a UBI scheme. Everyone at, or just below the median would not receive any significant *net* material benefits from UBI (and they would inevitably have to pay higher taxes to fund it). But that's not even the most basic issue. As VPV properly note, conditional grants are universally more popular than unconditional ones; nowhere in the world is there any evidence that given the choice citizens would prefer the unconditional version which UBI advocates want. Conditional grants – tied to something like children's enrollment and regular attendance in schools, a disability of some sort, or limiting benefits to someone who combines schooling, paid employment, registered care work, or volunteering – may be, and appears to have been, politically viable around the world (indeed, various conditional payments are embedded in contemporary social democratic welfare states, alongside the traditional universal benefits). But this is a long way from universal cash contributions without reciprocity. Ironically, the distinction between “deserving” and “undeserving” is eliminated by the universality of UBI, as the choice to work or not may be freely chosen or because of some attribute that makes work difficult or impossible.

UBI capitalism Versus Social democratic capitalism

One vitally important way to think about the political and economic feasibility of UBI is to systematically contrast it with what we know about existing welfare states and labor market regimes (or in Kenworthy's terms, social democratic capitalism). Disappointingly, none of the relevant chapters in the Torrey *Handbook* systematically assess that comparison; indeed, there is so little discussion of social democracy in the entire book that the term doesn't appear in the index). There is, however, an important, albeit mostly implicit, debate between Kenworthy's vision of social democratic capitalism and VPV's ideas about what UBI capitalism would look like, which we can usefully bring together to get a deeper take on UBI (Kenworthy devotes a few pages to UBI where this contrast is most explicit). The conversation between the

⁴ Steensland (2007) provides the definitive historical account of the remarkable rise and fall of the Family Assistance Plan.

two books hinges on four critical assumptions on which they significantly diverge. First, social democratic welfare states, no matter how comprehensive and generous, still provide benefits (except for services like education and health care) to individuals or families *ex post*. VPV (and other UBI advocates) argue that only an *ex ante* distribution could truly produce freedom of choice on the most fundamental question of how we use our time. In this sense, social democratic capitalism may provide more security (and plenty of redistribution in its maximalist form), but it will never offer the kind of freedom that an upfront, guaranteed income grant might (this was a fundamental limitation of Gosta Esping-Andersen's influential concept of "decommodification," introduced in his landmark 1990 book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*; contra Esping-Andersen, social democratic welfare states never provided decommodification options in the way that an *ex ante* UBI would).

This is an important distinction, and it cannot easily be settled by empirical evidence alone (as we will see shortly). We could ask the abstract question of whether a poor single parent, with two small children and limited education and work opportunities, be better off under social democratic capitalism (which will do everything possible to train and support work opportunities and then top up low earned incomes), or is a UBI capitalism in which any cash comes before work the better platform to stand on? In the social democratic world, the single-parent would typically receive a wide-range of benefits – including substantial childcare support, job training or educational benefits, free health-care, and income top-ups that in total are likely to be significantly larger than a single UBI grant, conditional on a recipient's willingness to train for or take paid employment. Most would be giving up a good deal of income to settle for a single cash payment.

Second, there is a largely unaddressed administrative puzzle about how UBI would be implemented over and above what existing welfare states provide (if UBI is to make no one currently receiving benefits *worse* off). VPV estimate (without specific and critical details) that in the more generous welfare states in Europe, UBI might replace as much as 10% of GDP going to fund programs like unemployment insurance, pensions, cash assistance programs, and others that would now be covered by UBI (p. 135). This would lower the *net* cost of a full UBI from 25 to 15% of GDP in generous welfare states. UBI would provide a new and perhaps more reliable income floor, but all of the existing benefits above the UBI grant (such as, say unemployment benefits that might be approximately \$2000 a month for an eligible median earner in the U.S., higher than the individual share of UBI of \$1250 proposed by VPV). In this case, the first \$1250 of income would come from the full UBI, and the remaining \$750 would come from the existing unemployment system, although other benefits would also have to be taken into account). These are immensely difficult adjustments to existing welfare state institutions. Such a complicated design could be made to work, but it would not at all be straightforward to implement and subject to the kinds of costly administrative and implementation issues that cut directly against the alleged simplicity of UBI (not least of which would be requiring significant *ex post* monitoring).

Further, if no one is to be made any worse off, UBI would provide few, if any, any program administrative savings, and might well add to them. It would not eliminate the most costly of the service-oriented features of existing welfare states such as

service programs in health care, education, job training, old age pensions, and others which would continue as they are. And while the “universal minimum” idea seems straightforward, actually existing individuals have widely varying needs that cost different amounts to meet. The monk living in a remote outpost that grows its’ own food will have needs vastly lower than that of a typical citizen living in a metropolitan area, who in turn will need much more than the disabled citizen requiring significant assistance and services to navigate everyday life. In an engaging chapter in the *Handbook*, Australian public health scholar Jenni May argues that UBI would be inherently freeing for disabled people, and would bring the endless controversies over who is and is not “disabled” to an end. The latter benefit would be real. But eliminating 40% of existing welfare state expenditures (as VPV propose we could) would likely threaten many of the service-oriented programs that are important for disabled (and many other) people.

The third critical assumption dividing Kenworthy and VPV is the role of future economic growth. Kenworthy generally assumes that the historical pattern since the early 19th Century – economic growth driven by capitalist markets subject to periodic but not permanent downturns, with low unemployment most of the time – will continue into the foreseeable future. Indeed, one of the central claimed benefits of social democratic capitalism is that the most generous welfare states exist in societies that have growth rates similar to their less generous counterparts. Economic growth is critical for social democratic capitalism if it is to fund the rising costs of unfavorable demographic shifts (most notably population aging and rising life expectancy and the climate crisis), as well as the inevitable *new* needs that will arise when social movements or policy entrepreneurs put them on the table. Kenworthy acknowledges (as we all must these days) there are many ways in which future growth may slow , but even that would not *require* welfare state retrenchment (it could just limit future program expansion). VPV, in contrast, consider environmental and other limits to future economic growth as part of the very appeal of UBI. If societies must shrink certain types of economic activity in the future for sustainability, UBI might serve as a superior approach to making sure no one is left completely behind. But UBI capitalism would also incur rising costs, and if it did slow down or eliminate economic growth it would eventually be difficult to fund such programs. Finally, in order for a positive case for a “green” UBI capitalism to be viable, major (and perhaps implausible) changes in basic human psychology on a grand scale would be needed. We have no good reasons to believe that a mass reduction in demand for consumer goods can be willed into existence by anything other than force. The 20th Century experience of Socialist Man provides no confidence on this score.

The final issue dividing Kenworthy’s social democratic capitalism and UBI is how they read political dynamics and public opinion. VPV make a very common observation among political commentators and those on left: social democracy does seem to have hit a brick wall, and may indeed be running out of steam. Social democratic parties in Europe have seen their vote shares across continental Europe fall (on average) to the low 20s in recent years (while far-left parties have not, for the most part, seen significant offsetting gains). Fundamentally new ideas in the social democratic world are relatively few; these parties and their allies have mostly had to play defense in recent years, with many leaders shifting to centrist positions sometimes character-

ized as “neoliberal.” On this reading, it would make sense to imagine that a bold new proposal like UBI might serve as a source of political renewal for the left.

But Kenworthy offers a striking and convincing alternative observation: social democratic capitalism is so thoroughly baked into the social policy systems in Europe and even in the UK and the US that it is virtually impossible to roll-back major programs without sparking massive resistance. Further, new social spending programs, once established, have historically been shown to prove popular fairly quickly. In short, social democracy has, to date, always trumped serious retrenchment efforts on the right, in large part because public support for a large welfare state remains robust.⁵ Contrast this with what we know about public attitudes towards unconditional cash proposals. The political track record of social democracy remains vastly more reliable, even if social democratic *parties* no longer benefit from the popularity of their own creation.

The one possible future context that even Kenworthy acknowledges *would* strongly motivate an international movement towards UBI is the possibility that accelerating job losses due to advances in Artificial Intelligence and related technologies, which may develop in the coming decades. Mass unemployment might well create a mass constituency in favor of something like UBI – *if* democratic institutions remained in place to register such preferences. In this scenario, where able-bodied adults came to be seen as unable to work for reasons beyond their control, even full-time surfers would threaten no one. UBI would probably be the best mechanism for sharing the benefits of technology to all. Popular and even some scholarly accounts about an impending “job apocalypse” are rapidly growing. It is impossible not to be impressed by the *potential* of the next major wave of technology. But we still at an early stage, in which immense uncertainty reigns. Those authors and politicians rushing to endorse UBI to “solve” this crisis (UBI or else!), including some Silicon Valley moguls who perhaps fear the social consequences of the very technologies they have helped to unleash.⁶ Yet the historical record remains that capitalism and the technologies it stimulates constantly destroy some jobs while creating new ones. Since the rise of modern capitalism in the 19th Century, overall employment and demand for workers has only grown, not declined. The remarkable shift from farming to manufacturing to services represents major transitions in human history in this period, in both cases involving technological breakthroughs that played a major role (and led to contemporary fears of job displacement). Yet in both cases, and with plenty of painful adjustment for many, employment levels and real earnings ultimately rose. Maybe AI technologies will prove different, but we are not at the point where radical policy shifts can be motivated by what is still highly speculative.

⁵ My argument on this question is presented in joint work with sociologist Clem Brooks; see Brooks and Manza 2007.

⁶ Some examples: Hughes 2018; Yang, 2018; Kroll, 2020.

And yet

The critical assessment of the UBI literature offered here can only lead to a negative set of conclusions. But there are some caveats. UBI does offer a utopian vision that social democratic capitalism cannot currently match. The robustness of the welfare state all over the world is one of the great achievements of the political left in the past Century. But getting voters excited about long established welfare state institutions or modest tweaks to meet emerging problems in the current moment is challenging. Like Nigel Tufnel in *This is Spinal Tap*, social democrats and welfare state supporters have to turn up the volume to 11 to get citizens to notice (and even that often does not work). The contemporary social democratic welfare state has evolved from innovation to established success to a shaggy old dog taken for granted. A fresh injection of utopian thinking is always valuable, even if implementation issues remain unsolved. We would also be remiss do fail to acknowledge how rare it is to find a global network of intellectuals and scholars committed to a radical social reform, talking to each other across national boundaries and building connections with politicians and unions. The fact that a growing number of mainstream politicians and government and many United Nations and development agencies are debating UBI is also an important indicator that something is going on. It may be that in the poorest countries, UBI will be a faster and simpler solution to ending poverty than a decades-long process of building out welfare state institutions could provide.

In particular, UBI raises directly the question of whether the good society is one in which everyone should be compelled to work. On the left, this discussion is, arguably, long overdue. In a world full of “bullshit jobs” (Graeber 2018), is the insistence that all who can shall work consistent with other left goals? Emerging anti-work movements of young people on social media platforms (with catchy slogans such as “unemployment for all, not just the rich”) are a useful reminder that the compulsion to work has been a less desirable aspect of the socialist project. From the compulsory work laws under Soviet-style communism (known as “social parasite laws”) to modern social democracy, where able-bodied people are expected to either be working or in school or job training, work (especially paid employment) has largely been taken for granted. While the goal of full-employment is combined with massive redistribution in the socialist tradition, compulsory work is one position largely shared on both the left and the right. At a minimum, then, the sharp questioning of this foundational piece of modern capitalism by UBI advocates is valuable and important point to discuss, albeit one that is avoided by UBI advocates rushing to assert that there will be no significant labor market consequences. For that reason in particular, along with the need to prepare institutional designs if the next wave of technological change proves as harmful as some think, it is premature to dismiss UBI altogether, even as the social and political conditions for its realization are as yet unrealized.

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