

The Tensions of Welfare State Reform and the Potential of a Universal Basic Income

Yannick VANDERBORGHT

Introduction

The idea of granting every individual a universal basic income (UBI) has a long history. Since the end of the 18th century, various thinkers in Europe and North America have advocated the implementation of an income by right as a fair compensation for the private appropriation of natural resources. In 1848, for instance, the Belgian Fourierist Joseph Charlier published his *Solution du problème social (Solution to the Social Problem)*, in which he claimed that everyone should be entitled to a modest cash transfer, or “territorial dividend”.¹ Similar proposals can be found in the writings of several other so-called “utopian” socialists throughout the 19th century.² Interestingly, much later the same idea of a compensation for unequal access to resources was also at the core the *Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD)*, launched in the early 1980s. The PFD, today’s only existing UBI scheme, is paid out of the oil revenues under the justification that oil is a common property of all residents of the State of Alaska.³

During the 20th century, and especially after the 1960s, UBI gradually entered the mainstream discussion on welfare reform. Since then, it has left the marginal circles to which it was mainly confined, and has been advocated by several prominent economists, including John Kenneth Galbraith, James Tobin, Milton Friedman, Herbert Simon, or Anthony Atkinson. It has been widely discussed in the academic literature,⁴ and has been included in the platform of several important political parties

¹ J. Cunliffe and G. Erreygers, “The Enigmatic Legacy of Charles Fourier: Joseph Charlier and Basic Income”, *History of Political Economy*, Vol. 33, 2001, pp. 459-484.

² J. Cunliffe and G. Erreygers, *The Origins of Universal Grant. An Anthology of Historical Writings on Basic Capital and Basic Income*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

³ K. Widerquist and M. Howard (eds.), *Alaska’s Permanent Fund Dividend: Examining its Suitability as a Model*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

⁴ See K. Widerquist, J.A. Noguera, Y. Vanderborght and J. De Wispelaere (eds.), *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research*, New York, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

across the world. Furthermore, experiments have been launched in a few countries.⁵

It is not part of the purpose of this chapter to give a detailed account of these historical developments, full of stimulating stories and fascinating figures. My intention is rather to show that there were, and still are, many good reasons to think about a UBI while exploring the issues of welfare state reform in developed countries. It is especially true in the context of an increasing emphasis on activation – or even workfare – in almost all welfare states. In particular, I intend to show how the discussion about UBI forces us to think about three key tensions of welfare state reform: the tension between universalism and selectivity (I.), between in-cash and in-kind benefits (II.), and between conditionality and unconditionality (III.).

In the remaining of this chapter, I will use the following background definition of UBI: an income paid by a political community to all its members, on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement. As it is made clear by this definition, a UBI differs from a minimum income scheme, or social assistance, in three crucial ways. Conventional minimum income schemes are restricted to the poorest (i.e. they are means-tested), take into account the recipient's family situation, and are conditional upon availability to work. By contrast, a basic income is granted to all, rich and poor (universal), on an individual basis (individual), without any work requirement (unconditional). In principle, a UBI would be paid to all adult residents, but a basic universal pension, or a universal child benefit, can be considered to be part of the same league of proposals.

I. The Tension Between Universalism and Selectivity

Discussing the idea of a UBI first offers a welcome opportunity to examine into some detail a central tension in social policy, the tension between universalism and selectivity. Should the welfare state provide the same benefits to all legal residents on a universal basis, or should it target benefits in order to cover the needs of some specific categories only?

Since the early 1990s, strong pleas in favour of increased selectivity have been heard, especially on the left side of the political spectrum. The case of child benefits is quite illustrative in this respect. While Canada had already ended the universal character of its Federal Family

⁵ See for instance E. Forget, "The Town with no Poverty: The Health Effects of a Canadian Guaranteed Annual Income Field Experiment", *Canadian Public Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2011, pp. 283-305.

Allowance in 1989, other countries started to discuss similar reforms in the 1990s. In France, for instance, the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin made an attempt at turning the universal child allowance into a selective system in the late 1990s (see below). After the election of Socialist President François Hollande in 2012, the French government was again considering the end of universalism in child support policies. The French case is illustrative of many similar moves in other countries.

The main arguments in favour of increased selectivity always refer to budgetary constraints (universal schemes are said to be too costly), but also to fairness: universal benefits are allegedly unfair, since rich households or individuals do not need them. In November 2012, in the context of an intense discussion about the child benefit reform, a Belgian columnist phrased it as follows: "Why would someone who is earning as much as Kris Peeters [the then Prime-Minister of the Flemish regional government] receive the same amount of child benefit as a lone mother"?

To some extent, it sounds self-evident: why should a welfare state opt for universalism, whereas some of the recipients, be it in the middle-class or the wealthy upper class, do not need the benefits? In other words, a universal benefit such as UBI seems to waste valuable tax and payroll revenues by distributing equally among all what some do not need in the least. This is an often-heard objection to UBI: why pay Bill Gates?

Obviously, I would not argue that selectivity, or targeting, is always wrong. It is sometimes required, especially when one has to meet certain specific needs, such as those of the disabled. But contrary to what one might think at first sight, universalism matters a great deal when we think about progressive welfare reform. Not only does universalism "express our common membership of society";⁶ it is also, crucially, more efficient against poverty (A.), more efficient in guaranteeing access to the labour market (B.), and more resilient against welfare retrenchment (C.).

A. Poverty

Universalism is, somewhat paradoxically, important if we want welfare programmes that are efficient in tackling poverty. Of course, the concrete distributive impact of a universal scheme will always depend on how it is financed. Let us assume that, as is the case for most existing universal programme in Europe, a UBI would be funded through progressive general taxation (i.e. not via flat-rate social contributions). If

⁶ B. Eeckhout, "Hervorm de kinderbijslag", *De Morgen*, 13 November 2012.

⁷ F. Block, "Why Pay Bill Gates?," in P. Van Parijs *et al.* (eds.), *What's Wrong with a Free Lunch?*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2001, pp. 85-89.

⁸ T. Horton and J. Gregory, *The Solidarity Society*, London, Fabian Society/Webb Memorial Trust, 2009, p. 135.

it were the case, the fact that both rich and poor receive a UBI would not mean that its implementation makes the rich richer. The richest will have to finance both their own basic income, and a considerable portion of the basic income of the poorest. More interestingly, universalism is a key to anti-poverty policies for the three following reasons.

First, selectivity tends to be hampered by severe administrative problems. Selective programmes typically have to rely on means-tests in order to get a more or less accurate picture of who is to be counted as poor: caseworkers control the actual income of potential recipients, as well as their other assets such as the income of other members of the household, properties, and savings. In some cases, claimants even have to prove that they cannot count on the resources of their extended family. These complex controls take time. As a result, eligible recipients might ultimately get the benefit with some delay, or be denied access to the benefit altogether because they failed to pass the tests. In other words, selective schemes operate *ex post*, on the basis of a complex prior assessment of the beneficiaries' means, whereas universal programmes operate *ex ante*, providing a more stable basis for income security.

The second reason is closely related to the first. Given the above-mentioned complexity, potential recipients are often unable to pass the means-tests because they even ignore what their exact rights consist in. In other words, "targeting rules often tend to exclude the neediest potential recipients because they are the ones who have the most difficulty complying with program rules".⁹

Third, selective programmes also tend to stigmatise recipients, a fact that is well-documented by sociologists. For this reason, a significant proportion of the eligible recipients do simply not claim the benefits, especially in countries where cultural norms tend to make individuals ashamed to apply for assistance. This does not only raise a problem in terms of efficiency against poverty but is also, and perhaps more importantly, a problem of justice, assuming that self-respect is an important social primary good in the sense of John Rawls.¹⁰

Along with the administrative complexity, the stigma attached to targeting explains the relatively low take-up rate of all social assistance programmes: in a nutshell, targeted programmes often miss their target. Studies conducted in France after the 2009 thorough reform of the minimum income scheme (see the chapter by Diane Roman in this volume) have shown that almost 50% of the potential recipients of the scheme do simply not claim it. Ironically, estimations also show that this

⁹ J. Currie and F. Gahvari, "Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2008, p. 348.

¹⁰ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971.

low take-up rate amounts to massive savings for the budget of French public authorities.¹¹

B. Labour Supply and the Right to Work

A universal benefit is not only more efficient against poverty, it is also more efficient in guaranteeing access to the labour market, a key objective for supporters of activation policies. Somewhat paradoxically, a UBI can thus perfectly be discussed within the framework of a reflection on the "active welfare state" and the "right to work".

Selective programmes always tend to generate traps. Means-tested minimum income schemes, for instance, generate deep poverty traps. They penalise those who succeed in finding a low-paid job, since the gains from taking up work are offset by the reduction, or complete withdrawal, of the benefit. In some cases, when different means-tested transfers are combined, including subsidies for public housing or free public transportation for instance, access to employment becomes financially unattractive, as marginal tax rates get close to (or even exceed) 100%.

Policymakers across Europe are of course aware of this issue. Some of them argue that one solution might consist in lowering the benefits, in order to increase the incentives to take a low-paid job. However, since in all European countries minimum incomes are already below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, this option does not seem very promising. The idea of increasing the minimum wage looks more attractive, and is supported by a vast majority of workers' representatives. In most countries, however, there is not much room for such a reform since the labour market is already under pressure at the bottom end of the income distribution.

In such context, UBI supporters argue that one should start with turning selective schemes into universal ones. A universal benefit, such as the existing child benefits in most EU countries, can be fully kept when one takes a low paid job.¹² It means that a UBI, contrary to targeted schemes, gives incentives to seek work, because it improves the net income of the individual worker as compared with what she receives when she is inactive. Disregarding mechanisms for its subsequent recovery through taxation, the basic income is retained in full by the recipient whatever the

¹¹ The studies were conducted by Philippe Warin. In English, see for instance P. Warin, "Non-Demand for Social Rights: A New Challenge for Social Action in France", *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2012, pp. 41-55. See also the following interview (in French) with P. Warin: "La moitié des personnes qui ont droit au RSA ne le demandent pas", *Le Monde*, 17 January 2013.

¹² On the impact of universal child benefits, see the illustrative Belgian case in B. Cantillon and T. Goedemé, "Les allocations familiales dans le régime des travailleurs salariés: rétrospective axée sur l'avenir", *Revue belge de sécurité sociale*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2006, p. 9.

circumstances. It can be compared to a stable, permanent employment subsidy, available to everyone, regardless of prior employment record. Contrary to the complex schemes of job subsidies that are implemented on a yearly regular basis by all governments across Europe, it accordingly avoids creating income inequalities at the bottom of the wage structure, while being far more transparent as regards conditions of entitlement.

A UBI is sometimes presented as the ideal alternative to full employment. Some criticise it for this very reason, as they fear that paying a basic income will amount to pay the lazy, whereas our goal should be to guarantee a right to work – perhaps through a guaranteed job (see the chapter by Philip Harvey in this volume). However, the discussion about the differences between universal and selective schemes shows that in order to have an effective right to work, it is essential to guarantee the right to an income. By focusing on the inactive only, conventional means-tested schemes definitely help to reduce poverty, but also create a genuine trap as they tend to penalise people who manage to find a job. The introduction of a UBI guarantees that even a poorly paid job can provide individual workers with a higher net income than they would have if unemployed.

C. Resilience

The final way to explain why universal schemes perform better than selective ones has to do with the politics of income support. To put it briefly, data show that “the greater the degree of low-income targeting, the smaller the redistributive budget”.¹³ The distribution of power resources is key to understanding this mechanism, and can be summarised as follows: the probability that universal programmes will be defended against a potential backlash is much higher than in the case of selective programmes, simply because the former are more inclusive than the latter.¹⁴ Selective programmes establish a clear divide between net recipients and net contributors, and the middle class is less prone to support them.

The French universal child benefit offers a perfect illustration of this: in the past two decades, several governments attempted to turn it into a selective programme. As already mentioned, the socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, for instance, tried to reform the universal child benefit in the late 1990s. In 1998, he managed to introduce a short-lived income-test. However, as he had to face the fierce opposition of major

¹³ W. Korpi and J. Palme, “The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State Institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 63, No. 5, 1998, p. 672.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Korpi and Palme for further details and additional references.

political and social forces, in 1999 he had to make the transfer universal again.¹⁵ By contrast, the U.S. case is paradigmatic of the perverse effects of selectivity: targeting tend to assign some specific social identity to recipients, especially since a significant proportion of the worst-off are Black or Hispanic (see the chapter by Daniel Dumont in this volume). No surprise, therefore, to see little support for welfare within the white middle class.

“Not only the poor”:¹⁶ this is a crucial element of welfare reform, at least if we believe, as I do, that sustainable and resilient programmes are of key importance.

II. The Tension Between In-Cash and In-Kind Benefits

Suppose we agree on the fact that, for the above-mentioned reasons, universal benefits are superior to selective transfers. The next question then becomes: should we opt for universal benefits in-cash or in-kind?¹⁷ This question, which was already raised during the early stages of welfare state development, is also at the core of the discussion between UBI supporters and advocates of a job guarantee.

According to supporters of in-kind benefits, some form of mild paternalism is required in order to protect individuals against themselves, or in order to protect their dependent relatives (especially their children). By directing their consumption choices, in-kind benefits help to avoid suboptimal spending on some specific goods and services. For instance, by providing free universal education, public authorities avoid parent’s (potential) suboptimal spending on children’s education. Similarly, as illustrated by the comparison between Europe and the United States, a free public health care system is more efficient than a largely privatised one, because it helps to avoid individual’s suboptimal spending on preventive health care services. In almost all OECD countries, health care and free basic education are two universal programmes that provide in-kind benefits, and still represent a very large share of public spending. It should also be noted that several means-tested (i.e. non-universal) schemes, such as public housing programmes, or the U.S. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, also rely on this mildly paternalistic view through the provision of in-kind benefits.

¹⁵ However, on October 24, 2014, the French House of Representatives adopted an important reform of the child benefit, which mainly consists in paying lower benefits to higher income groups.

¹⁶ Following the title of a famous book: R.E. Goodin and J. Le Grand, *Not Only the Poor: the Middle Classes and the Welfare State*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

¹⁷ An excellent overview of this discussion can be found in J. Currie and F. Gahvari, “Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data”, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-383.

Another related argument in favour of in-kind benefits focuses on the broader issue of the legitimacy of public transfers. Even when income inequalities are seen as justified, for instance because they are considered to be the result of individual merit, many people will nevertheless stick to some sort of “specific egalitarianism”: they will tend to think that everyone, regardless of his or her past choices, should have a guaranteed access to some basic necessities. The expression “specific egalitarianism” was coined by American economist and UBI-advocate James Tobin, and refers to the widespread view that “scarce commodities should be distributed less unequally than the ability to pay for them”. According to Tobin, “candidates for such sentiments include basic necessities of life, health, and citizenship”.¹⁸ In other words, most of us would agree with the fact that access to these basic necessities should be guaranteed to all, on a universal basis.

To some extent, both arguments apply to the proposal of a “job guarantee” supported by Philip Harvey (see his contribution in this volume). The job guarantee includes some form of mild paternalism, since its advocates want to make sure that people are going to work; and it includes some form of specific egalitarianism, since it assumes that everyone should get access to the labour market, be it only because it guarantees access to other “social primary goods” such as income and self-esteem.

By contrast, a UBI is paid in cash, as in the case of existing conditional schemes of means-tested income support, without restrictions as to the nature or timing of its consumption. The key argument here is based on considerations of individual freedom, since such a benefit leaves everyone fully free to decide how to spend it. In this vein, philosophers of the liberal-egalitarian school insist on the importance of combining egalitarian transfers with a great degree of freedom. In-cash is then justified on grounds of justice; this is what Philippe Van Parijs, one of the most prominent UBI advocates, calls “real freedom for all”.¹⁹ In order to be really free, and pursue one’s own conception of the good life, some form of minimal income security is required.

But in-cash benefits can also be defended for efficiency reasons, referring to what economists usually call “consumer sovereignty”: “At the heart of the economist’s love affair with cash transfers is the doctrine of

¹⁸ J. Tobin, “On Limiting the Domain of Inequality”, *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1970, p. 264. Tobin’s argument is also discussed in J. Currie and F. Gahvari, “Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data”, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

¹⁹ P. Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All. What (if anything) Can Justify Capitalism?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

absolute consumer sovereignty.”²⁰ This argument is best phrased in terms of imperfect information of public authorities: in-cash is superior to in-kind, because the government has limited information about individual preferences and consumption choices. In other words, following this argument, individuals are supposed to be “the most qualified judges of how to best maximize their own utility.”²¹

These arguments about justice and efficiency of in-cash transfers should be carefully discussed, as they are not decisive; in fact, in-kind transfers also have obvious positive features. It certainly means that, in the end, welfare states have good reasons to combine both in-kind and in-cash benefits. Let me focus on two last arguments in this respect.

First, in the framework of any discussion about activation policies and the right to work, one should pay attention to any possible impact on the labour supply. Leaving aside the normative question of the work ethic (work as being intrinsically important), if transfers are aimed at reducing the poverty rate, providing poor individuals with cash benefits might not be enough, even when it has a positive impact on the inactivity trap (see above). The difference between childcare facilities (in-kind) and a universal child benefit (a basic income for children, in-cash) is quite illustrative in this respect. According to the above-mentioned arguments, on grounds of justice and efficiency one should obviously opt for the highest level of in-cash child benefit. But if we want to promote employment in the framework of activation policies, universal services such as childcare facilities might also be considered, as they could positively affect the labour supply of mothers.

This is a tricky issue, as there is no clear-cut evidence about the fact that in-kind benefits really have better effects on labour supply, at least in the short-term. Most American studies actually found minor effects: on the whole, “there is little evidence that in-kind programs have positive short-run effects on labor supply” of mothers.²² In a detailed study on the European Union (EU27), Wim Van Lancker gives a more balanced picture of this relationship, as he examines inequalities in childcare use.²³ But evidence also shows that an expansion of childcare services will not necessarily translate into an increase of women’s employment rate among

²⁰ L. Thurow, “Cash Versus In-Kind Transfers”, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 1977, p. 193.

²¹ L. Thurow, “Government Expenditures: Cash or In-Kind Aid?”, in G. Dworkin (ed.), *Markets and Morals*, New York, Wiley, 1977, p. 96.

²² J. Currie and F. Gahvari, “Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data”, *op. cit.*, p. 365.

²³ W. Van Lancker, “Putting the Child-Centred Investment Strategy to the Test: Evidence for the EU27”, *European Journal of Social Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2013, pp. 5-27.

all social groups. In fact, childcare services are widely used by high-income groups, but to a much lesser extent by least well-off families. Hence, the impact of such services on the employment of mothers of disadvantaged children is also much lower in the short-term.

If one considers a long-term perspective, however, and especially when employment patterns tend to converge as least well-off mothers gradually enter the labour market, there might be good reasons to support in-kind services such as childcare facilities. To some extent, “the relationship between childcare use and maternal employment is presumably reciprocal: availability of childcare services gives mothers of young children a better option to engage in paid employment, which will in turn induce a higher demand for childcare places”.²⁴ Childcare services also tend to have a positive effect on the human capital of young children, hence providing them with better opportunities to access the labour market when they become young adults.²⁵ Furthermore, such services might also have a positive effect on the socialisation of mothers, which in turn – due to the positive impact of networks and social capital – might improve their chances to find a job.

Second, we have seen that according to one classic view in economics, individuals are said to be best qualified to make decisions that will satisfy their preferences and maximise their own utility. This is a strong argument in favour of in-cash benefits without any restriction as to nature or timing of consumption. However, as was rightly stressed by Thurow, “real public policies must face up to a modification of this simplistic view – there are individuals who are incompetent to make their own decisions”.²⁶ If this is true, and especially at young age, some mild paternalism might be required after all. It might also mean that some decision-aiding services are justified for the management of in-cash benefits.²⁷

This point implies at least one important consequence: it means that payments of in-cash transfers should be made in small instalments, rather than once a year, for instance. In fact, while they often argue against any form of paternalism, almost all UBI advocates opt for a monthly payment of the basic income. In other words, even if UBI supporters are attached to individual freedom, they seem to be aware of the fact that individuals have to be protected against themselves. For this reason, contrary to what one might think at first sight, mild paternalism is not totally absent from the design of their proposal.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁵ J. Currie and F. Gahvari, “Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data”, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

²⁶ L. Thurow, “Cash Versus In-Kind Transfers”, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

²⁷ See L. Thurow, “Government Expenditures: Cash or In-Kind Aid?”, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

In principle, one could of course pay a UBI as a lump-sum, as was proposed by Ackerman & Alstott in the U.S. context. Their idea was to give every American a “stakeholder grant” of 80,000 US\$ at the age of 18.²⁸ But the whole of such an endowment could be spent on luxuries or unnecessary items, rather than invested in studies, training, or housing. Hence, a vast majority of UBI advocates have been very critical of this proposal, arguing that its design was bound to make such a capital grant “far less opportunity-egalitarian” than a UBI. Philippe Van Parijs, for instance, argued that young people already favoured along various dimensions, such as talent, parental attention, or school quality, would be “the most likely to make the best possible use of their stakes”, while others will likely take wrong decisions.²⁹

In the end, it seems that the tension between in-kind and in-cash remains intact, partly because of the conflicting objectives we have in mind when we think about welfare state reform. Clearly, as was already stressed by Thurow, transfer systems probably need a continuum “ranging from cash, cash with advice, vouchers, in-kind provision, and, finally, compulsion”.³⁰ In any case, what is often overlooked by UBI opponents is the fact that the introduction of an universal benefit in cash is, of course, fully compatible with the maintenance and even reinforcement of universal benefits in kind, such as free basic education, free healthcare, or free access to public services in general.³¹ Some universal social policies already in place rely on such combination, like is the case in countries where universal child benefits are combined with universal access to subsidised childcare facilities.

III. The Tension Between Conditionality and Unconditionality

Finally, let me briefly deal with the third tension, the tension between conditionality and unconditionality. If the idea of paying everyone a UBI

²⁸ B. Ackerman and A. Alstott, *The Stakeholder Society*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999.

²⁹ P. Van Parijs, “Basic Income Versus Stakeholder Grants: Some Afterthoughts on how Best to Redesign Distribution,” in B. Ackerman, A. Alstott and P. Van Parijs (eds.), *Redesigning Distribution. Basic Income and Stakeholder Grants as Cornerstones for an Egalitarian Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2006, pp. 199-208.

³⁰ L. Thurow, “Government Expenditures: Cash or In-Kind Aid?”, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

³¹ Given the fact that governmental resources are limited, some left-wing critics of basic income conclude that “state provision of a long list of expensive services, plus targeted cash payments to those in special circumstances, has a higher priority” (B. Bergmann, “A Swedish Welfare State or Basic Income: Which Should Have Priority?,” in B. Ackerman, A. Alstott and P. Van Parijs (eds.), *Redesigning Distribution*, *op. cit.*, London, Verso, 2006, p. 130.

sounds radical, it is probably not due to its universal or to its in-cash nature. The most controversial feature of this proposal rather lies in the fact that, by contrast with activation schemes, the benefit is not linked to any work requirement. In other words, even if most of us would agree that the very idea of a “right to work” deserves closer attention, there might be a broad consensus about the idea that there should still be some form of “duty to work”, at least for the able-bodied. Note, however, that in developed welfare states unconditionality – under the form of an absence of work requirement – is already at the core of several existing universal in-cash benefits (such as child benefits and basic means-tested pensions), and of several universal in-kind benefits (such as health care and education).

How can we justify this feature of the proposal, especially in the light of the discussion of active welfare policies? One obvious way to answer this question consists in referring, once again, to the liberal-egalitarian framework already mentioned. In this perspective, providing everyone with an unconditional cash grant of equal value is a good way – indeed, the best way – to achieve social justice in terms of “real freedom”. But some would object that social justice also has to do with the idea of reciprocity, or with the idea of merit: somehow, access to benefits should be deserved, since there are no rights without related duties. In other words, why would we pay the lazy? Shouldn’t we force them to reciprocate through some form of participation in the labour market? Facing this widespread “reciprocity objection”, UBI supporters have at least three different replies.³²

First, forcing individuals into the labour market, be it through workfare policies or through a job guarantee programme, might prove counter-productive. Many entrepreneurs are reluctant to support activation programmes, as they do not want unproductive workers who are not motivated to do the job. In general terms, for obvious reasons, the average productivity of forced labour is quite low. By contrast, the cost of workfare and job guarantees programmes is quite high, perhaps higher than the net cost of a UBI. Proponents of activation might counter-argue by saying that within the OECD most activation programmes are of a much softer nature, as they rather focus on vocational training, guidance, or positive incentives intended at “making work pay”. An increasing proportion of UBI supporters, as we will see below, do not necessarily oppose this softer approach. They advocate a progressive activation strategy, of which a guaranteed income is the main component.

³² Leaving aside the numerous replies that are inspired by political theory. For an overview, see Part III (“Reciprocity and Exploitation”) of K. Widerquist, J.A. Noguera, Y. Vanderborght and J. De Wispelaere (eds.), *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research*, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-140.

Second, UBI proponents argue that one should not be afraid of an alleged “nightmare scenario”, in which everyone stops working and live off their basic income. Paradoxically, they can even rely on one of the most-often heard arguments against UBI. Sceptics like to say that a UBI makes no sense because individuals are not looking for an income as such, but for social recognition and self-esteem through a valuable occupation. If this is really the case, i.e. if the non-monetary benefits of work are so important, why should we fear the nightmare scenario with the implementation of a modest income guarantee?

Third, and perhaps most importantly, one should stress the fact that a UBI is an essential component of a progressive activation strategy. As was made clear in the above discussion about the tension between universalism and selectivity, selective schemes definitely help reduce poverty but also create a genuine trap, because they penalise people who manage to find a job. Since the introduction of a UBI guarantees that even a poorly paid job can provide people with a higher net income, it can be considered as a job subsidy. Some UBI opponents, especially within the trade-union movement, counter-argue by saying that taxpayers would then actually subsidise “bad jobs”, i.e. degrading jobs. But precisely because of its unconditional nature, with a UBI workers get the right and the power to refuse jobs that they consider as degrading. The fact that there is no work requirement provides the most vulnerable with a negotiating power, enabling them to reject job offers that (in their own view) have no future. In other words, because it is universal, basic income functions as a subsidy for less productive work, but because it is unconditional it does not serve as a subsidy for degrading jobs. Basic income favours employment, but not under any conditions. It makes it possible to offer and accept poorly paid jobs, but these will only find takers if they are sufficiently pleasant, stimulating, and formative, or offer real career prospects, not if they are repulsive, degrading and lead nowhere. It makes it also much easier to accept such transitions as training and apprenticeship, provided they correspond to one’s individual aspirations, not to the will of a civil servant.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, the driving idea behind the proposal of an unconditional basic income is to improve the situation of the worst-off in at least three key dimensions: income security, freedom, and self-esteem. Even if conventional social policies often share similar objectives, the careful examination of the tensions at the core of welfare reform shows that a UBI performs much better, even when one takes progressive activation strategies into account. UBI supporters do not, in fact, deny the idea that there should be some sort of “right to work” or, at least, the

right to get access to a meaningful activity. What they dispute is that the best way to realise such a right consists in implementing a “duty to work”. Instead, they force us to think about the idea that there might be a (somewhat unexpected) connection between the right to work and the right to an income.

In this chapter, I did not explore the financial and political feasibility of basic income, although I am aware of the fact that these are key elements in the assessment of its potential from the perspective of welfare reform.³³ However, whatever the results of such exploration, I firmly believe that in the long-term a UBI indicates the direction into which developed welfare systems should evolve. But in the short-term, this proposal can – and should – inspire more modest reforms, that might prove more realistic in times of economic downturn; some potential advantages of a UBI can be incorporated into less radical policies, which might even include existing mainstream activation schemes. It could, for instance, inspire reforms aimed at facilitating transitions between the school system and the labour market, if it is implemented as a direct subsidy for students and apprentices.

In particular, one should pay attention to the possible drawbacks of a move towards increased selectivity, which is on the agenda in most European countries. Such move might be detrimental to the interests of the worst-off. On the contrary, as this brief discussion of the potential of a UBI shows, universalism is required in order to achieve a welfare reform that bridges concerns of justice with concerns of efficiency and sustainability.

³³ On the potential of basic income in a changing welfare state, see for instance Y. Vanderborght and T. Yamamori (eds.), *Basic Income in Japan. Prospects for a Radical Idea in a Transforming Welfare State*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Elise DERMINE and Daniel DUMONT (eds.)

**Activation Policies
for the Unemployed,
the Right to Work
and the Duty to Work**

Work & Society
Vol. 79

This publication has been peer-reviewed.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photocopy, microfilm or any other means, without prior written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

© P.I.E. PETER LANG S.A.
Éditions scientifiques internationales
Brussels, 2014
1 avenue Maurice, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
info@peterlang.com; www.peterlang.com

ISSN 1376-0955
ISBN 978-2-87574-232-2
eISBN 978-3-0352-6495-1
D/2014/5678/98

Printed in Germany

CIP available from the Library of Congress (USA) and the British Library (GB).

Bibliographic information published by "Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek".
"Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek" lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie";
detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <<http://dnb.d-nb.de>>.

Acknowledgements

The origins of this book lie in an international symposium held at the European Trade Union Institute, in Brussels, on the 15th of March 2013. The symposium was the result of collaborative efforts between the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Work, State and Society (CIRTES) and the Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Law, Enterprise and Society (CRIDES) at the Université Catholique de Louvain, and the Centre for Public Law (CDP) at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

The editors wish to thank the European Trade Union Institute for its hospitality; Philippe Pochet, Bea Cantillon, Filip Dorssemont and André Nayer for agreeing to chair the various working sessions that led to the four parts of this book; Pascale Vielle, Paul Van Aerschot and Virginia Mantouvalou for their presentations on the day of the symposium; and the many participants for their questions and interpellations. The editors also wish to express their gratitude to the organisations and institutions without the financial support of which this adventure could not have happened: the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS), Wallonie-Bruxelles International, the Belgian Federal Minister of Social Affairs, the Minister of Employment of the Brussels-Capital Region, the Minister of Employment of the Walloon Region, and the research centres that co-organised the symposium.