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How can a basic income be defended?

By Guillaume Allègre¹

Following the submission of 125,000 signatures collected by organizations (including [BIEN Suisse](#)²) supporting the establishment of a basic income, Swiss citizens will vote in a referendum on a popular initiative to include the principle of an unconditional basic income in the Swiss Federal Constitution. While a basic income, which is defended by [Vanderborcht and Van Parijs \(2005\)](#) under the term “universal allocation”, can take many forms, its principles are that it is paid (1) on a universal basis, in an equal amount to all³, without testing for means or needs, (2) on an individual basis and not to households, and (3) unconditionally, without requirement of any counterpart. It can be defended from both a liberal-libertarian perspective as a replacement for existing benefits and social insurance (with Friedman often cited in this sense, although his negative tax proposal is for a family-based system; [Capitalism and Freedom](#), p. 159), or from a progressive standpoint, in which case the basic income would be added to most existing benefits and social insurance. It is more in this second sense that the [BIEN \(2013\)](#) advocates a basic income, although the liberal aspect of the measure is also assumed: “It's the most liberal solidarity principle one can get, as it ensures individual existence and social cohesion, without the rigidity of interventionism and no oppressing bureaucracy.” A progressive version would add a fourth characteristic: it must be (4) in an amount sufficient to cover basic needs and enable participation in social life. The spectrum of advocates of a sufficient basic income is very broad, and includes – under different names (universal allowance, subsistence income, etc.) – those coming from the perspectives of Marxism, political ecology (Gorz) and liberal egalitarianism (Van Parijs). The critics also represent a

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2. Basic Income Earth Network. The [BIEN](#) international network has its home office in the Catholic University of Louvain. Its council is headed by [Philippe Van Parijs](#).

3. Citizens and adult permanent residents. It is also often proposed that a lower amount be paid to or on behalf of minors, as a replacement for family allowances.

variety of trends: Marxist, liberal-egalitarian (Rawls⁴) and social democratic (Castel).

The features of a basic income differ from those of a guaranteed minimum income, as it exists for example in France (“RSA-socle, former RMI”). The guaranteed minimum income (1) is subject to means-testing, (2) is paid on a family basis (household), (3) is conditioned on efforts at vocational and social integration. This conditionality can be considered weak in practice: it is monitored unevenly around the country and sanctions are only rarely applied. Its level reflects a trade-off between the goal of “ensuring its beneficiaries a suitable livelihood” and the goal of “encouraging the exercise of a vocational activity”. In practice the amount of social assistance is set not relative to the resources it provides but relative to the minimum wage, as the report on the law establishing a minimum income acknowledges⁵: “Given current conceptions of how income and work are linked, it does not seem possible to avoid setting the RMI relative to the minimum wage [“SMIC”].”⁶

This Note will discuss the fundamental principles underpinning a basic income. It concludes that it is not easy to find a basis in terms of distributive justice that is consistent with the four characteristics of a basic income. The generalized reduction of working time seems to be a more sustainable political solution than a basic income for achieving the ecological and emancipatory goals that have been attributed to it.

What fundamental principles?

It is possible to distinguish four criteria for how economic resources are distributed. The first three are criteria set out by distributive justice (Forsé and Parodi, 2006): the principle of contribution (or **merit**), according to which each person should receive their due; the principle of compensation, according to which resources should be allocated according to **need**; and finally, **equality**. The fourth criterion is intended to take efficiency into account: according to this principle, resources should be allocated to those who use them best.

Theoretically, a basic income can be justified by these four principles.

A basic income justified by contribution?

The contribution principle is widely used in social and labour struggles. These struggles traditionally rely on the notion that workers are not really paid according to their contribution to the creation of wealth. For example, from a

4. Rawls (1993) rejects the unconditionality of a basic income: “So those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds.”

5. This was not the case of the single parent allowance (“API”), which in 1976 was set at an amount close to the full-time minimum wage: at the time, it was not considered appropriate to encourage mothers of young children to work.

6. Cited by L. Cytermann and C. Dindar (2008): “Les grandes étapes de l’histoire du RMI”, in *RMI, l’état des lieux*, La Découverte.

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Marxist perspective, labour is the sole creator of wealth: owners of capital pay labour less than the value created and thereby derive a profit. Capitalist exploitation thus expresses the fact that labour is not paid in proportion to its value (which deviates from the principle of contribution). In a logic that they describe as Marxist, Monnier and Vercellone (2007) justify a guaranteed social income by the contribution principle: according to the authors, it must be “designed as a primary income representing a counterpart for social work that is not currently compensated, which implies a challenge to the still dominant reductionist understanding of the concept of productive labour”.... The authors emphasize that there is a disconnect between work and employment, and that the former is also a source of wealth, which should be remunerated. The authors may seem somewhat confused about the meaning of “a counterpart”, as they justify an unconditional income (thus with no counterpart) as being the counterpart for work. The trick is to *assume* that such work exists: “Indeed, the counterpart in terms of work already exists. It is, on the contrary, its counterpart in terms of income that is lacking.” The authors assume that each individual has already performed social work that should be compensated. This kind of argument can easily be turned against its advocates, as it could be argued instead that the income already exists – in the form of income support, access to education and health care – without any counterpart in terms of employment. The authors could use a type of “second best” argument: individuals who do not perform any social work are very few in number, and it would be too complicated or expensive to try to identify them. But this line of argument would require defining social work and producing evidence about the individuals who do or do not perform it.

In any event it would seem difficult to justify an unconditional income in an amount equal for all solely based on the principle of contribution.

Justified by need?

A basic Income could also be justified by the principle of compensation (need). In its progressive version, it replaces a number of benefits that are generally justified by need and dignity, in particular income support (RMI, base RSA). When François Mitterrand was a candidate for re-election, he argued in his Letter to the French people for the implementation of an RMI-style income support as follows: “The important thing is that a means of living or rather survival is guaranteed to those who have nothing, who can do nothing, who are nothing.” Mitterrand thereby settled the debate at that time between proponents of the introduction of a universal allocation and advocates of a minimum income. Indeed, once the provision is justified by need (“a suitable means of existence”), the characteristics seem to follow, including the fact that the amount depends on family composition, insofar as this characteristic determines need. However, it is widely accepted that economies of scale arise due to living together, which is implicit in calculations of living standards: a couple has fewer needs than two single people, as spouses share things that can be used collectively (housing, automobile, household appliances). While an empirical assessment of these economies of scale is difficult, as is the way resources are actually shared by couples,

the INSEE – and the OECD as well – believe that two people living alone need one-third more income than a couple in order to achieve the same standard of living. However, the studies relied on by these institutes assume that economies of scale do not vary with income.⁷ As the issue of economies of scale can be adjusted by taxation for those with the highest incomes, what matters here is the existence of economies of scale at lower incomes, especially for those who do not have any income other than a basic income. In other words, the question that interests us is the following: does a couple with a monthly income of 1000 (1600) euros have a higher standard of living than a single person on 500 (800) euros? The results of empirical studies on the relationship between economies of scale and the level of income differ depending on the method used for the estimation. Donaldson and Pendakur (1999) use the budgets of Canadian households and conclude that economies of scale decrease with income. Koulovatianos *et al.*⁸ on the other hand use subjective surveys and conclude that economies of scale increase strongly with income. Those on low incomes do nevertheless benefit from economies of scale.⁹ There is also the issue of the actual sharing of resources within the household: Is the RSA benefit shared equitably within the household? If not, then the concept of a household's standard of living does not have any real meaning and an individual benefit becomes relevant. In France, most couples pool their resources, especially among those on lower incomes: 72% of couples in the first standard of living quartile state that they fully share their income (Ponthieux, 2012).

Whether households share resources and whether economies of scale for people on low incomes exist are empirical questions. At present, it seems that they do. If so, then the individualization of a basic income is not compatible with a justification based exclusively on need, and the formula for the RSA benefit – in which the amount paid per individual depends on the household composition – seems justified.

Justified by efficiency?

Efficiency can also be advanced to justify a basic income. This requires defining efficiency in terms not of the maximization of commodity production, but of the maximization of well-being, based on a utilitarian perspective along the lines of Bentham. The idea is liberal, as follows: whereas everyone has their own definition of the good life, the traditional welfare state seeks to cover needs that it defines itself (in terms of housing, education, health, access to employment); an unconditional income makes it possible to avoid this paternalism¹⁰ and is thus more efficient in terms of well-being. This argument, though seemingly attractive, poses a problem. In practice, efficiency is not a principle of justice, and

7. And that resources within a household are shared in full.

8. Koulovatianos, Schröder and Schmidt: "On the Income Dependence of Equivalence Scales", *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 89.

9. Another question that arises concerns the importance of housing in economies of scale for people on low-incomes. Indeed, if economies of scale derive exclusively from housing, it would be possible to supplement basic income by generous housing allowances for single people.

10. Used here in the sense that needs are defined by someone other than the individual concerned.

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it can be difficult to convince a majority of the merits of a basic income by relying on the maximization of overall well-being. Take the well-known example that is often raised against Van Parijs of the “hippie surfer”¹¹ who has few needs and uses his basic income to surf all day in Malibu, Hawaii or elsewhere. For this individual, the unconditional character of a basic income would be a blessing in terms of well-being: no more administrative formalities or appointments with social workers to whom he has to justify his lifestyle or his efforts at social integration. The rest of society would also save money because this type of social control is expensive. Unconditionality would lead to a gain in terms of overall well-being, since the gain for surfers would be very high and the loss for the rest of society would ultimately be relatively low (thanks to savings on administration). But how socially acceptable is this? Is it credible that the rest of society would agree to fund hippy surfers at a sufficient level? On the contrary, it is likely that the socially acceptable level of an unconditional income would be lower than that of an income conditioned on efforts at social inclusion. **The losers from unconditionality would be first of all long-term unemployed people receiving income support.** From a Rawlsian perspective, in which the long-term unemployed are the most disadvantaged group, this sacrifice would not be acceptable.

The problem of social acceptability is primarily an empirical issue, but the burden of proof tends to lie on the side of progressive supporters of unconditionality, as they make the sufficiency of the allowance the main demarcation between a free market policy of dismantling the welfare state and a progressive policy.

In addition, from a conceptual point of view, a justification based on maximizing well-being poses well-known problems (underlined in particular by Pareto and then Rawls): how can we measure and aggregate individual utilities? Is it sufficient to assign monetary values to the individual utilities ??and then aggregate them? Can one compare the welfare of differing individuals in this way? Should we then give the same amount of basic income to both the thrifty and the spendthrift?

Efficiency is not in fact a principle of justice but an instrument: greater efficiency can of course make it possible to compensate the losers and thus to obtain unanimous agreement (the principle of Pareto efficiency). But in the presence of losers, it is unlikely that invoking efficiency (the fact that overall well-being is greater) will convince the losers that the solution adopted is fair.

Justified by equal sharing ... of what resources?

Egalitarian distribution seems the best principle for justifying a basic income. Contrary to the principles of contribution and compensation, it is *a priori*

11. The expression comes from Van Parijs. He answered this objection, which was formulated by Rawls in particular, in an article entitled, “Why Surfers Should Be Fed: The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income” ([jstor link for subscribers](#)). Note that he does not defend the hippie surfer with a utilitarian argument but with the logic of greater Real Freedom for All. The surfer here is a metaphor for someone who does not intend to contribute significantly to social institutions, whether economically, socially, politically or culturally.

compatible with individualization and unconditionality. Note that the principle of equal distribution is rarely used in the sphere of social policy. The typical example in the domestic sphere is that of inheritance¹², which in France is overwhelmingly divided among children into equal shares; an inheritance that benefits one or more direct heirs to the detriment of others is rare, even within the limits allowed by law (see Arrondel and Laferrère, 1992). In the social sphere, equal distribution is generally restricted to situations where the physical integrity of individuals is at stake, such as systems of rationing or systems for queuing¹³ for access to a medical operation or an organ transfer.¹⁴ In addition to physical integrity, equal distribution is generally accepted in the case of resources that “felt from the sky”, where the contribution principle cannot apply (typical case of inheritance) or where it is impossible to distinguish each person’s contribution (sharing a surplus that is due to cooperation). For example, some advocates of a basic income justify it by the common ownership of natural resources or the technological heritage. It is therefore not surprising that one of the first states to have set up some form of basic income was Alaska, whose [Permanent Fund](#) is a form of universal allocation based on the State’s oil revenues. The problem is that justification based on a commonly-held resource does not at all guarantee that the allowance is adequate and stable: the Alaska Permanent Fund dividend for the whole of 2013 was only 900 dollars, compared with more than 2000 dollars in 2008 ([APFC](#)). In addition, for other types of natural resources as well as for the technological heritage, the argument of equal sharing would point more towards a global basic income, which is explicitly rejected by Van Parijs. Indeed, it is doubtful whether a global basic income would be sufficient, particularly in the developed countries, unless the level were differentiated by country, but this would mean deviating from the principle of equal sharing in favour of justification based on need.

To pursue what goals?

In addition to these fundamental principles, it is important to discuss the goals of a basic income. Its objectives are often the same as those pursued by current social welfare instruments or by existing public policies.

Managing the end of work?

A basic income is often presented (including by liberal egalitarians) as a way to manage the end of work and the growth of unemployment¹⁵: there are already too few jobs, and in the future [robots will take over the few jobs that remain](#). The fact of robots producing a large share of the social wealth would be a strong

12. Although it can be considered to belong to the private sphere, the generalization of egalitarian inheritance is a product of legislation, having been imposed by the Civil Code in 1804.

13. A queue, like a random draw, is a form of egalitarian distribution when goods are indivisible.

14. In these latter cases, equality concerns only individuals with an identified need.

15. See Van Parijs, 1996: “De la trappe au socle, l’allocation universelle contre le chômage”, *Revue du Mauss*, no. 7.

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argument in favour of a universal income: the robots would represent an important legacy from the past, so sharing this legacy equally would be especially justified.

While awaiting that utopian future, work remains an indispensable complement to machines: our societies are very far from a post-work future, and we also have good reason to believe that productivity gains will be lower in the 21st century than they were in the 20th century, mainly because of the scarcity of raw materials & cheap energy source: it might then be necessary to work more, not less¹⁶.

Even if productivity gains remain high and the reduction of working time is desirable, it is doubtful that the introduction of a sufficiently high basic income is the fairest and most sustainable way to reduce working time (so long as it is still essential for the creation of wealth). The generalized reduction of working hours – through a decrease in the duration of pension contributions, a reduction of legal work week hours, an increase in the annual period of paid leave, longer parental leave, or, why not, the right to a paid sabbatical leave – seems more equitable and politically sustainable than a situation where some would benefit from a basic income for life while others finance it by working. Indeed, introducing a basic income does not produce a homogeneous reduction in working time, since the incentive to reduce one's working time would be much greater for individuals on lower wages. This is a significant difference with laws on paid leave and laws on the reduction of the work week: the latter have also affected middle class workers, a situation which, it seems, makes for broader social acceptability.

For Van Parijs, circumstances in which some would work to finance a basic income for life for others who choose not to contribute (his metaphorical surfers) is not unfair in so far as, if a basic income is set, anyone can choose not to work and receive the basic income: people who choose to carry on working would do so because they prefer to work rather than to surf all day, so they do not have any legitimate reason to complain (he uses [the envy test](#) proposed by Dworkin as a criterion for the fair distribution of resources). Maybe this would be true if we ever reached this situation, but would we ever reach it with this type of logic?

The reduction of working time following the introduction of a sufficiently high basic income would not just affect those on very low wages. It is conceivable that some higher-wage earners would also be encouraged to temporarily stop working, in particular to take care of young children. In this respect the basic income would replace parental leave. In current social conditions, it is overwhelmingly women who stop working to care for young children; contrary to what could be done by reforming parental leave (see H  l  ne P  rivier, 2013), a basic income does not encourage greater gender equality by trying to balance parenting responsibilities within the couple. This highlights that even in its progressive version the philosophy underlying a basic income is anti-state. The

16. For a critique of the end-of-work thesis, also see Clerc and M  da, 2009: "Emploi et travail chez Andr   Gorz".

state is considered either illegitimate or ineffective whenever it tries to achieve social objectives (*e.g.* gender equality) by modifying individual incentives. As with Hayek, by seeking to pursue social objectives the welfare state becomes either lost amidst complexity or the hostage of political calculations¹⁷.

Managing the transition to the knowledge economy?

For political ecologists and Marxists, a basic income would make it possible to adapt to the changing nature of work at a time when “intelligence and the imagination ... are becoming the main productive force” (Gorz, 2002). Indeed, the knowledge economy is changing the nature of productive labour and is increasing the time required for training and preparation, which is usually conducted outside working hours¹⁸. This justifies finding ways to finance this time (*e.g.* by systems of intermittent work or continuing training) and instruments to internalize the positive externalities associated with the production and transmission of knowledge. However, the fact that knowledge is produced outside the hours of employment does not justify delinking employment from job income, since there is a strong complementarity between training and employment. It is true that professors, artists, child minders, researchers, and physicians train outside working hours and therefore that much of the wealth produced results from time outside employment. Nevertheless, this preparatory work is only fully productive in so far as the professors give courses, the artists perform, the child minders look after children, the researchers communicate, and the physicians treat their patients.

The knowledge economy complicates the set of incentives needed in order to optimize the social contribution of each person, but it does not make it possible to bypass the incentives created by employment.

Improving working conditions?

According to its advocates, a sufficiently high base income would lead to improving the bargaining power of workers and thus their working conditions, as they could refuse really bad jobs. In economic terms, a basic income would increase the reservation wage for low earners and thus boost low wages (while reducing the labour supply). There is therefore a threefold cost for high earners, depending on the amount of the basic income: they must finance the basic income itself, and eventually the decline in labour supply will decline and the rise in low wages. The fact that low earners refuse jobs they consider unfit and that low wages rise are obviously desired results of introducing a basic income. This is the consequence of greater equality of resources, and thus of a more favourable bargaining power for the most disadvantaged, which is desirable from an egalitarian perspective.

17. Some Marxists might also identify with this critique of the state, as is pointed out by Gazier (1988).

18. “Cognitive work consists of the combination ... of intellectual activity involving reflection and communicating, sharing and developing knowledge, which takes place both upstream, outside of production as well as in the course of direct, immediate productive work” (Monnier and Vercellone, 2007).

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tarian perspective. But the cost for high earners cannot be ignored¹⁹: it is at least equal to the benefits for the worst-off. As the transfers required by a sufficiently high basic income are potentially very large, it is essential that the foundations of such a policy be sound.

In fact, the existing social welfare system has the same effects as a basic income, with foundations that seem more solid. Social minima also have the effect of increasing the reservation wage of low earners: with the RSA *activité* benefit, the minimum social benefits are already combinable with earnings from work, which helps to fight against trap effects (Allègre, 2011). If the goal is to lift the reservation wage of low earners, the minimum social benefits could be increased. As we have already seen, justification based on the guarantee of basic needs (and hence the consequent family-based treatment) is widely accepted, and conditionality (weak in practice) on vocational and social integration can counter arguments about welfare dependency. Unemployment insurance also improves the bargaining power of many workers, particularly the low skilled, who are often victims of unemployment. It thus improves the distribution of added value in favour of the less skilled. To promote equality, it is possible to reduce the contribution periods to qualify for payouts, to extend payout periods and to improve replacement rates.

Fighting against stigmatization and the lack of benefit take-up

While minimum social benefits may have the same effects on the bargaining power of workers as a basic income, a universal unconditional income has the advantage of not provoking unwarranted take-up or lack of take-up and does not stigmatize the systems' net beneficiaries. The issue of the lack of take-up of minimum social benefits has however been growing in importance, especially from the mid-1990s (Warin, 2012; Domingo and Pucci, 2012). This is due to several factors, which are not necessarily mutually independent: lack of awareness of the scheme, bureaucratic complexity, fear of stigma, concern about intrusiveness, or a desire for autonomy. Lack of take-up poses the problem of [horizontal equity](#) and equality in the face of the law.

The public authorities must thus arbitrate between on the one hand benefits that seek to meet the needs of potential beneficiaries, and thus are geared to the beneficiaries' characteristics, with the associated risks of complexity and lack of take-up; and on the other hand, simple non-stigmatizing universal benefits that are not as responsive to differences in need. In this trade-off, a basic income represents an extreme solution, which can nevertheless be tempered if it does not replace all the other welfare measures (housing benefits in particular). Conversely, the conditionality of the RSA benefit could be eased. It might be desirable to return to the spirit that led to the creation of the RMI minimum income. From this perspective, the effort at integration is not regarded as a coun-

19. In particular by overestimating the positive externality of equality. If equality is truly better for everyone, why aren't societies more equal?

terpart for the service, but as an *ex-post* condition: the effort is assumed, and the benefit may be suspended if it is found that there is no effort at integration.

A liberal pathway to exit capitalism?

Beyond the technical considerations, the utopian aspect of a basic income should not be neglected: it is now brandished by some – Marxists, or political ecologists – who want to move away from productivist capitalism. A basic Income is thus the bearer of every kind of hope: freed from commercial work, people can engage in activities that take on meaning in the context of community associations.

It might be felt that this view overestimates the productivity of these associations and underestimates the power of the division of labour that the commercial sector makes possible. From a Marxist or Illich-type perspective, the response would presumably be that it is the counter-productivity of the division of labour that is underestimated.²⁰ Without entering into this debate, note that the growth of the non-commercial sphere is probably more sustainable through the general reduction of working time than through the introduction of a basic income. A basic income runs the risk of dualization, or – worst – the balkanisation of communities within society²¹

Conclusion

While a basic income looks attractive, its principles are not very compatible with the fundamental principles of contributory justice: unconditionality is incompatible with the principle of contribution (merit), in the presence of economies of scale; individualization is incompatible with the principle of compensation (need); and as long as work remains the main source of wealth (until the advent of robots) the principle of equally sharing an exogenous resource does not justify a sufficiently high basic income.

In these circumstances, the generalized reduction of working time seems to be more sustainable than a basic income for achieving its ecological and emancipatory goals.

Furthermore, so long as there exist economies of scale and a political trade-off between conditionality and the level of minimum income, then in a Rawlsian perspective a system of guaranteed minimum income like the French RMI / RSA programmes (family-based with weak conditionality) seems preferable to a pure basic income.

20. In a posthumous note, Castel opposes Gorz and Illich with respect to this counter-productivity, and stresses that the “mass consumption” permitted by employed labour “represented a rather extraordinary victory over the reign of scarcity, over the state of permanent insecurity that was the secular lot of the vast majority of people.”

21. Dominique Meda (1996) also points out “the dangers of dualization, segmentation and balkanization that such a system carries within itself”.

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This is not meant to short-circuit discussion of a more universal allowance that would be less stigmatizing. It would have to take into account the situation of a couple and set conditions on social participation (which would exclude “surfers”). It would involve checks on black market work and include incentives to work. It would be supplemented by specific policies to provide support for children, the elderly and disabled people, *i.e.* people who do not respond to incentives, and it would complement the insurance system (unemployment, retirement, illness). The social welfare system would thus not really be simplified but transformed in such a way as to avoid stigmatization and the lack of take-up.

While a guaranteed basic income is [not such a silly idea](#), nor is it the miracle reform pictured by its advocates, *i.e.* a veritable Swiss Army knife - social, ecological, emancipating for reforming social welfare.

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