

Guy Standing's case for a basic income

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Guy Standing, *Basic Income: How We Can Make It Happen*, Pelican, 2017

Guy Standing was a founder member of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) and has been advocating the value of a basic income since the early 1980s. In his recent books (*The Precariat*, *The Precariat Charter*, *The Corruption of Capitalism*) he has proposed a basic income as a solution to precarious work. However precarity is more than just a lack of economic security. It can be defined as: uncertainty about the security of work; lack of control over work and pay; lack of protection against dismissal, unfair working practices and social security benefits; and low pay and lack of basic needs (Rodgers, 1989, Vosco, 2010).

Guy Standing's most recent book *Basic Income: How we can make it happen* is a response to the growing interest in basic income by policymakers and activists. The book starts by defining the different forms of basic income and its historical origins. Guy Standing defines a basic income as 'An amount that would provide economic security, not total security or affluence' (Standing, 2017: 3). Basic income is not a new idea and dates back several centuries but has never been fully implemented. This book presents a series of arguments to support its full implementation.

Basic income as a 'social dividend' or form of social justice to reduce poverty and inequalities is presented as a 'transfer for collective inheritance to less privileged communities' for regions which had previously experienced rapid economic growth but are now de-industrialised. A well-run basic income scheme could solve many of the problems of accessing existing welfare benefits which cause

economic insecurities, although it would not solve the structural problems which caused the poverty in the first place.

The questioning of 'work' and 'labour' leads to a wider understanding of what could constitute work. This might include caring, household work, applying for jobs, filling in tax returns and many other activities which are accepted as part of everyday life but which are not necessarily paid. Although employment and work are seen by policymakers as synonymous, a new 'Charter of Emerging Human Rights' defines work as covering many activities and 'rejects the notion of duty to labour'. This book contributes to the growing discussion about a wider understanding of work.

Guy Standing uses this wider conception of work to show that basic income, rather than resulting in less work, which policymakers have always feared, would actually reward the wider range of activities that could constitute work. The recognition of many of these activities as a form of work is to be welcomed, but when placed in the context of 'tertiary' time in the 21st century, where 'work' and 'wage-labour' merge into each other and are done in and outside workplaces and often outside conventional working time, the wider recognition of work does not sound so liberating. The blurring of boundaries between the workplace and home surely needs to be challenged rather than presenting basic income as a way of rewarding these 'extra' activities. In this sense, basic income is expanding the commodification of a wider range of activities, and contradicts the belief that basic income could increase the quality of leisure and the expansion of participation in cultural and political life.

Where the argument for a basic income alone becomes less convincing is after acknowledging

that, although economic security is important for mental and physical wellbeing, more is needed for an individual or a community to feel recognised, valued and secure. In two chapters, the issue of agency emerges and is relevant for trying to understand how basic income operates in a wider context. Taking the example of a three year basic income project in India, Guy Standing argues that basic income has an emancipatory value which exceeds its monetary value, although this depends on voice security as well as the economic security which basic income can provide. Agency can only be provided by 'access to institutions and mechanisms that provide voice, collectively and individually'. This is an important step in acknowledging that economic security and, by implication, basic income alone is not enough to address issues of precarity.

Individual payments may result in a higher degree of individualism rather than a shared sense of responsibility. Whether resources, such as oil reserves, are considered a communal or individual resource determines the attitude towards the payment. The Alaska Permanent Fund showed that a basic income scheme or 'social dividend' has to have a place within a political discourse about the future or, if not, it may appear as an individual benefit rather than part of public services. This attitude has resulted in a lack of evaluation studies of the scheme. It was not felt to be something that needed to be evaluated because the population was receiving a dividend rather than receiving resources from the government which would have to be justified (Golsmith, 2010).

Katarzyna Gajewska (2017) argued that the introduction of a basic income has to be accompanied by changes in public services and systems that make them accountable to citizens. Increased digitalisation and robotisation may lead to capital being further concentrated in the hands of the owners of the technology. This will reduce the already declining power of labour to influence wages. There are wider issues that link basic income to the role of public services in providing education, health care and other forms of support. It is these policies which would be most effective in addressing one of the major elements of precarity: the lack of protection against dismissal, and unfair working practices and social security benefits.

Guy Standing does acknowledge throughout the book that basic income cannot exist on its own, without supporting public services and other welfare benefits. However, a criticism of the book is that there is not enough appreciation of the political context within which basic income schemes would be implemented. We need to understand why basic income has received such attention from both Right

and Left in recent years and be sceptical of its promotion as a single solution to the problems of low pay and technological change.

References

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