

# Real Freedom

Philippe Van Parijs

Comment on Brishen Rogers, “Basic income in a just society”,  
in *Work, Inequality, Basic Income*, Forum 2, *Boston Review*, 2017, 66-71.

According to Brishen Rogers, “a decent future of work and welfare requires a basic income—and much more.” With a piece concluded in this way, I am unlikely to have big disagreements. Even about the exact content of the “much more” we may well concur, if only because priorities are unavoidably different in different parts of the world. For the United States, Rogers proposes revamping the public sector and rejuvenating the collective bargaining system. In Europe, my own top priorities would include the reclaiming of our cities from cars and the proliferation of lifelong blended learning. Elsewhere in the world, priorities may be access to water, universal literacy, or the securing of civil peace. No hope of a sharp disagreement on this count.

Nor do I think we disagree about why basic income is needed. Alarmist forecasts about the impact of automation are undoubtedly a factor in the current unprecedented worldwide interest in basic income. But like Rogers, I do not believe in an inevitable rarefaction of jobs. In my new book with Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy*, we do not advocate basic income as a way of enabling the permanently unemployed to keep quiet and consume what the robots produce. Rogers mentions that some of the American advocates of a guaranteed income in the 1960s used the prospect of automation as their main argument. This argument is actually much older. To illustrate: I just received issue number 1182 (yes, 1182!) of *La grande relève des hommes par la machine* (“The great replacement of men by the machine”), a magazine founded in 1932 by French socialist Jacques Duboin, who was already pleading for a universal “social income” to avert an imminent and fatal crisis of underconsumption that would generate permanent unemployment.

That the case for basic income does not rest on the assumption that human beings will be replaced by robots does not mean that technological change is irrelevant, though. In complex interaction with economic globalization and with cultural trends affecting the employees’ loyalty to their firm, the strength of trade unions or family stability, technological change is leading to a polarization of market earning power. Incomes are increasing for those who own capital and intellectual property rights, or who possess valuable talents and credentials. By contrast, there is now little hope of decent income for many of those whose skills are poorly valued by the market, who cannot learn new skills or move to areas in which their skills are more valued, and for many of those with family constraints that prevent them from working full time. In order to provide such as these with a sufficient income, one might think of more or less stigmatizing means-tested social assistance, of wage subsidies or of guaranteed public employment. But one can also think of an unconditional basic income. Rogers expresses his attraction to the latter in terms of equality, whether equality of status or equal share in the return on society’s capital. In our book, we formulate our own principled preference for it in terms of real freedom, and we try to clarify the relationship between this justification and rival or complementary ones. I shall not do so here and focus instead on Rogers’s main critique of standard defenses of basic income, namely that they are oblivious of capitalist power relations.

The power of each individual to say yes or no to a job, a power closely related to the notion of real freedom, has been present in the advocacy of basic income from its inception.

Thus, Joseph Charlier saw as a crucial advantage of the unconditional income he advocated that ““It is no longer the worker who will have to bow before capital, it is capital, reduced to its true role of collaborating agent, that will have to negotiate with labor on an equal footing.”” (*Catéchisme populaire*, Brussels, 1871). Rogers agrees that a basic income helps protect the worker, but insists on the need for a powerful regulatory state and thinks it is critical to preserve and enhance arrangements such as minimum wage and collective bargaining rights. One might speculate about the “real-libertarian” legitimacy of various constraints on the labor market when an unconditional income is in place at the highest sustainable level. But as explained in detail in our book, all real-life basic income proposals are fully consistent with minimum wage legislation and active trade unions. There are, however, a number of trends—such as the shrinking of firm size or the expansion of part-time work and self-employment—that reduce the effectiveness of these traditional ways of correcting the balance of power in capitalist societies, and therefore increase the importance of empowering workers with a wider set of options, outside *and* inside the labor market, which is what a basic income does.

Beyond some minimal conditions, such as a safe work site, it is very difficult for labor market regulators—whether legislators, bureaucrats, or experts—to distinguish good and bad jobs. There are so many crucial factors that are very hard for them to track: the quality of the relationship between workers and their bosses and colleagues; how much the job enables workers to learn and improve their prospects; whether new technology is used to reduce discretion rather than facilitate work; how convenient the job is in terms of location and schedule; and how close the job is to the great passion of a worker’s life. The workers themselves are best placed to assess these various dimensions and an unconditional basic income gives them the power to give up more easily a lousy job and accept more easily a job that may pay little or irregularly but possesses redeeming features. For this reason, it can be argued that a basic income would not only help accommodate but also encourage the growth of precarious jobs, but not of just any precarious job. A basic income empowers those who possess the relevant information, namely the workers themselves, who tend to know far more than anyone else both about the jobs concerned and about their own situations, capacities and ambitions.

Being closer to the shop floor than labor market regulators, collective bargaining can, to some extent, achieve the same result. But basic income has the advantage of being more egalitarian. Collective bargaining improves the situation of workers in proportion to the economic value of their skills; to how much they participate in the formal labor market; to how easily their firm lends itself to unionization; and to how much nuisance capacity they possess through strikes or other means. The more “universalist” a labor organization is, and the closer one gets to “social bargaining”—with which I share Rogers’s sympathy—the more this assertion needs to be qualified. The less broad a union is and the more corporatist its ideology, the more strongly it holds. By contrast, a basic income makes the biggest difference to workers most disadvantaged along the various dimensions mentioned.

Of course, the actual monetary value of the basic income matters. But even a basic income that amounts to less than the current level of means-tested social assistance for people living alone would make a significant difference. At that level, the right to conditional benefits over and above the basic income would need to be kept, so as to prevent poor households from becoming worse off. But the secure access to a modest income that can be relied upon even if one gives up a job voluntarily and that can be combined with other income would broaden the options of the worst off and thus increase their power. Such a modest basic income could not eradicate poverty on its own. But it would be more than the “baby step” discussed by Rogers, namely a basic income for parents or a universal child benefit of a sort that already exists in a number of countries. And it would be more reasonable than a bold

jump to a basic income of \$2,500, a scheme supported by nearly a quarter of Swiss voters in their June 2016 referendum.

Like the two older forms of social protection—social assistance and social insurance—basic income will only be introduced in sustainable fashion in democratic societies if it manages to get enough support from both the left and the right. In Switzerland only the Green Party recommended voting in favor of basic income in the referendum. In Finland it is a right-of-center government that launched, in January 2017, a two-year basic income experiment. In France basic income moved center stage because it was the most widely discussed component in the program of Benoit Hamon, the most left-wing candidate in the socialist party’s January 2017 presidential primary. And when the European Parliament examined a resolution stating that “in the light of the possible effects on the labour market of robotics and artificial intelligence a general basic income should be seriously considered,” it was endorsed by a strong minority of 286 members (against 328) drawn from a wide variety of parties. All of this suggests that basic income now enjoys an unprecedented level of support across the political spectrum. Not enough to guarantee that the balance of democratic power will soon make it reality. But enough to make it reasonable to hope that it will.