

ISSN: 2456-9550  
JMC  
December 2022

## **Book Review**

### ***BASIC INCOME: A RADICAL PROPOSAL FOR A FREE SOCIETY AND A SANE ECONOMY***

by Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, Harvard University  
Press, 2017, pp. 400, ISBN 9780674052284

*Reviewed by:*

**RISHABH RAJ**

Email: rajrishabh011@gmail.com  
PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science,  
University of Delhi

**Volume 6, 2022**

**THE JMC REVIEW**

*An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism,*

*Practice and Theory*

<http://www.jmc.ac.in/the-jmc-review/content/>

**JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI  
NEW DELHI-110021**

***Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and A Sane Economy*** by Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 400, ISBN 9780674052284

***Reviewed by Rishabh Raj, PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi***

The idea of Universal basic income which is an alarmingly simple albeit a radical idea has gained a larger traction in academic and policy making debate. This idea which has existed in several bold minds in multiformity since the last couple of centuries has started receiving special attention in last couple of decades. Universal basic income can be defined as "*a regular cash income, paid on an individual basis, without means test or work test*" (p. 245). This income needs not only be regular but also stable for it to have any emancipatory potential. There has been a range of reasons for this new drawn interest from rising automation in the labour market to deepening inequality affecting both developed and developing economies over the globe. The co-author of this book Philip Van Parijs has contributed significantly since the last decade of twentieth century in bringing the idea of universal basic income in the mainstream academic debate. His development of the idea of 'real-freedom' in the framework of universal basic income has given a significant boost to this discourse. Since then, a large number of multidisciplinary and multilingual literature has emerged engaging in a comprehensive dialogue over this idea. The two authors Philip Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght has attempted to cover a large spectrum of debates to bolster the case for UBI in this book. Parijs who has been writing and engaging with the idea of a policy like universal basic income since last couple of decades and Vanderborght who has joined the debate in the last couple of years together build a strong case for a simple although a radical idea of UBI.

The book engages with the idea of UBI in a systematic manner, addressing the objections and criticisms head on. The authors aim to provide conceptual and factual clarity to both supporters and objectors to this policy while building a case in favour of UBI. The book begins with an extensive understanding of this idea. UBI is understood through its parts i.e., unconditionality, universality, individuality and being in-cash rather than in-kind. Through this understanding, a case is built in favour of UBI that argues for it being an instrument of freedom for an active welfare state and a sane economy. Here, active welfare state is understood as a state which actively removes traps such as unemployment and isolation and empowers people with wider spectrum of options for paid and unpaid activities. (p. 26) The writers argue for a move from efficient economy to a sane one that hopes to provide meaningful work to all while keeping the way of living sustainably generalizable (p. 28).

The succeeding chapter is a comparative study of similar policy proposals which are dubbed as 'cousins' of basic income (p. 29). These include basic endowment, negative income tax, wage subsidies, earned income tax credit, guaranteed employment and working-time reduction. Even though the writers are sympathetic towards these alternative proposals, a comprehensive theoretical comparison argues for universal basic income. Moving on, the writers engage with two models of social protection, namely public assistance and social insurance, which are precursors to universal basic income. The historical analysis of models of social protection covers several ideas that emerged in European society from the early 15th century. The writers aim to understand the underlying philosophy behind these models of social protection to argue for a case of universal basic income.

The next chapter, i.e., chapter 5, takes a philosophical approach to building an ethical case for UBI. The chapter begins with two major objections against UBI: the "perfectionist" objection, i.e., income without work would lead to idleness, and the "liberal" objection, where it is argued that income without work is unfair. (p. 99) The writers methodically deal with these two objections while building a case for UBI on its ability to provide 'real freedom.' Real freedom is "*not only the sheer right but also the genuine capacity to do whatever one might wish to do*" (p.104). This idea of 'real freedom' is built on the premise of the authors' egalitarian conception of distributive justice, where justice requires distributing freedom fairly. (p.104). Furthermore, this chapter deals with different conceptions of distributive justice while making a case for UBI.

The next two chapters take basic income from the realm of ideas to practice. Firstly, chapter 6 discusses in detail the economic feasibility of a policy like universal basic income. This economic feasibility is studied through both short-run and long-run impacts on the economy, namely inflation and sustainability issues. This chapter also explores funding for a policy like universal basic income while exploring basic income experiments done in countries such as Belgium, Namibia, India etc. Furthermore, the chapter also engages with alternative models such as Categorical basic income, Household basic income and Partial basic income. The writers prefer a partial basic income which can be a stepping stone towards reaching a universal basic income if its implementation bears the expected results (p.168). Secondly, in chapter 7, the writers engage with the political feasibility of basic income. The political feasibility debate is engaged through public opinion developed by different political and social forces around the world. In this context, the chapter explores how the idea of basic income can become a reality. This would require broad public support, for which this chapter highlights specific ways and methods which can be employed without any backlash.

The book's last chapter adds a dimension to the idea of basic income, which has been missing from the major debates. Primarily, the authors aim to apply the principles of egalitarian social justice on a global scale (p.217) and argue for the existence of basic income, which is not limited to domestic boundaries. The writers argue that a global basic income has the capacity to counter the threat that selective migration poses to basic income at the national level. The writers also argue that it would have capacity to create a world of open borders.

The book 'Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy' envisions a utopian society built on the foundation of unconditional and universal basic income, which is truly free. This utopian world with an active welfare state and sane economy provides meaningful work to all outside the dictatorship of the market. The writers, Parijs and Vanderborght, are not limited to universal basic income for building this utopian society but also creates space for policies such as universal primary health care, education, access to information and more.

This book proves to be a significant work because of the comprehensive debate it covers in a single volume. However, this book fails to offer the same philosophical depth as Parijs's earlier works. The book argues for partial basic income, whose implementation would differ from country to country depending on factors like structure and size of tax and transfer system and availability of adequate political opportunities. However, the book has not explored in depth all the variants of the partial basic income for different countries and the method of implementing such variants in developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations. The authors' bias towards developed economies and European political and economic structure is visible throughout the book.

Nonetheless, this book moves beyond previous works of Parijs and attempts to develop a plan of action for making universal basic income a reality. The book focuses more on providing a floor of social protection in the form of basic income rather than putting all eggs in one basket, i.e., the highest level of sustainable universal basic income. Therefore, after a careful assessment of the arguments offered in the book, it can be rightly said that this work could prove to be helpful for the academics engaged in debates over the idea of universal basic income, along with providing a guiding light to the policymakers engaged in designing policies for an active welfare state.