“FROM EACH (VOLUNTARILY) ACCORDING TO HIS ABILITY, TO EACH (UNCONDITIONALLY) ACCORDING TO HIS NEED”

Interview with Philippe Van Parijs

Philippe Van Parijs, in conversation with Baptiste Mylondo, in conversation with Simon Cottin-Marx

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PATHS

PHILIPPE VAN PARIJS

«From Each (Voluntarily) According to His Ability, to Each (Unconditionally) According to His Need»
Philippe Van Parijs, Belgian philosopher and economist, is one of the leading modern figures in promoting the idea of a universal basic income, which he presents as a capitalist route to a modern communism. In this interview, he gives an overview of the emergence of the idea, the controversies it has provoked, and continues to provoke, around the issue of work. He also talks about his activism on Europe and on ecological issues, in favor of a reappropriation of urban space with the aim of offering future generations “a better life.”

Mouvements: You are one of the world’s leading figures in the debate on universal income. How did you come to take up the idea? What route have you taken, intellectually and as an activist, to where you are now?

Philippe Van Parijs: It goes back to 1982. I arrived there via two routes. The first arose out of the urgent need to put forward a solution to unemployment that was ecologically responsible. When I arrived at Louvain-la-Neuve in 1980, after my doctorate at Oxford, I took part in setting up the local branch of the French-speaking Belgian ecologist party, Écolo, brand new at that time, with a Benedictine monk and another philosopher, Jean-Luc Roland.¹ I then quickly joined the committee tasked with preparing Écolo’s first socio-economic manifesto.

One problem seemed central to that program. There was very high unemployment in Belgium, and even when the economic circumstances
were good, unemployment hardly went down. For the grand coalition of employers and unions, on the left and the right, there was only one way to solve the problem of unemployment: growth. More specifically, growth which would outstrip the rate of increase in productivity, which itself was very high. But for ecologists, a crazy, endlessly-accelerating race for growth could not be the answer. Was there another way?

It was in this context that the idea came to me of an unconditional basic income, for which I proposed the name “allocation universelle” (“universal basic income” or “citizen’s income”) in order to suggest an analogy with universal suffrage. This kind of income is about partially decoupling income generated by growth from the contribution made toward that growth. It was intended to allow some people who suffered through over-work to work less, freeing up jobs in the process for those suffering because they could not find any work. An unconditional income is, in a way, a flexible method of redistributing hours of work which attacks the unemployment problem without requiring a crazy race for growth.

The second path that led me to universal basic income is more philosophical. In the early eighties, lots of people who, like me, were on the left, realized that it barely made sense any more to see socialism—the collective ownership of the means of production—as the desirable future of capitalism. We were beginning to fully recognize that although the communist regimes had not fulfilled the great hopes to which they had given rise, it was not for purely circumstantial reasons. It was also important, in my view, to formulate a vision of the future that did not limit itself to specific little measures, but which could enthuse us, give us a dream, and mobilize us. Now, could this unconditional income not be interpreted as a capitalist path towards communism, understood as a society that can write on its banners: “From each (voluntarily) according to his ability, to each (unconditionally) according to his need”?

A market society equipped with a universal basic income can in fact be understood as a society in which part of the output is redistributed according to each person’s needs, adjustable where necessary for age, and topped-up for people with particular needs—for example, mobility. The higher this universal income is, the more each person’s contribution to the economy is a voluntary one, motivated by the intrinsic interest of the activity rather than by the obligation to earn a living. The greater the proportion of output that is distributed in the form of an unconditional income, the closer you come to that “communist” society, meaning
a society where output as a whole is no longer distributed according to contribution, but according to need.

So these are two very different but convergent routes that have led me to the idea of universal basic income: an ecologically-sound solution to the problem of unemployment, and an alternative to the view on the left that saw socialism as the future of capitalism. In December 1982, I wrote a few lines using the neologism “allocation universelle” as a title, and invited critical discussion of it from some colleagues and friends. When you have an idea that you think is brilliant, one of two things is happening. Either you discover pretty quickly that the idea raises definitive problems that you had not seen, or that others have already had the same idea. Over a period of time, I did in fact discover many writers who, in other places, sometimes quite close, have put the same idea forward. And one of the first was a certain Joseph Charlier. In 1848, when Marx was in Brussels writing the Communist Party Manifesto, a few hundred yards away Joseph Charlier was finishing off his Solution du Problème Social, arguing for a true universal basic income under the name of “dividende territorial.” However, while I did find numerous forerunners, I did not, conversely, find any decisive problem that would have caused me to give up on the idea. But I did read and hear thousands of objections, and quickly formed the view that the most serious objection was not technical, economic, or political in nature—it was ethical.

This observation was made unavoidably clear to me in 1985, when I was giving a course as visiting lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. It was a particularly interesting moment for basic income in the Netherlands, because a commission of respected experts had, at the behest of the government (the WRR, or Scientific Council on Government Policy), published a report arguing for a “partial basic income,” that is, a genuine strictly individual universal basic income, but set at a low level such that it could not be a complete replacement for the minimum conditional income (similar in kind to the RMI [the French Revenu Minimum d’Insertion, a form of conditional social income]) which had existed in the Netherlands since the 1960s. Toward the end of my semester in Amsterdam, I was asked to chair a debate on the issue between, among others, a Marxist economist and Bart Tromp, a sociology professor who was part of the leadership of the labor party, the PvdA (Partij van de Arbeid), the major center-left party in the Netherlands. The position of the Marxist was, in essence, that the idea was fantastic, but that in a capitalist society it was not possible due to the power relations which allow capitalists to effectively oppose anything which does not serve their interests. We might as well forget it as long as there is a capitalist society. The PvdA man took an ironic approach: “...the Marxists said we’d never have a health-insurance system for workers, a pension system, unemployment benefits, or universal suffrage. For the Marxists, all that was impossible, and yet we, the social democrats, have made it happen. The same goes for universal basic income: it could be done if we want to do it. But we do not want it at any price, because the right to an income must be
dependent on a contribution of work. Of course, those who want to work but cannot must have the right to a benefit. But allocating an income to people who choose not to work, that’s morally unacceptable.”

From that point on, I said to myself that the priority task was to find a response to that ethical challenge. It was no small matter. The result is contained in Real Freedom for All, a big book published ten years later.

M.: This issue was the object of an academic controversy with John Rawls—the problem of the Malibu surfer. Is it legitimate to pay an unconditional income to a person who does not “work”?

P. V. P.: That’s right. On precisely that point, my first encounter with John Rawls was simultaneously one of my biggest disappointments, and one of the most intellectually stimulating in my life. At the beginning of the 1980s, I had organized at Louvain what was undoubtedly the first French-speaking seminar on Rawls, and had set about publishing a series of essays on Anglo-American political philosophy which were later collected in Qu’est-ce qu’une société juste? It was that which earned me an invite to the big conference organized in Paris in November 1987 to mark the publication of the French translation of A Theory of Justice. Other than Rawls himself, as far as I recall, there were only four foreign participants, namely Amartya Sen, Ronald Dworkin, Otfried Höffe and me, all staying at the Hôtel des Grands Hommes, by the Panthéon. Rawls and I were the only ones who woke up early, and therefore I had the privilege of having two long one-to-one conversations with him over breakfast, which allowed me to put to him some of the numerous questions I had after an attentive reading of A Theory of Justice. One of the questions, I was particularly dying to ask. Unsurprisingly, it was about the relationship between Rawls’ principles of justice, in particular his famous difference principle, and universal basic income. In his A Theory of Justice (1971), as indeed in an earlier article entitled “Distributive Justice” (1967), Rawls mentions quite explicitly negative income tax as an illustration of the practical application of his difference principle. Now, in some versions—like the one James Tobin argued for in a famous article in 1967—negative taxation is none other than what Tobin would call the “demogrant,” that is to say: a universal basic income. Moreover, Rawls’ economist of choice, the one from whom he borrowed the expression he uses to refer to what he considers to be the best socio-economic system—a property-owning democracy—is none other than the Nobel Prize-winner for economics, James Meade, a great defender of unconditional income from the 1930s until his last writings. On that basis, it seemed obvious to me that an attentive reading of the difference principle not only justified a form of minimum income, but more specifically a

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universal basic income set as high as possible. Obvious to me, but—to my great surprise—not obvious at all to Rawls, whose riposte was more or less: “Let’s take the surfers in Malibu. If they spend their time surfing, surely it wouldn’t be fair to ask society to pay for their needs!” And in fact, in the written version of the lecture he gave on that occasion, he added a little comment about the Malibu surfers, and a hint of a modification of his “difference principle,” with the noteworthy implication that they be deprived of the right to be fed.

That was in 1987. Three years later, on the initiative of Sen and Rawls, I was invited to give a lecture at Harvard, an opportunity I used to return to the subject. En route for Harvard, in a Chicago bookshop, I had stumbled by chance upon a book by Patrick Moynihan dealing with the history of the attempt to introduce a guaranteed minimum income in the States. In it he tells the story of a Republican senator for Hawaii who, in the sixties, used to complain about the arrival of hippies, who came to enjoy the beaches in his State thanks to the benefits of the American welfare state, and took up the slogan: “No parasites in paradise.” I began my lecture at Harvard with a parallel between the senator’s slogan and Rawls’ remark about the Malibu surfers. Then I set about justifying an unconditional income without using Rawls’ “difference principle,” but I did remain faithful to the two basic intuitions of a Rawls-style liberal egalitarian approach: equal concern for everybody’s interests (that is the egalitarian dimension), and equal respect for different conceptions of the good life (the liberal dimension), with no “perfectionist” slant, meaning an anti-liberal one in favor of a life of work. A written version of this lecture, which took place in the spring of 1990, was published shortly afterwards in the journal Philosophy and Public Affairs, under the title “Why Surfers Should Be Fed,” and the argument developed in it forms the kernel of my book Real Freedom for All, the cover of which is taken, as if by chance, from a surf magazine. Since then, in Anglo-American circles, I have been seen as the Malibu surfers’ advocate. But as I stated at the end of that article, it is not about looking after the Malibu surfers—you need more than a modest universal basic income to live in Malibu—but of creating a means of emancipation, of conferring the strongest possible negotiating position on the weakest, most vulnerable members of our societies.

M.: Was Rawls convinced?

P. V. P.: No. In the discussion immediately after the lecture, his response was: “I’m not against it if there is no way to provide work for everyone.” And until the end of his life, his preference was always instinctively for methods of supporting employment, for example, the one put forward by
Edmund Phelps, Professor at the University of Columbia and Nobel Economics laureate, in *Rewarding Work*: a substantial subsidy to top up the salaries of low-paid full-time workers. It is a much more “laborist” formulation than the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) now in place in the United States, or the *prime à l’emploi* (officially known as “prime pour l’emploi,” a form of EITC), which exists in France, for example, and which also encourages part-time employment and operates in a number of ways between on the one hand, a universal basic income, and on the other, Phelps’ proposal or other models restricted to full-time workers.

While Rawls clearly had sympathy with Phelps’ approach, he was not, however, opposed to universal basic income on principle; but he was conflicted, because what underpins his theory is actually the view that the principles of justice constitute a contract, a deal between cooperating individuals. But this notion of cooperation has an ambiguous meaning, which—as Brian Barry in particular has highlighted—induces in Rawls a wavering between cooperative justice and distributive justice. In the case of cooperative justice, it is simply about distributing fairly the cooperative surplus—that which the individual could not have produced alone, without cooperation. A natural implication of this is that he who contributes nothing has no right to receive anything. But for Rawls, in the first instance, it is a matter of distributive justice, more specifically of a conception of distributive justice which reflects the idea that we consider ourselves, and consider each other, as free and equal people; put another way, a conception which combines an equal respect for diverse conceptions of the good life and an equal concern for each person’s interests. This second perspective can also include the idea of a contract between citizens whose cooperation we must be able to assume, but in the minimal sense here of voluntarily following rules taken to be equitable. It is only if we adopt this interpretation, rather than the other, that universal basic income has a chance of being justified as something other than a last resort, or a second best to which we can withdraw if Phelps-style mechanisms prove not to work. It was not until much later that I got to the bottom of why certain liberal egalitarian writers were *a priori* hostile to universal basic income and could only go along with it in a qualified way, while others like me saw it in a direct route to realizing what justice demands.

**M.: Do you class yourself as a liberal egalitarian?**

**P. V. P.:** Definitely. Or among the liberals of the left, if you like, provided those terms are carefully defined. To be “liberal” in the philosophically pertinent sense here is not to be pro-market or pro-capitalist. It is only to hold that a just society must not be founded on a preordained concept of what a good life is, on a favored status for heterosexuality, for example, or a religious life above a libertine one (or vice versa), and so on. A liberal conception is one that assumes there is a means of defining what a just society is without making use of a conception of the good life, of human perfection, that just institutions would make it their business to make possible, and to reward.

But among liberals, there are liberals of the right and liberals of the left. Those on the left think that it is a priori unfair that the members of one society have unequal means at their disposal for realizing their version of the good life. The fundamental assumption is that fairness is about equality of resources. If you move away from that, you need to justify it by appeal to two considerations. On the one hand, personal responsibility. Even beginning from strictly equal positions, some people have, in the end, greater resources because they make different choices: they worked more, saved more, spent more time in education, or took more risks. Justice is about equality of opportunity, not of outcome. Whatever each person makes of their opportunities is their personal responsibility. That is the first consideration that allows you to move away from equality without producing injustice. The second consideration is efficiency, at least where a particular level of inequality contributes so much to efficiency that even the “victims” of that inequality benefit from it: those who have less than the others would have less still if the system was less unequal. Rawls’ “difference principle,” for example, takes account of this when it declares that institutional mechanisms that sustain the maximization of the minimum over time are just, and not those which achieve equality at any price.

M.: What you recommend, like Rawls, is a maximin principle, the maximization of the minimum, the maximization of the outcomes or the opportunities of those in the worst position. But is there a place in liberal egalitarian theory for a minimization of the maximum? From your point of view, can it be fair to introduce a maximum income?

P. V. P.: The maximin principle will require us to reduce current inequalities considerably. In particular, the highest incomes will have to be reduced. Under the full version of the maximin, the only justifiable inequalities are those which contribute to improving the situation of the poorest in society. In the lighter version, known as “leximin,” any inequality which does not worsen the situation of the least well-off is acceptable. Setting in place the principle of a maximum income, or at the very least minimizing the maximum, is an attempt to reduce inequality by reducing the highest incomes, even when that reduction might have as a consequence a worsening of the situation of the least well-off. I see no good reason for doing that. Of course, if the existence of very high salaries means that some very wealthy people are able to put pressure on political leaders in such a way as to weaken the redistributive
mechanisms which might allow the least well-off to have more, then it is important to reduce those higher incomes. But to do that there is no need for anything more than a workable maximin system. Looked at this way, it may be appropriate to impose a maximum income, but not because it would be a good thing in itself: only to the extent that the reduction of the high incomes would help to improve the lot of the worse-off.

M.: Let us return to your trajectory as an activist. In 1986, you took part in the creation of what would later become the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN).

P. V. P.: When the idea of universal basic income came to me, at the end of 1982, I was coordinating, with a union friend, a small group preparing a special edition of the *Revue nouvelle* (a Brussels journal on the Christian left) dedicated to the various component parts of what was at the time beginning to be called “neo-liberalism.” After that edition came out, in March 1984, I began the task of setting up a small group, bringing together both academics and trade unionists, with a view to preparing another edition of the same journal (to be published in April 1985) on the subject of basic income. As we got to work, a competition was organized by the main Belgian foundation, the *Fondation Roi Baudoin*, on the future of work. I reformulated the position paper on universal basic income in terms of future scenarios, submitted it to the competition on behalf of the group—named for the occasion as the “Collectif Charles Fourier”—and we won the prize, using the money to organize at Louvain-la-Neuve, in 1986, the first international conference on universal basic income. I invited a number of people I had discovered over the course of the previous two years to be supporters of the idea. Among others who came were Guy Standing (OIT, Geneva), Claus Offe (University of Bremen), Robert van der Veen (University of Amsterdam), Yoland Bresson (University of Paris-Saint-Maur), Marie-Louise Duboin (from the journal *La Grande Relève*), Bill Jordan (University of Exeter), and so on—in total, around fifty people. Somebody suggested setting up an association. Guy Standing, who with Claus Offe became its first co-president, put forward the name BIEN: Basic Income European Network, an excellent idea combining an English name and a French (or Spanish) acronym. Bit by bit things fell, slightly haphazardly, into place and from that point on BIEN began to organize a biennial convention. In 2004, at the Barcelona convention, I allowed myself to be persuaded, in particular by Brazilian Senator Eduardo Suplicy, to turn our network into a global network, which would keep the acronym BIEN, but change the “European Network” part to “Earth Network.” It made sense given the number of non-Europeans attending our convention: initially South Africans and Brazilians, Canadians and Americans. At the last convention, organized in Munich last August, BIEN again recognized three new national networks, from Korea, Slovenia, and Belgium. There is still no network in France sufficiently “ecumenical” to be recognized.
M.: *This work in support of universal basic income, is it your main commitment as an activist?*

P. V. P.: Unfortunately not! But it is undoubtedly my most sustained commitment because it began nearly thirty years ago with the *Collectif Charles Fourier*. As I was saying a moment ago, I also took part around the same time in the first steps of the *Écolo* party. I am not a member now. Being part of public debate in Belgium, I feel more comfortable not belonging to a party. There is also a more fundamental reason. After having lived in Louvain-la-Neuve, I came back to Brussels to live about fifteen years ago. In Brussels, the *Écolo* party, like the other political parties, is an ethnic party. It is not an ethnic party in Wallonia, because it speaks to all the ecologists who live there. But in Brussels, there are two ecologist parties: *Groen* and *Écolo*. Following the split at the University of Louvain in 1968, all the Belgian parties split along so-called «community» lines. I refuse to belong to an ethnic party which, in Brussels, will only address French-speakers or Dutch-speakers.

This obviously does not stop me from working in support of «green» causes. Last May, for example, I published an opinion piece in the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian press under the heading «Picnic in the Streets,» where I argued that there was such a lethargic attitude toward the improvement of public spaces in Brussels that it seemed to me that there was a legitimate place for civil disobedience. So in the article I invited those who shared my view to go down and have a picnic along the central boulevard of Brussels, outside the Bourse, every Sunday throughout the summer. And I concluded by saying that it was not up to me, an old philosopher, to organize it; the generation growing up with Facebook, Twitter, and flash-mobs would make a much better job of it than me. I would be there, and would be quite happy to get picked up by the police in such a just cause. That same day, three young guys wrote to me to say that they wanted to organize a «Facebook event.» I suggested that they work together on it, and by midnight there were 350 «will be there»s on Facebook. On June 10, the date chosen for the first protest picnic, this had grown to 3,500. In the meantime, I had returned to Oxford, where I teach, and the Brussels police called to warn me: «You are organizing an unauthorized event.» I explained that I was only the author of a publicly-available article, that I was not organizing anything at all, but that I would certainly be there with my picnic in the middle of the boulevard on June 10! To start with, the *bourgmestre* of Brussels threatened us: «I have not authorized this and I will send the police.» Shortly after that, seeing the success of the event, he clarified his position: «I’ll send the police to close the road off for you.» And a few days later: «It is an absolutely lovely idea which is in line with my policy.» Thanks to the efficiency and the enthusiasm of
a handful of young people, French-speakers and Dutch-speakers, «eurocrats» and «immigrants,» June 10 was a magical day on the Place de la Bourse. The internet is crammed with pictures of thousands of Bruxellois calmly setting themselves up in the middle of the boulevard that cuts the heart of the city in two, including—given the proximity of the local commune elections—members of all of Brussels’ political parties. Three days later, the bourgmestre invited me in to tell me that he would be making the boulevard available at midday every Sunday throughout the summer. As the communale elections approached in mid-October, all the parties promised to pedestrianize that stretch of the central boulevard, and the majority that was formed after the elections made it one of their priorities. The most important thing remains to be seen—keeping the promise; and after that, the virtuous circles that this action is intended to produce in order to make the heart of Europe’s capital a place that all Europeans can be proud of.

M.: Let’s come back to what you have called your most sustained commitment.

P. V. P.: Amidst all of this, universal basic income is really for me a fundamental part of thinking about the future; whether in Belgium, in Europe, or around the world, it has to be seen as a plausible answer, both radical and realistic, to the double challenge of poverty and unemployment. There is no long-term solution to this double challenge that does not involve some form of universal basic income. Otherwise, we are either fighting against poverty and creating dependency and unemployment traps, or we are fighting against unemployment and reducing social protection, and creating a mass of poor workers forced to work.

M.: You created BIEN in 1986 and it has developed in different countries. How do you explain the fact that no country, not even a developed one, has put in place a universal basic income, or even begun to have a serious debate on the subject?

P. V. P.: There has been a real debate in some countries, but it comes and goes. A good example is the Netherlands. In 1985, there was the impression that we were about to see the establishment of a basic income. And again in 1993, because two ministers, from two different parties, had come out in favor of it: the Finance minister, a member of the Liberal party, and the Economics minister, a member of the Democrats 66 party. But the minister for Social Affairs, a Labor party member, set himself firmly against it, and the prime minister quickly put the idea back on the shelf. That said, the resistance and the slowness are no surprise. Even in cases where they are not very far from it in terms of practical policies—the Netherlands already has a basic pension, family allowances, a conditional minimum income and refundable tax credits—it still represents a profound change in our understanding of how society and income distribution work. So we cannot expect it to be a walk in the park. There are more obstacles systematically blocking the way.
The first can be expressed as a dilemma: either the economy is doing well and they tell us «no need for a universal basic income,» or it is doing badly and they tell us «there is no money to pay for it.»

The second structural obstacle is that this is an idea that divides people who are usually on the same side of the barricades, on the right as on the left. Among liberals defined as pro-market, there are those who only argue for a theoretical freedom, and those who are aware of what real freedom is. Thus, you have the very liberal Samuel Brittan, joint editor-in-chief of the Financial Times, and author of *The Permissive Society*, who has said: «There is nothing wrong with unearned income, except that not everyone has it!» Thus, you have very liberal people like him, very pro-market and anti-government, who defend true freedom for all, not just the freedom to be crushed by hunger, against people who are indignant at the extortion of tax and the parasitic nature of those in receipt of benefits.

On the left, the conflict revolves around a different question: why are we against capitalist exploitation? There are some who are against capitalist exploitation, like the Dutch Marxist I mentioned earlier, because «it is unacceptable that the proletariat should be forced to sell their labor-power.» In this case, giving a universal basic income is wonderful, because if the proletariat works, it is because the work is attractive. It is a powerful tool for the emancipation of the proletariat, so if you are on the left, you can only be in favor. But there are others who are against capitalist exploitation because it allows capitalists to live without working. Those in favor of universal basic income would like to extend that scandalous opportunity to the whole population by offering everybody the option which fortunately today is the privilege of only a small minority. The ethical reason for opposing capitalist exploitation is profoundly different in the two cases, and the debate on basic income brings that tension to the fore. As soon as the conversation starts, people in the same organization start beating each other over the head. And to avoid the public appearance of disunity, it is easier to put the idea off until later.

A third obstacle to which it is important to pay attention is the opposition of the unions. There are certainly some unions who have supported universal basic income. In the Netherlands, one of the spearheads of the movement for universal basic income was a union in the food sector, with a majority of women and part-time workers. That is no accident. But in general the unions, insofar as they take any interest in a subject so far
removed from their traditional demands, are quite hostile. In part this is for certain circumstantial reasons. In Belgium, for example, a large part of union income consists of a commission on unemployment payments. It is understandable that universal basic income is of no interest to their treasurers. On the one hand, it would reduce involuntary unemployment. On the other hand, the total unemployment payments would be reduced because it would become no more than a conditional supplement to the universal basic income received by each member of the family. The base figure on which their commission is calculated would thus be less. On another tack, universal basic income is also a formidable strike fund: you can still receive it while on strike. Would this not be a major advantage from the union point of view? Not necessarily. The reason is that with universal basic income, the workers are also less dependent on the union. This reduces the capacity of the unions to organize the workers’ movement in collective action, notably to avoid wildcat strikes that are often strikes on matters of individual concern in one or other sub-category. Universal basic income is a form of emancipation for everyone: for bosses, for the authorities, for spouses, but also for the unions. It will in no way, however, render the unions obsolete. They will still have an important role to play: a role in providing information, in mobilizing workers in all areas of their professional activity. But obviously, the unions will have to adapt to this new situation.

So for all these reasons some have argued that in a country such as ours, universal basic income would come in through the back door rather than being trumpeted in through the main entrance as was the case, for example with the RMI (Revenu Minimum d’Insertion [a contributions-based unemployment benefit]). One possible scenario is that as awareness grows about dependency traps caused by conditionality mechanisms, as well as about the costs of administering a complex system, we will move toward a rationalization that would include a universal basic income. That is one of the ways it might happen, but it could take a more modest form, via other routes. Thus, a consensus is emerging here and there to increase considerably the cost of energy in order to reduce consumption. This policy involves an increase in the cost of living for those of few means. The simplest solution to compensate for that would be to put in place a refundable lump-sum tax credit for everyone in the form of a universal basic income. In that case, there is an under-compensation for big consumers, who are on average richer, and an over-compensation for small consumers, who are generally poorer. Once such an arrangement has been adopted, all the mechanisms for paying a universal basic income are in place and the various different benefits can be progressively eliminated along with an increase in the amount of the universal basic income.

**Universal basic income is also a formidable strike fund: you can still receive it while on strike.**
M.: After 30 years of activism on universal basic income, are you mostly optimistic about the adoption of the idea in the short, medium, or long term?

P. V. P.: I am systematically pessimistic in the short term, but optimistic in the long term. Pessimistic short term, in contrast for example to my friend Senator Suplicy, who regularly predicts that universal basic income will be fully established in Brazil in 3 to 5 years. Knowing the size of the obstacles, I am convinced it will not be soon. Every time there is a step forward somewhere, I take it as a nice surprise.

But after hearing thousands of arguments, I remain convinced that it is the way we must, and will go, in various ways, from the national to the global level.

At the global level, we need to identify and achieve as quickly as possible a decent standard of living which is sustainable and widely applicable and so leave behind a way of life which is only sustainable for some parts of the world, of for a few generations. A coherent and plausible vision of this kind cannot rely on development in every country in the world, in terms of productivity, becoming sufficient everywhere—including for example in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—in order to ensure a decent standard of living for its whole population. That will never happen, even with all the fair trade in the world. Is there an alternative? Definitely: the opening of frontiers in such a way as, for example, to relocate hundreds of millions of Africans in regions where for both institutional and natural reasons, productivity will remain structurally higher. Would that be desirable? Not for the communities from which these people would come, nor for the communities to which they would move. Is there a third option? Yes, one which could additionally be combined to some extent with the first two: a system of permanent interpersonal transfers from the ‘North’ to the ‘South,’ analogous to what exists today within nation states, except that it should take a much simpler form, which happens to be a form of universal basic income.

M.: Is that not just a Utopia?

P. V. P.: We have an urgent need for utopian thinking. For me Marx’s biggest mistake, for example, was absolutely not that he was a utopian, but that he was not utopian enough, that he did not devote some belated pages—the marginal notes on the Gotha program—to some real utopian thinking. What is needed is to imagine the institutional changes likely to make our world better and to reflect unstintingly, from a point of view at
once ethical, economic, and sociological, of the probable consequences of those changes, the possible undesired outcomes, and the ways to overcome them, and so forth. We must have a vision of the future which sticks to the road through all the twists and turns, one that is as robust as it is desirable. Then we have to combine it with a healthy dose of opportunism. The «visionaries» must join forces with those who are more «hands-on,» the ones who spot the openings through which progress can be made. The RMI was a great step forward; we have to find the right moment to build on it.

M : You talk of reducing the pace of life in the countries of the North in order to allow the countries of the South to move up to a standard of living that can be made generally achievable in a lasting way. Are you talking about economic contraction?

P. V. P.: Yes and no. To make a decent standard of living available to all in a lasting way, it is essential to organize transfer payments from high-productivity countries to countries with weak productivity. That means that in the North, production will have to be permanently in excess of consumption. Compared to what is produced today in the North, we will have to produce more, even as we consume less. The systematic transfer of purchasing power to the poor countries with lower productivity will allow them to buy part of what we produce. The corollary of this contraction of consumption will not therefore be an increase in free time, allowing us over the course of a lifetime, to work less. It will take the form of transfers made to the rest of the world allowing them not to suffer hunger, to have fair access to a decent standard of living, without having to leave their ancestral homes to achieve it, and come en masse to our countries.

The future for my children’s and grandchildren’s generations seems in these circumstances to be quite bleak: they will have to consume less without a corresponding reduction in work. In particular, they will have to live more densely-packed in the cities, where their housing will be more expensive, and they will have less private space to live in. And yet we must give them hope, tell them without any kind of deception that they will be able to have a better life than we have had. How is that possible? One essential ingredient is the improvement of access to public space. Hence the importance for me of actions like «Picnic the Streets,» that I was talking about earlier.

But here, too, universal basic income has a part to play. The fact that reducing our consumption does not automatically translate into an increase in leisure time does not necessarily mean that we will not be...
able to work in a more relaxed way than today. The platform of income provided by a universal basic income must enable us to work for longer over the course of our lives thanks to the fact that we will have been able to take breaks, slow the pace down, at times we choose. It facilitates a more flexible mix of work, training and family priorities. So it would be easier to reduce the time spent working with a break at forty to refresh yourself, so that you do not wait until you reach fifty-two, and find that the sector you work in has become obsolete, and that it is too late to change careers. Of course, universal basic income will not be enough on its own to allow this to happen. The education and training system will need to be reviewed in parallel. It is not absurd to undertake training at sixty in order to be able to carry on working until you are seventy-five. My mother, who is now ninety, did not have paid work until she was seventy, when she got involved in literacy work with immigrant women, which she kept up until she was eighty. There are many people who have the capacity and the desire to make a contribution at an advanced age. Our income distribution system must allow greater flexibility by allowing people worn out by work to stop sooner, and others to continue working later on in life.

M.: There has been controversy in Belgium over the case of a man who never worked in his whole life, who just lived on benefits. The Belgian system seems to be generous enough to allow people to live without working. In France, the unemployed are stigmatized, and their rights are cut back; is that the case in Belgium?

P. V. P.: In Belgium, there are unemployment payments which are made for an unlimited period. It may be that the case you mention is of someone who worked enough when he was young to establish his right to receive benefits, and who has subsequently never been required to accept a job. But an increase in the rate of reduction of the benefit payments paid as unemployment goes on has just been accepted.

M.: That means that we are really moving away from universal basic income. It calls into question everybody’s right to an income.

P. V. P.: Not necessarily. Unemployment benefits are in principle an insurance payment. Therefore, you pay in in order to cover a risk, the risk of involuntary unemployment, or of encountering circumstances in which it is impossible to find a job when you look for one. So, unemployment benefits are not a form of income intended to actually be paid out to everybody. This explains the bitterness, a legitimate resentment in
the mind of those who work and whose salaries are seriously reduced by the contributions they pay in with the aim of ensuring they are protected should they find themselves involuntarily unemployed. If there are people who manifestly make no effort to find a job, who perhaps even take great pains to avoid finding one, their problem with that is understandable. That is why toughening the conditions on benefits is not necessarily in contradiction with arguing the case for a basic income, which is not intended as a replacement for conditional, insurance-type benefits, but as a platform underlying them.

What is important, though, is that such measures be accompanied by a strengthening of that platform, the income paid in the same way to those who work as to those who do not. If a guy who goes to work finds the job too unrewarding and is jealous of the person who is content to live on that modest income, he can stop working and make do with it himself, without having to pretend to be involuntarily unemployed. And if his employer wants to keep him, he will have to pay more to persuade him to continue. We should not dismiss the resentment of those who work hard when they encounter what they see as an abuse of the insurance system. But for universal basic income, the perception has to be completely different. This is not an insurance payment triggering what economists call moral hazard: an increase in the occurrence of the risk as a result of the coverage available for it. As I said earlier, it is simply an equitable sharing of what would otherwise be appropriated by those whom the lottery of talent and life chances had enabled to get an interesting and well-paid job.

M.: Very few women seem committed to the idea of universal basic income—why?

P. V. P.: It does not seem to me to be an issue to which women are less committed than other matters of public policy. Whatever the context and the method of financing it, the establishment of a universal basic income will be more beneficial for women than for men. It will redistribute income from men towards women, but it is the widening of accessible options that will have the most significant impact for women. This question brings to mind a long conversation I had with James Tobin during my time as visiting Professor at Yale, in 1998. Tobin had, since the 1960s, been an open advocate of the universal basic income variant, negative taxation, which he called the «demogrant.» He even managed to convince George McGovern, the Democratic candidate for the Presidency in 1972, to include it in his electoral platform.

McGovern made the case badly, and went down to a massive defeat for unrelated reasons, even if it did not help his cause, either. After Nixon’s victory, there were, however, some closely-watched experiments on forms of negative taxation in various places. It was not the effects demonstrated by these experiments that surprised Tobin, but the political reactions they provoked, reactions which led to the idea being buried. What were those effects? Firstly, there was a reduction—not enormous,
Among feminists, some joined in with critics from the right to denounce the apparent tendency of basic income to cause women to go back into the home. But in clear contrast others saw in it an important tool of emancipation.


M.: You caused a stir with an article 6 in which you presented universal basic income as a capitalist road to communism. That seems paradoxical.

P. V. P.: As I was saying just now, that is one of the meanings I initially gave to universal basic income: a way of remaining faithful to the ideals that Marx shared with the utopian socialists he disdained, while daring to learn all the lessons of history. I reiterate that communism is understood here as a society in which each person voluntarily contributes, according to his ability, enough for everyone to be able to receive for free everything they need. For Marx, making this communism possible required the prior establishment of socialism—defined as a society in which the majority of the means of production are owned by the state due to the superiority of socialism over capitalism in terms of the development of the forces of production.

I doubt whether many still believe in that kind of superiority. In an irredeemably globalized world, state enterprises do not work very differently from private ones. Moreover, it is hard to deny the classical arguments of Hayek or Schumpeter, which attribute an intrinsic superiority to capitalism in terms of internal and dynamic efficiency. The central point, in any case, is that the market will never go away. The price mechanism is a marvelous phenomenon which manages to condense into one
measurement information relating to millions of preferences of very different types and intensities on one side, and to millions of resources of varying degrees of availability on the other. Of course, prices are not in themselves able to take account of what economists call the externalities—for example, atmospheric or noise pollution—and they are also utterly incapable of reflecting the importance future generations will give to non-renewable natural resources that we are helping to use up. Right now, there are staggering disparities between the prices we pay and what the cost should be if we took into account the relative rarity of the product and the preferences of human beings. So prices have to be corrected in many ways and that is one of the fundamental reasons why markets work within the framework of rules set by democratic public bodies. The second fundamental reason is that the market is also completely incapable of automatically carrying out an equitable distribution of resources among individuals. And therefore it is supremely important that we manage the interactions of market and democracy, which are both mechanisms aimed at aggregating individual preferences in order to transform them into social outcomes. With the advent of the single European market and economic globalization, we have gradually moved from a situation where each national market was subject to laws determined by a national democracy, to one where the national democracies are all immersed in one market subject to laws that it imposes on them. Bringing the market back under democratic control is now one of the most urgent tasks of this century. The drive toward the construction of Europe has, for that reason, an importance which stretches far beyond the frontiers of Europe, and bringing about the conditions that would make European democracy possible is now at the center of my concerns. But democracy and the market share one major fault: short-termism. The purest form of democracy could easily prove to be nothing but a dictatorship of the present. The rules of democracy, like those of the market, need intelligent modeling toward the priority objective not of maximum democracy, but of minimum injustice.

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