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Debate: "Basic Income and the Republican Legacy"
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**Basic Income and the Republican Ideal:
Rethinking Material Independence in
Contemporary Societies***

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1. Introduction: Freedom as Material Independence

The republican tradition revolves around the idea that freedom requires the enjoyment of a certain set of material assets granting individuals socioeconomic independence from others. This material independence constitutes a necessary condition to build and consolidate individuals' positions as free choosers – their capacity for making choices in all domains of life with the security that, thanks to a particular social and institutional design, nobody will have the remotest chance of arbitrarily interfering in their individual life plan decisions.

The picture republicanism paints of social life shows a dense network of social relations intersected by all sorts of asymmetries of power likely to cause bonds of dependence. Therefore, Philip Pettit asserts that "if a republican state is committed to advancing the cause of freedom as non-domination among its

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citizens, then it must embrace a policy of promoting socio-economic independence" (Pettit, 1997, pp. 158–159).

Historically, this condition of socioeconomic independence was achieved through ownership of certain resources, like land or slaves (republicanism has often shown an undemocratic face), that could provide men (women tended to be excluded) with an *oikos* or *domus* – that is, a full materially rooted private sphere – qualifying them as fully fledged members of the community. To take a well-known example, a polity made up of proprietors of this kind was Aristotle's ideal, an ideal that Jefferson took up again in late 18th-century America. Today, once the condition of citizenship has been universalised so that no one remains *de jure* outside the polis, republican thought must seek mechanisms to universalise the material and civil independence that ownership of resources like land or slaves used to confer on individuals. Thus, new ways of granting material independence – and the bargaining power deriving from it – to *all* individuals are required.

At this point, it is worth recalling the (republican) way in which James Meade, one of the most renowned basic income (BI) proponents whose writings inspired Rawls's criticism of welfare-state capitalism¹ as well as his defence of the ideal of a property-owning democracy, observes the following:

A man with much property has great bargaining strength and a sense of security, independence, and freedom....He can snap his fingers at those on whom he must rely for income, for he can always rely for a time on his capital. The propertyless man must continuously and without interruption acquire his income by working for an employer or by qualifying to receive it from a public authority. An unequal distribution of property means an unequal distribution of power and status even if it is prevented from causing too unequal distribution of income (Meade, 1964, pp. 38–39).

Could a BI provide individuals with the bargaining strength and sense of security, independence and freedom claimed by James Meade, as well as by Jefferson or Rawls?² Would its universal and unconditional nature confer on individuals the fallback position they need to sign all kind of contracts in the

¹ According to Rawls, "[Welfare-state capitalism] permits very large inequalities in the ownership of real property (productive assets and natural resources) so that the control of the economy and much of political life rests in few hands" (Rawls, 2001, p. 138).

² As Rawls stated, a property-owning democracy would endow people equally from the start "[by putting] all citizens in a position to manage their own affairs on a footing of a suitable degree of social and economic equality" (Rawls, 2001, p. 139).

absence of domination, in line with the republican ideal? As some authors (Raventós, 2007) point out, a thorough answer to this question requires such an association between BI and republicanism. A BI would enable individuals to deal with each other from a more powerful social position and – up to a point – turn down proposals that do not satisfy their needs, wishes and expectations. In labour relations, a BI would confer on individuals the bargaining power they need in order to explore the possibility of other kinds of (labour) contracts and, therefore, to aspire to achieve “what men want,” which is “meaningful work in free association with others” (Rawls, 1999, p. 257).

Yet the association between BI and the republican ideal is not free from nuances and conceptual tensions that require further analysis and clarification. In the sections that follow I discuss both the motivations and the obstacles such a republican case for BI involves.

2. Are Civic Duties Disregarded?

One of the most common critiques of the unconditional nature of BI relies on the fact that it would be conferred regardless of individuals’ willingness to contribute to the social product, which would give rise to exploitive social relations (White, 2003). In effect, by giving individuals the chance to free ride on the work and efforts of their fellows, a BI would infringe on an elementary “principle of reciprocity” according to which “each citizen who willingly shares in the social product has an obligation to make a relevantly proportional productive contribution to the community in return” (White, 2003, p. 18).

Some authors claim that the violation of this “principle of reciprocity” becomes especially relevant when BI is conceived of within the framework of the republican ideal. According to authors like Richard Dagger (2006), republicanism envisages individuals as members of a political community that bestows on them some essential elements of their identity as individuals and citizens and that expects them to assume a certain set of civic duties that support such a social regime. Thus, republicans can only favour those cash transfer schemes that impose certain conditions – performing some broadly defined public service – on everyone who benefits from them. Unconditionality undermines the rights-and-duties rationale that shapes the way in which individuals become members of a community. Hence, it cannot be accepted.

In this approach to the republican tradition, republicans face a dilemma that forces them to either (1) weaken the requirement of an unconditional BI as a possible institutional implication of their normative analysis, or (2) weaken the

defence of republicanism (by diminishing the alleged importance of civic values) as a normative justification of BI that is effectively distinct from those we find within egalitarian liberalism (Noguera, 2006).

3. The Priority of Independence

However, an alternative account of the republican ideal that relies on a materially based conception of individuals' motivations might lead to considerably different conclusions. Some authors have argued that it makes no sense to conceive of human motivations without first tackling the question of the material roots of such motivations (Bertomeu and Domènech, 2005; Raventós, 2007). Can individuals be asked to deploy some kind of contributionist ethos without granting them an unalienable and politically secured social position that gives them material independence and, therefore, effective freedom of choice – as full citizens?³ If not, then an unconditional BI may be seen as a prime element for constructing that material sphere granting individuals an autonomous existence – granting individuals the bargaining power needed to make free choices.

So, if BI plays this role, its implementation should not be seen as a threat to the stability of the republican polity but as the starting point for its constitution and for individuals' civic commitment to its reproduction. Having spare time available for political participation and higher degrees of protection against possible threats coming from other parties, together with the awareness of the beneficial effects BI has in enhancing material independence and individual freedom, would support the kind of civic commitment that is needed from individuals to sustain such a republican regime (Birnbbaum and Casassas, 2008).

Notice that the republican tradition has always tended to link the question of individuals' motivations to an in-depth analysis of (the forms of) class struggle. Some republicans stress that all forms of political commitment and engagement must be understood within the framework of a class analysis of individuals' interests in becoming part of *civil society* – an association of equally free individuals in a community whose fully fledged members enjoy material independence and, therefore, can achieve that “meaningful work in free association with others” that Rawls values so much (Casassas, 2006).⁴

³ Are individuals really embracing “civic values” when they (are forced to) perform certain activities as a condition for a subsidy?

⁴ Note that it was the decidedly republican Marx who asserted that “the yoke of capital can be removed by the beneficial republican system of the association of free and equal producers” (Marx and Engels, 1989/16, p. 195).

In the end, the very notion of *neutrality* is at stake. The republican requirement of neutrality is not confined just to the *negative* respect of all the conceptions of the good life (in fact, the radical republican laicism has always tended to take this respect for granted, for it does not embrace a concrete notion of the good life); the republican requirement of neutrality demands a *positive* obligation: nonarbitrary state interference in social life in order to universally and unconditionally guarantee material independence (Bertomeu and Domènech, 2005). It seems, therefore, reasonable that BI has a lot to offer.

Is this republican scheme far from egalitarian liberalism? No, insofar as it can be freed from comprehensive doctrines, and it also points to the need for state intervention in order to achieve effective freedom. But yes, insofar as it aims, mainly, to detect all power relations and dependency bonds permeating social life, whereas egalitarian liberalism does not show similar concern for problems resulting from individuals' lack of bargaining strength and independence,⁵ and it does so by securing *ex ante* individuals' social positions: equality in socioeconomic status being necessary for freedom in social life (instead, egalitarian liberalism tends to focus *ex post*, on the domain of (re)distributive justice, for alleviating the effects of unequal asset distribution).

4. Why a Basic Income?

Even if we accept that priority of independence and, therefore, assume that unconditional ways of granting individuals' socioeconomic self-sufficiency make the best sense, the question of BI's optimality as the main corollary of the republican normative analysis still requires further consideration. Are there other ways to grant individuals their material independence? What – if anything – qualifies BI as the best way to achieve that goal? Are there other measures worth considering? I examine next the following three alternatives.

First, Ackerman and Alstott (1999), following Thomas Paine's (republican) analysis, have suggested the idea of a citizen's inheritance scheme seeking to endow all individuals that reach adulthood with a basic capital to use to define and start their life plans from better (greater equality and bargaining power) social positions. Are there good (republican) arguments for promoting BI instead of such a basic capital?

⁵ The Rawlsian "basic structure" of society is sometimes understood as a set of agencies that (1) share equal power in respect to each other, and (2) do not harbour internal power relations. As stated, the republican description of social life goes in the opposite direction.

Second, should republicans, as most BI proponents do, take capitalism as a given? Can certain forms of economic democracy, such as collective ownership of the means of production as envisaged within the socialist tradition, be better guarantors of republican freedom as nondomination than can a BI within capitalist societies? Or perhaps these forms of economic democracy as collective ownership of the means of production are a possible and desirable consequence of introducing a BI, which would therefore make BI part of a wider socialist project (Wright, 2006)?

Third and finally, if the account of republicanism we rest on gives priority to civic duties, which, as it has been shown above, would push us to stress the centrality of the principle of reciprocity that the contributionist ethos harbours, then we would have to take workfare schemes seriously. It is true that workfare schemes, given their curative (ex post) rationale, are not set into motion until poverty and deprivation, which are significant sources of dependence and domination, have become a reality. This might make these schemes incompatible with republicanism. But it is also true that, if certain ideas of reciprocity remain as the core values, granting citizens an unconditional income that is compatible with their eventual free riding on others' contribution to the social product might make no sense.

Clearly, the republican case for BI requires thoroughly considering and debating both the normative goals we might envisage and the institutional means that are necessary to achieve them.

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