

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT A BASIC INCOME SOCIETY?

José A. Noguera
Department of Sociology
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
jose.noguera@uab.es

Introduction: a tricky question?

The organisers of this seminar pose an important question: how would a Basic Income (BI) society look like? (I will refer to this as 'the question' in the following text). With their kind permission, here I would like to briefly discuss the question itself, rather than trying to answer it substantially. My aim is just to present some analytical remarks about how I think we should understand and address that question. I take the risk that some of my statements may seem obvious at first sight, but I contend that they point to important issues we have to keep in mind when engaging in the BI debates.

The main point I want to make is simply that the question, so formulated, may be somehow tricky, since it may be read as making at least three debatable assumptions:

- 1) That, conceptually speaking, there is something as '*a* BI society', in single form. This is what I will call the *definitional* issue.
- 2) That there is something as an '*ideal* BI society' that has some defined features, and those of us who want a BI society want it because we believe it would bring them forth. This second issue is, hence, a *normative* one.

- 3) That the main features of such a society may be foreseen and predicted in some way, perhaps with the help of social science. I will refer to this as the *cognitive or positive social science* issue.

The definitional issue

Can we think of something as 'a BI society'? And, if so, how would we define this term?

Of course, there is a trivial sense in which an answer is easy to find: obviously, a BI society may be defined as 'a society which has some form of BI', that is, a society in which every citizen is paid a guaranteed income on an unconditional and individual basis. But I am afraid that when we are talking here of a 'BI society' we mean something more than this: we are implicitly assuming that a BI society could be identified and distinguished by some type of social, political, psychological or economic regularities and phenomena that would not appear in non-BI societies. Otherwise, the question about the nature of 'BI society' would be an empty one. When we ask how a BI society would be like, we are not expecting an answer of the type 'a BI society is a society which pays a BI to every individual'. We are expecting to be told something about the general 'model of society' that a BI would give rise to. For that question to make sense, the features of a 'BI society' must, then, be different from the fact that a BI exists in that society.

But, if we accept the latter, a not so trivial issue arises: it is dubious that we might think of a single 'model of society' to be raised when a BI is introduced. Rather, it is quite clear that there cannot be one single model of BI society (at least if 'model of society' means what is usually understood by that term) in the same way that there is not one single model of welfare society or welfare state.

At this point, we arrive to what I shall call the definitional problem. We have to make a difficult choice when we ask what a BI society will look like:

either we define a ‘BI society’ as having some constitutive features other than BI in order to deserve that name, and then the answer to the question is a pure tautology; *or* we do not make that kind of extensive definition, but then the answer is that the question itself is not well formulated, since there is not and cannot be one single model of BI society. It is obvious that there could be a lot of radically different models of society compatible with the existence of a BI. Would there be *something common to them all*, apart from the obvious fact that they would have a BI?

In saying that, I am assuming a less obvious but important point: that there is no relevant social feature *conceptually* connected with the existence of a BI other than the existence of a BI itself¹, and, therefore, the connections between BI and other social features are purely *causal* or *empirical*. This is, I think, a non trivial point to make, since some usual discussions on BI focus on issues such as ‘what does the very idea of BI entail’ in terms of such things as ethical values, social preferences, economic performance, or ecological worries (think, for example, of all the usual discourses on how BI is necessarily at odds with the work ethic).

A possible objection would be this one: there is not a single ‘capitalist society’ (capitalism is compatible with very different cultures, social structures, political regimes, etc.), but defining the term ‘capitalism’ still makes sense in a non trivial way. This is true, but then the only common thing to all those societies is that they are capitalist, no matter how we define ‘capitalism’. Similarly, the only common thing to ‘BI societies’ would be that they have a BI. What happens here is that “capitalism” is a much more complex object than “BI”, which is just a very simple social benefit. Capitalism entails a whole institutional structure for an economic system, so its definition requires more work in terms of necessary conditions.² BI is a much more modest idea: it is not

¹ I say ‘relevant’ social feature because, of course, some social features are conceptually connected with a BI, like, for example, the existence of monetary currency, but they are not relevant for our question (when one asks how a BI society would look like, he don’t expect to be told that it will be a society in which money exists).

² Noguera (2007c).

an economic or social system, but a type of social benefit, and its definition is today highly consensual.

So far, my impression is that, from a purely conceptual point of view, the question does not seem to have an interesting answer.

The normative issue

A second assumption we tend to make when asking the question is a normative one: that there is something as an 'ideal BI society', and, therefore, some valuable social, psychological, political or economic treats would have to be raised as a result of the introduction of a BI.

Two considerations may be made when discussing this issue. The first is that of course everyone who supports BI does it because he thinks that, once introduced, it will favour the realization of some ideals or principles of justice (in fact, he may expect BI to help to achieve other social ends or goods, such as economic efficiency, social cohesion, or stability, but here I will limit my scope to justice issues). In this sense, every supporter of BI may have in mind his own 'ideal BI society'. But which is the concrete content of BI's advocates' particular principles of justice in terms of social structure, social institutions, and social practices is far from being obvious, since there are many ways and many different rationales for defending a BI. So I do not think we can speak of *the* ideal BI society, but just of different normative reasons and theories for defending BI. This is also an important matter, for many well-known discussions on BI have focused precisely on which are the best normative reasons or the best theory of justice in order to justify BI.³ But then the discussion goes easily to general political philosophy and the question is not 'what is an ideally just BI society', but rather 'what is an ideally just society' as such.

³ In this seminar we have a good example of that kind of debate with regard to the republican justification of BI. I have tried to discuss it in Noguera (2005, 2006b).

However, that would be the main question for a complete theory of justice, not for a debate on BI. The valuable features of society we are interested in here are only those features we take to be *conceptually or causally connected with the existence of a BI*. This may not be unimportant, since a lot of tiring debates on BI focus on irrelevant issues and questions, such as ‘will BI overcome injustice in the world?’, ‘will BI mean the end of capitalism?’, or ‘will BI mean the end of market and profit orientations?’. Another variant of this kind of debate is exemplified by questions such as ‘what kind of society should we globally prefer as BI supporters?’. To my view, this is again a tricky and redundant question, since it can be reduced, at the end, to the fundamental question of political philosophy itself: how should society (in general) be like? And the answer should not be affected by the fact you support BI or not, besides the obvious fact that for a BI supporter a BI program will be part of his ideal society. Besides that fact, I do not think that supporting a BI is necessarily linked to a specific answer to that general question. And, therefore, I do not think that the preferred principles of justice and institutional design one endorses can be predicted from the fact that he endorses BI (or from the fact that he do not).

The second remark, which I am particularly interested to make, is that the most well-known normative standpoint for defending BI, real-libertarian theory,⁴ necessarily has to leave the question *unanswered*, though, to be sure, this is not a bad thing. Let me explain. If you support BI from a real-libertarian point of view (as I tend to do), the question is also politically (not only logically or conceptually) tricky, because for a real-libertarian the aim of a BI is precisely to empower citizens to spontaneously shape *whatever* forms and styles of life they may want or prefer. Surely, when you start from different normative theories or sensibilities (right-libertarian, egalitarian liberal, Marxist, communitarian, feminist, republican, Christian, etc.), you have to face the positive thesis that there could be radically different types of society compatible with BI. But in the particular case of the real-libertarian justification of BI, this

⁴ Van Parijs (1995).

indeterminacy is not only cognitive, but *normative*. *It is good*, from the point of view of justice, that we cannot determine from the start what social features will be produced by individuals' composed actions when a BI is in place, at least if that indeterminacy is due to the fact that individuals' real freedom is maximized.

For example, a real-libertarian would not be worried about some feminists' provisions that BI would allow many women to reduce their market work time and increase their care work time;⁵ he would be concerned only with whether or not women took their labour decisions in the exercise of their real freedom, whatever those decisions are; to that extent, he would not care if they decide as feminists would like them to do or not. If we consider BI from the point of view of freedom, then we cannot blame it if it does not deliver the preferred social settings that feminists would like. A very similar argument could be made regarding socialism or ecological concerns.

My conclusion to this section is that we can hardly think of something as 'an ideal BI society' from a normative point of view. If you are a real-libertarian (and maybe an egalitarian liberal) BI supporter, the rationale of BI would be precisely freedom for individuals to choose and compose whatever model of society they may want. And if you are not, and you are committed to a specific 'social ideal' (meaning a particular kind of psychological, social, political or economic institutions or patterns of behaviour, which have value in themselves), then your commitment to it is normatively independent of having a BI, in the sense that BI could be only a contingent instrument for achieving those ends, valued only to the extent it successfully does it. So it is not a 'BI society' what you would be defending, but simply a just society (according to your particular ideal of justice), whether BI is a part of it or not.

What I am trying to say is that we should avoid the idea that BI should be understood as a type of 'social system' or specific 'regime'. Instead, I feel very comfortable with the idea of BI as a type of social benefit among many others, which may favour different objectives, and may be implemented and

⁵ Robeyns (2007).

designed in very different ways depending on the context and the aims of social policy.⁶ We can think of ‘an ideal society’, but the idea of ‘an ideal BI society’ can only refer to that subset of ‘ideal societies’ which include a BI, and therefore is redundant.

The cognitive issue

As we saw, the social features that are relevant for the normative issue are those which one takes to be conceptually or causally connected with the existence of a BI. However, when talking about the definitional issue I assumed that there are no social features conceptually connected with BI. That leaves only causal or empirical connections as the ones to be studied. So when we ask the question, we probably may be assuming some cognitive or positive beliefs about how the introduction of a BI would affect social regularities.⁷

This third issue is, to my view, the most interesting and challenging for BI supporters. Now the question is not what is the *ideal* of a BI society, but what would be the most likely social effects of the introduction of a BI. The question ‘how would a BI society look like’ could then be read as ‘what would be the main social effects of a BI in a specific social context’. Here we are asking about the *social mechanisms* that a BI would put into effect. And, no need to say, the implications of this question would be manifold and could involve different research projects in different fields.

The methodology for this causal analysis is well established by contemporary analytical sociology⁸: a given macrosocial phenomenon (such as the implementation of a BI program, macro level in T0) may affect opportunities, beliefs and desires of agents (micro level in T0), that may affect their actions (micro level in T1), that may bring about some other macro-social effect or phenomenon (macro level in T1). This is the well-known ‘Coleman

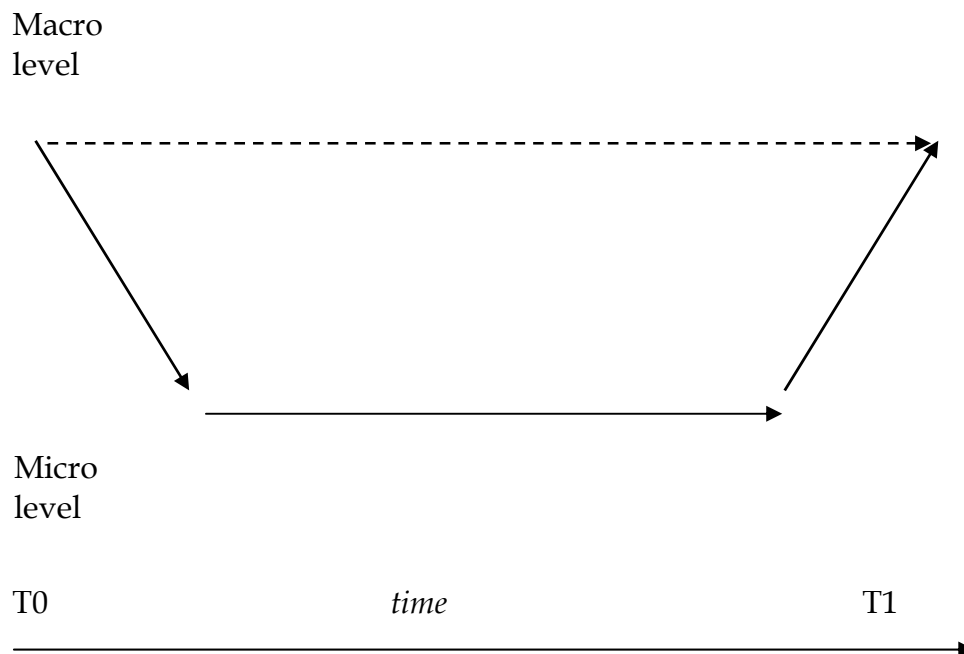
⁶ De Wispelaere & Stirton (2004).

⁷ Factual and causal assumptions are very usual in normative theories (Noguera, 2007a).

⁸ See Coleman (1990), Hedström (2005), Noguera (2006).

boat' (Figure 1), that specifies that our explanations of macrosocial facts and regularities must have microfoundations in terms of individuals' beliefs, desires and opportunities, and, hence, must specify in an intelligible way the causal mechanisms which are in place for producing the fact we want to explain.

Figure 1
Macro-micro-macro relationships in the 'Coleman boat'
(Coleman, 1990)



But to what extent can social science not only *explain* existing social phenomena, but also *predict* the effects of something that is not the case, such as BI? Of course basic research on social mechanisms can be very useful to answer this question, but in the case of BI research we will have to be aware of the limited predictive power of social science, at least until a real BI is at work and we are able to study its causes and effects on the field. Meanwhile, research techniques like social simulation and social experimentation can help a lot to try to envisage such possible causes and effects.

How would this cognitive issue relate with (or be relevant to) the normative one? Note that the rationale for social-scientific research on BI could

be understood in two different ways. Social scientists do (or perhaps *should* do) research about objects which are normatively relevant.⁹ In the case of BI research, this relevance may be at least double:

- 1) We may be interested in the causal mechanisms that may bring forth and enhance the *feasibility* of a BI program (for example, its economic, political or psychological feasibility in given contexts).
- 2) We may be concerned by the social *effects* of a BI given certain social circumstances (for example, on macroeconomy, the labour market, political participation, or gender division of labour).

At first sight, one would say the first concern is more likely to be shared by those who think that the real freedom BI gives is a final *end* for a theory of justice (like Van Parijs), and that the second concern could be mostly shared by those who regard BI as a good *instrument* for achieving other social ends than real freedom (such as democracy, virtue, a particular distribution of work, etc.). But, of course, both concerns may be perfectly compatible, and both types of supporters of BI may be deeply interested in each of them, for obvious reasons. In fact, generating valid knowledge about the effects of BI may have a decisive influence on its political feasibility.

There is, however, a final problem I want to refer to, that points to an inner tension between the normative and the cognitive issues. If we assume that BI gives real freedom, and that for that reason its social effects will be undetermined, then how can we expect social research to determine them? Here we face the classical tension between freedom and indeterminacy, a difficult problem for social theory. I will not go into it here, since it would take us very far from BI research, but I think that it is perfectly possible to generate valid knowledge on the causal effects of a BI when introduced in certain contexts and social settings, and at the same time to avoid a determinist picture in which human freedom has no place at all. The social mechanisms perspective allow to

⁹ Swift (1999).

combine both positions, by rejecting covering-law or nomological explanations in social science, as well as case-by-case contextual or relativistic narratives of social phenomena. And in doing so, it is consistent with recent and promising ways of addressing that problem at the philosophical level.¹⁰

Concluding remarks

The preceding arguments and considerations are of course not intended to question the opportunity of this seminar nor of its title, but just to call attention to a dangerous assumption I have often faced when debating about BI: the implicit belief that BI is some sort of ‘complete social ideal’, ‘model of society’, or ‘regime’, or that it entails a whole ‘doctrine’, ‘ideology’, or ‘worldview’ (though surely it may be a *part* or an element in some of them).

Personally, I would be happy to adopt a deflationary approach that considers BI just as an income guarantee program, compatible with a lot of institutional designs, models of society, social ideals, etc. Such an approach would de-mistify the idea of BI, and would prevent it from being appropriated as a flag by sectarian intellectuals or social groups which are only interested in doctrine and word fetishism, or in transcendent and quasi-religious ordeals of epochal transformation. A deflationary approach would make BI less attractive for all those groups, and, at the same time, would reduce the frequent (but flawed) criticism against BI for not being able or enough to solve all the problems of the world (a type of criticism one does not often see when other welfare programs or benefits are presented and implemented).

One could ask whether this non-transcendent, deflationary, non-religious and anti-sectarian approach would have a cost for the BI movement in terms of motivation or social mobilization. I cannot know, but my impression is that it would not: BI supporters use to be a sort of ‘enlightened minority’ more sensitive to arguments than to social prophecy and ideology. But of course one

¹⁰ Dennett (2003); Searle (2007).

may also find some romantic, ideological and emotional impulse among them. So whether this approach would be good or bad for social mobilization in favour of BI, I will leave it for discussion. What I have tried to argue is just that it is good for intellectual health. It may well be that intellectual health is not always good for social mobilization or even for social health, but that is another question.

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