Book Review

Basic Income Guarantee and Politics, ed. Richard K. Caputo. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, pp. 322, $110.

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Ideas of the state's social duties have weakened in the industrial countries during the 21st century. The political talk favouring government responsibility for ensuring shared risk and mutual obligations has been "eclipsed by rhetoric emphasising individual choice, agency, and preferences". It is against this "backdrop of global uncertainty and generalised reluctance of national governments to expand welfare state functions" (pp. 6–7) that *Basic Income Guarantee and Politics*, edited by Richard K. Caputo in 2012, discusses international experiences and perspectives on the viability of income guarantee.

Some of the book's authors contend that the deteriorated socioeconomic conditions increase the political prospects for adopting unconditional basic income schemes. One is the Brazilian senator Eduardo Suplicy, an internationally well-known figure, and another is Guy Standing, BIEN cofounder and one of the leading academic proponents of basic income. The latter refers to "a quiet revolution" that is taking place: basic income has been accepted as a legitimate option in development policy discourses. Pilot schemes, for example, in Namibia, India and Brazil "have lifted our spirits". (p. 60)

A bit surprising is the scant attention the book pays on the weak perspectives of getting employed. The point is that the scarcity of jobs and the ensuing insecurity of living may serve as incentives for governments to unconditional basic income. Achieving full employment is no more a realistic possibility in any industrialised country and an increasing part of population lives on continuously irregular jobs. Technological development, especially the various smart-apparatuses and the polarisation of jobs into highly- and low-skilled ones will also diminish work.

Another significant trend is discernible in countries with highly developed welfare structures. Here Finland represents (as the only Scandinavian country dealt with in the book) an interesting case. As Markku Ikkala argues there is a limit to the expansion of the conditionality of welfare measures. The ideas of simplifying the social security system and of removing a large amount of various benefits have created remarkable support for basic income. In the early summer

of 2015 this mood even got the country's right-wing government to include experimenting basic income in its programme.

The book's empirical reports cover 11 OECD countries, five of which represent the European Union. In addition, there is an article on Iran. The tone in these texts is pessimistic to a varying degree. One can risk summarising their common attitude with a reference to Michiel van Hasslet from the Netherlands. He hopes that the current conditions will in the end compel politicians to take up serious consideration of basic income legislation.

A book gathering together the latest basic income-related political developments in various countries is more than welcome. As such it may be of interest for academics looking for comparative perspectives as well as political activists willing to learn from experiences elsewhere. However, as a whole the book edited by Caputo is rather a collection of scattered texts. There is not much else than the idea of basic income that ties the chapters together. More coherence would have provided an opportunity to utilise one of the strong points of the BIEN-movement, its nature as a "broad church".

A fruitful starting-point for a concerted effort was supplied by the analytical frame presented at the beginning of the book by Jurgen De Wispelaere and Jose Antonio Noguera. Their idea is to provide a toolkit for examining the political feasibility of different policies, to compare "how (they) fare in terms of their probabilities of being actualized given a particular social environment" (pp. 17–18).

The year 2015 may well turn out to be the point when basic income went from being disregarded to being in the mainstream in at least two industrialised Western countries. Finland and the Netherlands, both handled in the book, went on to plan experimenting basic income in practice. As the experiments will take place, public talk of basic income as daydreaming or at least a naively utopian scheme will be forced to recede and political actors can no more avoid taking a substantiated stand. However, so far the politicians (in Finland the national government and in the Netherlands the city of Utrecht) have formally engaged themselves only to experiments, not to implementation of the program.

Secondly, and more importantly, there is the probable irrevocability of the process once got under way. The problems connected to the prevailing system of earning one's living are too upsetting and the benefits of unconditional basic income too obvious to be disregarded. Furthermore: putting the experimentation into practice brings light to previously dismissed aspects of the society that arouse discussion by themselves.

In industrialised countries, the groundwork for the reform has been done, first, by the insecurity of living which results from the various changes in the nature of work and employment, and second, by the continual growth of an

unmanageable bureaucracy created by new conditional benefits. These two structural processes will most probably keep on guaranteeing the topicality of basic income. Or: they suggest that that the days of means test as the foundation of social security are coming to an end.

Making unconditional basic income come true in terms of practical politics is an object of reflection that has the additional advantage of unravelling the nature of present Western political systems. Discussion of the prospective reform has disclosed in many countries, first, the anachronistic tendencies in traditional political boundary lines, and second, the need to think about the social structure in novel terms. Furthermore, proceeding along these lines may help in getting into grips with the degraded state of democracy in all Western countries.

With his three lines of thinking Guy Standing suggests one approach (p. 56). The "broadly philosophical and libertarian" one has always been there and so has the pattern of thought in which basic income is "one component of a redistributive political and economic strategy". Nor is the third line a novelty but it may well prove "decisive in the next few years". What he denotes is thinking of basic income as "a means of enhancing a more [equitably] gendered and ecologically viable future".

Another perspective is provided by the growing sense of inevitability in Western politics. What takes place in political systems has come to be seen as a part of the natural order of things. The policies governments pursue reflect the imperatives of the globalised economy that appears as the self-evident context of all politics. This view leaves only a superficial room for democracy because influences emanate inherently "from above", but citizens acquiesce to it because they do not see an alternative. Here, basic income may emerge as one way out. The condition is that people will be convinced of its emancipatory nature, that it really leads to enhancing their living conditions and offers them more room for action on their own initiative.

What follows is that the political implications of putting basic income into effect open intriguing perspectives. On one hand, there is the unquestionable potential for an active popular opinion demanding that the reform must be carried out. On the other hand, this very logic, from "bottom up" instead of "top down", may well prove to be the gravest obstacle for the reform. There is a clear tendency among most political parties within the EU to share the position that economic growth and global competitiveness together with balancing public finances must take priority over all other aspects of politics. Breaking this consensus is going to be extremely difficult indeed.