

Beyond Work for Pay? Basic-Income Concepts in Global Debates on Automation, Poverty, and Unemployment (1920-2020)

Workshop at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), September 30-October 1, 2022. Co-organized by the GHI, the Blum Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Democracy at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and the Collegium Philosophicum at Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel. Conveners: Manuel Franzmann (University of Kiel), Axel Jansen (GHI), Alice O'Connor (UCSB). Participants: Halah Ahmad (Jain Family Institute, New York City), Jennifer Burns (Stanford University), Grace Davie (City University of New York), Ugo Gentilini (World Bank), César Guzmán-Concha (University of Geneva), Louis Hyman (Cornell University), Bru Laín (University of Barcelona), Otto Lehto (New York University), Mark Levinson (former Chief Economist, Service Employees International Union), Premilla Nadasen (Barnard College), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Natalie Rauscher (University of Heidelberg), Oleksandr Svitych (O.P. Jindal Global University, New Delhi), Melody Webb (founder of the Mother's Outreach Network/DC Guaranteed Income Coalition in Washington), Toru Yamamori (Doshisha University, Kyoto City, Japan), Daniel Zamora (Université Libre de Bruxelles).

Political utopias have long envisioned a life without the need for paid work. Over the past century, the idea of payments to citizens without work requirements has gained traction as a way of assuring human rights and well-being at times of high unemployment, structural change, and job-threatening automation. In the 1960s, the idea of an income floor became a centerpiece of social and economic justice movement politics, reaching a height of grassroots support in the

Black freedom and welfare rights movements in the United States. By then, basic income proposals had drawn support from ideologically divergent groups of policy intellectuals as a centerpiece of a reformed or re-envisioned welfare state, laying the groundwork for government-staged basic income experiments in the 1970s. Basic income gained sustained momentum after the global financial crisis of 2007/08, as debates about the effects of automation on the labor market have continued. At a workshop entitled “Beyond Work for Pay? Basic Income Concepts in Global Debates on Automation, Poverty, and Unemployment (1920-2020)” sociologists, economists, political scientists, and advocates joined with historians to discuss the recent global evolution and impact of basic income concepts. In their introductory remarks, Axel Jansen and Alice O’Connor noted that the workshop had been designed as a dialogue across disciplines.

The workshop was preceded by a public roundtable on “Guaranteed Income as Economic Justice,” which was convened by the GHI, the UCSB Blum Center, and the Kalmanovitz Initiative at Georgetown University. Moderated by Alice O’Connor, the event featured Jain Family Institute Vice President Halah Ahmad, SEIU economist Mark Levinson, historian Premilla Nadasen, and Executive Director of the Mother’s Outreach Network/DC Guaranteed Income Coalition Melody Webb, in conversation about the recent resurgence of interest in guaranteed income in the United States. In addition to such pandemic-era measures as the federally administered expanded Child and Dependent Tax Credit, especially notable has been the widening array of guaranteed income experiments in localities across the U.S. These in turn have given rise to a diversified, largely community-based network of activists, policy analysts, and, increasingly, elected officials dedicated to building support for the idea. While acknowledging that the pandemic had created an opening for such experimentation, panelists

emphasized that grass roots support for these initiatives stemmed from decades of working-class wage declines, diminishing social supports, rising inequality, and racial injustice. Under what terms and conditions, they asked, could the guaranteed income be understood as something more than a “basic” minimum, and instead as a vehicle for building collective power and transformative social change? In these and other ways, this lively and wide-ranging exchange anticipated themes that would be addressed in the ensuing workshop.

The next day, Oleksandr Svitych’s paper kicked off the panel on “UBI and Social Movements.” In his paper, Svitych proposed a normative framework for adopting a universal basic income on ethical grounds from the perspective of theories developed in political economy and in political philosophy. Drawing from works by Amartya Sen and Karl Polanyi, he emphasized the former’s focus on the capability of people instead of economic growth and on an unconditional income as realizing the latter’s demand for a decommodification of labor. Svitych suggested that the public in India stood to learn from such perspectives, for basic income experiments in India usually had been proposed by sociologist Sarath Davala, economist Guy Standing, and others with reference to Western concepts of development. In his contribution on the same panel, César Guzmán-Concha charted how the concept of an unconditional basic income in the UK had become mainstream in the early 2000s. Guzmán-Concha did so by examining the role of activists in building epistemic communities, networks, and coalitions in order to make the concept more salient. The panel’s discussant, Grace Davie, noted that both papers, in their own way, explored the historical context for today’s discussions about unconditional basic income concepts. She noted that Guzmán-Concha built on a definition of “mainstreaming” also used by feminist scholars.

The second panel focused on “UBI, Technology, and the Future of Work.” Natalie Rauscher charted recent discussions of an unconditional basic income in the United States. Based on her examination of both quantitative and qualitative data of major U.S. media outlets and congressional hearings between 2013 and 2017, she highlighted concerns that a new wave of automation could break with historical patterns and introduce a permanent decline of jobs. Except for references to an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, which was endorsed by both parties, debates among politicians have usually stopped short of major transformations along the lines of a basic income. Raucher’s paper was followed by Otto Lehto’s presentation, which focused on debates about an unconditional basic income to propose that intellectual shifts were taking place within that conversation. Instead of focusing on a threat of “permanent unemployment,” the debate more recently had focused on an unconditional basic income as an answer to a “permanent uncertainty.” This uncertainty, Lehto observed, derived from a new pace of societal transformation. While the future of technological unemployment remained hard to assess, rapid change was certain. Such change, Lehto suggested, deteriorated income security, which an unconditional basic income would cushion. In response to the papers by Rauscher and Lehto, Louis Hyman emphasized the longstanding utopian character of unconditional basic income concepts. Situating the two papers within this context, Hyman appreciated Rauscher’s analytical approach to investigating the growth and significance of U.S. debates. With respect to Lehto’s intervention, he suggested that such debates went hand in hand with moral questions about the future of capitalism and the state. Hyman noted that the labor market has been transforming for a long time, from the agricultural to the industrial and on to the digital age. To these larger developments, both papers responded by tracing how basic income debates have come to shift the conversation away from unemployment towards the broader issue of uncertainty.

The third and final panel of the day, on “UBI and the Shifting Parameters of Social Provision,” featured one presenter and two respondents. In his paper on “The Rise of Cash Transfers and the Demise of Development Economics,” Daniel Zamora charted the significant shift of perspectives among economists who have advised governments and shaped policies for global institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In Zamora’s narrative, the nexus between development and industrialization held sway after the Second World War. It was broken in the 1970s when state-centered policies came under pressure to respond to the ongoing problem of poverty, both in first-world countries such as the U.S. and in the Global South. The IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. government, however, increasingly translated a neoliberal consensus into demands that debtor countries cut public spending, privatize, and open up their markets to global competition. Zamora went on to highlight developments in India and South Africa, where economists such as Guy Standing in the 1990s unsuccessfully proposed that the state “give people money so they could sustain themselves as they saw fit.” Since then, civil societies in South Africa and elsewhere have taken up the idea of “cash transfers.” In response to Zamora’s paper, both Ugo Gentilini and Jennifer Burns praised his ability to develop a broad historical narrative on shifting solutions to poverty. Gentilini highlighted that debates about an unconditional basic income have been framed in different ways. While Zamora had focused on development economics, an unconditional basic income had also been discussed as a fiscal stimulus, as social assistance, or as a response to automation. Gentilini noted that each perspective translates into different policy narratives.

Toru Yamamori started off the final panel on “The Politics of Popular Support.” In his paper on “A Forgotten Feminist History of Basic Income and Responsible Production” he focused on demands for an unconditional basic income by

Claimants Unions in the UK, i.e., neighborhood community organizations in the sixties and seventies representing welfare recipients. Yamamori homed in on their successful but long overlooked efforts to have the British Women's Liberation movement endorse a "Guaranteed Minimum Income" (in fact, an unconditional basic income). Even if their demand has been forgotten, Yamamori argued, the British women's movement in the 1970s had in fact committed itself to demanding a guaranteed income. The other paper on the panel was presented by Bru Laín, a sociologist who helped design and run the Barcelona basic income pilot. Laín offered a critical assessment of unconditional basic income experiments. He compared the Barcelona pilot with experiments in countries such as Finland and Canada, noting their overall positive results, such as improved diets, subjective well-being, and happiness among participants. But Laín critically noted that the design of many experiments created a positive bias. The Barcelona experiments produced results some consider less beneficial, such as a decrease in labor market participation. Looking at the results of the various basic income experiments together, Laín suggested that they may not provide a coherent conclusion on the viability of an unconditional basic income, the implementation of which cannot be tested anyway. In response to Yamamori's presentation, Axel Jansen highlighted contemporary criticism of Claimants Unions from within the women's movement, considering an unconditional income "socialism" or "wages for housework." He wondered about the role of social class in these debates, a matter picked up by Alice O'Connor, who added that race and transatlantic exchanges within the women's movement may well have played a significant role. With respect to Laín's paper, Jansen noted that those who criticized the Barcelona experiments for their ineffective labor-market integration presupposed that such integration was important. He wondered about the framing of the experiment when it was first set up and noted that basic income experiments in the U.S. and in Canada in the

1970s, even if they improved people's lives, were considered a failure because of slow labor-market integration. Framing a basic income as an anti-poverty measure (instead of an expansion of citizenship rights) has consequences.

For the workshop's concluding discussion, the three conveners each offered ideas to summarize and extrapolate. Axel Jansen suggested several perspectives of concern to historians, such as comparing campaigns for an unconditional basic income to earlier struggles for an expansion of citizenship rights. With respect to the wave of basic income experiments in many countries around the globe, he wondered about the paradoxical effect of reinforcing social stigma. Manuel Franzmann emphasized that the papers presented at the workshop shared a common theme as they all touched on different aspects of trusting people to do something sensible when given the opportunity. Alice O'Connor emphasized that in discussing basic income concepts, historians and other scholars needed to shift from a focus on technology to a focus on precarity, which also entailed emphasizing the opportunities associated with a basic income. Opening the general discussion, O'Connor underlined the significance of definitions (what are we talking about when we talk about an "unconditional basic income") and of interventions. Under what conditions, she wondered, would a policy be socially transformational? For transformation to occur, after all, the details of implementation mattered, as well as the narratives that explained what a given intervention was about. Picking up on this observation, Halah Ahmad pointed to literature showing that, in general, government programs need to run well to sustain public trust in government. On the issue of legitimizing an intervention such as the one proposed by unconditional basic income proponents, Bru Laín emphasized the issue of funding. While the point was missing in conversations among some activists, he considered it crucial for its legitimacy. Looking ahead, Grace Davie suggested that

demands for an unconditional basic income be historicized. She suggested that a future workshop or panel could focus on the intersection of calls for a basic income and other contemporary demands. For an academic engagement with the topic, Manuel Franzmann observed that the notion of autonomy in basic income concepts had methodological consequences, for it challenged researchers to observe changes in individual autonomy. Otto Lehto tied the discussion back to the public roundtable at the beginning of the workshop by pointing out that the group had hardly mentioned the pandemic. He noted that policies implemented in response to crises rarely outlast them, even if basic-income debates perhaps had helped facilitate massive government interventions during the recent global crisis.

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