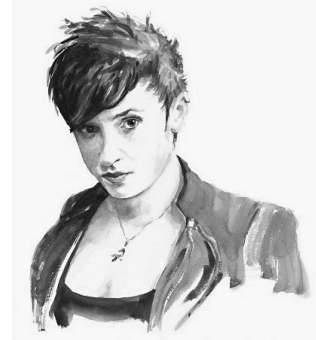


Basic income: a good idea?

adapted from an article by Laurie Penny



- 1 What would you do if somebody gave you a few hundred pounds each month to spend on whatever you wanted? Basic income – the proposal to give a flat, unconditional payment to every citizen – is an old idea. It has been around for centuries, and for centuries its proponents have largely been dismissed as utopian, or insane, or both. This year, however, that insanity is gradually becoming a political reality. Finland is considering giving its citizens an unconditional stipend of €800 a month. In the US, the tech start-up funder *Y Combinator* is earmarking money to test the theory. In Germany, *Mein Grundeinkommen* ('my basic income'), a crowdfunding initiative to give a basic wage to as many people as possible, has attracted over a quarter of a million contributors.
- 2 Michael Bohmeyer, a former entrepreneur who runs *Mein Grundeinkommen*, says: "If we don't 11 work and income, humans will have to compete more and more with computers. This is a competition they will lose sooner than we think. The result will be mass unemployment and no money left for consumption." With that in mind, Bohmeyer began an experiment in anti-capitalism that has been more successful than he could have imagined. So far, 39 people, chosen at random from a pool of applicants, have received €1,000 a month through the scheme – and almost none has spent the year twiddling their thumbs. One quit his job at a call centre to retrain as a pre-school teacher, while others found fulfilling jobs, having given up on the prospect years earlier; almost all have been sleeping better, worrying less and focusing more on family life.
- 3 Basic income is an idea that is both simple and practical: it has received positive coverage from almost everyone, from *Financial Times* columnists to feminist campaigners, from libertarian techno-millionaires to young, left-wing organisers. It is also radical. 12-1
- 4 The present organising principle of economics is that without the threat of starvation, homelessness and poverty, people will not be motivated to work. Human beings, left to their own devices, will inevitably sit on the sofa and eat crisps until the species collapses into a state of degeneration and episodic television. 12-2

- 5 The notion of an economic system based on trust and mutual aid rather than anxiety, shame and suffering still sounds like a fairy tale. But as more and more jobs are automated away, as mandatory wage labour collapses as a method of organising society, even the most conservative governments may find themselves with no other option. We can choose to let fear and suspicion run our lives as we all struggle harder each year to survive in a collapsing economic system on a smoking planet. Or we can choose to trust each other enough that everyone can share in the rewards of technology. It is blasphemous and unthinkable. However, it may also be the only practical choice we have.

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