

Republicanism and a universal minimum income

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Inequality is on the increase in the world. It is increasing at both global and regional levels; it is increasing in poor countries and in rich ones too. Since the 1980s, with the exception of France and Norway, in the majority of the other wealthy countries (according to the Gini coefficient) inequality of income has increased (*UNU-Wider*, 2001). In some cases, such as in the USA, this has happened to a grotesque degree: in the world's richest, most powerful country, 1% of the population possesses 50% of the national wealth. Funnily enough, this is a proportion similar to that found at a global level, where the richest 1% of the world population has an income equivalent to the combined income of the poorest 57% (Milanovic, *The Economic Journal*, January 2002). Contemporary capitalism has taken over the most remote corners of the globe, and it has no rival (and even if it did have it could eliminate it with financial precision or military force); contemporary capitalism has generated a level of wealth, luxury and hedonist refinement worthy of the most demanding Sibaritis; but it has also generated huge human oceans of poverty and desolation. However, even at the height of its power and glory, it is an unacceptable (and unsustainable) system from the perspective of social justice. Take any respectable justice theory: none could warrant the current widespread system of domination, exclusion and social degradation. Even John Rawls, never suspected of radicalism, has been warning us since 1971 that his (liberal) theory of justice as a force for equality – without doubt the principal and most widely accepted contemporary justice theory – is incompatible with capitalism.

Not far removed from inequality and exclusion – which have multiple, complex causes – is the reduction of social protection systems on the part of welfare states whose budgets currently get more and more emaciated each year. A political strategy to deal with inequality and exclusion would obviously have to touch on many issues. However, we would like to ask whether it would also have to reinforce the current systems of benefits on the part of the welfare state. Why are we asking this? Simply because these benefits – given their conditional and specific nature – are sick with many problems and furthermore leave many areas of domination and inequality uncovered. To begin with, they encourage fraud on the part of their recipients, they promote dependency on the part of society's most vulnerable sectors, and, what is more, they are very expensive to administer. As if that were not enough, they stigmatise their recipients – as any social worker knows – and promote the well-known *poverty trap*. Finally, there are sectors of society (unemployed people whose partner is working, dependent women, non-resident immigrants) who receive no benefit whatsoever. Is there a better alternative to the current conditional and specific systems of social protection? We believe that there is, and that this alternative would not only stem social inequality, not only eliminate at a stroke the most shocking aspects of social marginalisation, such as poverty, but would also increase the freedom of those social groups whose vulnerability is most apparent. Let us not forget that behind inequality – at least when it gets to dramatic levels – behind social exclusion, there is a deeper problem of lack of liberty. Lack of liberty – to decide, to do and even to refuse – is what is suffered by the worker with a precarious position who barely gets to the end of the month and who doesn't know if he will still have his job tomorrow; it is suffered by the woman forced to depend on her husband, while she is impaired and discriminated against in many aspects of life; it is suffered by the long-term unemployed person who must put up with the social stigma of dependence on public benefit (if he is lucky enough to receive it). Lack of liberty is suffered by the poor person who depends on the meagre charity of those like him. Lack of liberty is, in the end, what is suffered by the subordinate – in the respective hierarchies of companies, parties, universities – when he can't afford to be a dissenting voice because his vital needs and desires depend on the charity of his superior. Let us not forget the words of Juvenal: “there are many things a man does not dare to say if his cloak is worn and mended.” The present-day world suffers a deep-rooted problem of lack of liberty because it distributes its resources, opportunities and wealth in such a grossly imbalanced manner.

The alternative we are talking about is the so-called *universal minimum income*. That is, an income assigned by the State to every citizen regardless of any considerations: sex, race, cultural identity, level of wealth, whether employed or unemployed, etc. We are talking about a universal and unconditional income, received by rich and poor alike, labourer and businessman, man and woman, employed and unemployed; an income – and this is important – sufficiently generous to provide the basic necessities of

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life. The rich should receive it as well as the poor! Obviously, because otherwise it would not be universal; but not forgetting, however, that any scheme for sensible financing of said citizens' income would have to be felt more by the rich than the poor. So then, taking its economic feasibility as read – and we have no doubts over this – the positive effects of a citizens' income like this one are obvious. All of these benefits, however, are concentrated in one: an increase of liberty as against domination; an increase of liberty in republican terms. Why? Simply because an income of this type would increase the economic or material independence of all citizens, but especially the most vulnerable – because only being independent can one make free choices. Only in a situation of independence can a woman choose not to be maltreated by her husband, can a young person choose to reject a miserable salary or an insecure job, can an unemployed person choose to do unpaid voluntary work for the good of society (but, actually, many paid jobs not only produce no real benefit for society, but are even socially pernicious). Only coming from a position of independence can a poor person aspire to a dignified existence, can a worker choose from a broader range of more gratifying and better-paid jobs. Independence increases freedom. A sufficiently generous basic citizens' income *universalises* a reasonable level of independence.

The great republican tradition, the tradition of liberty, the tradition which – from Aristotle to Jefferson and Paine, from the best of Machiavelli to Cromwell and Harrington, from Bolívar to Juárez and Zapata – fought against any political expression of tyranny and despotism, not forgetting that to be found in the depths of social relations; this age-old tradition, we repeat, clearly put its faith in material independence as a criteria for full citizen involvement. For this reason it was a tradition so firmly rooted in the idea of property. Property of the land meant the possibility of liberty. A democracy of small (and large) independent producers was Jefferson's simple dream, a dream – it goes without saying – that the modern industrial world erased when it created a huge army of people shut out from ownership of capital (and land): the wage-earner, the disinherited labourer. It is no coincidence that 19th Century liberalism would end up separating the ideal of universal citizenship from the condition of independence. Modern liberalism, in fact, universalised civil and political rights, regardless of the property and wealth of the individual, but in doing this not only created an extremely vulnerable (and dependent, on state protection) sector of society, but also gave legal and constitutional coverage to social inequality between supposedly free citizens. The proposal for a minimum income, on the other hand, goes back to the idea of independence for all and ties in with the republican tradition of liberty. The basic income should therefore be seen as a right of *social existence*, as a universal minimum which allows all citizens – but especially those more vulnerable and less fortunate – to be (more) free.

The world in which we happen to live shows how (unfortunately) we are able to do the most incredible things: how a tiny minority of the population of many countries can hoard half the national wealth, how hundreds of millions of people can be condemned to die of starvation (need we remind yet again that this is the unhappy fate of 30,000 children each day?); how huge fortunes can be amassed; how it can be permitted that decisions taken by so few people in administrative councils, solely for their own, exclusive benefit, should affect thousands of millions of people... The basic income would not completely change this whole state of affairs on its own. Even introducing it we would continue to be far from an ideal world. Nevertheless, without having to renounce this ideal world of our imaginations, the minimum income would constitute an entirely reasonable path between the resigned inertia of the current situation and the inoffensive maximalism that will consider nothing less than a "perfectly ordered society".