

the broader whole of the polis, and the author remarks that it is St. Paul's and the Historical School of economics. When he claims, "Economics, like philosophy, is about the good life" (85), Reisman depicts Aristotle's thinking with notable accuracy.

### References

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## Welfare for Markets: A Global History of Basic Income

**Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas**

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There is a certain mythical history of the Universal Basic Income (UBI), especially common among its most ardent supporters. According to this history, the UBI is a timeless idea—one that is discovered, forgotten, and then rediscovered by subsequent generations. The timelessness of the idea is suggestive of a certain kind of power. People keep coming back to the UBI, presumably, because there is something importantly *true* about it, even if that truth has yet to be fully realized in a large-scale, permanent public policy. The UBI is an idea whose time is perpetually coming.

In their new history of the UBI, Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas admirably eschew this mythology in favor of a history that is more complicated, more contextualized, and more accurate. The main problem with the mythical history, they point out, is that it assumes a continuity that does not actually exist. It is true that many different individuals throughout history—from Thomas More in the sixteenth century, to Milton Friedman in the twentieth—have suggested that the government should give people cash. But it is a gross overreach to describe all of those proposals as the same idea. A transfer that is conditional upon recipients working or trying to find work, or that is limited to families with children, is not the same thing as a *universal* basic income. Different thinkers in different historical contexts were attracted to cash transfers in order to address different sets of particular social and economic problems. And while ignoring those differences might bolster the historical pedigree of the UBI, it obscures our understanding both of the idea itself, and of people's reasons for endorsing, or rejecting it.

One of the central themes of the book is that for much of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States, the UBI was seen as an attractive way of reconciling government provision of social welfare with the broader logic of a market economy.

The idea—appealing to both neoliberals such as Milton Friedman and to Keynesians such as James Tobin and James Meade—was that cash transfers were superior to the old system of public services because they allowed beneficiaries to decide for themselves how to meet their needs through the marketplace. The problems of society, on this view, were not due to capitalism; they were due to the fact that some people simply did not have enough money to take advantage of the benefits that capitalism had to offer.

Even among the radical left, the UBI gathered support as new strands of anti-statism and post-workerism began to emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. Figures such as André Gorz in Europe began to challenge the traditional Marxist emphasis on establishing a “worker’s paradise,” and instead envisioned a future in which humanity would be free from the obligation to work altogether. At the same time, leftists such as Pierre Clastres argued that standard Marxists accounts ignored the role played by the state in facilitating the exploitation of labor. The solution was to be found in a UBI that rejected both statism *and* workerism. Or, the Situationist International more colorfully put the point: “Humanity will not be free until the last bureaucrat has been hung with the intestines of the last capitalist.”

*Welfare for Markets* is a rich and engaging history of the UBI, full of ideas and connections that will surprise and edify even readers who are familiar with the previous literature on the topic. Both Jäger and Zamora Vargas are themselves leftists who are critical of the UBI, but their approach is remarkably evenhanded, and, if anything, their skeptical perspective actually contributes to their ability to provide a relatively objective intellectual history of the idea.

The one exception to this generalization has to do with the author’s perspective on the success of the UBI movement. It is a common feature of politics that those *outside* radical movements tend to regard those movements as more successful than those within. American conservatives often complain about the ways in which America has become a socialist country, while socialists sometimes seem to believe that the country is in the grip of a band of extreme libertarians. Similarly, Jäger and Zamora Vargas write that, with each defeat of the UBI, “[b]asic income supporters might have lost a battle, but they were winning the war.”

Were they, though? It is a striking fact that, despite a great deal of interest from intellectuals over the course of the twentieth century, no state or country has yet implemented a genuine UBI on a permanent, large-scale basis. The United States came close in the 1960s with Nixon’s Family Assistance Plan (FAP), but even then the program was limited to families with children. And it still could not pass through Congress.

In considering the prospects of the UBI, it is important to bear in mind—perhaps more consistently than Jäger and Zamora Vargas do, that the UBI is not a single, well-defined policy. It is a *family* of policies, and the differences between different

versions of the UBI are often so big as to make forming an effective coalition altogether impossible. Conservatives such as Charles Murray support a UBI because it would promote individual responsibility. Progressives such as Philippe van Parijs support a UBI because it would advance the real freedom of the poor. But when van Parijs and Murray use the phrase “UBI,” they *simply are not talking about the same thing*. Murray wants a relatively small grant that would replace almost all existing social welfare programs, while van Parijs wants a maximally large grant that would leave many existing programs untouched. Those aren’t the same idea by a longshot, and the fact that we use the same words to describe them only obscures and confuses the matter.

Another major obstacle to the UBI is the fact that, to put it bluntly, there simply is not much political interest in unconditional, universal transfer programs. As Brian Steensland argued in his book *America’s Failed Welfare Revolution*, a big part of the reason why Nixon’s FAP failed was that it ran afoul of the distinction—much despised by intellectuals but embraced by just about everyone else—between the deserving and the undeserving poor. People are generally willing to help those who are genuinely unable to help themselves—children, the disabled, the elderly. But they are much less willing to help those who *could* work, but choose not to. That is why Americans rejected the FAP, but embraced the Earned Income Tax Credit and Supplementary Security Income. And that is why, as the authors show, countries in Europe and Africa have rejected the UBI in favor of more conditional, restricted programs as well.

My own hunch is that the prospects for a genuine UBI are dim, but that we are likely to see a continued expansion of a variety of conditional or restricted cash transfers such as the Child Tax Credit. But whether you are a critic or an enthusiast for the idea, or whether you are bullish or bearish on its future, any view of the merits of or prospects for a UBI will be better-informed by the deep and nuanced intellectual history provided by this book.

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