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## **Universal Basic Income & Common Good: Lessons From the Covid19 Pandemia**

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### **Abstract**

The global COVID19 pandemic has caused at least three interrelated crises. The first, a socio-health crisis with millions of infected people and deaths around the world. Only in Spain, official statistics refer to over 100,000 deaths due to the pandemic. Incidence that varies significantly according to the social stratum of people, affecting more seriously the most vulnerable social sectors, the subaltern social classes and the immigrant population. A second crisis, the economic one, which has put on the table the falsehoods and mirages of the neoliberal capitalist discourse, by crudely showing, on the one hand, the limitations of the privatization of central pillars of the social welfare state; and on the other hand, the limitations of the strategy of precariousness of the labor market and the degradation of essential jobs for society such as those related to the care of people, education, health, but also those related to the supply and distribution of products and goods. And a third crisis, related to the periods of paralysis of the productive process and therefore of the circulatory process of capital, which pose a potential systemic risk for the survival of capitalism itself. In any case, the different facets and dimensions of the crisis generated by COVID19 have forced us to rethink how we should organize the distribution of wealth and employment, the social utility of jobs, and the organization and goals of education.

It is in the crises of capitalism where it is possible to see the real operation of the logics that sustain it, and it is in the capitalist crises where it is possible to glimpse potentially antagonistic proposals -such as the Universal Basic Income-. Thus, it is in the crises of the old dominant social order, where it is possible to glimpse the cracks and spaces for the generation of antagonistic and emancipatory alternatives to capitalism.

**Keywords:** Basic income, education, neoliberalism, social change.

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## **Introduction**

The global Covid-19 pandemic has caused at least three serious, inter-related crises. The first is the public health crisis with millions of people infected and more than five million deaths worldwide. In Spain alone, by August 2021, official statistics had reported almost 82,000 deaths due to the pandemic. Incidence varies significantly according to social stratum, with the most vulnerable sectors of society, the subordinate social classes and the immigrant population being those most severely affected. The second is the economic crisis, which has laid bare the falsehoods and chimeras of neoliberal discourse as regards its trickle-down and human capital theories, by starkly revealing the limitations of privatisation of the central pillars of the welfare state, such as health care, social care and education, as well as the limitations of the strategy of labour market flexibilisation and the failure to properly fund jobs that are essential for society, such as those related to care, education, health and the supply chain. The third crisis is related to periods of productive standstill and therefore the non-circulation of capital, which poses a potential systemic risk to the very survival of capitalism as a system of global social organisation (Harvey, 2013 and 2020). The various facets and dimensions of the crises generated by Covid-19 have obliged us to rethink the distribution of wealth and employment, the social utility of jobs, and the organisation of space and urban mobility, among other questions.

These crises have uncovered the real functioning of hegemonic social discourses, which in our current societies issue from the liberal discursive tradition, but they have also thrown into relief the potentially antithetical proposals —such as basic income— fostered by alternative and opposing discourses. Thus, the crises of the old dominant social order provide a glimpse, through the cracks and spaces that have opened up, of emancipatory alternatives and opportunities for the *articulation* of alternative discursive spaces (Laclau and Mouffe, 1987) and the construction of “viable unprecedented measures” (Freire 1992).

The social responses inherited from social liberal and neoliberal discourses, such as minimum income schemes, including Spain’s recent minimum vital income (Spanish initials: IMV), present a series of inherent limitations and problems (Rodríguez Fernández, 2016 and 2018; García García and Rendueles Menéndez, 2017; Ávila Cantos and Ayala Rubio, 2018). In opposition to these *social safety net* approaches, I shall discuss the potential of the basic income to serve as a tool for *structural* change that contributes to social transformation and the construction of an alternative discursive space based on the notion of the *common good* (Ostrom, 2000).

### **Post-pandemic crossroads: a social safety net or social change?**

In the face of crises as profound and far-reaching as the current global Covid-19 pandemic, political leaders usually deliver *grandiloquent* speeches and addresses calling for profound change and comprehensive social transformation. Not so long ago, for example, during the global economic crisis of 2007, French President Nicolas Sarkozy called for a

profound reformulation and reshaping of capitalism<sup>1</sup>. At that time, many cheered, thinking that the European Union was about to radically transform its economic policies and embrace the path of social democracy, of a social democracy that really deserved to bear the name: a progressive tax structure, effective redistribution of wealth, solid public services in the fields of social care, health care and education and a leading role for the public authorities in guaranteeing social cohesion and the functioning of an economy at the service of the people.

However, as time has passed and new headlines have flooded social networks and the media, this impetus for renovation and transformation has lost steam, rapidly giving way to more moderate, more conservative or even criminalising and retrograde positions: “Teenagers are ignoring the pandemic safety measures: they’re only interested in drinking on the street”, “She says she was raped, but why did she go with them, or why was she alone?”, or “if they haven’t got a job, it must be because they don’t want one, because there’s work to be had, but of course it’s more comfortable to live off State handouts”, etc.

Thus, we can roughly distinguish two main responses to catastrophic events and situations, such as that of Covid-19 and others: the provision of a *social safety net* or *social transformation and change*.

The social safety net approach emphasises care for the social groups most affected by a particular crisis, organising and providing aid (e.g. economic, social, cultural and educational) that specifically targets these groups and collectives. Such aid does not alter the structures that ultimately lie behind these problems and crises but is simply intended to alleviate their collateral effects, running the risk of generating dependency in the beneficiaries. Transformative social change, on the other hand, emphasises tackling the underlying structures —the generative mechanisms and structural conditions— of crises. Its goal therefore is to change or eliminate the structural causes that give rise to crises, in order to prevent a return to the previous situation that generated the conditions for their emergence.

The Covid-19 crisis has provided examples of these two main approaches. Thus, some discourses and proposals have emphasised the role of neoliberal policies and their effects in several dimensions (e.g. ecological, biological, economic, architectural and urban planning) as regards the emergence and management of the pandemic (Harvey, 2020). Others have been limited to advocating the need to strengthen State welfare sectors through rapid and forceful State interventions such as injecting public money and boosting the economy. The Spanish mass media has very eloquently called this approach *the economic bazooka* (Maestre, 2020), likening a powerful injection of public money to a shot of adrenaline, intended to revive the economic and productive fabric following the *cardiac arrest* caused by health measures (e.g. lockdown, closure of non-essential work sectors and restrictions) aimed at preventing contagion and the spread of the virus throughout the entire population. Each of these two forms implies a different understanding of the role of the State and divergent worldviews. Thus, each of them is based on a distinct vision of how society should be organised and how the subject is conceptualised, affecting questions such as the notion of citizens’ political participation,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20081018/sarkozy-bush-estudian-reforma-del-capitalismo-mundial/179630.shtml>

the role of education and the conception/acceptance of inequality and social exclusion. Although there are clearly some shared spaces and common areas between these two extremes, their proposals point to antithetical directions and assessments of the social order.

One might argue that a third position would first be to intervene rapidly and effectively to mitigate the disasters caused by the crisis, and then to calmly and methodically address the related issues through structural change.

### **The dilemma between transformative change and the social safety net**

Assuming one position or the other has important consequences: ultimately, they point in opposite directions, albeit they may have temporarily shared spaces and both entail State intervention (economic, budgetary, resources). As is often said, resources are finite and taking one approach implies cutting back on resources for the other.

Thus, palliative measures, aid and benefits reduce the State's capacity to undertake far-reaching transformative measures in the future, either because they reduce the State's economic muscle or because they underpin structures, logics and dynamics that should be transformed or eliminated. For example, local council housing benefit for people at risk or in poverty is a measure that covers a basic social need —enshrined, by the way, in the Spanish Constitution— but which nevertheless contributes to keeping rental prices up and thus supports the private rental business. Ultimately, it constitutes a form of public funding that limits the public authorities' ability to implement other approaches. Along the same lines, *emergency social assistance* and *anti-poverty benefits* are measures aimed at alleviating or mitigating the problem of poverty; however, they do nothing to tackle the structures responsible for the growing social inequality in our societies. Spain's furlough programme (*Expedientes Temporales de Regulación de Empleo*, ERTE) falls within this social safety net approach to the Covid-19 crisis. Admittedly, the furlough scheme has paid the wages of a large segment of the Spanish population, safeguarding thousands of jobs and businesses, but it is not a measure aimed at transforming labour relations, reducing job insecurity, fomenting innovation or creating highly skilled jobs, promoting the green economy or eliminating the gender pay gap. Rather, it is intended to alleviate the symptoms and disasters generated by Covid-19. Ultimately, however, it helps reinforce the structures largely responsible for the current crisis generated by the pandemic, because it implicitly seeks a return to the situation prior to the pandemic, i.e. a *return to normality*.

Even so, given the magnitude of the disasters caused by the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, it is evidently necessary to intervene in order to meet the needs that have arisen and to assist the most disadvantaged groups, which have been the most severely affected. To fail to do so would be Manichean. However, such an intervention must be sufficient but limited, so as not to jeopardise future attempts to reform the structures responsible for the crisis. Hence, welfare benefits should give way in the medium term to more ambitious proposals that do not distract from the truly important measures or hinder their implementation. Even when viewing the Covid-19 crisis from a structural perspective, we must not forget

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<sup>1</sup>The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that around 500 million full-time jobs have been lost worldwide as a result of the pandemic (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

the need for social protection, but we must avoid falling into the trap of a mere *social safety net*.

**Premises for transformative change: the common good as the guiding principle for social change**

Given the above, an approach aimed at structural change must satisfy a series of requirements that differentiate it from proposals limited to assistance and that ultimately reflect a social safety net approach. These include: a) an analysis of the previous structures responsible for the emergence or exacerbation of the crisis, i.e. starting from the problems that existed before, b) avoidance of short-term, superficial, cosmetic measures and c) an analysis that reveals the functioning of the previous old social order, not with the intention of returning to it, but rather in order to move towards a different horizon which shifts us away from scenarios that neoliberal policies have steadily degraded in recent decades and which have contributed heavily both to the emergence of the crisis and to our societies' limited response capacity. I am referring in particular to the restoration in the social order of the primacy of the notion of the *common good* (Ostrom, 2000).

This implies re-establishing prioritisation of the community in the face of the problems that State structures have had and continue to have in providing protection. The multiple bureaucratic labyrinths of the public authorities are a good example of such problems (Oliver Olmo, 2013; Ávila Cantos and García García, 2015), but one could also add the procedures typical of delegated political and citizen participation, which have become increasingly withered and impoverished until becoming a caricature of true democratic participation: devoting one day every four years for citizens to deposit a piece of paper in a glass box has now come to be called *the festival of democracy*. Restoration of the common good also entails reclaiming a different notion of the political subject from that advanced by liberal discourses, which emphasise individuality.

The limitations of State management of collectively owned assets and services have only been exacerbated by neoliberal solutions, leading to an absolute failure to meet the needs of the general populace as a result of the neoliberal privatisation policies that have been implemented worldwide since the 1980s. No State-owned area that has been privatised has witnessed an improved service of higher quality and utility for the general populace, be it municipal water management (Babiano, 2012), the railway network<sup>2</sup> (Robinson, 2013), health care (Padilla, 2013 and 2019) or telecommunications. What privatisation has done has been to generate higher returns and economic productivity, but this has rarely reached the bottom of society, as the trickle-down economic theory would suggest, instead being appropriated and concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, as numerous international studies attest (Piketty, 2014). As a result of this situation, the space for social management and collaboration—which in the past was thought to be covered by the State, through the Welfare State, or by the market through privatisation strategies—has been left stranded. This space indicates a growing concern for the common good, that is, for a new subject that differs from the notion of subject that pulsates beneath neoliberal capitalism.

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<sup>2</sup>For more information on privatisation of the rail network in England, see the studies by the *Action for rail* group. *People before profit* en <http://actionforrail.org/the-four-big-myths-of-uk-rail-privatisation/>

An orientation towards the common good as a premise for social change implies highlighting areas that neoliberal policies have hijacked from citizens' control. It is these spheres that can serve as seeds for social change, as *cracks* (Holloway, 1999) that allow us to see the true functioning of capitalism in its current neoliberal guise and which enable us to imagine other spaces in which to build a new social order and rethink our lives. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us the need to strengthen society in at least the following areas: a) the management of *ecology and our relationship with nature*, b) the management of *community and social cohesion* and c) the management of *citizen participation*. All of these are dimensions where neoliberal policies, through various operations and strategies of commodification and co-option, have largely eroded citizens' democratic control.

The basic income emerges here as a tool for social transformation with the capacity to reorient management towards the common good, as a platform from which to launch cooperative and collaborative actions that facilitate the expression of altruistic, collective behaviours and attitudes, based not on competition but on sharing. As a biological species, our genetic makeup includes the possibility of supportive, collaborative and altruistic behaviour, but also of selfish, competitive and violent behaviour (Bermúdez de Castro, 2021). Human history, past and recent, is replete with examples of both. We cannot change our genetic makeup, but we *can* change the basis for the cultural expression of our genes, by putting in place social structures that serve as facilitating platforms for supportive and collaborative behaviour. We are not only biological, but also cultural, social, psychological and historical beings. If we are given the possibility to act altruistically in solidarity with others, through the creation of supportive and collaborative social networks, we will be more likely to act supportively and collaboratively than to act selfishly and individualistically. If one of the basic principles of the social order is to guarantee the common good, then it is more likely that our behaviour will be supportive and altruistic. If, on the other hand, society is based on the values of competitive individualism and the acquisition of material goods as a sign of social success and personal fulfilment, then it is more likely that we will conform and *adapt* our behaviour to such principles. Given its characteristics, the basic income constitutes a framework that facilitates social support based on collaboration and solidarity.

Below, I shall discuss the potential of a basic income to achieve the common good, focusing especially on its capacity to promote this in the social, community dimension.

### **Basic income and the common good: structural problems prior to Covid-19.**

Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of structural problems were already evident in our societies. These are closely interrelated problems that articulate and reinforce one another through transversal discourses, such as the *entrepreneurial* discourse (Moruno, 2015), and transversal political and economic operations and strategies, such as labour reforms, negotiations and concessions with the major unions.

The first of these is growing inequality and social polarisation. Despite the constant increase in wealth, its distribution across society has become ever more uneven (Chacel, 2018), with the consequence that wealth is concentrated in increasingly fewer hands. Persistent, chronic levels of precariousness, poverty and unemployment are structural characteristics of our societies. They had already become more deeply rooted since the beginning of the hegemony of neoliberal policies, but have increased

exponentially with the outbreak of the pandemic (Oxfam International, 2021). Numerous international and national reports have corroborated the existence of these problems as structural elements in our societies (United Nations, 2020).

The second problem is the increasing erosion of wage labour as a mechanism for social integration and belonging. Neoliberal policies have steadily eroded employment conditions in all sectors of the labour market and across all social strata. This has served as a mechanism for increasing productivity and economic profits, but also as a measure to discipline the working class, the *reserve army* in Marx's words, "if you don't accept our employment conditions, join the queue of the unemployed". Thus, the idea of a permanent job as part of a stable, continuous employment history has come to be viewed as negative for the economy, counterproductive for entrepreneurship and innovation and ultimately an anachronism of a bygone era which must be eliminated. The social consequences of job insecurity are manifold, ranging from the impossibility of launching one's own autonomous life projects, such as starting a family or becoming independent, and a more widespread incidence of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, stress, to subjugation and submission to those who set the market rules: "If in order to get a job, however insecure it may be, I have to do whatever is required and go over whoever's head, then I will have no choice but to do so". Necessary and essential care and attention throughout the life cycle and its inevitable contingencies (e.g. illness, old age) come to be seen as something external to us, ripe for commodification, as an obstacle and hindrance to the achievement of our individual goals or as situations that are impossible to tackle and attend to adequately under the cloak of job insecurity and neoliberal *habitus* (Díez Gutiérrez, 2018). The large number of people who, having completed their education funded largely by the public purse, emigrate in search of decent employment conditions commensurate with their qualifications is another example of the consequences of neoliberal policies for the social fabric.

The third problem is the gradual loss of meaning and prestige of education and academic knowledge. As a consequence of the growing influence of neoliberal policies in education, this latter has steadily lost its meaning and social utility, to become instead a means to compete and fight for a job. Thus, education has become a kind of *invisible tax* that everyone must pay in order to gain access to an uncertain labour system characterised by a lack of jobs and insecure employment conditions. We should not forget that education is also intended to train critical citizens with the capacity to exercise responsible citizenship, not solely to transmit the labour skills required by the productive system. Neoliberal policies advocating the notion of employability have given rise to educational consumerism. Thus, it is increasingly necessary to hold ever more training certifications and accreditations in order to compete for jobs which are becoming ever more insecure and offer worse pay. Recent reports in the media of people, some of them well-known political representatives, who have acquired university degrees through fraudulent procedures and without the minimum required level of achievement, evidence one aspect of this loss of meaning and prestige of knowledge and education. What is important is the certification and the diploma that enables an individual to compete for a job; what you might learn and what that might give you is viewed as entirely secondary.

It is necessary to draw attention to the limitations and limited capacity of traditional anti-poverty benefits—inherited from social liberal thinking—to eliminate poverty, or even to provide universal protection for those who need it. These benefits are characterised (Rodríguez Fernández, 2016 and 2020) by poor funding, bureaucratic

complexity, allowances below the poverty threshold and an increasingly charitable and punitive bias in their management.

### **How did we get here: the decline of social democracy and the hegemony of neoliberalism**

From the structural perspective adopted here, it seems necessary to explain how the current situation of precariousness and social inequality has come about. In doing so, I will focus primarily on the role that neoliberal thought attributes to education, through the theory of human capital. This theory emerged in the 1950s at the University of Chicago—one of its main promoters being the Nobel prize-winning economist Gary Becker—and from the outset appears to have been linked to neoliberal economic thought with a decidedly international orientation.

Despite the increasing loss of legitimacy of neoliberal thought and the realisation of its limitations as regards responding to the problems of our societies, paradoxically, the concept of *human capital* remains hegemonic and fully present in the main debates and political agendas. It is not only advocates of neoliberal thought who promote human capital theories: even progressive groups have adopted it and included it in their proposals for social intervention. Just as former US President John Nixon once confessed—perhaps in a moment of mental abstraction—that “today we are all Keynesians”, so today, *all* political representatives and leaders of socio-educational institutions defend the theses of human capital theory.

Neoliberal discourse arose in opposition to social democratic discourse and its Keynesian approaches that advocated public intervention by the State in the economy and society. Developed in Europe from the end of the Second World War onwards, these approaches became dominant between 1940 and 1970 and were responsible for the period of greatest well-being in European society as a result of increased public sector involvement in strategic sectors central to cohesion and the achievement of social welfare. Some have referred to this period as the *30 glorious years*.

During the hegemony of Keynesianism, neoliberal thought was marginal and secondary, but it began to gain traction following capitalism’s growth crisis in the 1970s, when more was being produced than could be consumed. Capitalism’s response to this crisis was to seek to colonise new sectors which, due to the rise of social democratic policies, were in the hands of the State or were largely located in the public sector: health, education, transport, housing, the media, administration, etc.

This process of privatisation of what used to be State-owned, in order to render it beneficial for private enterprise, has occurred on different scales and through different procedures. Those sectors in the hands of the State that could provide immediate profits were privatised without further ado, at least until they were no longer profitable. Others, before passing into private hands, had first to be put to rights with public money. In some cases, privatisation was funded by subsidies from the public purse so that it did not depend solely on the clients’ purchasing power, while in others, the State retained ownership but outsourced services through contracts that were in turn subcontracted. Economically unprofitable sectors were sometimes simply eliminated. In short, the goal was not so much to eliminate the public sector, as some social movements have implied in their protest activities, as to *reorganise it* according to the flows of capital in neoliberal

capitalism. This entailed re-organising its internal functioning so that it was sufficiently close to socialise losses when necessary but also sufficiently remote to privatise profits when they occurred, eliminating those sectors superfluous to economic profitability, modifying the structure and characteristics of the workforce and so on.

Capitalism's constant need to colonise new spaces in order to increase profitability has even affected sectors such as social care, through privatisation of residential institutions for the elderly, care centres for minors and training courses for the poor (Rodríguez Fernández, 2016): everything that might be economically profitable—or that the State subsidises—can and must be managed privately. If such management were to remain public, there would be no possibility of capitalising on economic potential or of achieving economic benefits which, according to trickle-down theory, would subsequently reach society as a whole.

### **Mechanisms of neoliberal subjectivation: trickle-down theory and human capital theory**

Neoliberalism has achieved this process of psychological subjectivation and State colonisation by disseminating, as if it were a truth beyond dispute, the *trickle-down theory*. This theory could be described as follows: increased capital accumulation through higher rates of economic profit generates a greater demand for labour because firms hire more workers; this contributes to higher wages and better employment conditions, and ultimately leads to an increase in the population's well-being, as more people will be working, for a higher income, and will consume more. The wealth of millionaires and multinationals is thus considered to have a positive impact on the population as a whole through the *trickle-down* effect, as it gradually seeps through society to eventually reach and benefit everyone. It is precisely at this point of expanding demand for skilled labour that *human capital theory* plays its role in the neoliberal system. As stated earlier, according to this theory, education cannot be an end in itself but must instead be at the service of the expansion of capital, and therefore subject to its interests, which are ultimately the obtaining of profits. These will eventually benefit society as a whole through an increase in the demand for qualified workers and a corresponding increase in wages.

These approaches have gradually permeated public opinion, and have been internalised by much of the population. They are not seen as the product of neoliberal ideology, but instead as absolute truths central to the construction of the neoliberal subject (Díez Gutiérrez, 2018). Therefore, some authors believe we have reached the *end of history* (Fukuyama, 1992): there are no valid ideological alternatives to neoliberal thought, which has found the key to continued social progress.

However, fifty years after the emergence of neoliberal policies as a class-based political project (Harvey, 2002), social inequalities have increased and neoliberal discourse does not stand up to the slightest scrutiny given the current situation around the world. Even Pope Francis himself has denounced the consequences of neoliberalism in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>Available at the following link:

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

Thus, contrary to *trickle-down* and *human capital theory*, capital has found alternative ways of making profits other than by increasing the number of jobs and improving employment conditions. One blatant example of these alternatives is the financial economy, which nowadays moves a much larger volume of capital than traditional economic sectors in the real economy, such as industry. Another means in neoliberal thought to generate profits is through the speculative economy, which with the veiled threat of relocation to continue socialising losses and privatising profits has burgeoned and increased its influence. The various mechanisms of privatisation of public services have also become a semi-speculative business, in which short-term profits go hand in hand with a worsening of the quality of service, with negative consequences for the population as a whole. In the face of these neoliberal profit-creation mechanisms, the drive to innovate and create good jobs has fallen by the wayside, as jobs that offer a decent living wage and enable workers to use their knowledge and personal creativity are not necessary for economic growth. In other words, the avenues opened up by neoliberal capital do not generate a demand for skilled labour, with higher wages and better employment conditions. Instead, what they actually foster is the existence of a willing, docile *reserve army*: willing to accept insecurity given the lack of job opportunities and docile in the face of increasing employment insecurity and attrition. As a result, we have lost sight of the fundamental idea of work as a potential route to personal development and integration, or as a means to make a positive contribution to the well-being of society, thus repaying society's previous investment in the worker's academic and professional training.

For these reasons, there is a twofold situation to reverse in terms of achieving the common good from a structural perspective. First, the true meaning of education at each of its levels must be restored, which has been lost through subjugation to the needs of capital and uncritical acceptance of neoliberal policies implementing trickle-down and human capital theories. Second, it is necessary to counteract the increasing instability of employment that affects ever larger segments of the population, not only young people.

### **Proposals for social change towards the common good: the basic income**

The basic income is a measure that goes much further than welfare benefits to fight poverty, such as the guaranteed minimum income, minimum vital income, social emergency aid or unemployment benefits. It is not limited to addressing poverty in terms of assistance, but is itself an instrument for social transformation. It is not a tool in the fight against poverty—as is the minimum vital income<sup>4</sup>—but rather in the fight against social injustice, thus falling within the perspective of structural change to tackle the crisis.

In general terms, the basic income can be defined as a regular economic income that the State pays to each citizen as a social right, at the same level as other social benefits which are fundamental for social cohesion and welfare, such as education and health. In other words, the State assumes responsibility for ensuring that every person has the right to a dignified existence by virtue of being a person, a citizen. The idea of a basic income has historical antecedents dating back to the 16th century, with contributions by Thomas More and Juan Luis Vives (Iglesias Fernández, 2004), and emerged in the academic world in the 1980s, most notably in the article by Philippe van Parijs and Robert Van der Veen,

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<sup>4</sup>For an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the minimum vital income, see Gimeno, J. (2020). El IMV: Luces, sombras y futuro. *LABOS Revista de Derecho del Trabajo y Protección Social*, 1 (3), 184-195

*A capitalist road to communism*, published in 1986 in the journal *Theory and Science*. In the same year, the Basic Income Earth Network<sup>5</sup> (BIEN) was founded, bringing together academics, activists and people interested in the basic income. The network organises periodic meetings and conferences to discuss the latest contributions and research related to this proposal. In Spain, debate on a basic income began in the 1990s, mainly in the work of the economists Daniel Raventós (1999) and José Iglesias Fernández (1998, 2002 and 2004). Over the following decades, it has gained space in political and public debate and especially in the social protest movement, where movements such as 15-M and *Occupy Wall Street* have adopted this measure as one of their demands.

As a result of this interest, several studies have explored the technical and economic feasibility of a basic income, and there have been pilot projects, including an initiative launched by the Finnish government in 2017-18 to study the effects of implementing a basic income system in the country (Standing, 2018). In Spain, studies on the economic and political feasibility of a basic income conducted by the Baladre Network and the Colectivo Alambique are particularly pertinent, with the latter presenting a very detailed, comprehensive technical and political feasibility study carried out in the Principality of Asturias (Colectivo Alambique, 2019).

The generic conception of a basic income encompasses the following structural elements, which radically differentiate it from social safety net approaches to fight poverty: It is *individual* because it is paid to a person rather than to a household, as happens with economic benefits aimed at combating poverty. It is therefore an individual right. It is *universal* and *unconditional*, covering all citizens, not only groups at risk — thus avoiding social stigmatisation or the creation of dependency in beneficiaries— and it is a social right independent of the individual's social, employment, economic or any other situation. It is not linked to an obligation to actively participate in the activities and training courses established in individualised itineraries towards social integration<sup>6</sup>. Lastly, it is *sufficient* to cover basic social and living needs and payments are above the poverty threshold<sup>7</sup>. Minimum income programmes, such as the minimum vital income, do not provide an amount higher than the poverty threshold and therefore do not meet basic social needs such as housing, because in many cases the cost of renting accommodation is far higher than the benefit paid. As Negri (1998) has observed, anti-poverty programmes are a mere stopgap aimed at forestalling social revolt; thus, in a sense, they represent a small tax that capitalism in its current neoliberal form pays in order to continue to legitimise itself as the dominant social order.

### **Basic income as a tool for structural change**

The first and most obvious potential of a basic income to effect radical social change is that its introduction would make a powerful contribution to the eradication of income poverty. A basic income implies a redistribution of wealth with a much wider scope than that achieved by minimum income programmes, which only target marginalised social

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<sup>5</sup><https://basicincome.org/>

<sup>6</sup>For a critique of conditional anti-poverty programmes and the role education plays in them, see: Rodríguez Fernández, J.R. (2016). *Entreteniendo a los pobres. Una crítica político ideológica de las medidas de lucha contra la exclusión social*. Albacete: Bomarzo.

<sup>7</sup>There are various proposals in terms of the actual amount a basic income should pay, from the most moderate, of around €700, to the most ambitious, around €1000. Nevertheless, all proposed amounts are above the poverty line, which according to the Spanish National Statistics Institute, was around €9,000 per annum in 2019.

sectors excluded from the labour market<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, owing to their bureaucratic and punitive nature, such programmes do not reach all the people who could benefit from them (Bargain, Immervoll and Viitamäki, 2012). A basic income is intended for all citizens: it is not a charitable or paternalistic measure aimed at the poor, it is universal and does not carry the social stigma of “aid for the poor”.

Second, a basic income has the potential to restore the power balance between the world of capital and the world of labour, by strengthening the social position of workers in labour negotiations (Standing, 2013). This would facilitate improvements in employment conditions and a reduction in job insecurity, as the economic cushion would give workers greater freedom to choose jobs and would thus endow them with a greater capacity for negotiation. We would move away from the current draconian *take-it-or-leave-it* model towards a model where workers could demand fair and decent employment conditions. Re-establishing a balance between capital and labour would have important consequences for the labour structure. For example, jobs that are essential for the cohesion and maintenance of any society, such as cleaning, heavy manual work, caring for people, etc., which at present receive no social recognition or employment status, would have better pay and better employment conditions. We should not forget that such jobs are fundamental in any society.

Third, a basic income would significantly reduce the role of bureaucratic structures typical of conditional benefit programmes. As a universal and unconditional benefit, there would be no need for the bureaucratic apparatus aimed—at least formally—at monitoring and assessing the situation of claimants. The case of the minimum vital income is a typical example in this respect. It is managed by central government but must be coordinated with all other minimum income benefits managed by each regional government, which in turn must coordinate various activities linked to these benefits with local government<sup>9</sup>. It is no surprise therefore that the minimum vital income has encountered multiple management problems since its inception, given the bureaucratic labyrinth involved in the provision of aid for the poor (Paniagua, 2021). Linked to the above, new opportunities and spaces would arise that gave social workers more time to devote to real direct social and educational work with a greater component of social transformation and mobilisation. I think it is important to note that a basic income would not render the work of such professionals obsolete (Gil and Candedo, 2019); rather, their work would be redirected towards forms based on community social work and away from the current bureaucratic framework of control, supervision and resource management. In other words, they would cease to *count the poor* (e.g. drawing up reports, statistics or exclusion profiles) or to *manage marginality* (e.g. monitoring whether or not people were complying with the commitments established in their integration itineraries, were attending appointments with professionals or had registered as job seekers, etc.).

Another benefit related to the implementation of a basic income would be the promotion of citizen participation and forms of organisation based on cooperation and grassroots activism (Wright, 2001). This aspect is emphasised in some basic income proposals of a more transformative nature, such as the *Renta Básica de las Iguales* [basic

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<sup>8</sup>As is well known, these programmes receive little funding, usually around 1% of the GDP of the autonomous region responsible, with the exception being the Basque Country, where it exceeds 3% (Arriba González de Durana, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of bureaucracy, see anthropologist David Graeber’s excellent book *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*.

income for equals], where part of the amount is paid to the individual and another part is reserved for a community fund (Iglesias Fernández, 2002). Then, through assembly and direct democracy procedures (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2015), the community decides how it should be managed and how and where it should be spent. This approach also reflects a conception of the political subject very different from that wielded in social liberal and neoliberal discourses, in which subjects delegate decision-making to elites and representatives who defend their individual interests, eroding the communal and social nature of life (Iglesias Fernández, 2009; Biehl and Bookchin, 2009).

The cushion of economic security offered by a basic income would facilitate the launching of novel personal projects with significant potential for the individual, i.e. true entrepreneurship. This is very different from what is promoted under neoliberalism, where neither the State nor the business world assumes responsibility for creating jobs, instead transferring this burden to the individual, who is expected to earn a living through entrepreneurial initiative. The figure of the entrepreneur is particularly useful for neoliberalism, because it destabilises, individualises and weakens the worker's social position still further. In this respect, one could argue that a basic income would stimulate entrepreneurial initiatives of a social, artistic or cultural nature by guaranteeing an economic cushion that would enable the development of innovative projects which are difficult to launch in the present economic context because of uncertainty in relation to future success and possible profitability or problems in accessing financing from banks.

### **Transcending human capital theories**

The platform offered by a basic income would enable the education system to move away from the principles of human capital theory, in which all education is viewed as professional training and as a subsystem of the productive fabric aimed at providing —as if it were a *conveyor belt*— the professional skills required by the latter.

Once education is free from subjection to the business world and the centrality of employability, spaces can be created in which it is possible to introduce relevant, socially useful and counter-hegemonic content that unveils the falsehoods and misrepresentations of the dominant ideology. These should serve to promote other values on which to build our societies, values different from those proclaimed by neoliberal thought and based on mutual support and solidarity. In other words, the social utility of education would be enhanced, a value considered of little worth in neoliberal education policies.

Furthermore, the framework of a basic income would enable education to fully assume the principle of lifelong learning, not from the point of view of human capital, which leads to continuous educational consumerism in order to accumulate educational credentials and remain employable in the individual struggle for scarce, insecure jobs, but from an understanding of education as a fulfilling humanistic activity that contributes to personal development. From this perspective, knowledge and skills are acquired for purposes other than mere *exchange* in the labour market, including the possibility of sharing and discussing what one knows with other people, or the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of teaching and learning. Such an approach once again espouses notions different from those advanced by neoliberal thought in relation to the subject and to the city itself, shifting from the competitive, materialistic subject of the neoliberal city, to the social subject of the *educating polis* (Díez Gutiérrez and Rodríguez Fernández, 2019).

A basic income would contribute to rectifying one of the main problems — contradictions according to Harvey (2013)— that the neoliberal discourse on education has generated, namely the imbalance between the *use value* and the *exchange value* of education. As I have already indicated, one of the theoretical pillars of the neoliberal discourse on education is that of the theories of human capital, which have devalued educational credentials —because it is increasingly necessary to accumulate ever more qualifications in order to secure an increasingly insecure job— and view education as a mere means to obtain something in exchange, losing sight of the value of learning or personal enjoyment and falling into a spiral of educational consumerism.

Contrary to what human capital theories suggest, the problem in our societies is not that workers are poorly trained for the needs of the productive fabric, but rather that there is a lack of available jobs. Under neoliberal capitalism, the ways to increase the rate of profitability do not necessarily involve increasing the number of jobs; instead, profitability is increased through labour exploitation, automation, various forms and strategies of speculation, and ultimately through the generation of a “reserve army” that contributes to disciplining the working classes and rendering their situation even more precarious.

According to data from the European Statistical Agency, 2% of jobs were available in Europe in 2021, a figure which has remained consistent in recent years. In Spain, this figure falls 0.7%: there are practically no jobs available<sup>10</sup>. The unemployment rate in Europe as a whole in 2020 was approximately 9%, but in Spain it was around 17% and in the population under 25 years of age it exceeded 50%. How can education alone generate sufficient jobs to absorb this surplus working population? It is an impossible task, which leads to educational consumerism, individual competition for the few jobs available and insecure employment conditions accompanied by the mantra *take it or leave it*.

In this sense, a basic income would be a particularly powerful mechanism for redressing the balance between capital and labour and challenging the hegemony of ideas based on employability and the commodification of education.

## Conclusions

Neoliberal policies have been implemented worldwide since the 1980s with varying degrees of resistance and intensity, and their effects can be seen in at least the following aspects:

- Rising inequalities around the world (Chacel, 2018), despite economic growth and an increased capacity to generate wealth and productivity. An exponential increase in inequality, poverty and suffering as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Oxfam International, 2021).
- Degradation and attrition of employment as an unparalleled instrument for social integration and access to citizenship rights.
- Loss of meaning and devaluation of education. Education has less and less *use value*: going through the education system does not guarantee that people will be

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<sup>10</sup>[http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=jvs\\_q\\_nace2&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=jvs_q_nace2&lang=en)

able to critically read the problems that affect them as citizens, nor does the attainment of high educational accreditations (masters, doctorates) guarantee that graduates will have greater capacity or increased sensitivity to social problems or the common good. At the same time, however, education has less and less *exchange value* in terms of access to the labour market, spurring educational consumerism and competition for the few insecure jobs that still exist.

This problem has a negative impact on the common good of society, prompting the need to think of strategies that, from a structural perspective, allow us to move towards scenarios that are more conducive to the promotion of the common good. These structural problems are not tackled by either the minimum vital income or other anti-poverty benefits, which are instead limited to providing stop-gap measures and superficial, cosmetic solutions, in turn limiting and undermining the public authorities' capacity to reverse and transform the situation.

In contrast, a basic income addresses the very problems that neoliberal capitalism generates (e.g. insecure labour market, social inequality, poverty and chronic social exclusion) and which have been exacerbated by the pandemic crisis, establishing spaces and practices that can allow us to think of alternatives for creating a fairer and more egalitarian society. Under this transformative proposal, education would open up new horizons and would cease to be shackled by the neoliberal principles of human capital and employability.

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