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Basic Income and Deepening Democracy

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Introduction

Although many discussions of basic income have taken place, there still exists a lack of debate over the correlation between basic income and democracy. Even so, it is widely believed that the implementation of basic income can contribute to the democratization of a society. Therefore, the topic needs further explanation regarding how basic income leads to democratic transformation at both the practical and theoretical levels so as to redress the imbalance between this widespread belief and its insufficient grounds.

This paper is based on two main arguments. One is that there are explicit linkages between basic income and the development of democracy. The theory of justification for basic income will be more persuasive and powerful if this attempt is successful. The other is that democracy redefined and renovated by means of basic income could open up new horizons. As a consequence, the understanding of democracy itself would be improved.

Everyone has his or her own image of democracy, so one can argue that there is incommensurability among the various versions of democracy. However, it is also certain that we will be able to determine ways to develop and deepen democracy as well as realize basic income on the condition that commensurability is provided through a basic income concept so that the public can reach the common goal based on the same perception of our democracy.

Crisis as an Opportunity in Democracy

Universal suffrage, which was introduced to the fullest in the late 20th century, is regarded as one of the greatest accomplishments of democracy, corresponding to the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, but it was just a starting point toward realizing political equality. Today, this is clearer than ever because democracy faces a great challenge with regard to the globalization of neo-liberalism and global financial crises.

Post-democracy was coined by Crouch (2004) to describe this kind of situation more clearly. That is, he tried to depict the fact that politics and governments are sliding into the realm that the privileged elite rule, even though there still remain at least formal elements of modern democracy. The present situation, he argued, is a far cry from real democracy, but it can hardly be called non-democracy in a conclusive way. This led him to the concept of *post-democracy*. In contrast, Slavoj Žižec, one of the most influential philosophers of the 21st century, recently claimed in interviews that democracy will be divorced from capitalism in the near future. This seems to be a rather extreme and pessimistic view, and the divorce is likely to happen only if democracy is defined his way.

Setting aside a wakeup call to the people about thinning democracy from some pundits, the current reality gives us a sufficient foundation for further discussion of democracy. For example, the growing interest in the correlation of political democracy with economic democracy and the economic underpinnings of democracy demonstrates this. In addition, a

fair number of attempts are being made to refine and develop the notion of democracy. Despite these efforts, the results to date seem to remain at an abstract level, and it has been difficult to determine an effective means through which we can get to a concrete level.

Meanwhile, the question that might arise is whether basic income that would guarantee a certain regular income without any conditions attached, which would enable everyone to live a decent life, would be a powerful means to constitute new democracy. In other words, it is a question of whether basic income would effectively underpin democracy in terms of providing economic security in the same way that universal suffrage provided political underpinnings for democracy. It is likely that the people who believe in equality would easily accept this sort of assumption. While we look at the big picture, we must find methods based on basic income that can contribute to bringing the spotlight onto modern democracy and reconstituting it. One can argue that this is a significant task put before the people who support basic income.

It is widely accepted that basic income has enough potential to be more than a simple policy that reduces poverty and wealth inequality by income redistribution. To draw out this potential to the fullest, however, not only is exercising active political imagination about basic income needed, we also need to associate basic income with more fundamental thought. Suffice it to say that if basic income becomes the basis for rescuing today's democracy, the theory justifying basic income will be strengthened, and modern democracy will have an opportunity to enter a new phase.

Current Weak Linkage Between Democracy and Basic Income

Before getting to the point, let's take a look at what some people who strongly support basic income say about democracy. First, Pateman (2006) argued that basic income can play a significant role in promoting democratization and hold a key position in a strategy for democratic social transformation. This is one of the most important reasons why she is not

only interested in basic income, but also in favor of it. She also asserted that individual freedom as autonomy or self-government is so central to democracy that basic income that enhances individual self-government can contribute to democratization. What must not be overlooked is the essential premise of her argument that basic income should be established at an appropriate level so as to achieve the freedom not to be employed. However, the claim that the core of democracy is individual freedom as autonomy or self-government should first be proved persuasively to justify her thesis. That is, when the most salient value is placed on autonomy or self-government, it should be explained why this notion is strongly associated with democracy, not autonomism or anarchism. Nevertheless, she only mentioned that “‘democracy’ has become identified with collective (national) self-government,” thus, “other forms of government that deny or limit individuals’ freedom fall out of the picture” (p. 103).

Next, Wright (2010) argued that “the abstract idea of democracy as ‘rule by the people’ is translated into actual systems of democratic governance through three primary institutional forms: direct democracy, representative democracy, and associational democracy” (p. 152). These institutional forms of democracy, he remarked, are not mutually exclusive but complementary to each other, and each of the forms that can be organized in either a positive or negative way should be driven in a more deeply democratic direction alongside enhanced social empowerment. Among the several examples of deepening each form of democracy he pointed out, there is the *patriot card* proposal that Bruce Ackerman, a leading exponent of *stakeholder grants*, first suggested and that is accepted as a pathway to reform representative democracy. (This novel institutional device will be mentioned in a bit more detail later.) On the other hand, basic income is, in a separate case, considered one of the alternatives to increase social empowerment over the economy. What Wright underscored is that basic income should be integrated as a program into the whole social transformation strategy, not that basic income itself is closely related to democracy.

Redefining Democracy

The theory of democracy has been continuously (re)created, revised, and transformed throughout its history. As a result, a lot of definitions of democracy exist. While conversing about democracy, people are likely to become confused because they tend to rely on their own definition of democracy. However, I am not sure whether this inclination has influenced academic debates on democracy. At any rate, libertarianism and republicanism have been seriously considered as the theory of justification for basic income, whereas relatively less attention has been paid to democracy in this respect. Accordingly, this paper aims to address this point, but there is a need to redefine democracy before moving on to the task of associating basic income with democracy.

Well-known definitions of democracy in today's society can be roughly classified into three types. First, democracy is understood as a desirable political system. This sort of understanding has been consolidated through confrontations with real socialist countries as well as dictatorships in the 20th century, and it has become a predominant definition of democracy. Second, democracy is defined in a rather narrower sense as a procedure or institution in which majority rule is always followed. This definition comprises an integral part of the first one because representative democracy based on voting rules is central to democracy as a political system. However, it is also routinely used in a variety of contexts. Third, democracy is construed as the political ideal of "rule by the people" or "power of the people." This can be considered a textbook definition that is a long way from reality. (We seem to have overlooked the fact that there is a considerable difference between these well-known definitions and the original meaning of democracy, which will be addressed below.)

In addition to these general definitions of democracy, two efforts have been made to describe what the previous definitions are not able to capture: One is an attempt to extract elements that comprise democracy, and the other is the attempt to apply various modifiers to democracy. A typical example of the former is Robert Dahl's (2000) argument; Dahl was a distinguished scholar of politics who devoted his life to researching democracy. Democracy, he argued, provides opportunities for achieving particular standards or criteria: effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, final control over the agenda,

and inclusion of adults (p. 38). In contrast, there are countless examples of the latter: formal democracy, real democracy, ideal democracy, political democracy, electoral democracy, economic democracy, direct democracy, participatory democracy, indirect democracy, representative democracy, deliberative democracy, grass-roots democracy, cosmopolitan democracy, and cyber(or e)-democracy, among others. These endeavors, on the one hand, help people understand democracy in a diverse and abundant way; on the other, they give rise to confusion mainly owing to indiscriminate use of the term. Nevertheless, the fact that many definitions of democracy now exist in a great variety of contexts indicates a thread of connections to the original meaning of democracy.

Ober (2008), who tried to trace the origin of democracy, argued that democracy is not simply reducible to majority rule or a certain ruling system. He started off by roughly classifying Greek terms for regime types into two groups according to their suffix: *-kratos* root terms (e.g., *demokratia*, *isokratia*, *aristokratia*) and *-arche* root terms (e.g., *monarchia*, *oligarchia*, *anarchia*); he concluded that *kratos*, when it is used as a regime-type suffix, becomes power in the sense of “capacity to do things” and that each of the three *-arche* root terms listed above answers the question: How many rulers? On the other hand, Dahl and his colleague introduced *polyarchy* in 1953 as a handy way to refer to a modern representative democracy. This term, however, keeps democracy not only confined to a narrow sense but also far from its original meaning. We need to bear in mind that “ancient critics of popular rule sought to rebrand *demokratia*,” interestingly enough, “as the equivalent of a tyrannical ‘*polloi-archia*’” (Ober, 2008, p. 8).

Ober (2008), finally, made the point clear: *Demokratia* refers to “a *demos*’ collective capacity to do things in the public realm, to make things happen” (p. 7). If this definition is accepted, democratization can also be defined as transforming the standards of a political system, not just adjusting the system to fit pre-existing standards. In other words, we can see democracy as continuous transitions of a polity through a people’s capacity, not movement toward a fixed polity. Consequently, democracy is the foundation that creates conditions in which a people’s collective capacity can erupt on all fronts. If we go beyond the limits of thin

definitions of democracy and perceive democracy in that manner, the gap between basic income and democracy can be further narrowed.

Returning to Political Equality

If democracy is construed as centering on voting rules or majority rule, all that remains is the shell of democracy. Additionally, the institutions of Athenian *demokratia* were not focused exclusively on elections. Lotteries for offices and agenda-setting deliberative bodies, although not as well known as elections, were also primary democratic institutions in ancient Greece. In addition, Manin (1997) argued that elections themselves do not directly guarantee democracy. He regarded modern representative governments established through elections as democratic aristocracy, or oligarchy, which has both democratic elements and non-democratic elements. This becomes important, therefore, in revitalizing the original meaning of democracy, provided that we call for an active change on the basis of democracy without settling for the way things are. The original meaning of democracy is likely to allow for more possibilities that let us take a step forward than the definition of “rule by the people” or “power of the people.” Nonetheless, the original meaning of democracy cannot be seamlessly incorporated into practice unless we advance to the task of establishing substantial conditions that can strengthen a *demos*’ collective capacity.

Dahl more clearly and strongly argued that political equality is the basic premise of democracy in his last book, *On Political Equality* (2006), than in his previous book, *On Democracy* (2000). This argument hints at the development of the theory of democracy. Dahl also distinctly remarked that political inequality has a lot to do with economic inequality and that alleviating political inequality leads to enhanced democracy. The problem, however, is that he only suggested an array of realistic reforms, having considered political equality as an idealistic goal, rather than taking into account making full use of fundamental measures to eradicate unjustifiable political inequality. Dahl (2006) illustrated reforms that address political equality directly—campaign finance reform, electoral reform, redistricting

reform—and reforms addressing political equality indirectly (via raising economic and social equality)—universal health care coverage, programs to enhance savings among the poor, raising the minimum wage, increasing the earned income tax credit (EITC), expanding child care subsidies, and making higher education accessible to more people (pp. 100-103).

It is, of course, clear that the reforms listed above can contribute to promoting political equality to some extent, but it is by no means certain whether the measures would be able to provide a quantum leap in political equality. We should, therefore, focus not on rather stopgap policies but on the fundamental change in conditions on which democracy should be based. To sum up, two critical conditions are needed to realize the original meaning of democracy: The first is the establishment of a political foundation, and the second is the establishment of an economic foundation. In addition, it is, I suppose, widely accepted that an economic foundation has a significant impact on the political foundation in both direct and indirect ways. I am positive that modern democracy can take a historic step forward only if we secure these primary conditions. If this task is fulfilled, we can proceed to the next step to tackle a new task.

One-Person-One-Card as Part of Basic Income

Let's look at the political foundation of democracy first. The introduction of universal suffrage was undoubtedly a huge breakthrough in political democracy; however, it was just a jumping-off place for a long journey strewn with difficulties. Today, it is clear that universal suffrage itself cannot help to cope with the emerging problems of political inequality and imperfections in modern democracy. It cannot be denied that today's democracy, which might be called incomplete democracy or post-democracy, is becoming another form of aristocracy or oligarchy on the basis of plutocracy. If this is the case, we have to build a new political foundation for democracy with effective measures to deal with the problem. By the same token, Manin (1997) considered eradicating the effect of wealth in elections as the first priority in political reforms; but what he primarily suggested is nothing other than rigorous

application of the limited amount of election expenses and public fund-raising for electoral campaigns. Even though it is not easy to put his suggestions into practice, it may be possible to change our way of thinking in a more radical direction.

It has been a long time since the principle of *one-person-one-vote* turned into a purely rhetorical matter in modern politics; now the operating principles of stock companies dominate so that large stockholders and corporate owners control almost everything. At this point, society must pay attention to a *democratic card*, a term that Eric Olin Wright prefers over *patriot card*, which was introduced by Bruce Ackerman, even though it has not come to the fore so far. This proposal can be summarized as follows: First, every citizen is provided with a special kind of debit card on which a certain amount of money is recorded at the beginning of every year. Second, the funds on this card can be used exclusively for electoral campaigns. Third, candidates for electoral campaigns and political parties that participate in elections try to recruit *democracy card* money from citizens and use those funds in electoral competition. Last, but most important, any candidate or party accepting those funds is prohibited from accepting any funds from corporations or wealthy individuals (Wright, 2010, pp. 167-170).

The logic behind the *democratic card* scheme has a lot to do with both a *stakeholding* idea (Bruce Ackerman & Anne Alstott) and a basic income idea in terms of taking a concrete step toward initial equality for everyone. It is plain that political or electoral democracy would be enhanced if this scheme were to be implemented, yet it cannot be our final destination. As Manin (1997) pointed out, it is well known that many problems, including those associated with campaign finance, are entrenched in our current electoral system. Nevertheless, if that scheme is introduced, it is obvious that political revolution will occur: For instance, the line of thinking that many politicians have followed cannot help but change dramatically, not only because there will be no need for politicians to flatter the affluent to raise their election funds, but because politicians will no longer see voters as just machines that cast ballots on a regular basis. Again, the political foundation on which we can build from formal political equality to real political equality will be firmly laid through a *democratic card*.

Putting the *one-person-one-card* principle into action might have great historical significance in the way that it will offer new political foundations for the 21st century's democracy. A *democratic card* scheme would be a pivotal and direct means for social empowerment in politics in the same way that basic income could result in social empowerment in the economy. On the other hand, a *democracy card* can be counted as a part of basic income, mainly because everyone would be given a certain amount of money on a regular basis without any conditions attached except for the use of the money being fixed to election campaign funds.

Basic Income and a Democratic Economy

Next, let's look at the economic foundation of democracy. As I mentioned earlier, it has been broadly accepted and never debunked that economic inequality gives rise to political inequality. Although a wide range of policies exist to alleviate economic inequality, it is no exaggeration to say that no measures are as powerful and fundamental as basic income, as Pateman (2006) and others have argued. This powerful and fundamental measure indicates that basic income has the capacity to democratize the economy itself by redressing the imbalance of power and unequal relationships in the economy, not just by alleviating poverty. The changes created by basic income would affect both production and consumption in a positive way, and that would make a material difference in politics as well.

To begin with, basic income would help to delink income from work. (How far they are delinked, of course, depends on the level of the payment.) This feature can be translated as partial de-commodification of labor. That is, the characteristics of the labor power commodity in our society would change to some degree as a result of implementing basic income. This would lead to the increased collective and individual bargaining power of workers. Not only that, basic income would enhance democracy in the workplace, provided that other supplementary policies are properly linked with it. Also, basic income would

facilitate setting up a business related to the social economy (which can be defined as “economic activity that is directly organized and controlled through the exercise of some form of social power” [Wright, 2010, p. 193]), and thus the social economy would continue to grow, resulting in overall improvements in the economic environment. In addition, basic income would strengthen consumer democracy by increasing the right of selection. Finally, expanding these interstices more and more on the basis of basic income would open up new avenues for diminishing the overwhelming power of big capital both inside and outside the workplace and in production and consumption.

Conclusion

Basic income can be integral to democracy, and it can play a significant role as an effective measure to deepen democracy, for several reasons. First, in principle, similarities between basic income and democracy can be compressed into individuality and universality. This is not merely because democracy provides each individual member of a political community with credentials as a coequal political subject through everyone having an equal right to vote, but also because it is taken for granted that this principle, without exception, is universally applied to any member of the community. In this respect, basic income is often compared to universal suffrage. As a consequence, the implementation of basic income can greatly contribute to realizing the principles of democracy as well as the establishment of its substantial foundation.

Second, in terms of political dimension, if a *democracy card* scheme is introduced as a part of basic income, democracy can be reinforced. The impact would be obvious, unless the power elite in the economy continue to maintain control over politics by finding a means other than their financial muscle to dominate politics. However, it is sure that basic income itself, without the scheme, could also be a stepping stone for enhancing political democracy indirectly. For example, several researchers have found a close correlation between poverty and low voter turnout or political participation rate.

Third, in terms of economic dimension, basic income can strengthen democracy, mainly because it can lead to democratic transformations at all levels of production and consumption. In particular, basic income can provide a foothold for workers to create more favorable labor relations, and it can contribute to ecological diversity of the economy, which might constrict the power of capital to exercise overwhelming domination over the economy.

Finally, in terms of social dimension, basic income has the potential to enhance democracy. Above all, basic income can reduce the high level of dependence on a breadwinner in a household. This implies a possibility of democratic transformation in a household's power structure. Basic income would have a similar effect on every other part of society as it can change existing dependent relationships. In addition, basic income can contribute to invigorating a wide range of social activities, and thus it can empower a civil society in a variety of ways.

The abolition of slavery is an emblem of the fact that all people are born equal, and the achievement of universal suffrage is an emblem of political equality in that everyone has just the same voting rights. The implementation of basic income can be considered to represent socio-economic equality that at least enables people to live without worrying about their most basic needs. However, implementation represents just the establishment of minimum conditions. For example, people still exist in slave-like working conditions even though slavery was abolished, and we still have a long way to go before we achieve real political equality despite the introduction of universal suffrage. Seen in this light, the need to recover one's subjecthood in everyday life, including political and economic life, is urgent. In other words, we are still suffering from a dearth of democracy, the political and economic basis of which is also very weak.

There is no reason to hesitate about introducing basic income if it is true that basic income not only properly answers emerging questions about thinning democracy but also has been proven to be the most effective means of laying the cornerstone of new democracy.

Many people who are in favor of basic income argue that it is not a sufficient condition but a necessary condition for a better society, just as universal suffrage is not a sufficient condition for real political equality. According to the original meaning of democracy, basic income can only place democracy at a new starting point. Democracy must set out on a new voyage from that point. This is what democracy really means.

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