

The correct definition of basic income as primary income: remuneration of life in bio-cognitive capitalism

Andrea Fumagalli (Basic Income Network – Italy, University of Pavia)

Introduction: the minimum (basic) income

In Italy, the debate on basic income has lasted for almost 20 years. It is, in fact, of the August 1997 the publication on Internet (on the site ecn.org) of my pamphlet titled "Ten thesis on citizenship income". This text, which saw a successful circulation, especially underground, re-edited in the book "TuteBianche"¹, presented a survey of the Italian debate about the introduction of a basic income dropped from labour, a proposal that had begun to circulate in the neo-workerist environments in the previous 2 years².

Twenty years later, it should be acknowledged that the definition of "citizenship income" has created more negative effect than positive: at that time, although starting to increase, the phenomenon of migration had not yet assumed today's proportions. So, guiltily, the term "citizenship" was used without thinking that the concept of "citizenship" is terribly ambiguous. In fact, it can be used in an ethical and philosophical framework for designating that every human being is born already "world citizen", regardless of the nationality of origin. But increasingly today, the concept of citizenship has to do with the legal-national sphere and then with a grid of limited rights *ius soli*, not be extended to all those who were born elsewhere. From this point of view, the idea of a "citizen's income" can only be misunderstood as a limited proposal to who has that specific nationality, in contradiction with what is rather our idea of "right to income". The term "basic income" appears therefore more appropriate and inclusive.

Are now numerous in Italy and abroad proposed legislation, policy initiatives and declarations in favor of the introduction in Italy of some form of income support independent on employment status.

And numerous, well differentiated, are also the interpretations of such a measure. In the cultural political debate promoted by Bin-Italy³, which for years has promoted a cultural and socio-political campaign aimed to introduce a guaranteed minimum income (basic income), it is necessary to define certain parameters, to reduce the interpretive confusion that has now reached a critical level that makes unclear what it actually is a "citizen's income" or "minimum income" or "a dignity income" (to use the most common names).

To actually talk about "basic minimum income" (we use this term in a broad sense and provisional), we believe that at least 5 criteria have to be verified:

1. individuality criterion: the minimum income must be paid at the individual level and not familiar. It can then discuss if children under 18 years will have the right or not.
2. Criterion of residence: the minimum wage must be paid to all / the people who, residing in a given territory, live, rejoice, suffer and participate in the production and social cooperation regardless of their marital status, gender, ethnicity, religious belief, etc.
3. Criterion of the maximum extension of unconditionality: the minimum income must be provided by minimizing any form of compensation and / obligation as a free individual choice as possible.

¹A. Fumagalli, M. Lazzarato (eds), *Tute Bianche*, Derive-Approdi, Roma, 1999

²M. Bascetta, G. Bronzini (eds), *La democrazia del reddito universale*, Manifestolibri, 1997. Il tema di un reddito sganciato dal lavoro, etichettato con il termine *salario sociale* era già stato patrimonio del dibattito degli anni Settanta a parte dalla formulazione del *rifiuto del lavoro (salariato)*.

³See www.bin-italy.org

4. Access criteria: the minimum wage is paid in its initial phase of experimentation to all / the people who have an income below a certain threshold. This threshold may, however, be greater than the relative poverty line and converge toward the median level of the personal distribution of existing income. Moreover, this level of income must be expressed in relative terms, not absolute, so that increasing the minimum threshold (as a result of the initial introduction of the measure) the range of beneficiaries will increase continuously until to rise to graded levels of universality .

5. Criteria for funding and transparency: the modalities of financing of minimum income must always be set out on the basis of economic viability studies, detailing where resources are obtained based on an estimate of its cost necessary. These resources have to fall on general taxation and not on other assets of origin (such as, for example, social security contributions, sale of public assets, privatization proceeds, etc.)

The criteria 1, 2, 5 should not be amendable, while criteria 3 and 4, are expressed in relative terms, may be subject to additional definitions depending on the context of reference, but within the principle directives we have just outlined.

1. The basic income as a primary income and therefore unconditional

The basic income today is good and right thing. The reasons for this claim are inspired by the forms of the social composition of labor and the modalities of accumulation and exploitation which are today dominant.

To this regard, it is necessary to propose a cultural leap before political and affirm that Basic Income is a primary distribution variable: the basic income must intervene, in fact, directly in the income distribution of productive factors: such as salary, which remunerates certified labor time as such, or profit, that rewards the business entity or rent, which derives from a property right. Primary distribution variable means that it is not a re-distributive variable: it directly occurs at the level of the balance of power and social relations within a certain process of accumulation. Despite it, a redistribution of income, which occurs at a later stage, it is the outcome of a second level of indirect distribution, an extra market level, thanks to appropriate discretionary economic policies.

If Basic income is remuneration, the question is what it pays. To answer, it is necessary first to analyze what are in contemporary capitalism the main sources of exploitation/valorization. More and more studies and case studies confirm that today is life itself, in every daily event, to be the productive factor *par excellence*.⁴ If we take into account the acts of daily life that characterize our existence, they can be categorized into four types: labor, work, leisure, entertainment / game. More and more today is not the only labor to be the basis of added value but also the time of creation (*opus/work*), the *otium*/leisure time, entertainment time: all are included in a growing and continuous enhancement mechanism. The classic dichotomy of the Fordist paradigm between labor and non-labor time, between production and consumption, between production and reproduction are now partially obsolete. It is the result of a historic process of structural changes in manufacturing processes and labor organization, which marked the transition from a material Fordist capitalism to a bio-cognitive and financialized capitalism. Today, wealth production derives, at the same time, from absolute surplus value and relative surplus value extraction, where for absolute surplus value we intend the existence of a sort of primitive accumulation in capitalist organization based on capital employment and on private property. The result is the change of the relationship between productive and unproductive labor. What in the material Fordist capitalism was considered unproductive (ie no production of surplus value and therefore not remunerable), has now become productive, while the remuneration remained anchored to the one of Fordist era (salarization crisis). As a result, we are facing new ways of valorization such as “dispossession” (Harvey⁵) and

⁴ A. Fumagalli, C. Morini, “Life put to work: towards a theory of life-value”, in *Ephemera*, vol. 10, 2011, p. 234-252

⁵ D. Harvey, “The new imperialism. The accumulation by dispossession”, in *Socialist Register*, 2004

“extraction”, to whom no remuneration is applied, according to the dominant rules (legal, industrial relations, uses and so on).

It is no coincidence that unpaid labor is in sharp increase, from those sectors that more has been invested by the transformations of the enhancement methods and the adoption of the new linguistic-communicative technological paradigm (cognitive-relational activities).

Against this background, one proposal that could be advanced to counter this phenomenon of unpaid labour (ie, basically "slavery" with another name, even though for most it is not perceived as such) is to proceed with its salarization. But, we ask yourselves: is it possible? If the answer would be "yes", Basic income should be not necessary

2. The vagueness of labour time

This question opens a second theoretical problem - political and, at the same time, methodological. When technological and organizational transformations favor the spread of increasingly intangible productions with a high degree of non-measurability, when values are created by a whole range of life activities, from learning processes, to social reproduction⁶ and networks of relationships, then arises the problem of "measure."

The theme of the measure is linked to the calculation/quantification of labor productivity. Unlike in the past, where this calculation was possible because employee labor activity could be measured in hours and by an equally measurable amount of production on an individual basis, productivity today has changed shape: it depends on the increasing use of new forms of scale economies: learning and network economies). These are scale economies no longer static but dynamic, because it is the flow (continuously) of time to allow for growth and learning of social skills as well as social reproduction and thus increase productivity, whose effects can be seen no more on individual basis but on social one. Both learning and network, in fact, need a social context and a social cooperation. The productivity in bio-cognitive capitalism is therefore primarily social productivity or, with reference to the role of knowledge, *general intellect*.

Learning economies are based on the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Knowledge is not a scarce resource, such as material goods, but abundant: the more you swap, the more it spreads, the more it grows, with a highly productive cumulative mechanism: cumulativeness requires relationships and social networks. Learning and network are two sides of the same coin: if knowledge is not spread through relational over individual processes is not economically productive. Only if you develop social cooperation and general intellect becomes productive.

We're not talking in the traditional sense of the term co-operation, that is, "join forces" but co-operation, namely the interaction of individual operations that only achieve synergy in the common processes of accumulation and thus of surplus value creation. These relational activity often hides forms of hierarchy and exploitation, whose value is difficult to measure, not only on individual basis but collective, too. If the traditional factory productivity was based on precise technical mechanisms that allow you to measure individual productivity in the labor places today. the productivity of social cooperation cannot be measured in terms of individual productivity.

Not just individual productivity but also the same product of social cooperation is not measurable. When you are producing symbols, languages, ideas, forms of communication, social control, what kind of measurement we can take? Every relationship between output value, its production time

⁶C. Morini, "Riproduzione sociale" in C. Morini, P. Vignola (eds), *Piccola Enciclopedia Precaria*, Milano X, Milano, 2015

(measured in hours) and its remuneration (measured in wages) becomes almost impossible or very difficult and subjective.

The crisis of the labor theory of value derives from the fact that not only the individual contribution today is not measurable but also the output tends to escape a unit of measurement, the more the more the production tends to become immaterial. And this takes place in a context in which the measure of value is no longer constrained by a scarcity factor. As was pointed out earlier, learning (knowledge) and network (space) are abundant input, theoretically unlimited (especially if we consider the virtual space), as the human nature. A theory of value based on the principle of scarcity, such as the one implicit in the theory of free market founded on the law of supply and demand, today has no longer any economic and social relevance. It is only artificially perpetuated in market dynamics where are continuously defined the power relationship. Paradoxically, the only theory of value that appears adequate to contemporary bio-cognitive capitalism, the labor theory of value, is not able to provide one measure.

How to give a measure to social cooperation and general intellect?

It 'a question that can only surmise some answers. One possible aspect to consider has to do with the sphere of financialization. The pervasive and central role of financial markets, such as investment financing tool, privatization of social welfare and the form of partial compensation of the high content of knowledge labor, has affected not only the sphere of realization but also that of production. In capital gains, the speculative activity partially derives from the value produced by the cognitive-relational living labor. It is in financial markets that we can roughly see the implementation of the process of expropriation of social cooperation and of general intellect.

This process is not immediate and direct. It is often handled by the dominant bio-power management and the hierarchical relationships that continually redefine the property structure and market structure.

From this point of view, basic income, as a primary income, becomes even more a tool of direct re-appropriation of the wealth that is generated by the common life time put to labor.

3. The inadequacy of wages form at the time of the body-mind

The order of discourse leads us to say that the traditional salary structure is no longer adequate, it does not fully capture the transformations in the valorization process. The classic wage structure can still be useful in those parts of the overall production cycle in which there is a measure of the value of labor in term of time. But it cannot be generalized. From a theoretical point of view, this issue leads to the need to review, rethink and redefine the Marxian labor theory of value.

The inadequacy of the wage form as remuneration of all the productive life, leads to say that we need another way of remuneration (in addition to the wage forms where these are measurable). From this point of view, Basic Income is something structurally different from salary (though potentially, in the future, convergent): it cannot simply be understood as an extension of the wage form, because it is necessary to take into account the quantitative and qualitative change that new technologies have generated.

In particular, I'd like to stress the relationship between human and machine.

In the sixties, the relationship between human beings (with his body, his nerves, his muscles, his brain, his heart, his eros) and the machine was a relationship between separate domains: on the one

hand, the ' human being, living labor, on the other hand, the machine, the dead labor. The relationship between life and death was clear, physically traceable. From the point of view of human inner, the machine was something external and tangible, separate from himself.

Since the nineties to the present, such a separation is no longer so clear. The machine becomes machinic and loses some of its materiality: the old Tayloristic machine becomes increasingly linguistic and relational. In presence of linguistic-communication technologies (ICT) , only the support is material (hardware) but the core depends more and more on cognitive-relational human faculties processes. The use of language as the main tool of the machinic operation changes the relationship of interdependence between human and machine typical of Taylorist technologies. In digital technologies, the despotism of the machine is less.

But this hybrid between man and machine that takes direction? And it is 'the machine that is humanized or rather the human becoming mechanical? We witness the becoming human of the machine, or rather the becoming human of the machine? That's the challenge of bio-robotic.

Consider the web 2.0 and the recent spread of social media. "The profit of advertising agencies, just like the profit of all firms web 2.0, almost entirely depend on the ability to develop control technologies. Social control is then presented as the only way to innovate, develop in the future. But what is checked, exactly, today? Our identities and how they change. "The profiling algorithms of digital technologies feed on human biodiversity that it is itself channeled and integrated "in a Panopticon space, completely transparent, where we are called to act publicly". See Google Pagerank, for instance.

Control of the body-mind becomes today (in agreement with the unpaid labor) the new enhancement border. Even if such activities would be salarized or simply paid otherwise (which is not), our freedom of choice would be conditioned.

An unconditional basic income is also a tool not only to recognize that our life is an active part (though often not aware) of contemporary exploitation but also able to exercise the right to choice, that is towards an individual and social self-determination: the right to choose our destiny as far as social participation is concerned, and also the right to refuse bad and indecent labor conditions. And this cannot be allowed, otherwise there is the risk to break the fragile balance of social control and the supine condition of subordination. From this point of view an unconditional income is subversive and that is the political struggle.