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Book Review

Malcolm TORRY, *A Modern Guide to Citizen's Basic Income: A Multidisciplinary Approach*

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A Modern Guide to Citizen's Basic Income: A Multidisciplinary Approach

Torry Malcolm

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'Citizen's Basic Income' (also known as 'Universal Basic Income' or simply 'Basic Income') is a social policy that can radically transform work-leisure dynamics. A rise in the level of economic development in recent decades has brought an era of prosperity and higher standards of living for some, while leaving behind a significant proportion of individuals in financial insecurity and uncertainty. This is evident from rising inequality, poverty and homelessness, even in some of the most developed nations (World Bank, various years). Coupled with this, the threat of unemployment resulting from automation and shifts in production patterns has led to a renewed interest among policy-makers, academia and citizens in general in the idea of Basic Income and related policies. In such a context, Malcolm Torry's *A Modern Guide to Citizen's Basic Income* is a welcome addition for any student of this concept.

The book follows a standard textbook style of prose and adopts a multidisciplinary approach for analysis, as indicated in the subtitle of the book. It is suitable for readers who are new to the concept of Citizen's Basic Income (CBI), or those who wish to explore the ways in which such a far-reaching policy may impact on various spheres of social and economic organisation. The concepts and ideas examined in the book are well defined and explained in detail, which would suit undergraduate readers. Torry is well placed to comment on the history and development of the idea of CBI through his decades of involvement in the Basic Income movement in the UK. While such close involvement may imply a bias, Torry maintains an objective balance in analysing the merits of the concept and he addresses many of the critiques levelled against it throughout the book.

Torry also addresses some of the debates surrounding the meaning of the term "Basic Income" and the appropriate attendant terminology early in the text. The adoption of the term "CBI", defined as an unconditional income paid to every citizen, offers clarity and consistency in a field where confusion often arises from the different meanings that scholars attribute to the concept, based on linguistic preferences or on their affiliation with various regional Basic Income networks. The analysis is consistently based on the definition mentioned above and Torry does not attempt to analyse the CBI based on its several variants. Throughout the text, he juxtaposes CBI with other existing social policies, such as the UK's means-tested benefits, and policy instruments such as negative income tax. However, related concepts such as Basic Income Guarantee (in the US context), or Ontario's Basic Income Pilot, are not extensively covered in the discussion as these do not meet the criteria to be considered as universal or unconditional Basic Income, according to the author.

One of the truly refreshing aspects of this book is the heterodox treatment applied in attempting to understand and critique the idea of CBI. Torry's approach is well balanced in the sense that equal weight and space are dedicated to the discussion of CBI through the lens of various traditions of social enquiry. He examines the feasibility of CBI using concepts from nine different fields of enquiry, from ethics and psychology to political economy and law. The chapters are organised along these lines and the analyses from these different traditions go a long way in explaining an otherwise complex and multifaceted concept. Questions of financial feasibility and undersupply of labour dominate debates on CBI; however, equally important concerns, such as social justice and the indignity of means tests in the current benefits system, are often glossed over by proponents and opponents alike. Torry provides a detailed account of the positive impact that CBI can have on psychology at both individual and social levels, based on the evidence from experiments, while he does not ignore the financial and administrative feasibility debates. The trade-offs associated with such a radical policy, including probable high income-tax on earned income, are considered along with the numerous gains (individual and societal) from such a redistribution.

Overall, the book is fairly comprehensive despite its introductory character. Depth is sacrificed occasionally for the sake of articulating a more holistic argument; however, this has not impacted on the quality of the book. A reader interested in a particular aspect of CBI, such as financial feasibility, would have to turn to other sources, such as the research repositories of BIEN (Basic Income Earth Network), as this book is a broad introduction rather than an in-depth analysis of a particular aspect of CBI. Indeed, this book clearly demonstrates why such a narrow enquiry might not be sufficient to understand fully the utility of a policy such as CBI. To aid the curious reader further, Torry provides a variety of reading suggestions in the text. While Basic Income experiments and pilots conducted across the world are not discussed in detail (some of these do not qualify as CBI as the term is defined in this book), the case studies at the end of each chapter provide more technical details and practical implications.

The UK context features heavily in the discussion throughout the text. However, the author's close association with the UK's Basic Income movement, and with the country's long history of debates around this topic, contributes to the richness and broadness of this book. A more sceptical reader may still need clarification on certain aspects of the implementation and the feasibility of CBI, but the ethical and philosophical arguments that Torry outlines are sound, timely and useful to the reader. To conclude, this book puts forth some compelling arguments in favour of the idea of CBI and of how we can employ it to overcome some of the toughest challenges faced by our society currently and in the near future.

World Bank. (n.d.). Gini index (world bank estimate). Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>