



## Let Them Eat Basic Incomes

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A study from Oxford University concludes that the percentage of U.S. jobs that are at risk from automation, within 20 years, is no less than nearly half (47%). From the viewpoint of managers, silicon chips and hydraulic arms offer some advantages over human workers: they don't strike or even ask for higher wages, they don't need health benefits, they don't file suits for sexual harassment, they don't get a higher rate of pay for overtime, they may be faster or otherwise better at some tasks, they don't require maternity leave, they create jobs for highly skilled technical people, and as capital investments they qualify for tax deductions. What's not to like? However, the loss of jobs is an impending crisis on the scale of a world war. It is developing in parallel with what climate scientists predict will be a series of disasters. One response to the former problem is said to be a universal basic income; another is some sort of tax on robots. As for the latter problem, global warming, the main solution being discussed is a shift from carbon-emitting technologies, such as gasoline-driven vehicles, to massive development of sustainable energy.

However, progress being made on either predicament is strikingly inadequate. With regard to global warming, the general attitude is sluggish, reluctant, minimal action, if not outright denial. With regard to machines taking half of our jobs, we have not even reached the stage of denial. Unemployment above 50% seems unthinkable. Look what's happened in politics with only a tiny fraction of that disruption.

In the middle ages, feudalism was much simpler. The work to be done did not demand high-tech skills. Many could guide a plow. Almost everybody could drop seeds and weed with a hoe. All hands turned out for the harvest. In contrast, machines of the near future will require skills of a relatively small group to make, install, program, and repair them. Strikingly unlike a canvas of fieldworkers by Breughel.

From one viewpoint, a universal guaranteed income is a streamlining of welfare: the dole without a means-test. But a basic income given to people who have no jobs and do no work is arguably a formula for trouble. It goes against the American ethic to get paid for doing nothing. It seems unfair, especially to the people who are still working. It deletes whatever meaning a job offers. You become nothing but a "consumer" and, like today's welfare client, you can't consume much. Meanwhile, the corporations selling stuff are in the position of no longer of negotiating with workers but, in effect, owning them, or at least owning the machines that have replaced them.

The issues that will inescapably arise include (a) who pays the taxes to provide the basic income? (b) how do we provide meaningful occupations for those who no longer have jobs? (c) to what extent can people not working be attracted into socially useful volunteer work rather than, say, watching TV and sleeping? (d) how generous would the basic income be? would it only amount to welfare without the case workers? (e) which level of government would be responsible for paying the basic income, and if not the federal, what would stop states from paying so little that people would move to states that were more generous?

It may sound simple to design a universal basic income. It is paid to everyone. It would cover the basic expenses of life. However, questions arise as soon as you try to define what is basic, and as soon as you consider the relationship to getting an additional income, as from a job.

I live in a town with an unusually high fraction of retired people, some of whom volunteer for such local organizations as the hospital, a food bank, elder care, meals on wheels, theater groups, the public library, hospice, schools (trained teacher's helpers). Since retirement, almost all of my work as a writer and TV producer has been on a volunteer basis. My wife has volunteered at the library, my sister as leader of a weekly discussion group, my brother's partner at the food bank. I don't know to what extent this pattern can be generalized.

Basic income is a formula for a two-class society even more extreme than our democratic, exceptional nation has today. Are we going to let the investor class get even richer relative to the average, based on the ownership of high tech machines or are we going to find a way to reach a quite narrow band of inequality, in part as a reward for some people able and willing to hold the remaining jobs? What will be the rate of social mobility between the basic-income-only families and those who have work or investments or both?

Most of all, can we divide the available work?

As proponents of a basic income gain more traction, critics of the idea have come forward; from the Cato Institute, from a contributor to Scientific American, from a writer in MIT's Technology Review.

One thing is certain. Advances in automation make this an issue we can ignore only at our extreme peril.