

Philippe Van Parijs

Against the two-third society. A view from Europe.

Summary of a paper presented
at the Conference "Marginalization: injustice at work"
Skepparsholmen, Sweden, October 1989

Arguably, Christ's key message in social and economic matters is a call for a special concern with the poor, the powerless, the underprivileged. In a Christian perspective, therefore, a life is a better life if it is devoted to improving the fate of the worst off. And this tends to coincide with fighting for social justice. The content of social justice, however, is and must be defined in a way that makes no reference to any particular conception of the good life, in a way that does not discriminate between alternative views about what is valuable or moral. On its most defensible interpretation, social justice requires that all should be given equal rights and maximal resources to pursue their own conception of a good life.

The paper that follows was originally prepared for a meeting of the National Board of Belgium's Christian Trade Union Confederation. It spells out this liberal conception of social justice, shows how it provides the core of a powerful response to so-called "neo-liberal" thought and policies, and discusses how it fits in with a number of typically Christian concerns.

One implication of this conception of social justice, as well as of the notion of special concern for the fate of the worst off, within the boundaries of affluent countries, is that marginalization, the rise of a society in which an affluent two-third majority ignores the interests of an excluded minority, is ethically unacceptable. What can and must be done about it? Let us be careful: the most obvious answer to this question is fatally counterproductive. Being committed to improving as much as possible the fate of the worst off does not imply that one should favour selective measures aimed specifically at them. Indeed, the very selectivity of the social policies currently in force in European countries is no small factor in the process of marginalization.

To illustrate, take first the case of *child benefits*. These are means-tested or selective - restricted to those who "need" them - in some countries, and non-discriminating or universal - given to all families with children, whatever their incomes from other sources - in other countries. However well meant, selective systems generate two perverse effects. The poor, who have to claim child benefits, are singled out as a special, stigmatized category. And many of them, with low skills and several children, are trapped forever in unemployment, because they are most unlikely to find a job that will pay so much as to make it worthwhile to forego the means-tested benefits.

An analogous argument can be and has been used to justify a *basic pension*, given to all as from retiring age, irrespective of past work performance. For a few years, however, a number of individual scholars and organizations throughout Europe have been discussing and promoting a more radical proposal. Let us not just give an unconditional grant to all the young (universal child benefit) and all the old (universal basic pension). Let us also give it to all people of working age. This proposal has many names (social dividend, *Grundeinkommen*, *allocation universelle*, *reddito di cittadinanza*, *bürgerlon*, etc.), but the name under which it has become known in the European discussion is *basic income*.

The state of the discussion varies a great deal from country to country. Only in one case - the Netherlands - has the discussion turned into a broad social and political debate. But in nearly all European countries there has been some discussion, especially in green, left Christian and libertarian socialist circles. 1986 saw the creation of a European coordination called B.I.E.N. (Basic Income European Network), whose regular Newsletter reviews relevant events and publications throughout Europe.

What has attracted such a varied set of people around the basic income proposal? To understand the reasoning behind it, let us bear in mind that many European countries have a guaranteed minimum income for those without adequate labour income or social insurance (the latest ones to introduce such a system were Luxemburg in 1986 and France in 1988). But this guaranteed income is conditional, in the sense that it is restricted to those who have inadequate income from other sources and make themselves available for work. Basic income supporters want to un-conditionalize this income guarantee. An income given to all and not just to the worst off, they argue, would be for

better for the sake of the worst off. For (1) it would remove the humiliating stigma attached to the status of a claimant; (2) it would abolish the unemployment trap in which the low-skilled are kept by a conditional system; and (3) it would improve the bargaining situation of every individual worker, esp. the low-skilled, by enabling her/him not to accept just any job (s)he is offered. If the fate of the worst off is not just a matter of income, but also of dignity, of social participation and of power, basic income is what we must go for.

Issues of financial feasibility and ethical defensibility, transition scenarios, advantages and drawbacks relative to alternative strategies (employment subsidies, work sharing, etc.) have all been abundantly discussed. This is not the place to summarize these discussions, but only to conclude by stating a personal conviction. At least in the current technological, economic and political context of the European Community, basic income provides the core of what I believe is the most promising strategy against marginalization, against the perpetuation and consolidation of a two-third society. It provides the core of a radical, yet realistic strategy demanded by both social justice and the concern with the least privileged, with their dignity, their participation in social life, their power.

References

Tony Walter, *Basic Income. Freedom from poverty, freedom to work*, London: Marion Boyars, 1989, paperback, £7.95.

A well informed and accessible introduction to the current state of discussion.

Philippe Van Parijs, 'The second marriage of justice and efficiency', in *Journal of Social Policy* (Cambridge), January 1990.

A more technical paper that identifies what I believe to be the key issues in the discussion about basic income.

Basic Income (c/o BIEN, 21 Bosduifstraat, B-2018 Antwerpen, Belgium) is the Newsletter of the Basic Income European Network.

Sent three times a year to all members of the network

(Membership fee for two years: BEF 1000 standard rate, BEF 500 unwaged, BEF 2000 institutions)