

Amy Downes and Stewart Lansley (eds) (2018), *It's Basic Income: The Global Debate*, Bristol: Policy Press, £15.99, pp. 256, pbk.
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If the answer is that “It’s Basic Income”, what is the question? For some enthusiasts, Universal Basic Income (UBI) is the answer to many questions: how to tackle poverty, make society more equal, cope with the uncertain future of work, promote creativity, make society more inclusive and democratic. A UBI would be a radical change that is idealistic and utopian – as were, in their time, universal education and healthcare, and few now question their continued existence. And interest is growing around the world. What is not to like? Is it merely cynical, conservative curmudgeons who stand in the way of progress? Or is it the case that UBI is not quite so smart, progressive or fair as it superficially seems? Is it not inherently improbable that one policy can solve so many problems so simply?

This book, comprising 38 brief chapters is, for the most part, a manifesto of UBI enthusiasts. There is a short section of “Dissent” – one tenth of the book. For example, Ian Gough succinctly argues that UBI is ‘deluded and diversionary’, combining ‘a radical vision with a naïve or insouciant view of politics’ which ‘will drain the energies of the left in social policy and will divert attention from so many other worthwhile policy alternatives.’ Such dissent deserves a serious answer but the reader will look in vain for serious engagement with the criticisms. Despite this, there is much to learn from this book.

As the editors set out, a UBI ‘would see a tax-free, unconditional and non-contributory weekly income paid to every individual as of right, irrespective of how much they earned or their work status.’ UBI is, then, a mechanism with certain key features. It should not be confused with a goal of policy, such as the goal of ending poverty or, in other words, ensuring that an adequate or basic income is universal; this goal will be taken here as paramount, a human right that should have priority, even if it is far from being achieved. Thus UBI is one specific mechanism, that may or may not be the best way of achieving the goal. Many mechanisms exist that can and do contribute to ensuring a basic income for all: basic services (education, child care, health service); employment policies (full employment, training, generation, fair pay policies); and redistributive policies (social security and tax policy). The key question is, then, whether, as the editors maintain, a UBI would be a valuable contribution to ending poverty.

For many enthusiasts, UBI is about to happen, and trials are reported from eight countries. Yet, if one examines the chapters on these trials in detail, the relevant evidence is very thin. First, most of the experiments described simply do not match the editors’ definition of UBI. Some are not universal, such as the much heralded trial in Finland which was restricted to unemployed people – a small tremor in contrast to the chapter heading of “An earthquake in Finland” – which has, since the book was published, come to an end. Some are income-tested, as with the trial in California. Several, such as those in India, Uganda, Kenya and Brazil, are forms of international charity targeted at poor villages. The evidence presented clearly shows that when the incomes of very poor people are increased this is highly beneficial to their welfare – which is why reducing poverty should be a national and global priority – but this is scarcely news. Annie Miller’s discussion of a planned Scottish pilot is carefully considered and shows the problems of setting up a bona fide experiment; yet even here there is no discussion of a trial that would compare the gains from a UBI with the gains from alternative uses of the same resources – which is surely the most important question.

In an interesting chapter, Ruth Lister reviews her ambivalent attitude to UBI. On the unconditionality of UBI and ‘the right to be lazy’ she writes “I find myself recoiling at the idea that other people should be required to subsidise that right”. In the past, she has found the idea of a “participation income, favoured by Tony Atkinson, “a potentially attractive compromise”

which “would allow for a more inclusive form of conditionality, based on making a social contribution.” While UBI would “provide financial support for the mass of unpaid work, disproportionately undertaken by women”, Lister acknowledges the argument of many feminists that UBI “does not value care work as such because it provides financial support whether or not care work is being undertaken.” She also has political concerns that “if progressives focus all their energies on calling for a UBI, they suck energy out of more immediate, potentially more achievable reforms” and she fears that “if UBI were implemented . . . it would be at a level that provided an even less adequate income than now for those without other means.” Given all these concerns, it is puzzling that she is “coming round to the idea of a UBI as a means of ensuring everyone at least a modicum of basic security in an increasingly insecure world.” Whether such a modicum might result in a yet more complicated system of social support and, most seriously, whether it might become an alternative, far lower, poverty level attractive to a right-wing government are dangers that are not pursued.

An important feature of this book is the recognition by many of the writers that a full UBI sufficient to replace existing social security is neither feasible nor fair. While there are serious deficiencies in social security, exacerbated in many countries by years of austerity and neo-liberal regimes, the social security system, with its conditional and targeted benefits, remains fundamental to tackling poverty. To eliminate social security with its benefits for those with children and those sick and disabled, unemployed or old and replace it by a UBI would increase poverty and inequality.

Philippe van Parijs, the high priest of UBI, who in the past has presented UBI as a fair and effective response to poverty, in this book writes: ‘Does the introduction of a basic income not threaten the very existence of our welfare state? . . . Needless to say, a basic income is by no means an alternative to publicly funded education and health care.’ (In passing, it should be noted that many advocates of UBI, such as Charles Murray and other neocon writers in the USA, following Milton Friedman’s advocacy of a Negative Income Tax, with which UBI has much in common, do explicitly see UBI as just such a means to roll back social provision for education and health care). Van Parijs continues: ‘Nor is it [UBI] meant to provide a full substitute to earnings-related social insurance benefits funded by workers’ social contributions.’ Unfortunately, van Parijs has yet to recognise the justice of fair conditionality, as explained in Piachaud (2018).

What is clear is that the more judicious advocates of UBI, such as Malcolm Torry, are no longer envisaging UBI as a replacement for social security but rather as a modest scheme that would work alongside it. There are certainly gains that might result from converting tax allowances into credits for all and using the tax system as a general means-test rather than having multiple means-tests for individual benefits, as many countries already do – but this is a pale shadow of what many believers in UBI hope for. And to have called the book “It’s Basic Income, partially” would not be quite so striking.

Social security, cut back as it has been in many countries, needs to be restored and extended to meet needs of changing circumstances. It also needs to be far more open to experimentation, and in this debates on UBI may be genuinely stimulating. But the principle of concentrating social security on the major causes of poverty has worked, and will continue to work. Compared to a UBI, social security schemes remain more equitable and efficient and are likely to remain far more politically attractive than a UBI distributed unconditionally regardless of need, without any conditions. Certainly universal benefits that are not conditional or means-tested are an important part of social security and many countries have such benefits for children, for disabled people and for older people. But because they work does not mean that it follows that it would be efficient or equitable to extend them to everyone regardless of need, as a full UBI would do. Yet this is what believers in UBI are proposing.

Overall, read carefully and critically, this book has many innovative and stimulating ideas. But, if you are looking for a transformative solution to all society's ills, then the conclusion must be "It's not Basic Income".

Reference

Piachaud, D. (2018), Basic income: confusion, claims and choices, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 26(3): 299–314.

DAVID PIACHAUD
London School of Economics
D.Piachaud@lse.ac.uk

Henning Lohmann and Ive Marx (eds) (2019), *Handbook on In-work Poverty*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, £40.00, pp. 528, pbk.

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It sometimes seems that with each passing week a handbook on some topic or other is published. Do these handbooks succeed in advancing understanding on a particular topic? Do they even achieve the more modest aim of representing a comprehensive compendium of knowledge in a specific sub-field? Do we – whisper it – *need* all of these Handbooks? I confess to not always being convinced. But there is undoubtedly a need for this excellent volume on in-work poverty edited by Henning Lohmann and Ive Marx.

As Henning Lohmann and Eric Crettaz note in their chapter on explaining country differences in in-work poverty, while there has been 'growing body of research on the working poor, evidence is still fragmented and often focussed on single aspects' (p. 67). This volume contributes towards overcoming this fragmentation, bringing together twenty-five chapters by leading experts in this growing field on a wide range of comparative analyses, country studies and policy issues.

In their Introduction, Lohmann and Marx identify three distinctive features of the volume. The first is that it seeks to cover a wide range of international contexts and perspectives, reflecting the growing concern about in-work poverty internationally. The second is to 'do justice to the analytical complexity' of in-work poverty, which they argue requires attention on how in-work poverty is being affected by labour markets, by demographics, and by policy change. Third, while the editors are clear about their own preference for quantitative analysis, they seek to 'do some degree of justice to paradigmatic diversity', by including chapters 'taking different approaches' to their favoured quantitative approach.

To what extent does the volume succeed against these criteria? Quite well, I would argue. The geographical breadth of the analyses included is impressive. There is a strong comparative focus running through the volume, with many chapters comparing in-work poverty across multiple European nations and (sometimes) the United States. There are then a smaller number of country chapters on the US, Italy and the UK, while there are a full seven chapters representing country studies and comparative perspectives from Latin America, South Africa and Asia.

The analytical complexity of in-work poverty is also on full view here, with several chapters detailing the contingent relationship between an individual's employment situation and their household's poverty status. The comprehensiveness of this volume provides the space to