



A History of the BIG Idea: Winstanley, Paine, Skidmore and Bellamy

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Abstract

The notion that humans have a right to basic capital or to a basic income guarantee by virtue of their existence can be traced to the Enlightenment. Many of the suggestions inherent in modern proposals for basic income or basic capital originated with four forerunners in the Anglo-American tradition: Gerrard Winstanley, Thomas Paine, Thomas Skidmore, and Edward Bellamy. All four embraced the notion that the equal moral considerability of all humans implied an equal right to the resources needed to survive, and were subjected to withering criticism of their ideals on the grounds that the provision of basic resources conflicted with rather than enhanced freedom.

The notion of an entitlement to basic capital or a basic income guarantee is far from a new idea. ECSO freedom (“effective control self-ownership”), the concept upon which Karl Widerquist predicates the modern basic income guarantee, depends on a notion of the moral equivalence and equality of all human beings that did not become widely accepted until the Enlightenment—or, in the case of women and people of color, decades after the Enlightenment (Widerquist 2013; Fleishacker 2004, 7; see also Lovett 2009). Those who owned property in the 17th and 18th centuries happened to be the same people who were assumed under the previous economic and social system to be those meriting the possession of property—the aristocracy and the wealthy (Fleishacker 2004,). The “ought” of economic independence had, therefore, constantly to conflict with the “is” of vast differentials in income and assets. As this paper will show, social reformers from the 17th century onward asserted a right to independence predicated on similar principles to those that Karl Widerquist outlines in his 2013 book, and were met with similar criticisms.

Widerquist’s theory of effective control self-ownership is predicated on the notion that the impoverished ought to be able to use natural resources without interference. Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers provided a practical demonstration of a failed attempt to mitigate poverty using natural resources. During

the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell's "New Model" army was formed to fight against the Royalist forces of Charles I. In the ideological space formerly occupied by the idea of divine right monarchy, the Levellers asserted the right of the people to political participation. The Putney debates, held by the army in 1647, illustrate the circulation of new ideas about the equality, or at least, the moral considerability, of all men. If all men were equally morally considerable, then their life plans were of equal value to them, and they ought to be free from coercion. In the words of Colonel Thomas Rainsborough, who was deputed to represent the perspective of the commoners in the Putney Debates, "Really I think that the poorest he that is in England has a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he has not had a voice to put himself under" ("Extract from the Debates at the General Council of the Army" 1647).

It was a short step from the rejection of political coercion to the realization that poverty was itself a form of coercion. Immediately in the wake of the regicide of Charles I, and in the midst of famine and high food prices among the people, Gerrard Winstanley, the literate, evangelically Protestant son of a cloth merchant, and army activist William Everard gathered a group of the poor together to cultivate what they characterized as the common land of Surrey (Petegorsky 1995). Christopher Hill notes that the Digger experiment coincided with a period in which more were becoming dependent on others for food production for the first time (Hill 1970, 223). Winstanley strove to realize Christ's kingdom on earth by making into material reality idealized notions of divine harmony (Hayes 1979, 83). "The rich man tells the poor, that they offend Reasons law, if they take from the rich; I am sure it is a breach in that Law in the rich to have plenty by them, and yet wil see their fellow creatures men and women to starve for want," Winstanley wrote in *The New Law of Reason* (Hayes 1979, 123). He advocated that the poor withhold their labor from landowners and cultivate the commons instead. He noted that victory over Charles I provided the poor with the opportunity to grasp freedom for the first time—a freedom dependent on exercising their right to the soil (Hayes 1979, 207; Petegorsky 1995, 183).

On April 1, 1649, Winstanley and four others began to dig, planting parsnips, carrots and beans on the commons on St. George's Hill in Surrey. Within two weeks, the colony had been reported to the New Model Army, resulting in a dialogue between the Diggers and Parliament over just what the Diggers were doing. Winstanley appealed to Lord Fairfax, Lord-General of the Army, and claimed that his only intention was to feed the poor rather than to disrupt the established order. He even gave good consequentialist reasons for allowing the poor to cultivate the commons, noting that if "Parliament, Army, and rich People, would cheerfully give consent that those we call Poor should Dig and freely Plant the Waste and Common Land for a Livelihood," unemployment would cease, scarcity of food would stop, [and] crime would be halted" (Hayes 1979, 184). Despite his many attempts to explain himself in print, Winstanley was arrested and the Digger experiment ended (Sandell 2011). But Winstanley was not alone in seeing this moment of political transition as a hopeful time for something more like economic equality; a non-Digger pamphlet from this same period, entitled *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, called unequal access to property the "original cause of all the slavery in the world but chiefly in England" (Petegorsky 1995, 139).

The demand for economic rights predicated on human rights emerged again in the context of the French Revolution, issuing from the pen of the major propagandist of the American Revolution. Written when he was a representative to the National Assembly in France, in the midst of a destabilized economy and widespread poverty, Thomas Paine's *Agrarian Justice* proposed payment to all citizens as reparation for the fact that their right to an equal share of the earth's natural resources had been usurped. In *Agrarian Justice*, Paine argued that "civilization" presents a tradeoff: without economic organization there is no economic growth and development, but economic development makes possible what Paine called "extremes of wretchedness" that are not present in a state of nature. Although individuals may have

preferred the “natural state” because every person had access to resources, it was impossible to move from a state of economic development back to a state of nature. Paine emphasized that private property and economic development owed their existence to society, and thus a man “owes on every principle of justice, of gratitude, and of civilization, a part of that accumulation back again to society from whence the whole came” (Paine 1797, King and Marangos 2006).

Although Paine acknowledged that the move from a state of nature to economic development was detrimental to some, he refused to propose confiscation of private property as a remedy. To do so would have been unjust, since improvements on the land and to other natural resources were indeed the work of individual hands. In an attempt to preserve the benefits of economic development while at the same time acknowledging the great injustice that had been done to those without land, Paine advocated the creation of a national fund, and a stake of 15 pounds sterling paid to each person when he or she turned 21. He also suggested an old-age-pension of 10 pounds a year be paid to each person upon reaching the age of 50, and to all lame and blind persons. Paine proposed that the national fund be created through a 10 percent tax of estates on the death of the holder, since that would perturb the economy the least (Paine 1797).

Paine claimed that his plan would increase national prosperity and stability while ensuring justice. Giving young people a monetary stake as they embarked on adulthood might prevent them from falling into poverty in the future. “When a young couple begin the world, the difference is exceedingly great whether they begin with nothing or with fifteen pounds apiece. With this aid they could buy a cow, and implements to cultivate a few acres of land; and instead of becoming burdens upon society, which is always the case where children are produced faster than they can be fed, would be put in the way of becoming useful and profitable citizens” (Paine 1797). Paine’s plan would benefit wealthy as well as the poor, since a more equitable distribution of property would provide the poor with good reasons to endorse the property rights of others (King and Marangos 2006, 63).

Paine’s involvement in the French Revolution, and his profession of religious infidelity, had damaged his reputation, but he continued to be celebrated by working people in both Britain and the United States, who identified “land monopoly” as the biggest threat to their personal freedom (Evans 1841, “Biographical Notice” 1825). Groups on both sides of the Atlantic saw access to land—whether “free land” in the form of homesteads in the west, or purchased land, as in the Chartist Land Plan—as potentially permitting workers to opt out of the wages system entirely, and to become economically self-sufficient (Bronstein 1999). In his 1829 *Rights of Man to Property!*, the most extreme proponent of this case, Thomas Skidmore, sketched out a left-libertarian plan for distributive justice. (Huston 1998, Gilbert 1834, Skidmore 1829). Skidmore argued that both self-ownership and the ownership of the products of one’s labor were crucial to human freedom, in ways that called for an exit option.

“Whenever nations have ceased to exist . . . it has been because there has prevailed in them no system, or theory of government, whereby property should be as nearly equal among the people, comparatively speaking, as their stature; and yet so constructed, as that each individual should labor, as it were, *exclusively* for himself, except so far as regards contributions to the public service” (Skidmore 1829, 29).

Skidmore also recognized the necessity of intergenerational economic justice, asserting that a man, finding himself born into an existing allocation of property, had just as much right to a portion of that property as those who preceded and surrounded him, simply “in virtue of his existence, and in virtue of the existence of the property in question. They are inseparable; while one has vital life, or the other physical existence” (Skidmore 1829, 42).

As Winstanley had done more than a century before, Skidmore asserted that humans' initial and pre-political right to an equal share of resources can be generalized from the right to life. No one questions the right of living humans to breathe, take in light with their eyes, or occupy the space taken up by their bodies. The necessities that support physical existence—food, water, shelter—are only extensions of the human body because they are the things humans need to survive (Skidmore 1829, 77-8). From the perspective of each individual, his life has priority, and the priority of his own existence is paramount for him whether he exists within or outside of any particular society. Thus, the individual can have no motivation to support any state of affairs that will not at the very least preserve his life.

If this natural right to resources is posited, there can be no requirement that land be fenced or improved or otherwise "mixed with labor" before it can be owned. Skidmore argued that a man may own his own labor, but labor does not have magical properties that confer ownership on resources. Rather, everyone has a continuing claim to all natural resources. Moreover, Skidmore asserted that because civilization is so ancient, no matter how much labor individuals perform, they remain tremendously indebted to the generations that came before them, for preparing infrastructure (Skidmore 1829, 237). Since a natural right to resources based on mere existence does not identify any particular *tract* of land or set of resources as belonging to any particular person, to have arrogated any particular tract in the mists of time without the consent of is to have made all worse off (Skidmore 1829, 33). Everyone has an equal claim, and "there can exist no power whatever to destroy equality of rights, but the power of violence and injustice" (Skidmore 1829, 44).

Skidmore's plan begins with a property census; all citizens of his state are required to register all the real and personal property in their possession (anyone holding back items from the general inventory is sentenced to 14 years in prison for grand larceny). Having performed the census, the state will issue all of the adult natives of the state with a dividend, or credit, corresponding to their equal portion of the value of the goods and chattels enumerated in the state. Once this dividend has been credited, the state will hold an auction, at which credited citizens will purchase real and personal property. The general property auction will include all people, including the disabled and the mentally ill, who will be represented by guardians or trustees acting on their behalf (Skidmore 1929, 41). Anything so large or complex that it cannot be divided up may be jointly purchased by a group of people (Skidmore 1829, 139). Once the auction has been conducted, the value of the goods sold is compared with the original dividend, and that those who are creditors to the state because they have not spent their original dividend will be entitled to a second dividend, called a "patrimony" (Skidmore 1829, 141). Thus, some people living within a state's boundaries will have exercised their preference for the acquisition of particular property, and others exercised their preference for the possession of liquidity.

Skidmore's plan resembles modern proposals for a "stakeholder society," with several crucial differences (Ackerman and Alstott 1999, 5). First, unlike Ackerman and Alstott's suggestion that young adults receive a one-time \$80,000 stake, Skidmore's property census and division of property take seriously the assertion that any initial acquisition of property has to be just in order for subsequent property ownership to be just. Second, while Ackerman and Alstott rationalize stakeholding on the grounds that it recognizes common participation in a national project, Skidmore's plan is predicated only on a common humanity, producing greater political freedom (Ackerman and Alstott 1999, 33). Finally, conducting a current property census and compiling all available property to calculate the citizen dividend allows Skidmore to avoid imposing a "wealth tax" or a "privilege tax," as suggested in other plans for stakeholding (Ackerman and Alstott 1999, 94-122).

Skidmore's plan also provides for intergenerational justice, by prohibiting his ideal state from recognizing and executing wills. For Skidmore, the power to make a will was an unfair binding of one generation by the previous—a failure to see that the rising generation has moral claims that are equal to ours.

“For, as individuals are equal one with another, so are generations; and to allow a past generation to extend the operation of its laws or its wishes into the present generation, contrary to their consent, is to allow a principle which destroys the existence of equality between one generation and another.” (Skidmore 1829, 115; Ackerman and Alstott 1999, 114).

Because those citizens reaching adulthood in every year subsequent to the initial auction have an equal claim on resources, Skidmore proposes that a general inventory be repeated annually, from the goods of everyone who has died in the past year. This inventory will then be divided up among those who come of age. People receiving their dividend may take it in cash or in credit to buy the goods that the state will always have on sale (Skidmore 1829, 142). Although Skidmore’s remarkably detailed plan had little traction, constant lobbying over a twenty-year period by other members of the labor movement resulted in the 1862 Homestead Act. The act, which provided 160 acres of land to “actual settlers” willing to farm it for five years, represented partial recognition by the United States government that there were at least good consequentialist reasons for a more equitable division of natural resources.

Before the American Civil War, the United States was an overwhelmingly agricultural nation in which farming occupied an almost mythic place. Most early proposals intended to ensure a more equitable distribution focused more on basic capital—in the form of land—than on a basic income (Bronstein 1999). After the war, as Northern industrialism coincided with the influx of vast waves of relatively poor European migrants, there were other attempts to limn a basic income guarantee. In his 1889 novel *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy envisioned an organization of society that would ensure both economic productivity and allow people access to maximum freedom. The conceit of the novel is that a denizen of Boston in 1887 named Julian West falls into a hypnotic sleep. When he is awakened in the year 2000, miraculously not having aged a day, he finds that Boston society—once paralyzed by the “labor problem”—has been completely transformed. Dr. Leete, Julian West’s tour guide through the future, echoes Thomas Paine when he explains that future Bostonians see no hope of going back to a prior stage of economic development.

“The restoration of the old system with the subdivision of capital, if it were possible, might indeed bring back a greater equality of conditions, with more individual dignity and freedom, but it would be at the price of poverty and the arrest of material progress.” (Bellamy 1889/1960, 65).

Edward Bellamy’s solution for the tension between distributive justice and economic development is government nationalization of industry; “the epoch of trusts had ended in the Great Trust. In a word, the people of the United States concluded to conduct their own business, just as one-hundred years before they had assumed the conduct of their own government . . .” (Bellamy 1889/1960, 66).

In the Boston of Bellamy’s year 2000, the notion of national defense extends to include the responsibility of each to “contribute his quota of industrial or intellectual services to the maintenance of the nation” (Bellamy 1889/1960, 69). All Americans from the ages of 18-45 are employed by the government. For the first three years of their “industrial army” service, all men and women work as common laborers; then they choose a career or one is chosen for them. In order to make all trades equally attractive, Bellamy’s utopia takes a page from the French socialist Charles Fourier, by proposing that people working in more unpleasant trades work for less time each day than people in more pleasant ones. “The principle is that no man’s work ought to be, on the whole, harder for him than any other man’s for him, the workers themselves to be the judges.” If a trade is so arduous that it has to be done in ten-minute shifts, then ten minutes is the length of the workday (Bellamy 1889/1960, 72; Gilman 1889).

In return for their participation, all in Bellamy's utopia, including the disabled, the mentally impaired, and children, are given a government "credit card," charged with the same number of dollars (Bellamy 1889/1960, 83). The right to that credit accrues to every person. As a critic of Bellamy explained, "Every person is free to spend his income as he pleases; but *it is the same for all*, the sole basis on which it is awarded being the fact that the person is a human being" (Alstott and Ackerman 1999; Gilman 1889, 58). Fictional protagonist Julian West points out to Dr. Leete that if all are given the same government credit, then the more physically or intellectually gifted might do twice as much work as the less gifted for the same pay. Leete has an interesting answer: "The amount of effort alone is pertinent to the question of desert. All men who do their best do the same. A man's endowments, however godlike, merely fix the measure of his duty" (Bellamy 1889/1960, 88). With differential wages removed from among the factors able to motivate people to work, the society of Bellamy's utopia depends on a sort of angelic hierarchy. "With us, diligence in the national service is the sole and certain way to public repute, social distinction, and official power. The value of a man's services to society fixes his rank in it" (Bellamy 1889/1960, 90; Walker, 2008).

Does Edward Bellamy's plan offer ECSO freedom? In a way, it does not: Bellamy's plan mandates participation in the economy; anyone who opts not to contribute his labor to the large corporation that is the United States will, in Bellamy's own words, "be left with no possible way to provide for his existence. He would have excluded himself from the world, cut himself off from his kind, in a word, committed suicide." (Bellamy 1889/1960, 70). Put into historical context, however, Bellamy's plan offered much more freedom than was available to the vast majority of Americans at the time he wrote. Education in his fictional Boston of the future is fully subsidized, enabling children from any background to choose any available trade or profession. No one enters the workforce before the age of 21, whereas child labor was still common in the United States until the 1920s and persists in some places today. And while "retirement" was not even a concept, much less a possibility, for most Americans in the 1880s, in Bellamy's utopia everyone retires from the industrial army at the age of 45 and then pursues any avocation, or none. For Bellamy, work was not necessarily the highest or most meaningful part of anyone's existence (Franklin 1938, Gilman 1889, 56).

Writing at a time of great social inequality, Bellamy saw the largest problem America faced not as individuals' inability to opt out of the labor market, but rather, as the failure to understand that rich and poor were part of a common cause, and that the wealth of the current generation had been built on the backs of the generation before them (Tilman 1985, 888). Bellamy called his unique ideology "Nationalism" to differentiate it from Socialism, and it was hugely popular with sectors of the American public. Nationalist clubs began to be formed as soon as the book was published, and the movement soon had two magazines and a monthly newspaper, *The Nationalist*. Bellamy's novel elicited responses by other authors, who expounded on or argued against his plan, and was read and recommended by British Fabians, members of the New Zealand Labour Party, and the Populist Party in the United States. As Carl Guarneri shows, Bellamy's influence persisted well into the 1930s, even influencing the New Deal (Guarneri 2008).

Historical antecedents of the Basic Income Guarantee, Winstanley, Paine, Skidmore and Bellamy shared more than just their attachment to the idea of a right to access to resources; they also all were subjected to withering criticism of their projects. Gerrard Winstanley was accused of fomenting war by the poor against the rich, and he and his fellow Diggers were arrested (Hayes 1979, 169). The Digger colony also faced the ire of the local populace, which, whipped into a frenzy by local preachers and landlords, burned it out and trampled the crops on several occasions (Petegorsky 1995, 175). Thomas Paine's ideas were criticized on the grounds that on the one hand, he saw government as potentially subversive of liberty, but on the other, was content to see it involved in income and inheritance taxation on a large scale (Merriam 1899).

Contemporaries objected to Thomas Skidmore's plan on the grounds that it failed to account for desert, to differentiate between the idle and the productive, giving the same stake to those who failed to work, when their lot should have been "hunger, thirst, and cold" (Gilbert 1831). Skidmore was also tagged with the term "agrarian," a reference to the agrarian laws of the Gracchi of ancient Rome. Agrarianism was an emotionally freighted term connoting not just division of the land and its distribution among the people, but destruction of the land by untrustworthy mobs (Govan 1964). It was such an effective epithet that upon being tarred with the brush of agrarianism, the labor movement expelled Skidmore, not even allowing him to speak at meetings (Political: movements of the people 1830). The fact that Skidmore was monomaniacal about his plan cannot have helped (Gilbert 1834).

The economist Nicholas P. Gilman savaged Edward Bellamy in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, excoriating Bellamy's Nationalists as cranks. Gilman alleged that Bellamy's corporate state was too much like the monarchy that the Americans had revolted to free themselves from, and called it "utterly subversive" of the "political freedom dear to the Anglo-Saxon race and of the deepest-founded American institutions" (Gilman 1889, 68). He noted too that Bellamy had skipped over such incremental but possible solutions as the municipal provision of utilities to full-blown nationalization of all industries, somehow achieved without violent revolution (Gilman 1889, 65). Like Paine's critics, Gilman wondered whether it was possible to square the "independence from tyranny" which was so central to the American myth of the state, with the statist moves necessary to make a basic income guarantee possible (Gilman 1889, 69)

Winstanley, Paine, Skidmore and Bellamy are only four among a host of predecessors whose ideas have overlapped with those expressed by modern advocates of stakeholding or of the Basic Income Guarantee. This is more than a historical curiosity; it shows both the persistent attractiveness of notions of a natural right to access to resources, on the one hand, and the persistence of opposition to these notions. Like Winstanley, Paine, Skidmore, and Bellamy, proponents of a modern Basic Income Guarantee have to wrestle more fully with the opposition to change that is imbricated in the current skewed distribution of economic power; with the question of desert, and whether those who fail to contribute their effort to an economic system should reap its benefits; and with the conflict between the liberty supposedly conferred by economic independence and the extent of the state that is suggested to put the mechanisms of economic independence in motion.

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