

**Beyond ‘Floor without a Ceiling’:  
The Rise and Challenges of ‘Commons Dividends Basic Income’**

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Just as there are diverse ideas of basic income, there are equally varied discourses to support and justify the ideas, ranging from anarcho-capitalist libertarianism to the new leftist post-work perspective. Moreover, these justification discourses appear to have a certain fad: for instance, while the rationale behind universal basic income has historically been linked to the ideas of “real libertarianism” (van Parijs and Vanderborght 2017) or “social republicanism” (Raventos 2007), a recent trend suggests a shift in the foundation of basic income towards the concepts of ‘commons’ and/or ‘common wealth dividends.’ Although these novel efforts to associate basic income with the notions of commons or common wealth (which is the wealth generated from commons) can be found on a global scale (for example, Standing 2019, Ranalli 2021), the endeavors have gained significant traction within the community of South Korean basic income proponents. The Basic Income Korea Network (BIKN), for instance, redefined basic income in 2019 as follows: “Basic income refers to the income that is paid in cash to all, unconditionally, individually, and regularly, based on the rights of all members of society to the common wealth.” (Revision Date: January 26, 2019.) In parallel, the network’s publication, *Basic Income* (〈계간 기본소득〉) has featured a plethora of discussions exploring the relationship between basic income and commons. Meanwhile, the network’s scholarly members have been developing theoretical frameworks to legitimize basic income as commons dividends (Kwak 2018; Keum 2000, Ahn 2021, Kim 2022).

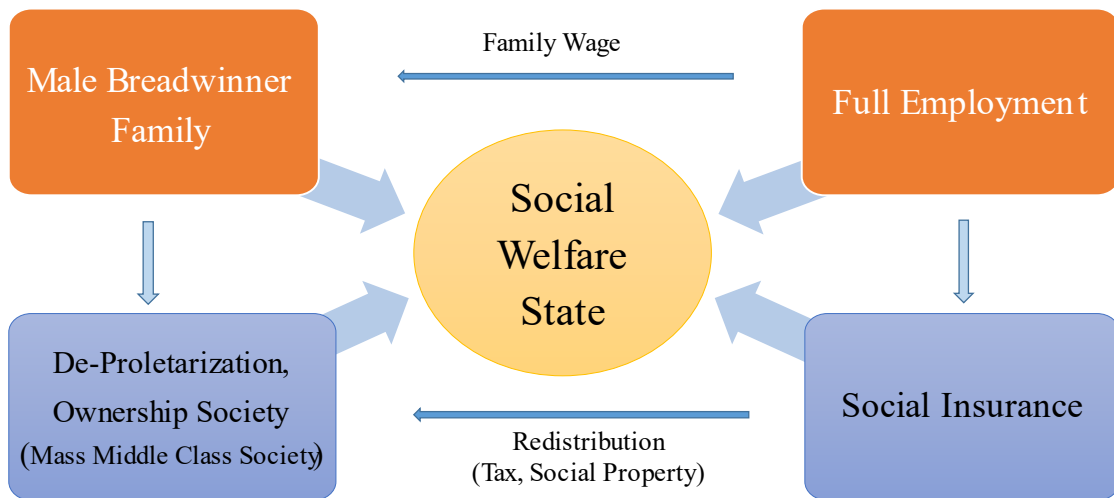
This presentation will examine these endeavors that redefine basic income as “Commons dividends” (CBDI hereafter), situating their significance and challenges within the historical context of the contemporary basic income movement. The presentation is divided into two sections. First, I will provide a brief exploration of the intricate relationship between the neoliberalization and the global rise of the basic income movement, against the backdrop of the waning Fordist social contract in the late 20th century. This exploration aims to elucidate the

implications and significance of the idea of CBDI. Subsequently, I will discuss the key arguments of CBDI and underscore the challenges that it has encountered.

### **Basic Income and Neoliberalism: Evil Twin?**

The modern resurgence of the basic income movement in the late 20th century intriguingly coincided with the rise of neoliberalism. Is this mere coincidence, or does it indeed unveil shared concerns or worldviews between neoliberalism and basic income? While basic income initiatives need to be understood in complex global contexts, including the implementation of various cash transfer programs since the 1990s in the Global South (Ferguson 2015; Jager and Vargas 2023), due to constraints in time and capacity, my primary focus here will be on exploring the experiences of Western countries within the framework of Fordist and post-Fordist capitalism. The diagram below provides a rough illustration of the structure of the “Fordist social contract,” which worked during the so-called “golden age of capitalism,” spanning from World War II to the late 20th-century rise of neoliberalism.

## Structure of Fordist Social Contract



The Fordist social contract was established on two fundamental pillars: male breadwinner family and full employment (ensuring job security). In the realm of the family, the Fordist family wage, encompassing compensation for the reproductive labor by female homemakers, facilitated the transformation of the mass working class into middle-class asset owners. This approach prevented them from pursuing socialism and challenging to private ownership (Harvey 1994). On the other hand, stable employment ensured access to social insurance, which measured and managed various risks deviating from the conventional life trajectory—such as unemployment, workplace accidents, and retirement. Also, redistribution policies were implemented in the forms of progressive taxation and the transfer of social properties. Consequently, the post-war “welfare state” or “social state” undertook the role of the “ultimate insurer” which is responsible for the administration of these four pillars (Ewald 2020).

As is well known, this model collapsed after the 1970s and underwent neoliberal reform. Due to its internal contradictions and external economic crises, each element of the Fordist social contract began to be “subject to suspicion, criticism, and political conflict” from both the left and the right (Donzelot 1994). In opposition to full employment, the discourse of labor flexibilization and de-industrialization were raised from the right. Meanwhile, the left criticized the alienating and oppressive aspects of labor and deployed “work refusal” strategies. Although the debate over the male breadwinner family was more complex, in general, the right had a strong interest in dismantling the Fordist family wage and promoting entrepreneurial and flexible family models, while the left and feminists criticized the patriarchy and heteronormativity inherent in the male breadwinner model. Regarding social insurance, right-wing discourses problematized the financial burden and inefficiency of the welfare state, emphasizing personal responsibility for risk management. In contrast, leftists pointed out the exclusive normativity within the social welfare system and resisted the expansion of state bureaucracies. Such critiques of the Fordist social contract from both the right and the left contributed to the reconfiguration of the post-war welfare state, leading to its transition to a neoliberal regime based on the flexibilization of work and family.

This process that we usually call ‘neoliberalization’ has also served as a condition for the

resurgence of global basic income movements as an alternative social security program. The technology of cash transfer, which occupied a marginal position in the social insurance welfare system, has reemerged as an attractive option for a new social security system that Arthur Kemp once called “welfare without the welfare state.” In fact, despite their internal differences, various basic income ideas are largely based on a common understanding of contemporary realities: the three pillars of the postwar Fordist social security system—full employment, the normal family, and social insurance—have collapsed and been irreversibly superseded by neoliberal conditions. This shared belief is reflected in the main principles of basic income. For example, in BIEN’s widely accepted definition of basic income, “a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement,” the phrases such as “unconditionally” and “without work requirement” reflect the belief that work can no longer be the basis for security. “On an individual basis” shows the rejection of the ‘normal’ family and the male breadwinner model, while “cash payment” reveals suspicions regarding the inefficiency and oppression of the social insurance system.

In this sense, the idea of basic income runs the risk of sharing neoliberalism’s “market utopia.” Instead of aiming to curb capital accumulation and mitigate widening inequality, basic income often places greater emphasis on providing individuals with the option to pursue their own social security by granting them cash. To borrow Samuel Moyn’s words, basic income appears to envision a social security system that lacks a “ceiling to limit wealth accumulation and inequality”, focusing solely on “providing a floor of protection against the worst tragedies that free markets can produce”(Moyn 2019). Rather than using social control to reduce inequality, basic income initiatives seem to envision a social security system in which individuals are guaranteed a minimum standard of living through cash transfers and market consumption.

This could explain why basic income often garners unexpected support from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, conservative politicians, and anarcho-capitalists. Especially when offered in insufficient amounts, basic income might alleviate capital’s burden concerning labor reproduction costs and potentially contribute to the proliferation of a flexible, low-wage workforce. Moreover, basic income could serve as a solution to potential insufficient demands caused by technological innovations. If the provision of such a “floor” can legitimize the

capitalist accumulation of wealth, there would be no reason for innovative entrepreneurs and anarcho-capitalists to oppose the idea.

### **Beyond ‘Floor without a Ceiling’: Conceptualizing Shared Wealth and CBDI**

In what ways can a basic income go beyond the passive acceptance of neoliberal conditions and its market utopia? What conditions are necessary for a basic income to function as a catalyst for a new social contract that provides not only a “floor” for survival but also a “ceiling” to control the extent of inequality? I think that CBDI can present an answer to these questions. By actively highlighting and addressing the concepts of shared ownership and wealth, CBDI engage with the matter of private ownership—a concern overlooked by the Fordist social insurance system.

According to advocates of CBDI, commons/common wealth can be categorized into two types: “natural common wealth” encompassing land, natural resources, and the environment, and “artificial common wealth” including knowledge, cultural assets, and data. They argue that since these forms of commons do not exclusively belong to specific groups but are created through collective social efforts, it is justifiable to distribute the revenue derived from them in the form of basic income. For instance, even if we acknowledge the pursuit of private profit through the utilization of land or natural resources, the resources themselves are communal assets; consequently, a portion of the profit should be shared among everyone. Bid data can be another example—given that its creation involves contributions from everyone, the profits from it should be distributed as dividends to all citizens. Proponents of CBDI, furthermore, extend their perspective beyond viewing commons as an important funding source for basic income; they also redefine and rationalize basic income through the lens of the right to commons and common wealth. An example of this approach can be found in BIKN’s definition of basic income, as seen earlier. In this way, CBDI offers the potential to introduce a “ceiling” that curbs inequality and advocates for a more equitable redistribution of wealth throughout society.

Naturally, several questions need to be addressed for the idea of CBDI to effectively serve as a catalyst for a new social contract. Primarily, as acknowledged by some proponents of CBDI, the concept of commons itself does not inherently lead to endorsing basic income: even if citizens

have an equal right to commons, there is no inherent reason that it must be distributed in the form of basic income. (We can think of various other forms of distribution.)

Simultaneously, due to the indeterminate scope of commons or common wealth, it needs to be addressed how the scope of commons or common wealth can be defined, and who should be recognized as the custodians of the commons. For instance, when asserting that natural resources belong to ‘everyone,’ questions arise regarding which resources qualify as commons as well as who is ‘everyone’ (whether it is local community members, citizens within a nation-state, or the global population).

More importantly, we should question whether CBDI inherently contradicts the neoliberal conditions embraced by existing basic income movements: labor flexibility, reliance on money and markets, and an emphasis on individual autonomy. For instance, while commons calls for “social cooperation and reciprocity” among community members managing the commons resources (Federici & Kapentzis 2020), there is limited room for such collaboration and reciprocity within the framework of basic income that emphasizes individual autonomy. In addition, CBDI is essentially built upon the premise of receiving one’s “rightful share” in monetary form, which inadvertently risks reinforcing and expanding the liberal or libertarian idea of ownership—that everything belongs to certain owners and this ownership must be always safeguarded.

Furthermore, despite the “something for everyone” ethos underpinning commons, the actual execution of basic income hinges on citizenship (residency) of a particular political community, often a nation-state. Consequently, CBDI runs the risk of escalating disputes over citizenship boundaries and intensifying market competitions among political communities striving to enhance their shared wealth. Guy Standing, an advocate of commons dividend basic income, seems to recognize these risks: “One concern is that, to increase the size of dividends, commoners might support a rapid rate of extraction of commons resources and commons-depleting commercialization.” Nevertheless, instead of thoroughly addressing this potential contradiction, he merely proposes enhancing “ecological education” to prevent sharers (citizens) from succumbing to short-term thinking (Standing 2012: 412-13).

## **Conclusion**

Despite these potential tensions and contradictions, the idea of CBDI is deserving of attention as a compelling endeavor that seeks to establish fresh foundations for social security and solidarity within the framework of neoliberal conditions. The widespread global trend of neoliberalization since the late 20th century has eroded the very basis of full employment, intensifying the precariousness of life, and thereby disrupting the former Fordist "work-social security" paradigm. While acknowledging these neoliberal conditions, CBDI presents an opportunity to replace the dysfunctional "work-social security" model with a novel "commoning-social security" paradigm. What can be the future envisioned by basic income? On one hand, there would a neoliberal market utopia characterized by a "floor without a ceiling" looms, offering only minimal safeguards, as apprehended by Samuel Moyn (2019). In contrast, we can also imagine a new ideal of universality and social solidarity where our very existence forms the foundation of our entitlements to society's common wealth. Albeit partial, CBDI seems to present a route to the latter future.

This presentation does not intend to advocate for or against CBDI. Instead, I have examined its implications in comparison to other basic income ideas and proposed the necessary considerations to clarify its political orientation. As a discourse still in its infancy, the future of CBDI remains unanswered. What is clear, however, is that the issue of ownership and sharing has emerged as the focal point for new alternatives and returned to the center of debates within basic income movements.