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Is a Penny a Month a Basic Income? A Historiography of the Concept of a Threshold in Basic Income

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Abstract: Does a penny per month constitute a Basic Income? Were that penny to be paid individually, universally, and unconditionally, the answer would be ‘yes’, following the definition of Basic Income given by some of its leading advocates, be it organisations like the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) or prominent scholars such as Philippe Van Parijs. Some might be puzzled as to how this could be ‘a capitalist road to communism’, or give us ‘freedom as the power to say no’, both of which have been advocated by prominent researchers. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for or against their definition, but rather to situate it historiographically, enabling fruitful discussion. The paper will show how there was a widely shared assumption in the 1970s and 80s, at the early stages of both academic articulations and public discussion, that Basic Income comes with some notion of a threshold or level to be taken as a minimum or as adequate. The paper goes on to outline three issues that arise once the concept of a threshold is dropped from the definition. Examined in addition are five justifications for doing so. Much like any other idea, the concept of Basic Income is a social construct. By situating it here within a historical perspective, we wish to facilitate academic discussion regarding both the achievements and erasures that have occurred as a consequence of the concept’s academic refinement—refinement that is in itself majorly indebted to BIEN and Van Parijs.

Keywords: definition, threshold, historical revisionism, Philippe Van Parijs, basic needs

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1 Introduction

Does a penny per month constitute a Basic Income? Were that penny to be paid individually, universally, and unconditionally, the answer would be ‘yes’, following the definition of Basic Income given by the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN)—‘a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement’.

Some might be puzzled as to how a penny per month could be ‘a capitalist road to communism’, or give us ‘freedom as the power to say no’, both of which have been brought forward by prominent researchers (and co-chairs of BIEN at various points) as an example of what Basic Income can achieve. In no way does this paper wish to argue for or against the current BIEN definition. Rather, I want to situate this definition historiographically, enabling fruitful discussion.

The paper will show how in the 1970s and 80s, at the early stages of both academic articulations and public discussion, there existed a widely shared assumption that Basic Income comes with some notion of a threshold or level to be taken as a minimum or as adequate. This was also the case around the time when the term Basic Income (and terms like it) first came into use, which, as far back as we can currently trace, was in 1919. I will then go on to examine the *change* in the definition (be it *intentional* or not) that was undertaken by leading proponents in the late 1980s and early 1990s and that has led to the current ‘diarchy of definitions’ or two definitions ruling in parallel. This change made at that time seems to have already entered the collective amnesia, hence my first aim in this paper would be to rescue it against historical revisionism. The second aim would be to discuss the pros and cons of the particular definition that excludes the notion of a threshold—the no-threshold definition. There are three deficiencies—logical, historical, political—that I would like to lay out at the start, before continuing with two justifications in favour of the no-threshold definition. These two are 1. the argumentative nature and practical difficulty of identifying such a threshold and 2. the potential merit of highlighting ‘unconditionality’ by excluding ‘subsistence’ from the Basic Income definition. Further to this, I would like to offer a charitable interpretation that would justify the no-threshold definition by adducing three other reasons: namely, the role of social services in determining the threshold, and the accommodation of a related idea (i.e. some versions of ‘social dividend’), and the economic fluctuation of the level of Basic Income.

2 An Apparent Assumption

In their epoch-making article titled ‘a capitalist road to communism’, Robert van der Veen and Philippe Van Parijs differentiated the concept of ‘Basic Income’ from

a wider concept of ‘guaranteed income’, and argued for the merits of the former. Their description of Basic Income there is that ‘every individual, whatever his or her income from other sources, is entitled to a completely unconditional *universal grant* or *basic income*, the level of which depends only on such variables as age and degree of handicap (as rough proxies for basic needs)’ (van der Veen & Van Parijs, 1986, p. 162. Italics are original, underline is mine). This understanding of Basic Income as covering basic needs is vital for their key argument: Basic Income can be ‘a capitalist road to communism’.¹

It isn’t hard to find other examples of showing how people understand Basic Income (or what now we call Basic Income) as a type of income roughly sufficient to meet basic needs. In the ranks of advocates we can have a range: starting from John Stuart Mill’s argument in favour—in the second edition of his *Principles of Political Economy* (Mill, 1849), passing via the demands of the British working-class women’s liberation movement in the long 1970s (Yamamori, 2014), and running up to *Freedom as the Power to Say No* by Karl Widerquist (Widerquist, 2013).²

Those in the ranks of the critics who fear that Basic Income would cause people to be lazy and shirk work, assume that Basic Income would make people live on it – meaning that it would entirely suffice in covering basic needs. Similar assumptions are made by those who criticise on grounds of feasibility. Even among those whose critique is based on the reciprocity principle (regardless of whether or not there is a threshold), some assume that ‘every citizen will be entitled to a basic income that frees them from the necessity of having a paid job’ (Rothstein, 2017).³

These assumptions have been multifariously worded—as covering *basic needs* or the *cost of living*, as corresponding to a *subsistence level*, as being *adequate*, or constituting a *minimum*, etc. Obviously, ‘adequate’ ordinarily means something different from being ‘minimum’, and in some movements the point has been debated as to whether demands ought to be made for an adequate income or a minimum income (Yamamori, 2014). What is common among these assumptions is that all of them presuppose a certain *minimum threshold* as essential component of Basic Income. In this paper, I use the term ‘threshold’ as short-hand for this *minimum threshold*. I do not mean to suggest a maximum threshold.

1 ‘communism’, in their understanding, as the state when ‘each [and everyone in society would have an income distributed] according to needs’. See van der Veen and Van Parijs (1986).

2 We can add here Joseph Charlier’s ‘guaranteed minimum’ of 1848 (Charlier, 1848), E. Mabel and Dennis Milner’s ‘State Bonus’ of 1918 (Milner & Milner, 1918), C. E. Ayres’s ‘Basic Independent Income’ in 1952 (Ayres, 1952), and J. E. Meade’s ‘Unmodified Social Dividend’ in 1972 (Meade, 1972). The list, in fact, can be exceedingly long and it is a point to revisit from a slightly different perspective in Section 4.

3 Malcolm Torry criticises it as ‘the flawed definition’ (Torry, 2017b). While I don’t think Rothstein’s definition ‘flawed’, but rather consider it one of the authentic definitions, I have been guided by Torry’s concluding remark: ‘the debate should be rational. Rationality requires attention to definitions [...] (Torry, 2017b)’. This paper is a modest endeavour to follow through on his remark.

3 The Two Definitions of Basic Income

Why then is this widely shared assumption omitted from BIEN's definition? Actually there were and there still are many definitions that include this assumption explicitly, whereas the definition omitting the assumption can be found not only in BIEN's definition, but also in other literature. The two definitional lineages, so to speak, have existed in parallel.

3.1 The Definition with a Threshold

Let me start with the definition in which a threshold is included. In the constitution of The Basic Income Research Group (BIRG) – a British organisation founded in 1984 – the definition of Basic Income included a threshold concept: '[a] Basic Income would be paid to every man, woman and child resident [...]. It would provide for *basic subsistence* and the level would depend mainly on age'⁴. Bill Jordan, a founding member of both BIRG and BIEN, wrote in *BIRG Bulletin* (spring 1988) that BIRG adopted four criteria, the first of which is *adequacy* – '*a guaranteed living standard sufficient to prevent poverty*' (Jordan, 1988, p. 3. Italics mine). Annie Miller, another founding member of both BIRG and BIEN, pointed out that there are many versions of the Basic Income scheme, all sharing four common principles and one of these four is that 'each individual is entitled to an "adequate" basic income, paid automatically into his/her account' (Miller, 1984, p. 71).

In his letter of 1986 addressing attendees of the first international conference on Basic Income (as well as other interested parties), Philippe Van Parijs not only informed the foundation of BIEN, but also defined Basic Income as '*a guaranteed minimum income granted on an individual basis, without means test nor willingness-to-work requirement*' (Van Parijs, 1986b. Italics are mine). The word 'minimum' here ostensibly connotes a threshold.⁵ In 1989, Van Parijs provided the definition of Basic Income with seven characteristics—one being that '*it is sufficient to cover a person's basic needs*'—in his paper 'on the ethical foundations of basic income' presented at a conference in 1989 (Van Parijs, 1989a, pp. 4–6; van Trier, 1995, pp. 6–7. Italics are mine). He went on to explain that '[t]his is one connotation

⁴ BIRG (1984), p. 1. Italics are mine. BIRG (1985) introduced the definition with slightly different wording, but still retaining the concept of a threshold: 'to guarantee to each man, women and child the unconditional right to an independent income *sufficient to meet basic living costs*' (p. 1. Italics are mine).

⁵ In his 'terminological note' presented at the first congress, Van Parijs also referred to 'four ways of guaranteeing a *minimum income*', one of which is Basic Income. Again, a threshold seems to be presupposed as an indispensable part of Basic Income (Van Parijs, 1986a).

of the “basic” of “basic income”, as it is standardly understood’ (Van Parijs, 1989a, p. 6). It is also worth noting that Van Parijs distinguished this ‘Basic Income’ from what he calls ‘universal grants’—lacking a threshold (Van Parijs, 1989a, pp. 4–6; van Trier, 1995, pp. 6–7).

This threshold-encompassing line of definition has continued to exist to this day. Guy Standing, former co-chair of BIEN, writes in his 2011 book as follows:

The core of the proposal [Basic Income] is that every legal resident of a country or community, children as well as adults, should be provided with a modest monthly payment. Each individual would have a cash card entitling them to draw a monthly amount for *basic needs*, to spend as they see fit, with add-ons for special needs, such as disability.⁶

Karl Widerquist, in the introduction of *Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income: a theory of freedom as the power to say no*, adopts the concept of ‘Basic Income Guarantee (BIG)’ which consists of Basic Income and Negative Income Tax. BIG is ‘a government-provided, unconditional assurance that everyone has a regular cash income *large enough to meet their basic needs*’.⁷ Palgrave Macmillan’s book series *Exploring Basic Income Guarantee*, possibly the biggest academic book series on Basic Income, adopts similar terminology⁸ as does also the U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network, which is an official affiliate of BIEN.⁹

The Unconditional Basic Income Europe (UBIE), a European-wide network and also an official affiliate of BIEN, describes four characteristics of Basic Income, that is, *universal, individual, unconditional, and high enough*. The last one is detailed as follows:

The amount given should provide for *a decent standard of living*, one which meets society’s social and cultural standards in the country concerned. It should prevent material poverty and provide the opportunity to participate in society and to live in dignity.¹⁰

Basic Income Ireland, another official affiliate of BIEN, presents Basic Income as ‘*sufficient to live a frugal but decent life without additional income*’.¹¹ The Citizens’

⁶ Standing (2011), p. 171. Italics are mine. In Standing (2009, 2017) the definition of Basic Income is differently worded, but still retains a threshold.

⁷ Widerquist (2013), ch. 1. Italics are mine.

⁸ ‘Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) is designed to be an unconditional, government-ensured guarantee that all citizens will have *enough* income to *meet their basic needs*’ (in Widerquist, 2013. Italics are Mine). Series editors are Karl Widerquist, James Bryan, and Michael A. Lewis.

⁹ ‘The Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) is a government ensured guarantee that no one’s income will fall below the level necessary to meet their most basic needs for any reason’. <https://usbig.net/about-big/> (accessed 26 July 2021)

¹⁰ <https://www.ubie.org/who-we-are/> (accessed 26 July 2021). Italics are mine.

¹¹ <https://basicincome.ie/faq/> (accessed 13 August 2021). Italics are mine. According to Malcolm Torry, the threshold definition of Basic Income has been widely adopted by not just the

Basic Income Feasibility Study Steering Group in Scotland adopts the following definition for their work between 2018–20, assessing the feasibility of a basic income pilot project in Scotland, ‘[a] *minimum* payment, sufficient to meet *basic needs*’ among one of four ‘[k]ey elements of a Basic Income’.¹²

3.2 The Definition without a Threshold

Now let me move on to the definition *without* a threshold. While its first conference organiser seemed to describe Basic Income as having a threshold in 1986, BIEN now defines Basic Income as ‘a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement’.¹³ It is the current version that was revised in 2016, but the older version adopted in 1988 also didn’t have any reference to a threshold.¹⁴

BIRG, which initially had the definition with a threshold (as we have seen above), changed its name a few times, and is currently called the Citizen’s Basic Income Trust (CBIT). And just as it changed its name, it changed its definition of Basic Income. It currently defines Basic Income as ‘an unconditional income for every citizen’ with five criteria: unconditional, automatic, non-withdrawable, individual, and as a right of citizenship.¹⁵ There isn’t any reference to a threshold.

Philippe Van Parijs, whose initial description of Basic Income and its justification, relied on a particular threshold that would meet basic needs as we have seen above, changed his definition of Basic Income sometime between 1989 and 1992¹⁶.

three affiliates of BIEN I cited (U.S., Europe, and Ireland), but also by many others such as South Africa, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Netherland, Norway, Portugal, and Switzerland (Torry, 2017a).

¹² <https://www.basicincome.scot/what-is-basic-income> (accessed 26 July 2021). Italics are mine.

¹³ <https://basicincome.org/about-basic-income/> (accessed 31 July 2021)

¹⁴ ‘an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement’ (BIEN, 1988)

¹⁵ <https://citizensincome.org/citizens-income/what-is-it/> (accessed 31 July 2021)

¹⁶ Definitions/formulations by Van Parijs from 1989b, 1991 and 1992c are interesting in terms of his transition. In 1989, he uses the term ‘unconditional income’ rather than Basic Income or ‘universal grants’. And there seem to exist two gradations of it. One is as a threshold of unconditional income—‘a certain *level* of satisfaction of material wants is given to all ... in the form of an unconditional income’ (p. 485. Italics are original). The other is a desirable level, for when societal productivity is elevated: ‘[Unconditional income is] to be developed into a fuller version, as the height of the income that can be unconditionally provided to all rises, due to enhanced productivity, up to the point where it is sufficient to enable everyone to buy a satiating bundle of goods’ (p. 485). In 1991, he explains Basic Income with a threshold: ‘an individual guaranteed *minimum* income without either a means test or a (willingness to) work condition’ (p. 102. Italics are mine). Finally, in 1992, he already uncouples Basic Income from the notion of basic need, while admitting

His new definition is exactly the same as the definition by BIEN adopted in 1988: ‘an income unconditionally paid to all on individual basis, without means test or work requirement’. It is quite clear that in the formulation below, the threshold as linked to basic needs that had existed in his initial description, was dropped:

It [the expression ‘basic income’] is *not*, however, meant to suggest a link with so-called basic needs. As the expression will be used here, a basic income can in principle fall short of as well as exceed whatever level of income is deemed sufficient to cover a person’s basic needs. (Van Parijs, 1992a, p. 4)

The addition of this note is a rather unexpected full volte-face from Van Parijs’ definition of ‘basic income’ as income ‘sufficient to cover a person’s basic needs’, which latter he had described just three year earlier as suffusing the meaning of ‘basic’ in ‘basic income’.

4 What’s Wrong with the Omission of ‘Threshold’ from the Definition?

These threshold-omitting definitions categorise the ‘penny per month’ as a genuine Basic Income (‘a penny per month, paid individually, universally, and unconditionally’). Might there be anything wrong with that? The issues that arise are logical, historical, and political.

4.1 The Logical Rupture

Let us take the example of CBIT. According to its definition, a penny per month would constitute Basic Income, if it were to be paid unconditionally, automatically, individually, in a non-withdrawal manner, and as a right of citizenship. The organisation claims that such income would:

- provide a secure financial platform to build on
- enable the employment market to become more flexible at the same time as enhancing income security
- give to everyone more choices over the number of hours for which they were employed

its proposals have ‘typically been proposals for a form of guaranteed *minimum* income that is unconditional (pp. 471–2. Italics are mine)’.

- enable carers to balance their caring and other responsibilities
- make it easier to start new businesses or to go self-employed, and
- encourage personal freedom, creativity, and voluntary activity¹⁷

It is not at all clear how a vanishingly small penny per a month can make such an enormous undertaking possible (be it in general, or in the U.K. of today where the organisation is based). Something seems to be amiss, logically speaking, between what CBIT defines as Basic Income and what CBIT think such an income would enable—in effect, tremendous outcomes already presuppose that basic needs are met, but nowhere is this acknowledged. A similar logical lacuna could be spotted in many (though not all) of both academic and popular justifications for Basic Income.¹⁸

Another issue of logic is that there is widespread use of ‘*full* Basic Income’ and ‘*partial* Basic Income’, even among organisations/advocates/academics adopting the no-threshold definition. Here ‘*full* Basic Income’ means a level equal or above a certain threshold, while ‘*partial* Basic Income’ means a level under a certain threshold. Thus this *full-partial* terminology presupposes a threshold for Basic Income. According to Van Parijs, expelling the threshold from the definition and still using the *full-partial* terminology (in the above sense) is logically inconsistent (Van Parijs, 1992a, p. 30). In a world where a penny a month fell *fully* within the definition of Basic Income, what would two hundred pounds constitute—a *partial* basic income?

4.2 Historical Revisionism

Another issue with the threshold-omitting definition is that it is different from what Basic Income meant to people, whether in academia or in activism, at least in the long 1970s and 1980s (maybe, for many, to this day).

Let me probe a bit more into the situation in academia. In the very book where Van Parijs introduced the no-threshold definition, several contributors had either explicitly defined or implicitly assumed a Basic Income *with* a threshold. John Baker, an Irish philosopher, made ‘sufficiency to cover basic needs part of the definition of basic income’ (Baker, 1992, p. 126). Brian Barry, a British philosopher who taught at Oxford, LSE, Columbia and Chicago, stipulated criteria for Basic

¹⁷ <https://citizensincome.org/citizens-income/why-do-we-need-it/> (accessed 31 July 2021)

¹⁸ Some advocates for Basic Income who define it without any threshold are cautious enough to put adjectives such as ‘significant’, ‘sizeable’, ‘highest sustainable’, or ‘substantial’ before Basic Income when they try to justify it with some possible merits. For example, see Van Parijs (1992b, 1995); Birnbaum (2012).

Income, one of which is ‘set at a level such that anyone can live on it’ (Barry, 1992, p. 137). Richard Norman, another British philosopher, wrote on ‘the two defining features of basic income’, one being that ‘it is sufficient to satisfy basic needs’ (Norman, 1992, p. 141).

Did these philosophers misunderstand what Basic Income meant? Or were they stipulating an idiosyncratic philosophical definition of Basic Income, which is different from the usage of the term outside their ivory towers? I would like to show that neither of those was the case. In the long 1970s the term Basic Income was used quite loosely, and in 1980s people started to differentiate it from similar concepts in an effort to fine-tune definitions. Both the earlier loose usage and the later precision-based formulations include a threshold concept in their core.

Let us look at the earlier usage. In the long 1970s, there proliferated rather vague concepts of Basic Income, Guaranteed Income, Minimum Income, etc. They were interchangeably used and all came with a threshold—signalled by words like adequate, basic, minimum, etc (Steensland, 2008; Yamamori, 2014).

In the 1980s academics and policy makers started to differentiate these terms, but almost all still came with the idea of a threshold.¹⁹ For the choice of the term Basic Income to mean unconditional income, the definitive moves were the Basic Income Guarantee proposal made by MP Brandon Rhys Williams in early 1982, and the formation of BIRG in 1984. The proposal had ‘the first official use in Britain’ of the term according to Hermione Parker, a research assistant at the House of Commons, working for Rhys Williams, and co-founder of BIRG (Parker, 1989, p. 123). Brandon Rhys Williams had proposed it in the 1960s, under the name of ‘universal flat-rate allowance’ which would provide a ‘*minimum* income for everybody’. His more recent one is meant to ‘replace virtually all existing benefits and allowances’ (Torry, 2021, pp. 131–2. *Italics are mine*). A threshold is implicit in it and it is explicit in the case of BIRG’s definition, as previously discussed.

In the media, both usages (Basic Income as a guaranteed income in general, and as an unconditional income) existed in the early 1980s. *The Times*, in 1982, used Basic Income as an umbrella concept of broader guaranteed income, and used ‘social dividend’ for an unconditional income. *The Times*, in 1983, published a letter by K. V. Roberts, and J. M. Abbott, where Basic Income was used for an unconditional income. Both cases in *The Times* came with a concept of threshold – ‘sufficient to meet everyone’s needs’ (in the former) and ‘a basic subsistence income’ (in the latter).²⁰

¹⁹ In an earlier case for distinction in 1970’s, see Yamamori (2014).

²⁰ The former is ‘Left unveils new policy on welfare’, by Our Social Services Correspondent, *The Times*, London, England, Monday, Apr. 12, 1982, Issue 61205, p. 2; the latter is Roberts and Abbott (1983).

The situation was not dissimilar in the run-up to the long 1970s. There may not yet exist a thorough genealogy of the term Basic Income as used in its current sense (be it with or without a threshold) and it is certainly beyond my capacity here to reign in the torrents of terminology, but let us nonetheless venture upstream this River of Basic Income, searching for the putative springs without veering into every tributary and rivulet.²¹ As far as our academic community has been able to determine (Cunliffe, Erreygers & van Trier, 2004), the earliest usage of Basic Income in published literature in English, in this exact wording—‘basic income’, comes from George D. H. Cole in 1953 (Cole, 1953, p. 310). He was discussing John Stuart Mill’s affirmative remark on what now we call Basic Income – ‘a certain *minimum* is first assigned for the subsistence of every member of the community’ – in his second edition of *Principles of Political Economy* (Mill, 1849, vol.1, p. 260. Italics are mine). It came with a threshold concept. If we were to extend our research to encompass private correspondence, the use of the term ‘basic income’ as an unconditional income could be traced back to a letter by George Wansbrough to John Maynard Keynes in 1939 (Sloman, 2019, p. 70). There, too, a certain threshold was assumed.²²

If we were to extend our research beyond English, dating can go back to 1932 when Hubert Paulus van Tuyll van Serooskerken, who was at the centre of the Dutch Sufi movement, wrote a plan for ‘basis-inkomen’ and sent it to Jan Tinbergen, a Dutch economist, requesting comment.²³ Van Tuyll van Serooskerken

21 Two qualifications are probably in order here. Firstly, what follows is a brief overview of the history of the term Basic Income and similar (terms incorporating an insertion between ‘basic’ and ‘income’), the use of which is more or less in line with our current definitions (either with or without a threshold). There are two reasons why this is not a complete history of ideas fitting into our current definitions of Basic Income. For one, depending on the definition used (with/without a threshold), content would differ, which would be counter-purposive. Moreover, such an attempt would find it difficult to escape the ‘mythologies’ that Quentin Skinner warned against: ‘mythologies of doctrines’, of ‘proplesis’, and of ‘parochialism’ (Skinner, 1969)—the first of which Peter Sloman, Daniel Zamora Vargas, and Pedro Ramos Pinto rightly remind us is especially relevant when talking about the history of Basic Income (Sloman et al., 2021). My second qualification is the provisionality of the overview I hazard to undertake here.

22 My thanks go to Peter Sloman for kindly pointing this out.

23 van Tuyll van Serooskerke (1932). It is unknown how (or even whether) Tinbergen replied to Van Tuyll van Serooskerken. The year when Tinbergen himself started discussing Basic Income had been considered 1934 (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Jäger, 2021). According to Anton Jäger, ‘Tinbergen took the term from G. D. H. Cole, whose own term “basic income” was used regularly in the 1930s—hence the original hyphenation’ (Jäger, 2021, p. 124). I am not in a position to speculate whether Tinbergen’s inspiration came from Cole or van Tuyll van Serooskerke, and neither have I managed up to now to identify any usage of the exact term ‘basic income’ (as unconditional income) in English prior to these Dutch uses of the early 1930s. In addition unlike Cole’s, van Tuyll van Serooskerke’s proposal is vague in the sense that it could be understood as an unconditional

formed a working group for banishing class society and poverty through the introduction of Basic Income (basis-inkomen), according to *Het Vaderland* (A Dutch newspaper) on 3 March 1933.²⁴ Both in the letter and in the newspaper, ‘basis-inkomen’ envisages for everyone to be provided by the community for his or her primary needs. Thus the concept comes with a threshold at this Dutch point of origin as well.

Were we to allow for the inclusion of usage rather similar but not selfsame, i.e. with an insertion of a word between ‘basic’ and ‘income’, then we can date things back to 1919. Dennis Milner, a British social reformer who advocated ‘state bonus’ with his wife E. Mabel Milner, referred to his proposal as ‘basic minimum income’, in his open letter published in a newspaper in 1919 (Milner, 1919). His proposal was a weekly monetary payment to all individuals at an amount equal for all and ‘just *sufficient* to maintain life and liberty’ (Milner & Milner, 1918, p. 125. Italics are mine).²⁵ This is exactly what we now call Basic Income, and it comes with a threshold. Thus, in the beginning was the threshold.²⁶

income but also could be a minimum income guarantee where payment is made to fill the gap between a threshold and one’s other income. (After this paper was accepted, van Trier has recently informed me that he found Tinbergen’s reference to ‘basisinkomen’ in the late 1932, which would rewrite the genealogy of the Dutch term ‘basis(-)inkomen’. Thus this Dutch part of the paper is tentative and we will learn more when van Trier’s new findings will have been published.)

24 My thanks go to Walter van Trier for kindly elucidating this point.

25 G.D.H. Cole referred to Milner’s proposal in 1920 (Cole, 1920), and later developed his own proposal. His preferred term was ‘social dividend’, but sometimes used other names, one of which was ‘basic minimum income’ (Cole, 1935, p. 225). The intellectual influence between Milner and Cole (and Meade) is analysed in depth in van Trier (2018). However, it should be noted that it seems not purely unconditional, as we will see in the Section 6. An American institutional economist Clarence E. Ayres advocated ‘basic independent income’ and what he meant by it is Basic Income with a threshold: ‘a basic independent income, the same for all, and just sufficient to cover the “minimum of subsistence”’ (Ayres, 1952, p. 262). Ayres later contributed to a book titled *The Guaranteed Income* edited by Robert Theobald, which influenced the North American debates on guaranteed income in the long 1970s. This is a reminder that terms such as ‘guaranteed adequate income’ or ‘guaranteed minimum income’ have been categorised under the rubric of ‘guaranteed income’. Here I make the assumption that the same can be applied to ‘basic minimum income’, ‘basic independent income’ and ‘Basic Income’. Were I to be wrong about this, then the origin is not 1919, but 1932, to the extent that tracing has been possible so far.

26 If we were to turn from the history of the term Basic Income to the history of the social movement advocating the idea, again there has been almost always a threshold, from the 1930s to at least the 1980s when delegates of social movements joined the founding meeting of BIEN. And even today many social movements envision the idea of Basic Income with a threshold. A payment of a penny a month is certainly not what people fought for. See Yamamori (2014) in the case of the British women’s liberation movement in the long 1970s.

In addition, the term Basic Income (or similar), in the sense of unconditional income (or similar), has not been isolated from the term Basic Income in other usage, as we have seen in the case of the 1970s and early 1980s. The vague usage of Basic Income as a social minimum that society should guarantee to its all members dates back to the early 1920s, as far as I have been able to determine so far. It, too, came with a threshold (Piddington, 1921).

What are the take-aways then from this historiographical revisiting of the term Basic Income here? It would be an act of historical revisionism, I believe, if we were to begin using the invented new definition (the one lacking a threshold concept), without prefacing this with an explanation of the fact that there had been these older initial and prevailing usages that had included the idea of a threshold and without giving reasons for why such definitions should be abandoned.²⁷

4.3 The Political Danger

Many advocates for Basic Income, both in the past and today, not only assume Basic Income should be at a level to cover at least basic needs, but also envision improving the predicament of the least well-off through the implementation of Basic Income.

Today, however, we have witnessed proposals to replace existing social policies by low ‘Basic Income’. If such a replacement were to happen, many vulnerable people would become poorer and more vulnerable.²⁸ It is true that a lot of discourse has focused on introducing Basic Income and abolishing existing welfare systems. Some of this rests on the assumption or definition of Basic Income as covering basic needs. If this assumption or definition is now less salient, it is because leading organisations and advocates have preferred to adopt

²⁷ At the 2021 BIEN Congress and elsewhere, there were responses saying that the no-threshold definition is not a historical revisionism and all historical uses of the term ‘Basic Income’ in English that we have discussed in this subsection are irrelevant, because the choice of the term ‘Basic Income’ either by BIEN or Van Parijs was not following English usage, but German usage—from ‘Grundeinkommen’, and the German word ‘Grund’ does not connote any relation to the concept of basic needs, unlike it is with the English word ‘basic’; thus it does not connote any threshold either. It is a very interesting claim, but I am not in a position to evaluate whether ‘Grundeinkommen’ has nothing to do with ‘Grundbedürfnisse’ (the German term for ‘basic needs’). Here instead, I shall restrict myself to pointing out that the concept of ‘Grundeinkommen’ has come with the concept of a threshold on numerous occasions from the 1980s to the present day.

²⁸ In Japan, for example, there are a couple of recent proposals for abolishing social assistance and pensions with the introduction of ‘Basic Income’, the amount of this latter being lower than the amount in social assistance. The most vocal advocate among them is Heizo Takenaka, an influential economist in Japan, who had been also a minister for neoliberal reforms in the 2000s.

the no-threshold definition and eschew mentioning the implicit consensus that existed in the past (at least in the 1980s). For a case in point, consider CBIT's claim that 'we need to replace the present benefit and tax systems', while its definition of Basic Income allows for an amount as low as a penny per month to constitute a Basic Income.²⁹

5 A Discussion at the BIEN 2016 Congress

Some of the issues outlined above have been 'in the air' among international Basic Income communities, if not clearly articulated in a strictly academic way. At a certain point also these issues were discussed in BIEN where decision making takes place at the General Assembly (which used to be held once every two years until 2016 and has been held annually since). Two separate motions on the definition were submitted to the General Assembly in 2016. Both of them, using different wording, asked for a reference to be made to a threshold either in the definition or as a note to the definition. The first resolution submitted was by 17 members and six official affiliates of BIEN (UBIE and the national networks of Germany, Austria, Netherlands, South Korea, and Italy). The wording encapsulating the idea of a threshold was that Basic Income 'secures a livelihood (material existence) and enables participation in the political community (country) for everyone'.³⁰ The second resolution was submitted by Louise Haagh, one of the co-chairs of BIEN at that time and suggested adding one of the following two formulations:

(a) BIEN supports a basic income paid at a rate at least sufficient to meet living standards compatible with sustainable nutrition and health and a life of dignity in accordance with accepted national or international standards of sufficiency.

or

(b) A full basic income is at least sufficient to meet living standards compatible with sustainable nutrition and health and a life of dignity in accordance with accepted national or international standards of sufficiency. A partial basic income is less than that amount.³¹

²⁹ <https://citizensincome.org/faqs>.

³⁰ https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/5.c.-Statute-proposal-2016-05-21_BIEN-final-5.pdf (accessed 31 July 2021) This motion was originally submitted to the General Assembly in 2014, but was tabled due to time constraint of the Assembly.

³¹ https://basicincome.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/5.d._Proposal_to_amend_BIENs_description_of_basic_income-_LH.pdf. (accessed 31 July 2021)

Logically (a) and (b) appear to differ as (a) can be open on whether the definition should include a threshold or not and the statement can be interpreted to mean that BIEN supports a version of Basic Income with a certain level of threshold. In contrast, (b) assumes that the notion of Basic Income comes with a threshold because the ‘full-partial’ terminology presupposes a threshold.

Treating with fairness two separate motions on the same matter is fraught with difficulty. If the first motion were passed, then the second would lose its meaning. Thus a working group was set up to deliberate on the possibility of merging the two motions and I was appointed its chair. Discussions carried on for the entirety of three days during the congress. Passage (b) above presented an opportunity to include the idea of a threshold in the definition, but the working group could not reach a consensus on how such an idea for a threshold should be worded. In the end, it was decided to sort the threshold matter out in the line of passage (a) above. A separate resolution was written in which the wording regarding the threshold read:

A majority of members attending BIEN’s General Assembly meeting in Seoul on July 9, 2016, agreed to support a Basic Income that is stable in size and frequency and high enough to be, in combination with other social services, part of a policy strategy to eliminate material poverty and enable the social and cultural participation of every individual. We oppose the replacement of social services or entitlements, if that replacement worsens the situation of relatively disadvantaged, vulnerable, or lower-income people. (Yamamori, 2016a)

This compromise was made possible with the understanding that the words above will be placed in immediate proximity to the definition on BIEN’s homepage, as part of a clarification of the definition. The resolution was passed at the General Assembly and appeared for a while on the same page as the definition.³²

6 Justifications for the No-Threshold Definition

6.1 Existing Justification 1: Hard to Identify the Exact Amount

Malcolm Torry’s two papers – ‘What’s a definition? And how should we define “Basic Income”?’ (Torry, 2017a) and ‘The definition and characteristics of Basic Income’ (Torry, 2019) provide an excellent overview of the current definitional conundrum. He offers a justification for the definition without reference to

³² Somehow, by now, it has been removed from BIEN’s definition page. I can only express my apologies to those who, trusting in my mediation as chair, made the sacrifice of compromise. For the report on the discussions and conclusion of the working group, see Yamamori (2016b). For the decision at the General Assembly, see Yamamori (2016a).

‘subsistence level’, which I think is the most sustained, elaborated argument. he gives three reasons. First, “‘subsistence level’ is notoriously difficult to define’. Second, it would not ‘help a government to ponder the possibility of making a start with a small Basic Income’. Third it would deprive any organisation that defines Basic Income with a threshold ‘of research results from organisations that research Basic Income at lower levels’ (Torry, 2019, p. 27).

Here I think the first point carries the heaviest weight.³³ It is true that subsistence level is difficult to identify. However, doesn’t the same hold true for ‘universal’? Where is the boundary of universality? Is it limited to Earth? Or the U.K.? Or Scotland? Or Inverness? Let’s take the answer to be the U.K. Then, is it limited only to people who have citizenship? Or includes some residents without citizenship, etc? These practical difficulties would not necessarily lead us to drop ‘universal’ from our definition of Basic Income.³⁴ Shouldn’t it be the same for ‘subsistence level’?

In fairness to Torry, he speaks of whether the definition should include ‘amount’ and he argues against that. I fully agree with him that the definition should not determine the exact amount. And whether the definition should have a threshold is a different question from whether the definition should determine an exact amount. Thus, strictly speaking, this is not a justification for the definition without a threshold.³⁵ And the following remark by Jurgen de Wispelaere and Lindsay Stirton would apply to Basic Income as well.

There exists an immense literature on various ways of delineating basic needs in contemporary welfare societies. While most of this literature accepts that there is something arbitrary about determining a uniform level of subsistence across society, we should nevertheless appreciate that even arbitrary benchmarks often serve a useful purpose in social policy. (de Wispelaere & Stirton, 2004, p. 271)³⁶

33 For his second and third reasons, there might be such a case, but I think it is not generalisable. On the second point, allow me only to ask: if we were to have a narrower definition, then would governments be discouraged from implementing a policy that is excluded by the narrower definition? The international Basic Income communities have narrowed down the meaning of Basic Income by emphasising ‘unconditionality’ thus excluding minimum income guarantee. Has it discouraged any government from implementing any conditional minimum income scheme so far? On the third point, let me ask: many advocates and organisations differentiate Basic Income from Negative Income Tax by emphasising the former’s ‘unconditionality’. Then did they commit to ignoring either the result of, or the research on, Negative Income Tax? On both counts, it is easy to find the cases otherwise.

34 On what ‘universal’ should mean, I learnt a lot from Télémaque Masson.

35 Torry (2020) is an excellent analysis on the practical issue when we try to identify a threshold.

36 On the current state of undertheorisation of the concept of need and ‘relative poverty’, see Yamamori (2019). On the concept of need in economics, see Yamamori (2017, 2018, 2020).

6.2 An Existing Justification 2: Separating Unconditionality from Subsistence

Everyone would agree, I think, that Philippe Van Parijs has contributed the most to making Basic Income a serious academic subject in the field of philosophy. As we have seen, he initially assumed a threshold in his argument for Basic Income, then adopted the definition without a threshold. While I cannot find any remark by him on why he changed his definition, we can find his remark (with Yannick Vanderborght) on the merits of having a definition without a threshold. They wrote:

The advantage of the definition we adopt, *following common usage*, is that it enables us to conveniently separate these two big questions: whether a scheme is unconditional enough for it to qualify as a basic income and whether it is pitched at the right level. (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 10. Italics are mine.)

Unfortunately, the definition without a threshold has been hardly ‘common usage’. As we have seen, not only the competing definition preceded and existed in parallel, but also Van Parijs himself presupposed a threshold in 1986 and 1989, and he edited and published a book, a significant part of which is based on the definition with the threshold. Further, he described the usage of Basic Income *with a threshold* as ‘common usage’ (Van Parijs, 1989a, p. 6).

Having said that, still, I fully agree with Van Parijs on the importance of analytically separating the issue of unconditionality from the issue of subsistence. However, in order to recognise this importance, did we really need to depart from the ‘common usage’ of the 1970s and 1980s by going and changing the meaning of Basic Income? As we have seen, Van Parijs himself recognised a threshold as one of the indispensable components of Basic Income, and distinguished it from ‘universal grants’. The latter differs only in that it lacks a threshold. Isn’t this distinction between Basic Income and universal grants enough for separating the issue of unconditionality from the issue of subsistence?

So far we have not yet been convinced that these justifications have made the case strongly enough to overcome the issues identified in the previous section. Thus let me try to offer several possible justifications in the following subsections.

6.3 Possible Justification 1: Social Services and Cash Payment

One of the issues possibly arising from having a threshold (for example, ‘covering basic needs’, ‘subsistence level’ or ‘high enough to ensure X’) is that whether someone can meet basic needs is not only a function of Basic Income, but also of other social policies and wider social systems, including the market.

In principle, it does not stand as a justification for dropping a threshold from the definition, because the same goes both for any existing minimum income guarantee scheme and for any alternative to it. Should we drop a threshold concept from all minimum income guaranteed schemes?

Having pointed it out, however, there seems a (mis)understanding both in academia and in public that Basic Income should replace all other social policies including social services. And there might be a possibility to facilitate such a misunderstanding by stating a threshold in the definition. In order to avoid such a misunderstanding, two strategies present themselves.

One is to broaden the meaning of Basic Income not only in cash but also in kind. Van Parijs argued ‘Basic Income in kind’ in this line (Van Parijs, 1995, pp. 42–45).³⁷ The other, is to state that a certain threshold (whatever wording we chose for it) would be met by Basic Income and social services together. This line was taken by the definition working group at BIEN 2016, and was embodied in the resolution on a threshold passed then, as we have seen in the previous section.

6.4 Possible Justification 2: Basic Income and Social Dividend

As we have seen already, in its oldest currently traceable usage the term ‘Basic Income’ came with the concept of a threshold. The same holds true for how the term was used up to the mid-1980s, either explicitly defined or implicitly assumed. The case was different, however, for the term ‘social dividend’, which in the 1970s and 1980s had been used in ways similar to Basic Income.

We can find many cases where ‘social dividend’ comes with the concept of a threshold, for example, George D. H. Cole (Cole, 1935), James E. Meade (Meade, 1948, 1972), Anthony B. Atkinson (Atkinson, 1969), Hyman Minsky (Minsky, 1969), etc. But equally, we can find cases otherwise. For example, Joan Robinson uses the term ‘social dividend’ without including a threshold (Robinson, 1969),

In fact, the term ‘social dividend’ had been very loosely used among Cambridge economists and economists whose works are closely related to them. Not

³⁷ I would like to thank Télémaque Masson for reminding me on this Van Parijs’s argument. Van Parijs has raised this question intermittently since 1991 (Van Parijs, 1991). By emphasising a Basic Income as ‘a cash income’, he himself seems to be abandoning this line of argument in Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017), while keeping it in 2021 (Van Parijs, 2021). Masson has been deeply engaging this ‘Basic Income in kind’ by Van Parijs. Thus I leave it to Masson and Van Parijs themselves to develop the analysis or explain further. Here I only indicate earlier examples of similar usage: Cole mentions “‘social dividend’ in kind” (Cole, 1944, p. 144) and the first usage of the exact term ‘Basic Income (basis-inkomen)’ explicitly includes ‘inkomen’ in kind (van Tuyll van Serooskerke, 1932).

only can it be without a threshold, but it can also be conditional. For example, G. D. H. Cole's use of 'social dividend' in 1935 comes with a threshold concept, but is conditional in the sense that it is not paid to people who can work yet are unwilling to work.³⁸ Thus if we need to exclude the idea of a threshold from the Basic Income definition on account of some historical usage of the term social dividend, probably we ought to exclude unconditionality from the definition as well. Then what would remain?

6.5 Possible Justification 3: Economic Fluctuation of the Level of Basic Income

In my argument above, we see that Van Parijs dropped the threshold from his definition of Basic Income. This does not mean there was a sea-change on what Van Parijs deemed desirable – a highest sustainable basic income (Van Parijs, 1995). How high is sustainable would be a function of various factors, including economic ones. It could be zero or one penny a month in certain circumstances, or it could be three times more than enough to cover one's basic needs at other times. Thus by dropping a threshold from the definition, we can allow for such a fluctuation of Basic Income. This is very close to Joan Robinson's version of social dividend (Robinson, 1969).

While he has not offered a reason for the changes of his definition over the span of these three decades, my conjecture is that this at least one of the main reasons. To me, it is also the most plausible justification of the no-threshold definition of Basic Income. Nevertheless, this justification seems still unable to overcome the second of the three issues (outlined in Section 4) that arise from such a no-threshold definition—namely, historical revisionism.

7 Concluding Remarks

To sum up, both in its early usage and in the wider usage of the term during the long 1970s and 1980s, Basic Income came with a threshold either explicitly defined

38 Cole wrote: 'the social dividend would be payable to able-bodied persons only on condition that they were ready to work, and there would have to be means whereby a man's receipt of the social dividend could be questioned on grounds of proved unwillingness to perform his part in the common service' (Cole, 1935, p. 263). While numerous remarks by Cole seem to suggest unconditionality—'assured to everybody'(p. 225), 'to all members of the community'(p. 252), he is not the only one whose proposals are clearly conditional, yet included in the history of Basic Income by many advocates. The proposal of Juliet Rhys-Williams (1943) is another such example.

or implicitly assumed. The no-threshold definition emerged mid-1980s and a leading advocate and a leading organisation either purposefully changed their definition from one with a threshold to one without, or adopted the latter, with the reason for the adoption quietly slipping away from our collective memory.

We have identified three issues arising from the adoption of a definition without a threshold: logical rupture, historical revisionism and political danger. The recognition of some of these issues led BIEN to discuss the matter of a threshold in its definition in 2016. We also examined in this paper two existing and three potential justifications for dropping any mention of a threshold from the definition.

The idea of Basic Income is, both in its origin and in its history, not a purely academically prompted idea such as Rawls' 'difference principle' or Van Parijs' 'undominated diversity' (Rawls, 1971; Van Parijs, 1995). And since its complex origins, it has come with a threshold as its indispensable component. This means that declarative efforts by leading scholars or organisations in favour of the no-threshold definition would not be enough to wave aside or erase the history of the term and its common usage. Having pointed this out, however, these acts of declaration have been neither properly situated in the historiography of Basic Income, nor seriously examined, at least academically, for almost three decades. As a consequence, the two definitions exist in parallel.

This paper does not intend to offer any solution to this parallelism, but Van Parijs' distinction between Basic Income and universal grants in 1989 would be one of possible solutions. This distinction can accommodate some of possible merits of 'no-threshold definition', without ignoring history of the idea (and the people who struggled for it). Here Basic Income comes with a threshold. The concept without a threshold could be called 'universal grants',—following Van Parijs (Van Parijs, 1989a), or maybe 'unconditional income'—following van Parijs on several other occasions (Van Parijs, 1989b, 1992c).

While I personally think that dropping the concept of a threshold from Basic Income's definition is an act not unlike the proverbial throwing of the baby out with the bathwater, this paper is *not* written with the intent to suggest that any organisation should change its definition of the term. My timid hopes are, first, to rescue the concept of a threshold in Basic Income from historical revisionism and perhaps subsequent collective amnesia. This is the principal aim of the paper, which is purely academic. My second timid hope is that these definitional discussions in Basic Income communities be based on proper recognition of the history of Basic Income, and on respect for people's collective (intellectual or social) movements that make up that history.

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