

Why America's favorite anarchist thinks most American workers are slaves

Making Sen\$e

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Contents

Strange Bedfellows?	5
Do People Like to Work? Look at Prisons	6
What Is Society Missing Without a Basic Income?	6

Editor’s Note: Conservative proponents of the guaranteed income want a lump sum payment (Charles Murray suggests about \$11,000 to all adults) to replace existing social welfare programs and downsize American bureaucracy. But some leftists oppose those government welfare agencies, too, London School of Economics professor David Graeber says. The leftist critique of private and public bureaucracies, Graeber explains, is that they “employ thousands of people to make us feel bad about ourselves.”

Bureaucrats pushing paper decide what we and our work are worth. But somewhat ironically, Graeber suggests, it’s those bureaucrats who perform the most meaningless work of all. If we gave everyone a lump sum basic income and eliminated those bureaucratic jobs, we’d all be better off, he says.

Graeber doesn’t self-identify as an anarchist (“anarchism is something you do”), but as an activist in the Occupy and student loan movements, this is all part of his concern that workers today are “wage slaves.”

With a basic income, everyone would have access to the market. Workers (including those government paper-pushers) could pursue the work they want, while society as a whole would benefit from their scientific breakthroughs and artistic talents. From the Beatles to Derrida, Graeber says, this form of public assistance has supported people who would otherwise be “lifting boxes,” or performing some other mundane job as a condition of welfare.

Graeber appears in our Making Sen\$e segment on Switzerland’s basic income debate and its appeal in the United States, below. Paul Solman’s extended conversation with him about how a basic income would liberate wage slaves follows.

So you like this idea?

I think it’s great. It’s an acknowledgement that nobody else has the right to tell you what you can best contribute to the world, and it’s based on a certain faith — that people want to contribute something to the world, most people do. I’m sure there are a few people who would be parasites, but most people actually want to do something; they want to feel that they have contributed something to the society around them.

The problem is that we have this gigantic apparatus that presumes to tell people who’s worthy, who’s not, what people should be doing, what they shouldn’t. They’re all about assessing value, but in fact, the whole system fell apart in 2008 because nobody really knows how to do it. We don’t really know how to assess the value of people’s work, of people’s contributions, of people themselves, and philosophically, that makes sense; there is no easy way to do it. So the best thing to do is just to say, alright, everyone go out and you decide for yourselves.

But Friedrich Hayek famously wrote that the market system is an un-replicable way of everybody with their own little piece of knowledge telling you, the producer, what to make and what to use — how much of this, how much of that — via the price system, right?

Right, well, giving people money isn’t eliminating a market system. You could make the argument that that would be true if everybody started with the same amount of money in the market, but when the market is as skewed as it is, where some people control almost all the wealth, and most people have none at all, the market communicates what people with lots of money want.

I mean, think about it: I have a friend — the story is very typical — who's a musician. He had a hit record — he's very talented obviously — but having just one hit record won't set you up for the rest of your life. Eventually, he lost his contracts, so what did he do? He went off and became a corporate lawyer. Pretty much anybody with any brains can get a job as a corporate lawyer, so what does that tell you?

In our society we have a very, very limited demand for brilliant poet-musicians, but we have an infinite demand for corporate lawyers; anybody who can get a law degree will get a job. Well, is that because most people think that corporate lawyers are better to have around than poet-musicians? No. Almost everybody, given the choice, would go for the poet-musicians, but people with lots of money like to have corporate lawyers, so that's what the market actually ends up saying.

So you think the market is so skewed that a dramatic move against it would be an improvement?

Yes... If everybody has the same means to vote, then the market will actually represent what most people want.

When they're voting with their dollars?

Yeah, exactly.

So in that sense, the minimum income is a total welfare improvement?

I think it would mean that people's spending patterns would reflect what they actually want. First of all, survival needs would be taken care of, so that skews people, and you could see what people think is actually important in life. I think that's why even a lot of libertarians, whom I don't agree with on a lot, actually kind of like the idea of basic income — because they know that it would make the market work the way they say a market should work.

The libertarians I talk to all said this is great, but great because it will eliminate all the government programs that are otherwise skewing the way these people behave.

Yeah, and there's something to that. I think that one big problem we have on the left is we don't really have a strong critique of bureaucracy. It's not because we like bureaucracy very much; it's just that the right has developed a critique. I don't think it's a very good critique, but at least it's there. I think this is a perfect left critique of bureaucracy: Who are all these people — and this goes for private bureaucracies as well as public ones — sitting around watching you, telling you what your work is worth, what you're worth, basically employing thousands of people to make us feel bad about ourselves. Just get rid of those people; just give everybody some money, and I think everyone will be much better off.

So would you get rid of government programs?

It depends on which. The amounts of money that they're now talking about giving people aren't enough to take care of things like health care and housing. But I think if you guarantee those sorts of basic needs, you could get rid of almost all the programs on top of that. In huge bureaucracies, there are so many conditionalities attached to everything they give out, there's jobs on jobs on jobs of people who just assess people and decide whether you are being good enough to your kids to deserve this benefit, or decide whether you're trying hard enough to get a job to get that benefit. This is a complete waste. Those people [making the decisions] don't really contribute anything to society; we could get rid of them.

So you'd get rid of, say, the food stamp bureaucracy?

If we had a basic income, we wouldn't need to decide who needs food and who doesn't.

Strange Bedfellows?

Libertarians have said to me that this would make people more responsible; there would be more communitarianism...

In fact, that actually has happened in places. In Namibia, they did an experiment where they used to give aid, and instead they just gave everybody a flat sum of money. And the first thing people did was get together, take half the money, put it in a common pool, and that created a democratic system. They decided what they really needed was a post office, which is something no aid group would ever have thought of. These people actually do know their communal needs better than somebody from outside.

So in fact, I think there's a certain communal tradition that might not exist in a city like London. It might take some changes for people to bring that together, but it would at least give us the opportunity to get together and create common projects in a way that we haven't been able to do before.

Are you surprised that there's right wing support for this?

Not at all. Because I think there are some people who can understand that the rates of inequality that we have mean that the arguments [for the market] don't really work. There's a tradition that these people are drawing on, which recognizes that the kind of market they really want to see is not the kind of market we see today.

Adam Smith was very honest. He said, well obviously this only works if people control their own tools, if people are self-employed. He was completely rejecting the idea of corporate capitalism.

Smith rejected corporate capitalism because it became crony capitalism.

Well, he rejected the corporate form entirely; he was against corporations. At the time, corporations were seen as, essentially, inimical to the market. They still are. Those arguments are no less true than they ever were. If we want to have markets, we have to give everybody an equal chance to get into them, or else they don't work as a means of social liberation; they operate as a means of enslavement.

Enslavement in the sense that the people with enough power, who can get the market to work on their behalf...

Right — bribing politicians to set up the system so that they accumulate more, and other people end up spending all their time working for them. The difference between selling yourself into slavery and renting yourself into slavery in the ancient world was basically none at all, you know. If Aristotle were here, he'd think most people in a country like England or America were slaves.

Wage slaves?

Yes, but they didn't make a distinction back then. Throughout most of recorded history, the only people who actually did wage labor were slaves. It was a way of renting your slave to someone else; they got half the money, and the rest of the money went to the master. Even in the South, a lot of slaves actually worked in jobs and they just had to pay the profits to the guy who owned them. It's only now that we think of wage labor and slavery as opposite to one another. For a lot of history, they were considered kind of variations of the same thing.

Abraham Lincoln famously said the reason why we have a democratic society in America is we don't have a permanent class of wage laborers. He thought that wage labor was something

you pass through in your 20s and 30s when you're accumulating enough money to set up on your own; so the idea was everyone will eventually be self-employed.

Do People Like to Work? Look at Prisons

So is this idea of a guaranteed basic income utopian?

Well, it remains to be seen. If it's Utopian, it's because we can't get the politicians to do it, not because it won't work. It seems like people have done the numbers, and there's no economic reason why it couldn't work.

Well, it's very expensive.

It's expensive, but so is the system we have now. And there's a major savings that you'll have firing all those people who are assessing who is worthy of what.

Philosophically, I think that it's really important to bear in mind two things. One is it'll show people that you don't have to force people to work, to want to contribute. It's not that people resist work. People resist meaningless work; people resist stupid work; and people resist humiliating work.

But I always talk about prisons, where people are fed, clothed, they've got shelter; they could just sit around all day. But actually, they use work as a way of rewarding them. You know, if you don't behave yourself, we won't let you work in the prison laundry. I mean, people want to work. Nobody just wants to sit around, it's boring.

So the first misconception we have is this idea that people are just lazy, and if they're given a certain amount of minimal income, they just won't do anything. Probably there's a few people like that, but for the vast majority, it will free them to do the kind of work that they think is meaningful. The question is, are most people smart enough to know what they have to contribute to the world? I think most of them are.

What Is Society Missing Without a Basic Income?

The other point we need to stress is that we can't tell in advance who really can contribute what. We're always surprised when we leave people to their own devices. I think one reason why we don't have any of the major scientific breakthroughs that we used to have for much of the 19th and 20th centuries is because we have this system where everybody has to prove they already know what they're going to create in this incredibly bureaucratized system.

Because people need to be able to prove that they'll get a return on the investment?

Exactly. So they have to get the grant, and prove that this would lead to this, but in fact, almost all the major breakthroughs are unexpected. It used to be we'd get bright people and just let them do whatever they want, and then suddenly, we've got the light bulb. Nowadays we don't get breakthroughs like that because everybody's got to spend all their time filling out paperwork. It's that kind of paperwork that we'd be effectively getting rid of, the equivalent of that.

Another example I always give is the John Lennon argument. Why are there no amazing new bands in England anymore? Ever since the '60s, it used to be every five, 10 years, we'd see an incredible band. I asked a lot of friends of mine, well, what happened? And they all said, well they got rid of the dole. All those guys were on the dole. Actually in Cockney rhyming slang, the word for dole is rock and roll — as in, "oh yeah, he's on the rock and roll." All rock bands started

on public relief. If you give money to working class kids, a significant number of them will form bands, and a few of those bands will be amazing, and it will benefit the country a thousand times more than all of those kids would have done had they been lifting boxes or whatever they're making them do now as welfare conditionality.

And in the United States, the entire abstract expressionist movement, whatever you think of it – Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock – was all on the WPA [Works Progress Administration], on the dole.

Absolutely, look at social theory. I remember thinking, why is it that Germany in the '20s, you have Weber, Simmel, all these amazing thinkers? In France, you have this endless outpouring of brilliant people in the '50s, Sartre... What was it about those societies that they produced so many brilliant thinkers? One person told me, well, there's a lot of money – they just had these huge block grants given to anybody. And you know, again, 10 out of 11 of them will be people we've completely forgotten, but there's always that one that's going to turn out to be, you know Jacques Derrida, and the world changes because of some major social thinker who might otherwise have been a postman, or something like that.

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