The History of the Big Idea

By Jamie Bronstein

The notion of an entitlement to a basic income guarantee is far from a new idea. ECSO freedom (“effective control self-ownership”) 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. The timing of proposals to ensure political freedom by ensuring economic access helps to explain why a Basic Income Guarantee is a controversial proposal. By the time of the Enlightenment those who owned property happened to be the same people who were assumed under the previous economic and social system to be those entitled to hold property—the aristocracy and the wealthy. 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.

If the theory of effective control self-ownership is predicated on the notion that the impoverished ought to be able to use natural resources without interference, we can look all the way back to Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers for a practical demonstration of the idea. During the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell’s “New Model” army was formed to fight against the Royalist forces of Charles I. In the space that emerged in the vacuum formerly occupied by the idea of divine right monarchy, the Levellers emerged, asserting the right of the people to political participation. The Putney debates held by the army in 1647 illustrate the extent to which new ideas about the equality, or at least, the moral considerability, of all men
were floated. Central to the idea that all men were equally morally considerable was that 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.”¹

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.² For Winstanley, what he was doing was nothing less than achieving Christ’s kingdom on earth, making into material reality idealized notions of divine harmony.³ “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 will see their fellow creatures men and women to starve for want,” Winstanley wrote.⁴ He advocated specifically that the poor withhold their labor from landowners and cultivate the commons instead, noting that with the victory over Charles I, the

² The historiography on Winstanley up to the mid-1990s is ably recapped in Ivan Roots’ introduction to David W. Petegorsky, Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement (Stroud: Alan Sutton Press, 1995).
⁴ Gerrard Winstanley, The New Law of Reason, quoted in Hayes, Winstanley the Digger, 123.
poor had the opportunity to grasp freedom for the first time—a freedom that Winstanley saw as dependent on exercising their right to the soil.\(^5\)

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, claiming 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.\(^6\) Despite his many attempts to explain himself in print, Winstanley was arrested and the Digger experiment was ended.\(^7\) 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.”\(^8\)

A demand for economic rights emerged again in the context of the French Revolution, from the pen of the major propagandist of the American Revolution. Written when he was a representative to the National Assembly in France, Thomas Paine’s *Agrarian Justice* proposed payment to all citizens as reparation for the fact that they had been born with their right to an

\(^{5}\) Hayes, 207; Petegorsky, 183.

\(^{6}\) Hayes, 164.


\(^{8}\) Petegorsky, 139.
equal share of the earth’s natural resources having been usurped. In *Agrarian Justice*, Paine argued that “civilization” presents a tradeoff—without economic organization there is no economic growth and development; but on the other hand, economic development makes possible what Paine called “extremes of wretchedness.” Although the “natural state” may have been preferable on an individual level because every person had access to resources, it was impossible to go back from economic development to the equal possession of resources, given the greater amount of natural resources that each person would need to be self-sufficient on the land. Nonetheless, it was incumbent upon every person to understand that property-ownership and acquisition were only made possible at all due to the existence of society, and a man “he 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.”

Even as Paine criticized the origins of private property, he was unwilling to propose that this historical injustice be remedied with confiscation. Improvements on the land 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.

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9 See also Karl Widerquist, *Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 123.
Paine saw his plan not only as furthering justice, but also as increasing national prosperity. Giving young people a 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’s reputation in Britain and the United States had declined after his trip to France, and his profession of religious infidelity. But Paine was celebrated by working people in both Britain and the United States, who identified “land monopoly” as the biggest threat to their personal freedom.¹¹ As I wrote about in my first book, 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.¹² The most extreme case for this was put by the labor advocate and political philosopher Thomas Skidmore. In his 1829 Rights of Man to Property!, Skidmore sketched out a plan for distributive justice that took seriously the notion of access to raw materials as essential to human freedom, and which can be characterized as “left libertarian.”¹³ Skidmore argued that self-ownership, and the ownership of one’s productivity,

were crucial to human freedom. “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.”

But 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.”

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. 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.

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sketch of Skidmore, see Amos Gilbert, “A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Skidmore,” *Free Enquirer*, April 6, 1834.


15 Ibid., 42.

16 Ibid., 77-8.
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. A man may own his own labor, but labor does not have magical properties that confer ownership on resources, Skidmore argued. If there were some way of taking the labor back out of those materials again you might again own the labor; but everyone has a continuing claim to the natural resources. Moreover, Skidmore asserted that because civilization is so ancient, no matter how much labor individuals perform, they are tremendously indebted to the generations that came before them, for preparing infrastructure.\textsuperscript{17} Since a natural right to resources based on mere existence does not identify any particular \textit{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.\textsuperscript{18} Everyone has an equal claim, and “there can exist no power whatever to destroy equality of rights, but the power of violence and injustice.”\textsuperscript{19}

Skidmore devised a mechanism property ownership that begins with the fairest possible initial distribution, and then acknowledged the continuing claim on resources presented by people born into an existing population. His 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

\textsuperscript{17} Skidmore, \textit{Rights of Man to Property!}, 237.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 44.
auction will include all people, including the disabled and the mentally ill, who will be represented by guardians or trustees acting on their behalf. Anything so large or complex that it cannot be divided up may be jointly purchased by a group of people. Once the auction has been conducted, Skidmore suggested that the value of the goods sold should be 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." 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 idea may seem similar to the modern suggestion for a “stakeholder society,” but it is different from, and superior to, such ideas, in three ways. First, the use of a property census and division of property takes seriously the assertion that the initial acquisition of property has to be just in order for subsequent property ownership to be just. Second, basing the property census on the same “historical” justification used by libertarians avoids having to base it on other categories that libertarians may not acknowledge (for example, a common commitment to citizenship in a non-minimal state). Finally, performing a current property census and compiling all available property to calculate the citizen dividend avoids the necessity for any controversial “wealth tax” or a “privilege tax,” as suggested in other plans for stakeholding.

Had Skidmore envisioned only a single, initial property auction, it might be objected that his plan failed to address what could be expected to happen over time; those with easily-

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20 Ibid., 141.
21 Skidmore, Rights of Man to Property!, 139.
22 Ibid., 140.
23 For one such proposal, see Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott, The Stakeholder Society (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 5.
24 Ackerman and Alstott rely heavily on concepts of shared citizenship and civic nationalism. See, for example, Stakeholder Society, 33.
25 Ackerman and Alstott, Stakeholder Society, 94-112.
marketed talents might earn money at a faster rate than those with few talents, and those born into families with less talented parents would be disadvantaged at the outset. But Skidmore foresaw this objection, and his plan prohibits the state from recognizing and executing wills.

Inheritance concentrates property in a single family over time. 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.”26 Because those citizens reaching adulthood in every year subsequent to the initial auction have a claim on resources, Skidmore proposed that each year, a general inventory be repeated, from the goods of everyone who has died in the past year. This inventory will 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.27 Skidmore’s remarkably detailed plan had little traction, but constant lobbying by other members of the labor movement resulted in the 1862 Homestead Act, partial recognition by the United States government that there were at least good consequentialist reasons for a more equal division of natural resources.

After the American Civil War, as Northern industrialism coincided with the influx of vast waves of relatively European migrants, there were other attempts to envision a basic income guarantee for Americans. In his 1889 novel Looking Backward, Edward Bellamy envisioned an

26 Skidmore, Rights of Man to Property!, 115; Cf. Ackerman and Alcott, Stakeholder Society, 114.
27 Skidmore, Rights of Man to Property!, 142. It might be possible to conduct auctions on a less-frequent basis—say, every five years—in order to smooth out any inequities that might result from rapid demographic shifts one way or the other.
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—which had been paralyzed by the “labor problem”--has been completely transformed. Julian West’s tour guide through the future echoes Thomas Paine when he explains economic change by noting that there was no 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’s solution for this problem was to have government nationalize all 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 . . .”

In the Boston of Bellamy’s year 2000, the acknowledged responsibility of all citizens to contribute to the defense of the country extends to include a responsibility to “contribute his quota of industrial or intellectual services to the maintenance of the nation.” All Americans from the ages of 18-45 are employed by the government, which has nationalized all industry. For the first three years of their 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 were so arduous that it had to be done in ten-minute shifts, that would be the length of the workday.\footnote{Bellamy, \textit{Looking Backward}, 72.} 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.\footnote{Bellamy, \textit{Looking Backward}, 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 \textit{it is the same for all}, the sole basis on which it is awarded being the fact that the person is a human being.’\footnote{Gilman, 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.”\footnote{Bellamy, \textit{Looking Backward}, 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.”\footnote{Bellamy, \textit{Looking Backward}, 90.}

Did Edward Bellamy’s plan offer ECSO freedom? In a way, it did not: Bellamy’s plan was a “mandatory-participation economy;” anyone who opted not to contribute his labor to the

large corporation that was the United States would, 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.”

Conceived another way, however, Bellamy’s plan offered much more freedom than was available to the vast majority of Americans at the time he wrote. Education in 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.

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. 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.

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37 Bellamy, Looking Backward, 70. For the difference between mandatory-participation and voluntary-participation economies, see Karl Widerquist, Independence, Propertylessness, and Basic Income (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 116.

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. 39 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. 40 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. 41

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.” 42 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. 43 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. 44 The fact that Skidmore was monomaniacal about his plan cannot have helped. 45

39 Hayes, 169.
40 Petegorsky, 175.
44 “Political: Movements of the People,” Free Enquirer, March 20, 1830.
45 Amos Gilbert, “A Sketch of the Life of Thomas Skidmore,” Free Enquirer, April 6, 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.” 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. 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.

Winstanley, Paine, Skidmore and Bellamy are only four among a host of predecessors whose ideas 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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46 Gilman, 68.
47 Gilman, 65.
48 Gilman, 69.