(partial rough draft for discussion only)

Bitsphere, Biosphere and Basic Income: The Search for Context

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It is a very great privilege for me to be here in Hart House, with the opportunity to participate in the Eighth Annual Walter Gordon Symposium on Public Policy, sponsored by the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. I'd like to express my thanks both to Master John Fraser for the hospitality of Massey College, and to Professors Sally Lerner and Ursula Franklin, organizers of this meeting.

Thirty years ago I was here as a freshly-minted enthusiastic Professor of Political Economy, professing mathematical economics and working as an Associate of the new Institute for Policy Analysis. Twenty years ago when I returned to give a talk, I could perhaps better be described as a proponent of socio-political economy. Had I returned ten years ago, it would have been as an avowed ecological socio-political economist. Today maybe all I can say is that I come as a recovering economist, or perhaps simply as an applied policy analyst still seeking context.

It is a great pleasure also to be here with this present distinguished company, and particularly with the National Treasure that is Professor Ursula Franklin. Just before leaving the West Coast I was talking with my sister, also a great fan of Ursula, and quoting the little snippet I quote often from her 1989 Massey Lectures, **The Real World of Technology**, in which she observes that "In order to make socially responsible decisions, a community must keep three sets of books." (P. 132) I noted that if only she had been a better marketer, Ursula could now be reaping tremendous royalties travelling around the world selling her concept of the Triple Bottom Line, which the consultants are now promoting with great hoopla. It says that in order to make socially responsible decisions, corporations need to report results from keeping three sets of books. (Look up the Massey lectures to see what they should be, and save yourself a consulting fee.)

My sister advised, however, that I would do better to keep in mind Franklin's earthworm theory of social change, which sees us all simply as worms preparing from below the soil from which many flowers will bloom and many ideas will spring. It's in that spirit of preparing a bit of ground for ongoing social learning that I want to suggest three bits of context that strike me as important in thinking about basic income as unfinished business. (With apologies to Isaiah Berlin, I find myself asking "If you cross an earthworm with a hedgehog, do you get a fox?")

Before addressing those three, let me offer a word of definition. I shall be talking about the idea of a basic income, by which I mean simply *an unconditional payment to every adult irrespective of efforts to find formal paid employment*. Notions such as a citizen's income, participation income, guaranteed annual income, or negative income tax are closely related ideas, but I shall not try to spell out any nuances here.

I'd like to make three points, one from each of Ursula's three sets of books.

1. The basic income idea is good economics. And here I mean good economics in the substantive sense of productivity, competitiveness and realization of potential, not the subordinate question of financing. [In the way we have chosen to embrace national accounting as a mechanism for social assessments for which that machinery was never designed, our accounting system has become the living, breathing exemplar of dysfunctional performance measurement. We measure outcome and welfare by activity, and ask nothing about distribution or justice.] BI is good economics in effectiveness or consequential terms.

2. The basic income concept fits well with the emerging understanding of social cohesion and good governance in a globalizing world which also must accommodate strengthening communities or national feeling. It is good in terms of social justice, or fairness.

3. The basic income concept accords well with notions of 'people's capitalism' and concepts of property in a complex, changing and uncertain 'full world' which demands resilient communities and ongoing adaptive management at all scales. It is good design in terms of fundamental ownership and life chances.

In all of this search for interdisciplinary context, it is hard to avoid polarized concepts or blatant dichotomies. In the face of such dichotomies, it is hard to avoid arguing for balance, for reconciliation, for response to the tension through moderation. And in such a search for balance in such complex circumstances, it is hard not to see ongoing oscillation in the world of ideas, a continuous swinging of the pendulum between extreme interpretations of persistent concepts.

I've just spent ten years in a ten-country project on social learning. (The book is finally ready to be published by MIT Press early next year.) I'm going to argue that we do see social learning and a progressive evolution of ideas. But we also see swings. And for each of these three points above, I'd like to highlight three historical moments in the evolution of ideas, each representing almost a generational shift.

These swings reflect and underline my own search for context and perspective, as I noted in my opening comment. It was just up the road from here, at 150 St George Street, in the old coach house offices of the Institute for Policy Analysis that I sat in a seminar room and quite scornfully rejected an earnest plea from a woman who wanted to insist that there were "other ways of knowing" that must be respected in analytical work. With my MIT PhD in hand, just off a five-year appointment teaching mathematical economics and optimization theory to graduate economics students at Harvard, I was full of hard-minded positivist righteousness, convinced that only what we now call 'sound science' and evidence-based (that is to say, numerically buttressed) decision could help us in properly serving the public good. Being now a lot older, and coming from the West Coast where the debate over respect for traditional perspectives as well as traditional territories is intense, I hope my comments here can be seen as reflecting a little more learning.

1. BI is good economics.
In the paper "The Dance of the Deficit: Economic Management for Social Purpose" which is reprinted in the Lerner et al book already mentioned, I suggested that "A high degree of social consensus will be needed to move forward with the changes made necessary by rapid technological change and globalization.... By refusing to address human security, we force an obsolete clinging to job security throughout an economy that should be more flexible...A social contract provides security–individual and collective–against the risks of economic change and global competition. The pooling of risk through social insurance, social assistance or regional adjustment is a natural response of any community observing the problems that individuals face in responding to changing circumstances.... A minimum participation income would cushion the shocks of adjustment to and in the new world economy.... The minimum participation income, then, becomes a form of social consensus on fair ground rules for sharing the burden of adjustment costs [in a more flexible and competitive economy]."

Despite some scornful reaction by reviewers of my draft paper, the empirical evidence and general commentary in support of these ideas seems to be growing. After extensive examination of current data, Dani Rodrik concludes that more open economies have larger governments in order to provide some social insurance against the greater risks taken on. Government spending plays a risk-reducing role and contributes to economic security in societies exposed to significant external risk in an integrated global economy. He also quotes John Ruggie's concern that a serious problem in the international economy is governments' inability to sustain their part of the social compact on which postwar international liberalization has hinged, namely the "compromise of embedded liberalism: Societies were asked to embrace the change and dislocation attending international liberalization. In turn, liberalization and its effects were cushioned by the newly-acquired domestic economic and social policy roles of governments." (Rodrik, 1997, P. 65) Rodrik goes on to suggest that "What seems clear is that we need some creative thinking on how to provide social insurance and thereby foster stability in the new global economy." (P. 67). The BI is perhaps an example for this purpose. Rodrik closes off his short pamphlet by noting that globalization is actually part of a broader trend that might be called marketization [or, in the social policy context, responsibilization], and that "The broader challenge for the 21st century is to engineer a new balance between market and society, one that will continue to unleash the creative energies of private entrepreneurship without eroding the social basis for cooperation."(p.85)

For the students in this crowd, I have to draw attention to the massive and challenging tasks here. In his discussion of policy implications, Rodrik includes a comment on the role of economists, observing there is lots of work to do. "For example, there is much thinking to do on how to design appropriate policies and institutions that can best address the need to provide social insurance, which I have argued is a critical complement to the expansion of global markets."(p.72). In a footnote, he quotes Avinash Dixit as suggesting that "Designing more efficient systems of social insurance tailored to the particular shocks that matter to particular countries, which will allow them to secure more of the benefits of integration and suffer less of the costs of it, is just the right kind of task for economists." [By the way, this should sound somewhat familiar. In Canada we had the MacDonald Commission report in the mid-eighties recommending exactly this, that we should take the leap of faith into free trade, but buttressed with UISP, a universal income security program. Mr. Mulroney fought an election in 1988 on that promise that the winners could compensate the losers in the adjustment process. But when the election was over and the deed was done, the winners reneged, on the grounds that the wisdom of the market didn't extend to the identification precisely of the exact losers.]

Distinct from this question of social performance in the global economy, there is concern also with some domestic issues of economic security. Writing in the US context, Shirley Berggraf considers the problem of social security and intergenerational transfers. She suggests that the whole system "is based on the implicit assumption that middle-class families will continue to produce human capital in the form of productive children at something close to their historical rate" (p. 12), but is silent on who will make the necessary investment. She is led to propose a parental dividend, held in trust fund investment until parents retire. But in contemplating transition problems she is also led to note (p. 208) that "It is considerably easier to design a rational system for making the investments in labour and capital that are necessary for old-age support and for economic security in general than it is to figure out how to get out of the present non-investment system."

Of course, the idea of a social compact including a basic income notion is not new. In Canada, we have the landmark 1943 report of Leonard Marsh quoted by Rice and Prince in their book just published as arguing that social security payments 'are investments in morale and health, in greater family stability and from both material and psychological viewpoints, in human productive efficiency.... It has yet to be proved that any democracy which underwrites the social minimum for its citizens is any the weaker or less wealthy for doing so." (Rice and Prince, 2000, P. 243, 244) Rice and Prince close their book with a chapter on the challenge of creating a new policy agenda, arguing for expanded use of a negative income tax, and in their closing lines urging that "there is work to do in finding a new balance of democratic social provisions within our increasingly global economy and pluralistic society" (p. 255).

So we have, in the wartime generation, the Marsh Report and the foundations of a welfare state as an investment in social solidarity and human economic productivity. A long generation (thirty years) later, we have the peaking of this commitment with the Federal-Provincial Social Security Review, and its subsequent repudiation in 1975 by a split federal Cabinet. Now, coming up on another thirty years later, we have the unfinished business embraced by Rodrik, Rice and Prince, and others, looking for the creative ideas by which to ensure that social disintegration need not flow from economic integration. The basic income notion has to be examined much more fully in this context. As the observations quoted above affirm, the design challenges will be great, but the moment to take on the technical dimensions of this unfinished business is now.

At the risk of quoting myself, the nature of the design and implementation challenge has been anticipated in a number of respects. In a paper for an OECD meeting twenty years ago, on The Crisis of the Welfare State, I argued that "So far as the making of social policy is concerned, therefore, the next decades will be based on a view of the decision process which argues for decentralization and experiment, not centralization and planning; for procedural concerns and 'natural justice', not analysis of the substance and consequences of policy proposals; for intervention in the structure of economic mechanisms, not correction of the outcomes through stabilization policy or redistribution programs." (Dobell, 1981, P. 234) And finally, "The design of institutions which can maintain consistent strategic goals in social policy while tolerating the variety and diversity of decentralized management of social programs is the challenge for the next decade." (P.239) I said that in 1981, but it seems to me that this question of scale and subsidiarity (coordination and coherence versus freedom and discretion) is still the nub of the problem of implementation and realization.

Let me turn then to address it as part of the second dimension of context, the issue of solidarity and governance.

2. BI is consistent with the simultaneous strengthening of "Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism" and vernacular nationalism (Kymlicka). It looks after our commitment to meet "The Needs of Strangers" (Ignatieff) at a large (universal) scale while supporting the diversity of more direct provision within individual communities. On the foundation of core universal human rights and basic income can be built a rich variety of diverse community structures recognizing different traditions and social bonds. So long as the more general and more basic commitments are not called into question by more exclusive communities, the dark sides of social capital generated through greater community solidarity need not be encountered.

There is much to say in all this, much more than is warranted or possible here. But I can't resist drawing your attention to the fascinating swing in ideas as we move from the 1944 Raymond F. West Memorial Lectures of Reinhold Niebuhr at Stanford (The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness) to the famous 1973 Report of the Trilateral Commission on the problem of governability, and now, almost thirty years later again, to the ideas of Ralf Dahrendorf, or Will Kymlicka, or even U of T's own Bob Rae, speaking just down the road at a seminar on federalism as we meet here at his old alma mater. Niebuhr speaks of a vindication of democracy; the Trilateral Commission initiated a campaign to contain the excesses of democracy; now Dahrendorf and others give voice again to the faith that it is possible to balance the forces toward universalism with the bonds of community, falling neither into cold abstraction nor demeaning exclusion.

Niebuhr speaking in 1944:
"The organization of, and the achievement of peace and justice in, the community have been considered up to this point with the understanding that the national community was usually under consideration, but that the social problem of mankind transcended the national community, though the nation has been for some centuries the only effective organ of social cohesion and cooperation. Beyond the national community lies international chaos, slightly qualified by minimal forms of international cooperation. The problem of overcoming this chaos and of extending the principle of community to world-wide terms has become the most urgent of all the issues which face our epoch.
"In more than two millennia, it seemed a fixed principle of history that effective human communities should be much smaller than the universal community which was implied in any rigorous analysis of man's obligation to his fellowmen. In this whole long period of history the national and imperial communities, which gave effective cohesion to social life, drew a considerable part of their cohesion from the power of particularity. Geographic boundary, ethnic homogeneity and some common experience and tradition were the primary bases of their unity....So matters stood until a technical civilization...introduced a new force of universality into history. Its instruments of production, transport and communication reduced the time-space

dimensions of the world...and led to a phenomenal increase in the interdependence of all national communities. This new technical interdependence created a potential world community...

"The task of building a world community is man's final necessity and possibility, but also his final impossibility. It is a necessity and possibility because history is a process which extends the freedom of man over natural processes to the point where universality is reached. It is an impossibility because man is, despite his increasing freedom, a finite creature, wedded to time and place and incapable of building any structure or culture or civilization which does not have its foundations in a particular and dated locus. The world community, standing thus as the final possibility and impossibility of human life, will be in actuality the perpetual problem as well as the constant fulfillment of human hopes." (Niebuhr, 1944, P. 188)

Note that the issue here in its most practical form is whether we can bring the global economy within the framework of democratic control. This is what the controversy about the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF is all about: will trade and commercial relations be seen as instruments of human purpose, or somehow viewed as beyond human influence. I've argued elsewhere that one can find practical examples of instruments to achieve a social frame around the market, and indeed, in nascent form we have these in the institutional structures of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which is a triplet of parallel accords, not just a trade deal. (See Dobell, "A Social Charter for a North American Community). Again it's not a new idea. Karl Polanyi (another familiar name here in these quarters) said it all pretty clearly in the mid-1950s as well.

But note also how clearly the issues fit within this general question of control–will our institutions, created for instrumental purpose, somehow come to control us, or will we succeed in establishing the framework of principle within which the operations of our organizations will be controlled?

3. BI fits well with concepts of property in a complex, changing and profoundly uncertain "full world" that demands ongoing adaptive management at all scales.

The simple proposition here is that any search for certainty in an uncertain world about which we learn more in only fragmentary ways is an illusion. The demand for secure tenures and immutable property rights is simply inconsistent with the nature of such a world.

The contextual feature of that world is well summed up by Jane Jacobs in the foreword to her recent book, the Nature of Economies: "The theme...is that human beings exist wholly within nature as part of natural order [natural systems] in every respect."

This natural order–Ursula's biosphere–embraces human activity. Indeed, we hear too much about managing resources; what we should be talking about is managing humans (or human activities) in light of their impacts on resources and natural systems.

This idea too goes back a long way. We have an earlier Marsh (Marsh, 1865) in the middle of the 19th century, but that was a lonely voice. We have the remarkable 1945 paper of Academician Vernadsky, drawing our attention to the fact that "humankind has become a mighty geological force", and making a plea that we consider the consequences.

Then a generation later, twenty-five years on, we have the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, with its hopeful recognition of a growing human awareness of obligations to future generations in a complex ecosystem. Twenty-five years further on again, we come, not to the visionary Rio meeting, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, but to the 1997 Rio+5 meeting at which it became clear that aspirations for an Earth Charter and effective implementation of commitments made at Rio were running into major barriers. Here again is major unfinished business from the last century.

But notice again the interesting resonance with the concept of BI. The motive for the Rio meeting was the growing recognition of the value of natural capital and ecological services, and indeed the absolute need to ensure the continuing integrity of the interdependent web of life which sustains the life support services on which we all depend. Those ecological services, like Ursula's Triple Bottom Line, are not well marketed. They should command a price, and some are beginning to do so. But who are the owners of this common heritage of humankind? The question, so phrased, answers itself.

It was, of course, precisely this question, posed increasingly insistently in activities at the United Nations in the early 'seventies, leading to the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) launched in 1973, and to the 1974 Declaration and Action Programme for a New International Economic Order that prompted the backlash of concern captured so well in the 1973 Trilateral Commission report on problems of governability, calling for action to roll back the excesses of democracy. It is also the urgent motivation behind activities at the OECD, the WTO and many other places to consumate some form of multilateral agreement on investment to entrench financial claims to ownership or property rights in remaining unenclosed elements of the global commons (principally in the ecosphere, but also in cyberspace).

Market revenues in this world are produced jointly. There are factors of production which are rewarded, and there are factors which are not. Among the latter are social, cultural, and natural capital. The simple point, then, is that natural capital, social capital, cultural capital are all collective assets, they are resources of the community as a whole. The interdependent web of life, and the interdependent networks in the bitsphere are the essential foundations for almost all economic activity and wealth generation. Niebuhr quotes Gerard Winstanley, leader of the Diggers movement in England centuries ago: "If a man has no help from his neighbours he shall never gather an estate of hundreds and thousands a year. If other men help him then are those riches his neighbours' as well as his own." In our present world, the incremental product of one person's effort is usually the joint product of vast networks of social relations, ecological systems and pre-existing cultural and institutional assets. [There is a growing literature now contrasting the economic view on distribution here with the much more persuasive principles of fairness (perhaps in light of concerns for reciprocity) embraced naturally by most people. See ....] The commons are the property of the poor no less than the rich; the returns to their use in production are legitimately channelled to the owners of the resources.

It probably has to be emphasized that none of this argument for recognition of the common heritage of humankind deviates in the slightest from the best mainstream economics that I learned at UBC and MIT and Harvard, and taught at Harvard and Toronto and other places.

Market mechanisms work as always. Incomes and allocations flow from ownership. The Coase Theorem applies unaltered. To the extent that the Fundamental Theorem of Welfare can be proved for our existing state of affairs, it can be proved for the world envisaged here. Creative destruction still reigns; the wisdom of the market still guides. Flexibility, adaptability, agility, imagination, innovation and ingenuity in resource allocation are as present as ever. Incentive structures still guide economic behaviour in as constructive a way as at present.

No political problems of redistribution need arise. There are no opportunity costs or resource costs incurred.

All that has happened is clearer recognition of the owners of the resources going into production, a deemed transfer of ownership just as if Weyerhaueser had taken over Macmillan-Bloedel, or BCE had divested itself of its Nortel holdings. The personality of the owners may have changed, and the institution may therefore be responsive in its actions to the new motivations and new interests of the new owners, and so the future trajectory of economic events may be altered. But economic theory applies just as it always did, to the extent it always did. The only shift is that envisaged in the first (but generally ignored) line of all economic theory, “The distribution of endowments being given, the following can be proved...”. We can take, for good and sufficient reason, a different distribution of endowments to be given. The issue is not redistribution of flows, nor redistribution of stocks, but the recognition and respect for the ownership claims, thus far left implicit, of the collective resources of the community.

In particular, in the case for basic income, we see the ownership of the resources of cyberspace, the bitsphere, civil society, the biosphere and the ecosphere as being held in common, the common heritage of humankind. Between the real systems of the bitsphere and the biosphere, between the world of ideas and the world of action, activities are mediated by a wide range of institutions and organizations created for the purpose. The boundaries between these agencies are varying dramatically, and our accounting systems cannot keep up with the consequences of shifting activities and shifting boundaries. But the claims of these agencies on resources are indirect claims, held by the agent in trust for the purposes of the principals. And the principals are, first and foremost, citizens.

A citizens’ income flows from this ownership. Just as the claims to consumer sovereignty associated with those who cash their stock options are recognized and respected, so the claims of those exercising their dividends from resource ownership must be recognized and respected. Incentive problems arise no more with respect to the latter than to the former. Those who choose the option of raising children, restoring habitat or pursuing education as a use of their income need encounter no more questioning of their participation than those who choose to trade stock options for a number of villas that might seem, to the naive observer unfamiliar with the sophisticated reason of economists, excessive.

Should a participation income flow to those who choose not to participate in the building of any of the resources of social capital, natural capital, cultural capital which represents the greater part of national wealth and provides the basis for the flow of national income? Probably not, but is this a problem greater in magnitude than the diversion from investment associated with high-income expenditure patterns?

Thus, as we speak of basic income ideas, we are not speaking primarily of reform of tax-transfer mechanisms or income redistribution. Economic security is necessary to the realization of human potential, but it is not sufficient. We are not speaking here of the unfinished business of the twentieth century as a concern for completion of the postwar welfare state, but as the unfinished business of the whole century, the goal of citizenship in a world community, the ideal of Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism *together with* the goal of sustainable communities at all scales from global to neighbourhood, from IWW and League of Nations [need better starters here] onwards. We are seeking to fulfill the scriptural promise of a full and abundant life through the pragmatic instruments of self-interest mobilized through instrumental institutions (just as Rheinhold Niebuhr visualized ()). We look to the realization (not negotiation) of the new social compact through the recognition of the social framework around the trade and commercial relationships and institutions designed to serve human purposes within agreed social and collective groundrules.

It is necessary, of course, that the detailed provisions for implementation be negotiated within the framework of economic reality. But the institutions of economic operation are at our disposal. The realities of nature and the realities of human motivations must be respected. What is non-negotiable are the principles we formulate collectively to establish the framework for economic realities. In time, even the realities of human motivation may evolve, though one must not be overly naive or overly optimistic about the powers of self-interest, as has been often emphasized. We need not bargain about social and environmental objectives within a given structure of economic institutions; we can design the structure of economic institutions within the framework of social principles guiding human activity in all spheres of activity, in light of impacts on human and natural systems overall. Economic relations are pursued within a social charter. It is, as Humpy-Dumpty said, merely a question of who is to be the master.

With this shift in perspective or mind-set–this figure-ground reversal–the problem of incentives always foremost in the minds of critics of social support systems can be addressed. There seems to be no obvious reason why those who cash stock options to drop out into conspicuous consumption should be seen as less of a problem than those who cash dividends from their ownership of real natural, social and cultural capital. We do have to pay attention to the concerns about those who take their participation income without participating in the formation of the stocks of wealth which generate it. But this is a general concern about social inclusion, not a problem of work incentives.

Can we pay for all this? That is not a question to be pursued here, but if common ownership of the bitsphere and the biosphere are recognized, then the Bit Tax, and the Tobin Tax and the whole quiver of Green Taxes which have been often mentioned in this context would seem plausible sources of the necessary revenues in the new economy.

But again the question of agency and the possibility of social control of institutions created for human purpose arises in the most profound manner.

Niebuhr warns about creating pools of excessive social power in the hands of those who manage both its economic and social processes. “Even if a community...preserved...a democratic check upon the power of economic managers, ...their power might be so great they could use it to establish control over the political institutions....The social ownership of the power and wealth...is certainly more plausible than the efforts to maintain its individual character...Yet it may be wise for the community to sacrifice something to efficiency for the sake of preserving a greater balance of forces and avoiding undue centralization of power....This is the kind of question which cannot be solved once for all...There must be a continuous debate of the property questions in a democratic society and a continuous adjustment to new developments. Such a debate is possible, however, only if there is some common denominator between opposing factions.... None of these propositions [advanced in his text] solves any specific issue of property in a given instance. But together they set the property issue within the framework of democratic procedure. For democracy is a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems.” (P.118)

CONCLUSION

For the sake of concrete illustration, I’ve chosen three specific historical markers to ground ideas underlying each of these three contexts in which we should consider proposals for basic income.

1. Consequential effectiveness: BI can contribute to a resilient and adaptive economy
Marsh Report (1943)
Federal-Provincial Social Security Review (1973)
Dani/Rice-Prince/Lerner/Rae (1997-2003)

2. Basic income mechanisms can contribute to social cohesion and universal concern: solidarity, social capital and good governance
Niebuhr (1944)
Trilateral Commission (1973)
Dahrendorf (1997/98)

3. Basic income mechanisms form a reasonable part of a resilient society seeking conservation of natural capital and preservation of ecological integrity–that is, pursuing sustainability.
Verrnadsky
Stockholm Conference (UNCHE, 1972) [and UNCLOS III (1973), and NIEO (1974)]
Rio (UNCED) + 5; but also Jacobs (2000)

Social learning is a generational thing. In many cases it is another generation re-learning previous truths against the experience of a long swing away from them. But one has to see the process not just as the pendulum swings; the process is a spiral; with fluctuations also comes progress, and as we look back here to take on the tasks of unfinished business, shouldering the burden like the good earthworms we try to be, we do have the benefit of the learning and the experience that has gone before. We should not lose that advantage.

END

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