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BOOK REVIEW

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Hein Marais (2022). *In the balance. The case for a universal basic income in South Africa and beyond.* ISBN 978-1-77614-772-4. Pages 299.

Social work practitioners are at the coalface of casework documenting individuals, households and communities whose livelihoods and security have been ravaged by South Africa's worsening poverty, unemployment and inequality trends, and they know well that state social security assistance brings considerable amelioration. Socioeconomic rights to social security indicated in Section 27 (1) (c) of the Constitution stir debates about the architecture of social security and appropriate social assistance, as well as the legislation directing the use of resources towards progressively realising those rights.

Slow economic growth, unemployment and rising incomes for the rich while the poor's share of wealth is diminishing all mirror global trends. In this book Marais (2022) reinvigorates the case for South Africa adopting a universal basic income (UBI) grant. The early years of post-apartheid transition saw trade unions and the African National Congress (ANC) government supporting the idea of a UBI. Concerns about affordability informed the opposition of the National Treasury and the Presidency to the grant, though in 2021 a Department of Social Development Green Paper revived the idea.

Constitutional Court rulings note that South Africa's socioeconomic rights align with international law; nonetheless, the Human Rights Commission contends that South Africa falls short of its obligations to realise these rights. Intuitively, one could say that episodic, violent, social protests about the rising costs of consumer items and the deterioration of municipal services, as well as palpable social polarisation, are linked to the trend of worsening poverty, unemployment and inequality. Insightful thinking is required about a post-apartheid constitutional order and the state machinery to address these issues. The promise of a UBI, according to Marais (2022:5), is that "such an intervention would afford people vital means for survival, reduce poverty and inequality, and broaden their life choices".

This book's eight substantive chapters about reshaping social policy to complement broader social transformation and egalitarian projects are also a valuable resource for lawmakers, civil servants, social movement activists and scholars of poverty and development studies, and

public administration officials. The book weaves into its arguments commentary on five decades of the preferred policy orientations of neoliberal capitalism, as well as reports, statistics and analyses of actual outcomes. It is widely lamented that worsening global social trends are rooted in the dominance of neoliberal capitalist ideology and practices that have prompted states to retreat from welfare provision. Rather, state regulation prioritises supporting market forces in the provision of commodities and services (Marais 2022:17-18). Different courses of action are pursued in a terrain that is not confronted with a radical alternative. The book addresses a wide range of concerns in the background, in the process producing helpful insights and ideas and thereby empowering a broad audience to address these issues and realise socioeconomic rights.

Global thinking behind shaping the idea of UBI and opposition to it, pilot studies and comparative practices in adopting a UBI, similar neoliberal assaults on the welfare state and social spending, dismal economic performance, unemployment and poverty trends – these all inform Marais's case for a UBI. The book is interspersed with information about historical moments in the early 2000s such as the social forces in South Africa that supported a Basic Income Grant (BIG); social forces impeding a BIG; findings of a committee that examined implementation of a BIG; why the campaign waned; resuscitation of the idea in a Green Paper draft policy document; and the rollout of the COVID-19 Social Disaster Relief Fund bolstering views about its conversion to a BIG.

The book's theoretical rigour draws on the work influential analysists of capitalism and protagonists of reform strategies. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright argued a UBI relieves people of the burden of surviving by means of wage labour, and potentially reshapes and destabilises capitalist society's characteristic power relations. Sociologist André Gorz contends that a UBI brings relief from poverty and waged work, as well as enabling people to engage in socially productive lives. The economist Amartya Sen argues that relief from poverty comes from enhancing 'capability'; while philosopher Hannah Arendt critiqued perceptions that associate worth with waged work. Influential antagonists include the philosopher John Rawls, who argued that society should not subsidise those who choose an unproductive life; and political scientist Alex Gourevitch and philosopher Lucas Stanczyk repudiated illusions about the emancipatory potential of a UBI while the working class does not control the economy. After a decades-long advocacy of ungenerous neoliberal controls over social spending, shifts in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the US Agency for International Development support of cash transfers unravel complex reflections informing Marais's case.

The themes covered in the book include: conceptualising the notion of a UBI; whether and how to finance it; different perspectives about eligibility; the impact on economies; its role in diminishing unequal class and gender relations in capitalist societies; concerns about whether a BIG creates a disincentive to work; and South Africa's current types of social grants and their effects in terms of reducing poverty.

Chapter 1, "Behind the idea of a universal basic income", highlights moments over the last two centuries revealing a drift supporting measures towards providing an income for all towards the present conceptualisation of such a measure: "a UBI is a universal and regular (monthly) cash payment to individuals, without conditionalities (such as work requirements or enrolling

children in school), means-testing or targeting" (Marais 2022:13). Unpacking the diverse positions among proponents of UBI expands the range of a broad audience's potential support. The inclusion of international comparisons of UBI-type schemes encourages debate about the nature of a scheme suited to South Africa. International comparisons reveal government reversals of support as well as continuation of projects; nonetheless, the research shows the benefits of such projects – improved health among recipients, completion of high school education, steady employment rates. These studies belie any apprehension that recipients withdraw from work or spend the income on luxury goods.

Chapter 2, "The crisis of waged work", includes international statistical comparisons on levels of insecurity. Countries are affected to varying degrees by similar issues: unemployment, underemployment, stagnant and decreasing wages, decline of worker power through trade unions and declining membership, decline in labour's share of national income, skewed distribution among paid workers, and job losses associated with the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. South Africa's social policies evolved concurrently with a belief in the availability of jobs as a source of income. Currently, six types of social grants – namely old age pension, disability grant, child support grant, foster care grant, grant in aid, and care dependency grant – help people to cope with precarity. The chapter dissects the roots of precarious lives in SA: the bleak economic growth and job creation results of macroeconomic policy; poverty, inequality and their interrelationships with wage work and inequality in wage levels; the capacity of families to cope with the national minimum wage of R3 320 per month; and lack of empathy in social policies and social transfers beyond the current six types.

Chapter 3, "The attractions of a Universal Basic Income", after a caveat that social grants do not instantaneously halt poverty, examines positive outcomes of cash transfers and social grants and dissects claims about the positive effects of a UBI paid to all. Targeted, means-tested and conditional grants can be 'burdensome, inaccurate and prone to error and delay' (Marais 2022:58), and miss intended beneficiaries, as illustrated by the rollout of COVID-19 grants in South Africa. International studies demonstrate the positive effects of cash transfers; targeted income support includes use of healthcare services, improved maternal and child health, improved nutritional status and school attendance. Nonetheless, measuring the impact of such programmes must take cognisance of the depth of inequality in health and education systems. Cash transfers may boost economies as increased purchasing power boosts demand for domestically produced consumer goods and employment increases, as well as stimulating community-based economic activities. A variety of commentators contend that a UBI allows women to exercise more options and realise forms of independence and empowerment through their social reproduction roles, relief from financially dependent and abusive relationships, and pursue the possibilities of participating in informal economic activities rather than wage labour.

Chapter 4, "Testing the arguments against", unpacks the scepticism about and opposition to a UBI. Economic and ethical concerns are foremost, while others contend that it diverts the focus of workers' struggles against capitalism. Economic concerns entail the unaffordability of a UBI financed through personal income taxes in developing countries; economic disruption because of a reduced labour supply, and inefficiencies from reduced competitiveness and price inflation; cash benefits discourage work-seeking and counter the norm of people seeking paid work;

compared to means-tested transfers, a universal transfer rewards the underserving; transfers subsidise able-bodied persons to live off welfare and not reciprocate with contributions to society. International and South African research findings counter the latter concerns. Leftist concerns that mobilising for a UBI acts to undermine struggles to improve workplace conditions and worker rights, as well as efforts to combat capitalism, are countered with reference to South Africa's trade union movement linking struggles of the employed and unemployed. Leftist concerns that cash transfers are used to acquire goods and merely commodify human life, exposing people to market trends, are countered with examples of people using transfers to engage in community economies and to effect local social change. An alternative to cash transfers is job guarantees. However, international examples and South Africa's Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) show limited achievements – small numbers were employed, and the incomes failed to reverse poverty levels. Blending public works programmes and a UBI promises better results.

Chapter 5, "Financing a Universal Basic Income", confronts the toughest hurdle – affordability concerns. International research about amounts to pay out, the impact of paying to particular age groups, the relationship between a UBI and a country's taxation structure dispel affordability concerns. Besides support for a UBI, exactly what the amount should be and its cost, depending on the size of the beneficiaries population, must consider the impact of choices between higher and lower amounts. Research deals with calculations of paying amounts equal to particular calculations of the poverty line; linking a UBI with existing forms of income support; and paying amounts that respond to inflation. South African research explores paying for a UBI using existing tax instruments; its impact on the economy, on citizens and corporations; and green taxes such as carbon emissions taxes, supporting optimism about financial feasibility.

Having allayed affordability concerns, Chapter 6, "The politics and economics of a Universal Basic Income", focuses on the important issue of a UBI's political feasibility and examines the balance of power between significant social and political forces, local and international, tussling over its implementation. The balance of forces in industrialised countries after World War Two saw the emergence of welfare states, which were later undermined by the neoliberal political project serving the interests of the capitalist class. Opposition to a UBI was based on its nature as a handout, while policies promoting waged work were put forward. The field is not dominated by rigidly pro-capitalist players – World Bank thinking has shifted in favour of safety nets. Popular social and political forces have not routed neoliberal capitalism, but rather neoliberalism's ideological authority has diminished; dogmatic opposition to a UBI has receded and the discussion now accommodates dialogue about the purpose, content and scale of a UBI, which is a surplus sourced from economic activities. Increasing the state's allocation to grants or transfers indicates a greater 'influence' of broader citizens' interests on policy as opposed to capitalists' interests and preferences about the role of the state and use of its fiscal resources. South Africa's National Treasury and Reserve Bank remain opposed to redistributive policies that encroach on the interests of capital. Despite name changes and shifts in emphasis, South Africa's neoliberal orientation in its macroeconomic policy has not changed. There is recognition a UBI is not a cure-all and a demand for a UBI is not about overthrowing neoliberal capitalism. Yet such a call may mobilise larger partisan support among left positions: it links

well with discourses about realising social justice and meeting egalitarian goals; it fits well with practical thinking and popular support for converting the COVID-19 relief grant to a BIG; it resonates with ruling party and government debates about a developmental state pursuing a balance between economic growth and social redistribution; and it fits in with combined notions of a 'just transition' and responses to climate change calling for economic activities with low carbon impacts. And there are political risks to dismantling a UBI entrenched in South Africa's projects for transformation.

The "Conclusion" summarises the respective chapters. Having moved beyond the binary choices of reform or revolution against capitalism, Marais (2022) enlivens thinking about addressing the collapsed livelihoods of a large proportion of society. This resourceful book is empowering for activists who are lobbying government to transform social policies into services to address the collapsed livelihoods that are associated with episodic and volatile social protests.