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Why Left Reciprocity Theories
Are Inconsistent*

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Abstract – The reciprocity objection is one of the most widespread criticisms against Basic Income (BI). In this article I challenge the consistency between the reciprocity principle and the preferred policy options of left reciprocity theorists. I argue that any consistent policy design for a reciprocity theory should satisfy two conditions: 1. Everyone who benefits from social resources contributes relevantly (reciprocally) to society's efforts; and 2. Everyone who contributes relevantly to society benefits from social resources. BI is accused by reciprocity theorists of failing to satisfy Condition 1. But, surprisingly, their preferred policy pack also fails to satisfy Condition 1, and seems badly prepared to satisfy Condition 2. Significantly, left reciprocity theorists reject those options that would satisfy both conditions. I suggest that other normative values and intuitions may explain that inconsistency and indicate that the reciprocity objection to BI is wrong for principled reasons.

Keywords – basic income, distributive justice, reciprocity, right to work, social benefits, workfare.

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1. Introduction: Normative Ideals Versus Policy Options

One of the most widespread criticisms of basic income (BI) in its universal and unconditional form has come from the so-called reciprocity theorists, and occasionally the discussion in recent years has been tough¹. However, I have the impression that a spectator of the debates between BI's advocates and the reciprocity theorists would feel puzzled. Such an observer would see some reciprocity theorists who, after writing forceful pleas against parasitism and in favour of citizens' duties, accept a package of welfare schemes that would bring us close to an unconditional BI (Anderson, 2001, 2004; White, 2003, 2006). This observer would also find some BI defenders who argue that the reciprocity principle may be fair, but for pragmatic reasons BI may be the most favourable scheme for achieving fair reciprocity (Barry, 1997, 2001; Couillard, 2002; McKinnon, 2003; White, 2004; Widerquist, 1999). Still, many others would be seen to argue, on other grounds than reciprocity, that BI is the fairest policy but for pragmatic or political reasons we may prefer a reciprocity-sensitive scheme such as participation income (PI) or wage subsidies (Atkinson, 1996, 2004; Goodin, 2001; Offe, 2001; Van der Veen, 2004). Moreover, there are those who, being sympathetic to BI, try to show that it is compatible with reciprocity (Segall, 2005) – implying that, if it weren't, it might be rejectable. This spectator will read forceful and convincing critiques of work requirements in the welfare system, followed by a defence of less stringent work requirements (Anderson, 2004). Finally, this observer would see how some reciprocity theorists such as White (2004) argue that workfare policies may be justifiable only on pragmatic grounds, where other alternatives are not politically feasible.

After a dispassionate study, our spectator may well conclude that this is a peculiar discussion, since after all, few of its participants seem to consistently defend their first-choice options in institutional design. No doubt, it would take time and hard effort for this spectator to fully understand who is defending what and on what grounds. This is important, since consistency between normative principles and policy options seems to be an obvious desideratum for anyone who tries to put ideals of justice (no matter which ones) into practice.

Many reciprocity theorists (and most of those who have played a part in the BI debates) consider themselves to be politically progressive or on the left of the political spectrum. They contend that there is some ideal of fair reciprocity that

¹ See, for example, the statement by Anderson (1999, p. 299) that BI "effectively indulges the tastes of the lazy and irresponsible at the expense of others who need assistance". The classic (and similarly tough) formulation of this accusation can be found in Elster (1986).

left liberals, socialists, and egalitarians should bear in mind when making concrete policy recommendations. In this article, I argue that their criticisms against BI and their defence of alternative welfare designs rely on an inconsistent position: I claim that the reciprocity principle collides with basic intuitions of those in the left, which is why left reciprocity theorists frequently make inconsistent choices when examining the field of institutional design and welfare policy. Although the reciprocity objection to BI has generated a considerable amount of literature, little stress has been placed on the most striking and visible flaw of left reciprocity theories: their favourite policy options are not consistent with the normative principle they openly and proudly defend. The startling fact is that, in the end, left reciprocity theorists defend nonreciprocity policies and reject true reciprocity policies.

Although not considered here in detail, some BI defenders also sympathize with some allegedly reciprocity-sensitive policies (such as PI or some combination of conditional schemes).² I encourage BI supporters (and those who look at BI with interest and sympathy but are not completely sure of its fairness) to see that the reciprocity principle, if consistently applied, would harm a considerable number of other values and principles that are at the core of egalitarian and progressive social thinking. If that is so, then a principled defence of BI against the reciprocity objection should be possible, and BI defenders need not be ashamed or reluctant to say that the objection is wrong and that BI is the best policy option on principled grounds.³

Two stipulations are worth noting. First, I focus my argument on *left-* and not *right-wing* reciprocity theorists. I consider as right-wing reciprocity theorists those who favour a more stringent workfare design for present social welfare schemes (see Mead 1987, 1992; Phelps, 1997) in order to fight the culture of dependency, to enhance work performance, and to encourage the work ethic among the poor. In contrast, left reciprocity theorists agree to demanding some kind of productive contribution by social-benefit recipients, but add several egalitarian qualifications that make this demand much less stringent and subject to *decency* in work opportunities, social rights, and income sufficiency. Their rationale is to support equality, social cohesion and participation in a cooperative social framework, rather than to support a moral life or the work ethic. Right-wing reciprocity theorists may defend unfair policies, and they may be consistent in doing so. However, a left reciprocity theory can hardly be consistent. I clarify this distinction and the left reciprocity theories below.

²For instance, see Couillard (2002, p. 1), Goodin (2001), Offe (2001), and Opielka (2005, p. 8).

³This is Philippe Van Parijs's option from the beginning, as McKinnon (2003, p. 153) rightly notes.

Second, I take Stuart White's formulations of left reciprocity theory to be the *standard* version. Of course, this is not to say that all left reciprocity theorists agree with every step in White's argument, or that there cannot be other appealing left reciprocity discourses. However, space limitations and clarity require a narrow focus in this article, so I leave for the future an exhaustive analysis of left reciprocity sensibilities.

2. The Reciprocity Objection to BI

Since the reciprocity objection to BI has been widely discussed elsewhere, I do not present it here at length. Its basic point is simple: the unconditional nature of BI makes it possible to live off society's collectively produced wealth without ever making any relevant (that is, reciprocal) contribution to it. The most sophisticated argument to date in favour of a left reciprocity theory is developed by Stuart White in his book *The Civic Minimum* (2003). White adduces that economic justice necessarily embodies some fair reciprocity principle: citizens have some degree of responsibility for the common good, which should be reflected in making useful contributions to society. Thus, economic and social citizenship rest on a civic minimum comprising the right to a share of the social product as well as the obligation to contribute to generating that product. The reciprocity principle advocated by White reads as follows: "each citizen who willingly shares in the social product has an obligation to make a relevantly proportional productive contribution to the community in return" (2003, p. 18).

White's idea of fair reciprocity states that, when state institutions satisfy other basic principles of justice, grant civil and political rights, and provide citizens with a sufficiently high minimum share of the social product to avoid poverty and vulnerability, then those citizens also have the duty to make a decent productive contribution in return, in terms that are proportional to their abilities. Everyone should contribute according to one's capabilities and aptitudes. Provided that the state sets policies against privation, market vulnerability, class inequality and lack of self-realization, then in return, citizens must perform a socially defined minimum of hours of paid work throughout their lives, that is, to accomplish a basic work expectation. This expectation, White adds, may also include other kinds of unpaid work – such as care, volunteer or community work, or even some capital-generating activities. This suggests that left reciprocity theory embodies a broader concept of social utility than does the right-wing concept, since for the latter only paid work seems to count as an acceptable contribution.

White (2003, pp. 170–175) goes on to suggest some concrete policies that could instantiate a nonideal model of fair reciprocity, as for example, the following:

1. A “republican BI” – as White calls it – similar to PI, civic work or citizen’s service programs such as those defended by Atkinson (1996) or Beck (2000) (see section 5, below).
2. A targeted benefit to be delivered to only those citizens most disadvantaged in their labour market opportunities, or in their chances for self-realization in work (we may include refundable tax credits in this category, as well as other means-tested benefits).
3. A time-limited but unconditional benefit – an income guarantee to be enjoyed for only a certain period in a citizen’s working life (for example, sabbatical accounts⁴).
4. A universal basic capital,⁵ such as a social inheritance linked to certain productive or human-capital enhancing activities.

These policy proposals have some kind of resemblance to BI, according to White. Together with other already existing welfare arrangements, they form the set of policy schemes typically defended by reciprocity theorists. Call them the “Reciprocity Policy Pack” (RPP). Discussion of the ideas and policy proposals included in the RPP is widespread among the intellectual left in several industrialized countries. However, we shall see that their consistency with the reciprocity principle is by no means obvious.

3. What Reciprocity Theory Really Requires in Terms of Welfare Policy Design

The reciprocity principle states that if one benefits from society one must contribute to it. In White’s nonideal model, the typical benefit one gets from society is some kind of income or wealth, and the typical contribution one makes is some kind of paid work (although some forms of unpaid work are also accepted as relevant contributions).⁶ Two conditions are required in order to

⁴ Sabbatical accounts have been proposed by Offe (2001) as a generous version of time-limited welfare benefits: they include the right to live on a generous benefit but only for a certain period, which may be linked to the number of years of full-time work through life.

⁵ Universal basic capital is an unconditional benefit equal to a BI but in only one payment, for example, when individuals reach a specific age as an adult.

⁶ Here I am concerned only with what reciprocity theorists themselves imply reciprocity requires as a decent contribution. Another question, which does not affect my argument, is whether the reciprocity principle may be

fulfil reciprocity: Condition 1 – everyone who receives is contributing; and Condition 2 – everyone who contributes receives, in the defined terms.⁷ Inconsistency between a given policy and the reciprocity principle may arise in two ways: Inconsistency 1 – someone is receiving income or wealth without reciprocating; or Inconsistency 2 – someone is contributing (relevantly) without receiving income or wealth. In both cases, the reciprocity principle is violated. So by definition, if a given policy or policy set⁸, by virtue of its own design systematically allows at least one of these two possibilities, then it would be inconsistent for a reciprocity theorist to prefer that policy option. In Table 1, only case A is consistent with the reciprocity principle; cases B, C and D are inconsistent with it.

Table 1. Types of inconsistency with the reciprocity principle

		Condition 2: “all contributing are receiving”	
		Yes	No
Condition 1: “all receiving are contributing”	Yes	A	B
	No	C	D

Two clarifications are necessary. First, for the inconsistency to arise, it is important that the selection of the policy (or policy set) is made *in the name of reciprocity* – that reciprocity, and not another principle, is the *rationale* for that choice. In the discussion that follows, I take the latter for granted, since all the policy choices I discuss are made on those grounds by left reciprocity theorists;

understood in a way that does not require a work contribution and, thus, is compatible with BI and other unconditional benefits; this argument was developed by Segall (2005).

⁷ To avoid misunderstandings, “is contributing” should be read as “has the duty to contribute,” and “receives” as “has the right to receive.” I assume this throughout the rest of this article.

⁸ The question of whether we are dealing with particular policies or with policy packs or sets does not affect my argument. Typically, the relevant units are policy packs because, depending on the particular combination of policies a society chooses, Condition 1 and 2 will or will not be socially satisfied. The point is that a consistent reciprocity theorist should favour a policy pack which scores positive for both conditions.

in fact, many of them are making these choices once confronted with the alleged lack of reciprocity allowed by BI.

Second, relaxing the reciprocity principle in order to admit cases B, C, and D to some degree would amount to modifying deeply or giving up the reciprocity objection to BI. Strictly speaking, if reciprocity theorists relax Condition 2 (that all contributing are receiving) they are not forced to give up their objection to BI, but they must modify the reciprocity principle (although it is difficult to see how they could do that cogently) or find different foundations for their criticism. If, alternatively, reciprocity theorists relax Condition 1 (that all receiving are contributing), then the reciprocity objection to BI becomes unavailable for them. Reciprocity theorists, then, by virtue of endorsing the reciprocity principle, commit themselves to select a set of policies that fall under case A. Otherwise, they have no legitimate reason to reject BI, at least on reciprocity grounds.

4. All Receiving Should Contribute

4.1 Does the RPP satisfy Condition 1?

Reciprocity theorists tend to assume that, provided one is not receiving any public cash benefit, there is no problem for reciprocity. But think of all the different ways an individual may find in our society to obtain some benefit from the collective efforts of others (even if the others do not want that individual to benefit), and, at the same time, in order to live without making any productive contribution or corresponding effort oneself (be it paid or not): even if one does not receive any cash benefit from the state, one may benefit from collective public goods, or from in-kind benefits with universal coverage; one may live from rents not produced by oneself, and whose maintenance results from collectively accepted arrangements of the social cooperative scheme; one may have a job in the shadow economy or even a formal one, but which does not contribute to anything really valuable⁹ or has no productive function (think of many civil servants or outdated workplaces that are maintained only because of social, political or union pressure). Still, a lot of people who receive public benefits do not seem to contribute: they may have retired early yet be perfectly able to work – but they live (at least partially in most cases) off public funds; they may be disabled only in terms of doing certain kinds of work – yet receive

⁹ Here I am only assuming that this would not be valuable from the standpoint of left reciprocity theory, but I am not necessarily committing myself with a substantive theory of what is valuable for society. Rather, I think that the concepts of “social utility” or “social value”, as they are frequently used, are unworkable from a normative and theoretical point of view. But to develop this claim would require another article.

benefits even if they do not; they may be unemployed but waiting to find an adequate job offer that never comes; they may be in prison and may refuse to work – hence they live off general taxation; etc.¹⁰ Can a consistent reciprocity theorist remain impassive in front of all those possibilities? Maybe, but if so, the criticism against BI loses much of its force¹¹.

Do the policy measures (or any combination of them) favoured by White ensure that Condition 1 will be met? The answer is no, whether we take them separately or all together forming a policy pack. It is not difficult to see why: PI, sabbatical accounts, capital grants and benefits targeted to the least advantaged (such as tax credits or means-tested benefits), even if combined, still leave open the possibility that some able-bodied citizens benefit from society's collectively produced goods without contributing at all to generating them. None of these schemes, nor the whole set, is enough to ensure the satisfaction of Condition 1. Something else is required if we are really consistent in trying to deliver such state of affairs.

Although all benefits in the RPP are conditional in some way, this is quite different from ensuring that Condition 1 is fulfilled: one requirement is to ensure that no one gets a cash benefit from the state without making a decent contribution, and another is to ensure that no one takes advantage of collectively produced goods without contributing to their production to some extent. The kind of earmarked grants and conditional benefits in the RPP fail to satisfy reciprocity in one important sense: the contribution is voluntary. If you do not contribute, all that happens is that you are not entitled to the grant – but you are free to live on other sources of income and wealth available to you or to try to get other benefits from the state or the community.

What would be required to avoid those possibilities and ensure Condition 1? As we saw, if we do nothing, we fail to satisfy Condition 1; therefore, *we cannot allow reciprocity to criticize BI while defending another policy pack that permits essentially the same thing that motivates our rejection of BI* – namely, that some people may live off social resources without having the duty to contribute to their production.

¹⁰ Note that I exclude from this list situations such as living off others' voluntary help, gifts or charity (which of course need not be a problem in reciprocity terms), as well as overt fraud in welfare programs, even if it would be easy to commit it under some reciprocity policies as PI: see De Wispelaere and Stirton (2007) or Noguera (2005).

¹¹ A question placed by Coulliard (2002, p. 20) is whether it is possible not to contribute to social cooperation while living in society. The answer is affirmative if we define "contribution" according to the intuitions that underlie reciprocity theory: to "contribute" is to do something to help produce some benefit that others can enjoy; the contribution must be active, and must result in utility to others. The same idea is constitutive of the definition of work in Van Parijs (1995, pp. 137–138).

4.2 *Retiring benefits to the undeserving poor?*

Consider some institutional consequences of all this. First, to avoid Inconsistency 1, reciprocity theorists should include in their preferred policy pack some kind of *duty to work*. This may be understood in two different ways. The first is a coercive obligation to work: all able-bodied citizens would be directly forced to work or accept jobs. Of course, this version is highly troublesome both for normative and pragmatic reasons (see Noguera, 2002), and no left (or even right) reciprocity theorist endorses this, since it would violate basic individual freedom in a liberal state and would return us to the poor laws or the work camps.

However, a second way to understand what a duty to work entails – one that may be more compatible with respect to formal freedom – would be to enforce an indirect (but no less coercive) obligation to work, by which citizens would be forced to work or to accept jobs through the pressure of income deprivation. Obviously, this second meaning of the duty to work would be much more palatable than the first one in modern democratic societies (in fact, one could say it already exists for many people). But it is worth noticing that, to become a real reciprocity policy, the enforcement of that duty would require the retirement of income sources for all able-bodied citizens who do not work. Of course, this would entail an extremely stringent form of workfare under which, in order to be entitled to any public assistance or benefit, able-bodied citizens would have to find a job or engage in some defined nonmarket work.

But, some left reciprocity theorists join the defence of the reciprocity principle with a nonstringent conditionality for the unemployed and other welfare recipients.¹² If you coherently defend the first one, you should sooner or later be ready and unashamed to retire those benefits in order to *force* some people to work. How else can a reciprocity-committed state deal with those who refuse to accept any adequate job offers? Sooner or later, it will be necessary to force some people to accept jobs they do not want – to enforce stringent workfare as done by right-wing reciprocity theorists. Otherwise, there would be no point in rejecting BI. The point is that left reciprocity theorists rarely support that option or even the hardening of the eligibility conditions for unemployment or social assistance benefits for working-age citizens able to work.

¹² See White's (2003, pp. 129-152) defence of a generous and flexible interpretation of the work test in his book *The Civic Minimum*. See also Anderson (1999, p. 325; especially 2004). White (2003, p. 223) leaves open the possibility of introducing some form of Mead's welfare contractualism, depending on the political context, but I argue that reciprocity theory has no reason to leave that question undetermined. Related and useful discussions can be found in Goodin (2002) and Wolff (2004).

It is hard to see why reciprocity theorists should not back those kinds of measures. If their criticism of BI is consistent and honest, then they should be concerned that in most European welfare systems “refusing a job offer does not really lead to losing the benefit. Unemployment benefits have become a twisted picture of BI that gives bad incentives” (Groot and Van der Veen, 2000, p. 8). In fact, our public employment services normally operate in a more flexible way than would be demanded by any coherent reciprocity principle, because the policy of those services towards the unemployed often rely on the vague concept of appropriate job offer in order to decide whether or not they deserve to keep their benefits. Since determining what counts as an appropriate job offer is ambiguous, in practice a broad discretionary margin allows, on the one hand, arbitrariness and coercion depending on the government policy or the administration level – and even on civil servants’ moods; and on the other hand, interpretations so flexible that the benefits would become almost unconditional. But if we had to apply the reciprocity principle consistently, why should we not force some recipients of public benefits to accept some job offers under the threat of withdrawing their benefits?

This point forces left reciprocity theorists to face a dilemma. If the reciprocity principle is consistently applied, it will lead us to practical consequences that are intuitively unacceptable from a left-wing point of view. If, on the contrary, the reciprocity principle is applied weakly and flexibly, it will lead us to a *de facto* BI or to something close to it. I cannot see any way out of this dilemma if we accept the philosophy of reciprocity.¹³

4.3 Preventing parasites from benefiting from public goods: starvation or exile?

But would a stringent workfare policy be enough to avoid Inconsistency 1? To answer this we have to ask exactly what “to benefit from society” means. For a right-wing reciprocity theorist who believes in the ideology of self-sufficient, isolated individuals, one could say that someone is benefiting from society (and has the obligation to reciprocate) only when that person receives some kind of public assistance or benefit, paid by the state out of general taxation; in that case, a stringent workfare scheme would do, and Inconsistency 1 would not arise. According to this view, a person who is financially self-supporting has no duty

¹³ This point could be taken further: Buchanan (1990) has suggested that if a reciprocity theorist should be ready to deprive non-contributors of available subsistence resources, then the theorist should be ready to also deprive non-contributors of their civil and political rights, and even to convict them. The reasons to reject the second possibility would also count as good reasons to reject the first. Couillard (2002, pp. 16–17) shows that the same charge of nonreciprocation may be held by reciprocity theorists against shirking workers and husbands who do not take on their share of domestic work.

to contribute to society – that person asks nothing, takes nothing, and owes nothing to society.

However, as already suggested, there are reasons to doubt that this can be enough for a left reciprocity theorist. The view just mentioned would be regarded as too atomist and Robinson Crusoe-like.¹⁴ A left-wing sensibility sees social resources and opportunities as being collectively produced, and considers the production of public goods (which, by definition, can be used by all) to be one of the main aims and rationales of the state. Everyone living in society is, therefore, by definition, benefiting somehow from social cooperation, even if someone does not contribute to the production of those benefits, or if the others do not want that person to benefit from them. Hence, it would not be enough to retire monetary (and even in-kind) benefits to idlers to satisfy reciprocity. Clearly, it would be necessary to ensure that *no able-bodied resident who is not performing any kind of work (paid or not) benefits at all from any public good*. But how is this to be achieved?

This condition may be satisfied if every time a parasite benefits from a public good we impose a fine equal to the estimated value of the consumed portion of the good. But, leaving aside the obvious problems involved in calculating that, how could we impose fines upon persons who lack any income or wealth? This would condemn them to die in starvation, or would violate the reciprocity principle by allowing people to benefit from public goods without contributing to them. A second possibility (one frequently imposed historically, see De Swaan, 1988) would be *exile*. Deporting idlers and parasites seems something that the preferred policy pack of a reciprocity theory may well include, since that measure would help to decisively ensure Condition 1.¹⁵ So, why do left reciprocity theorists not even consider suggesting these options?¹⁶

4.4 *Eliminating the idle rich?*

Still more would be required to satisfy Condition 1: the ensuring that no idle able-bodied citizen receives income from the state *or from the market*, which is a social collective arrangement where economic agents benefit from cooperation and public goods. Paradoxically, in order to avoid Inconsistency 1, a left

¹⁴ See, for instance, Anderson (1999, pp. 321–322) and White (2003, p. 61).

¹⁵ This would be similar to the treatment immigrants receive in some developed countries: they are deported if they fail to prove they have a regular and legal job.

¹⁶ Anderson, who criticizes BI's unconditional nature and defends the core of the reciprocity principle, notes that right-wing reciprocity theorists should not be worried about deporting idlers (2004, p. 246). My point is that anyone defending what Anderson calls "the General Reciprocity Principle" (a left reciprocity principle) will have to face, sooner or later, the same choice.

reciprocity theory would have to endorse a much more stringent and coercive policy than right-wing reciprocity theorists demand.

This applies particularly to the case of the idle rich or rentiers: those who receive income from only their property rights or inherited wealth, and who do not work or follow any socially useful activity.¹⁷ Significantly, socialists and most left liberals have always showed distrust towards them, and have often accused the idle rich and rentiers of being unproductive parasites. They always took for granted that an egalitarian society would eliminate this social position, and that it would be just to do so.¹⁸

A possible objection would be that rentiers are contributing by paying taxes on their income and wealth.¹⁹ But is this objection acceptable to the left? It would be as much as accepting that someone can buy an exemption from a citizen's duty to the state: since I have money to pay taxes over a given threshold, then I do not have to work. Think of paying to avoid compulsory military service (where it exists), or to avoid going to prison once condemned, or to avoid jury duty or a voting station.

These are nonmarket obligations for every citizen; why should a duty to work be different? According to left-wing and egalitarian sensibility, if citizens have the duty to work, then it should not matter whether they have money or not: citizens have the duty to work, to contribute productively to society – rather than the duty of having enough money and enjoying it, or of just being self-supporting and independent like a Robinson Crusoe (which is illusory in a complex modern society).

Thus, a consistent reciprocity theorist should also reject imposing just a fine or punishment on rentiers and idlers, as Segall (2005, p. 340) suggests. To accept that would be as much as accepting that a citizen's duty can be marketable (see Couillard, 2002, p. 16). It follows that the only acceptable option from a left

¹⁷ See Widerquist (1999) for the argument that a consistent reciprocity theory should apply the work or starve principle to everyone, not just to those who lack significant amounts of external assets.

¹⁸ See White (2003, pp. 118–124). One objection may be that to the extent that the idle rich and rentiers are allowing others to use productive resources they own, they are making a contribution. But this would be vulnerable to the gatekeeping objection made by Schweickart and addressed by White: they would be consuming social resources in return for their gatekeeping (an unnecessary role) of productive resources. To simplify the argument, and to avoid White's reasonable exceptions (2003, pp. 120–123), I assume here that the income of these rentiers does not come from productive resources generated or saved by them: I suppose that they are living off the rents of nonproductive property, inherited wealth, fortunate investments, or, say, a lottery prize.

¹⁹ To what extent White thinks so is not clear. Although he endorses the view that society is the product of cooperative effort, White sometimes seems to say that the important thing for reciprocity is not *to contribute* but *is to avoid being a burden to others* (2003, p. 62). These are dissimilar: even if rentiers may not be a burden (which is debatable), they do nothing to benefit anyone. Again, if they did not exist, society would lose nothing.

reciprocity viewpoint would be to force rentiers and idlers to work, through the pressure of income deprivation – to *confiscate their rents*. Incidentally, Segall seems to concur that the idle rich could be allowed to reciprocate with money instead of work, and argues that work duty would be “ineffective with regard to adults who are dependent on their families” (2005, p. 334). I can agree with this latter point although there is, arguably, a difference between receiving income and public goods from society or the market and receiving them *as a voluntary gift* from a relative *out of a personal share*; but I can’t agree with the former point that the idle rich do reciprocate by paying money. Moreover, as Anderson (2004, p. 247) has seen, the undeserving also pay (indirect) taxes through purchasing basic consumption goods, so they should be exempted from the work contribution for the same reason the idle rich are.

To count living off rents as a decent productive contribution conflates not only with left-wing sensibility, but also with the basic intuition underlying reciprocity theory: it perverts the idea that people have to make some minimum *effort* or *active* contribution to society in order to receive something in return. Failing to eliminate rentiers entails a particular kind of discrimination and unequal treatment *precisely on reciprocity grounds*, since the entitlement conditions and labour obligations of the civic minimum are imposed upon only the poor and disadvantaged, while some lucky citizens may live on unearned income and wealth without working. Even if we adopt a stringent workfare scheme, additional measures would be necessary to eliminate rentiers, in order to ensure that everyone in society is “doing their bit.” So, an institutional consequence of a consistent left reciprocity theory should be the elimination of rentiers. *Any policy pack a consistent left reciprocity theorist can support must include some measure to eliminate rentiers* (such as forcing rentiers to work or confiscating their rents).²⁰ However, eliminating rentiers is not the same as eliminating capital gains and rents as such, but instead means eliminating the institutional possibility of living off *only* that kind of income source *while* not working.

²⁰ White (2004, pp. 278–279) faces this problem and concedes that, for this reason, “in contemporary circumstances, workfare can make no claim to clear moral superiority over basic income”. Similarly, in *The Civic Minimum* he admitted that “some forms of capitalist income are inconsistent with the reciprocity-based demand” and that therefore “it is...unjust to allow citizens to use these incomes to reduce their work effort and thereby escape the basic work expectation” (2003, p. 124). But the reader is left asking why this conclusion has no institutional consequence in the RPP and why White does not recommend simply eliminating this social position.

4.5 *Abolishing or cutting current nonreciprocity benefits?*

As we have seen, left reciprocity theorists do not usually back policy options that would ensure satisfaction of Condition 1. Therefore, it is not surprising that they do back (or at least show no worry about) some existing welfare schemes that violate Condition 1 by allowing some able-bodied citizens to receive income or goods without contributing to society's efforts. Some of these schemes are unconditional, so it may seem that it is not *unconditionality* as such that disturbs left reciprocity theorists, but only the unconditionality associated with BI.²¹

Consider the following examples:

1. Non-contributory or universal pensions exist in many industrialized countries, and they provide benefits to seniors independently of their previous contributions and their work record.
2. Child benefits, whether they are means-tested or not, are not usually linked to any past, present or future contribution from parents or children: when children grow up they do not have to work to return a decent contribution to society in exchange for those benefits.²²
3. Contributory schemes would seem to be more in accordance with the reciprocity principle; but after a closer look we can easily see that what counts as contributing in these schemes isn't working or performing any productive activity, but rather is *paying*, as such. The more one pays, the more one will receive, even if having worked less. As we saw above, for a left reciprocity theory to be consistent, it should be hard to accept that one may buy one's rights or avoid one's duties by paying more than others. But these schemes are never challenged by left reciprocity theorists, nor do they dispute that the capacity to pay money counts as a relevant contribution (even when, as is the case in most contributory schemes, the payments are compulsory, not voluntary).
4. Reciprocity theorists do not appear worried about some types of unconditional and universal in-kind benefits like public health, education, or social services – which exist in many West European countries and which clearly violate Condition 1.
5. Finally, reciprocity theorists say nothing about the huge and intricate mess

²¹ Segall (2005, p. 344–345) also notes this.

²² One might argue that this is because the rationale of the benefits is to make children *capable* of making contributions in the future; but is this not an argument that may also be held to defend BI? (for citizens to make morally relevant contributions, subsistence and real freedom should be guaranteed unconditionally).

of direct and indirect subsidies and tax exemptions (including the European Union agrarian subsidies) enjoyed by capitalist firms and by some economic sectors, although most such subsidies are independent of productivity, profitability, and social demand. And they say nothing about tax exemptions, for income-tax payers, that are enjoyed even if the declared income does not derive from work.

So, as far as Condition 1 is concerned, it seems that for left reciprocity theorists the reciprocity principle *only counts against BI*, but not against already existing policies that are contribution independent, nor against their preferred policies that also violate that principle. The indignant battle cry “what about reciprocity” is, surprisingly, inspired by only BI. Reciprocity seems to be of much less importance when any other reciprocity-inconsistent policy is at stake. An impartial observer may say that BI is clearly a victim of intellectual discrimination, since other policies are also violating reciprocity *on exactly the same grounds that BI does*, but they do not receive the same opposition.

5. All Contributing Should Receive

5.1 Does the RPP satisfy Condition 2?

In order to avoid Inconsistency 2, the RPP would have to ensure that all who contribute relevantly also receive some income from society. Is that the case? I do not think so, although in this case the inconsistency is less obvious. Let us see why.

One can easily see that schemes such as sabbatical accounts, tax credits, earmarked capital grants or other conditional benefits, even if they could entitle more contributors than present schemes do now to receive income or wealth, would not ensure the satisfaction of Condition 2 (recall that BI would ensure that condition automatically). There would still be thousands of unpaid domestic, care and voluntary workers, who would be contributing relevantly to society (perhaps even more relevantly than thousands who are in paid work), but would not be entitled to those benefits, nor would they receive income from the market. Then, we would be enhancing unfair differential treatments that are not consistent with the reciprocity principle.

For instance, why offer paid sabbatical years to Wall Street brokers and to weapons or tobacco producers, while we deny them to NGO volunteers and family caregivers? In short, if only those in formal employment could qualify for the sabbatical accounts, then Condition 2 would not be satisfied. If, on the

contrary, we extend the right to sabbatical accounts to all citizens, we would be instituting a time-limited but universal BI. But some questions arise when we carefully consider such a policy: what would a sabbatical year mean for a family caregiver? Would the state fund and organize the performance of their domestic and care work, while paying them an income for two or three years so that they could plant bonsais? It is quite difficult to think so, but then the reciprocity principle would be again unfulfilled, and unfair differential treatment would arise between those who are formally employed and those who are not.

Let us now consider the case of tax credits for low-income workers. We may find one of the usual problems, about which reciprocity theorists should be most concerned, of in-work benefits: the discriminatory treatment of unpaid workers who, because they work for free, would not receive any tax credit. This raises the question of why one should receive in-work benefits only when one is paid, leaving aside millions of people who are undoubtedly making a decent contribution to society. But even if we take into account only paid work, if reciprocity were really the rationale for tax credits, they would have to be paid to the entire employed population and not just to low-income workers. That only the latter qualify for these tax credits shows that their rationale mainly has to do with income redistribution and labour market efficiency.

Only one method would ensure Condition 2 with the RPP: pay the benefits to everyone performing some socially useful and productive activity. That would transform the benefits into a PI. It may well seem, then, that PI is a consistent scheme for a left reciprocity theory as far as Inconsistency 2 is concerned. However, it remains to be shown how that could possibly be a realistic policy option. As De Wispelaere and Stirton (2007) have cogently argued, a PI scheme would most likely face the following trilemma: 1. It is designed as a stringent workfare program (something that left reciprocity theorists reject); or 2. It would work as a *de facto* BI (which would once more deprive reciprocity theorists of their objection to BI); or 3. If the required controls and inspections are really enforced, its implementation would be so costly (economically, but also politically, because of its intrusion into citizens' private lives) that it would cease to be an available policy option.²³

²³ McKinnon (2003, p.144) also thinks so. Note that if this proposal were seriously implemented, contrary to BI, it would support the subordinate role of many women, because of the link between receiving the benefit and performing domestic work.

5.2 *Should unpaid workers receive income?*

I have been assuming until now that Condition 2 implies nondiscrimination against the unpaid labour performed by care, domestic, or voluntary workers. A consistent reciprocity theory would imply, along with some kind of duty to work (necessary to avoid Inconsistency 1), a duty for society to reciprocate to everyone who makes relevant contributions (in the form of some payment). But there are three ways in which a reciprocity theorist may reply to that:

1. The relevant payment should not necessarily be monetary, and some social rights (like education or health services), political rights (like voting) or other public goods could be enough.
2. Contributions that do not generate income are not necessarily relevant, so the RPP would be right in discriminating against unpaid workers.
3. If a household has an employed member, that person's gains are enough to reciprocate for all the unpaid work done by members of the household.

Now, arguments 2 and 3 may be wrong. But *if* they are, they are not necessarily wrong on reciprocity grounds; they are wrong on equity or equality grounds, based on progressive or left-wing normative ideals. That is why a right-wing reciprocity theory may be consistent. And, argument 1 may be endorsed by left reciprocity theorists: we saw that, for a left reciprocity theory, to benefit from public goods should count as benefiting from society. This could result in considering that unpaid workers receive enough benefit from society just by living in it and benefiting from public goods, even if they do not receive an income or payment of their own. As we saw before, a consistent reciprocity theory should not allow some people to free ride on collectively produced public goods without making any relevant contribution to society (otherwise, Inconsistency 1 would arise). The equation works the same the other way round: the enjoyment of public goods may be enough payment from society, in exchange for some unpaid work, and that would satisfy Condition 2 without any necessity for a PI scheme. Note that this has the institutional consequence that, for a left reciprocity theorist, it may be right to force some members of society to do some *unpaid* work, in addition to being employed or accepting a job offer.

5.3 *Is basic work the answer?*

A left reciprocity theory may consistently satisfy Condition 2 just by considering unpaid workers to be members of society. Obviously, however, one of the policies in the RPP – namely PI – would be required if the *amount* of unpaid work

done by some citizens is higher than a decent minimum contribution. In that case, PI would be the only scheme in the RPP that would avoid Inconsistency 2, but it is hard to see how it could be consistently implemented. Then, in order to avoid Inconsistency 2, left reciprocity theorists should have to either render the RPP as unnecessary or abandon it in favour of BI (and thus give up their objection against the latter).

But section 5.2 suggests another possible institutional solution for left reciprocity theories: what we could plausibly call a “basic work” scheme (Jackson, 1999; Noguera, 2002). Under such a scheme, all able-bodied citizens would have to perform some amount of socially useful or necessary work throughout their lives so that some amount of socially necessary work would be distributed equally and compulsorily among the population. As we have seen, this required work may be paid or unpaid. But here a reciprocity theorist would be in big trouble again: if it is paid, why not pay the rest of the unpaid work that citizens may perform outside the programme? That would be unequal in terms of Condition 2, since the same payment would be made to those who do extra unpaid work as is made to those who don’t. If, on the contrary, basic work is not paid, we would still face more serious implementation and political problems than with PI: for example, basic work would require an unimaginable degree of authoritarianism and state control over the economy and the life choices of citizens. And this would lead us to a planned economy even in such fields as care and domestic work. A basic work scheme would be incompatible with left-wing and progressive ideals to the extent that they value basic liberties. Therefore, democratic left reciprocity theories never defend the basic work scheme although it would be consistent with the reciprocity principle (satisfying both Conditions 1 and 2).

The conclusion to sections 4 and 5, then, is that virtually all policy designs favoured by left reciprocity theorists fall under one or more of the inconsistencies shown in Table 1. Reciprocity theorists accuse BI of failing to satisfy Condition 1, but surprisingly, the RPP also fails to satisfy that condition and seems badly prepared to satisfy Condition 2, which would be totally satisfied by BI. The RPP is compatible with the existence of surfers and, at the same time, does not ensure that society reciprocates to all who are “doing their bit.” Conversely, some of the policy designs needed for bringing about real reciprocity (case A in Table 1) are often rejected by left reciprocity theorists – the only policy packs that score positive in both Conditions 1 and 2 include some arrangement that left reciprocity theorists do not (and seemingly cannot) accept.

6. Conclusion: Why Left Reciprocity Theorists (and Some BI Supporters) Should Not Be Ashamed of Defending BI

Why do left reciprocity theorists reject policies that bring about case A and satisfy both Conditions 1 and 2? Unfeasibility does not seem to be the reason: some feasible policy packs may satisfy those conditions. Then the reason must be that they perceive some unfairness in those policy options. But why do they see those policies as unfair? It cannot be because they fail to satisfy the reciprocity principle: they do. They do not reject those policies in the name of reciprocity, but rather because they are *left* reciprocity theorists. So left reciprocity theorists must admit (and they often do) that there are other principles of justice guiding their policy choices.

It is important to know the reasons underlying this (somewhat paradoxical) rejection of the reciprocity principle by some of the so-called reciprocity theorists – so that we might be able to determine the proper role of reciprocity in a just society, and to see that it differs from the role reciprocity theorists give to it, even when they admit that there are other principles of justice. Because of space limitations, I cannot go deeply into each reason, but these include such values and principles as freedom from coercion, free choice of occupation, relief from poverty, altruism, self-respect, the right to decide whether or not to participate in a cooperative framework, and the idea that rights are subject-centred (Buchanan, 1990). Once all those reasons were fully developed and acknowledged, left reciprocity theorists would have to accept that the reciprocity argument should not affect minimum levels of material subsistence and freedom such as those BI wants to ensure.

By now, it should be clear that I do not agree that pragmatic and implementation arguments are all that BI supporters can use to reject the reciprocity objection – even if BI provides more *de facto* reciprocity than does the RPP or any similar policy pack (White, 2006, pp. 6–8); even if BI provides valuable benefits other than reciprocity (White, 2006, pp. 4–6); and even if the RPP and similar policy options are futile and trivial as separate policies from BI and would produce a similar scenario in practice.²⁴ Of course these arguments

²⁴ Certainly, one may be surprised when some social policy scholars who are openly critical of BI declare they agree with most of the steps towards it, if these are presented to them one by one: for instance, to accept proposals such as a universal basic pension, a universal child benefit, a generous guaranteed minimum income or negative income tax, and even some in-work benefits like tax credits or sabbatical leaves, is to back individually all the pieces that together form a universal and unconditional BI. It is irrational to be against the reform R (which equals $a + b + c$) while at the same time favouring a , b and c if these are taken separately. But from a psychological or political viewpoint, this is often done. As Marx said, we should not confuse the logic of

may play an important role in the political arena. But, in using them, BI supporters concede that any lack of reciprocity raised by BI is to some extent unfair. I suggest that even left reciprocity theorists implicitly acknowledge that this is not so.

Reciprocity is not a first-choice option to be discarded only because it is not feasible: first, because it would be feasible under some (unacceptable, even for left reciprocity theorists) conditions; second, because feasible or not, reciprocity is not a first-choice option, as far as basic subsistence and basic real freedom are concerned. Similarly, BI is not just a second-choice or compensatory policy, provisional until we find an institutional design that directly distributes job opportunities, decent contributions, and payments in a reciprocity-friendly way. There is no third choice, conceptually speaking: either one favours the unconditionality of some basic citizens' benefits (and accepts that the reciprocity principle does not apply *there*), or one cannot oppose more coercive right-wing reciprocity measures. There is no consistent nonideal model of left reciprocity policies. In contrast, BI is a nonideal model consistent with many left-wing intuitions and inspirations. And that is why left reciprocity theorists should not be ashamed of becoming BI supporters.

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