Book Review

Bob Deacon. 2013. *Global Social Policy in the Making: The Foundations of the Social Protection Floor.* Policy Press

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This book makes an important historical and analytical contribution to understanding the evolution of one of the UN's key social development initiatives, the Social Protection Floor [SPF]. Moreover, it also gives an important insight into the fortunes of basic income [BI] within the UN system, especially within the International Labour Organization [ILO]. Crucially, Deacon's analysis explains why the BI proposal has failed to gain traction in the ILO and suggests how BI might become situated more centrally in the SPF initiative.

Having won a competitive ILO research fellowship, Deacon spent 6 months in the ILO's Social Protection Department (previously the Social Security Department) in 2011–2012. He thus conducted a quasi-anthropological/political economy analysis of the genesis of the SPF, including interviews and discussions with key individuals involved in the SPF initiative within the ILO, other UN agencies and constituents from NGOs. The book documents how this initiative was very much shaped by human psychologies and by the machinations of their dynamic interplay. This interplay has important repercussions for BI too.

The SPF was adopted as an international labour standard in the form of ILO Recommendation No. 202 in June 2012. This marked a major milestone for social security, reaffirming the human right to social security and renewing national commitments to extend coverage. It supports the development of social protection to all by extending social security vertically (providing more comprehensive services and benefits) and horizontally (extending coverage to a greater number). It emphasises that social protection systems should comprise at least the following social security guarantees: access to essential health care and basic income security for children, for persons of active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, and for older persons. Currently many middle- and low-income countries are strengthening their Floors and the SPF also looks poised to feature in the UN's forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals framework as Goal 8: Decent Work. The proliferation of SPFs also represents an opportunity for more experimentation with BI and, possibly, fully-fledged BI programmes. Exciting as this might sound for BI aficionados, caution is necessary. The Floor's emphasis on "basic income security" should not be conflated with explicit

backing for BI, as defined by BIEN. Basic income security in the SPF refers to a set of minimum income guarantees that can be fulfilled in different ways through social insurance, social assistance or effective minimum wage or labour market measures.

Yet in spite of the divergence with BIEN's conception of a BI, these policies may represent a step toward BI by legitimising the idea of BI security as an essential ingredient for human development and freedom, and by creating a social policy culture more conducive or receptive to BIEN-type notions of BI. In fact, many of the income security programmes championed by the SPF, such as Brazil's *Bolsa Familia*, are those often touted by the BIEN community as programmes that contain partial BI logic and are precursors to fully-fledged BIs.

The BI proposal features explicitly in a three-page section (pp. 31–33, and a fascinating footnote 5 on pp. 187–188) of Deacon's book, and sporadically elsewhere. Replete with insight, it details how BI fell in and out of favour in the ILO, and to some extent reveals why it has never been wholly embraced nor backed as an unconditional, universal and economic right by the ILO. Deacon argues BI enjoyed its apotheosis at the ILO when the ILO ran its InFocus Programme on Socio-Economic Security (headed by Guy Standing). This programme's 2004 report "*Economic Security for a Better World*" argued "for new forms of universalistic social protection such as categorical cash benefits" (p. 32). In spite of the programme's efforts to mainstream BI, it never secured full backing. Resistance within the ILO stemmed probably from a combination of elements comprising personal disagreements/personality clashes with Standing, and adherence to the ILO's traditional social insurance model. This latter concern no doubt figured prominently, especially given that a comprehensive BI system could, in theory, weaken extant social insurance models and social security "standards".

Deacon concludes that Standing's strategy in the ILO was to shirk both classical social security extension approaches and new Recommendations on social security and "use a citizenship income approach to break with the work-income connection." (p. 33) This struck at the heart of the ILO's *raison d'être* as Standing was proposing that socioeconomic security should be provided by the guarantee of a BI, which would provide an element of security on which recipients could then make life choices. This presupposed decommodifying labour. Consequently, and according to Deacon, Standing's InFocus programme was subject to an internal review in 2005 and discontinued in 2007. BI has since been side lined by the ILO.

This prompts the question, why has BI had a mute response within the UN system, when it has resonated powerfully with civil society organisations,

academia and with workers groups. It cannot be down to personal differences alone. Was the proposal's failure to attain institutional backing indicative of it being insufficiently compelling and incapable of satisfying the *Realpolitik* demands of national governments? For the UN, BI was and is a hard sell to make to governments with different levels of development and resources. In fact Deacon mentions several examples of how pressure was brought to bear on the ILO to avoid BI-type logic (e.g. unconditional/universal/citizenship-based approaches) by some national governments in SPF negotiations. This is clearly visible in Deacon's book (see pp. 76–77, 89). These tensions remain an area that BI proponents need to be aware of.

Deacon is ambivalent as to whether the SPF is amenable to BI. Reflecting on the inception of the SPF, he suggests “it is a debatable question as to whether the SPF recommendation for a guaranteed access to a minimum income ... reflected the concerns with a universal citizen's income that Standing has argued tirelessly for or whether its premises were in fundamental contradiction to it.” (p. 33). Nonetheless, the momentum behind the SPF and the strengthening of existing SPFs throughout middle- and low-income countries provides the BI agenda with an entry point as well as legitimising BI discourse in general. However, extending a rights-based discourse to BI (in the BIEN sense) still remains plagued by an array of difficulties where active population groups are concerned. Such an extension would violate the dominant social norm of “social reciprocity” and deservingness which still figures so strongly in many societies. This norm refers to a common objection directed against BI which states that there can be no rights without obligations and that financial assistance must be earned through the seeking of employment or making some other form of effort or social contribution. Consequently, the SPF at times could be seen to pander to this logic. Thereby proffering more of a “workfare” view of income guarantees for the working poor, along with behavioural and conditionality testing, rather than unconditional income guarantees for this group.

Whether BI will emerge as a viable option in SPFs remains unclear. One might speculate that BI may enjoy more favourable conditions now, given that the ILO's new Social Protection department director is a member of BIEN. Nonetheless, for those interested in understanding the history of BI in the UN system and its changing fortunes, Deacon's books locates BI in its place.