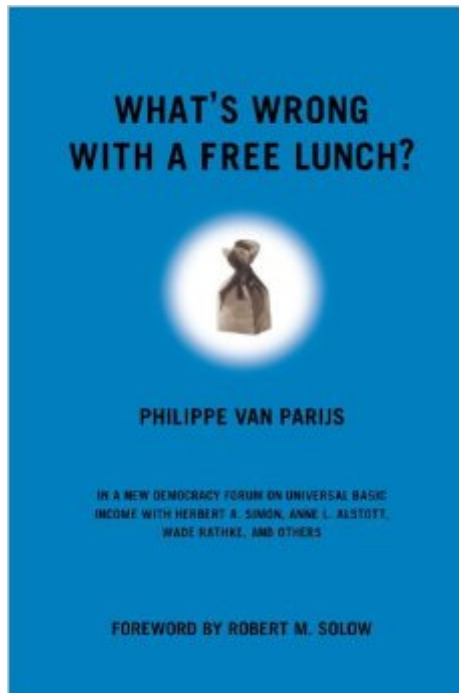


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# What's Wrong With A Free Lunch? (New Democracy Forum)



## Synopsis

Our politicians insist that we live in a time of unprecedented prosperity, yet more and more Americans are pointing out that the richest 1% of our society holds more wealth than the bottom 90% put together. In this timely book, economist Philippe Van Parijs has a simple plan for addressing not only poverty but other social ills: everyone would be paid a universal basic income (UBI) at a level sufficient for subsistence. Everyone, including "those who make no social contribution-who spend their mornings bickering with their partner, surf off Malibu in the afternoon, and smoke pot all night." Van Parijs argues that a UBI would reduce unemployment, improve women's lives, and prevent the environmental damage caused by overproduction and fast growth. At the heart of his proposal is the intention to secure real freedom for all, because it offers the greatest possible opportunity to those with the least opportunities. He acknowledges that an idle surfer might not deserve a UBI, but that the surfer's good luck would be no different than the good fortune enjoyed by those who benefit from the current distribution of resources. Responses to this controversial proposal vary: Some are in favor of a basic income, but only if it's tied to work. Others find the entire proposal unrealistic and unaffordable. Almost all agree, however, that it is time for us to talk about this issue.

**NEW DEMOCRACY FORUM:** A series of short paperback originals exploring creative solutions to our most urgent national concerns. The series editors (for Boston Review), Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, aim to foster politically engaged, intellectually honest, and morally serious debate about fundamental issues-both on and off the agenda of conventional politics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"What's Wrong With a Free Lunch" by Philippe Van Parijs proposes that every person be given an above-subsistence-level Universal Basic Income with no strings attached. The book includes responses from 15 thinkers, mostly sympathetic to the idea. A couple oppose the idea of letting anyone have anything for nothing (as if that were not already the case), and several suggest what they see as similar but better ideas. The majority of these are based on the idea that enacting a UBI in the United States is unlikely, not that it is undesirable. This may be right, but even an unreasonable goal serves a very important purpose. Many of the right-wing ideas openly discussed in the media are, I dearly hope, unreasonable goals. But they serve the purpose of making somewhat-less-destructive ideas pass for "centrist." As long as the right wing proposes what it dreams of and the left wing proposes only what it thinks it can get in the foreseeable future, the "center" will be commonly placed further and further from what the left thought it could get. Van Parijs's book is exactly the sort of thing needed to break this defeatist pattern. We need to direct our energies to the achievable, yes, but we also have to dream -- or the achievable won't be. I'm not convinced that some of the alternatives offered, such as a Negative Income Tax, are either more desirable or more feasible. And concentrating on how best to convince Americans to pay more income taxes is the wrong thing to be worried about. Our first project should be to free up the tax dollars we are wasting.

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