

# Was Basic Income Invented in Belgium in 1848?

## Exploring the Origins and Continuing Relevance of a Simple Idea

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### **Abstract**

Basic income proposals have a long and interesting history. Two of the earliest, and nearly forgotten, proposals were formulated in Brussels in 1848. One was short, anonymous and written in Dutch; the other long, authored and written in French. As far as we can tell, the two proposals are unrelated: they originated in different circles. In this paper I explore the roots of each proposal, and try to explain why Brussels proved to be a fertile ground for basic income ideas in 1848. In addition, I show that there are striking similarities between these old proposals and the present-day debate on basic income. The similarities refer both to the diagnosis of the problems to be addressed and to the difficulties which have been thought to beset the proposals.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a surge of debate, in academia and beyond, on the desirability and feasibility of introducing a (universal) basic income – the idea that everyone, as of right, is entitled to an unconditional regular income payment. While a lot of attention has gone to the principles of social justice underpinning basic income proposals, the discussions are now enriched by empirical evidence generated by a wave of experiments of various basic income schemes. A casual observer might get the impression that basic income is a relatively recent invention. It is not.

In their most recent book, Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017: chapters 3 and 4) provide an excellent overview of the prehistory and history of basic income. Aspects of basic income proposals can be found as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. in the book *De Subventione Pauperum* (1526) by Juan Luis Vives. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century both Thomas Paine, in *Agrarian Justice* (1796), and Thomas Spence, in *The Right of Infants* (1797), argued for the introduction of unconditional cash payments (more details on their proposals can be found in Cunliffe and Erreygers, 2004). As far as we now know, the first basic income proposals intended for implementation at the level of the nation-state were formulated in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Remarkably, the two earliest proposals were written in the same year (1848) and in the same town (Brussels), but in different languages (Dutch and French) and by authors working independently from one another.

Why 1848, and why Brussels? 1848 was a pivotal year in European history. In late February, after months of unrest, King Louis-Philippe of France was chased from power, and soon thereafter the revolutionary fever spread to other European countries. Almost simultaneously with the February Revolt in Paris the *Communist Manifesto* was published anonymously in London. It is well-known, however, that this pamphlet had been written by Karl Marx in January in Brussels, the city where he and his family were living at that time. Although no firm connection can be established between the two early basic income proposals and the *Communist Manifesto*, the sources of inspiration of the two proposals lie in the whirlpool of ideas launched by various socialist and communist thinkers in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of which were harshly criticised in Marx's pamphlet. Since one of the proposals originated in a circle of militants frequented also by Marx, it is a tantalising thought that he might have heard about the idea of a universal basic income during his stay in the Belgian capital. In any

case, it seems that Brussels happened to be a fertile breeding ground for the combination of socialist and liberal principles which is often found in basic income proposals.

In this paper I summarise my previous publications on the two basic income schemes which surfaced in Brussels in 1848 (Cunliffe and Erreygers, 2001; 2008; Erreygers and Cunliffe, 2006) and complement it with results of recent research. I begin with a sketch of the intellectual climate in Brussels around 1848, before dealing in more detail with the two proposals. The first took the form of an anonymous and unpublished draft of a new constitution, which was seized by the police in March. The second was the focal point of a book written and published by Joseph Charlier in September. I then compare the two proposals and explore the links with the present-day debate on basic income.

## **2. Brussels around 1848**

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgium was still a relatively young state – it had gained independence only in 1830 – surrounded by more powerful neighbours. Yet it managed to benefit from its central location in Western Europe and enthusiastically embraced new initiatives with regard to industry and trade. While the south of the country took advantage of the availability of coal and rapidly developed new industrial activities, the north remained a predominantly agricultural region which moreover suffered heavily from fierce competition by the British textile industry. It was in the northern part that the famines which swept through Europe in the 1840s were felt most severely, although it must be noted that the consequences were less brutal than they were in Ireland. These economic developments not only initiated debates on economic policy (e.g., on free trade), but also found an echo in discussions on issues related to social justice.

The intellectual output in Belgium at that time was to a great extent influenced by inputs from abroad. The liberal political attitude adopted by the Belgian government attracted a significant number of foreigners who had problems in their home countries and sought asylum there. Scores of German and French refugees – with Marx as the most prominent example – settled in Brussels, and exerted influence on the predominantly French-speaking, Belgian intellectual elite. In addition, universities actively solicited and recruited foreign candidates for professorships. The freedom of the press also contributed to the creation of an environment in which new ideas and theories, especially if they came from France, could rapidly disseminate.

In this way Belgium, and Brussels in particular, became a fertile ground for innovative applications. When it comes to ideas about social justice, this led to several interesting proposals of what we now call liberal socialism.

The views of the radical egalitarian Filippo Buonarroti (1761-1837), who lived in Brussels in the period 1824-1830, were influential in the early discussions on social justice in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> Buonarroti had been one of Gracchus Babeuf's main accomplices during the so-called *Conspiration des égaux*, the failed insurrection attempt against the French *Directoire* in 1796, but he remained a kind of professional revolutionary during his whole life. In Brussels his main activity was the organisation of several secret masonic societies in order to spread the egalitarian doctrine among a select group of young disciples.<sup>2</sup> These included the brothers Félix and Alexandre Delhasse, Lucien Jottrand and Jacob Kats. In his Brussels period Buonarroti also published his main book, *Conspiration pour l'égalité, dite de Babeuf* (1828), with the aid of Louis De Potter, who played an important role during the Belgian Revolution of 1830, before being marginalised.<sup>3</sup>

In the beginning of 1831 a delegation of Saint-Simonians arrived in Belgium, as part of Prosper Enfantin's strategy to spread their new religion over France and Europe.<sup>4</sup> The Belgian adventure was, however, not a big success; the delegates managed to organise only a limited number of meetings, and were unable to launch a lasting Saint-Simonian movement. Some intellectuals were attracted by their ideas – the main examples being Adolphe Quetelet, Édouard Ducpétiaux and, again, Louis De Potter – but it seems that their enthusiasm cooled rather rapidly. It is therefore hard to speak of a strong Saint-Simonian influence in Belgium.

The same cannot be said of the Fourierists, who did gather a lot of support.<sup>5</sup> Ducpétiaux and the Delhasse brothers converted into ardent supporters of Fourier's ideas, and throughout the 1840s took multiple initiatives to spread Fourierism. In 1845 Victor Considerant, the dominant figure of the French Fourierist movement, visited Belgium and gave a series of

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<sup>1</sup> See Kuypers (1960) for a study of the egalitarian movement in Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> Fleischacker (2004: 79) considers that “the notion of distributive justice in its modern form” was first articulated by Babeuf, in that “a right of all people to a certain socioeconomic status” was affirmed directly and placed on the political agenda as a political right.

<sup>3</sup> On the influence of Buonarroti in Belgium, see Billington (1999: 117, 157, 175, 308).

<sup>4</sup> See Bartier (1985) for an extensive study of the Saint-Simonians in Belgium.

<sup>5</sup> See Bartier (2005) for an overview of the Fourierist influence in Belgium. In fact, this is an edited and updated version, by Francis Sartorius, of an unfinished manuscript left by the historian John Bartier, who died in 1980.

widely attended public lectures on the Phalansterian doctrine, while in 1846 and 1847 Victor Hennequin did the same. This led to a substantial increase in the number of Fourierist followers; in the late 1840s, for instance, a strong group of Fourierists emerged among the students of the Catholic University of Louvain. The Delhasse brothers also managed to take control of the influential liberal review *Le Débat Social* and made sure it wrote sympathetically about Fourierism. At the beginning of 1848, Considerant was again in Belgium for a series of lectures; the news of the outbreak of the February revolt in Paris reached him when he was in Liège, and he decided to return to France immediately. During the 1850s he was in Belgium once more, in connection with the foundation of a Fourierist colony in Texas.

A number of those sympathetic to the Fourierist cause were also active in the liberal movement, in both the economic and the political spheres. With regard to economic liberalism, an important development was the rise of the free-trade movement in 1846, echoing the success of Cobden's *Anti-Corn Law League* in England and the creation of Bastiat's *Association pour la Liberté des Échanges* in France. The Belgian *Association pour la Liberté Commerciale*, of which Charles De Brouckère was president, failed in its attempt to change the government's economic policy. It did, however, make an impact by organising in September 1847 in Brussels the *Congrès des économistes*, probably the first ever international conference of economists.<sup>6</sup> Marx and Engels attended the conference, but Marx could not give the speech he had prepared because of 'time constraints'. Political liberalism, on the other hand, was more successful. During the 1830s and the early 1840s Belgium was ruled by so-called unionist governments, composed of both liberals and Catholics. As the tension between the two groups grew, the liberals in particular multiplied their efforts to gain a clear majority in the Parliament and to be able to form a uniform liberal government. Thanks to associations such as *L'Alliance*, a national 'Liberal Congress' was held in 1846 which adopted a 'Programme of Belgian Liberalism' meant to serve as a platform for the liberal candidates during the 1847 elections. In spite of a serious conflict between factions of left-wing (or radical) and right-wing (or doctrinal) members, the liberals won the 1847 elections and formed a homogenous liberal cabinet headed by Charles Rogier.

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<sup>6</sup> The proceedings have been published by the Association Belge pour la Liberté Commerciale (1847). More details on the conference can be found in Mosselmans and Erreygers (2003).

Some radical liberals became involved in the nascent labour movement, which presented itself as democratic. In November 1847 the *Association Démocratique* was founded which aimed at “l’union et la fraternité des peuples”<sup>7</sup>. The founding members included both Belgian activists (such as Jacob Kats) and French, German and Polish exiles (such as Karl Marx). Almost immediately the association sent its vice-president Marx on a mission to the *Fraternal Democrats* in London, and it is certain that already at that time Marx was thinking of creating an international working men’s association. It was also then that Marx was commissioned to write the *Communist Manifesto*, which he completed by the end of January 1848. The German version, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, was published anonymously in London on 21 February.<sup>8</sup> A few days later the revolt in Paris broke out, and the days of Marx in Belgium were counted.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. The anonymous draft proposal**

When news of the Paris upheaval reached Brussels, the government immediately realised there was a serious threat that similar events might happen in Belgium. Rumours were circulating that the king had decided to abdicate and that an armed insurrection was imminent. There certainly was increased activity and animosity among those who sympathised with the cause of the French republicans. Through a combination of measures, the Belgian authorities eventually managed to prevent the revolutionary fire from spreading in the country. Perhaps the most conspicuous decision was the controversial arrest and subsequent expulsion, at the beginning of March, of Marx and his family (Andréas, 1978; De Maesschalck, 2005). When the Belgian army, at the end of the month, crushed a rather harmless ‘invasion’ of Belgian workers from France at a border place called Risquons-Tout, the unrest was over and the situation was more or less under control (Bertrand, 1906-1907, Vol. 1: 336-385). Later that year, the Risquons-Tout affair was brought before the Assize Court of Antwerp, which

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<sup>7</sup> Bertrand (1906-7, Vol. I: 258).

<sup>8</sup> In later editions and translations the names of Marx and Engels would be added as authors. The introduction mentions that translations into English, French, Italian, Flemish (!) and Danish would be published. The use of ‘Flemish’ rather than ‘Dutch’ probably reflects the presence of the Dutch-speaking Belgians in the *Association Démocratique*.

<sup>9</sup> More details on Marx’s activities in Brussels can be found in De Maesschalck (2005) and in Stedman Jones (2016: 168-248).

handed out death sentences to 17 of the 32 accused; these were later transformed into jail sentences.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this period of turmoil the Belgian police and security services closely scrutinised all radical and democratic persons and associations. If troubles occurred, they questioned and sometimes arrested those they deemed responsible. On 26 March, just before the Risquons-Tout event, several disturbances had taken place in Brussels. This led to the arrest of seven men: Jan Pellerin<sup>11</sup>, André Quoilin, Charles De Guasco, Pierre Vosté, Henri Charles Decock<sup>12</sup>, and the brothers Antoon and Jozef Kats<sup>13</sup>. The instructing judge investigating the troubles immediately issued a search warrant ordering the police to search the houses of the troublemakers and to confiscate any material that ‘might incite rebellion’ (Bertrand, 1906-7, Vol. 1: 341-344; Wouters, 1963, Vol. 1: 514-516; Vol. 2: 966-970). Hardly any compromising material was found. During a property search in the house of Jozef Kats at Sistervatstraat 7 (Rue de la Rasière 7 in French) in Brussels on 28 March, the police seized two items: a printed brochure entitled *Wat Men Is en Wat Men Worden Kan* (What We Are and What We Can Become), by Jan Pellerin<sup>14</sup>, and a manuscript entitled *Project van eene Nieuwe Maetschappelijke Grondwet* (Project of a New Constitution for Society).<sup>15</sup> These documents, and many others, were collected to be used as evidence in the trial of the seven arrested men. A lower tribunal sentenced Pellerin, De Guasco and Decock to six months in jail, while the other four were acquitted. The Brussels Court of Appeals, however, ruled that Quoilin and Vosté should also be imprisoned for six months. The legal proceedings ended when the Court of Cassation saw no grounds to revise the sentence of the Court of Appeals.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A very detailed analysis of the case can be found in Kern (2014: 485-538).

<sup>11</sup> Jan Pellerin (1817-1877) was a Flemish shoemaker and writer. A biography of him has been written by Kuypers (1962).

<sup>12</sup> André Quolin (born about 1829) was a shoemaker, Charles Du Guasco (born about 1812) a school clerk, Pierre Vosté (born about 1812) a day labourer, and Henri Charles Decock (born about 1818) a typographer. See Wouters (1963, *passim*).

<sup>13</sup> Antoon and Jozef (born about 1812) were both weavers and younger brothers of the well-known Flemish socialist pioneer Jacob Kats (1804-1886). On Jacob Kats and his family, see Kuypers (1930).

<sup>14</sup> This short utopian pamphlet was published originally in 1845; it has been republished by Kuypers (1962: 29-37).

<sup>15</sup> The documents are now in the Anderlecht branch of the State Archives of Belgium (catalogued as Hof van Beroep van Brussel, Reeks II, Dossier 1156A, Item 65 “Pièces saisies au domicile de Joseph Kats”). The whole dossier consists of more than 100 pieces.

<sup>16</sup> Decision of 24 July 1848; see *Pasicrasie* (1848: 417-8).

It is the second of the documents found at the house of Jozef Kats, the manuscript of a “new constitution”, that contains the basic income proposal. In fact two non-identical versions of the constitution were seized, one of which is clearly an early draft, since it has quite a few corrections and additions.<sup>17</sup> The first part of the constitution lists a limited number of unchangeable basic principles with regard to justice, equality and property (Art. 1-5). The second and major part introduces a wide variety of more specific principles, some of which have to be elaborated by special laws (Art. 6-33). This part begins with the idea of giving to every member of society an equal portion of the fruits of nature in the form of a monetary natural right (*natuerregt*). No condition would be attached to this right, and therefore we can rightly speak of an unconditional basic income proposal. (Art. 6-8) Among the other issues dealt with in the constitution, we can mention the use and property of immovable goods, production and labour, taxation, inheritance, education and democracy.

It seems useful to quote the articles which describe the basic income proposal:

### ***Unchangeable Law***

#### *Art. 1.*

Justice is eternal and unchangeable. – It is the equality of the rights and duties of men. – It is the principal law of human society; everything that is in conflict with this law, constitutes crime.

#### *Art. 2.*

The equality of rights is for every human being the equal opportunity to meet the needs of the body, the mind or the soul. It is the equal division of the fruits of the earth, and of the advantages of society.

#### *Art. 3.*

The equality of duties is for all human beings the equal possible participation in all burdens of society.

#### *Art. 4.*

The earth is the general inheritance of mankind; its fruits must be divided equally among all its members.

#### *Art. 5.*

All private property rights of immovable goods are abolished; all landed goods belong to the State.

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<sup>17</sup> The Dutch version of the more complete draft has been published by Wouters (1963, Vol. 2, Doc. 1338: 963-966). An English translation of the text has been published by Erreygers and Cunliffe (2006). Since then, the text has been cited a few times in the basic income literature. The only other reference to the text I have been able to find is in Kern (2014: 622).



### ***Special Regulation Law***

#### *Art. 6.*

The lands or building plots will be rented publicly. The rewards or the money from these rents are regarded as the fruits of nature, to be distributed equally among all members of society in as many equal portions as there are human beings, no one excepted. – The share that every person receives from the proceeds of the earth is called the natural right [*natuerregt*].

#### *Art. 7.*

Nobody can totally or partially dispose of his natural right (as long as one resides in the country); by no means can the natural right be confiscated or burdened before it is received.

#### *Art. 8.*

The way in which lands will be rented or leased, and in which the natural right will be received, as well as the length of the period during which parents will enjoy the natural right for their children, will be prescribed by a special law, but in any case the natural right must follow the persons to the place where they will be.

(*Project of a New Constitution for Society*, in: Erreygers and Cunliffe, 2006)

Although not many details are provided, the main idea of the proposal is clear and simple: all land should be common property, and all revenues generated by using the land should be distributed equally among all. Everyone would have an inalienable natural right to an equal share of the revenues. Art. 5 seems to hint at the possibility that the stock of common resources might be extended to the buildings erected upon land, which would of course significantly expand the flow of revenues available for distribution.

For the declaration of basic principles some social reformers appear to have had a strong preference for the format of the constitution. A good example is the *Projet de constitution républicaine et déclaration des principes fondamentaux de la société, précédés d'un exposé des motifs* of the egalitarian Charles Antoine Teste. This book had originally been published in Paris in 1833; after it was republished in 1836 in Brussels, it circulated widely in Belgium. Jacob Kats, the older brother of Jozef Kats, included the text of a constitution at the end of the first act of his play *Het Aerdich Paradys, of den Zegeprael der Broederliefde* [Paradise on Earth, or Fraternity's Triumph] (1836: 32-37). And Joseph Charlier, whom I will consider next, also used the constitutional format to express his basic income ideas.

#### 4. Joseph Charlier's proposal

While the author of the first basic income proposal remains unknown<sup>18</sup>, it is clear who wrote the second proposal: Joseph Charlier. Basic income was the main idea of the book he published in September with the rather ambitious title: *Solution du problème social ou constitution humanitaire, basée sur la loi naturelle, et précédée de l'exposé de motifs* [Solution of the social problem or humanitarian constitution, based on natural law, and preceded by the exposition of motives]. That said, the man and his work remain shrouded in mystery.

Charlier was born in Brussels on 20 June 1816 and died there on 6 December 1896.<sup>19</sup> He published quite a few books, ranging from novels and poetry to works on technical legal issues and social theory.<sup>20</sup> The four key works in that last category were as follows:

- *Solution du problème social ou constitution humanitaire, basée sur la loi naturelle, et précédée de l'exposé de motifs* (1848). This introduced the scheme for a 'guaranteed minimum' funded from the socialisation of rent. Charlier explained in detail why he advocated the scheme, and he presented it in the form of a 'humanitarian constitution'.
- *Catéchisme populaire, philosophique, politique et social* (1871). Here Charlier refined the core theme of the guaranteed minimum under the new form of 'the system of territorial dividend'.
- *La Question sociale résolue précédée du testament philosophique d'un penseur* (1894b). This is Charlier's most substantial work. He reproduced the relevant sections of the *Catéchisme* on territorial dividend, included a scheme for pension provision initially suggested in 1887, and introduced another 'humanitarian constitution' that was similar but not identical to the 1848 version, together with a set of justifying 'interpretative remarks'.

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<sup>18</sup> It seems unlikely that Jozef Kats, who never published anything, is the sole or main author. My guess is that the constitution was a collective effort by a group of Flemish workers from the circle around Jacob Kats.

<sup>19</sup> According to his birth certificate he was born on 22 June 1816, but in all other official documents his date of birth is given as 20 June 1816.

<sup>20</sup> The *Bibliographie nationale* of 1886 (Vol. A-D: 237-8) mentions 11 books authored by Joseph Charlier, but I have been unable to find copies of all of them.

- *L'Anarchie désarmée par l'équité: Corollaire à la question sociale résolue* (1894a).

This summarised the diagnosis and solution of social issues presented immediately before in *La Question sociale résolue*.

One episode apart, very little is known about Charlier's life. His exact profession is unknown; he once classified himself as a "juriste" (Charlier, 1894b: 10), but in successive population registers and official documents his occupation is variously listed as writer ("homme de lettres"), accountant, merchant, and even business teacher ("professeur de commerce").<sup>21</sup> He is considered only in passing in many of the standard sources on the history of socialism in Belgium, and there is no substantial study of either his life or work.<sup>22</sup>

The only event which brought Charlier into the public eye happened almost ten years before he published his basic income book. On 26 November 1839 he and his concubine Sophie Scarron were arrested after she had been caught using counterfeit banknotes in Mechelen and Ghent.<sup>23</sup> In March 1840 the two were brought before the Assize Court of East-Flanders on the accusation of the fabrication and use of false money. Since this was a capital offense, the Court sentenced both to death.<sup>24</sup> However, the Court of Cassation annulled this verdict and ordered a re-trial at the Assize Court of West-Flanders. In fact, the banknotes counterfeited by Charlier and Scarron were bills issued by the *Société générale pour favoriser l'industrie nationale*, and the judges argued that the *Société générale* was not a bank in the proper legal sense.<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding this ruling, after a short trial in August the Assize Court of West-Flanders again condemned both to death.<sup>26</sup> Once more the case was brought before the Court of Cassation, this time with 'united chambers', which again overruled the decision.<sup>27</sup> It ordered a re-trial at the Assize Court of Brabant, and it urged the government to take a legal initiative before the start of the new trial to lift the uncertainty with regard to the interpretation

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<sup>21</sup> Most of this information comes from research undertaken by Maryline Van Parijs in the City Archives of Brussels.

<sup>22</sup> References to Charlier have been made by Malon (1879: 475, 488-9; 1892: 115), Henrion (1892: 132), Bertrand (1902: Vol. 1:175; 1906-7: Vol. 2: 424, 428-30), Serwy (1948-52, Vol. 1: 27, 96-97, Vol. 4: 110), Dhondt (1960: 271), and Dandois (1974: 21).

<sup>23</sup> See *L'Indépendance Belge* of 28 November 1839 (p. 2) and *Le Messenger de Gand* of 28 November 1839 (p. 1) and 29 November 1839 (p. 1).

<sup>24</sup> See *L'Indépendance Belge* of 16 March 1840 (p. 3) and *Le Messenger de Gand* of 11 March 1840 (p. 1), 12 March 1840 (p. 1), 13 March 1840 (p. 2), 14 March 1840 (p. 1), 15 March 1840 (p. 2) and 16 March 1840 (p. 2).

<sup>25</sup> Decision of 8 June 1840; see *Pasicrisie* (1839-1840: 394-5).

<sup>26</sup> See *L'Indépendance Belge* of 24 August 1840 (p. 4) and *Le Messenger de Gand* of 25 August 1840 (pp. 1-2).

<sup>27</sup> Decision of 23 November 1840; see *Pasicrisie* (1841: 14-17).

of the law on the use of counterfeit banknotes. At the end of March 1841 both Chambers of the Belgian Parliament approved a tailor-made interpretative law stipulating that the death penalty was not applicable to those who used counterfeit banknotes issued by the *Société générale*.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, the Assize Court of Brabant sentenced Charlier and Scarron to ten years of forced labour, public humiliation and branding (“flétrissure”).<sup>29</sup> Once again the case came before the Court of Cassation, but this time the judges no longer saw any legal impediments.<sup>30</sup> A few months later it was decided that Charlier and Scarron were exempted from the punishments of public humiliation and branding.<sup>31</sup> It is not known when Charlier and Scarron were released.

It was not the last time that Charlier ran into legal trouble. In 1862 he published a six-volume *roman à clef* about what he perceived to be abusive commercial law practices: *Les martyrs de l'échéance, ou reflet photographique des mœurs contemporaines*. Apparently the real identities of the persons he was writing about were not hidden very cleverly, because in 1863 he was condemned for false allegations against the lawyer Félix Isaac from Charleroi.<sup>32</sup> In the same vein he published in 1866 the four-volume *Les martyrs de la captation, ou les tortures occultes*, and he contributed to the satirical weekly *Le Franc-Parleur Belge*.<sup>33</sup> He obviously was familiar with the law, but he had an axe to grind: already in his 1848 book he scorned the (Belgian) judicial system, ‘this whole parasitic corporation of judges, lawyers, bailiffs, and ushers who in general live and enrich themselves at the expense of the masses; because all these people do not produce anything at all, do not add a single atom to the social capital’. (Charlier, 1848: 63). Towards the end of his life he was a member of the *Société d'études sociales et politiques* (Charlier, 1894b: 3), a short-lived association active in Belgium between 1890 and 1895 (Crombois, 1994: 16-20). We also know that he tried to draw the attention of

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<sup>28</sup> Belgian Senate, 22 March 1841, legal document 73 (available at [www.senate.be](http://www.senate.be)); Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 25 March 1841, legal document 176 (available at [www.dekamer.be](http://www.dekamer.be)).

<sup>29</sup> See *L'Indépendance Belge* of 16 June 1841 (p. 3).

<sup>30</sup> Decision of 11 August 1841; see *Pasicrisie* (1841: 327-330). This source mentions that Charlier and Scarron were sentenced to six rather than ten years of forced labour.

<sup>31</sup> See *L'Indépendance Belge* of 13 November 1841 (p. 1) and *Le Messager de Gand* of 13 November 1841 (p. 1) and 3 May 1842 (p. 1).

<sup>32</sup> See *L'Écho du Parlement* of 19 April 1863 (p. 3) and 18 July 1863 (p. 4), and *Journal de Bruxelles* of 20 April 1863 (p. 2). The Brussels librarian Joseph (Josse) Sacré (1866: 205) nevertheless recommended the book.

<sup>33</sup> More details can be found in Sartorius (2004: 110-1).

Hector Denis, professor of economics at the Free University of Brussels, to his work, seemingly without much success.<sup>34</sup>

In one of the passing references to Charlier in the literature on the history of socialism in Belgium he is designated as a Fourierist.<sup>35</sup> It is certainly possible that he was influenced by Fourierist writings and activities, but there is no evidence to suggest that he played a significant role in Belgian Fourierist circles.<sup>36</sup> Although the intellectual provenance of his views is unknown, it cannot be denied that in the *Solution*, Charlier did indeed present a sympathetic but not uncritical assessment of Fourier and Fourierism. He explicitly (but not unconditionally) praised Fourier and his work,<sup>37</sup> and he used terms clearly borrowed from the Fourierist tradition.<sup>38</sup> In all of Charlier's subsequent works, however, neither Fourier nor his theory is referred to, as if Charlier later in life distanced himself from his original source of inspiration.

The book opens with a reference to the February Revolution in Paris and to a speech of Michel Goudchaux (1797-1862), at that time Minister of Finance, in the French *Assemblée Nationale*. Well aware of the ideas that were circulating in Paris, Charlier lamented that the 'material question' – how to ensure that everyone would have sufficient means of existence – had not been resolved satisfactorily. Writers such as Victor Considerant (1848[1840]) advocated the right to work at a decent wage as the solution. Whether or not Charlier was directly reacting to Considerant's views, it is clear that he did not believe the right to work constituted an adequate solution. The originality of Charlier is that he argued the problem could be solved by an unconditional basic income scheme, even under conditions of so-called

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<sup>34</sup> Letter of Joseph Charlier to Hector Denis, 25 June 1894 (Archives Institut Émile Vandervelde, Fonds Louis Bertrand, I.91).

<sup>35</sup> To be precise, Serwy (1948-52, Vol. 4: 110) described him as "publiciste, poète, fouriériste".

<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the publication of his 1848 book was announced in *Le Débat Social*, the Brussels-based journal with Fourierist sympathies. The journal vowed 'to give an account of it as soon as we have examined it', but the promised review never appeared. (*Le Débat Social*, 1 October 1848; 5(25): 217) There is no trace of Charlier in the study by Discailles (1895) on Considerant's influence in Belgium.

<sup>37</sup> 'Of all the socialist doctrines that have been put forward, with the exception of Fourierism, there is none that can be translated into reality without throwing society into a state of disorder, at least with regard to its material interests. But Fourierism is like an Oriental wonder that charms, seduces, and fascinates the mind, and that one admires like a brilliant spectacle. But as of now we need a less complicated device, and above all one that would be clear of any type of illusion.' (Charlier, 1848: 10; see also 11, 37, 39, and 40).

<sup>38</sup> Terms such as "minimum garanti" (Charlier, 1848: 33, 37), "destinée sociale" (20), "travail ... attrayant" (36), "industries répugnantes" (36), and "garantisme rationnel" (83) have a Fourierist pedigree. The views of Fourier and Considerant on guaranteed income have been explored more deeply by Cunliffe and Erreygers (2001: 460-8).

‘repugnant labour’. He attached so much importance to the idea that he ended his book with a ‘humanitarian constitution’, a detailed set of constitutional rights and duties in which the guaranteed minimum plays a central role. In his philosophical testament of 1894, the year of his death, he published a second version of his constitution centred around the same idea.

In a typically Fourierist manner Charlier (1848: 19) insisted that the central problem to be addressed was the ‘the improvement of the condition of the disinherited classes’. This was above all a ‘material question’ relating to ‘physical life’: the concern should be with material, not political, rights, and the aim should be to realise ‘physical’ or ‘material emancipation’ but without political or social upheaval. He rejected two currently fashionable responses to the problem: ‘the right to assistance’ addressed only the effects and not the cause of the problem, whereas the ‘right to work’ (also referred to as the ‘organisation of labour’) would result in an unacceptable extension of state control.<sup>39</sup> Instead, he proposed an alternative solution that both guaranteed natural rights entitlements and respected existing legal titles, through compensation arrangements.

Charlier adopted the familiar jurisprudential contrast between natural and produced resources. Like Considerant, he argued that a creators-keepers principle did not justify individual property rights in land itself, but only in assets resulting from human labour.<sup>40</sup> That familiar distinction was given a new dimension by Charlier, however. He maintained that natural resources were intended by God to provide a guarantee for the ‘vital needs’ of all persons. Produced assets, by contrast, were destined to meet the ‘acquired needs’ of each person.<sup>41</sup> Only the vital needs generated an absolute right: because every human being had the right to live, each person had a right to a share of the fruits of the earth sufficient to provide subsistence.<sup>42</sup> The essential role of the state consisted in guaranteeing these individual rights to the produce of the common patrimony by ensuring that all were included and none excluded. The acquired needs, by contrast, did not generate a right but merely a discretionary

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<sup>39</sup> On the right to assistance, see Charlier (1848: 6-7), and on the right to work (*ibid.*: 11-14).

<sup>40</sup> ‘*The land to nobody, but the fruit to all.* That is the great, true maxim on which the faith of human society rests and of which we will demonstrate the intrinsic legitimacy and benefits.’ (Charlier, 1848: 23).

<sup>41</sup> We use the expression ‘vital needs’ for Charlier’s “besoins absolus”, “besoins naturels” and “besoins naturels et vitaux”, and ‘acquired needs’ for his “besoins relatifs”, “besoins artificiels” and “besoins acquis”.

<sup>42</sup> ‘When he is born man brings with him the right to live; from this right, which is inherent to his being and which surely nobody will dare to contest, follows as a necessary consequence, the right to demand from the land, the common patrimony of men, his share of the fruits that he needs for his existence.’ (Charlier, 1848: 20)

power.<sup>43</sup> Whether and to what extent these relative needs were fulfilled was a matter for individual choice expressed through labour. For Charlier, therefore, entitlements to property should be assigned on dual principles each applying to different domains: common property in natural resources, with guaranteed individual shares in their bounty, but full private property rights in produced assets. So, the fundamental law that symbolised truth and justice was as follows:

Landed property, the work of God, belongs to the community of created beings: it is indivisible and invariable like humanity itself, to the service of which it has been intended and of which it must secure the natural and vital needs.

Mobile wealth, the work of man, is essentially personal: it is destined to give satisfaction to the acquired needs, in direct proportion to the degree of activity of each person. (Charlier, 1848: 39)

On a more practical level, the problem to be resolved was the implementation of these principles in a setting in which there was private landownership, especially in a concentrated form. Although Charlier emphasised that private landownership was incompatible with the notion of a common natural patrimony, he also insisted that current legal titles to land had to be respected. The proposed resolution hinged on a system of mutual compensation, mediated by the state, between the minority of current landowners and the landless majority. Landowners would be compensated, at least partly and temporarily, for any loss resulting from the reassertion of the collective right to the land. The landless majority would be compensated permanently through the disbursement of a ‘guaranteed minimum’. The state would derive the financial resources for this system of mutual compensation from the socialisation of rent and related measures. In Charlier’s view, only this mechanism could remedy the injustice of private landownership without introducing another injustice by a forced dispossession of legal titles. He claimed that his ‘humanitarian constitution’ provided a ‘mathematical solution’ to the problem (Charlier, 1848: 21).

Charlier did not limit himself to a general description of the scheme, but consistently with his own injunction against impractical plans, worked it out in great detail and added calculations

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<sup>43</sup> ‘The vital needs are those that are indispensable to the support of life. In the mind of the individual they constitute *rights*.

The acquired needs are those which are provided by the refinement of the senses, and which can be suppressed without threatening existence. They constitute only *discretionary powers*.

Rights must be respected, protected, and satisfied by society or by the State.

Discretionary powers, on the other hand, do not impose any obligation; they must be left to individual activity of which they are the most energetic incentives.’ (Charlier, 1848: 24)

to show that it was financially sound.<sup>44</sup> The main question was whether the state would have enough financial resources for the two compensatory payments. As the sole landowner, the state would receive all the existing land-rents; in addition, it would generate new revenue streams by better managing the land. In exchange for the loss of their land, owners would not receive its capital value but instead would be entitled to an annual revenue partly compensating their loss of land-rent income.<sup>45</sup> The compensating revenue would vary with the wealth of the landowner: the higher the individual fortune of the landowner, the smaller the ratio between revenue and capital would be.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the revenue would diminish through time according to the number of intergenerational transfers: with each transfer the revenue would decrease by a quarter of its original amount.<sup>47</sup> The difference between the rent revenues of the state and its compensation payments to the original landowners would be the amount available for the guaranteed minimum. Charlier stressed that the right to the minimum was equal and universal, in that it was possessed by each individual from birth: this effectively means that his guaranteed minimum is a basic income in the modern sense.<sup>48</sup>

The level of the minimum would be established annually; in the beginning it would be fairly low because of the transitional compensation payments to the original landowners, but it would increase as those payments declined and eventually ceased. Payments would be made quarterly, and in cash. The right to the minimum was a personal lifetime one, inalienable and irrevocable. It was inalienable because ‘membership’ in a society was by nationality; but, ultimately, Charlier hoped that this criterion would become redundant as the entitlement came to be calculated on a global basis. Alongside the minimum, which expressed the general obligation of society to guarantee basic necessities for its members, there would be other

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<sup>44</sup> The calculations applied to Belgium; he arrived at the conclusion that in the first year the scheme would yield an income of about 50 francs per head. For more details, see Charlier (1848: 47-50).

<sup>45</sup> Charlier (1848: 48-9) estimated that in Belgium the total rent-income amounted to 670,020,000 francs; he proposed compensating payments for an amount of 322,000,000 francs, that is, 48 percent of the total land-rent income.

<sup>46</sup> For those owning a fortune worth more than 3 million francs, the compensating revenue would be equal to 1.5 percent of the estimated land value; for those owning a fortune between 1 and 3 million francs, the percentage would be 2 percent; finally, for those owning less than 1 million francs, it would be 2.5 percent (Charlier, 1848: 49). Later in the pamphlet he changed the upper threshold value to 5 million (*ibid.*: 105).

<sup>47</sup> ‘Based upon survey estimates or any other valuation method to be decided, the value of these goods will be converted into annuities to the benefit of proprietors and their descendants, and this until the fourth generation and by depreciation of a quarter per generation.’ (Charlier, 1848: 40-1).

<sup>48</sup> The relevant articles of the humanitarian constitution of 1848 and the corresponding articles of the humanitarian constitution of 1894 can be found in appendices 1 and 2 of Cunliffe and Erreygers (2001).



measures reflecting particular obligations to specific groups. Children would be entitled to education, and the old and the infirm to special care. The state would provide institutions for these purposes funded in part from the transfer of the guaranteed minimum to them (Charlier, 1848: 64, 73, 82, 86).

## **5. Comparison, assessment and influence**

An intriguing question arises about the relation between the ‘natural right’ proposal formulated in the anonymous manuscript and Charlier’s ‘guaranteed minimum’ scheme published a few months later. There are, indeed, a few striking similarities between the two basic income ideas. In both cases the basic income is equal for all, without any distinction according to sex, age, occupation, etc. It cannot be alienated and it is immune from confiscation. It is funded from the net rent-revenues of the state, the sole owner of the land. In other respects, however, the proposals are quite different. The ‘natural right’ idea bears the mark of the egalitarian doctrines of Babeuf and Buonarroti, which Jacob Kats had helped spread in Belgium in the 1830s. The words ‘equal’ and ‘equality’ occur prominently in the articles 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 of the constitution. Charlier’s ‘guaranteed minimum’, by contrast, has Fourierist origins. The term echoes Fourier’s ‘social minimum’, a precursor of basic income. Another difference is that the anonymous constitution is an isolated document: we have no additional motivation or discussion to put it into context or perspective. Charlier, on the other hand, explained his ideas extensively and advocated his proposal over a period of almost fifty years. With minor variations, his diagnosis and the corresponding prescription remained remarkably constant. Two of these variations were the change in terminology from ‘guaranteed minimum’ to ‘territorial dividend’ and the increase in the frequency of payment from quarterly to monthly.

Due to the isolated character of the anonymous constitution, nothing meaningful can be said about what those who formulated the idea of the ‘natural right’ perceived to be its strengths and weaknesses. However, the same does not hold for the idea of the ‘guaranteed minimum’ or ‘territorial dividend’. In his last two works, Charlier assessed the scheme that had occupied him for most of his life. He listed nineteen advantages such as a reduction of religious rivalries, robberies, and begging, a decrease in legal disputes, the abolition of ‘the domination of capital over labour’, and so forth (1894b: 244-7). The claimed advantages were so many

and various that the scheme resembled a panacea. Nevertheless, Charlier also looked at the potential disadvantages. Three of them had worried him since his first advocacy of the scheme. These are particularly fascinating because they directly anticipate some of the reservations that figure prominently even in present-day debates.

The first potential disadvantage concerned the level of payment that could be achieved through a scheme apparently based on the market value of natural resources only. The suspicion was that the aggregate flow of land-rent revenue would be insufficient to cover the basic needs of all, especially after the deduction of the compensation payments to the original landowners (Charlier, 1848: 76-7; 1871: 44-5; 1894b: 211-2, 226-7). Charlier readily accepted that the initial dividend level would be ‘necessarily minimal’ and probably insufficient to satisfy basic needs. But what about the level once the transitional compensation payments had fallen significantly? Although in some countries the per capita land-rent revenue might be too low to meet vital needs, Charlier believed that on a global scale the dividend generated by the common patrimony would be more than enough. Incidentally, in most of his calculations Charlier did not restrict that patrimony to pure natural resources, that is, to land in its original condition before any changes resulting from human labour. Without offering any explicit justification, he increased the pool considerably by identifying it with ‘real estate’.<sup>49</sup> This category included not only land in its improved form as a result of labour, but also buildings and other fixtures. With one possible exception, no attempt was made to separate the revenue attributable to the original site from the total.<sup>50</sup>

The second and related danger was that the provision of a territorial dividend would encourage the population to grow, reducing the per capita level of payment below a subsistence rate (Charlier, 1848: 73-4; 1871: 64-5; 1894b: 241-2). According to Charlier, this would not be the case; any growth (or decline, for that matter) in population would follow the ‘normal course’. Apart from endorsing the familiar appeals to divine providence, he argued

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<sup>49</sup> He moved from “la propriété foncière” to “la propriété immobilière”.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Real estate produces:

A. Civil benefits, including the rents for the use of the fund;

B. Industrial benefits, that is to say everything that man, by his own labour, can obtain or extract from it.

The first belong, by fundamental right, to the usufructuaries of the common fund, by virtue of their *sui generis* right of use. In this case, there is no personal property in the fund.

The second belong to those that have produced them; they constitute in their opinion the right to dispose of them according to their wishes and interests. These products create an absolute property right in their favour.’ (Charlier, 1894a: 17-8).

rather unpersuasively that a guaranteed minimum would have no effect on parents' calculations (if any) about family size.

The third concern echoed the Fourierist fear that a guaranteed minimum would constitute 'an incentive to be lazy' ("une prime d'encouragement à la paresse") (Charlier, 1848: 35), which would create a new class of "rentiers" (Charlier 1871: 51). Charlier recognised the possibility that some individuals might be content to survive on the dividend alone, but he accepted without reservation that this was their right:

Too bad for the lazy: they will have to get by with the minimum allowance. The duty of society does not go beyond this: to assure to everyone his fair share in the enjoyment of the elements that nature has put at his disposal, without usurpation by some people to the detriment of others. (Charlier, 1894b: 56)

Charlier was convinced, however, that this would hold only for a minority; for the majority, the dividend scheme would actually be an incentive to labour. The security derived from the guarantee of basic needs would allow individuals to concentrate on satisfying the expanding domain of their acquired wants, which could be achieved only through labour itself.

Moreover, that security would promote the independence and dignity of each human being, liberating all from the tyranny of dependence on others, especially for the satisfaction of basic needs. (Charlier, 1894b: 54-5)

Of the three concerns discussed by Charlier, two remain hot topics even today. What is the appropriate level of a basic income, and how can it be financed? Van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017: 10-11) suggest that one fourth of GDP per capita could be used as a benchmark level. As far as funding is concerned, a wide variety of possibilities has been explored. The idleness objection has also received a lot of attention in the modern literature on basic income. Already more than 25 years ago, the most vocal present-day advocate of basic income has argued "Why surfers should be fed" (Van Parijs, 1991). The debate over whether a basic income would benefit the "Lazies" at the expense of the "Crazies" continues until today (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017: 104-105). Population issues, by contrast, have been discussed much less. It seems there is not much worry that in rich countries a basic income system would have a significant effect on population levels.

Finally, what has been the influence of the two early basic income proposals? The answer is simple: hardly any. Charlier's publications passed virtually unnoticed, and the constitution manuscript did not even make it to the printer's press. There is one author who might have

read the manuscript. In 1854 the rather obscure Flemish writer Napoleon De Keyser published his only book, *Het Natuer-Regt of de Regtveirdigheyd tot Nieuw Bestuer als Order der Saemenleving volgens de Bestemming van den Mensch* (Natural Law, or Justice as a New Governance for Society according to the Destiny of Man).<sup>51</sup> The first remarkable point is that De Keyser used the term “natuerregt” in the title of his book, but in a different sense to that in the constitution manuscript. But even more remarkable is that De Keyser also proposed the introduction of a basic income payment, albeit in support of a basic capital system (Cunliffe and Erreygers, 2004: xix). He called it ‘nature’s support’ (“natuer-onderstand”). Not much is known about the life of Napoleon De Keyser, but it seems reasonably sure that he spent a substantial period of time in Brussels, where he frequented the circles of Jacob Kats. There he easily could have picked up the idea of a basic income.

Despite obvious differences between their schemes, Charlier, De Keyser and the author(s) of the constitution manuscript apparently shared the premise that basic income payments were a monetised expression of a natural right to an equal share of land. In that respect, there is a striking affinity with the more familiar proposals of Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence, at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>52</sup> These two bitterly disputed whether the entitlement was to a land site’s raw value (Paine), or to its labour-enhanced value (Spence). This issue resonates even more loudly in the nineteenth-century Belgian proposals, with their tendency to include all real property (including buildings) as the funding base for basic income payments. In any event, the optimistic assumption was that this funding base would be sufficient to provide a basic income at a level satisfying a natural right to subsistence. By contrast, present-day basic income schemes are more pessimistic about the sustainable level of payment that might be realised from natural resource or land taxation alone and, in their principled rather than pragmatic welfare-oriented forms, ground their claims on ‘real freedom’ or justice rather than appealing directly to any right to subsistence.

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<sup>51</sup> See De Keyser (1854) for the original Dutch version. Key excerpts have been translated into English by Cunliffe and Erreygers (2004: 56-72).

<sup>52</sup> Relevant excerpts can be found in Cunliffe and Erreygers (2004: 3-16, 81-91).

## 6. Concluding remarks

This paper has focused on two of the earliest, and nearly forgotten, basic income proposals, both of which were formulated in Brussels in 1848. I have explored the roots of each proposal, and tried to explain why Brussels proved to be a fertile ground for basic income ideas in 1848. In addition, I have indicated that there are striking similarities between these old proposals and the present-day debate on basic income. The similarities refer both to the diagnosis of the problems to be addressed and to the difficulties which have been thought to beset the proposals.

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