

THE CITIZEN'S FREEDOM. ON THE CONDITIONS OF A UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

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The concept of unconditional basic income (UBI) is rapidly becoming a political goal for different people. It is connoted with freedom, participation and emancipation. In September 2016, at the Eine-Welt-Haus in Munich, the first German Party with the sole aim of putting the “Bündnis Grundeinkommen” to the vote has been founded. Since we live in a society which can, for reasons of automation, digitalisation and a shift in the entire working world, no longer provide full employment, UBI is supposed to ensure social participation and recognition for everyone by unraveling the connections of dependence on waged work. But if those connections were untied, what could then ensure the means of social participation, which would no longer depend on waged work? One condition remains, even with an ‘unconditional’ income: national citizenship.

There are two main objections against UBI. They come from different sides. But both rest on the realisation that national wealth is necessarily based on certain relations of exploitation. The first objection is the concern that people would stop working altogether unless forced to do it by sanctions, framed in the discourse of the “lazy” unemployed as operated by Gerhard Schröder. The second objection is this: a basic income is a liberal invention that affords some degree of freedom to some people while keeping stable the system that is seen to ensure national wealth.

According to a survey conducted in Germany in 2016, 50% of the people doubt whether “most people” would go to work at all. But 82% claimed that they themselves would continue to work. 33% added they would continue, but only under improved working conditions. Only 8% said they would not work at all.

All in all, these 8% would certainly be tolerable. The intuition that “most” people wouldn’t work at all seems, in light of those numbers, to be related to the knowledge of the unfavourable conditions under which “most” people work. In addition to working long hours for low wages and under structural disadvantages, among those unfavourable conditions are having also the kinds of work to do that are done without pay, such as care, nursing and educational work. These occupations are situated in the private sphere and often held by women, and often in addition to waged work. They are perceived as a matter of course which does not need any exceptional reward. But they are an indispensable resource which makes waged labour possible in the first place.

Those very different working conditions already create a wide gap within society, as well as a relation of exploitation of the less privileged. Many people would indeed profit from a universal basic income which is tied to the one condition of national citizenship. A single mother who attends night school after work or who is supplementing her waged work with Hartz IV would undoubtedly have a significant emancipatory advantage. But

for non-citizens in the same position, the gap would become even wider. In reality, UBI would sharpen the separation of a two-class society which exists already: citizens and non-citizens. A free flow of people and goods, befitting the idea of the liberal market, would give access to an unlimited resource of underprivileged and unprotected non-citizens doing the work that privileged citizens don’t want to do — for even less money than before.

The basic income is not a typical leftist revolutionary project for the redistribution of wealth, but a pet project of liberal market economists. The original liberal motivation in the sense of visionaries such as John Locke was the idea of freedom which defends rights and property against despotism. In 1796, Thomas Spence suggested a basic income with arguments rooted in the philosophy of natural law — he even demanded dispossession and redistribution. With John Maynard Keynes, the 1920s saw a current of social liberalism, which continued to hold individual freedom as the highest good, but wanted to prevent radical anti-capitalist movements which seemed likely against the backdrop of the world economic crisis. For this goal of prevention, Keynes recommended a welfare state and full employment. In times when full employment cannot be guaranteed, a basic income can have the same function, as Milton Friedman stated. He was the one who invented the “negative income tax”, which is supposed to replace social security, decrease incidental wage costs and deregulate the labour market. While this means emancipation for some individuals, it also means de-radicalisation of society.

For this very function of immunisation, basic income is often viewed critically by the left. Especially since waged labour as a means of social participation is an important motif in leftist politics, and for good reasons. Not only in the work of Marx, but already in Hegel’s dialectics of master and servant, social recognition of the subject (“Anerkennung”) becomes vital, and it is only achieved by labour. In the course of industrialisation, the topic of labour and consciousness has been supplemented with the questions of the means of production and the distribution of resources. And an important motif for the emancipation of women has been their access to waged labour.

So the problem is not whether the gross domestic product could deal with those eight (or even more) percent of people intentionally slacking off. Especially since they are getting a basic income already. It’s called ALG II, and unfortunately it is anything but unconditional. The Hartz version of basic income is based on a concept of humans who can by no means be trusted to be released into unconditionality, and a concept of labour which is geared towards maximum flexibility and a liberalisation of the labour market. The Hartz system connects Friedman’s neoliberal ideas with Keynesian striving for full employment, adding some rudiments of the idea of participa-

tion via waged labour which can still be found in the SPD's (the social-democratic party of Germany) program, taking the distasteful shape of a concept of solidarity that depends on good behaviour.

Compared to this system, UBI would be a gain, especially if accompanied by its promoters' liberal humanist ideas, according to which people should not be manipulated and sanctioned in order to deserve their society's solidarity. Ways for social recognition besides waged labour would have to be found. But there remains an important problem, because the actual utopian state that seems to elude us is not a basic income for German citizens, but a global basic income. The obstacle to this utopian state which would address the real relations of exploitation is precisely the thing that would easily enable us Germans to introduce a UBI: the sovereign national state. This sovereignty, securing our national wealth, would be sustained and consolidated by a UBI. But sovereignty can only be kept at the expense of solidarity with others who do not enjoy this freedom of national citizenship.

IMAGINE: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com

What do possible foundations for a future society look like? The universal basic income has become a viable option. With increasingly automated production processes, this utopia suddenly seems realisable. When the working hours are reduced, when work is not a means to mere survival, we can devote our time to global problems. A universal basic income could not only mean freedom from the constraint of breadwinning, but also the freedom to achieve individual and social goals.

As a think tank of artists, designers, and young researchers we'd like to start a discussion on the topic. Following an invitation by the New York based Print All Over Me, we commissioned 15 artists to do a fashion edition.

To launch the collection, we invited three theorists to talk about the basic income. To discuss the topic, there are essays by Nick Srnicek and Viola Nordsieck, which are available on the website www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com

LAUNCH

27 September, 7 pm
Import Projects Berlin
Keithstraße 10
10787 Berlin

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TEXTS

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TEAM/ SUPPORT

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