

Emancipatory basic income and socio-ecological transformation from the perspective of the European left

Katja Kipping, 2016

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to present to you my perspective on the topic of emancipatory basic income and socio-ecological transformation from the perspective of the European left.

I would like to divide my talk into three parts:

- 1. What challenges does Europe face?**
- 2. European policy and emancipatory basic income—pioneering leftist thinkers and social movements**
- 3. The ecological question and emancipatory basic income**

1. What challenges does Europe face?

Due to time limitations, I would like to restrict myself to three challenges here.

1. The Europe of the European Union is not a union of citizens and their democratic institutions, but rather is a Europe in the stranglehold of institutions that represent the interests of those who are powerful in the economic and financial sectors, both internally and externally: The European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

2. The Europe of the European Union also is not a community that ensures all of its citizens a minimum level of social security and basic social rights, but rather is an entity with very gap-ridden and to some extent very repressive security systems. The right to free movement is being undermined by the border fences being put around Europe and by the denial of the right to social security to immigrating EU citizens. The substance of the law on asylum seekers is likewise becoming ever more eroded, and social benefits that are far too low are being made contingent on conditions.

3. The residents of the European Union have a very large ecological footprint: 4.7 global hectares¹ per capita. This is twice the footprint of a Chinese person, and five times that of an Indian; the global average is 2.7 hectares per person. The environmental damage to countries of the global South that is done by the European economic system's imperial economy and hunger for resources is immense. The planned free trade agreement between Europe and the United States, TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership), which the powerful in Europe want, would lower environmental standards in Europe and would make qualitatively better future environmental standards subject to the approval of "investors".

I would like to focus first on the aforementioned points one and two, then conclude by tracing an arc to the ecological question, that is, to the third point, all through the lens of basic income.

¹ The global hectare is an internationally standardised unit of measurement of environmental impact. It contains the area that nature would need to renew the resources consumed and absorb the waste produced, including the area used directly.

2. European policy and emancipatory basic income—pioneering leftist thinkers and social movements

Let us first consider the foundational document for a “free and united Europe” – the document known as the Ventotene Manifesto. It was written by the Italian anti-fascists Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni while they were imprisoned on the island of Ventotene in 1941. A passage on the development of progressive economic life in the Ventotene Manifesto reads: “*The almost unlimited potentiality of mass production of goods of prime necessity through modern technology allows everyone to be guaranteed, at relatively low social cost, food, lodging, clothing and that minimum of comfort needed to preserve a sense of human dignity. Human solidarity turned towards those who succumb in the economic battle ought not, therefore, be shown with the same humiliating forms of charity that produce the very same evils it vainly attempts to remedy. Rather it must take a series of measures which unconditionally guarantee a decent standard of living for everyone, without lessening the stimulus to work and to save. In this situation, no one would any longer be forced by misery to accept unfair work contracts.*”

It was, then, clear to the writers of this manifesto that a free Europe also meant freeing people from social deprivation and from humiliating forms of social security. For these forward thinkers, a democratic and social Europe implied the unconditional security of all people and the other necessary foundations that are needed for a society in which “all citizens have the possibility of effectively participating in the life of the state”. This makes possible the freedom to be the sovereign of one’s own work and to have an influence on societal production, for the writers of the manifesto also recommend socialising the economic sectors that are able, due to their monopoly position, to extort consumers, the state and the public, and that must be preserved in view of the public good. Additionally, non-socialised sectors should be converted to cooperative management through reform.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, I define as emancipatory basic income a basic income that is, *first*, high enough for its recipients to help shape public issues from a position of material security and dignity and without being vulnerable to blackmail. *Second*, this basic income is embedded in additional social and economic democratisation processes.

Erich Fromm, a social philosopher from Europe—more precisely, from Germany—also advocated steps towards a socialism that would be democratic, humanistic and furthermore ecological. In his view, society should turn away from the attempt to gain dominance over nature. Rather, dominance over technology and irrational social forces and undemocratic institutions should be sought. According to Fromm, unlimited economic growth and an economy that makes people ill are to be abolished. What this comes down to is democratisation: all members of society must be put in a position in which they are truly able to assert their active co-determination in the economy and politics, that is, they must have the power to determine the direction of production. According to Fromm, in material terms this means that unconditional basic income is to be guaranteed to every person. Beyond this, the right of shareholders and corporate management to make decisions about production has to be dramatically limited according to Fromm, and the decision-making power of consumers must be strengthened (cf. Blaschke 2010: 279). With Erich Fromm, then, we can expand our perspective to another Europe—it is democratic and social, as well as ecological and sustainable in its production and way of life.

The *Citizens Manifesto for European Democracy, Solidarity and Equality* also addresses democratisation and unconditional basic income. This manifesto was compiled over the course of three years through more than 60 citizens' events across Europe and was presented to the Members of the European Parliament in 2014 before the European Parliament elections. It contains recommendations for the implementation of parliamentary democracy (e.g. through full legislative powers for the European Parliament and the election of MEPs from transnational lists), the democratisation of European political institutions and the democratic drafting of a new European Convention. Instruments of direct democracy should be strengthened (e.g. citizens' initiatives) and citizens should have a say in public tendering at all regional levels. A strictly defined function of serving the public good should be stipulated for the banking sector. The Manifesto also devoted significant space to the implementation of social basic rights in all of Europe. For this reason, it also calls for an unconditional basic income for all inhabitants of the EU. According to the Manifesto, an aim of the basic income that is called for is to foster active and integrative citizenship in the Union.

Making Europe into a democratic and social entity is also a concern of the *Democracy in Europe Movement 25 (DiEM25)*. Autocratic, powerful lobbyists and institutions hinder Europeans from exercising democratic scrutiny and governance regarding their currency, their finances, their economy and working conditions and their environment. This must be changed; decision-making power must be brought out of the back rooms of undemocratic institutions and democratic influence over and control of the economy and policy must be achieved. Those who are affected by decisions must also have the power to influence these decisions—this is the aim of the movement. Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek Finance Minister and a driving force in the DiEM25 movement, and many others also have a clear position on unconditional basic income (cf. Varoufakis 2016): basic income has the task of redistributing the wealth of society downward and thereby strengthening citizens' material power to shape society. In my opinion too, basic income would be an expression of social citizenship in the Union, a sort of fixed rate of democracy that would dismantle the prevailing repressive and gap-ridden systems of alms in Europe (cf. Kipping 2016).

3. The ecological question and emancipatory basic income

Today the ecological question and the social question can no longer be discussed separately, as we saw regarding the work of Erich Fromm. Reducing consumption of natural resources and stopping environmental destruction and pollution all require a different mode of production and way of living. The profit-oriented logic of production and investment must give way to a democratically organised economy that is dedicated to the needs of people and the common good. Social utility *and* compatibility with the requirements of sustainability and conservation of natural resources must be the central focus of production. This requires comprehensive changes in production and in people's way of living—changes that can *only* be attained democratically, which in turn brings basic income back into play if one is serious about including everybody in the negotiation of democracy.

Second, however, basic income is also necessary in order to implement without fear the urgently needed reconstruction—and in some cases dismantling—of production. A person who depends on earning their living from an environmentally unsound job, and would fall into poverty or into repressive social systems without this job, is no

friend of ecological transformation. All people must live secure in the knowledge that their basic livelihood and participation in society are unconditionally guaranteed. Unconditional basic income also, *thirdly*, fosters reduced working hours and sovereignty over one's own time and, *fourthly*, the development of economies rooted in solidarity—transformation projects that are indispensable from a social and ecological perspective.

The basic income movement and the environmental movement meet in the areas of social security, democracy, reduction in working hours, sovereignty over one's own time, and economies rooted in solidarity (cf. Conference UBI - Degrowth 2016).

The European left as a movement and as a party can and must take on this challenge too in order to carry out a socio-ecological transformation of Europe and to radically democratise Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues,

For social movements and leftist parties, emancipatory basic income is an essential component of the socio-ecological transformation of society. For the European left, and, I believe, for the global left as well.

Thank you very much for your attention!

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