

**Unconditional basic income as a fixed rate of democracy:
Safeguarding the social freedom and economic power of all people**

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1. Social freedom and democracy—radically democratic approaches to basic income

Radically democratic approaches to unconditional basic income bestow great consideration upon the interpersonal ties and interdependencies among members of a polity. The polity is understood as a public, political matter. It is oriented to the good of all and is to be shaped by all. It follows from this that freedom is understood not in the sense of absence of intervention and interference but rather in the sense of the independence of all people regarding foreign domination. In this spirit, freedom means not being subject to despotic intervention and interference by others or state institutions or the possibility of such intervention and interference. Despotism means here that interference occurs at the discretion of the interferer. Freedom, by contrast, first becomes real in the form of an autonomy that is exerted through communal and individual shaping and control of powers of intervention and institutions. Individual freedom, as viewed in such an intersubjective, political context, is also defined as *social freedom*. The active participation of all people in the *res publica* in the sense of a collective-deliberative (deliberatively deciding) democratic self-determination is of the highest value. A precondition for this is, of course, social equality to ensure social freedom, which prevents economically motivated domination and dependence. Also a precondition is that laws and institutions reflect, foster and facilitate autonomy and the common good (cf. Socialist Party of South Korea 2009, Patry 2010, Cassasas/De Wispelaere 2012, Cassasas/De Wispelaere 2015).

The following six theses concerning basic income as a fixed rate of democracy can be derived from these basic features of radical democracy and social freedom:

1. Unconditional basic income must ensure in monetary form those aspects of life which are necessary in a given political community to secure a person's livelihood and enable a person to participate in society, including participation in political life. This also means that non-monetary forms of unconditionally ensuring a livelihood and social participation are possible alongside monetary forms: free access to public goods, public infrastructure and services. The two forms are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Both forms are to ensure that people have, first, extensive socio-economic independence and, second, citizenship status that includes

economic bargaining power on the basis of which they can participate actively in shaping society. Democratic participation is impossible without sufficient material securing of free and equal conditions for social participation – the formal possibilities for participation are insufficient. Those who do not have sufficient material resources, first, are excluded from political participation and, second, do not have any adequate bargaining power in political processes. It should of course be taken into consideration that basic income, like every other area of public services for all, must endure over the long term, and therefore must be secure. In my view this is not a problem in an era of high productivity and abundance. It is at most a problem for those who do not wish to give up their economic privileges and political power. There is enough for everybody— worldwide!

2. From a radically democratic perspective, regularly disbursed basic income is to be preferred to one-time disbursements (e.g. as start-up capital), because this is the only way that a lifelong income and the corresponding participation can be guaranteed.

3. The right to unconditional basic income is to be connected with a modern understanding of citizenship. Differentiating between a majority comprised of citizens and a minority comprised of immigrants in relation to elementary socio-economic rights and possibilities would lead to a problematic division of the polity and the domination of a majority over a minority.

4. From a radically democratic perspective, people receive unconditional basic income as equal members of the political polity, not as part of a needy group that is dependent on the state. The stigmatisation of specific segments of the population through particularising splits the polity and is a source of relationships of dominance. This also holds true of situations in which partial basic incomes, that is, transfer payments that do not secure a person's livelihood or make it possible to participate in society must be supplemented by means-tested, income-tested and wealth-tested social benefits in order to reach a sufficient level.

It is clear that a person who must take on the role of the stigmatised petitioner at the social welfare office has a significantly harder time participating actively and with dignity in the political shaping of the polity. Or, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, the decisive argument in favour of basic income is that it is a *conditio sine qua non* of a

republic, which is conceivable only in the company of self-confident people, people free of existential fear. A basic income that truly guaranteed people's livelihood and enabled them to participate in society would establish a principle of citizenship that was not subject to a segregating and disqualifying 'access test' through means testing (cf. Bauman 1999).

5. It thus holds true that all citizens will only be recognised as full-fledged citizens through the civil right to a sufficient basic income, which all citizens accord to one another. But this also means that wealthier citizens will contribute comparatively more to financing basic income than less wealthy citizens. The question of redistribution of economic resources and economic power is thus raised.

6. Basic income is not tied to any return service. An obligation to engage in social or political participation would also be a source of new relationships of dominance, which would make despotically arbitrary intervention possible, for the question of what does and does not constitute an activity worthy of societal recognition leaves a considerable amount of bureaucratic leeway. A citizens' right to unconditional basic income that contained a direct citizens' obligation would also transform volunteer activities into regulated, compulsory participation.

I would like to conclude this section with a witticism from a German politician and supporter of basic income: "It is highly humorous that elected representatives claim that through their relatively high salaries they preserve their substantive independence and make themselves invulnerable to blackmail, but that most of these representatives do not consider it necessary to provide the same sort of independence and invulnerability to blackmail to the sovereign power, that is, to the population." (Spehr 2003, 105) I believe that what applies to representatives should also apply to all people. That is why some years ago I coined the term "*Diäten* light" as a pun on the German word *Diäten*, which stands for the parliamentary allowance that representatives receive to secure their political independence economically (cf. Kipping 2009). The individual guarantee of a basic income that secures people's livelihood and enables them to participate in society is, along with other forms of universal security for people (e.g. in the form of free-of-charge access to public goods, social infrastructure and social services), an essential prerequisite for the

social freedom, democratic political engagement and real negotiating power of all people. It is a fixed rate of democracy!

2. Economic power for all—basic income and democratic institutions

You must finish what you start. Or to put it differently, those who call for basic income so that people can participate actively in public life with bargaining power must also make it possible for people to shape the foundations of politics, everyday life and the economy publically and politically (cf. Casassas/De Wispelaere 2012 and 2015). This is necessary, first, for the security of basic income and other forms of public services. But it is all the more necessary for another reason: despotic interference in human matters through economic power, above all through the endangerment of people's existential survival and health or of natural resources, is not acceptable. An economy that is not shaped publically—that is to say, an economy that is privatised—is unacceptable. This also means that an economy and financial sector that are not subject to institutions which can be controlled and influenced democratically are likewise unacceptable. Unequal distribution of formative power through the pilfering of the public sphere (privatisation) in one form or another interferes profoundly with real political and social balances of power, leaving the political sphere and thus also citizens deprived of real possibilities for shaping and exerting control over public matters. On one hand, this means the economic power that emerges distributively—through the distribution of income, wealth and opportunities for investment. It also means, however, the public-political area of shaping and controlling the economy and the financial sector. Who is truly in charge of the use of natural resources and of the means of production; who is truly in charge of investments and the way that economic activities are taxed, to name just a few points? With today's unequally distributed real possibilities of shaping and controlling matters, who exerts foreign domination over people and subjugates society and the economy to the despotic will of a minority?

Along with basic income and other forms of guaranteeing all people's livelihood and opportunities for participation, the social freedom of people requires citizen autonomy: through community and individual control and corresponding possibilities for intervention that are secured through correspondingly democratic institutions.

These institutions must give all people the opportunity to help shape social and economic life, both individually and collectively (cf. Cassasas/De Wispelaere 2015).

Economic power for all also means basic income, including other forms of unconditionally guaranteeing the livelihoods and opportunities for participation of all people *and* the institutionally secured ability of all people to influence the public-political form of society. The more this is the case, the more necessary and pressing a democratic socio-ecological transformation of society is. Looking ahead, tomorrow at another event I will be speaking about the challenge this poses for the European left.

3. Concluding remark on socio-ecological transformation

Poverty and marginalisation, the power of the few over the many, and the destruction of the natural foundations of human life: this is the situation.

The international degrowth movement, which advocates a world with significantly less consumption of natural resources and more effective reduction of ecological destruction and damage to our planet, is therefore fighting for a way of thinking that brings together ecology, democracy and the social security of all people, and thus for the joining together of different social movements and political actors (cf. Blaschke 2016).

It seems to me that the challenges of the 21st century can only be met with this complex perspective and the self-advancing interrelatedness of social movements. Basic income that truly guarantees a person's livelihood and makes participation in society possible is an important element of a socio-ecological transformation that seeks to be a democratic transformation.

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