

The closer it gets –

Boon and Bane of a Highly Sophisticated Debate on Basic Income

The process of reforming the German social welfare scheme during the past decade was accompanied by a controversial debate on the future of the last safety net. The current reforms are rated as insufficient and a more fundamental welfare reform is being demanded. The idea of an unconditional basic income is energizing a growing number of theorists, scientists, politicians and campaigners with its promise of an alternative to the welfare state that is both fairer and more efficient.

Today basic income in Germany is discussed as one of the most popular alternatives to current social security system. It is discussed as a means to generate a sequence of social benefits—not only an end to extremes of poverty and inequality, but also a new beginning for individual freedom, democratic participation, social relationships, fair and flexible labor markets, and environmental sustainability. Basic income proposals advertise to attain all this while relieving states and individuals of the expensive, intrusive, and often bewildering bureaucracy associated with welfare provision and means-testing. Trading under different names such as Unconditional Basic Income, Guaranteed Income, Citizen's Money, Solidarity Citizens Income the idea is discussed by a variety of players such as parties, unions, civil society organizations and entrepreneurs. But the specific of the progress the idea does in Germany is that it's not only discussed: a broad range of grassroots movements are taking actions on bringing the idea of basic income to the people.

Over the last 25 years a significant number of publications discussing the idea of a basic income have appeared, sequences of cost calculations have been made, an unconditional basic income has been discussed in academic circles as well as in every political camp. The debate started slowly in the 1980s and was interrupted by German unification (though it carried on in many other countries), but starting with the new Millennium the debate has been reoriented by the political actions taken by the Federal Government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. It has been about 6 years now that one can speak of a public debate on a Basic Income in Germany, including increasing media coverage, not only by print media but also television. For the past year basic income supporters can report an enormous increase of public and political interest in the idea of basic income. This can be regarded as a great success for all the activists who have tried to spread the idea and put it on the agenda.

The range of BI-actors and the resulting discussion-structure in Germany

In the last years a wide scale of (political) actors has began to focus on the BI. By now actors of all levels of political activity handle with this idea. Almost every German party has a working-group about the BI. These groups conceive concrete BI-Models including more or less exact financing models. Established NGOs of the civil society like the "Humanitische Union", the Catholic Employee Movement (KAB) groups of *attac*, FIAN and others argue for unconditional cash transfers. Even the big labour unions have a controversial debate about this idea and it seems on the level of the

functionaries the contra position has a clear majority. But at the basis of the labour unions you can find a high response for the BI. And this once more underlines the striking point of the current situation: a significant grass root movement for the BI. Numerous groups of "ordinary" / "common" citizens exist which were founded only because to debate and "fight" for the BI. There are more than 50 sections of the German Network in cities all over Germany but besides our network a lot of people engage for this idea. The Internet also promotes several groups, one of the biggest exists on Facebook with about 45.000 people. All together one can imagine that this leads to a complex BI discourse.

Two main perspectives of this discourse can be identified: First the one dealing with structural problems of the Welfare State, the labour market and new problems of the individual labour-biography. The BI therefore appears as one possible solution which has to be compared with other ways to solve these problems. It's a political-pragmatic perspective: the BI as a goal of political action. The second perspective deals with the BI as a guide value and could be marked as the beginning of a thinking-process which conceptualizes and anticipates new forms of social life and organizing society. It is a visionary perspective and especially the grass-route movement is the actor of this BI understanding. Not primarily as a goal of political or rather parliamentary action but the BI as a new basis of individual activity, of personal autonomy.

Because there exists a wide range of financing-models, different opinions about the right reasons and the right first steps to implement the BI idea and finally due to the two main perspectives a complex and ambivalent BI discussion evokes on the bottom of one basic consensus. The consensus about an unconditional social cash transfer for everybody. Of course there is still the classic pro/contra debate in politics and the media. So there is the big conflict line of the pro/contra debate and several conflict lines within the wide BI-Movement.

Hegemonic struggles

The more differentiated the debate gets the less prerogative of interpretation belongs to just one group of theorists or activists. Basic income supporters differ on a horizontal axis as well as on a vertical one. On the vertical axis theorists are at odds over what level of income one should want and how to argue on behalf of a BI. Some would be satisfied with a universal, guaranteed income set at subsistence level, while others are convinced that we are each entitled to an income sufficient to sustain a "modest but decent standard of life," which would include the material freedom to participate in the political and cultural life of one's community. Secondly, how to argue on the unconditional basic income? Some do with developing rights-based arguments—building from human rights, land rights, work rights, or from the idea that citizens have an equal claim to society's technological inheritance. Others rather think in terms of political acceptance and viability, endeavouring to outweigh concerns about basic income's affront to reciprocity by compiling the ways in which it may be a very good thing regardless. While some supporters suggests that the labour market should no longer be regarded as the central institution of income distribution and consider an unconditional basic income as a reduction of the need for individuals to engage involuntarily in certain forms of arduous or unhealthy employment, others strengthen basic income as a basic social right being a political demand on the same level as the demand for universal and equal suffrage at the start of the twentieth century. In evidence of division of powers the horizontal axis is dealing with the matter of how to get to basic income. Should it be given to the people or does

it have to be eked out? By whom? Some theorists and activists think a general social reform like basic income necessarily entails a general reform of the political system as well.

The further the debate on basic income differentiates the more antagonistic it gets. Sometimes similar sounding postulations do have different objectives while different solutions are offered for the very same problem. It is defining for a highly differentiated debate that there is more than one solution for one and the same problem while an identical proposal is to be considered to solve different problems. The more supporters the idea of a basic income gets from politics as well as civil society, the less utopistic it gets. Curse as well as blessing: the more realistic an unconditional basic income becomes the higher the obstacles get.

We shall overcome – but how

Overall the discussion on Basic Income in Germany is: principle dispute as well as encouraging conversation; sometimes separating as well as building an expanding coalition among a broad range of actors; drawing together academics from a wide range of disciplines; and on the other and connecting their work to an expanding advocacy group without having a real center. We as a network understand ourselves not as the center of the debate, nor of the BI movement in general, but instead, we try to mediate the debate.

Netzwerk Grundeinkommen has set itself the task of promoting the introduction of a Basic Income and promoting a debate on Basic Income across all these conflict lines: across parties, beliefs and theories. We are not committed to any particular model or any particular reasoning or explanation for a basic income. Consensus has been reached on four criteria for a basic income that is to be available to everyone: it should secure a livelihood and participation; there should be an individually guaranteed legal right to it; there should be no means testing; and no forced labour or other service in return. At its general meeting in December 2008, Netzwerk Grundeinkommen incorporated the following passage into its statutes: "A basic income aims to contribute to eradicating poverty and social want, to increasing personal freedoms and to making lasting improvements to each individual's opportunities for development and the social and cultural situation of the community."