

Opportunities and Risks on the Way to a Basic Income in Germany – a political assessment¹

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There are many arguments in favour of an unconditional basic income². Many approaches and models are under discussion in Germany. But so far there is nowhere in the world which has an unconditional basic income, only a partial basic income³, Alaska being one example.

The introduction of an unconditional basic income would be a break with culture since it would make individual freedom the determinative element of solidarity and subsidiarity. The highest form of solidarity consists in consciously according another person *freedom from* existential need and materially determined exclusion as well as the *freedom of* individuals to develop their own skills and abilities. Subsidiarity which combines with individual freedom consists in making available sufficient material means to all individuals unconditionally in order to enable them to look after themselves and others.

All the attempts that have been made so far to make solidarity and subsidiarity a reality for the whole of society were and are based on quite specific societal conditions and dependencies. The conditions consisted and consist of various kinds of commitments to render a service in return or a requirement to declare the readiness to render a service in return. The dependencies were and are materially determined dependencies on other people in the public and private realm.

The dimension of the desired break with culture should not be understood as being divorced from the current political and social situation. In the following this is outlined in a largely abstract way for Germany.

¹ A more fundamental analysis can be found in Blaschke 2012c, translated into English, in Blaschke 2012d.

² An unconditional basic income must fulfil four criteria: sufficient level to secure livelihood and participation, no socio-administrative means test, no compulsion to undertake paid work or render other services in return, individual legal entitlement.

³ A partial basic income fulfils only three criteria; it does not have to be at a level to secure livelihood and participation. It therefore has to be topped up with other means-tested or conditional benefits or a poverty gap remains. In both cases it does not achieve the positive effects of the unconditional basic income.

1. Situation in Germany

1.1 Increased market dependency

In Germany there has been a radical increase in market dependency in recent years (commodification) and hence in the imposition of restrictions on individual freedom.

In 2005 the “Hartz IV” system of basic income support - a tightening up of the old social assistance - was introduced under the government of the SPD (Social Democrats) and Alliance 90/The Greens, with the consent of the CDU/CSU (Christian Conservatives) and the FDP (Free Democrats). Hartz IV stepped up pressure on every unemployed person and on people with low incomes to accept any paid work. Cuts in benefits which contravene human rights, international law and fundamental rights, including the complete withdrawal of benefits for failure to demonstrate good behaviour, have become routine. Moreover the basic level of social protection lies far below the level sufficient for subsistence and social participation. For these reasons there has been a rise in the readiness of those affected to make concessions, that is to say, a readiness to accept very poor working conditions and pay (IAB Kurzbericht 2010).

The public sector, too, on account of an alleged growing lack of funds, is coming under increasing pressure to cut and/or privatise public services. Both these factors mean that basic public services – and hence the users of public services too – are becoming increasingly subject to market mechanisms.

Both these commodification strategies should also be regarded as strategies to dismantle service provision activities in the social environment and subsistence economy. The increased incorporation of activities and people – particularly care activities and women’s activities – in the (labour) market means that day-to-day human life becomes market-dependent, whether through the direct marketing of service provision or through the privatisation of basic public services.

The causes of successful commodification strategies are unconsidered and politically unconstrained power aspirations. The political beneficiaries ultimately are corporate organisations and trade union functionaries. While it may be argued that the latter attempt to shape market dependencies for the benefit of society and prevent the privatisation of public services in the interests of their own clientele, they are, nevertheless, in the same

boat as the other power faction. In Germany the conflict between capital and wage labour has created an alliance between the two factions which has had the effect of expanding the (labour) market into all areas of society. One side sought/seeks thereby to safeguard its profits. The other wanted/wants to preserve the seemingly diminishing opportunities to secure a livelihood through wage labour. Both are hence pursuing a strategy of consolidating their power because the question of profits and existential dependency on wage labour is central to the political shaping of society – and while that continues to be the case, the gentlemen of the society of paid work can play an important, if not the most important role in shaping society.

1.2 Individualisation

Lifestyles and biographies, as well as forms of partnership, are becoming more diverse. Milieu allegiances are becoming looser, lifestyle preferences and also family forms more complex. Alongside “normal” marriages, patchwork families, lone parents and singles are becoming the “normal” case. Even in marriage there is greater differentiation in terms of concrete legal forms. The sequences of periods of education, vocational retraining, unemployment and career breaks for family purposes are becoming individualised.

The trend towards individualisation is coinciding with increased market dependency. This is making the ability of individuals to secure their own livelihoods and possibilities of participation more precarious. Increasingly, also, the law is encroaching on social relations, including in the socio-political context. Individualisation *could* mean more opportunities for individuals to shape their own lives. At the same time, however, it also means greater integration in market forms and state and/or legal forms which thwart possibilities for personal freedom. The buffer in between – the stable milieu, the stable family – is becoming ever thinner. This is why a new form of solidarity is needed – a solidarity which is based on the freedom of the individual.

1.3 Power and democracy

Post-democratic trends (the possibilities for non-democratically legitimated groups of people and institutions to exert influence – corporate bosses, financial oligarchies, secret services) are becoming stronger. At the same time there is a growth in civil society activities which are increasingly using the path of direct democracy to exert influence on

federal policy and local/regional politics.

The core economic and political areas (economy, finance, secret services) are largely direct democratic processes (something which is also regarded as politically desirable by those in power) and are also in part removed from the influence of national parliaments.

1.4 Economy and ecology

Germany is affluent. The German economy is strongly export-oriented – in an affluent society limits are set on a stronger domestic orientation. The role of the trade unions consists mainly in shaping national conditions of gainful employment and the national social insurance systems associated with gainful employment. Conflicts between business and ecological concerns are generally resolved in collaboration with companies in a way which safeguards profits and jobs. Even in the transition to renewable energy, too, which represents solely a change in the use of energy resources rather than any radical shift towards cutting consumption, the big corporations are the dominant actors. Instead of moving more towards sustainable, decentralised self-sufficiency, centralised, large-scale solutions are politically enforced.

1.5 Poverty and wealth

In Germany around 14 per cent of the population – that is to say every seventh person - live in income poverty. Income poverty and inequality of income distribution have been on an upward trend in Germany for 20 years. Wealth distribution has changed in recent years to the benefit of the upper decile of the population.

1.6 Germany and the “Third World”

Given that the German economy depends on exports, Germany necessarily has to advocate free trade agreements with countries of the so-called Third World, for example in the framework of the EU. These create an advantage for economically and politically stronger countries such as Germany.

The reparations which Germany ought to be paying for colonial and current exploitation of the natural resources and people of the countries of the global South are not calculated and are also not paid. Germany does not even pay the extremely low level of development

assistance which the Millennium Development Goals were supposed to help to realise. These set as a target an annual amount of just 0.7 per cent of gross national income to be paid for official development assistance by 2015. Currently the figure lies at around 0.39 per cent. By way of illustration: increasing development aid to 0.65 per cent, that is to say, by around 0.25 percentage points, would be almost enough with other wealthy countries to prevent starvation, hunger and malnutrition in the world (Künnemann 2007).

2. Opportunities on the way to a basic income in Germany

2.1 Discussion and political implementation of decommodification strategies

Since the unconditional basic income (UBI) potentially releases the individual from enforced dependency on wage labour (in the same way as free access to public goods, infrastructure and services), the question arises (in both cases) as to how to decide the form and shape of what is socially necessary – with respect to both the production of goods and the provision of infrastructure and services. The struggle within society for the introduction of a basic income hence provides an opportunity to put the “whether”, “how” and “what” of concrete production on the agenda since to a great extent production targets and conditions are subject to consent. The question as to “who will still go to work if there is a basic income?” is key to questions about the necessity of work and the concrete shaping of working conditions by society as well as to the answering of these questions. A similar effect applies to questions about the scope and concrete form of freely accessible public goods, infrastructure and services. What is necessary for a good life and in what social contexts (in the market sector? beyond the market and state? radically democratised?) should production take place and should goods and services be made available? For ideology-bound Germany, discussing a society without the requirement to undertake wage labour and with democratised production conditions is a fascinating prospect! There is also an opportunity here to discuss and redefine the societal role of business associations and trade unions.

Because of the universalistic nature of basic income, it is also appropriate to discuss the various forms of activity that people engage in for their own good and for the common good. This happened and is still happening in Germany with the debate on the stakeholder society (Catholic Employees Association of Germany), the four-in-one perspective (Frigga Haug) and care work (Adelheid Biesecker). In this context, of course, it is also necessary to call into question the primacy of paid labour. This naturally alarms functionaries of those

organisations which conceive the society of paid work as the preserve of their power. There is also scope here to critique gainful employment and wage labour as the most significant forms of securing a livelihood and highlight their alienating effects. These debates are linked to the question of shortening working hours and the gender-equitable distribution of necessary work, the decolonialisation of the social environment and expansion of the possibilities of self-organised and decommodified economic, cultural and social activities (Habermas, unabhängige Erwerbslosenbewegung in Deutschland, for both see Blaschke 2010: 59 ff; Gorz 2000).

2.2 Making the individualised society less precarious and encouraging solidarity

The discussion about and implementation of the basic income provides an opportunity to openly debate and combat the increasing precarity caused by increased market dependencies, since the unconditional basic income has a decommodifying effect. It also provides an opportunity to conduct a new debate on the complex tension between individual freedom and solidarity and to disengage the notion of solidarity from the shackles of compulsion and existential need. An unconditional basic income, namely, demands and opens the way for more heartfelt solidarity and communicative solidarity as opposed to the paternalistic and needy “solidarity” that has existed up to now. This also applies to partnership-based relationships.

There is also scope to discuss and rein in the trend towards more legal regulation and to simplify family and social policy rules and regulations. The principles of the highly legalised, uncertain and unjust familial passing on of life options (maintenance and inheritance law) would all be up for discussion in the event of the introduction of an unconditional basic income to secure individual livelihoods and participation.

Thus with a basic income it is possible to develop a concept in which the possibility of participation in society and the development of individuals’ skills and abilities is a basic principle on the path to making individual ways of life and lifestyles less precarious and developing ways of life based on solidarity.

2.3 Breaking the domination of people over other people and radical democratisation

One particular issue in the debate on the basic income in Germany is the democratic introduction of the basic income by referendum. The unconditional basic income with its potential for freedom, however, throws up much more far-reaching questions, as discussed

in chapter 1.2 and 2.1. The key question associated with the debate about the introduction of an unconditional basic income to secure individual livelihoods is that of the general social framework in which people live their lives: who determines these social conditions and why is it that certain people/groups of people, particularly from the business and finance sectors, have the right to define the framework for societal and individual development? What inbuilt mechanisms enable the seemingly broad acceptance of the exercise of power by people over other people? How can post-democratic conditions be changed to bring about the radical democratisation of the economic and political realms? The discussion about and introduction of the basic income as a one-off democratic package in the framework of a democratic social state (Lessenich 2009; Kipping 2010), which enables every individual to participate as a citizen with their basic needs secured and without threat, opens up areas for societal debates, decision-making processes and change.

2.4 Instead of capital management, cooperation to bring about a life-serving, resource-saving economy and an ecological way of doing business and living

The economy and environment are closely interconnected. Economic activities (production and consumption) impact directly on the natural world of which humans are part. At present humanity exists on the basis of an unparalleled exploitation, wastage and destruction of natural resources which belong to all people. Under capitalism the main reason for this is that in an economy driven by competition, profits have to be generated – and therefore consumption, of course, necessarily has to expand. But in the first place nature has an intrinsic value, and secondly the forces and riches of nature on earth are finite. Money (including in the form of a basic income) cannot be eaten. Neither does it replace any species threatened with extinction or return any energy consumed, healthy air or clean water. Increasingly, however, there is discussion in Germany about the positive contribution the basic income can make to an ecological, non-growth-oriented society: the basic income can promote democratic and cooperative processes in the economic sphere and use pro-environmental taxation to promote ecological management for the benefit of the basic income (Schachtschneider 2011, Blaschke 2012a). The debate on expanding self-organised and de-commodified (subsistence) cooperation agreements also links in with the discussion about non-consumerist lifestyles. Large-scale decentralisation of economic processes avoids unnecessary mobility and also promotes direct democratic processes.

2.5. Redistribution to cut poverty and exclusion

The unconditional basic income is not a socio-political instrument but it does, nevertheless, have socio-political effects. For this reason the basic income was and is also discussed as a simple instrument of redistribution, promising poverty reduction (including hidden poverty) and *at the same time* more individual freedom and democratisation. The debate on the basic income therefore provides an opportunity to highlight fundamental questions regarding redistribution as well as property questions and to offer solutions. Why is the question of redistribution also a question of property? Because it questions the fairness of certain forms of appropriation. To name just one example: when it comes to discussing whether a basic income is fair for all, people often refer to property established by natural law – namely nature (natural resources) which belong(s) to all. The charge for exploiting these resources can be used to pay out a nature dividend along the lines of a basic income. The privatised use of natural resources owned by the community for the purpose of generating profits and paying individuals (the logical and real corollary of profit) is called into question by the nature dividend *and* by democratic conditions in relation to appropriation (cf the debate on John Locke's theory of appropriation in Blaschke 2010: 99 ff.). Right-wing proponents of the idea of basic income shun these debates about redistribution and appropriation like the plague.

2.6 Global social rights

The debate on the introduction of the basic income as a human right also offers an opportunity to define human rights as global social rights which accrue to all people at the place where they live (Klautke/Oehrlein 2008; Kopp 2011). A universalistic transfer is not compatible with selective mechanisms. If this is accepted, the question to be asked and answered is: how is it possible to prevent the right to freedom of movement as a universalistic right leading to massive migration problems? This means that against the background of possible migration problems the following aspects need to be discussed: the exploitation of the countries of the so-called Third World, hunger, armed conflicts and their support by certain countries in the global West and North, as well as in general the economic and political responsibility of the countries of the wealthy North. This debate could help to eliminate all economically exploitative and socially and ecologically destabilising dependencies of poor on rich countries.

The path to a universalistic basic income in Germany offers an opportunity to radically

question the existing massive dependencies of poor countries on rich countries, nationalist mindsets and existing imperial economies and policies in order to go a long way towards removing the existential and material causes of migration.

3. Three selected risks on the way to a basic income in Germany

In view of the large number of different approaches to and models of a basic income in Germany, it might appear as though the debate on the basic income was already far advanced. And so it is, except in one point where it is still in its infancy. There has, namely, been a lack of discussion of the risks on the way to a basic income. It is well known, however, that new ideas on and approaches to creating a different society have either been destroyed at birth or turned on their heads for want of adequate reflection.

I would like to present three selected risks on the way to the basic income which, if they are more thoroughly examined and taken into account, can be minimised and avoided.

Risk no. 1: Basic income as social and control technology

What does it mean to refer to basic income as social and control technology? It means that rather than focussing on the opportunities for societal change outlined above, the debate on basic income is dominated instead by the question of the “technical” implementation of the basic income in the context of the social and tax system as it is or as it needs to be changed. Apart from the normal arguments over detailed issues relating to the social and tax system, the different societal dimensions associated with a basic income are totally overlooked (see Chapter 1.1. to 2.6). The suspicion is that a technical solution to the issue of a basic income supposes that many other problems will solve themselves or will no longer be problems once the basic income is introduced – for example ecological questions, questions of democratising all areas of society or redistribution and justice. However necessary it may be to demonstrate the “technical” feasibility of the basic income, such proof is hopeless in the face of a social reality which does not (yet) accept the implicit societal dimensions of a basic income and hence rejects it. *One* consequence of regarding basic income in terms of social and control technology is the debate about a partial basic income.

Risk no. 2: Partial basic income

The partial basic income is often presented as a step towards the unconditional basic income. In Germany a number of representatives of the Greens, the Christian Democrats and the Pirates in particular are pushing for a partial basic income as a first step. The key argument, although not one that features prominently, is that the unconditional basic income is not (at present) affordable because it would entail a massive redistribution. Sometimes it is also hinted that initially it would be necessary to carry out a small-scale test to examine the effects of the basic income on the labour market – in order not to cut the incentive to continue to perform wage labour too sharply. Seemingly socio-technological arguments hide unresolved societal questions and problems: namely the question of fair appropriation and the problem of attractive working conditions (Charles Fourier) and alienated labour (Karl Marx, on both, see Blaschke 2010: 160 ff.). Progressively minded proponents of a partial basic income naturally claim that the unconditional basic income would follow on from the first step of introducing the partial basic income. Yet there is no logical or empirical proof that this wishful thinking would become reality. Firstly a partial basic income does not in any way have the positive effects of an unconditional basic income that are often cited, i.e. in terms of greater freedom, democratisation and de-commodification. Logically therefore it is also impossible to deduce that once a partial basic income was introduced, it would prove so successful that a large majority would be in favour of taking the next step. In fact the reverse could happen: namely that a large majority would call for a step back or at least a standstill instead of moving forwards because the higher-level effects had not yet manifested themselves. Secondly it is also untenable in empirical terms to assert that the first step would be followed by a second. An example from history illustrates the point: Hartz IV, which contravened fundamental rights in many respects (too low, massive hidden poverty, sanctions) was introduced by the governing coalition of the SPD and Alliance 90/The Greens to provide a basic level of social protection. Some politicians, while they suspected that Hartz IV was in breach of fundamental rights, believed that it constituted a step towards guaranteeing people a decent existence. In fact the opposite happened: Hartz IV was actually made step by step more stringent. Poverty was consolidated. The threat of penalties and benefit cuts which in practice has become ever harsher has increasingly been oppressing even those who are earning a crust. Even individual dependencies in partnerships and with respect to parents have intensified. Moreover, society's opinion of those drawing the Hartz IV benefit has hardened. Debates fuelled by envy have intensified

and group-related exclusions increased (Blaschke 2008). In other words, the reverse of what was hoped for has happened: the situation of society as a whole has worsened. Hartz IV was and is in no way a hoped-for step towards a decent level of basic security and neither is any such step on the political agenda.

The socio-technological argument surrounding the feasibility of a basic income hides unresolved societal problems. The practical realisation of socio-technological, pragmatic approaches can actually bring about the opposite of what is intended, namely a basic income which fails to free people from the necessity of working or partnership-based dependency. This would be made even worse if a partial basic income were to be introduced and at the same time social security systems were dismantled or refused (e.g. the minimum wage which only exists in Germany in a few branches of the economy). This would have the effect of creating greater commodification – that is to say, the opposite of what an unconditional basic income promises.

Risk no. 3: Basic income concepts with national characteristics

Another socio-technological argument is that the basic income needs to be designed in such a way that it does not trigger great surges of migration. Depending on how deeply the problem is considered, this argument leads to the incorporation of conditions in the basic income concept which are at odds with its universalistic character, for example citizenship, lengthy preceding period of residence, etc. This also contradicts, for example, decisions of the German Federal Constitutional Court which recently ruled: “Foreign nationals do not lose their entitlement as social individuals by virtue of leaving their home country and settling on a non-permanent basis in the Federal Republic of Germany [...]. The decent livelihood, which must be subject to a uniform understanding, therefore has to be realised from the start of the period of residence in the Federal Republic of Germany.” (cf Blaschke 2012b) This raises the question as to whether, in the event of a basic income being introduced in Germany, migrants would not also be entitled to this decent level of protection right from the very beginning of their stay in Germany in the same way as German citizens. Supporters of the basic income rightly criticise the fact that forms of social security designed to ensure a livelihood and participation that are means tested or otherwise subject to conditions could not be regarded as decent. Thus this should not be used as a factor to refuse a basic income to migrants. Migrants would have exactly the same entitlement to the unconditional basic income.

It is also argued that we (in Germany) would not be responsible if other countries failed to introduce similar systems which would largely avoid migration to wealthier countries on material grounds. This argument conceals the problem that Germany shared and shares responsibility both politically and economically in history and in the present day for the exploitation and impoverishment of the countries of the Third World. It conceals our responsibility with regard to the social situation and the real possibilities for freedom of the people in other countries, particularly in those countries in which we have made and are making “good money”, and so in reality facilitate our basic income. This results in basic income concepts with national characteristics which in extreme cases, as well as having inbuilt barriers to access and access conditions, also continue to accept the “walls” around Germany (and around Europe). People often refer to Germany as a role model, meaning that other countries convince themselves of the benefits of the basic income when they look at us and believe they could introduce it in their own countries. Only in very rare cases do they reflect on whether they can afford it in material terms and if they can, at what level.

Conclusion

The debate on the introduction of a basic income is linked to debates about and social opportunities for a democratic, ecological and free society based on the principle of solidarity, since a basic income promotes such a society. Even just engaging in the debate on the basic income is beneficial. But if pragmatic, socio-technological implementation strategies are brought in, these debates could be blocked and the opportunities wasted. It would then be impossible to rule out possible undesirable developments on the way to a basic income, and while the idea of the basic income would not be to blame for these, the implementation strategies would be. This process of blame would make the path to a fairer and freer world based on more solidarity more difficult.

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