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Saving Citizenship from the workhouse.

Upholding the obligation to work undermines the citizen's autonomy¹

1. Diagnosing the crisis

Within the past years, the legitimacy of the nation-state has come under attack in intellectual debate. The discourse on the “end of history” (which followed the demise of communism) as well as the discourse on what is called “globalization” showed that the old justification for “capitalism”² is no longer sufficient. During the Cold War the competition of political systems provided a plethora of evidence that the democratic nation-states, together with their market economy, were in a much better position than communist regimes to create collective wealth and to support the citizen's autonomy.³ Yet despite its success, the concept of the nation-state has become an intellectual target since 1989. The breakthrough of democracy coincided with questions about the future of “capitalism”, even though democracy and capitalism are but flip sides to one another. Democracy without a market economy is inconceivable, and so is long-term economic success without democratic institutions.⁴ Historical development seems to support our argument here.⁵

¹ Our arguments have evolved from ideas first put forth by Ulrich Oevermann who has come to the idea of an unconditional basic income by way of a sociological model of human *praxis* (the central idea being “Autonomie der Lebenspraxis”). See Ulrich Oevermann, "Ethische Verantwortung, Beschaeftigung, Globalisierung", *Unternehmen und Gesellschaft*, 2/1998, and: “Die Krise der Arbeitsgesellschaft und das Bewaehrungsproblem des modernen Subjekts” (<http://www.rz.uni-frankfurt.de/~hermeneu/Arbeit-Bewaehrung-1999.PDF> Oktober 1999)).

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² We are not using the term “capitalism“ in Karl Marx' sense, i.e. we do not understand capitalism to characterize the entire political community. Following Max Weber's arguments, “capitalism” is nothing but an *economic* order that is *embedded* in a political consensus, i.e. it is dependent on political institutions.

³ See Francois Furet, *Das Ende der Illusion. Der Kommunismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Muenchen: Piper, 1998); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1992); G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Werke in 20 Baenden, Bd. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

⁴ The nation-state is the ultimate institution that represents and defends the political order against enemies of the body politic. See Max Weber's definition of the “state”: “Staat ist diejenige menschliche Gemeinschaft, welche innerhalb eines bestimmten Gebietes—dies: das 'Gebiet', gehoert zum Merkmal—das Monopol legitimer physischer Gewaltsamkeit fuer sich (mit Erfolg) beansprucht. Denn das der Gegenwart Spezifische ist, daß man allen anderen Verbaenden oder Einzelpersonen das Recht zur physischen Gewaltsamkeit nur soweit zuschreibt,

But let us step back and have a look at the current contradictions of the modern nation-state which promotes a revitalization of what, in this paper, we would like to call a “workhouse mentality”.

Modern democratic nation-states seek to achieve fundamental aims of *equality* and *justice*, from which derive others, such as *wealth*. The community's decision to provide goods and services within a competitive market economy, and its decision to distribute income via paid work with reference to individual achievement, both create a dynamic of rationalization, of large-scale production, and of wealth, which results in significant inequality with respect to the individual's opportunity to succeed in this system. As a result, communities dedicate a considerable part of their budgets (generated by taxing economic value) to balance out these inequalities. Since 1945 the main political parties in Germany have agreed to employ federal funds to such ends.⁶

Generally speaking, economic booms before the 1970s generated full employment in industrialized countries. In the mid-1970s, however, things changed: *during* such a period, unemployment *barely decreased*, and thereafter, unemployment *usually increased*. The term “structural unemployment” came into use to characterize such non-cyclical unemployment which has been with us ever since. Today an ever *decreasing* amount of human labor is necessary to create an ever *increasing* amount of wealth.⁷ Back of this development lies the introduction of technology (such as an increased use of computers) which replaces human labor. It is not difficult to see that this tendency will not go away, and that the rationalization it represents will continue to accelerate within the next decades. Standardized work will become dispensable as it is translated into routines — routines being what computers and machines

als der Staat sie von ihrer Seite zuläßt: er gilt als alleinige Quelle des 'Rechts' auf Gewaltsamkeit.“ Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972), p. 822.

⁵ It is an interesting historical fact that political systems which claimed to be democratic but decided for a non-capitalistic, planned economy, soon turned into repressive regimes. (Foremost among those nation-states are the so called “people's republics”, i.e. communist countries.) It is also interesting that repressive regimes, which maintained a market economy for some time, later turned into democratic nation-states.

⁶ Terms such as “Sozialstaatsgebot” and “soziale Marktwirtschaft” indicate that in Germany there is a political consensus in this respect.

⁷ See *Kommission fuer Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachsen*, “Erwerbstaetigkeit und Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland. Entwicklung, Ursachen und Maßnahmen. Teil I: Entwicklung von Erwerbstaetigkeit und Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland und anderen fruehindustrialisierten Laendern.” (Bonn 1996); A. Bassanini, S. Scarpetta, I. Visco: “Knowledge, technology and economic growth: recent evidence from OECD countries.” 150th Anniversary Conference of the National Bank of Belgium: “How to promote economic growth in the Euro area.” Brussels, 11 and 12 May, 2000 (OECD Internet-pages).

are made for.⁸ As a result, structural unemployment will turn into a pressing problem — if no appropriate answer is found. The current system of the distribution of wealth, which is based on work income, will enter a fundamental crisis — and it is our thesis that this crisis cannot be overcome *as long as our society bases the distribution of societal wealth on the criterion of work.*

That paid work is the central criterion for the distribution of values dates back to an era in which the human labor force was indispensable for economic success. That this normative assumption is hardly questioned today — even though its underlying premise is no longer valid — indicates how deeply a “work ethic”⁹ is embedded in our culture.¹⁰ A community which allows its members to participate in its wealth only to the extent to which these members are pursuing paid work will ultimately have to provide each citizen ready to accept this norm with a job. If a community, however, cannot provide such work and if it seems irrational to do so, the question arises in what sense these goals still correspond to the community's obligation to establish equality and justice. On these latter goals, however, rests the legitimacy of the modern nation-state. Hence there has emerged a contradiction between the citizen as the foundation of the nation-state, on the one hand, and the policy of upholding the obligation to work (even though full employment in a strict sense is out of reach), on the other. To further explain our diagnosis we will shortly try to characterize the citizen and its autonomy from a theoretical, i.e. sociological perspective.

⁸ Only where crises — not routines — are concerned (in Max Weber's terminology: “materiale Rationalitaet”) does human labor remain irreplaceable. This includes judicature, medical therapy, education, politics, entrepreneurship, art, science and research. This is because the ability to solve a crisis and to be creative is a genuine human capacity which cannot be automated or computerized. Computers are unable to create new routines, and instead rely on routines — their software is the formulation of routine operations in a symbolic machine language. In discussions about “artificial intelligence”, this is often overlooked. Machines which “learn” are nothing but machines which operate on a routine which lets them extract new routines! Because machines do not live, they have no interests and no “will” and they cannot, therefore, make a “true” decision in a crisis in which they are presented with options that are equally valid.

⁹ We use the term “work ethic” with reference only to *paid* work.

¹⁰ “A man who does not ‘produce’ as long as he has health and strength, no matter how well he can afford to retire, is somehow neglecting his *ethical* responsibilities.” Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action II*, (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 515. The *ethical* dimension refers to the religious foundation of the Protestant ethic. Also see Talcott Parsons, “The motivation of economic activities”, *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York: The Free Press, 1954).

2. A brief sociological characterization of Citizenship and Autonomy

The citizen's *autonomy* is the basic constituent of citizenship. The citizen is the founding basis of the political community and any decision that affects the body politic can only be made with reference to him. The community has to always presuppose that citizenship is based on the individual's self-reliance. And the citizen's autonomy, in turn, is rooted in the structure of human *Praxis*. "Autonomy" in a strict sense is an "objective potential" of the structure of human *Praxis*. It implies "self-determination", or "making decisions on one's own" and according to one's reasonable intuitions. The realization of the potential for autonomy in human conduct depends, first of all, on its appropriate articulation in religious or secularized myths. Therefore, the main root of the occidental process of rationalization (which is also a process of the unfolding of autonomy) lies within the Jewish-Christian religious tradition.¹¹ The Jewish myth of creation (Genesis) and the Christian myth of salvation (crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ)¹² together formed a strong religious expression of the potential for autonomy which, historically, culminated in the articulation of autonomy as a basic notion for the individual's conduct of life by Protestantism.¹³ The work ethic today is a secularized derivative of this historical development. In the course of secularization (which goes along with rationalization), *collective* answers as to what the good life should consist of are eroded. As there are no longer reliable answers on how to live one's life, the individual must rely on his own individual experience in building such a myth. A secularized society is characterized by a very abstract and yet unique "collective myth" which contains a seemingly paradoxical formula — a "non-content", if you like. This formula reads: "Do not rely on collective myths and their answers. On the basis of your experience, create your own myth and live up to it!"¹⁴

¹¹ See Max Weber's famous analysis of the Protestant roots of capitalism and of the occidental process of rationalization and disenchantment, and Talcott Parsons as cited in footnote 10.

¹² Sociologically speaking, The Fall of Man is a Fall into Autonomy. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrates that death could be "transcended" to the extent to which an (autonomous) contribution to the community or to humanity has been made. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 389, and *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Religion II*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 75-9. Also see Ulrich Oevermann: "Ein Modell der Struktur von Religiositaet. Zugleich ein Strukturmodell von Lebenspraxis und von sozialer Zeit", in: Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (ed.), *Biographie und Religion. Zwischen Ritual und Selbstsuche*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1995, p. 27-102.

¹³ This principle lies behind the *personal* relationship which the Protestant believer maintained with his God and also behind the paramount importance of "conscientiousness" for him.

¹⁴ Aesthetic criteria such as adequacy, appropriateness and clarity become central aspects of a secularized life.

Individual autonomy has two sides: The task of looking after one's private interest in order to gain the means for subsistence, on the one hand, and the task of contributing to the community or to humanity, on the other. A closer look at this pair of universal tasks uncovers their specific relation: Gaining the means for subsistence as such cannot make life meaningful, i.e. subsistence *for the sake of subsistence* does not provide a sense of life. At the same time, however, contributing to the community or to mankind presumes individual subsistence. Someone who tries to contribute to the community without the means to support himself inevitably becomes a burden to it. Everyone has to deal with both these universal tasks at the same time. The work ethic, which is still valid today, has been an answer to this problem of how to make one's living and of how to contribute to the community. It was valid for almost everyone and in this sense it represented equality.

At this point, we would like to put forth a frequently neglected argument. The culture of each nation-state — and this includes the present *economic* culture — is inherited from preceding generations. Our achievements today take for granted their work and their knowledge. There would never be anything like an autonomous and self-reliant individual, furthermore, without a family to initiate the individual. In terms of a work ethic, what is oftentimes portrayed as an individual achievement, is in fact a result not only of this individual's achievement, but of the process of socialization that lies behind that individual. It can therefore not be regarded as this individual's achievement alone. The same holds true with regard to a company: Its products are not the achievement of that company's current staff alone, but also of the surrounding community and its culture, its schools and universities, infrastructure, legal order, families, hospitals, and so on. For this reason, the whole community has a *right* to participate in values created by that company.

From this simple argument we conclude that a distribution of income which evaluates only the individual's achievement ignores that wealth is a political community's collective achievement. Today the question is not whether we could *afford* to alter the system of income distribution. Instead, the question is whether we should make the individual responsible for leading a meaningful life without the obligation to do paid work.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck's concept of "Buergerarbeit" e.g. still aims to control the life-content of the unemployed by installing a system of monetary incentives for state-operated "honorary" "engagement". His fundamental mistrust in the citizen's autonomy and ability to find something meaningful to do corresponds to his idea of a technocratic tutelage of these citizens. See: Kommission fuer Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachsen: *Erwerbstaetigkeit und Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland. Entwicklung, Ursachen und Maßnahmen. Teil III: Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der Beschaeftigungslage.* Bonn 1997, p. 142-170 (this part is written by Ulrich Beck).

3. Obligation to work vs. an unconditional basic income

Now let us confront the different consequences of upholding the obligation to work, on the one hand, and of introducing an unconditional and sufficient basic income (with no such obligation), on the other. Consider the consequences tied to the first of these two options — of upholding the work ethic and the obligation to work:

As structural unemployment will continue to grow, an increasing number of citizens are excluded both from national wealth and from social life — without justification. In many instances these individuals receive some type of social aid after unemployment benefits run out, and in this way they are stigmatized as “needy”, as having failed to provide for themselves.

As a further consequence of this first option, the process of rationalization is severely restrained. If all possibilities for rationalization were made use of, even more people would be excluded in the above manner since a lot more jobs would be eliminated.¹⁶ Even managers today feel that a reduction of jobs in a company should be avoided until the pressure of competition necessitates such a measure. In this way, companies do not make use of the full potential for efficient production and thereby reduce jobs. It is obvious that any limitation on such rationalization should be erased since the community as a whole gains by it. But instead of offensively cutting jobs, managers defensively restrict themselves to the necessity of conforming with their nation-state's idea of a just community.¹⁷

If a job that has lost its economic *raison d'être* to technological progress is nevertheless preserved, it will inevitably alter its structure of meaning. Because it is dispensable, it will be impossible for the respective employee to be proud of such a job. Instead, the jobholder will need to be thankful that his community grants him the privilege of letting him do unneeded

¹⁶ What the reasons are for not making use of technological progress is sometimes looked at as an unanswered question. Compare David Riesman: “In the present state of our social and economic accounting, I find it impossible to say where necessary personalization ends and unnecessary personalization begins. Nor have I the indices to separate profitably *productive effort* from *busy work* [Italics ours]. I cannot tell, for example, how much the slow progress toward automatization in the tertiary trades is due to low wages, *engaging Negro laundresses and pressers in a muscular race with existing mechanical power* [Italics ours], how much to failure to invent the necessary machinery, how much to consumer demand to buy personalization along with a product, and how much to the needs of the work force itself to personalize, for reasons already given, whether the consumer asks for it or not.” David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1989), p. 271 f.

¹⁷ In the case of Germany, I have found that this is indeed the case. See my dissertation (*Manifestes und latentes Krisenbewußtsein bei der nicht-intellektuellen Führungselite der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Exemplarische Fallrekonstruktionen auf der Grundlage von Interviews mit deutschen Unternehmensführern*, Dept. of

work so that he will have a source of income. In this situation, the former ideal of gaining one's income (private interest) by rendering a service to society and by doing useful and indispensable work (community orientation) has been abandoned. The jobholder will now have to seek his personal affirmation (which implies meaningful activity) outside of his occupation.¹⁸ The latter will merely serve as a source of income. Considering this dilemma, it is not surprising that individuals seek to prove themselves in challenging leisure activities, thereby paradoxically transforming what is a sphere of recreation into a sphere of ambitious activity.

Another consequence of upholding the obligation to work is that paid work in general has become a *desirable good*. In this way, trade unions and traditional social democrats seek to distribute work much like they would allocate economical wealth: By reducing working hours, they would distribute it *justly*. In this way, they ignore the question whether such a reduction is reasonable from the perspective of the production process. Obviously, this is not the case. Managers and some politicians stress economic prosperity as a basis for the redistribution of wealth and choose another strategy: They also want to increase the number of jobs, but they want to do so by expanding the low-wage/low-productivity sector.¹⁹ What these managers and politicians have in common is that they prefer human labor to both existing potentials for rationalization and “expensive unemployment”.²⁰

But in the face of ongoing rationalization of human labor, upholding paid work as the norm for adult life is nothing but *mistrust in the citizen's autonomy* — in the citizen's ability to live

Sociology, J. W. Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, 1999), in which I am reconstructing normative patterns by CEOs.

¹⁸ Many of these jobs consist of routines and do therefore not provide much of a challenge.

¹⁹ Such reform concepts normally contain three elements: 1. The reduction of welfare benefits (“Sozialleistungen”) and a more restrictive policy with regards to eligibility, 2. the encouragement of low-wage/low-productivity jobs by a reduction of minimum wages (legislative minimum wages, wages guaranteed by collective wage agreements) and of labor costs (i.e. legislative contributions to social insurance), 3. the support of low-wage jobholders by way of supplementing their income so that they will reach a certain predefined level of income (e.g. negative income tax).

²⁰ Implementation of these ideas probably would have the following results:

- The former stigma attached to unemployment would now be attached to jobholders who receive a supplementary income from the public (these jobs would be stigmatized because the character of these jobs reveals that those who hold them are in fact dependent on the supplementary income).
- These jobs would have less potential for self-realization and would be reduced to a means to supply income. The respective jobholders, furthermore, would have to be thankful that the political community lets them keep these kinds of jobs — the only purpose being that they are allowed (formally!) to earn their income along traditional lines.
- These jobholders would not be able to undergo (further) training and would stay unqualified.
- The public would indirectly subsidize the buyers of services such as shoe cleaning, bagging groceries, carrying suitcases and so on.

a reasonable and meaningful life without instruction or supervision. The idea of an unconditional basic income is frequently confronted with the argument that such an income would trigger “free riding” and laziness to the detriment of the community.²¹ This argument contains a wrong assimilation of the conduct of life under the condition of an unconditional basic income to “leisure time”. Laziness during leisure time implies the legitimacy to relax after one has completed a hard day’s work. An unconditional basic income, however, would completely change the foundation for leisure. Without its counterpart — work —, *idleness would lose its meaning*.²² It would be impossible to answer fundamental questions which are basic for human life (What is the meaning of my life, i.e. what will I leave behind when I die?) by relaxing.

What this “leisure-argument” also— wrongly — suggests is that life without the necessity to pursue paid work would be “easier”. In fact, the opposite is true. The possibility to choose between a life with, and a life without, paid work increases the number of choices to be made on one’s own, and thus implies a higher degree of autonomy.²³ An unconditional basic income would not render life easier. *It would make it more difficult*. From this perspective, it is obvious that much of the opposition to an unconditional basic income is based on the fear of an intensification of life that such an income would imply.²⁴

In this way, the introduction of an unconditional basic income, sufficient for living a life without paid work, would radically alter our situation. Managers could now *offensively* apply new technological solutions and substitute human labor. The community could get rid of legal restrictions with respect to laying off and hiring employees. To hire individuals for only a short time in order to work on a project *would now be a common thing*.

For those not continuing to be tied up in paid work, furthermore, activities would lose the stigma of irregularity and could now be appreciated as serious tasks. This is because an

²¹ See Philippe Van Parijs’ discussion of this topic in *Real Freedom for All* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

²² Compare David Riesman: “Work has the greater prestige; moreover, it is thought of as alien to man—it is sort of disciplined salvage operation, rescuing a useful social product from chaos and the disorders of man’s innate laziness. The same era, that of transitional growth of population, that saw the most astounding increase in man’s mastery over nature, took it as axiomatic, echoing a series of writers from Malthus to Sumner and Freud, that people had to be driven to work by economic necessity. Today, knowing more about the nature of man and of work, we still nevertheless tend to accept the psychological premise that work and productivity are disciplines exerted against the grain of man’s nature. We did not quite see, though we are close to seeing, that what looks like laziness may be a reaction against the kind of work people are forced to do and the way in which they are forced to define it.” Riesman et al, op.cit. p. 262.

²³ See Sigmund Freud’s “*Ich-Leistung*”.

²⁴ See Sally Lerner’s presentation at 7th International Congress on Basic Income 10-12 September 1998: “Fear from Freedom: A Barrier to Putting BI on the Political Agenda” (BIEN’s Internet-pages).

unconditional basic income is legitimized *as an individual share in the collective cultural heritage of the community*. At the same time, the remaining jobs would again provide a meaningful perspective. Jobholders could again be proud of their work because it is useful. Both the egocentric character of ambitious leisure activities and the exceptional character of voluntary and honorary engagement, furthermore, would vanish.

Finally, it should be stressed that an unconditional basic income is a prerequisite for life-long learning. A “Wissensgesellschaft” (“Society of knowledge”) which has been demanded by some, would now be inaugurated on a large scale. Such an income would make it possible for adults to continue to be curious — since curiosity will unfold only when there is an absence of pressing needs. An unconditional and sufficient basic income would provide the security and self-possession necessary to venture out into new intellectual fields and other activities. For these reasons, one can only guess what slumbering potential for innovation and rationalization would be activated by the introduction of such an unconditional basic income.

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