

The Basic Income Debate in Switzerland: Experiences and a Republican Perspective

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In most German speaking countries in Europe the basic income debate is under way: in Germany, since about 2002, several campaigns, movements, organisations with different approaches to basic income have tried to spread the Basic Income idea. With the time passing, the idea also encroached to a certain degree on German politics, with several politicians favoring it. By now, basic income has begun to shape public discourse about the future of the German welfare state.

In Austria too, the concept is getting more and more attention. A basic income congress held in the year 2005 in Vienna sparked the interest of media and politics in basic income.

And what is the state of affairs in Switzerland? I first want to briefly describe the development of the Swiss basic income debate. As my second point, the more important one, I will reflect on a possible future perspective of the Swiss basic income debate. I will conclude with some thoughts about what might be a good way to foster discourse about basic income, in Switzerland, but also in other countries.

1. Experiences

In Switzerland, the idea of basic income was most probably first discussed in the early 1990s. It was rather an academic debate, with sociologists and ethicists calling for the introduction of a basic income in order to better fight poverty as well as unemployment and to better meet abstract requirements of justice. However, at that time, poverty and unemployment were not seen as severe problems that should be tackled with basic income and there was, and still is, a deeply ingrained stereotype of a Swiss work ethos, that can be traced back to the reformation in Switzerland and the corresponding protestant ethic. Furthermore, the Swiss are said to prefer pragmatic step-by-step solutions to problems, and the basic income idea appeared to them as a rather utopian, visionary idea that couldn't be implemented then. So the idea, that every person should get an income without working for it, found no echo in the Swiss public discussion about welfare reform in the 1990s – there was even almost no reaction or critique referring to the idea.

Later, there was obviously a strong impulse needed to reactivate the basic income idea in the Swiss context. This impulse fortunately was given as a broader discourse developed in Germany. More and more organisations and personalities began to seize the idea in Germany, and, beginning in about 2004, this discourse partially spilled over to Switzerland.

Now, there are a few small organisations trying to spread the idea. Among others,

there is the “Initiative Grundeinkommen”¹ in Basle that is inspired by German basic income proponents. Also, there is BIEN-Switzerland² and an ATTAC-group³ favouring publicly the idea. Partly, those organisations were succesful, for example with articles, printed in broadly read newspapers or with public panel discussions. And BIEN-Switzerland organised a big conference in Basle on basic income together with the German and Austrian networks (and ATTAC) in 2007.⁴ This had a small impact and got some public interest. At least, the basic income idea is now increasingly perceived and criticised, for example as not being realisable. So there is a debate slowly developing. Arguments in favour of basic income centre on its desirability in the fight against poverty and unemployment and on the presumed fact that there is less and less paid work. Basic income is seen as a good means to reduce dependency from the labour market, which is no longer able to integrate all citizens. Some Swiss left-wing thinkers consider basic income to constitute a first step to overcome capitalism. Other arguments, situated rather on the political right wing, focus on basic income as a means to simplify the complicated Swiss social security system and even to reduce government spending.

But generally, I would say that the idea of an unconditional basic income has still not reached public discourse in Switzerland yet. On the one hand, there are some small organisations favoring it. But they generally lack the manpower and financial means to start bigger campaigns. On the other hand, there are some scholars who publicly argue for basic income, but they are often seen as utopists and their arguments are most frequently overheard. All in all, the Swiss context seems to be an infertile ground for spreading the basic income idea. Last but not least because of its cultural particularities. Therefore, the basic income idea is often perceived as a *utopia* that is only situated in the wonderland of dreams.

To classify the basic income idea as *u-topian*, however, means to litterally state that there is no “place” for it in a certain cultural and historical background. To counter this view, it is important to make the case that in a specific cultural or historic context of a certain country (like Switzerland), there *are* “places” to which the idea of a basic income can be linked; that means to show, that there is a relationship between the basic income idea and certain institutional or cultural characteristics of a country, and thus, that there is a fertile ground, that may serve as a basis for spreading the idea.

¹ See www.initiative-grundeinkommen.ch.

² See www.grundeinkommen.ch.

³ See www.local.attac.org/basel/spip/spip.php?rubrique15.

⁴ See www.grundeinkommen2007.org.

2. A Republican Perspective for the Swiss Basic Income Debate

This leads to the second part, in which I would like to briefly develop a possible perspective of the basic income debate in Switzerland.

I argue, that the Swiss political context is heavily influenced by its so called republican tradition. And that it is possible to link this republican tradition of Switzerland to the basic income idea. Let me explain. I will first roughly sketch what is meant by the republican tradition of Switzerland, and then show what follows from this for the Swiss basic income debate.

Republicanism is a model of political philosophy that emphasises the importance of freedom and rule by the people. It always stands in opposition to forms of monarchy, aristocracy or dictatorship. More broadly, republicanism refers to a political system that protects liberty, especially by incorporating a rule of law that cannot be arbitrarily violated by the government. Republican thinkers therefore outline the necessity of widespread citizen participation, civic virtue, and opposition to corruption if the republic is to survive and flourish. Citizenship plays an important role: It is the membership within a community that is linked to certain unconditional rights granting individual self-determination. Republicanism further emphasises the principle of non-domination. Citizenship in this sense corresponds to the status of a citizen, that ensures that he or she is not forced to act at the mercy or arbitrary will of others.⁵ Only citizens that are free in this sense of non-domination are fully able to participate freely in the republican polity.

Switzerland, it is often ascertained, has featured the oldest and most durable republican tradition in Europe. Swiss history can be read as one of independent communal groups that created a league to safeguard their independence against neighbouring powers. What distinguished the Swiss was a deeply ingrained distrust of personal power. On the one hand, republicanism in Switzerland implied strong self-governing communities in which individuals participated actively. Benjamin Barber even states that "... in Switzerland, freedom has been understandable only within the context of community"⁶. On the other hand, this freedom is understood as freedom from arbitrary rule (domination) which leads to a distrust of personal power. Within community, individuals are granted civic rights and duties emphasising individual self-

⁵ See for example Pettit, Philip (1997): *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

⁶ Barber, Benjamin R. (1974): *The Death of Communal Liberty. A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton*, Princeton University Press, Princeton/New Jersey, p. 11.

determination.

The strong republican desire not to be dominated can be traced in the history of Swiss republicanism. This ingrained attitude can be exemplified by the fear of being subordinated to feudal lords and the corresponding communal tradition of self-governing communities. However, this Swiss republican tradition does not exist anymore in the abovementioned form. But still, there are traces of it in the Swiss political system, for instance the direct democratic participation rights of citizens or a decentralised governmental structure with the communes still retaining considerable political power. But even more importantly, the republican tradition of Switzerland constitutes the self-concept of Swiss political thinking and by this helped constructing Swiss national identity and a feeling of being different compared to other countries (“Switzerland as a special case”).⁷

In a nutshell: I argue that Swiss political thinking bears affinity to republicanism, and that the Swiss republican tradition still plays an important role.

In order to show that the basic income idea is linked to this Swiss republican tradition, it is necessary to highlight that it seems to be possible to justify basic income on grounds of republicanism. Some political-philosophical work has already been done on this issue.⁸ Basic income, in short, ensures the status of republican citizenship in economic life, granting socioeconomic independence and by this reducing domination (for instance by the market, or by governmental welfare institutions). It corresponds to a republican citizenship right, that is granted to all citizens of the polity irrespective of a persons contribution to the economic process.

In short: The republican ideal of citizenship is linked to unconditional rights granting socioeconomic independence. It especially aims at avoiding individual dependence from charity and from the possibility of domination. I think the introduction of a basic income would guarantee as well as universalize a considerable degree of socioeconomic independence and thus conduce to republican aims.

At this point, I make the case that it is possible to establish a relationship between the specific Swiss historical and cultural context of republicanism and the idea of an unconditional basic income. The specific Swiss republican context could serve as a

⁷ See for example Widmer, Paul (2007): *Die Schweiz als Sonderfall: Grundlagen, Geschichte, Gestaltung*, Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Zürich.

⁸ See for example Raventós, Daniel (2007): *Basic Income: The Material Conditions of Freedom*, Pluto Press, London; and especially the debate about republican justifications of basic income in *Basic Income Studies* Vol. 2, Issue 2 (December 2007), with remarkable contributions by Stuart White, Carole Pateman, David Cassasas, Daniel Raventós/Antoni Domènech and Philip Pettit.

“place”, that bears reference to basic income. It could be a meaningful perspective and a point of departure for a broader public discussion in Switzerland about the future of the welfare state and basic income. With this republican context in mind, basic income is no longer a literally *u-topian* idea in Switzerland, but an idea whose underlying values may already be found in the Swiss context. Having said this, the introduction of a basic income could be perceived as another step in the development of the Swiss republican tradition.

3. Concluding Remarks

My aim is not to give a detailed account of the link between republicanism in Switzerland and the basic income idea. I have just roughly sketched the main argument, which could possibly inspire the basic income debate in Switzerland.

However, I generally think that it is crucial to try to investigate links between the basic income idea and the specific historical, institutional and cultural context of different countries. Researching abstract justifications of basic income is surely important to get a framework of arguments. But I think, it is as important to consider the specific context of a country, in which the idea could be realised. By doing so, basic income will possibly not be considered by the broad public as a utopian and far-fetched intellectual idea, but as something that can be linked and understood in the context of something that already exists. For this purpose, scholars could for example explore prevailing patterns of thought about social policy in a certain country and identify links to the basic income idea. Or they could investigate historical roots of certain social policy measures and try to link them to basic income. In short: In order to foster the basic income debate in a certain country, its specific context and characteristics have to be kept in mind.

I provided an insight into the emerging Swiss basic income debate. Linking basic income to the Swiss tradition of republicanism might serve as a meaningful scope for the future debate. It also gives an example of how to relate the basic income idea to country-specific factors like political culture, institutions and history.