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Far, though close¹

Problems and Prospects of BI in Germany²

Introduction

Basic income in a very general sense has been discussed at intervals in Germany since the 1970s. This reached a peak in the 1980s, though this was confined to academic circles or at best in features in magazine articles, but it was off the agenda after German Reunification in 1990. It was not until 2003 that BI returned into the public forum, with debates emphasizing its unconditional dimension.³ Broader attention has been paid to BI since 2005. Despite the stunning attention it has subsequently gained due to the greater intensity of debate, it has not made it into legislation or legislative initiatives.

In my chapter in the book edited by Richard K. Caputo (Caputo 2012) the very brief and rough chronological overview of the German debate stops 2010. An update is required to see, what has happened since then.⁴ Has there been a major change?

It was in September 2011 when the Pirate Party, until then not very successful in Germany, was elected to the Abgeordnetenhaus (the parliament) of the City of Berlin. Founded in 2006 with little success in previous elections (from 0,2% in the city of Hamburg to 2% in the national election 2009), they gained 8,9% of the votes, which can be seen as a breakthrough.⁵ The Party has subsequently gained an enormous number of members, and since 2010 among its supporters are some who are in favor of Basic Income. In December 2011 at the national convention in Offenbach (nearby Frankfurt/Main) the members decided to support the installation of a committee of inquiry into BI once they were elected to the German Parliament. The Pirates' success has thus boosted the debate again. Very well known news programs on television reported that the party is in favor of BI, and since then Party members have been invited several times to TV talk shows, thus bringing the spotlight back to BI. As shortsighted as the media often is, the idea is now in some way linked to the Pirate Party.

¹ Paper presented to the 14th BIEN Congress in Munich, Panel „The Politics of BIG“.

² This paper is an abridged and revised version of the chapter I contributed to Caputo (Liebermann 2012b). See a more comprehensive version in Murray/ Pateman 2012.

³ When I talk about Basic Income I follow more or less the criteria proposed by the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN): 1) it is paid to individuals rather than households; 2) it is paid irrespective of any income from other sources; 3) it is paid without requiring performance of any work or the willingness to accept a job if offered.

⁴ See Liebermann 2012a and b. For an earlier attempt to provide an inside to the German debate see Liebermann 2008.

⁵ History of the Pirate Party Germany: http://wiki.piratenpartei.de/Geschichte_der_Piraten.

Arguments and Debates

What I wish to do next, rather than present several contested concepts of BI, is to give a general idea of main arguments and objections to BI which allow one to draw the lines in the German debate. I hope to clarify obstacles that BI faces due to prevailing ideas of autonomy, individual capacities, social justice, democracy and equality. Finally, I will turn to the prospects of BI in Germany and deal with the question of whether it is just a pipedream or likely to be introduced.

Unconditionality

In current debates in Germany, the adjective *unconditional* has a prominent position. Why is “unconditionality” so important and what does it mean? The German welfare state provides an assortment of different insurance benefits (for example Unemployment Benefit I, Pension), assistances and allowances managed by independent funds. All are conditional; they either require willingness to work (Unemployment Benefit, wage-related), acquired entitlements or claims to benefits through contributions (Unemployment Benefit and Pension), a certain age (child benefits⁶), or means testing (social assistance) (Fleckenstein 2008). Stressing unconditionality⁷, however, as it is expressed in the goal, to provide BI from cradle to grave, counters an even stronger regime of workhouse policies that arose with the Schröder Government. The term unconditional in the German debate clearly refers to the *achievement-conditions* a beneficiary must meet to receive benefits today. So, that a beneficiary of BI must meet *status-conditions*, either citizenship or a permanent residency, does not—as some pundits mock—contradict the idea of unconditionality.

Education: prerequisite to BI or goal in itself?

The more the debate has broadened the easier it becomes to advocate conditions, while still calling it BI. Sneaking in the back door, you find conditionality in terms of educational obligations BI-beneficiaries must meet. Wolfgang Engler (Engler 2007) regards education as prerequisite for leading a self-determined life, and his fellow citizens largely agree.⁸ Education, they argue, is necessary in a world of alienated individuals not capable of coping with freedom and so accustomed to life-guidelines of the “employment society” or “consumer society”. Thomas Poreski and Manuel Emmler (Poreski/ Emmler 2006) restrict conditions to children, who must go to kindergarten or school for parents to be eligible for BI.

⁶ Generally, children are entitled to child benefit from birth until the age of 18. Under certain circumstances child benefits can be paid for a longer period. Child benefits are defined as a tax refund, primarily to meet the constitutional rule that income is untaxable up to a child’s subsistence level. See, Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs 2010.

⁷ The German BI Network is quite unclear on that point, because it regards NIT as BI as well. See frequently asked questions, paragraph 22, <http://www.grundeinkommen.de/die-idee/fragen-und-antworten>.

⁸ In this context Hannah Arendt and Erich Fromm are quoted quite often. Pundits refer to Arendt’s culturally pessimistic judgment put forth in “The Human Condition”: “What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.” (Arendt 1958, 5) Erich Fromm in “The Psychological Aspects of the Guaranteed Income” (Fromm 1967 [1966], 191) is slightly less but also skeptical about citizen’s capacity to cope with the end of employment society or the freedom from work obligation.

Educational obligations would undermine the citizen's status as the building block of a political community. Instead of necessitating education as a condition for receiving BI, a guaranteed income from the cradle to the grave could help to transform the educational misery we are facing following labor-centered policies in past years. Education today serves as a means to successful employment, the 'master' way to prepare people for the labor market. Starting with early childhood education, the groundwork for occupational skills is laid, improved at school, and optimized at university. Educational success equals employability these days. BI would foster a debate whether education should be a goal in itself, taking the individual's interests and inclinations into consideration. Consequently, idleness, that is, doing something for its own sake, would be recognized more positively as the basis of exploring the unknown. BI would support inquisitiveness, a capacity fundamental to innovation in all aspects of community life.

Citizenship? Political community, internationalism and human rights

Unconditionality would turn the German welfare system upside down. The higher BI is, the more conditional benefits it eliminates, and the further it gets in recognizing wage-labor as only one among other important activities within a political community of citizens. The status of wage-labor would decrease; that of childcare, volunteering and other activities would increase. BI would not have this equalizing effect immediately; it is rather a result of recognizing people as citizens and not as contributors through wage-labor. By being provided without obligation, BI tells 'beneficiaries' that they receive it for their own sake. As citizen rights are bestowed without obligation, so is BI.⁹ Does such a status, as some argue, pervert the idea of unconditionality?

Indeed, it is sometimes argued that BI should be provided to everybody. Various proposals advocate BI as global necessity. The *attac* subdivision *Genug für alle* (*Attac AG* "Genug für alle" 2010) argues that BI is not a national goal, it is universal and global, and it is a right for all people to have a decent life. Members of the party *Die Linke* (The Left, BAG *Grundeinkommen* 2010) also advocate a human rights approach. From this point of view, citizenship is not a necessary condition to be eligible; instead the criterion is permanent or principal residency. The fundamental question, though, is who decides and provides BI for whom and why?

If there is no international government, some infer, the only recourse to achieve a global BI may come through human rights. Consequently, some derive BI from human rights—rights supposed to be valid everywhere. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration refers to a right to work¹⁰ (i.e. consequently the right to a workplace). By agreeing on the right to work instead of a right to income, plurality of life-conduct is constrained and paid work as normative ideal is upheld.

As long as there is no international democratic government and no corresponding body politic, the nation-state is the ultimate institution to provide a BI. Contrary to notions of the

⁹ It must be said that some countries do have obligations such as the one to vote. But, as far as I know, people who do not vote, do not lose their rights. We can call this a constitutive asymmetry between citizen rights and obligation, which is fundamental to political communities.

¹⁰ See Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>), Article (23), Section (1): "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment".

nation-state being an obstacle to universalism, it has been the main driving force in bringing it about. It took particular communities and their political organizations to survive and prosper and so reinforce universalistic ideals and guidelines. For all practical purposes, universalism would not exist without national political communities and neither would human rights. Moreover, rights as such do not create a community; rights are only as strong as the citizens who are willing to abide by them. In fact, rights need to be rooted in everyday life—in a given community’s perception that it exists, that it has a particular culture, and that its members “belong”, are at home in it.

While citizens have rights and responsibilities, permanent residents have rights, but not necessarily responsibilities. Does this imply that BI should not be provided to permanent residents? Not at all, but to provide it to permanent residents derives from the constitutive meaning of citizenship for a political community.

Redistribution of working hours, a minimum wage and automation technology

The more detail we go into, the more it becomes apparent how contested some aspects of BI’s impact are. Therefore, different proposals highlight different aspects and combine different means to attain the kind of freedom they seek.

There is a strong consensus that through a BI, high enough to secure a livelihood, employees would gain bargaining power. Being independent of wage-labor implies the ability to say ‘No’ (Offe 2008), an ability trade union functionaries deny or they are at least skeptical whether people would use it (Neuendorff/ Peter/ Wolf 2009¹¹). On the one hand, companies could rely on motivated employees who work voluntarily and, on the other hand, companies would have to offer attractive working conditions and an attractive working environment. Both would help to create an innovative atmosphere in companies and organizations. The community could get rid of legal restrictions necessary to protect the employee’s status today; for example, restrictions on laying off and hiring employees. To hire individuals for only a short time in order to work on a project would become common (if employees agree) and not a threat to the individual.

Some argue (e.g., Opielka/ Vobruba 1986, Neuendorff/ Peter/ Wolf 2009, Blaschke et al 2010) that BI must be combined with a reduction of working hours to redistribute work. Additionally, they contend, a minimum wage is indispensable to protect employees against a race to the bottom where wages are concerned. Why reduce working hours in general? If BI were sufficient to say ‘No’, neither working hours nor wages could be imposed on employees. Because of bargaining power, it would be up to them to define acceptable working hours. Each individual would be in a much better position to find an appropriate answer in accordance with his or her life, inclinations, capacities and so forth. The amount of time someone is willing to spend in an occupation depends on what he or she regards as reasonable. Reducing working hours would ignore individuals’ decisions and desires. Furthermore, the normative status of wage labor would be upheld; to generally distribute working hours declares labor to be a scarce and desirable good that people should have the opportunity to share.

¹¹ This book gathers papers by trade unionists, traditional and critical, and BI advocates presented at a workshop. It provides an insight into trade union arguments against BI.

To reduce working hours ignores that creative and innovative work cannot be measured in hours—such work is too closely connected to the individual’s dedication to a set of problems or questions. Applying a formal scheme, not measured by the content of work, instead of leaving it up to employees to bargain, deprives them of a responsibility that BI would enable them to carry out.

The same holds true for minimum wages. Why protect people twofold (BI plus MW)—the aim of a minimum wage—who are able to refuse unattractive working conditions? Pirate Party members call the minimum wage a “bridging technology” to BI or regard it as a first step towards BI. As long as there is no BI to act as safeguard of the freedom to say ‘No’, they say, a minimum wage must protect employees. But what seems to be a bridging technology can also prove to be trap and a serious obstacle towards BI. A minimum wage reinforces the normative status and the prior value of labor. Instead of opening the door towards BI, it keeps it closed even stronger.

A relatively low wage under circumstances of BI does not necessarily mean low income. While today wages fulfill two functions: 1) to secure a minimum and 2) to provide a share in the company’s success, with BI the situation is altered. BI would secure a steadily available minimum income; a wage would be additional and separate. Consequently, if BI were relatively high, a lower wage than today would not imply a lower income (BI plus wage).¹² BI is the grounding every wage would be additional.

A further consequence of reducing working hours and introducing minimum wages might be to severely restrain the process of rationalization. There is evidence that the present insistence on paid labor is an obstacle to the active implementation of technology, which allows for the substitution of human labor. Managers feel loyal to their political community (against all prejudices) and try to avoid laying off staff for as long as they can (Liebermann 2002). Thus companies do not make use of the full potential for efficient production. Once the technology is available, a job loses its economic *raison d’être* to technological progress and this inevitably alters its meaning. Because it is dispensable, an employee cannot be proud of such a job. He is not contributing to innovation or even a meaningful activity but competing with machines that could easily do his job. For example, checkout operators operate a cash register and ring up items, usually with a bar code scanner. Why not leave the checkout operation to the customers as some supermarket chains have begun to do? By using automation technology where reasonable, people with a BI would regain leisure-time. Any limitation on such rationalization should be taken away since the community as a whole would stand to gain.

To live at the costs of others and plurality

One objection often made against BI—from more conservative to leftwing parties—is that such a grant allows some “to live at the cost of others without any contribution” (Busch 2005; SPD 2009; for FDP see Altmiks 2009). At first sight, it appears to be a plausible objection.

¹² Götz W. Werner (Werner 2007, 100; Werner 2010) sometimes argues that BI has a substitutive effect on wages. Some BI advocates (for example Blaschke et al 2010, Wagner 2007) use this argument to blame him for presenting BI as a means to reduce wages without employees being asked and brand this argument for being neoliberal. Although Werner is not always clear in this respect, he himself mostly hints to the fact that wages result from bargaining (Werner 2007, 100) and BI only substitutes benefits to the level of BI, but not beyond (ibid. 99).

Those who engage in wage labor contribute to the production of goods and services and their income is taxed and, thus, public infrastructure is made available. However, taxed income is not the only contributor to the general tax revenue. Consumers in general contribute where a value added tax is levied. Moreover, volunteers also provide services and produce goods without being paid, as do all people serving in unpaid work for example in churches, charity organizations and even in political parties. In Germany the amount of unpaid work exceeds that of paid work. Data by the Federal Bureau of Statistics (Statistisches Bundesamt 2003) says that 96 billion hours per year are unpaid work, while only 56 billion hours are paid work.¹³ Are these activities unimportant to a community because they are unpaid?

What does the phrase “to live at the cost of others” account for? In a community every individual lives “at the cost of others”, because each and every person depends on the contribution of others in the sense that each and every person relies on his or her fellow citizens to lead a self-determined life following his or her capacities and loyalty towards the community. Living at the cost of others is a mere fact today that a BI would not change at all. Rather, it is unavoidable. BI would make this transparent.

From this point of view, the term “contribution” underlying this objection implies the same normative assumptions as the term “unemployment.”¹⁴ It is all about the contested definition of what society regards as a “contribution”. As long as we insist on defining it, we constrain autonomy by defining what is accepted as an autonomous life.

Advocates largely agree that activities ‘outside’ of the labor market would, under a BI, gain an independent status. They would lose the stigma of being ‘second choices’ because there would no longer be an obligation to earn an income by doing paid work. Activities and occupations would have equal moral worth. Citizens would gain the freedom to choose between paid work and other activities such as volunteering. On the one hand, BI would give citizens the possibility to make choices and, on the other hand, would give them more responsibilities.

Plurality would be encouraged. Neither growth nor labor is a goal in itself. With a BI different ways of living a self-determined life are respected. Instead of financing employment-programs and educational trainings to “bring” people back into the labor-market—both of which are more or less compulsory for the unemployed—education could be a goal in itself following the individual’s interests and inclinations. By providing a BI, the community signals that it trusts in the citizens’ will to contribute to the well-being of the polity and, thus, fosters solidarity.

Families, Childcare, and Emancipation

Mothers and fathers who stay at home for their children – are they not contributing to the common welfare, are they “unemployed”? In the common use of the term, stay-at-home parents are unemployed because they do not work in the paid labor market. Of course, they contribute to the common welfare – without families the political community has no future.

¹³ I am totally aware how little insight these data allow into the motivation of those doing unpaid work and how much the measure amount of time differs according to definitions applied.

¹⁴ The term ‘unemployment’ goes back to what is regarded as employment or meaningful activity and, thus, defined by legislation. BI allows a totally different understanding of occupation, whereby people could be fully occupied with whatever they wish to do, without being employed at all.

Nevertheless, their contribution neither helps to acquire entitlements to benefits, nor is it recognized as central in the same way as having a full time occupation.¹⁵ Instead, public debate, following activation policies and the ideal of wage-labor as the most important contribution to the common welfare, devalue non-wage activities such as family care.

A debate about extending childcare institutions to support working parents accompanies current activation policies. What seems to be progressive and emancipatory turns out to be the opposite. Parents are put under increasing pressure by public debates and political decisions. They have to decide whether they should take care of their children, or whether they should pursue their professional career to fulfill the community's normative expectations. By enhancing childcare institutions without providing means such as BI to opt out of the labor-market, the normative ideal of doing paid-work is reinforced. Therefore, what is considered to be a step into the future by praising, for example, Scandinavian childcare policies, is a step backward. We can call this phenomenon the 'employment trap'. BI, however, would open up the opportunity for staying at home, without stigmatizing it. BI would leave the decision up to parents, without directing them towards any normative goal.

Some pundits in Germany argue that a BI is regressive for women; it would send them back to the cooker (Nida-Rümelin 2008) and, furthermore, would 'shut those persons down' without any chance to earn more than BI provides (Schlecht 2006, SPD 2009). To me, this is a very pessimistic view of women, as if they were not strong enough to defend and follow their interests (Fischer 2006). If they decide to go back to their households, why not, it is up to them. Those incapable of attaining more than a BI are at least able to live a dignified life. What seems to be a thoughtful objection shows the same mistrust in people's capabilities as those against BI in general.

Discomfort of Uncertainty

The feasibility of BI is, not surprisingly, a big issue as well. Critics and supporters alike often ask for 'hard facts', they demand calculations to show that a BI is feasible. Several attempts have been made¹⁶, but they cannot solve the core issue connected to the introduction of BI: the uncertainty of how it will really affect everyday life. To forecast effects in the future of decisions made in the present necessitates presuppositions of what will happen. To model or simulate such effects is based on findings inferred from data from the past. So to calculate or predict costs and effects necessarily means to simulate. Calculations cannot tell anything reliable about the future. While simulation might be helpful to make aware the quantities of goods and service available, to show the amount of income available to individuals or households in the past, it cannot tell, what will happen in the future. How irresponsible one may think to even propose a BI without knowing what will happen (DeWispelare/ Noguera:

¹⁵ The German statutory pension insurance scheme, which defines minimum conditions for to being entitled to benefits, takes periods of childcare (up to three years per child) into account. Certainly, this contribution is not enough to receive a decent pension. In 2007 the government introduced *Elterngeld* (federal parental benefit; see Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs 2010) for the first 14 months of a child's life. Parents are divided into two categories. Those, who worked can claim an earnings-related benefit, whereas others who did not work can claim a lump sum.

¹⁶ Several attempts were made to calculate prospected costs of different Guaranteed Income proposals in Germany not all of which are a real BI (see for e.g. Poreski/ Emmler 2006, HWWI 2007, Opielka/ Strengmann-Kuhn 2007, Pelzer/ Fischer 2009).

31).¹⁷ What we know from the past enables us to reason about the effects that are more likely than others. That is all we can do. The feasibility of BI is, in the end, a question of political will and the confidence to cope with unwanted consequences.

Public debate or master plan?

According to the above mentioned discomfort with uncertainty, it is another contested issue whether activists should instead point out in more general terms, what effects BI could entail or whether they should sketch detailed concepts of a particular BI. The former option would imply contrasting the present situation with BI and making people aware what changes it would bring about. The latter option would include a detailed plan concerning how to shape and to implement BI. Where the former leaves it up to the body politic to form an opinion, where to go and how, the latter tends to confront the public with a detailed plan, before an opinion about BI is formed.¹⁸

Labeling the opponent

Pundits often use certain categories to put BI advocates in a box by calling the idea socialist, communist, leftist, neoliberal and so on. This might be part of the political struggle. It also happens among BI advocates when defining certain BI proposals by applying criteria that is more or less combined arbitrarily, e.g. when linking a “real” or “strong” BI to a minimum wage regardless of the normative effects mentioned above (see e.g. Opielka/ Vobruba 1986, Wagner 2007, Blaschke 2010).

Note on Taxation and Social Justice

To sum up let me add a very brief note concerning taxation and social justice—another contested issue in the German debate. Most proposals to finance BI combine taxes on income and consumption. Götz W. Werner (Werner 2007) and Benediktus Hardorp (Hardorp 2008), however, argue for totally rebuilding the taxation system by eliminating income taxation and concentrate on taxing consumption.¹⁹ The objection is often made that this proposal is unjust because it burdens the poor. Werner and Hardorp point out that all costs a company has—wages, social insurance, taxes, infrastructure—are more or less contained in prices for goods and services, so it is the consumer who pays everything. To contain costs in prices is indispensable because selling goods and services is the only way to meet the costs and make profits. Accordingly, to tax consumption is the only way out of the dilemma. But what about

¹⁷ Although De Wispelaere and Noguera are pretty clear that modeling the presumed BI effects does not eliminate uncertainty as a constituent of life-practice, i.e. that models do not tell us anything about what will happen once BI is implemented, they regard agent based modeling (ABM) as helpful. But for ABM the same holds true as for any modeling: it is not reality and cannot foresee what will happen.

¹⁸ It seems to me that De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) underestimate the dynamics of public debate and its impact on political decision-making. In Germany, it was public debate initiated by BI advocates, which put BI on the agenda of political parties, trade unions and so on.

¹⁹ This includes the idea to measure the carbon footprint of goods and services and include it in the tax rate. It is an ongoing debate how the use of resources and energy can be taxed and by doing so include these costs in prices for goods and services instead of externalizing them.

the rich, one might say? Werner's and Hardorp's proposal challenges prevailing ideas of social justice by simply hinting at the fact that things are not as they seem to be, and by raising the question whether it is appropriate to build a taxation system which concentrates on income, i.e. on having money, instead of what it is used for either consumption or investment. They are also discussing ways of how the use of resources could be taxed to support sustainable production (for example by applying carbon footprint).

BI—Close, though far?

Support for BI comes from all sides, but conceptions differ widely in what they are aiming at. From those suggesting a BI below or at the poverty line to abolish the *Sozialstaat* to others arguing for a high and sustainable BI to allow for a self-determined life to those combining BI with an educational obligation, a minimum wage and a distribution of working hours—under the notion of BI a wide range of conceptions has been put forward. For some to foster democratization by linking BI to Citizenship is crucial, because by doing so political communities as such would be strengthened; others regard BI simply as human right and rather fear citizenship as condition for being eligible. They blame its supposedly excluding and nationalistic character. BI support is found within all political parties, churches—catholic and protestant—trade unions and welfare organizations. Even though support does rarely come from top-level representatives discussions within parties might accelerate depending on pressure coming from public opinion. While in the beginning of the BI debate political parties rather avoided contact with BI activists, it has become common for activists to receive invitations to talks or panel discussions. Although the financial crisis could have put BI on the agenda more than ever it has not pushed the debate significantly. Germany—as other European countries—predominantly tries to solve problems by saving 'costs'.

Being a member of the European Union, fellow citizens wonder whether BI could be implemented in Germany only or an EU-wide implementation is inevitable. Of course, EU legislation is complex and a BI implementation on a national level has to tackle certain challenges. According to Jürgen Erdmenger (Erdmenger 2008, 11), a national implementation must be coordinated with EU legislation even more, as he told me, since the Lisbon treaty has come into effect in 2009; a national implementation, thus, is possible (see also Brenner 2011, 224).

Nor is EU legislation the main obstacle to the introduction of a BI in Germany. It is rather found in a contradictory phenomenon; on the one hand, there is a discrepancy between the fundamental meaning of citizenship and political community already incorporated in democratic institutions; on the other hand, there is how it is interpreted in the self-conception of the people. Especially the ongoing public debate about BI has helped to make this contradiction apparent and, thus, set interpretive patterns going.

To my mind, any likelihood that a party might support BI (as the Pirate Party) totally depends on how the public debate develops and how much support BI gains.²⁰ It was public debate that put BI on the agenda in 2005, it will be public debate that decides whether BI

²⁰ De Wispelaere and Noguera (2012) make a good point when writing about the importance of not merely supporting BI but engaging with it. They are also right about the small account of attention the academic BI debate in particular has paid to practical questions such as how to bring the BI idea into the public realm and how to spread it (see Liebermann 2008).

moves forward and whether it will become more than a pipedream. When an issue gains more and more attention, political parties will deal with it, that is, what the debate has taught us.

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