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## **Why people would not stop contributing if an unconditional basic income were introduced. An argumentation from within the Sociology of Religion.**

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### **1. Introduction**

Many people fear that an unconditional basic income sufficient for living would seduce a substantial part of the population to an unproductive life of sheer consumption and laziness. The reason for this fear is obvious: Such a basic income provides elementary economic independence to everyone and dissolves the necessity for the individual to engage in paid work. It gives the freedom to contribute *or not*. For many of you and for me, there is no doubt that people would not use this freedom to stop contributing. However, is this conviction reinforced by empirical research? This question has an enormous weight for the basic income debate. For example, there is no serious problem for financing a basic income from a *static* perspective. But the question remains how a basic income alters the economical *dynamics*: whether people would downsize their productive commitments. My paper focuses on an argumentation from within the contemporary sociology of religion.

### **2. Preliminary note: a basic methodological problem**

Before sketching this argumentation, I attach a preliminary note about a fundamental methodological problem, which every research study about the assumable dynamics of a basic income society has to solve. The problem relates to the fact that this object of inquiry does not exist. Such a society still is more an idea than a reality, and so there cannot be an empirical study into this absent reality. For this reason, as a proponent of basic income you cannot focus on a full-blown basic income society and simply say: Look, it works! For your empirical base is restricted to a reality without basic income in the full sense. Opponents of basic income likewise cannot directly conclude from current workfare programmes and from the behaviour of their “clients” that in a future basic income society people would stop working altogether. Such a positivist citation of sheer facts without analysis only produces pseudo-evidence.

How to tackle this methodological challenge? The only available empirical evidence lies in detailed and accurate *analysis* of past and present reality. For example, you can analyse the

behaviour of lottery winners, who receive a monthly pension, as Hans Peeters and Axel Marx have done in the second volume of the Basic Income Studies Journal (Peeters and Marx 2006). Of course, analyzing this behaviour means taking into account the significant differences between such lottery pensions and a basic income grant. The same applies for the instructive ongoing basic income experiment in Namibia, which cannot be simply equated with an enduring basic income praxis. Another example is a series of case studies with young German adolescents from different backgrounds, which colleagues and I carried out in the last years (Daniels, Franzmann, and Jung 2008). We analyzed the particular conditions of their actual life and then extrapolated to the differences a basic income would mean to their particular case, thereby gaining some very naturalistic images of a future basic income society. However, much can also be learned from research not originally designed to study basic income.

Analyzing past and present reality means uncovering the universal in the particular case, thereby opening up the latter as well as gaining some general theoretical insights, which can be extrapolated to a life with basic income within a thought experiment. That is to say, in the centre of the mediation between available empirical data and a future basic income society stands social scientific *theory*. In order to become a good theory it must be derived from empirical data through an analytical process of “abductive” (Charles S. Peirce) conclusions. The argumentation, which I sketch here, rests upon such an analytical process. It is the result of a long series of case studies conducted by different researchers in different fields in accordance with Objective Hermeneutics, which is the most advanced research methodology in contemporary social sciences in my opinion. Of course, every proposition that science can make about a basic income society remains a forecast and cannot reach the status of scientifically proven knowledge. In any case, a reasonable forecast means a lot. It includes a remaining uncertainty, which in the end we must bear with faith and courage. This is one lesson we can learn from the sociology of religion.

### **3. The relevance of the sociology of religion**

Why is the sociology of religion relevant for scientifically addressing the widespread fear that basic income would seduce many people to stop contributing? To prepare an answer to this question, I make use of the distinction of *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivation: It is obvious that a basic income does not destroy material incentives to do paid work. For someone with a low wage job, more of his earned income would be left over. The so-called poverty trap of

contemporary welfare state regimes disappears. But why then do many opponents of basic income argue that it downgrades the motivation for contributing? The answer to this question is as follows. Currently, there are two types of extrinsic motives to do paid work: positive material incentives and negative material sanctions like the reduction or cancellation of social benefits. A basic income would keep or increase the former and remove the latter. Many opponents of basic income fear that the remaining material incentives to do paid work would not suffice to motivate people to contribute. They assume that without negative sanctions, many would prefer an unproductive life with the modest living standard of a basic income and would give up on material advancement through paid work. However, is this expectation justified? It is obvious that it completely ignores the category of intrinsic motivation and only relies on extrinsic factors resulting in a reductionist approach. That is the point where the perspective of the sociology of religion comes into play, because a “religious” motivation is in some sense the mother of all *intrinsic* forms of motivation.

#### **4. An elementary argument from within the sociology of religion**

What does research in the sociology of religion have to say about the issue of whether many people would stop contributing with the introduction of a basic income? First, it brings out the fact that with such an unproductive way of life the question about the meaning of one’s life cannot be answered. An answer to this “religious” question has to put the whole life of an individual (and all the single actions) in a transcending life context and thereby give meaning to it. In a secular perspective, this spanning life context consists in the particular community, to which the individual belongs, and in humankind, which lives on after the individual has died. Therefore, a meaningful life has to be a contributing, community-oriented life. To satisfy self-interests in this perspective appears to be a prerequisite for contributing, because successful self-reproduction is the basis of self-transcending contribution. This proposition has important implications for the basic income debate that will be mentioned later.

A second result of the research is that the question about the meaning of one’s life must be answered *compellingly* by each human. It cannot remain unanswered, as is said already in the Bible in its religious language: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (5. Moses 8.3, Matthew 4.4, Luke 4.4) The need for a credible answer to the “meaning question” results, like the sociologist Ulrich Oevermann has shown in his “structure model of religiosity”(Oevermann 1995), from the general structure of human life praxis. It results from the dualism between the representing world of hypothetical

possibilities in past and future on the one hand and the represented world of the here and now on the other hand, a dualism which appears in the emergence of humankind with the transition from nature to culture and the formation of language. This dualism enforces the *consciousness of the finiteness of life*, which in turn demands a *faith* that nourishes a hope for the meaning of one’s life by setting the finite life positively in relationship to infinity, represented primarily by the on-living community and humankind. In secularized contemporary societies, the answer to the question about the meaning of one’s life is no longer predetermined by religious tradition and alien voices (“the mouth of god” or others), but rather has to be found by the autonomous individual himself.

Now if someone with an unconditional basic income would decide not to do paid work *and in addition* do no other productive, meaningful activity, then a fundamental crisis of the meaning of his life would be inevitable for him. One should keep clearly in mind that such a person, who is not occupied with breadwinning and any productive activity, has plenty of time and is under no strain. Under these circumstances, a crisis of the meaning of life must become manifest. (This does not depend on education or a particular reflective attitude.) Of course, some people would succeed in repressing such a crisis by anaesthetising themselves in some way. However, this has to be weighted as an exception, as a significant psychopathology, which in principle cannot be cured through compulsory measures like some proponents of workfare programmes seem to assume.

It is a naïve belief that a “meaning crisis” is less hard, pressing and merciless than a famine or a supply crisis. For this, it would be misleading and wrong to characterize “religiosity” as a “soft” factor and to confront it with “hard” factors such as economical conditions. It is in no way a less urgent and imperative condition of human life as the material supply. The cited verse from the Bible thus turns out to be very realistic. It expresses a fundamental wisdom, which can be reformulated in a more explicit and accurate sociological language. Against this background, the fear that an unconditional basic income would entice many people to sweet unproductive idleness really is unfounded.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Such a concern is usually the outcome of an unreflecting transmission of the appreciation of “sweet idleness”, within the context of arduous, overstraining, unloved or alienating paid work, onto a “basic income society”. If the economic pressure for paid work is gone, also the idleness must lose its attraction and sweetness as a contrast.

## **5. Basic Income as a factor of social transformation**

What may be expected instead, is a transformation of life concepts. In this respect, basic income appears as a factor of social change. The reason for this is that it would alter the living conditions in a way that calls central aspects of current life concepts into question and provokes an adaptation process on a large scale. At present, our life concepts respond to the necessity of earning a living, because without a sufficient earned income, we are on the way to losing our independence and becoming an object of welfare office control. With a guaranteed basic income sufficient for living, the premises of life fundamentally change. Because your living is secured on a modest but decent level, breadwinning loses its status as the primary task that categorically has to be performed, before other aspects can gain weight. Now the question becomes dominant, whether your activities are, as such, meaningful and reasonable contributions to the community you belong to. At the same time, a basic income provides the necessary free space to cultivate a consistent life concept. Against this background, an enormous rationalization dynamic in the most fundamental sense is to be expected, which will allocate the right persons to the right tasks much more efficiently than today. It will mobilize the large, unemployed potentials of intrinsic motivation.

However, it demands from the individual such a high degree of autonomy that some opponents of basic income conclude that it would be too much for such a society. In this respect, it is essential to recognise an elementary finding of modern socialisation research, which Freiherr vom Stein already put in the words: “Confidence refines man; perpetual tutelage inhibits his maturing.” (Zutrauen veredelt den Menschen, ewige Vormundschaft hemmt sein Reifen.)<sup>2</sup> The actual autonomy of the individual grows with challenges and with the confidence that social surroundings provide in this regard; and this proposition not only applies to individual socialisation but also to social change. If you follow the transformations and the succession of generations since the 1960s, when traditional authority was fundamentally questioned and an autonomous life was established as a cultural value, you can trace a progressive advancement in the ability to live up to this ambitious life model in everyday life praxis (Franzmann 2005). The same probably will happen in the case of the still higher autonomy demands of a basic income society.

Of course, some people will be personally overburdened with these high autonomy demands, like presently some people are overburdened with today’s autonomy demands, because of

problematic socialisation. Nevertheless, this has to be considered as an exception and not as the rule. Furthermore, there is no reason to leave these people to their own devices. Naturally, it is highly desirable to provide an infrastructure of professional psychotherapy and social work. At the same time, the conditions for professional help for people, who already carry personal autonomy restrictions with them, would be very favourable. The reason for this is simple: A basic income clarifies personal responsibilities, whereas workfare programmes in fact obscure them.

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<sup>2</sup> That is why it is entirely consistent that the German entrepreneur Götz W. Werner often uses this citation on his basic income promotion tour in Germany.