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Democratization of the individual availability
of “leisure” through the introduction of an
Unconditional Basic Income in times of ac-
celerating societal change (with reference to
the perspective of social policy research and
social work).

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In recent years, the idea of an unconditional basic income seems to have had its breakthrough in worldwide debates about our future. Numerous basic income experiments have been launched in a wide range of countries, regions and cities. There is a broad stream of highly diverse arguments in favor for this idea. However, there is one thing, that supporters of an UBI seem to appreciate especially: the autonomy not to be forced to work for living. And I, too, think that the gain in autonomy is the heart of the matter. It also seems to be the neuralgic point, which causes defensive reactions against it among many fellow citizens.

In my short presentation, I will put forward some theses to characterize more positively what it means not to be forced to work for living. I will do this as a German and from the perspective of social policy research and social work.

I will start with an historical interpretation of the UBI within the context of the development of the welfare state. Summed up in a simple formula, an UBI, to my view, would represent the universalization of a largely unrestricted availability of “leisure”, especially for working-age adults. However, of “leisure” in a very specific sense, which has to be clarified now. I do not refer to “leisure” in the sense of the usual dichotomy “work versus leisure”. Most of the “leisure time” that remains after work in the evening, at weekends and in the holiday season is characterized by aspects of heteronomy and of alienation just like paid work itself, because this “leisure time” is functionally linked to the sphere of work and produces a recreation of the workforce.

What I am talking about instead is free time, which emerges after we have completely recovered and would start to feel bored if we don't look for something interesting or worthwhile. “Leisure” in this particular sense is almost the quintessence of autonomy, its most radical form. It represents the specific psychological state as well as the practice of doing something freely without any pressures and imperatives. The privileged ancient Greeks called this “scholé”, the Roman aristocrats “otium” and in my German mother tongue there is the word “Muße” (In Korean??: yeoga or lejeo ??). An early modern example of such a leisure culture were the wealthy British gentlemen, who

had no need to work for their living, but could live to work freely in dedicating their life-time to self-determined worthwhile activities.

The individual availability of “leisure” in this radical sense is a privilege, because it presupposes specific conditions. You need to have, on a long-term basis, guaranteed means to live, and it must also be culturally legitimate. The unemployed of today, for example, usually suffer psychological stress, even if they get the monthly living expenses reliably paid by the state and have plenty of time, because being unemployed is culturally constructed as a negative deviation from the norm. It’s a stigma. As such, this form of existence is a mental strain, which prevents feeling free and “leisurely”.

Historically, “leisure” in the radical sense, in which I am using this expression here, was foremost a privilege of the aristocracy and later of the wealthy bourgeoisie. It still is. However, with the enormous capitalist production of wealth, the society in general over a long period in modern industrial history also gained at least some scope for “leisure”. Strangely enough, this development ended in most of the industrialized modern democracies in the 1970s and 80s. Since the 1990s the scope for “leisure” in society often decreased again, although the overall wealth had further increased! It is obvious that this has to do with our societies’ deep normative attachment to the obligation to take part in paid work. Since the 1980s, it pushed many modern societies into a defensive position towards the effects of accelerating technological progress on employment and resulted in an advancing precarisation of jobs and of everyday lives among normal people. This precarisation was fostered by the so called “activating welfare state”, which subsidized human work against machines on a large scale and institutionalized a culture of mistrust towards the unemployed. The whole course of development was destructive to the accessibility of “leisure” within social structure.

The modern, “neoliberal” decline of “leisure” resources in many countries hits normal people at the time of a dramatically accelerating structural transformation of our societies, driven by globalization, digitalization, migration and climate change. It might be true what opponents of an UBI steadily put forward against employment projections, which assume a dramatical loss of jobs in the coming decades, when they say optimistically that these lost jobs will be compensated by new ones. However, for sure, these new jobs will be very different from the old ones and they will require even more sophisticated qualifications. How should all affected people manage to follow these fast transformations with their qualifications and identities under current conditions? The speed of transformation has reached a level, where the normal succession of generations doesn’t suffice anymore as a mechanism of cultural adaption. However, the same holds true for so-called “lifelong-learning”

in the usual sense, because what we are talking about are groundbreaking biographical transformations, which can't be mastered alone through a routine like practice of continuing training courses and the like. What we will need, is a societal situation, where everybody has the means to deal with fundamental biographical and societal transformations all over the lifespan, i.e. a social system, which allows every citizen to reconstruct and adapt her or his identity and life-conduct from time to time in an autonomous way. And the only consistent solution not to become alienated from the fast-changing world, to my view, would be a society with an UBI, because it provides every member of society with the necessary "leisure"-resources to explore the changing world open-minded, with curiosity, without pressure and fear, to some extent like an adolescent again.

Let us now look on the basic theory behind this whole argumentation, a theory, which has been strongly influenced by the German sociologist Ulrich Oevermann. It begins with the proposition that the formation and education process of the Individual is principally centered around *crises*, not routine practice. Without a crisis, you don't experience something new. "Crisis" should here be understood as a situation, where former routines of perceiving and acting become uncertain and questionable. A crisis can be negative or positive in nature. And there are three types of crises, which differ in the scope of autonomy that the critical situation leaves for the human actor. The first type leaves no time for action. Here, a crisis overwhelms a human as in the case of an accident. Only afterwards we can reconstruct and understand, which premises (of perceiving and acting) ended in failure and why. The second type already leaves some time for reflection and action, because it appears as a finite time-slot, in which a decision has to be made into an uncertain future. The third type is the most important one for us. Here, a crisis occurs through "leisure" in the sense outlined above. If you deal with a matter based on "leisure", i.e. freely, without practical pressures, you will pay attention to detail, and you will very likely discover some aspects, which are new for you and contradict your former schemes of perceiving and acting. With "leisure" you have time to reflect on these discovered things and build on them. There is no more intense educational and formative process for the Individual than crises, which are based on "leisure", i.e. autonomy.

Now this is the point in time, where we arrive at a theory of the emergence and development of autonomy. Controversies about UBI often suffer from the fact that there are questionable assumptions about this process involved, which remain implicit and undisputed. That's why I rely on such a theory explicitly. One basic proposition of it goes as follows. Autonomy grows through its performative practice and according to its challenges. An UBI, which

means not to be forced to work for living and to have “leisure” at your disposal, would imply the highest level of structural autonomy in life-conduct. And this enormous scope for action would, according to this theory, generate a corresponding substantial autonomy among its recipients too. Of course, this is a way to put it very simple and there is a need for many differentiations. However, it can be proven in many ways. And it has already a prominent and long history.

For example, it is at the heart of the bible's expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise! The decisive moment within this illustrative myth about the origins and nature of humankind is, where Adam and Eve *decide* to eat the fruits of the tree of knowledge. Through this autonomous act, they set in motion a process of experience by which they gain knowledge what it means to decide for this option. Thereby, they acquire a substantial autonomization in the end. And what is important here, is that they did not decide to eat the fruits *forced by hunger*. They decided completely freely, only out of curiosity in a situation, where the creator god and the snake both have made opaque and contradictory statements about the consequences of eating the fruits from the tree of knowledge. Therefore, Adam and Eve wanted to see for themselves what's true, without any practical pressure, with “time and leisure” and a thirst for knowledge. And that is, to my view, the core of holistic educational processes, the core of the formation as an autonomous subject.

Let me conclude with some theses on the question what this means for the target group of social work. Think of fellow humans, who are drowning in social problems and are trapped in them, also because their “poor” subjectivity, i.e. their lack of fruitful experiences and educational processes, is part of the problem. In such a situation of cumulative existential pressure and despair, which absorbs psychological energies, there is no room left for fruitful subjective transformations based on free curiosity and “leisure”. And I think, that's the main problem! Here, UBI comes into play, which calms the threatening situation and creates space for reflection, experiential processes and biographical reconstruction based on intrinsic, autonomous motivation. This last point is also decisive for social workers, because the most powerful ally for a social worker, who wants to help someone out of misery through an arduous subjective transformation is the autonomous, intrinsic motivation of this person in need. Unfortunately, modern incentivism, which dominates the activating welfare states of our time, is very naive in this respect. It notoriously overestimates the power of extrinsic motivation techniques and underestimates the reality of structural autonomy, which is ruled by intrinsic motivation and concrete answers to questions of the meaning of one's individual life.