

[Saving Citizenship from the workhouse](#)

Upholding the obligation to work undermines the citizen's autonomy

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" 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. 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 flipsides to one another. Democracy without a market economy is inconceivable, and so is long-term economic success without democratic institutions. Historical development seems to support our argument here.

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.

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. 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 are made for. 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" is embedded in our culture. 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.

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. The Jewish myth of creation (Genesis) and the Christian myth of salvation (crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ) 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. 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!"

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

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. 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.

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 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. 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. What these managers and politicians have in common is that they prefer human labor to both existing potentials for rationalization and "expensive unemployment".

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 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. 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*. 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. 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.

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 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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