

Vom Wert des Menschen. Warum wir ein bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen brauchen

[On the Value of the Human Person. Why We Need an Unconditional Basic Income]

Barbara Prainsack

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With this monograph, Barbara Prainsack, who is professor of Political Science at the University of Vienna, provides a challenging and interesting contribution on the theme and topic of the so-called “unconditional basic income”. Central to her approach is not so much to see a universal basic income as a self-purpose or end-in-itself, but more so as an approach or even so as an instrument, contributing to the establishment and further development of subsistence to a human right. “Subsistence” qualifies as a capability of self-enablement for every human being (and person in a social sense). For Prainsack, the unconditional basic income does not belong to the spheres of utopia (anymore), but has a realistic chance of existing, if it were to be integrated into a new Social Contract (pp. 22-25). Consequently, Prainsack states: “[...] dass ein Grundeinkommen die gesamte Gesellschaft verändern kann”¹ (13).

Prainsack decided for a particular structure that organizes her book: in the chapters there is an interesting alternation of different sections, on the one hand, with a discussion of scientifically developed and evidenced arguments; on the other, examples (anonymized) of individuals are presented, demonstrating how a universal basic income may relate to a practical life with all its consequences and ramifications. Here Barbara Prainsack is experimenting with new forms for how an academic book can be arranged, in the sense of combining scientific information with diversified narratives that are brought in terms of every-day language.

In her book, Prainsack applies the metaphor of bread and butter (“Butterbrot”). In this picture, the layer of “bread” refers to a more general and broader public provision of support and infrastructure, for example for health and education, which then would also qualify as forms of public services. The “topping of butter” is then either the universal basic income and/or the earned income, which a person may use for purposes in addition to the offered public services. Prainsack states that the possible implementation of an unconditional basic income should be seen as a comprehensive process, sensitive of its context, and perhaps also connected to reforms in other areas. The realization of any utopia or of any greater ideas requires time and involves efforts. So Barbara Prainsack puts forward the following benchmark: “Ich wäre für eine existenzsichernde bedingungslose monatliche Zahlung für alle in einem Land lebenden Menschen, die als Rechtsanspruch gesetzlich verankert ist”² (171).

Discussions about the universal basic income frequently relate to this one important question, which is: How can such a measure be financed? Several examples are introduced in the book, indicating a whole spectrum of available options: a (raised) tax on consumption (primarily a value-added tax); tax on exports; tax on financial transactions; and a progressive tax on wealth. Labor, at the same time, should become untaxed, by possibly abolishing income tax (124-128). Researchers of the University of Linz and of the Society of Economic Research in Innsbruck (GAW) engaged in a calculation of

1 “... that a basic income can change the whole society” (translation D. F. J. C.).

2 “I would be for an existence-securing unconditional monthly payment for all people living in a country, which is legally anchored as an entitlement in law” (translation D. F. J. C.).

the model of the Verein Generation Grundeinkommen, with two main scenarios, and arrived at the conclusion that a consumption tax of around 120%, in combination with an export tax, would (by and large) already have the capacity to finance such an unconditional basic income in Austria (132). In a recent interview for *period.*, carried out soon after the publication and release of the book, Barbara Prainsack herself emphasized the option of a reformed progressive income and wealth tax (Porak et al. 2021).

In summary, the reviewed book convinces with the sensitive development of arguments and provides important references for further discussions and continuing narratives on the unconditional basic income. Particularly, the practical economic feasibility of the basic income, systematically addressed by the author, should be underscored positively. Prainsack demonstrates that the funding base of a universal basic income, at least in principle, can be rationally argued in terms of stable financial feasibility considerations. By this, the universal income is not so much a utopia anymore but has entered the world of politics as a viable policy option, notwithstanding that the implementation of any new measure faces of course complex challenges, to a certain degree also unforeseen ramifications. For example, how does the unconditional basic income relate to the future of education and labor? The basic income is not seen or is not described as a mechanism of re-distribution, but more so as a mechanism of pre-distribution (148). Therefore, the unconditional basic income also should act as an enabler of chances for a high-quality-social-life in society and a democracy. As already elaborated at the beginning of the book review, in the opinion of Barbara Prainsack, the unconditional basic income is more so a political (policy) instrument, for establishing and further advancing “subsistence” as a universal human right. With this, we are entering a next crucial stage of democracy theory and democracy development.

References

Porak, Clara/Andrea Lehsiak/Apollonia Bitzan (2021): Vom Wert des Menschen: Ein Gespräch mit Barbara Prainsack, in: *period.*, 17.03.2021, Internet: <https://period.at/articles/vom-wert-des-menschen-ein-gesprach-mit-barbara-prainsack> (access: 13.09.2021).