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BI – a “historical necessity”? Sketch for a “functional” approach to the BI-debate

(Comments – also about readability as English is not my native tongue – will be much appreciated and can be sent to manfred.fuellsack@univie.ac.at)

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Abstract:

The deficits of modern labor markets and the subsequently enhanced attention for alternative social policies have called forth several interesting contributions to the debates about a partial detachment of incomes from labor as it would be implied by the implementation of an *Unconditional Basic Income*. Besides elaborate conceptions about financability and political feasibility of such an implementation, several attempts to philosophically legitimize a BI have been brought forward. Many of these endeavors tend to argue rather “normatively” on the base of *values* like “justice”, “freedom”, “solidarity” etc. and thus sooner or later seem to run aground on the difficulty to lastingly “stabilize” such values in a world of increasingly heterogeneous problem perceptions.

In respect to this difficulty, the following considerations will try to sketch out a rather “functionalist” line of argumentation for a BI ^[1] which seems to give reason to regard a partial detachment of incomes from labor may be even as something like a “historical necessity”. They will do so by starting out from shortly discussing a suspected deficit in what is currently probably the most elaborated attempt to philosophically legitimize a BI – the conception of *Real Freedom* by Philippe van Parijs.

I.

In his 1995 book *Real Freedom for All* ^[2] Philippe van Parijs suggested BI as a social political measurement that would be able to enhance “real freedom”. “Real freedom” thereby is understood as a sort of freedom that other than classical liberal freedom conceptions as proposed by James Buchanan or Friedrich von Hayek supplements the criteria “security” and “self-ownership” with the third criterion of the “opportunity to do

whatever one might want to do” ^[3]. This third criterion therewith offers the possibility to regard not only the absence of restrictions, be they imposed by people or by institutions, but also the presence of for example material preconditions as relevant factors for the chance to be free. Not only the “negative” freedom from constraints of any kind, but also the *chance* to do whatever one might want to do, for example the financial means to go on a cruise or to say no to a lousy job, would have to be considered in order to be able to speak

of “real freedom”, as Van Parijs supposes ^[4].

The formulation „to do whatever one might want to do” thereby is used to circumvent the problem of the “contended slaves” – the problem that slaves might feel free because they do not want anything else than their masters want them to want. Such slaves of course are not free in the sense of “real freedom” even though they *seem* to do what they *want*. They have to be regarded as “want-manipulated” and thus as not acting autonomously. Freedom in the sense of “real freedom” though, “requires *autonomy*”, as Van Parijs

points out ^[5], i.e. an *ideal state* in which no wants are imposed from “outside”, in which only “authentic wants” are part of the game.

This notion of “authentic wants” though, seems to stand in a certain contrast to the overall conception of “real freedom” which in its prevailing parts seems designed rather “relativistically” in accordance with the needs in “Polypolis”, i.e. the needs of a society whose members largely differ in the way they are endowed

with goods and abilities and in the way they look at the world.^[6] In these parts, following the conception of Rawls, Van Parijs defines “real freedom” as a social arrangement that in complying with the two criteria of “formal freedom” ensures that those with least opportunities can not point at any other feasible formal-freedom-respecting arrangement in which they would have greater opportunities, while nobody would

have opportunities as poor as theirs currently are.^[7] “Real Freedom” in this regard is construed not as an *absolute*, but in respect to the „undominated diversity“ of modern societies and the therewith permanent questioning of values as a *relative*, i.e. a *maximin*, or *leximin*-chance for freedom.

However, when Van Parijs decides to consider “authentic wants” in order to evade the *infinite regress* lurking behind the problem of the “contented slaves” – the fact that wants always are based on further wants,

on “second-order wants”, as he formulates^[8] – he seems to underpin the “first” level of “real freedom” with a “second”, more *emphatic*, more *idealistic* notion of freedom. And this notion seems to entice him in some contexts to may be preliminary decide for one side of distinctions which, as we will see, would not be necessary to draw in the first place – for example when he discusses the question whether social arrangements primarily oriented on individuals or on society (capitalism or socialism) would provide better

chances for “real freedom” and carefully but surely decides for “individual sovereignty”.^[9] In these contexts a hidden “second level ontology” of his conception seems to surface. Real freedom seems somehow “more authentically” be rooted in individuals than in society, implying that individuals would be free if only society would not restrict them. Not only that the *dichotomy* of individuals and society does not seem adequate to the “undominated diversity” of a (post-)modern global society, its underlying ontology somehow seems to collide with the “relativity” of his conception. And this in certain regards seems to undermine its basic aim – the legitimation of a BI – by triggering endless “philosophical” discussions among those who otherwise

would widely agree about the usefulness of a BI.^[10]

What is more, this “ontology” does not seem to be necessary. As I will try to show, a partial detachment of incomes from labor seems arguably not *against* but *via* the *infinite regress* a “de-“ or

“minimally-ontologized”^[11] line of argumentation inevitably gets caught in.

II.

To sketch out this line of argumentation, I will in the following review the problem of the “contented slaves” shortly on the foreground of the well-known distinction of *utility* and *exchange value*. For doing so, I will use a rather abstract notion of *labor*, the conditions of which I will subsequently investigate more detailed. This

abstract notion of labor is drawn from the definition of G.W.F. Hegel^[12] who has regarded the labor process as a “negation” of a given situation with which the one who decides to work is not satisfied. In applying work to this situation, in working on it, the attempt to *change* it according to needs or likings creates a *new* situation, a new “positive” state that – according to Hegelian triple-step dialectics – then can be perceived (by the worker itself or by someone else) as a new “unsatisfactory” situation which again asks for “negation”, for *work*.

This abstract notion of labor seems broad enough to regard, among others, freedom-pursuing activities in terms of labor. We thus might mark the *ideal state* of authentic (not manipulated) wants as a state in which one can *work unrestricted* from any manipulations by other society members or institutions. In such a state the aim of the labor process, and be it a particular notion of freedom, lays, so to speak, *unveiled* at hand. In such a state workers work under conditions of perfect information about the success of their labor. They work

in regard to the *utility value* of their labor.

However, as Karl Marx has pointed out, under conditions of divided labor, the *utility value* is “veiled”^[13] or “invalidated” by the *exchange value* – a *value* that is generated on *markets* and reduces the *utility value* to a mere *average* value. Even if perceived “sound” or “fair”, or “just” by the ones working, the *utility value* when exposed to the market has little relevance for the factual exchange anymore. And as we know, a big part of modern labor market problems stems from the difficulty to maintain individual (or traditional, cultural, national etc.) expectations of wage levels against those wages the market is ready and able to pay. Naively we might ask why, if this is the case, individual labor and labor products are exposed to the market. Wouldn't it be better to stick to what one *might* want to do *on his own*, without intermingling with market imperatives and their freedom restraining forces? The answer to this question is of course simple – but able to bring up two essential points: a reason to doubt the adequacy of a dichotomous conception for legitimating social policy measurements under modern conditions; and a base on which it seems possible to argue for a partial detachment of incomes from labor without having to recur to any notion of “want authenticity”. Simply put, whoever works (and be it “unrestricted” by any manipulation) will not be able to do whatever he might want to do *completely on his own*. And this not only because he is manipulated and wants what others want him to want. He will not be able to do so, simply because he does not have the time, the energy, the power etc. to produce all products and perform all activities that he considers necessary for what he might want to do *on his own*. He will have to get at least some of these products and services in *exchange*. Or in other words, he will have to generate the *preconditions* for his work by *exchanging* the products and services he *is able to* produce against products and services he *needs* for his work but can not produce *on his own*. And the same holds for his society members. Only *through exchange* they *will be able* to work in the first place. In other words, in differentiated societies (– and societies are of course always already differentiated –) no *undivided, individualized* labor process can be imagined. Exchange, and therewith the market and thus *society*, is always already part of the game. There is no whatsoever *basic* (individual) *utility value* that can be regarded as “more authentic” than others, as “free of society's influence”, as “not want manipulated” and thus only “alienated” by “evil” market conditions as Marxism has implied. Any notion of “authentic wants” on which “real freedom” is based therefore seems misleading. Utility values, as well as exchange values and

any notions of freedom, are always already *socially construed*.^[14]

This conviction gives reason to regard “individual aims” and “social conditions” as two aspects of one process, however, *with different and in time diverging dynamics*. If one is willing to regard it this way, analytical attention seems to shift from attempts to maximize “freedom” (or “justice” or “solidarity” etc.) to possibilities on how to *integrate* inevitably diverging social dynamics. And this in its turn seems to give

reason to regard BI as a “medium”.^[15]

III.

Let us at first consider the assumption that social dynamics inevitably diverge.

Following Hegel's suggestion to regard labor as “negation” raises attention for the fact that every new labor activity arising from a foregoing “negation activity” has to be seen as a *more specialized* activity, a *more specialized* sort of labor. In order to exemplify this, let's assume the initial negation in this example would be an attempt to solve human mobility problems, and the labor undertaken to do so results in the construction of cars. In producing cars man solves part of his mobility problems. In the same instant, however, this “solution” can also be seen – by himself or by others – as determining a “new world” which poses new problems – a world for instance with fuel supply problems, with road construction problems or parking lot problems. The work that now has to be done in order to solve *these new* problems is, compared to the work done before, *more specialized* work. It is the work done to solve the problems of car holders.

As should be easily seen, there is an additional *epistemological* catch to this consideration. Fuel supply problems, road construction problems or parking lot problems are problems that can only be *perceived* as such by someone who *already* has solved the foregoing mobility problem with the construction of cars.

People without cars will not have such problems and thus will not have demand for respective solutions. In more general terms, labor and its results can only be perceived as such from the point of view created in the preceding labor process. Work will be perceived as work only if the work done before has produced conditions under which work *can* be perceived as work. ^[16]

A bit less cryptically (but therefore less precisely) formulated, we could illustrate this with the common perception of *scientific* labor and formulate that the problem solving activities, or in short, the *work* of highly specialized scientists obviously quite often can be perceived as such only by scientists and their colleagues themselves. The rest of society does not understand what they are doing. Not because of a lack of intelligence or of willingness. Because of *inability*. Anybody who has not experienced and solved the foregoing problems will not be able to fully grasp what at the current labor step is being done.

This epistemological catch poses a severe problem for the overall labor process. Since specialized labor (– and in this context of course every labor is specialized –) simply takes *time* (*energy* etc.), no specialized laborer is, as we pointed out, able to generate all the *preconditions* he needs to go on with his specialization *on his own*. Thus, in order to specialize he has to be *supplied* with those goods and services he needs for maintaining his labor ^[17] but is not able to produce on his own. Specialized labor therefore is dependent on *exchange* through which these goods and services can be supplied. ^[18]

However, according to our assumptions specialized labor and specialized labor products can not “immediately” be *demanded* by *all* other members of society *at all times*. As we said, they can not be *perceived* as valuable and thus exchange-worthy labor forms and products except by those society members who have solved the same or at least similar foregoing problems. In all consequence, only mathematicians will be able to see mathematical problems, and only car owners will see car related problems and the need and relevance of their solutions. Other society members (who are specialized on other problem solving activities) therefore will have *reservations* to demand these solutions. Specialized labor thus is fundamentally impeded by the (relative) *improbability* of demand for its products. In other words, specialized labor runs up on the problem that in order to take place it needs to meet *sufficient demand* for gaining in exchange those *preconditions* it can not generate on its own. However, this demand is constantly at risk because differently specialized society members can not “immediately” perceive this specialized labor and its products as exchange-worthy. The crucial problem of the labor process as sketched out in this context thus is the question, how supply and demand of specialized labor and its products can be sufficiently probably *correlated* in order to enable the labor process to proceed. Or alternatively asked: how can the (relative) *improbability* of a correlation of supply and demand of labor be turned into sufficiently high *probability*?

IV.

The answer to this question is multifaceted and complex and can on a very general level may be adumbrated with a particular concept of “In-FORM-ation” ^[19] or with the especially by sociologists put forward concept of “media” ^[20]. In respect to the need for brevity in this context I will try to illustrate these answers on the examples of money and, in particular, of monetary wages. ^[21]

Early societies have, as we know, maintained their *exchange* in certain regards (i.e. relatively) “immediately”. They have exchanged their products and services *in kind* and not with the help of money. They have been able to do so because the number and variety of goods and services as well as the number of participants in this exchange have been relatively little. A bit more precisely formulated: the *expenses* for reaching an operable consensus as a base for this exchange (the value of the *labor* necessary to reach this consensus) have been lower than the values that could be gained through this exchange. The exchange thus has been “productive” and therewith has *enabled*, has “carried” the various (and of course specialized) labor

forms of these societies, lets say the hunting of dear and the collecting of fruits or seeds. However, in enabling this kind of problem solving activities, the exchange has also enabled the *continuation* and therewith – according to our assumptions – the *further specialization* of these problem solving activities. And this up to a point, at which the number and variety of the exchanged goods and services has reached an amount on which the *effort* of finding an operable consensus for the exchange has become higher than the values that could be gained through the exchange. The (relative) “immediate” in kind-exchange has become economically unprofitably. The solution of this historical moment has been, as we know, the implementation of money. Money has, as abundantly described, the ability to render hardly comparable things – the labor of peasants and the performance of soldiers, the consumption of a steak and the pleasure of a cruise – at least so comparable that the exchange of these things can be maintained.

The essential point in our context is the fact that money manages to do so by “veiling” a multitude of aspects adherent to the exchange process. As often described, money for instance does not require that exchange partners know each other or at least partly know about their credit worthiness, that they consider each other sympathetic and are willing to spend time together beyond their exchange relations. Or, money does not require that the things obtained through it are considered political correct (drugs, child labor products, weapons etc.) or that what is bought for it is bought for immediate consumption, etc. In other words, money

works in its *generality* ^[22], or in different wording, it works via a certain amount of *ignorance*. It works by selecting certain aspects from the exchange process as relevant and “veiling” all others. It therewith lets complex exchange situations as they inevitably occur in differentiated, labor sharing societies become manageable. By “veiling” a multitude of aspects it cuts off, so to speak, those edges in the exchange process that would make it too complex to happen. It therewith lets things become comparable along one single dimension – more or less money – and thus *bridges* to a certain extent the *perception deficits* of the differently specialized exchange partners. In other words, money *trims* specialized labor and labor products for exchange. Epistemologically formulated: it lets them become *visible* for the exchange partners who

otherwise – without money ^[23] – would have difficulties to see them. Or in economic terms: it enables the exchange of various and different values in differentiated societies by “reducing” these values to mere *money value* – which of course in its abstractness calls forth a wide variety of further problems that society then has

to work on. ^[24] Nevertheless, for the time being money enables a *sufficiently probable correlation* of supply and demand of specialized labor and its products.

Still a bit more illustrative the *necessary generality* of such “correlation media” might become on the example of *monetary wages* which, as money itself, function only in *generality*, through a *veil of ignorance*, so to speak. This *generality* comes into the game when similar, though in detail at times quite divers work performances are packed together in uniform wage categories in order to administrate them. Uniform wage categories sometimes do not seem “just” or “effective”, as we know, because the actual labor performance of individual workers can quite severely differ with their situation, their motivation, strength, health, age, creativity, or their attitude towards working. While every employer of course knows that not all of his employees will perform according to plan and some who might contribute valuable ideas will not be motivatingly remunerated, no employer can effort to remunerate only in regard to actual output. In order to do so he would have to sit a controller besides each of his employees recording the actual labor performed. And if these controllers as well should be remunerated according to actual output they themselves would have to be watched by other controllers, and so on. The ratio of labor and control in this way rapidly reaches absurdity. The expenses for control (the expenses for what in general might be called *preconditions* of the labor process) will be higher than what can be gained by the actual labor. No enterprise, no society could effort to work in this way. In order to remunerate economically sound the employer has to accept a certain amount of *ignorance*. He has to remunerate behind a *veil of ignorance*. Otherwise his work would not be “productive”.

However, in “veiling” aspects that inevitably are in the game when exchanging specialized labor and its products the societal exchange works. And in its working it enables, as we have said, the *continuation* of the

labor process and thus its further *specialization*. And with this further specialization inevitably *new* specialized labor forms and labor products come into the game which again run up on the problem of being sufficiently probably correlated (or “mediated”) with their demand.

V.

A severe problem in this respect, today afflicting most labor markets, currently is discussed under the term “globalization”. From the point of view outlined in this paper, many phenomena commonly associated with this term – here in particular the growth of worldwide trade and the therewith enabled mobility of transnational enterprises as well as their tax paying obligations and their employing possibilities – can be seen as a direct consequence of the possibilities opened up with the implementation of a *money* based economy. Globalization and the much lamented “inhuman” cut backs of domestic employment in favor of foreign cheap labor can be seen in this context as problems that arose, as we have said, “on the shoulders” of preceding problem solutions – here in particular money and monetary wages but of course still uncountable more – that have successfully contributed to enable the societal exchange and therewith to further specialization and society’s differentiation.

As a consequence, the plurality of labor and its products today seems to have reached an extent at which – in some places already pretty obviously – the ability of the “media” at hand to integrate this plurality becomes precarious. Money, monetary wages and all the other currently used means to trim labor into an operable “form” (– much discussed examples in this context would be standardized and minimum wages, social security laws and insurances, industrial safety regulations, unions as their defendants, but also rhetorical expressions like “full employment” etc. –) increasingly seem to fail in view of all the problem solving activities and their products that currently are worldwide at stake. From our point of view, however, the current labor market problems have nothing to do with a lack or shortage of labor. On the opposite, problem solving necessities steadily and inevitably become more in the course of problem solving. However, the manifold *forms* in which they meanwhile appear – in our part of the world the forms of precarious employment for instance, of unpaid household labor, care labor, educational labor, the work of some scientists or artists, of “leisure time labor” besides all the classical forms of gainful employment – can not sufficiently probably be integrated anymore with the means and categories currently at hand. Or in other words: from the perspective of the historical moment in which classical gainful employment and the therewith associated categories like standard employment relation, full and lifelong employment etc. have been the primarily relevant *forms* of labor the labor forms currently at stake can not yet be *perceived* as such. We do not yet possess the means to do so.

VI.

The modern plurality of labor thus has to find its “media” still. What is at hand obviously less and less reliably suffices to enable a stable continuation of the human problem solving process. Of course, the pretty abstract considerations in this paper do not allow to draw a too distinct picture of form and composition of these “media”. Nevertheless, what can be deduced from the way money and monetary wages work seems to be the notion that operable media for the “undominated diversity” of modern societies will have to operate with a fundamental *veil of ignorance*. They will not succeed by trying to forcefully press the plurality of modern day’s problem solving activities into the traditional and currently still prevailing forms of gainful employment, respectively to grasp them with the “media” of this epoch.

In other words, the new “media”, according to our assumptions, will rather have to be based on *more ignorance* than *less* in order to successfully “mediate” the societal exchange of goods and services. This necessary ignorance could be provided by explicitly and up to a certain degree *not trying to know* (to control) what kind of labor deserves remuneration. Or in other words, by *exempting* a certain sphere of human problem solving activities from the necessity to generate *exchangeable* goods or services. Within this sphere – and only within it – for what ever is done (or is not done) means (i.e. *preconditions*) would be provided *regardless* of any exchangeability. The exchange process would be suspended and the individual workers

would be *free*, “*real free*”, to do whatever they *might* want to do.

Needless to say, this step would factually equal a partial detachment of incomes from labor and thus would correspond to the implementation of an *Unconditional Basic Income*. It would enable at least part of the activities that currently can not be grasped in terms of traditional gainful employment. It would therewith *relieve* the current mode of handling our problem solving activities. Basic Income thus would not be a menace for this mode, but rather a “historical necessity” for handling it still a bit further.

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[1] I am aware that this endeavor itself inevitably is founded on *values*. It thus has to be seen as an attempt to “minimalize” rather than abolish the value-foundation of social political measurements. Cf. to this also footnote 11 in this paper. For an elaborate version of this “functionalistic” line of argumentation cf. Füllsack 2006.

[2] Quoted after the paperback edition of 1997.

[3] Van Parijs 1995/97: 25.

[4] “I shall use the term *real freedom* to refer to a notion of freedom that incorporates all three components – security, self-ownership, and opportunity – in contrast to *formal freedom*, which only incorporates the first two.” Van Parijs 1995/97: 22.

[5] Cf. Van Parijs 1995/97: 19.

[6] Van Parijs 1995/97: 61.

[7] Van Parijs 1995/97: 28.

[8] Van Parijs 1995/97: 19.

[9] Cf. “The ideal, however, remains a society of free individuals, to which the freedom of society is no more than a means.” Van Parijs 1995/97: 17.

[10] Cf. among others the contributions in: Krebs 2000, 2002; Groot / Van der Veen 2000; Reeve / Williams 2003, and also my discussions of them in Füllsack 2002: 127f and 2004a.

[11] Cf. to the term “minimal ontology“ or also “acting ontology“ a.o.: Fuchs 2004: 0.2.2.

[12] Cf. Hegel 1970: 137f.

[13] The term „veiled“ as well as the terms „invalidated“ or „reduced“ are implying SOMETHING as veiled, invalidated or reduced. These terms therefore themselves are misleading in this context. In a non-dichotomous “world” there are no “more or less” ontological entities, no hierarchies of subjects and phenomena. There is only *forms* condensing temporarily in *media* which can be perceived as such only through forms. Cf. a.o.: Luhmann 1995: 165f; Fuchs 2004: 1.6. Nevertheless, for reasons of expressability we can not do without such terms.

[14] As has been put forward against the Marxian conclusions of his distinction of *utility* and *exchange value* by Jacques Derrida. Cf. Derrida 1993: 237f.

[15] as I tentatively have done in Füllsack 2004b.

[16] No doubt, here it is, the “infinite regress” Philippe van Parijs tries to avoid by deciding for “authentic wants”.

[17] Marxists probably would have employed the term “for life” here. In the context at hand, however, labor is never conditioned on anything “absolute” or “authentic”. It is only conditioned on *prior labor* and its (however temporarily stabilized) results.

[18] Needless to say: specialized workers therefore can *only specialize in society of other specialized workers*. Specialization is dependent on *work sharing*, on *differentiated social conditions*.

[19] Cf. Footnote 13 in this paper.

[20] Cf. the media-conceptionens of Talcott Parsons (a.o. 1978) and of Niklas Luhmann (a.o. 1988: 230f)

[21] For a far more elaborate answer however, cf. Füllsack 2006.

[22] Money therefore has been described as “symbolically generalized interchange-“ or “communication medium”. Cf. Footnote 20.

[23] No doubt, this expression is *paradoxical*, for “without money” the exchanged products and services – according to our assumptions – would not be specialized in the first place, up to a point at which their exchange can not be maintained „without money“.

[24] From our point of view, the lamenting about the “reductionist”, “economizing” consequences of money or, even more widespread, of “capitalism” thus marks points at which the limitations of the operability of money come to the forefront and ask for *new* ”media” to *bridge* the imperceptibility of highly specialized labor.