

A full life in a degrowth society – the case for an unconditional basic income (UBI) and against modesty

Greed and insatiability are often considered causes of dangerous economic growth. For that reason creating a degrowth society is frequently connected with the idea of a modest way of life. This is misleading. With regard to harmful growth dynamics, modesty is a bigger problem than immodesty. In order to earn an income, people are coerced to abandon happiness in exchange for work and pay. This abandonment of happiness is very common and seemingly reasonable and inevitable; however, it leads to two negative developments: first an increase of employment, second an increase in consumption, both resulting in higher degrees of harmful economic growth. An unconditional basic income would reduce this coercion decisively and thus remedy these two maladjusted developments.

a) „Labour first“

The objective of full employment is becoming increasingly irrational since labour productivity continues to rise. High productivity does not bring about relief from work effort but rather a permanent threat against the potentially dispensable. In order to provide enough jobs, production is forced to grow at least as fast as productivity – regardless of whether the products are needed – a perversion in itself as well as a cause for unreasonable economic growth. Creating growth in order to offer enough jobs is also a central goal/ objective / aim of politics.

A UBI would change the framework of contracts on the labour market. Gainful work would be no more the only means of existence. Nobody would be forced into bad work as a lifelong “solution” any more. The option to lead a happy life with less or even with no gainful work would be open for everybody. The absurd necessity to “create” jobs and the subsequent commitment to economic growth would be stopped.

b) Compensatory needs and consumption

In working life people have to jump through hoops, make foul compromises, conform to rigid discipline. The compensation for sacrificing happiness is usually consumption. An economy fuelled by compulsion to work creates compensatory consumption needs and satisfies them with consumer products and services some of which are far removed from any real fulfilment. People try to underline their social status by consumption of luxuries. Thus, the trend towards more expensive consumption is coming up to an upwardly open infinite loop. In a society with a UBI people can better lead the working life they want. The less people are locked up in bad jobs, the more they can pursue their passions in their lifetime. The more ambitious and immodest they are in their working life, the less they will feel the need to comfort themselves by means of compensatory consumption, fuelling harmful production growth.

In economic terms both the pressure to create more jobs and the demand for compensatory consumer goods fail the aim of raising social welfare. Threat of poverty and authoritarian merit morality keep the society in a state of irrational hyper-production and cause striving for higher GDP growth. Steps towards a UBI can provide relief from general repression and pressure towards economic growth.

When all people, protected by a UBI, can decide on the amount of their free time, leisure will gain in quality; the more people will be masters of their daily routine, the more time they will have to write diaries and love letters; the more they will contemplate about communication and the less they will be addicted to their consumption habits; the more time they will have for the challenging activities of leisure, for all kinds of citizens' involvement, for instance in

culture, politics and social projects; the less they will remain caught up in the mindless hamster wheel of earning and spending money. Precondition for this is always a sufficiency of income: enough money for a room of your own, enough money to participate in social life, enough money to invite somebody for a cup of coffee.

The growth-critical demand for sufficiency has two facets:

Everybody should have enough, nobody less. This demand is specified monetarily by an unconditional basic income.

The second facet is problematic: nobody should have more than enough. It is evident that lavish consumption (yacht, private plane, jewels) is not to be generalised, and it is necessary to inhibit / restrict wastage of resources. It has to be taken into consideration, however, that the moral questionableness of a lavish lifestyle: the impertinence of making others work for oneself, is “disarmed” by means of a UBI. Protected by the UBI, nobody is forced to serve the rich any more.

Moreover, the moralising attacks against the greedy and insatiable are often motivated by resentment / grudge. And this attitude of resentment: the wish for nobody to dance out of line, is an affect addressed against a tolerant society, in which everybody can develop as freely as possible. Hence by connecting the degrowth outlook with the claim of a full life for all it becomes possible to see that immodesty, unsatiability and greed are not the problem but could be part of the solution.