

Basic Income beyond Wage Slavery

In search of transcending political aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the concept of Basic Income – hereafter abbreviated as BI – and its use in the contexts of welfare theory and aesthetic philosophy. A case study of the German artist Joseph Beuys is presented. It is suggested that the concept of BI approached through a ‘Beuysian’ lens, opens to a distinctly political aesthetics.*

INTRODUCTION

Substantial work has been done defining the idea of BI and positioning it in welfare theory (c.f. Baumann, 1998; Christensen, 2002; Gorz, 1999; Offe, 2001). Still, the relations between BI and political aesthetics have rarely been discussed. This paper elaborates with a post-industrial society requiring the payment of an unconditional BI to all society members; focusing the meaning of concepts such as ‘learned helplessness’, ‘social art’ and ‘liberation’. With the starting point in recent developments in welfare theory, and its attempts to understand changes in economic activity and in capitalism itself, we investigate the one of many proposed links to aesthetics (c.f. Agamben, 2000; 2005; Dewey, 2005; Rancière, 2004). There exists already a managerial ‘test map’ on different ‘aestetizations’, often proposed as models for business management; i.e. aesthetic marketing, aesthetic organizing etc. (c.f. Gibb, 2006; Strati and Guillet de Monthoux, 2002). But there are also suggestions that the aesthetics and artists increasingly will participate in the critic review and creativity aspects within the frames for new forms of capitalism (Ekstrand, 2004). We are told that critical theory and critical politic debates have played out their roles and have lost their relevance and impact. Artistic criticism is in the way to becoming a turning point in the economic world now as a transcending and rectifying factor. What does this implicate? Is this a reasonable perspective? How will this process take shape?

The purpose with this work is twofold: First, we aim to demonstrate how aesthetic philosophy, particularly as developed by the German artist Joseph Beuys, corroborates welfare theory. Simultaneously, we argue that BI, approached through a ‘Beuysian’ lens, opens to a distinctly political aesthetics. Second, we argue that an eye to the role BI plays in a post-industrial, socially sculptured society, can not only reconcile a philosophy of a politics of aesthetics, but can in fact render the BI discourse as more convincing, urgent and important.

* A BI is an unconditional income paid to each full member of society without reference to that individual’s work status, existing resources, willingness to work, household membership, or location (Ekstrand, 1995; 1996). The thrust of BI is to embody a principle of ‘larger freedom to choose’; unlike existing benefit systems where the aim is often to lower benefits to the point where applicants are effectively forced back into work – i.e. less freedom to choose – BI stresses the advantages of a range of activities and life styles (Offe, 1993).

Our guiding conviction is that the questioning of foundations implied here need not be merely corrosive, but leads rather to provocative new ways of imagining and re-imagining the shared terrain of philosophical reflection, political thought and aesthetics. Drawing on a study of the German artist Joseph Beuys, we try to – in dialogue with Seligmann, (1975); Foucault (1979; 2000; 2002), Offe, (1984; 1985; 1987; 1996), as well as Rancière, (2004) and other contemporary scholars – depict how politics are ‘aestheticized’ and how aesthetic manifestations are bound up with politics.

THEORY:

WAGE LABOUR AND LABOUR BEYOND WAGE LABOUR

One of Marx (Marx and Engels, 1976; 1980) main discoveries regards the double nature of labour, related to being done under capitalism or not; as a human, universal category *or* as a historically determined form. Man *needs* to work, in order to produce and reproduce, but work is not per definition labour work; and it *must* not be. Marxist philosophy unfolds in two directions: an ethic of labour and an aesthetic of non-labour; aiming to a rather speculative theory of ‘free time’, liberating the individual, opening and offering a space for creative growth.

Beyond the capitalist mode of production and the quantitative definition of labour, this is the perspective of a definitive qualitative metamorphosis in society: the end of alienated, reified individuals and the starting liberation of mans own power, beyond wage slavery. It is more than a simple utopia; we are standing on the treshold to a postindustrial society, demanding new ways of thinking and acting. Here is the place for what beneath is discussed as the aesthetization of society. Man owns the possibility taking the step from the world of necessity to the world of freedom, discovering his owns capacities.

METHOD:

THE INTERSECTION OF AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

The central ingredient of our device is the notion of aesthetics of politics, and this is where we begin.

'The main purpose of art is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to want and custom, perfect the power to perceive.'

Dewey, 2005

By the criteria of scientific knowledge, the knowledge carried by aesthetics is not especially notable. Formal logic seldom guides the reasoning, the level of abstraction is high, and the causal links may be established in an altogether random way. Lyotard (2004) points out the legitimacy of scientific knowledge in its modern and western meaning depends on its sharp differentiation from the fictive aesthetic knowledge that tells of human projects and their consequences as they unfold over time. Yet it has been claimed that the aesthetics is the main mode of human knowledge (c.f. Agamben, 2000; 2005). Reconciliation between scientific and aesthetic knowledge has been attempted (c.f. Gibb, 2006; Guillet de Monthoux, 2004). In principle, there are many possible ways of conceiving aesthetics. The advantages of building a connection between politics and aesthetics has – among others – been pointed out by Rancière (2004) who suggests that politics first becomes a possibility with the institution of a society; where a society itself begins with something in common. This commonality is not a shared stock of goods or shared claim to a territory. Rather, it is a shared detachment of the sensible. The distribution of the sensible is an aesthetic activity, and what is at stake in any politics is aesthetics. Similar to Rancière's reasoning, Beuys (Ekstrand 1998; 2004) suggests that social action is to be considered as art and art as a social action. As will be shown in this paper, the theory of aesthetic elucidation can thus be extended to the field of political sciences.

In the following section, by drawing this correlation between aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible and, ultimately, between aesthetics and politics, we scrutinize a 'Foucaultian' study of the German artist Joseph Beuys. In particular, we analyse Beuys' distinct artistic practices and systems, to illuminate the subject positions they make possible as well as the political system with which they are synonymous.

CASE STUDY: BIG BEUYS DON'T CRY* – THEY DO THINGS

The German charismatic artist and visionary, Joseph Beuys (1921 – 1986), who grew up in *The Third Reich* with its consisting trauma, can brusquely be caught by the two central concepts: *social sculptures* and *action*. Beuys visionary career started in a sharp critique on the traditional role of the artist in modern society; the role of the lonely genius. ‘Art is not here to be understood!’ Beuys declared. ‘If we understand art, we don’t need it!’ And even more: ‘I hate art!’ Provocative and attacking formulations; just like his actions and installations. It is easier to intellectually understand than to experience with all your senses. In the actions and installations you experience more than you intellectually understand. Art, according to Beuys, is a social activity and everyone is a contributor. Art is not to be ‘seen’; art is *doing*.



The artist, Joseph Beuys

And everything that Beuys did as an artist – and it sure was a rich and many folded production he left behind! – aimed at liberating the individual; first in relation to the individual himself and his views on himself and what one is able to do, and second in relation to a suppressing society based on wage slavery.

Beuys’ political theory of a democratic, artistically and spiritually motivated society

Beuys' affinity with the anthroposophic philosophy, developed largely by Rudolph Steiner (1894), is well documented (Beuys, 2004). Anthroposophic ideas inform Beuys' political theory of a democratic, artistically and spiritually motivated society. Beuys believed society to be one great artistic whole and saw the artist as having a key role in giving human society meaning and spiritual depth. Put in slightly different words, Beuys was ‘living’ his art and in this living he was demonstrating every one’s inner but often denied capabilities, ‘Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler’ (Everyone is an Artist), stated Beuys; and also in the same time he was demonstrating the possibility of a post-industrial society, based on what he called ‘social sculptures’; meaning unforeseeable interaction between individuals, not knowing what to expect while starting building the sculpture, but supposed to do it open-minded and creative. Social sculptures are temporary

* This section is an excerpt from Ekstrand, 1998.

* Wall inscription near the Hamburger Bahnhof, - a museum in Berlin where Beuys is represented.

and not lasting longer than necessary; they are no institutions, with the tendency to freeze and becoming rigid. (Beuys was an anti-institutionalist, even more after he has been dismissed as a professor in 'Bildhauerei', Sculpture, from the Academy of art in Düsseldorf, following his attempt to implement a principle of unrestricted admission). Social sculptures are governed by social fantasy, formed for the challenging moment and its demands, and then dissipated.

The art of liberation

Beuys did not believe in individual and social change through theoretical manoeuvres and theoretical critique; as Karl Marx (Marx and Engels, 1976; 1980) said: 'The philosophers have only explained the world, but have not yet changed it.' By theorizing, establishing a cold distance to the object remains possible, which is not possible while actively confronted by *and* contributing to actions and installations. Here we see an important implication of Beuys innovative actions: they open up our minds and engage us. Praxis is in other words the only way to go. According to Beuys, one has to start with our common inherited apathy, fostered by an industrial society demanding obeying and conformed individuals. The mental burden is heavy and we cannot wait any longer for liberation. And we must liberate ourselves, our fate is in our hands, it comes down to praxis. Put it slightly differently, it comes down to actions which are striving to consciousness-raising and self-reflection; inspiring the individual to rediscovering herself as a creative individual in the world, taking responsibility, not relying on others, politicians and other representatives.



Joseph Beuys: *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare*, Photo from Performance on Nov. 26, 1965.



Joseph Beuys, *Coyote: I like America and America likes me*, May 1974. Photo: Courtesy Exit Art.

Beuys was an agent for self-government. Among the spectacular and famous actions Beuys initiated one can mention *'I like America and America likes me'* (1974), when he spent some time with a coyote in a gallery in New York. As well as the action *'How to explain pictures to a dead hare'* (1965), in which he walked around a gallery with his face smeared with honey and covered in gold leaves, carrying a dead hare to whom he talked, explaining the pictures for. The audience for this performance was kept outside, only able to see the goings on from behind a clear screen. Beuys said the work was concerned with issues such as human and animal consciousness, and the problems of thought and language. Maybe the dead animal is more alive than we 'living dead' human creatures...?



"Kunst = Kapital"
(Art = Capital)
Joseph Beuys, 1980

'Kunst = Kapital' (Art = Capital), Beuys declared on one of his black boards which he used while performing. And the post-industrial society is an 'art-society', resting on creating individuals. The human capital is the only capital in that society. 'Only the creative individual can change history through using his creativity in a revolutionary way.'

DISCUSSION:

BI BEYOND WAGE SLAVERY

Our synthesis of welfare theory and aesthetic philosophy, inspired by the above study of Beuys, rest on a number of assumptions. Among the most fundamental are beliefs about individuals – specifically, assumptions about why people (do not) act provide the foundation for conceptualizing and theorizing how to aesthetical motivate human behaviour in the welfare state.

The discussion basically relay on three distinct yet mutually dependent dimensions:

1. Learned helplessness
2. Social art
3. Liberation

It is to be hoped that the interrogation of these dimensions can begin to dislodge the sense of historical inevitability attached to whatever (im)balance may obtain within the BI discourse, in order to engage with the wider potential, repressed but available.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS:

Proposition 1: In traditional welfare theory, the citizens are passive receivers of governmental distributed welfare benefit systems.

Traditional welfare theory assumes passive citizenship, i.e. the citizens are passive receivers of governmental distributed welfare benefits. The welfare state is often characterized by the affirmation and assurance of the right to work, which develops into a policy of mere protection and an attempt to guarantee the right to life (Rosanvallon, 2000). In its current phase, economic industrialisation and globalization has changed it all, for technological changes have deeply altered the working process, and massive unemployment has followed worldwide. There is no longer possible to guarantee all citizens the right to work (c.f. Christensen, 2002; Gorz, 1999; Offe, 2001). As a consequence, the welfare state has indirectly developed the ‘addiction’ of dependence for those who do not work, nurturing an internal pattern of learned helplessness.

According to Seligman (1975), learned helplessness is a result from being trained to be locked into a system. The system may be a family, a community, a culture, a tradition, a profession or an institution, or as in this case the welfare state. Initially, a system develops for a specific purpose. But as a system evolves, it increasingly tends to organize around beliefs, perspectives, activities and taboos that serve the continuation of the system. Awareness of the original purpose fades and the system starts to function automatically. It calcifies. The beliefs, perspectives, activities and taboos shift in subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways, to ensure continuation. And those beliefs, perspectives, activities and taboos are trained into the people that comprise the system. The system presents the view that power resides in the system, not the individual. The combination creates a dependence on the system for survival. Gradually, the system is internalized and the person identifies with it – (s)he sees her/himself the way the system sees her/him. Her/His sense of who (s)he is, is defined by the system. One of the primary characteristics of learned helplessness is that the person feels passive with respect to the system. Learned helplessness can be undone. The cost, however, is high. We can only undo learned helplessness by severing our internal connection with the system that gave rise to it. Our

motivation must be clear and strong. We must really want to hear and respond to our own questions about life. We must really want to live our own life and not one prescribed by our family, society, culture, profession or tradition. Metaphorically, we must be willing to go north, the direction that takes us out of society...

SOCIAL ART:

Proposition 2a: Every individual has creativity potential

‘Going north’ ...For Huizinga (2000) play is a significant function close to both religions – especially the ‘ritual’ – as well as art. Like ritual, one of the most important characteristics of play is its spatial separation from ordinary life. This way of thinking is close to Rank’s reasoning round the play-impulse and aesthetic pleasure in ‘Art and artist: creative urge and personality development’ (1989). Schiller’s letters (1795), written largely under the impact of Kant (1780), aimed at a remaking of civilization through the liberating force of the aesthetic function. From Kant’s writings, Schiller developed his own theory that art is the result of the ‘play impulse’. Operating through the play impulse, the aesthetic function would ‘abolish compulsion, and place man, both morally and physically, in freedom’. A difference of emphasis between Kant’s and Schiller’s writings is that the former is concerned with theoretical reflection, while the latter is concerned with social behaviour. Agamben (2000; 2005) describes the function of ritual to adjust the contradiction between mythic past and present, reabsorbing all events into a synchronic structure, while the function of play is a symmetrically opposed operation: to break down the whole structure into events. As Ekstrand (1988) puts it; in play we are ‘subjectified’ (made subjects), this is the main imperative behind the choreography of play. In play is our ability to drastically be able to react on every-day-life, to prevail over the immediately given, to get it on a distance, break free from it. To see behind the conditions which are in front of us. Playing can be said to be an art. It shows us that we are in possession of ‘creativity potential’; a discovering - the wild ideas and possibilities of diverse combinations. It is in the play – and only in the play – as the individual can create, be creative, and it is only through being creative as the individual can find the identity in herself/himself.

By saying this, the definition of creativity is not restricted. It does not get a ‘technical’ meaning, where creativity stands for ability to think ‘better’ or ‘different’. Instead we give creativity the character of an existential phenomenon. It is about our possibility to be ourselves; to have the

courage to be ourselves and to feel our own strength. The rebellion power of fantasy! The unrestrained and uncensored ideas! The release of the out bursting laughter to the absurdities we swiftly see around us. Suddenly, another light is radiating the world. Suddenly, it means something else. It is the creativity way of distinguish, more than anything other, that make us fell life worth living. Life lets it be interpreted in terms of possibilities and individual growth. In openings. To employ a creative standpoint to the world is to say no to all given truths, to the confirmation of the well-known (c.f. Bauman, 1993; Foucault 2000; Lyotard, 2004). The creative standpoint never lets the world outside to ‘stiffen’. All the time, a world to explain, amaze over, try our curiosity on, remains. Put in other words: the potential room of every-day-life is a room without clear limits. We do not remain the prisoners of every-day-life, trapped in the well-known; in the routines. By symbolically open doors and breaking ceilings, we transcend every-day-life. Discover something else than what is. When we talk about transcending, use this term, we want to point out this. The transcending is connected to the every-day-life we have to exist in, and it turns against its built-in obligations. Opposed to this, is a position characterized of indulgence and passivity to the surrounding reality. The world and its diverse parts are considered as something one has to adjust to; something which demands total adjustment of the individual. Indulgence forbids all participation and involvement. There is nothing more to add to a ‘complete’ world. It is considered as an already written story.

It is our own, self-conquered creativity, we are writing about. By which, we discover and confirm our selves. The creativity we mean is an attitude to the world of liberation and disobedience. Our acts’ ‘piece of art’ is a vehemently protest. We break free; nurturing an emergent revolt. In play we can start a transcendence of the reality that surrounds us. It does not reduce – which Winnicott (1971) also says – to a totally subjective phenomenon. The reality is not only a subjective imagination or “light”. In line with Winnicott’s reasoning, we distance us from a strictly phenomenological or idealistic epistemological way of explaining. Ontologically we want to claim, that there are an outside, ‘independent’ reality which cannot be reduced to something only experiential. It is there even if we turn our back to it or close our eyes. Fantasy and dreams do not erode away existing socially constructed power- or society structures (Foucault, 2000). They are there. In this sense, the reality exists outside the individual. The point is, the reality still force forward different stances. In spite of all, we can stance us to existing power and society structures in diverse ways. Playing as a mean of action, implies that one place oneself in an active stance towards the reality. A creative relation is ‘established’ from the side of the individual. The doubts are made concrete. The individual starts to work the reality, separating herself/himself

from it. Creates or re-creates herself/himself; uses the own creativity to see herself/himself. Beuys best summed it up: 'Everyone is an artist'.

Proposition 2b: Art is a liberating force (The politics of aesthetics)

According to Beuys (Ekstrand, 1998), only on condition of a radical widening on definition will it be possible for art and activities related to art to provide evidence that aesthetics is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only aesthetics is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social welfare system that continues to trotter along the death line: to dismantle in order to build a post-industrial society. This society will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator. Only a conception of art revolutionized to this degree can turn into a politically productive force, coursing through each person and shaping history.

But all this, and much is as yet unexplored, has first to form part of our consciousness; insight is needed into objective connections. We must probe the moment of origin of free individual creativity potential. We then reach the threshold where the human being experiences her/himself primarily as a spiritual being, where her/his supreme achievements, active thinking, active felling, active will and their higher forms, are recognized as flowing in the direction that is shaping the content of the politics and the welfare state right through into the post-industrial society of the future. This is the concept of aesthetics that carries within itself not only the revolutionizing of the historic bourgeois concept of knowledge (materialism, positivism) but also of spiritually, sublime aesthetic activity.

LIBERATION:

Proposition 3: BI presupposes a political theory of an aesthetically motivated society (The aesthetics of politics)

What will happen *after* the welfare state; which are the alternatives to discuss; is there only 'one way' to go? Are we heading a state of ongoing exclusion and widespread social poverty; containing even more alienation of people? *Does* it have to go that way? Can we perceive something else?

Offe (1984) argues for and defines a more creative role for the citizen. BI opens up for that role; you may say that one presupposes the other. Another way is to reduce BI strictly to a *basic*

income and no more. Look upon it as way of ‘getting rid off’ people already in a precarious outsiderposition, with no possibility ever to ‘get a deasant job’. To Offe, just like to Beuys, the BI is not only an economic reform, it cannot be reduced to that and nothing more; it is a political reform with far reaching, dynamic effects. But it must be connected with the idea of an aesthetically motivated society.

An active citizenship is not just a question about the right to live, but rather the right to live in and take active part in society; that is the right to civil and political involvement; and it opens up the possibilities for social and self-expressing labour which is *not* wage labour.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

IN SEARCH OF TRANSCENDING POLITICAL AESTHETICS

We have, in these remarks, attempted to sketch out the epistemological, political and aesthetic terrain within the field of welfare research. Our purpose has been to demonstrate how aesthetic philosophy, particularly as developed by the German artist Joseph Beuys, corroborates welfare theory; and how BI, approached through a ‘Beuysian’ lens, opens to a distinctly political aesthetics. We have tried to clarify and enrich – to clarify certain key issues implicit to our shared pursuit in order to enrich the critical and creative activities that arise out of that commitment. By invoking the philosophy of aesthetics through the elaboration of three discursive functions – those of learned helplessness, social art and liberation – we have hoped to introduce into these considerations a measure of critical stringency capable of encompassing political determinations. Such a study is necessarily open-ended and demands extension in several directions.

As writers and lecturers, we benefit from work which challenges our critical preconceptions and takes the occasional risk. It is our hope that the practitioner can likewise draw upon our research as a basis for an ongoing process of self-examination and boundary-testing. If a vital, self-sustaining post-industrial society embracing a BI for all citizens is, indeed our shared goal, we cannot afford to fail.

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