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Los comunes sociales: reconciliando la protección social con la renta básica universal.

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Global Social Justice

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The social commons: reconciling social protection and the universal basic income

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Abstract

Social protection is now being promoted by international organizations in order to further reduce poverty in developing countries whereas, in Northern countries, social protection is being dismantled. We are witnessing a paradigmatic change giving a new, neoliberal, meaning to social protection. Basic income is often proposed as an alternative, aimed at giving all individuals, unconditionally, an income that allows them to live in dignity. However, can citizenship be compatible with unconditional social benefits?

In this contribution, I analyze both proposals and I search for ways to combine them. This implies we re-think social protection, for the North as well as for the South, away from neoliberalism. Framed in terms of 'social commons', social protection could become a tool for systemic change, based on rights and inspired by the philosophy of 'buen vivir'.

Key words: *social protection, basic income, neoliberalism, social commons, development*

Resumen

La protección social está siendo promovida por organizaciones internacionales con el fin de reducir la pobreza en los países en desarrollo, mientras que, en los países del Norte, la protección social está siendo desmantelada. Estamos siendo testigos de un cambio paradigmático que da un nuevo significado neoliberal a la protección social. La renta básica se propone a menudo como una alternativa, destinada a dar a todos los individuos, sin condiciones, un ingreso que les permita vivir con dignidad. Sin embargo, ¿pueden ser compatibles con la ciudadanía los beneficios sociales incondicionales?

En esta contribución analizo ambas propuestas y busco diferentes formas de combinarlas. Esto implica repensar la protección social, para el Norte como para el Sur, lejos del neoliberalismo. Enmarcado en términos de "comunes sociales", la protección social podría convertirse en una herramienta para el cambio sistémico, basada en los derechos e inspirada en la filosofía del 'buen vivir'.

Palabras claves: *protección social, renta básica, neoliberalismo, comunes sociales, desarrollo*

1. Neoliberal social protection

Western Europe is the cradle of welfare states. Although all systems are different and less or better developed from one country to another (Esping-Andersen 1990), they also have common characteristics: citizenship, protection from markets, de-commoditized social services, and organic solidarity, that is solidarity beyond local communities and families. Due to the introduction of neoliberal thinking and especially since the economic and financial crisis of 2008 – leading to austerity policies -, these welfare states have been changing rapidly.

What is happening to-day in Western Europe has been happening already since the 1980s in Latin America and other third-world countries. Due to the debt crisis and the subsequent 'structural adjustment programs' of World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund), the welfare states existing in most countries of South America and Mexico have been seriously transformed. The – more limited – social protection systems in Africa also underwent changes, as did the – differently organized – social protection of some Asian countries.

In order to better understand what has happened and why, we need to examine the social thinking of international organizations. Welfare states may be nationally organized and respond to national political, economic and social circumstances, they also are and have always been in conformity with international thinking. In the last quarter of the 19th century, major elements of what would become social security – such as insurance against labor accidents, sickness and unemployment insurance – were being discussed at the international level. (Rodgers et al. 2009; Müller and Van Daele 2012) In 2014 it is also important to remember that the ILO (International Labour Organization) was part of the Versailles Peace Treaty, ending the First World War (1914-1918). The turn of the century also was a period of globalization and, just like to-day, liberalism had failed. Politicians started to understand that social justice was not a direct and inherent consequence of liberal democracy. The conclusion then was that peace is not possible without social justice. Economic competitiveness could not be achieved at the cost of workers. Fair competition, it was said, needed similar, converging and fair labor conditions in all countries. The ILO immediately started to work at international conventions on different social topics.

1.1. From social development to poverty reduction

Welfare states were not meant to be limited to European countries. Well developed Latin American countries like Mexico, Argentina, Chile or Brazil also developed their social protection systems according to the same principles. (Mesa Lago 1985). After the independence of African countries the UN (United Nations) started to promote social policies. In 1969 the General Assembly adopted a resolution on 'Social Progress and Development' (1969) containing all the ingredients of European welfare states. The decade of the 1970s started as a 'decade of social development' though this came soon to an end with the start of the monetary and oil crisis. The consequences of this crisis led to the over-indebtedness of many countries in the third-world and to

neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' policies. As we have learnt in the past decades, these neoliberal policies do not only concern the economy, but imply most of all political reforms with a changed role of the State. Consequences on social policies then are at the core of this transformation.

In 1990 the World Bank put 'poverty' on the international agenda and started to develop its theory on poverty, the poor and poverty reduction policies. Ten years after the start of 'structural adjustment' and its dramatic social consequences, this new policy was easily accepted by most partners of development policies. By the end of the century, World Bank and IMF adopted new mechanisms for debt and poverty reduction and introduced the 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers'. At the level of the United Nations, a Millennium Declaration was adopted by its General Assembly in 2000 from which a limited number of social indicators were chosen and framed as 'Millennium Development Goals' (MDG). These two different strategies were introduced in all developing countries. The official UN aim was to halve extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015.

Analyzing this emerging poverty discourse makes clear that the real objective was to reform the State, in the context of the economic dimensions of the Washington Consensus. (Mestrum 2002) The World Bank is very clear about it. The core social mission of States is to help the extremely poor people, preferably with 'sound' macro-economic policies, fiscal balance, open trade and as few as possible protective measures. States should do the necessary to make health care and education accessible to poor people. '*Market-inhibiting policies*' were said not to be in favor of the poor but were actually harming them. (1993: 34) Minimum wages and subsidies were to be banned. Social insurances can exist but can be provided by markets. (1997) UNDP (United Nations Development Program) implicitly agreed with this analysis. '*The chronically deprived and dispossessed must be brought up to a threshold of human development to enter the mainstream of economic growth. But then it is time for governments to step aside ... if human development is the outer shell, freedom is its priceless pearl*' (1990: 83-84) '*It was a diagnostic error to think of poverty in terms of social protection and social expenditures*'. (2000: 8, 42) Poverty is defined as a 'multidimensional' problem and the income dimension is largely ignored. In its second World Development Report of 2000/2001 (2001) on poverty, it becomes a matter of vulnerability, lack of voice and empowerment. To-day, the World Bank links poverty to risk-aversion. (2013) The poverty reduction policies were completely compatible with the Washington consensus and did not in any way modify them. They were never meant to improve the social protection systems but were an alternative to them. In that sense, they were contrary to the idea of social modernization as an integral part of national development.

To-day, at one year from the end date for the MDGs, we have to conclude that the poverty reduction strategies have failed. Certainly, extreme poverty has been halved at the global level, but this is only thanks to China and India. In Africa, the number of extremely poor people has doubled from 1981 to 2010. In Latin America, poverty has been reduced, but due to social policies and monetary transfers that were not allowed by Washington Consensus policies.

This explains that as from 2005, several UN organizations started to promote alternative approaches. In his report to the follow-up conference to the Millennium Summit the UN Secretary General states: *'[The MDGs] clearly do not in themselves represent a complete development agenda. They do not directly encompass some of the broader issues covered by the conferences of the 1990s ...'*(2005: § 30) Several reports were published criticizing poverty policies and starting to promote a transformative and universal social protection. *'... the narrow preoccupation with poverty may actually work against the broad and long term efforts that are required to eradicate poverty'*. (UNRISD 2010: 16)

1.2. Social protection

The World Bank published its first theoretical framework for social protection in 2000.(Holzmann & Jørgensen 2000) It is a scheme for 'risk management' equating economic risks with epidemics and natural catastrophes, all 'acts of God' that just happen and that cannot be avoided. Therefore, people, families and communities have to be made 'resilient' so as to bounce back quickly whenever such a risk occurs.(Mestrum 2003) In 2012 the World Bank published a follow-up document (2012), adding labor to its strategy and insisting it wants *'to strike the right balance between protection and competitiveness'*. It makes clear the World Bank does not think of a universal social protection. *'Resilience for the vulnerable, equity for the poor, opportunities for all'*.(2012: 1) At its annual meeting of 2013, it proposed in fact a new strategy: it wants to eradicate extreme poverty (reducing to it 3 %) and fight inequality by rising the incomes of the bottom 40 %.(IMF/WB 2013) Social protection is not mentioned in the texts anymore.

The ILO adopted in 2012 a recommendation on 'social protection floors' (SPF) (2012) emphasizing that social security is a human right. Social security also is *'an important tool to prevent and reduce poverty, inequality, social exclusion and social insecurity, to promote equal opportunity and gender and racial equality, and to support the transition from informal to formal employment'*. (2012: visa 4)

Only then are the economic objectives mentioned: *'an investment in people that empowers them to adjust to changes in the economy and in the labor market, and that social security systems act as automatic social and economic stabilizers, help stimulate aggregate demand in times of crisis and help support a transition to a more sustainable economy'*.(2012: visa 5)

Implementation of the recommendation is an overall and primary responsibility of the State (2012: § 3). SPFs have to be seen as *'a fundamental element of ... national social security systems'* and have to be implemented *'within strategies for the extension of social security that progressively ensure higher levels of social security to as many people as possible'*.(2012: § 1)

As for the scope, the ILO wants to give guidance to member states to establish, maintain and implement SPFs within strategies for the extension of social security. *'Universality of protection'* is mentioned as the first principle to be applied. (2012: § 1)

The ILO recommendation mentions explicitly the types of benefits or guarantees which should be provided under national SPFs: *'a nationally defined set of goods and services, constituting essential health care, including maternity care ..., basic income security for children ..., for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability, and for older persons.*(2012: § 5, 9)

As for the *coverage*, the recommendation is not very clear, or should we say is ambiguous. Social protection has to be universal, but it is mainly for those *'in need'*.(2012: § 4) We are told that guarantees are universal, though benefits will only go to selected groups, which necessarily implies targeting. It means the ILO claims the universality of the objective and therefore links the SPF to its older social security strategy. In the preparatory documents it states that the universal approach is pertinent, though limited in means. It also states there is but a limited ability to make the right to social security a reality for everyone. (2012b: 15, 18) It therefore speaks of a horizontal dimension (SPF) and a vertical dimension (linking up to its Social Security Convention of 1952).

As for the *funding*, the recommendation refers to a variety of different methods, which may include *'effective enforcement of tax and contribution obligations, reprioritizing expenditure, or a broader and sufficiently progressive revenue base'*.(2012: § 11) In an earlier document on social security, it had given indications on what social pensions in Asia and Africa might cost (1 to 1,5 % of GDP), child benefits (2,5 to 3,5 % of GDP), and health care (1,5 to 3 % of GDP).(2008)

The 'social protection floors' of the ILO are clearly the best proposal on social protection now being on offer in the framework of international organizations. But this being said, they are not reassuring as to universalism, social development and the necessary breakaway from neoliberalism. If ILO's SPF can be implemented as the recommendation suggests, it would certainly be a major advantage and progress for millions of people. The question is however, whether this is possible and whether it is enough?

Serious doubts and questions remain. The first one is a risk of terminological confusion. The SPF does not go beyond poverty reduction and is not a 'universal social protection'. As the ILO points out itself, the terms social protection and social security are not used in consistent ways, their meaning differing widely across countries and international organizations, and across time.(2010) In the case of SPF, it looks as if it is a rights-based social assistance program with the potential of being extended, in the long term, to a universal social protection system.

Secondly, several documents point to the fact that the distinction between the formal and the informal sector is in fact outdated. This makes it indeed necessary to introduce non-contributive social protection/assistance mechanisms in order to arrive at real universal coverage. It is positive to see the ILO wants to enhance formal employment and refers to its decent work framework. (2012: § 10) But non-contributive protection systems should be no excuse to further weaken the contributive systems with their implicit role for social partners. In this context, the link with the universal social security

objective in order to preserve this collective agenda with its organic solidarity is extremely important.

Finally, however positively the plans for SPFs can be assessed, what the documents do not tell us should not be ignored. They do not speak of a redistribution of incomes. They do not speak of a 'transformative' agenda in the way some UN organizations do, meaning that development has to put an end to dual societies and has to lead to substantial societal change. There is no proposal to change the economic paradigm, away from productivism and an exclusively growth-oriented economy and taking into account the ecological constraints. If the SPF is limited to its minimal requirements, it will be compatible with Washington Consensus policies. And that means the impoverishment processes will not be stopped.

1.3. European social policies

For changes in the European discourse on social policies, we have to look at the changing focus in documents of the European Commission. Whereas the Executive body had been asking for more social competences since its inception end of the 1950s – the Treaty of Rome defines social security as a national competence – from the end of the 1980s it started to look at the financing of social protection and its compatibility with the emerging internal market.

With the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 convergence criteria for the introduction of the single currency were imposed and obliged Member States to abide strict fiscal rules (as well as price stability and rules on public debt). The calls for 'social convergence' or an 'economic security council' were lost. Nevertheless, in 1992 two important recommendations (EEC 1992) were adopted in the Council, one on the convergence of the objectives of social policies, the other on common criteria for social assistance in social protection systems. The objective of social protection, according to these documents, is guaranteeing a minimum income, access to health care, social-economic integration and assistance in case of unemployment. The Council asked governments to recognize this basic right of everyone and to provide the necessary resources for social assistance in order to make it possible that all have a life in dignity.

In 1989 a modest 'social Charter' of the European Community was adopted, without Thatcher's United Kingdom.(EEC 1989) A 'Charter of Fundamental Rights' was agreed on in 2000 but is extremely modest in its ambitions on social rights.(2000) It does not give the EU new competences and it cannot influence national legislation. In the difficult discussions on the Constitutional Treaty – which later became the Treaty of Lisbon – social guarantees were rejected but in the end a horizontal clause was inserted: *'In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health'*.(2009: art. 9) During the years of austerity policies, it was largely forgotten...

An important policy document for the new orientation in social policies is the 'Lisbon Process' of 2000, stating that the EU wants to become 'the most competitive knowledge economy' in the world.(European Council 2000) Here, there is no talk of 'unemployment' anymore, but of the 'employment rate'. It concerns the 'employability' of people, that is, their potential to effectively find a job on the labor market, and on the liberalization of public services. Even if the EU has no competences for fighting poverty 'drastic interventions' are recommended and entrusted to the Member States. There is no budget and the method is an 'open coordination' which has utterly failed. Afterwards, a 'social agenda' mentioning the 'modernization of social protection' was adopted, the Commission made proposals for 'flexicurity' and the modernization of labor law.(European Commission 2000, 2006, 2007)

Some legislation however did make it, though with extremely heavy difficulties, such as the directive on the liberalization of services (the so-called Bolkestein directive), and on the posting of workers. Neoliberal visions won from social-democratic corrections. In a couple of famous Court judgments (Court of Justice 2005, 2006) economic freedoms are considered more important than social rights.

1.3.1. Economic governance

The economic and financial crisis that threatened the euro is at the origin of new legislation geared towards 'economic governance', and, indirectly, of social policies that limit the room for manoeuvre of governments.

The most important policy document of the 21st century is the so-called 'EU-2020' strategy, replacing the Lisbon process (European Council 2010). At the level of social policies, the document speaks of a 'poverty-target' of twenty million poor people less in 2020 than in 2010. However, as the European anti-poverty network states, the national reform programs do not really integrate this target. (EAPN 2013)

The 'European semester' consists of a number of procedures that oblige Member States to have balanced budgets. Contrary to the 'Stability Pact' which was adopted after the introduction of the euro, the institutions have now planned for sanctions when the rules are not respected. In a 'sixpack', a 'twopack' and a proper 'fiscal pact', detailed rules have been written down for Member States to respect.(European Commission 2013c)

In February 2013, the European Commission published a proposal for 'social investment' (2013), aimed at developing people's 'human capital' so that they can engage in the labor market. The basic idea is that remedial action should be replaced by preventing social hazards. In the academic literature (Morel et al. 2012) it was emphasized that these social investments have to be accompanied by strong social protection, and that they certainly cannot be conceived of as an austerity measure.

The European Commission seems to have ignored this question and proposes instead complementary 'social innovation'. This is based on the fact that there are many things citizens can take care of themselves, without having to call on the government. There are many good examples in most cities of car-sharing,

recycling initiatives, community housing, etc. These are initiatives that perfectly fit with local democratic renewal. But how this could help to make social protection less expensive is not clear at all. Social innovation opens the door to 'social business' and other 'private' initiatives, such as the multinationals of 'care'.

At their European Council meeting of June and October 2013, the heads of government adopted two more social measures. Firstly, they adopted a 'youth guarantee' which means that young people till 25 years of age, should be offered, four months after they have left school or became unemployed, a qualitative job, an apprenticeship or internship.

Secondly, the 'social dimension' of the European Union has been strengthened. This means that certain standards concerning social expenditures will be integrated into the monitoring mechanisms on national budgets. These standards are not binding. In the framework of the 'national recommendations' the European Commission now makes, Belgium has already received many 'social recommendations', more particularly in order to adapt its indexation mechanism and the wage setting arrangements, to limit early retirement, to improve the transition from school to labor market, etc. It has to be noted that at least 40 % of all recommendations concern social policies.(ETUI 2013)

1.4. A changing paradigm

Nationally, at the European level and globally, there are common characteristics to these new approaches of social protection which are far away from the old idea of welfare states.

This concerns in the first place the objective of social protection. Globally and at the European level what is emphasized is the economic role of social protection. The objective remains economic growth and growth needs more people – the last resource that is not in danger of being depleted. All adult, healthy people, men and women, have to engage in the labor market. Social protection can help to achieve this and is totally at the service of growth and the market.

Secondly, the concept of 'risk' in the emerging industrial society of the 19th century has changed again. Collective risks are now again individual risks. Those who do not live a healthy life have no right to protection. Cardio-vascular accidents and suicide are not collective consequences of the rat race, but individual consequences of individual behavior. Those who are poor or unemployed bear the consequences of the choices they have made.

What directly follows from this is the abandonment of universal rights. There are now targets, deserving poor and non deserving poor, a secular mechanism. The deserving poor can receive help, the non deserving will be punished. Repression of small crime is a direct consequence. Poverty is not a social problem, but a problem of individuals who have to be re-directed towards appropriate behavior. Deserving poor are 'employable' and can be 'activated', as long as they are prepared to take risks. The others will depend on charity.

Fourthly, general social protection is slowly disappearing and is replaced by conditional poverty policies. The money has to go to those who really need it. Poor people, it is said, have to develop their 'resilience' so as to bounce back rapidly when a 'shock' happens. In the European Union as well, this shift from social protection to poverty reduction has been noted. (Vanhercke 2011) No one dares yet to speak against social protection, but social insurance is being privatized and one tries to delink social protection from labor. Those who earn enough can buy an insurance on the market, answering to the specific needs of the individual or of the family, without solidarity. According to this philosophy, this is not a State mission and employers should not have to pay for it.

According to this logic, it is not problematic at all to liberalize and finally privatize public services. This creates new markets and the new vision on social protection allows for even more markets to be created, such as for education, health care, all types of insurances, etc. This 'free' trade in services plays a very important role, as is made clear in the current debates on the recently proposed 'Transatlantic Investment and Trade Partnership' between the US and the EU.

Finally, people are supposed to become more self-reliant. They can '*take their life into their own hands*', they do not have to depend on government, they can decide for themselves on how to organize their lives and on how to protect themselves. Here the ambiguity of the discourse concerns more particularly women. Women, and most of all female heads of households, are always presented as being problematic. It is certainly correct that it will be more difficult for a single mother to earn sufficient income for her family than for core families with two wage earners. But it is also clear that they are blamed most of all for their limited availability for the labor market and for the market of volunteering. The 'social innovation' that many governments want to promote has less to do with car-sharing and recycling, than with child care, care for the elderly and disabled people. Women are the first candidates for this kind of 'participation' in social tasks that the public authorities do not want to pay for anymore. It is once again the non paid work of women that is needed to re-organize and re-produce the economic system.

2. *An alternative: the Universal Basic Income (UBI)*

How to react to this spiral of declining social policies?

The world has changed. We do not live in the societies of the end of the 19th century anymore, when workers had to fight for minimal rights. We do not live in the societies of the 1950s any longer, with hope for endless growth and protected national economies. Corporations, capital and people are mobile and migrants are trying all over the world to find better perspectives for themselves and their children.

The Member States of the European Union are still on number one in terms of social expenditures, but the social budgets are declining and social protection '*cannot play its stabilizing role anymore*'.(European Commission 2013b)

Something will have to change. The trade unions in the countries of the European Union are on the defensive and from this position there is little more they can do than defend a status quo. The European institutions and the majority of right wing and conservative parties want to impose even more austerity and fiscal constraint. We seem to urgently need a new conceptual framework for social protection.

One of the proposals making headway these past years has been the introduction of a UBI.

In order to avoid all risks of misunderstanding, it is necessary to see what exactly a 'basic income' means and where and how it differs from other proposals. In the 'citizens' initiative' which was introduced at the European level, the universal basic income (UBI) is defined as follows: '*a guaranteed income, given to all in addition to any other income they might receive. By advancing equality and economic participation while enabling simpler welfare systems, the BI leads to a fairer and more efficient society*'. The UBI is unconditional, universal, individual, high enough to ensure an existence in dignity and participation in society.(ECI 2013)

The UBI replaces certain parts of the current social security and social assistance systems.

This UBI is not the same as the '*guaranteed minimum income*' (MI). The MI is a proposal made in a recommendation of the European Council of Ministers in 1992. (EEC 1992) It aimed to give everyone sufficient resources so as to maintain human dignity. It came about in the framework of a discussion on the convergence of social protection systems. It is referred to in different EU-documents till some years ago but it was never implemented, in spite of efforts to draft a framework directive. The MI could be given to all people who fall below a given income floor.

The third concept to take into account is the *minimum wage*. Some countries have legally binding minimum wages, whereas others work with wages defined in a process of collective bargaining. Some European countries have no minimum wage at all. This issue is now also on the agenda with a demand to avoid social dumping in the European Union and to define a legal minimum wage throughout the EU.

This minimum wage is part of labor law and is paid for waged labor. The MI is a kind of social assistance for people who are not participating in the labor market and are not able to provide for their livelihood. The UBI is an amount paid to all citizens, rich and poor, irrespective of their income and/or labor. This is why it is also called 'citizens' income'.

2.1. The advantages

The proposal to give all citizens, irrespective of their status, income or job a certain amount of money is rather old. It is based on the idea that all have a right to an 'adequate standard of living' as is stated in the International Pact for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the fact that States have to guarantee it.

In Belgium, the idea was promoted by the philosopher Philippe Van Parijs (1991) in order to promote social justice, given the fact that 'equality of opportunity' cannot really be achieved. Today, the idea is promoted by the political party Vivant and some greens. More recently, the idea was strongly promoted by Guy Standing in his book on the precariat. (2011)

There are convincing arguments to defend a system of UBI.

The first one relates to citizenship, this is the idea that all human beings are equal and have equal rights. It is unacceptable to make distinctions in function of job or status. All citizens of a national community should in the same way be able to share in nationally produced wealth. In this way, the UBI creates a kind of real freedom instead of the formal freedom of an abstract citizenship.

This is directly linked to the idea of universalism. Our systems of social security are, in theory, also universal but they are far from it in practice. By treating everyone in the same way and giving equal rights, one can work towards an effective social integration. Targeted and selective allowances should not exist. This will make an end to stigmatization, the frequent manifestations of clientelism, the biased assessments and the high administrative costs linked to the management of granting targeted benefits and detecting possible fraud.

The UBI is unconditional, which means that huge targeting and management costs can indeed be avoided. The amount can differ in function of age – children and youth on the one hand, aged people on the other hand will receive lower or higher amounts. This is the only criterion to be taken into account.

In the proposals coming from leftwing groups it is pointed out that a UBI gives people the freedom to choose whether they want to be active on the labor market or not. Those who prefer to dedicate their time to artistic activities or to social and/or political work, can do so. Those who want to do nothing, are free as well. No one is obliged to go and look for a job, which can only have an emancipating and liberating impact. At a moment when there are insufficient jobs and full employment seems to be a lost utopia, the pressure that is now put on people will disappear.

The UBI also makes an end to the precariat, people who today have no rights and therefore no interest in defending the rights of social security. Migrants and refugees can now participate in the labor market precisely because they do not respect the social rules and can offer their labor force at a much lower price. By seriously diminishing labor costs above the net paid wages, the UBI can make an end to the 'black' or 'informal' labor market which is based on competition.

With a UBI system, people would be free to participate or not in the labor market. Labor would become much cheaper, not only because non wage labor costs would disappear but also because employers will not be willing to continue to pay the same net wage above the UBI. A labor income certainly would help to raise the living standards above the UBI and workers will be able to exert more pressure on employers since they are not obliged to stay on the labor market. The currently badly paid jobs, for difficult or 'dirty' work could become well-paid jobs, since otherwise no one would be willing to take them.

Employers would thus be stimulated to offer attractive labor conditions so as to attract sufficient workers.

Contrary to our social security systems the UBI cannot be made responsible for the high labor costs or for distorting labor markets. UBI is indeed a distribution of incomes but outside the market for labor and goods. Income is de-linked from labor. UBI is not a simple distribution from rich to poor, but a redistribution of nationally produced wealth to all members of society.

Finally, the UBI is an effective tool to eradicate poverty, at least if the amount is high enough. The UBI gives freedom to the poor who are now constantly harassed in order to receive their conditional benefits and have to give evidence of their willingness to work and to justify their behavior and their expenses.

The UBI could advance a real systemic, progressive and ecological change. It could mean the end of capitalist labor relations by giving workers their freedom. Workers would indeed no longer be obliged to sell their labor force in order to survive. Labor relations can be based on free contracts that can end as soon as labor becomes redundant or labor conditions become unsatisfactory. UBI is not only an alternative for the existing social protection, but implies important societal changes.

2.2. Questions, doubts, pitfalls ...

UBI is often presented as being 'neutral', a proposal that goes beyond the opposition between the right and the left. This is clearly wrong since there is a very strong ideological opposition concerning this topic. UBI can be promoted by the left, as it can be promoted by the right, but with a different content and philosophy. It is no coincidence that in Belgium, the most important party supporting the UBI is the liberal Vivant. At the left, it is mainly libertarians and greens who support it.

For liberals, the arguments are obvious: a radical reduction of labor costs, a dismantlement of social protection and of their responsibility for it, and a weakening of trade unions.

This liberal background is also present already in the idea of a negative income tax: if your income drops below a certain threshold, government will pay a compensation. This is not the same philosophy as the UBI, but it is good to never forget that even in a neoliberal context, there is room for a minimum income, whereas minimum wages are refused because they are said to distort the labor market. (Hayek 1976, Friedman 1962)

Leftwing libertarians and greens interpret the UBI as a kind of new paradigm, a tool for building a new society, without any obligation to work and with a real emancipatory potential.

Both ways of thinking are problematic.

A UBI gives everyone the right to work or to not work. It constitutes a right to laziness. We may assume that most people do want to give meaning to their life and spend their time in a useful and agreeable way, doing some kind of socially useful work. But some people may want to avoid any activity, or just keep busy

with themselves. Is this acceptable? Some social and productive work is absolutely necessary and will always have to be done. Should not every member of society do some part of these tasks? Should this work not be distributed fairly or is it acceptable that some people totally withdraw from any responsibility?

The UBI exempts the State from doing anything for people above and next to the UBI. Even if today's social protection systems are not meant to fight inequality, they do rise peoples' incomes and limit inequality. The best tool in the fight against inequality is a fair tax system and this can be maintained and even improved when a UBI system is introduced. Taxes could be used to limit the highest incomes and thus provide money for a BI. But the responsibility of the State stops when the minimum floor of UBI is reached. Social progress through higher incomes stops to be a task of governments and income inequalities can rise. Allowances above the UBI become impossible because all resources will be needed to pay for the UBI.

Questions can also be put concerning the feasibility and the desirability of unconditionality. The freedom given to people is very important, but what if the UBI is used for gambling or drinking? What if people become homeless? Is the State responsible for people who fall off the wayside of minimal protection? And if so, how are governments to justify this help to those who behave 'correctly'? If not, is it possible to let people just die from hunger?

Can conditionality not also be seen as reciprocity? It would mean that people have to behave correctly if they do not want their UBI be withdrawn, whereas public authorities are committed to provide people with good quality social services. Or a decent labor market policy. Benefits rarely are totally unconditional because citizenship is based on a relationship between citizens and the State. It is an implicit agreement on rights and duties for all. A UBI is a cash transfer coming from nationally produced wealth. Is it possible for some to totally withdraw from any political or social commitment and still claim part of this wealth?

By eliminating non wage labor costs, labor will become far more cheaper for employers. The advantage for them is much more important than for workers who still will have to fight for decent labor conditions. In whatever way the UBI is being financed, it will always be some kind of tax to be paid by everyone. And that means that labor costs which are now paid by workers and employers as part of the wage cost, will have to be paid by the whole of society, possibly through a higher VAT rate. It thus comes down to a shift from labor costs to costs for society. One could react by stating that the price of labor and of capital are being passed on in the prices of products, and that is correct. But the price of products is determined on a competitive market and is very relative, if not arbitrary. It always is more interesting to raise social contributions at the level of wages.

It is obvious that trade unions are not very keen on such a system of UBI. It will become much more difficult to negotiate good labor conditions, certainly when the UBI is not high enough to live on. Their only possible threat is withdrawal from the labor market. If workers do not only want to survive, but also want a

house, a car or a holiday abroad, it will become difficult to put pressure on employers.

It is clear that trade unions will lose much of their power. A basic income is paid by public authorities out of tax money. If there are fiscal problems, it will be easy to diminish the UBI. Social security, on the contrary, is often jointly managed by employers and workers and cannot suffer from arbitrary decisions. In a UBI system, the freedom workers have is a freedom to not work. This is very relative and is only valid when one is satisfied with a life in relative poverty. Chances are real that wages above the UBI will remain very limited. An unconditional income outside of the labor market cannot influence that labor market. Contrary to the thesis that capitalism is being eroded, it is possible that one ends up with a capitalism without a labor market and that employers pass on as many costs as possible to the whole of society. Trade unions will become redundant, as Roland Duchatelet, the founder of Vivant, admitted in an interview with a Belgian newspaper.(2014) In his 'business model', trade unions could become 'coaches'.

2.3. How much? How to finance?

In Vivant Europe's proposal (2010) the idea is to have a UBI amounting to 50 % of the guaranteed minimum wage. Children up to 18 years old would receive 25 % of this amount, young people between 18 and 25 years old would receive 75 %, whereas aged people above 65 years would receive 150%.

For Belgium this would mean 700 Euro per month and the system would cost around 24 % of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). This is more or less the share now taken by social expenditures. Roland Duchatelet also mentions an amount of more or less 700 Euro.(2014)

Pensions, unemployment benefits, family allowances and costs for sabbaticals would disappear. According to Vivant, huge savings are possible on defense, police and cultural policies (because non wage labor costs disappear). The costs for health care would be halved because doctors would not have to pay social security costs.

The UBI is mainly financed through the savings on the current social expenditures and a substantial rise of VAT (Value Added Tax). The idea is that net wages would remain unchanged.

Apart from the clearly liberal ideology behind Vivant's proposal – speaking about 'taxes' on labor instead of social contributions as being part of wages and of a 'society of welfare recipients', this proposal gives rise to serious doubts.

This contribution cannot analyze the detailed amounts, but a first look at the proposals does raise questions about their feasibility and adequacy. It is very improbable that net wages would remain unchanged. It would mean that workers would really gain with these proposals and pensioners would seriously lose. Net wages may remain unchanged indeed, if workers only pay the difference between the UBI and the former net wage.

A decent life, in Belgium, is not possible with 700 Euro per month. Those who work can raise their income. And those who earn enough can buy a private insurance against illness, unemployment and old age, without any solidarity. But is it possible to choose not to work if it means you have to live with 700 Euro a month? Is it possible for an aged person to live with 1050 Euro a month, let alone to enjoy your old age?

Many of the arguments in favor of the UBI disappear rapidly when translated into concrete amounts. In the European citizens' initiative it is stated one wants to shift from a 'compensatory' system towards an 'emancipatory' system, but 700 Euro a month can hardly be said to be sufficient to achieve this. Even 1000 Euro a month is hardly emancipatory.

The amounts for other countries are not any better. In Bulgaria the UBI would only cost 5,45 % of GDP but the amount would not rise above 37 Euro per month.

The current proposals for Germany, Spain and Finland all mention amounts around this same floor as in Belgium. (Perkkiö 2013) No one proposes an amount up to the poverty line (for Belgium: 1000 Euro per month). Apparently this is too optimistic and this means the UBI would not be sufficient to really eradicate poverty.

It just means that the UBI would not be enough to have a decent life, and mini-jobs will have to be added, flexible jobs that employers will be happy to provide on a temporary basis. In other words, the UBI could become a subsidy for employers.

Philippe Van Parijs, who plays a very important role in the promotion of a UBI, now proposes a European 'dividend' of 200 Euro a month for every citizen of the EU.(2014) Apart from this sad choice of economic terminology, the philosopher sees this UBI as a tool for giving the EU more legitimacy. However, people have economic and social rights. Why should they be satisfied with alms? And should this legitimacy not come from policies that promote and protect their rights?

3. Re-thinking social protection

However much one may want to introduce a universal system of basic income with individual rights, if a UBI implies that a substantial part of society would have to live with an amount beneath the poverty line, it is not convincing.

The advocates of a UBI have very good arguments, but the problems outweigh the advantages, and the funding is highly problematic.

The UBI could be an attractive proposal allowing for new thinking on social protection. However, this new thinking also accepts the economic reality and is not geared towards changing economic relationships. The UBI certainly should be further examined in order to see if other, more modulated versions could be more feasible.

At any rate, our social protection will have to be re-examined. Its fragmentation into many different sub-systems has to be countered. The way our welfare

states are currently dismantled is not acceptable. But trade unions are on the defensive and remain very silent whenever a progressive reform could be discussed. It means that our societies are now victims of neoliberal reforms. A partial decoupling of labor and income/social protection could be discussed. A passing on of all non wage labor costs to the whole of society should not.

A flexible labor market in favor of workers, lower and differently organized social contributions in order to avoid the delocalization of labor, territorialization of social rights, a better and simplified protection against unemployment, better pensions, different family allowances and a more efficient health care system focused on prevention, more redistribution and more solidarity. These points are perfectly possible but are insufficiently reflected on to-day.

Most current advocates of the UBI want to dismantle social protection and weaken the trade unions. We certainly may have reasons to criticize them, but they are the result of a century old social struggle and should not be abandoned. In order to eradicate poverty and to protect human rights, we do not need a UBI. There are other solutions possible, able to protect the poor and workers better.

3.1. The social commons

‘Commons’ refer to natural resources accessible to all members of society, such as air, water, mountains, land ... Commons are thus shared by all and cannot/should not be privatized/commoditized. The concept of commons is also used for cultural goods, such as our cultural heritage, literature, music, knowledge, digital commons like software...

The ‘social commons’ refer to our shared and common needs and rights.

The idea of working on ‘commons’ has emerged with the resistance to neoliberalism and a desire to go beyond the state vs market dichotomy. It aims to change the economic and societal standards. It concerns a series of practices, struggles and institutions geared towards a non-capitalist future.

‘Social commons’ is a new concept based on existing human rights covenants though strongly focusing on the collective dimension, labor law, social services as well as environmental rights. It wants to conceptualize a social protection that speaks to young people, that includes the wealthy, and that is able to answer to the new challenges. It should allow to radically ‘re-think social protection’, also going beyond the human rights approach.

‘Social commons’ is broader than ‘public goods’ or ‘common goods’ (non rivalry and non excludability) which remain commodities. They are more linked to the ‘common good’ as a political and philosophical concept which refers to the community of people and to its wellbeing.

The concept of ‘social commons’ is nothing more than a conceptual framework within which to re-think, broaden and strengthen social protection. It refers to that which is common to all people as members of society – at different territorial levels - and to our common life on this planet. It is inspired by the philosophy of ‘buen vivir’.(León 2010)

The starting point is that all people, wherever they live, in whatever country or economic system, in whatever political regime, have the same needs: food, shelter, resources to live, clothing, health care, education,... and from these needs follows that all people need protection. We can speak of 'commons', precisely because all share the same needs, even if the answers to fulfilling these needs can be different.

Protection can be given in two fundamentally different ways: in a competition model, which will lead to protection from other people, taking the form of a police or military state; in a cooperation model which will lead to protection from markets, it will take the form of economic and social rights. 'Social commons', then, are based on our common needs leading to common rights. They confirm the basic equality of all people and contribute to our collective and individual welfare. This means social commons are universal, valid for all people, wherever they live. But speaking of social commons implies we consider ourselves as being a society, or a political community, at different levels, from local to regional to national to continental and global. We are all part of this community and the protection we organize will be valid for all within the relevant community.

This not only means all are beneficiaries, it also means all have to contribute. There will be a redistribution of resources, but there should be more than that. All have a responsibility in his/her political community by paying taxes or by doing socially useful and necessary work.

This does not mean the social commons ignore class conflict, conflicts between social groups are there and will not disappear, but the objective should not be to eliminate a class, it should be to put minority classes in the minority, respecting their rights. It is what Chantal Mouffe calls 'agonistic' instead of 'antagonistic' relationships. (Mouffe 2005) There are no enemies to eliminate but adversaries to fight with. In fact classes have become very diverse, most countries have middle classes even if in Marxist terms, these are not considered a class. Social commons address the rights of all classes and puts into place universal social policies.

Talking about universalism obviously brings us to universal human rights. Human rights should not be seen as natural nor as moral rights. They are the consequence of a political decision of humankind to give every human being a basic set of political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights. We should add to this the third generation of rights or solidarity rights, like the right to development, and environmental rights such as water, land, biodiversity and clean air.

A problem here is that human rights, with the exception of the third generation, have been worded as being individual rights. There are arguments to see economic and social rights as collective rights, but this is not generally accepted. Moreover, if neoliberalism has to be countered, protection is needed for society itself. I have treated this problem elsewhere (Mestrum 2013) and will limit myself here to stating that individuals emerge from society and that societies need protection, threatened as they are by an economic system that only recognizes individuals. In their important book on inequalities, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) also point to the disastrous social consequences of income

inequalities, a result which also points to the need for protecting societies. This is all the more so since they are more than contractual arrangements for satisfying material needs; in fact, they are constitutive of the individual and also serve immaterial needs. (Flahault 2011) This is why we need 'commons', as a collective arrangement for protecting societies while preserving individual freedom. The political nature of human rights is, therefore, very important because it allows us to go beyond, in order to reflect on commons without de-linking from human rights and to protect the society or community, or let us simply say the group of human beings at different levels. The challenge then is to combine the promotion of individual liberty, collective rights and the protection of the collective being. This is at the heart of the social commons project.

Social commons then, emphasize the collective dimension of social protection. They refer to that which is common to all people as members of society and to our common life on this planet.

Being a cooperative model aimed at universal coverage at whatever level it applies, social commons will have to be built bottom-up in a participative way in order to respond to the real needs of people and to commonly defined rights.

The difference between commons and rights is that commons emerge from collective and participatory action and they are evidence of our existence as a 'political community' or 'society', a 'we', at whatever level we want to work. Social commons are more than human rights in that they are based on them but also go beyond, sustaining our being in community, strengthening our co-existence.

Social commons want to tackle the inequalities on which the current globalization thrives. Corporations are benefiting from differences in taxes and social protection systems, promoting migration and distorting labor markets and societies. Social convergence should thus also be at the heart of a social commons agenda.

This social convergence is aimed at the global level, though it should be obvious that different people with different priorities and development levels in their countries will develop diverging protection systems. However, basic rights and standards should be defined for all. This implies that policies will necessarily have to be multi-level, following the different levels of decision-making.

In order to fulfill its role, social commons should broaden the current social protection systems, including a modified system of social security and social assistance, labor law, social services and environmental rights. In this way, bringing the aims of labor and climate movements within one single framework, it should also be possible to promote closer links between them. It should also help to overcome the extreme fragmentation of rights movements.

Social commons then require cooperation between movements in order to organize common struggles. While all movements will want to preserve their specific identities and topics, a search for common aims should help to build broad alliances.

Social commons will necessarily be transformative. Going beyond assistentialism, attacking the roots of poverty and inequality, they will require a change in the economic system and in the democratic functioning of society. Social commons cannot be subordinated to an economic system but will eventually contribute to its shaping. As a cooperative model, it will necessarily need to reconsider economic competition, nationally and internationally. It will allow to introduce economic practice into the protection system, such as autonomous labor organization, food sovereignty methods, access of land and social services... It can lead to promoting a social and solidary economy. Social commons also will require a more direct democracy as well as a national and international fairer tax system.

While society will have to play a more important role in shaping the social commons, the State will also remain a crucial partner, not the least in setting and monitoring standards and rules. States will always have to guarantee political, civil, economic and social rights. Also, States will not be the only public actor, local authorities will also play a role, as will regional and global authorities and civil society itself. The neoliberal State which has emerged in these past decades is not fit to play this role. We need a State and public authorities that take responsibility for the welfare of people and able to work in a broader framework of international organizations.

3.2. Between social protection and UBI

'Social commons' somewhere fit in between our traditional social protection and the proposal for a 'basic income'. It has advantages over both of them.

Introducing a guaranteed minimum income, it avoids to pay allowances to people with higher incomes, which makes the system more affordable. Allowances, however, will have to be attributed in a non-stigmatizing way.

While requiring serious reforms of labor markets, social commons allow for maintaining a contributive protection system, based on insurances against labour accidents, unemployment and leading to pensions, whereas health care and family allowances, for instance, can pass to a non-contributive approach.

The reforms labor markets require, imply a drastic reduction of working hours, possibilities for sabbaticals, the formalization of all labor, overcoming the dichotomy of productive and re-productive work and introducing peer-to-peer methodologies. Social commons require a very active role for trade unions in protecting and monitoring labor rights and working conditions at the national and international level.

Social innovation is an excellent way of organizing the needed protection of society, overcoming the problem of un-conditionality. It can involve people in different formulas of self-organization without losing sight of the necessary equality of people and the publicly defined rules and standards.

Social commons give people more freedom and life choices, without allowing their withdrawal from society. Social commons require States and other public authorities that are responsible for the welfare of people.

The concept of 'social commons' is a methodological framework to envisage a better future for all people and to re-think and re-politicize social protection. It re-invigorates social policies instead of doing away with them. It is not a blueprint, it is not a defined project with a clear end result. It is a concept allowing for thinking of other solutions than the one we already have and the ones that are now proposed. Most of all it is an attempt for including all people in a protective environment, making room for diverse interests and alternative lifestyles, taking care of material and immaterial needs, individually and collectively, in a cooperative instead of a competitive way. The concept has no boundaries, it remains open to include more dimensions. It is a long term objective and a conceptual framework within which we can work at global social convergence as well as at economic and political transformation. Finally, as has been explained, it can become a tool for systemic change.

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