

Paper for 17th BIEN Congress, Portugal

Exclusion and threat as a societal intention

What factors prevent the introduction of an unconditional basic income? Most compelling is that people just do not want it. The driving force here seems to be an authoritarian personality, one that clearly does not want the increase in freedom that a basic income could achieve, demanding, rather, that every income must be earned by own work. This is in the knowledge that there will be losers, many of whom are left behind. The problem is an implicit form of anti-solidarity which requires that not everyone can participate, that not everyone can sit down to eat. In this point of view poverty serves not “only” as a deterrent or as an incentive. Poverty is seen as an end in itself, is seen as natural and necessary. Any possible abolition of it must be prevented.

Elias Canetti describes in “Masse und Macht” (English title: “Crowds and Power”) the figure of the “survivor”, whose own survival depends on sending others onwards into death. This notion, which Canetti applies particularly to warlords and those who act as such, can also apply to the desire to keep others in poverty and avoid saving them by means of a basic income.

This pessimistic finding is not irrefutable, as the authoritarian personality is not stable, but ambivalent. The support of coercion and freedom are unified in one and the same design of life and thought. Satisfaction about the poverty of others is unstable from the beginning. Empathy, in particular, is a constant “hazard” for the hard, inflexible ethos of exclusion. Jeremy Rifkin addresses the fact that empathy comes into being when we recognise that we are all mortal. In this way, resistance against the authoritarian personality can result. This is what Camus understands solidarity to be: people standing together as one front against death.