Basic income in the Swedish legislative debate: The forbidden topic

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Abstract
When it comes to welfare in general, Sweden’s legislation is certainly one of the most comprehensive in the world. Living up to the ideal of supporting its citizens and residents from the cradle to the grave, this Scandinavian country has expanded its laws exponentially in the last century to cover all aspects of individuals’ and families’ lives. Thus, it comes, then, as a particular surprise to discover that the notion of basic income has been - and still is - almost completely absent from the Swedish political debate (and has consequently remained off the agenda of the Swedish legislative bodies), while being one of the hottest topics around the European continent. The purpose of this article is to investigate the possible reasons why the idea of basic income is missing from Swedish legislative agenda and to draw some brief general conclusions that may be valid for all legislative actors operating in advanced capitalistic societies.

Keywords
Basic income, legislation, Sweden, welfare state, law

When it comes to welfare in general, Sweden’s legislation is certainly one of the most comprehensive in the world. Living up to the ideal of supporting its citizens and residents from the cradle to the grave, this Scandinavian country has expanded its laws exponentially in the last century to cover all aspects of individuals’ and families’ lives (Bergh, 2010; Hort, 2014). Swedish legislation has truly attempted (and, in general, has succeeded) in supporting all individuals, particularly those who somehow find themselves on the margins of society, e.g. the long-term unemployed, or who need specific help from the state, e.g. single parents (Bergh, 2004; Ginsburg, 2001; Kangas and Palme, 2005; Steinmo, 2010; Stråth, 2005). Thus, it comes as a particular surprise to discover that the notion of basic income (in Swedish, medborgarlön or basinkomst) – i.e. a salary paid by a political community to all its members on an individual basis, without means test or work
requirement’ in order to guarantee a certain level of income for all adults – has been - and still is - almost completely absent from the Swedish political debate (and has consequently remained off the agenda of the Swedish legislative bodies), while being one of the hottest topics around the European continent and even beyond it (Van Parijs, 2004: 8; see also Groot and van der Veen, 2000; van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Widerquist, 2019).

The lack of focus on the issue of basic income by the Swedish public is surprising, particularly given trends in social welfare figures in the country over the last decade. Recent data confirm that only a relatively low number of the Swedish population is living in ‘material and social poverty’ (around 3-4%, a figure that is similar to the other Nordic countries and way below the EU average) (Statistics Sweden, 2020). At the same time, these very numbers also point to an alarming rise in those ‘at-risk-of-poverty’, with the figure currently standing at around 16% (Eurostat, 2020; Statistics Sweden, 2019). However, despite these startling data, to date, there has been barely the slightest hint of discussion in the Swedish political, legal or social arena as to the possibility of realising the welfare state’s ideal of supporting ‘weaker individuals’ by providing a basic income – financial support designed to ensure that the recipients can retain a decent standard of living (Andersson, 2000; Janson, 2003; Torry, 2019).

Indeed, if one looks at the Swedish map in respect of welfare measures, it becomes apparent that there has been one single small-scale attempt to introduce some kind of partial basic income through a ‘non means-tested social assistance benefits’ scheme. The experiment has been introduced in Linköping, a city in the South of the country, where some categories of welfare recipients have been given economic assistance without an external evaluation of the beneficiaries’ ‘actual’ needs being conducted, but rather based on a self-evaluation completed by the same recipients (Börjeson, 2017; Östlund and Holmström, 2008). However, it should be noted that while this attempt is not only limited to a tiny fraction of the Swedish population, it has also been conducted in a kind of legislative ‘penumbra’ (Proposition, 2018; Regeringskansliet, 2017; cf. Börjeson, 2017). This non-means-tested partial basic income scheme has been designed and introduced solely by the local welfare agency, with rather limited explicit encouragement or approval from central legislative and administrative bodies. Moreover, the attempt has lately come under pressure from both central agencies and public actors (Regeringskansliet, 2017). The absence of publicity

1. It is worth noticing that a neighboring country, Finland, had a two-year basic income experiment in 2017-2018, where a government agency (the Social Insurance Agency, or KELA) gave 2,000 unemployed citizens a certain fixed amount a month (EUR 560), regardless of any other income they may have had or whether they were actively looking for work (Kela, 2020a). In this work the Finnish experiment is not directly investigated and considered for several reasons. First, the experiment had a rather purely ‘academic-administrative’ nature: it was developed not so much in the legislative arena (which is the focus of this work), but rather in Finnish academia and public administration (in particular by Olli Kangas, a social science scholar and also director of the Social Insurance Agency). Second, and differently, for instance, from the Linköping scheme in Sweden, due to the fact that the experiment concluded quite recently, third-party data and/or literature on the case are yet to be published, with the only data published to date coming from the governmental agency itself (Kela, 2020b). Third, Finland, for extremely complex historical and social reasons, generally has a legal, political and social system that is quite distinct from the Swedish one. A classic example in this respect is the different role that religion and church (and the consequent religious ethics) have played in each country. In Sweden, the Lutheran religion and its values has been an integral part in the construction of the modern state and national identity, whereas in Finland, due to various and complex historical circumstances, religious ethics have played a very limited role. Therefore, a comparison between Finland and Sweden, even if only mentioned, would have needed such a long explanation of the differences between the two countries that, in the end, the majority of this work would have been used simply by setting the background for such a comparison, neglecting the main theme of exploring the reasons as to the lack in Sweden of legislative discussion about basic income.
around the scheme is even more surprising, considering that at least to date the Linköping experiment has been a financial success, by reducing the financial burden on the local welfare agency; and also a social success, as the trial has resulted in a higher percentage of welfare beneficiaries being able to organise their own lives successfully (Henriksson and Önstorpp, 2006; Thor and Ulvenäs, 2017; cf. Börjeson, 2017).

Therefore, one can say without hesitation that the idea of introducing a basic income scheme, either in its full form or a partial version, is rather absent from the political and legal agenda of the Swedish legislator (Janson, 2003). The very thought of introducing such reform into the political debate is considered political suicide by several scholars (Andersson, 2000; Ekstrand, 2013; Lee 2018). While the initiative might conform to the ideologies of some political groups in Sweden, e.g. the Green Party and some other small parties, some statistical polls show that the majority of the Swedish population consistently regards the proposal to introduce a basic income guarantee for all adult individuals with a rather marked hostility. This opposition is also widespread across the political spectrum (Andersson and Kangas, 2002; Andersson and Kangas, 2005; Birnbaum, 2005).

The purpose of this article is, then, to investigate, from a broad legislative agenda-setting perspective, the possible reasons why the idea of basic income (either full or partial) – a welfare model that is quite commonly discussed in public debate elsewhere in respect of state-financed financial and economic aid for people in need – is missing from the Swedish legislative debate (Rasch 2014). To achieve this goal, the first part of the article outlines the basic principles that feature in the Swedish political and legislative arenas in terms of individual welfare and the role of the state (and its public agencies) in this function. The second part continues in a speculative direction by investigating the possible reasons behind the deep-rooted and widespread refusal, on both societal and political levels in Sweden, to entertain the idea of any form of basic income, resulting in the conspicuous absence of this institutionally viable welfare policy from the programmes of all major political and legislative actors. In the final part, a brief and general conclusion will be drawn based on the Swedish reluctance to embrace the idea of basic income. This consideration can be seen as valid, in general, for all legislative actors operating in advanced capitalistic societies by stressing the need to focus more, in the literature, on the cultural factors in attempting to understand the reasons why basic income may have no political traction in a specific country.

**Politics and law of the (fragmented) Swedish welfare system**

As stated above, Sweden is considered to have some of the most generous welfare programmes in the world – and with good reason. The legislative approach in this area has been to build a highly complex and fragmented system of welfare benefits, each of which are intended to cover a specific need (Kaufmann, 2013; Niklasson, 2012). Moreover, for the implementation of each of the programmes, either the legislator creates a new public agency with the specific task of implementing one (or a few) part(s) of the welfare programme or, as more often is the case, it divides the

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2. In 2013, 2015, and 2019 some members of the Green Party tabled a motion in the Swedish Parliament requesting the establishment of an inquiry into the feasibility of a basic income programme in the country. The proposals were bluntly rejected each time by all of the other parties sitting in the Parliament (Le Moine, 2019; Wetterstrand, 2017). The other parties that support the idea of a basic income in their manifestoes are Feministiskt initiativ (Feminist initiative), Piratpartiet (Pirate Party), Vändpunkt (Turning Point), Enhet (Unity) and Basinkomstpartiet (Basic Income Party), none of which have been able to win a seat in the Swedish Parliament in recent memory.
responsibility for the administration of the various welfare benefits among already existing agencies (Hjern, 2007; Johansson, 2013). As highlighted recently by report of the Ministry of Finance, ‘Swedish social insurance consists of around 50 different types of benefits and aims to provide citizens with financial security and support in, among other things, illness, childbirth and parenthood, disability and old age’ (Finansdepartementet, 2019: 41 [translated by the author]).

The basic policy behind such specific legislation is first to categorise all the needs an economically weak individual (or family) may have, e.g. housing, medical care, and transportation. Following that, the evaluation and eventual fulfilment of each need (or group thereof) is assigned to an agency - or more commonly, to various branches within each agency (Hjortsberg and Ghatnekar, 2001; Ryberg-Welander, 2018). For instance, while the national Swedish Social Insurance Agency manages financial support for individuals and families for housing costs, the other non-housing related costs are covered in the financial support provided by the local Social Services office (Socialförsäkringsbalk, 2010; Socialstyrelse, 2020; Wehlander and Madell, 2013). As pointed out above, this very expansive and far-reaching welfare legislation is extremely encompassing and is often considered to be a jungle of statutory provisions, intertwined with administrative practices and rules, involving several public agencies – often in a conflicting manner (Bergmark and Minas, 2006; Westerhäll, 1990). However, such legislation also sends a clear message with respect to the favourable general political and legal environments in which – hypothetically – legislation on basic income should and could work.

First, Swedish welfare legislation is based on a generally positive attitude held by both legislators and public agencies in respect of the general principle underlying the introduction of basic income. By having such extended and firmly-rooted welfare systems, Sweden (in contrast with countries like the USA) clearly sends the signal that the population and its political representatives are generally favourable to the idea of using taxpayers’ money and state organisations to help people who are not capable, for various reasons, of earning a minimum level of income, and thus providing such underprivileged individuals with the possibility to live a decent life (Björklund Larsen, 2018; Rothstein and Trägårdh, 2007; Svallfors 2011; Thakur et al., 2003). Sweden’s population and its political representatives in the legislative bodies are very familiar with and, in most cases, favourable to the so-called ‘social-democratic model’ of a welfare state (Rothstein and Trägårdh, 2007; Svallfors 2011). This model implies the structuring of public service (mostly through statutes) to grant access to benefits and services based exclusively on citizenship in order to limit, as much as possible, the reliance of citizens on highly instable factors which are often not based on individual choices, namely, family and the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011; Luzkow, 2015). In short, the general and robust aversion to the idea of legislating on basic income may be quite understandable in countries such as the USA. There, the individualistic or ‘liberal’ perspective has been considered to be the foundation on which to build society and the work of the state, and welfare financing and its implementation tend to be of a more mixed-nature, where private actors always play a fundamental role in assisting the state to implement its welfare policies, e.g. by encouraging charity organisations through beneficial tax legislation (Béland et al., 2014; Cox, 2019; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Morgan and Campbell, 2012; cf. van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017). However, looking at the general political climate in Sweden in respect of state-financed welfare, the rebuttal is more difficult to understand, at least prima facie. As pointed out by a political scientist,

‘[t]he Swedish model is generally associated with low poverty levels, a low level of inequality, a high employment rate, a high level of employment among women, and a situation in which disadvantaged
groups such as single mothers and people with disabilities are more likely than in other countries to live on terms that are not very different from those enjoyed by the majority of the population’ (Palme, 2002: 1).

In the Swedish political context the ideology of basic income, namely, using public finances to economically support those existing on the fringes of society and who are - more or less - temporarily in a situation of need due to a lack of funds or market support, e.g. through unemployment benefits, is not a foreign one (Björklund and Freeman, 1997; Magnusson, 2000).

Second, the Swedish legal environment is definitely not hostile to introducing a legislative regulation of basic income, at least for the individuals fulfilling the residence criteria (Erhag, 2016). The most important of the Swedish constitutional laws, the Instrument of Government, was enacted in 1974; in its sections on basic rights and liberties, this law has codified the fundamental principle of the Swedish version of the welfare state, i.e. the political version of it, which began to emerge in the late 1930s (Hort, 2005; Korpi, 1978; Magnusson, 2000; Valocchi, 1992). In particular, Article 2 of the Instrument states the following:

‘The personal, economic and cultural welfare of the individual shall be fundamental aims of public activity. In particular, the public institutions shall secure the right to employment, housing and education, and shall promote social care and social security, as well as favorable conditions for good health’ (Sveriges Riksdag, 2016: 65).

The entire Swedish legislation (both before and after the 1974 constitutional reform) is built on the fundamental legal principle that the duty of the state is not only to regulate in such a way as to ensure to each and every individual some kind of work (or at least the possibility to enter the labour market) and a place to live (i.e. economic and social security) (Edling, 2018; Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 2000), but the state must also legislate (and public agencies must operate actively) to ensure each individual’s social security, i.e. provide a net of economic and financial measures designed to offer ‘equality in living conditions, and active participation in social life’, regardless of their (e.g. family) background and position in the market (Socialjärnslag, 2001: Chapter 1, Art. 1; see also Frykman et al., 2008; Korpi and Palme, 2004). Thus it is clear that in the Swedish legal arena, the introduction of legislation on basic income would scarcely meet with legal objections of a constitutional or administrative nature. In other words, this welfare institution could easily find a place in the Swedish legal landscape, in the case that the beneficiaries are residents within the country.

As a result, this situation – the relatively non-hostile environment of Swedish general political and legal discourses in respect of a basic income – makes it necessary to investigate possible explanations for the general social climate that has convinced political representatives that legislative discussion of such an institution is like debating the existence of UFOs and therefore should be avoided as much as possible (Bergh, 2019; Janson, 2000; Larsson, 2019).

**Hostility towards the basic income: Blame it on Martin Luther (and state individualism)**

As highlighted above, for the legal world, the introduction of basic income (at least for Swedish citizens) is fully in accordance with fundamental legal principles of Swedish social
These laws are indeed based on the idea that the state should provide individuals with all the help necessary – including financing – to guarantee them and their families a minimum level of support required for the pursuit of a decent personal and social life (Thakur et al., 2003; cf. Furniss and Tilton, 1977).

Here, it is necessary to examine other arenas that tend to influence legislative processes in Sweden, as they do in other advanced capitalistic welfare states (Habermas, 1998; Luhmann, 2004; Schustereder, 2010). One should start with the most obvious motivation for opposing a guarantee of basic income to all Swedish citizens or residents, namely, the economic one (Coote and Yazici, 2019; Greenstein, 2019; OECD, 2017; Prady, 2017; Spicker, 2017). Even if economic concerns are likely to be the first type of opposition, by citing the heavy burden of such welfare measures on state finances, the economic objection is actually also the least well-founded and the easiest one to rebut (Torry, 2013; Torry, 2019; Wehner, 2019). As a result, the economic argument has not garnered much attention in recent decades when basic income has been rather timidly put forward for discussion among legislative actors, e.g. when the Green Party hinted very shyly at the idea some years ago (Le Moine, 2019). The weakness of the economic argument in legislative discussions has its roots in the fact that – counterintuitively – several studies around the world show that in reality, the adoption of a basic income is not burdensome for state finances (Benson, 2018; Morgan et al., 2019; Nikiforos et al., 2017; Pereira, 2017; Reed and Lansley, 2016; cf. Macdonald, 2016).

The advantage of embracing this welfare institution can be traced in two types of economic effect: one of a direct nature and the other of a more indirect nature, and both of which have also been proven in Sweden by the only case of a quasi-basic income, i.e. the abovementioned Linköping scheme. From a state finance perspective, the direct benefit derives from the fact that introducing a unique welfare measure such as basic income inevitably brings with it reduced involvement of public agencies, and fewer personnel are involved in the process of evaluating and implementing support for economically vulnerable persons (Camplin, 2013; De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2011; De Wispelaere and Stirton, 2013; Offe, 2019). With one single agency in charge and fewer people managing all the cases of basic income, this administrative simplification leads not only to faster turnaround times and a slimmer bureaucracy apparatus (which usually means lower costs); it almost always also leads to a reduced degree of administrative conflicts among the different agencies or departments and between the agencies and the potential beneficiaries of their decisions (Handler and Hasenfeld, 2006; Pereira, 2017).

In addition to such direct benefits, the studies (and the Linköping scheme) also demonstrate economic benefits of a more indirect nature. In contrast with fragmented welfare measures, which tend to keep recipients in a state of dependency, similar to the one where children need to ask parents for money for specific purchases, basic income is closer to a ‘normal’ salary, in the sense of a single monthly payment being paid to the individual who is free to use the funds at their own discretion. In the cases at least where basic-income payments have been applied to limited local realities, it is evident that basic income has the capacity to increase the sense of responsibility among the recipients in terms of how to allocate these limited financial resources in an optimal manner for themselves and their family (Groot, 2004; Keegan, 2018; Mays, 2019). In turn, this

3. Due to space constraints, discussion of the problematic extension of basic income to non-EU migrants with a permanent residence permit has not been included in the analysis provided in this work (Koning, 2019; Parolin and Sjöland, 2020; Pioch, 2005).
similar-to-a-normal-salary income facilitates a faster reintroduction (of a greater number) of individuals into productive cycles of societies, where financial resources for individuals and families are usually a fixed monthly sum of money to be allocated to the individuals in - it is hoped - a rational manner (Kangas et al., 2017; van Parijs, 2009; Wehner, 2019; cf. Lindahl, 2019).

Since the economic motivations for rejecting the legislative establishment of basic income are easily dismissed (also by empirical data), and these potential counterarguments are also familiar to the political actors sitting in the representative bodies, one should look at other areas to find the reasoning behind the hard and widespread Swedish refusal to consider this welfare institution. In particular, one should highlight two components of modern Sweden. One is a cultural feature and the other is a more specific political characteristic of this Scandinavian country.

First, despite its modern secular character, many of the Swedish cultural traits are rooted in the Protestant religion and its work ethic (Danielson and Stryker, 2014; Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Jawad, 2012; van Beek, 2010). As pointed out by Max Weber, the Lutheran version of this religious movement particularly emphasises the idea that work is the key element for an individual to be included in the social fabric (Weber, 2001 [1930]; see also Kettunen, 2010; cf. Hilson, 2008). As opposed to the Catholic religion, where attending church and public religious festivities are the means of positioning oneself in a community, the Protestant religion underpinning Swedish society stresses that the contribution the individual makes to society must be of an economically quantifiable nature. This means that every member of a community must work, i.e. must perform an activity that in some way benefits the community at large and is therefore rewarded with a certain amount of compensation. Despite the extreme secularisation of contemporary Swedish society and culture, this work ethic of religious origins has become so ingrained into the Swedish culture that, as recently pointed out by a Swedish scholar, even today ‘the [Swedish] citizen is not just a welfare beneficiary or client but also a responsible elector and taxpayer, i.e. a subscriber to the Lutheran work ethic on Sundays as well as workdays’ (Hort, 2005: 163; see also Feldmann, 2007; Giorgi and Marsh, 1990; Kangas and Kvist, 2018; Tanzi and Schuknecht, 2000).

This cultural value has been translated in what can be defined as a dogma of the Swedish political discourse when it comes to the relation between work and social welfare, i.e. the idea of the ‘work principle’ (arbetslinjen) where, in order to benefit from the generous Swedish welfare system, ‘one should either work, looking for work or study’ (Andersson, 2000: 234; see also Bergmark and Palme, 2003; Eriksson, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Huo, 2009; Kautoo, 2010; Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 2006). This cultural background is easily detectable through the similar and general rejection of the ‘begging’ phenomenon, which has exploded in recent years in Sweden, mostly due to the arrival of unskilled and unemployed immigrants from EU countries of the former Communist bloc (Kahl, 2005; Kahl, 2009). While there is widespread tolerance for street performers (i.e. musicians, mimes and others performing in public places for gratuities), most Swedes – and thus their representatives in the legislature – have a general attitude of non-comprehension - and deep aversion - towards individuals who receive financial compensation for not doing any work (Ask et al., 2016; Forssell et al., 2019; Stendahl, 2019). In the Swedish mind, these persons are not contributing to society and, in the end, are not part of it (Hansson, 2019; Heclo, 2010; Lee and Farrell, 2003). Similarly, the Swedish cultural and religious traits result in an unacceptance of the idea of financing individuals with a fixed income, without expecting the recipient to carry out some kind of activity that will benefit the community, and ultimately, according to Lutheran beliefs, help, through such an activity, to establish the positions of the beneficiaries within the community.
The second component explaining this deep rejection of the idea of basic income in Sweden has a more specific political nature, though this feature may also find its roots in the Protestant religion. As pointed out by many scholars, the endorsement of the Protestant religion as the fundamental element of the construction of an idea of ‘national community’ in turn activated in Sweden a process focusing upon the representative of such a community, i.e. with the State being considered the ‘natural and only referent’ when it comes to solving economic and social problems (Abelin, 2019; Kahl, 2009; Schröder, 2013). Therefore, the state actors, and their social-democratic ideology in respect of social welfare, have traditionally had an almost monopolist position within the Swedish political discourse when it comes to deciding on the ‘best’ way to tackle the welfare issues. Non-state actors, such as private charities and NGOs, are usually left at the margins of the decision-making (and legislative) policymaking processes, regardless of the role such private actors may then play in the subsequent implementation of such policies (Löfstrand, 2012; Pessi et al., 2009; Stoica, 2010; Stryjan and Wijkström, 1996).

It is true, as pointed out above, that the general political (and social) climate is favourable to the basic principle of a welfare state as a political model for Sweden; both the population and its political representatives accept the idea of using taxpayers’ money to help economically weak individuals - and for this reason there is also general acceptance of a high level of taxation (Björklund Larsen, 2017; Sheahen, 2012). However, one should also consider that the Swedish welfare state, while accepting this principle, has been implemented in its social-democratic version, i.e. as seen above, with the basic strategy of economically helping all individuals to free themselves from the chains of ‘unchosen (by the community) constraints’ such as market forces and families (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010; Erhag, 2016; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

To implement this version of the welfare state, a precise choice was made, in the post-Second World War period, in favour of a state individualism modality, i.e. the central positioning and functions of the state actors in social and family policies in order to emancipate everyone ‘from the constraints of family and community…[so that] the basic unit of society is the individual, not the family or any community or association mediating between individual and state’ (Trägårdh and Svedberg, 2012: 229-230; cf. Jacobsson, 2011). The basic idea has been - and still is - to ‘liberate’ individuals from family and market through exclusive help from the organisation which - at least ideally - best represents, and has been chosen by, the Swedish community, namely, the state and its organisation (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010; Hearn, 2009; Kaufmann, 2013; Klinenberg, 2012; cf. Björnberg, 2012).

For instance, freedom from market forces has been pursued by developing labour legislation that are generous to the employees, while freedom from family has been delivered by offering state-financed loans to students who wish to continue their studies after reaching school leaving age, regardless of the incomes of their parents (Anxo, 2010; Kenworthy, 2004). As a result, the modality to realise the social-democratic version of the welfare state has freed individuals by (intentionally) linking them heavily to the ‘collectivity’, namely, the state and its organisations (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2006; Sejersted, 2011). This exclusive link of individuals to the state has been achieved, for instance, by compelling unemployed individuals to complete state-financed programmes in order to be eligible for very generous unemployment benefits, or by assigning student loan administration to a public agency – the National Board of Student Aid – instead of private financial institutions (Bell and Jones, 2005; Fenger, 2006).

With state-based individualism as the key modality through which taxpayers’ money is used to help economically vulnerable individuals, it does not come as a surprise that this aid has been structured to function in two simultaneous directions. On the one hand, the legislative policy adopted in welfare programmes has been to implicitly dismiss the recognition of a general
individual basic need for a ‘decent life’. The acknowledgement of such a general need could certainly have been best pursued by applying equally general welfare tools such as basic income. However, due to its vagueness, this general goal would also have freed the individual - at least relatively - from the collective (i.e. the state and its agencies) because defining a ‘decent life’ (e.g. better housing or better education) would have been left to each individual’s discretion; consequently, the individual would also make decisions about where to invest the state financial support (Birnbaum, 2012; Mays, 2019; Raventós, 2007; van Parijs, 1995; cf. Lewis, 2005). On the other hand, the option in favour of state-based individualism has pushed Swedish legislators in a different direction instead: to encourage what has been described above as a more earmarked distribution of the financial welfare measures – that is, by binding economic support to the ‘specifically selected needs’ of each individual (e.g. child support, housing support, transportation). By earmarking financial welfare benefits, the citizens’ representatives (i.e. the state) would then be able - at least in theory - to exert better control over the individual and their operation in society. As recently noted by a legal scholar, in the Nordic countries

‘[i]nstead of individual social rights, the creation of modern social security scheme was legitimized by the need to secure the material well-being of all segments of the population equally. This task was entrusted to the state (i.e. to society, in Nordic parlance)’ (Kotkas, 2017: 21).

In short, state individualism has required a Swedish legislative welfare policy based on treating economically vulnerable individuals more like small children (giving them a sum of money for buying a certain thing) than teenagers (giving them a monthly allowance to be spent as they please) (Jensen and van Kersbergen, 2017; Rojas, 2005; Sandmo, 1998). This choice has been made to keep the beneficiaries dependent on their ‘parents’, namely, the Swedish community at large and its ideal embodiment in the Swedish public administration, and the notions of these institutions on what constitutes ‘a decent life’ in Sweden.

Conclusion

To conclude this brief work, there is a lesson that legislators can learn from the total refusal in Swedish political and legal discourse to even speak of the possibility of introducing a basic income for all its citizens. As pointed out by Jürgen Habermas, ‘the law of a concrete legal community must, if it is to be legitimate, at least be compatible with moral standards that claim universal validity beyond the legal community’ (Habermas, 1998: 282). Even in advanced capitalist economies such as Sweden, the cultural frameworks within which the legal phenomenon takes place matter and the economic discourse – though important – is not always the primary driving force for legitimately promoting - or as in this case, stopping - new legislation (Licht et al., 2005; Rothstein, 1998; Suchman, 1995; cf. Habermas, 1998; Waldron, 1999). Components such as the political settings and, even more importantly, the cultural background of a certain community, i.e. ‘those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation’, must often be considered by the legislative apparatus as fundamental factors in choosing certain legislative polices over others (Guiso et al., 2006: 23). The engine of the legislative processes in a capitalist system may be the economy, its need, and its dogmas, but the key to start this motor must often be sought in the glove compartment of culture. Nowadays, when it comes to basic income, this key to start the legislative engine cannot be found in the cultural compartment of Swedish society.
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