

## SPECTACLE, VALUE, AND BASIC INCOME; OR, LABOR AND THE “MADDENING STATE”

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How could one criticize something so obvious as labor, or even just think that labor itself could fall into crisis?

—Robert Kurz, “Arbeit, Arbeit, Arbeit”

The corpse mediates between the state and the people.

—Begoña Aretxaga, “Maddening States”

Basic income—the policy of paying every member of society a minimum income regardless of the worthiness of their needs or their willingness to work—has existed as a proposal for some time. It has famously seen promotion by pundits and political thinkers across the ideological spectrum. Even in Europe, one often hears how even arch-conservative U.S.-Americans such as Richard Nixon and Milton Friedman supported this apparently open-handed policy. In Germany, where I did the fieldwork described in this essay, commentators have frequently held up universal basic income as a uniquely “post-ideological” innovation.<sup>1</sup> It indeed finds promoters and detractors within every political party represented in the German parliament.

The politics on the ground, however, seem to follow their own logic. In spite of drawing adherents from across social and political groups, support for basic in-

come seems insistently to collide with forces of conservatism engrained in popular consciousness. The result is a policy proposal indeed capable of scrambling political definitions and producing new alliances, but one more often seeming “stalled” (Ferguson 2015, 158, 200)—unable to advance through institutional channels for no clear reason. I take on this problem by arguing that the categorical relaxation of labor discipline represented by a basic income policy challenges ubiquitous experiences of value firmly lodged in popular consciousness. Basic income is not simply a question of who works and who does not, nor even a question of how economic goods are to be distributed among consumers. It is also a question of how economic value, and with it much of daily life, makes sense.

To an important degree, this ethnography shows that we can know the foundational character of labor through its undoing. While not everyone must work to live, labor is widely understood as the quintessentially legitimate solution to personal need. This links it closely to economic value as an expression of that need—an understanding further bolstered by the social state,<sup>2</sup> whose form suggests redistribution as a supplement to an ostensibly prior circulation of economic value. In general, the social state is capable of providing welfare, but does not manage to alter labor’s primacy in the social constitution of value. Because they suggest that labor might be more than supplemented by state-led redistribution, basic income policies trouble this arrangement. In Germany as elsewhere, a threat to the social construction of economic value is bound to emerge as a threat to society.

Even for the most firm adherents of this policy, it results in an experience of spectacle and abjection such as the one described below. My informants protest against a social state that penalizes them for refusing arduous, low-wage work. This is not, however, a “labor struggle” (*Arbeitskampf*) of the type that fueled the great political upheavals of the nineteenth century that ultimately led to the emergence of *Sozialstaatlichkeit*—“social-state-ness”—as a core principle of everyday German culture. The stakes for my informants do not include wages, nor even the social guarantees (*Sozialgarantien*) that have allowed capital and labor to operate at a standstill for well over a century by supplementing those wages. Rather, my informants open a conflict centered on the very *category* of labor<sup>3</sup>—one that asks about the *general* role work has in the construction of legitimate political subjects, rather than about the *particular* wages paid for work or the social guarantees that might surround the institution of work.

The political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011, 8) puts the point in the following way: “The activity of labor and the social relations that shape, direct and manage it” are “the locus of capitalist valorization.” She does not suggest here that labor

is the source of value, as many people did in the time of Adam Smith or David Ricardo (an idea frequently derided as the “labor theory of value”). Rather, Weeks claims that labor operates as a crucial—indeed *the* crucial—category of quotidian experience through which subjects interpret economic value. Weeks draws this insight from the reinterpretation of Karl Marx’s *Grundrisse* and *Capital* given several decades ago by [Moishe Postone \(1993\)](#). A similar point, also ultimately attributed to Marx, can be found in the work of the German “value critic” [Robert Kurz \(2011\)](#); see epigraph). At the center of both Postone’s and Kurz’s project sits the notion that the crucial intervention made by the “mature” Marx involves his systematic exploration of economic value as “abstract labor time.” Marx argues that the reduction of many different kinds of activities to the single category of labor crucially allows economic value to be legible not just as individual preference (i.e., as a disutility outweighed by the utility found in wages) but as a genuinely social and cultural phenomenon. Focusing on the way in which abstract labor of this type is constructed—and not on the ostensibly revolutionary point of view of workers elsewhere supposed by Marx—means eschewing the “worldview Marxism” ([Postone 1993](#)) and “class struggle fetishism” ([Kurz and Lohoff 1989](#)) that have long given meaning to readings of *Capital* while nonetheless hampering key insights into capital itself. Ultimately, by understanding the category of abstract labor, especially in relation to the conceptual achievement of economic value and the resulting circulation of commodities, we can also comprehend economic relationships dominated by capital in reasonably holistic terms.

On the basis of this approach, [Weeks \(2011, 145\)](#) argues that “basic income can be demanded as a way to gain some measure of distance and separation from the wage relation, and that distance might in turn create the possibility of a life no longer so thoroughly and relentlessly dependent upon work for its qualities.” The point here is not that basic income makes for a good way to provide for needs, that it is more affordable than administering the current social state, that it would have a salutary affect on wages, or some such. While each of these points merit debate as rational policy goals, Weeks rather insists that basic income, by puncturing the category of abstract labor, provides a window onto a society structured by economic exploitation. The very commitment to basic income helps to uncouple ordinary experience from a material dependence on wage-earning that is constructive of the phenomenon of economic value itself, rather than simply some set of economic benefits acquired through work.

I have the following to add to Weeks’s argument: first, achieving this kind of “distance and separation” is no simple matter; and, second, the actual form this

achievement takes reveals many of the underlying issues to which she refers. In many ways, basic income in Germany constitutes a relatively minor policy change. As I describe in the following section, the German social state has already established an “existential minimum” (*Existenzminimum*) below which incomes can fall only for purposes of discipline and punishment. At least by formal definition, a basic income would attain if the monetary sanctions used to these ends were simply stricken from the law. Were this the case, wage relationships would quite obviously continue to exist on a mass scale, and abstract labor would likely continue to function as a basic formative device for German society. Still, basic income would open up a novel, and at least initially threatening, space within which the obviousness of the category of labor could not be taken for granted.

The informants with whom I worked recognize that achieving basic income is not a straightforward matter. They make reasoned arguments about basic income, and are indeed happy to have long discussions about, for example, the effects of basic income on wage levels, taxation, and unionization across a variety of class and income groups. Nonetheless, the core of their political engagement involves recourse to the spectacular. This brings me to the second theoretical focus of the present essay. Theatrical and provocative displays centered on the lives of the unemployed are preferred to more traditional political organizing. The resulting actions (*Aktionen*) tend to foreground loss and abjection in the course of a direct engagement with the public.

I intend to theorize these actions here not as tactical maneuvers, nor even as well-wrought strategies. Rather, I approach them more holistically. As unemployed people, my informants find themselves faced with a shared, collective fear and dread about the loss of labor discipline. They participate in protest in reaction to these feelings as they might encounter them both in others and in themselves. Particularly notable in Germany is a thriving discourse on “social scroungers” (*Sozialschmarotzer*—not dissimilar to the U.S.-American notion of the “welfare cheat”) that frames the unemployed as a general threat to society. Basic income policy would seem to generalize the tension that underlies this discourse—making the putative “scrounging” of the unemployed into an accepted norm. The result is a form of protest that confronts deeply embedded norms by mobilizing figures of abjection in spectacular fashion.

To address this aspect of my data, I turn to several basic definitions of spectacle drawn from the media and social theorist Guy Debord. For a basic definition of spectacle, Debord has yet to be surpassed. He describes a collapse of relationality in spectacular moments, allowing for characteristically transfixed subjectivities

to emerge in an otherwise fluid and interactional world (Debord 1977). However, I find some aspects of Debord's approach limiting, and turn to the insights generated by Begoña Aretxaga's more ethnographically specific research on political protest in Northern Ireland to extend his insights. Aretxaga (1995) shows how spectacular political protests can be linked to the abject. In her ethnography, political subjectivity finds itself transfixed through an encounter with abjection. In her fieldwork, critics contest the highly rationalized penal state imposed as part of British colonial control of Northern Ireland by mobilizing feces, menstrual blood, and starving bodies as material that defies the state's control by virtue of its abject nature. In my fieldwork, starving bodies, gravestones, and money are similarly deployed.

My argument, then, has two sides. On the one side lies an argument about labor and value. It emphasizes the notion that economic value only emerges when labor is recognized as quintessentially legitimate. On the other side we have an argument about abjection and spectacle. It emphasizes the notion that abjection and spectacle alter the deep attachment to labor this arrangement implies. The attachment to labor might be a psychic one, as when people derive a sense of individual dignity or identity from work. More important for my purposes, however, is that this attachment is also built into institutions such as the social state by virtue of its role in the mediation of economic value. Thus confronting the public with the notion that labor is *not per se* legitimate unleashes, in a spectacular manner, a hidden process of abjection usually concealed by the hegemonic form of the social state.

## BACKGROUND

Since 2003, the German state has maintained a single level of benefit for all those unemployed for more than six months. This so-called Hartz-IV payment is named for the fourth section of the Hartz reforms of labor market policy enacted into law in 2002 (see Figure 1). In West Germany after World War II (and subsequently in the "new states" of the former East Germany after 1990), unemployment benefits were primarily set to a percentage of previous wages. Although considerable variability existed, these benefits were generally maintained over the long term. This helped credit the German social state with maintaining social structures even in the face of growing unemployment after the 1970s, and continues to contribute to the international reputation of the German social state as generous in its protections of workers. Yet the Hartz reforms upended a central tenet of this tradition by establishing an "existential minimum" (*Existenzminimum*) to which all benefits would be limited. Many who were already unemployed, but

who nevertheless had well-paying careers behind them, experienced the Hartz reforms as a major disaster. My informants frequently describe “falling” or “slipping” (*rutschen*) into a beleaguered or blighted existence after 2003. Indeed, it is interesting to note that although some of those at the lowest social aid level of benefit actually received higher benefit payments after 2003, they still complained about the Hartz reforms as entailing a loss in status because of the explicitly labeled “minimum existence” it offered.



**Figure 1.** Peter Hartz, the former Volkswagen executive and “architect” of the Hartz labor market reforms that bear his name. Photo by Alexander Kowalski.

Perhaps most crucial in the historical shift toward “Hartz” (as the current social benefits regime is usually called) were the new powers given to job counselors (*Arbeitsvermittler*) to levy sanctions on their clients. A missed appointment with a counselor could often result in a 10 percent reduction in benefits for a month or two, but repeated refusals to comply with a counselor’s wishes (especially refusal to apply for a low-wage job) could result in 30 percent, 60 percent, or even 100 percent sanctions. Given policymakers’ renewed emphasis on the need for the unemployed’s “activation” (*Aktivierung*) through the use of sanctions, it seems unsurprising that the current system of benefits generates constant complaints from

unemployed people about counselors' punitive attitudes and unfairness. While job counselors can be helpful to their clients in important ways, most unemployed people understand that the primary role of these government workers is to push those they counsel toward low-wage, insecure, and part-time work.

Beginning in 2014, I became acquainted with a circle of protestors who sought to draw attention to the plight of Hartz-IV recipients in creative and provocative ways. It is not unusual for unemployed people to fake an illness or otherwise prevaricate in the face of their job counselors' demands. This new group of informants, however, distinguished themselves by the way they explicitly refused to follow this course, sometimes formulating a "life without chicanery" (*Existenz ohne Schikanen*) as an explicitly political demand. Indeed, often their goal was to confront or provoke their counselors by refusing low-wage work, garnering sanctions as a point of pride, or perhaps even as a form of passive resistance against the punitive bureaucracy.

The particular group with whom I became acquainted had begun to form several years earlier, when a man named Ralph Boes delivered an impassioned appeal on the steps of his local unemployment agency (*Jobcenter*). The supporters garnered by Ralph through this act agreed that their first major protest action (*Protestaktion*) would involve delivering roses to *Jobcenter* case workers. They conceived the action as a gesture of solidarity with those required to enforce labor discipline as a term of their own employment, people who might also end up as Hartz-IV recipients should they refuse to participate in the levying of sanctions. Their "rose action" (*Rosenaktion*) offers a good indication of the highly situated involvement of a particular set of activists.

By the time I met Ralph in 2014, a core group had incorporated themselves as the Bürgerinitiative Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen Berlin (Berlin Citizens' Initiative for an Unconditional Basic Income). Meetings of the Citizen's Initiative were loosely organized, with few prescribed roles or procedures. The activists I met at those meetings seemed part of a loose network more than of any rigid institutional structure. This stood in clear contrast to another group rather more traditionally organized, which called itself the Netzwerk Grundeinkommen (Basic Income Network). Drawing from Germany as a whole, the network focused on commissioning a parliamentary inquiry into the feasibility of basic income.

### PROTEST, SPECTACLE, ABJECTION

During the summer and fall of 2015, I had the unusual experience of observing a hunger strike from several thousand miles away. My sabbatical over, I had

recently returned to the United States. My work in and around the Citizen's Initiative would become the basis for several case studies (McGill 2017, 2019). Even as I began writing these up, however, new events began to unfold back in Berlin. Ralph declared that, since he had been 100 percent sanctioned (*voll sanktionert*) by his job counselor, he would no longer be eating. He repeatedly clarified that he was not, in fact, undergoing a hunger strike initiated at his own volition. Rather, he was simply publicly living out the condition of "sanction starvation" (*Sanktionshunger*) forced on him by the state. Hunger, Ralph claimed, did not symbolize his dedication to the cause of basic income; it instead constituted the material result of an already existing government policy of benefit sanctions.

As July and August slowly passed, my alarm grew. The thin pretext of Ralph's actions seemed particularly glaring from half a world away. I knew he was still eligible for the grocery coupons (*Lebensmittlegutscheine*) reserved for those whose benefits have been fully sanctioned. And even though he objected to these on principle, I also knew that he had scores of supporters who offered to pay for him to eat. He was already living in an apartment paid for by the Citizen's Initiative (and which also served as the group's headquarters). Because Ralph so obviously did not need to go without food, it worried me to see him sticking so closely to the argument that the *Jobcenter* had forced him into starvation. Like at least some German observers, I reckoned that he would either capitulate and nullify much of the attention he had already garnered or would die in a basically futile gesture.

In retrospect, of course, it seems obvious that such concerns form a crucial part of the dynamic surrounding a hunger strike. My feeling that Ralph was being reckless simply constituted a geographically distanced, though otherwise commonplace, form of participant observation. In early September, when I learned that Ralph was consuming a small amount of vegetable broth and honey every day, I began to more carefully consider his predicament. He was clearly staving off the effects of starvation but still undergoing a slower and less threatening process of malnutrition. Any stark conception I had of what it might mean to be on hunger strike had become well eroded by the fall. Still, when Ralph was hospitalized on the seventieth day of the protest with a heart complaint, even his closest supporters seemed alarmed. In an interview posted to the internet, his life partner explained that she had opposed the protest throughout, but that she now stood in solidarity with Ralph:

We keep getting people who come to visit Ralph and say, "Ralph, just quit starving yourself." And we are always, "Yes that is fine, but please just tell it



to the *Jobcenter*." Since Ralph isn't getting any money for food, what should he do? Everything that he can actually do is a degradation.

Ultimately, Ralph called off the protest after 132 days, declaring on November 10, 2015 that he had accepted "asylum" in a local church (*Kirchenasyl*). He would only eat while on their grounds, and the church's members would pay for his nourishment in an act of solidarity against a set of government policies they also found inhumane and unacceptable.

Two things stand out here. First, my own experience told me that there was something of a spectacle involved. Although physically distant from ongoing events in Berlin and maintaining only sporadic contact with friends living there, I felt compelled to constantly grapple with my ethnographic role, and my relationship to Ralph in particular. As the above quotation indicates, I was not alone in this. Among a certain group of people, the desire to get Ralph to "listen to reason" was very strong. Debord (1977, §18) defines a spectacle as "the opposite of dialogue," and Ralph's actions seemed to showcase something of this refusal to engage—as if he was simply mired in his own viewpoint. Of course, this is arguably the sort of spectator's appreciation of things that Ralph sought. By putting his body forward as vulnerable and abject, he simultaneously presented himself as unwilling to engage on this vulnerable and abject status.

Second, this sort of spectacular dynamic, in spite of being the "opposite of dialogue," still retains something of a pragmatic character. Throughout his sanction starvation (and from this point forward I will simply adopt Ralph's terminology), the Citizen's Initiative set up a small table on a plaza near the Brandenburg Gate and invited passersby and acquaintances to join Ralph for conversation. Ralph did seek to draw spectators to his hungry body, but he also sought to frame these same people as interlocutors in a discussion about basic income, Hartz-IV benefit sanctions, and a series of related matters.

According to Debord (1977, §2), a spectacle involves the capture of a viewer's attention and the pursuant reduction of some entity to "an object of mere contemplation." The paradigm for Debordian spectacle has often been advertising or broadcast media. This case, however, seems to make clear that spectacle can also serve a role in political resistance. It is true that Ralph's spectacle seemed to have a limited valence, cementing an overtly political relationship with people already inclined to sympathize with his cause. Still, the spectacle was achieved. Some of the most poignant moments of his protest involved the complex mixture of sympathy, anger, and resentment he aroused in discussants who objected to his position on

basic income, resented the spectacle he made of his view, and yet could not help but engage with him while sitting at his little table.

As of this writing, I am convinced that Ralph never intended to directly court death, but that he nevertheless had some frightening moments. Shortly before his September hospitalization, Ralph gave the following account of himself:

In [the] Hartz-IV [system] there are a lot of dead, but I would be the first to really die in public. I don't want to die, I'll say that openly. I don't want to die . . . . The ideal is for people to see in general that Hartz-IV can lead to death. That really isn't known. Hartz-IV really shows its power in the whole low-wage sector, by playing with people's fear of death. The fear of death leads people to take any work under any conditions. For me, it is important that this is finally grasped . . . . You are really handled like a life that is not worth a life [*lebensunwertes Leben*] . . . that's the correct [phrase]. My real goal is to get rid of the fear of death. You see, I have gotten rid of my own fear of death. I can die now. That doesn't mean that I want to. But then sanctions can't put pressure on me.

There is a back-and-forth, dialogical process represented here: the German social state, and with it the low-wage labor market, depends on the fear of death in its address of ordinary citizens, but the person unafraid of death renders that state powerless. Readiness to “die in public” checks the state because it confronts the mass public with the real consequences of the government's sanctioning policy (*Sanktionspolitik*), interrupting this dialogue of power.

Begoña Aretxaga faces a similar set of issues in her own ethnography. Her case focuses on the no wash protests in two Northern Ireland prisons during the late 1970s (called by Aretxaga the “dirty protests,” but usually referred to by locals as “the no wash”). The initial impetus for these protests was the effort by captured Irish Catholic paramilitaries to defend their political status and to end their inhumane treatment at the hands of their captors. As in Ralph's case, we can discern a distinct theme of spectacle and abjection, but also a clear back-and-forth dynamic. When prisoners were required to wear uniforms connoting criminality, they remained naked and wrapped themselves in blankets. When they were arbitrarily denied access to toilets and subjected to humiliating strip searches, they refused to bathe and smeared the walls of their cells in feces. When women prisoners were sexually assaulted and denied access to sanitary products, they similarly included menstrual blood.

If we were to depend solely on Debord's definition of spectacle, something would be missing here. Like the Irish paramilitaries, Ralph engages in a spectacular political protest that functions on the immediate level to capture viewers' attention in unsuspecting ways, but also integrates this spectacle into a larger political engagement. This clearly makes for a dicey affair: if the larger political engagement is put front and center, then the spectacle collapses into transparent manipulation; yet if the larger political engagement is allowed to languish, then the spectacle becomes mere titillation. For Debord, the class interests of the bourgeoisie and the subjection of the working class serve to prevent the collapse of spectacle. As a result, the commodity form is perpetually engendered across public life. What I see in my fieldwork, however, more resembles what I believe Aretxaga saw in hers—a situation in which spectacle, rather than simply allowing class domination to take the form of increasingly refined commodities, can actually be put to use to challenge domination and reshape hegemonic social values.

In this sense, Aretxaga is obviously aware of the spectacular nature of the protests she describes. It is notable that the no wash initially elicited confusion among even some of the prisoners' core supporters, just as Ralph's hunger strike brought forth heightened concern among friends and supporters like me. The no wash proved attention-grabbing and perplexing in ways that could not be controlled. Tellingly, the spectacle took hold among the prisoners' supporters as much as among their opponents. Aretxaga insists, however, that a *pragmatic* relationship also existed between prisoners and captors that underlay this audience effect. For her, menstrual blood and feces are presented as "primordial symbols" wielded by prisoners who, by "resort[ing] to physiological material of great psychological significance," succeeded in condensing "different strands of meaning, none of which are in themselves necessarily determinant" (Aretxaga 1995, 125–26). In the deployment of symbols as primordial as menstrual blood and feces, Aretxaga sees a holistic political engagement with colonial power. The guards' immediate reaction thus proves important to her analysis, but she also moves outward from those guards' disgusted reactions to a wider public similarly caught up in a fraught relationship with captured Irish paramilitaries.

On the one hand, then, we have Debord's insight that spectacle draws its power from the way in which it shuts down dialogue and reduces participants in interaction to the status of "mere observers." On the other, we have Aretxaga's insight that spectacular forms of political protest do this *even while developing a certain engagement between the powerful and the powerless*. Her core theoretical argument (Aretxaga 1995, 137), which she associates with the work of Homi Bhabha

and Michael Taussig, is that the colonial project involves a relationship of mimesis between prisoner (colonized) and captor (colonizer), such that “savage” objects of colonial control can become the target of savage acts of violence. An ostensibly civilized nation (Britain) unleashes uncivilized viciousness on those deemed to be outside the civilized world (Irish Catholics). This means a relationship of identification, albeit a uniquely unreflexive one. The object of control, punishment, and colonial subjection stands in for the part of the colonizer’s or captor’s own psyche that has been disavowed. Protest, in the profound form described by Aretxaga, consists in an attempt to break this circuit of internal disavowal, hidden identification, and power-laden subjection by embracing the abject within a carefully composed and aesthetically minded semiotic engagement.

With this in mind, we can turn back to Ralph. Like the colonizer/colonized and captor/prisoner relationships, the relationship between unmarked members of the German public and marked unemployed persons is one founded both on an identification (i.e., that the unemployed are like “us” insofar as they each seek their own economic well-being) and a disavowal (i.e., that the unemployed are not like “us,” because they are lazy or incapable). Ralph embraces abjection in an effort to break up this public/unemployed dynamic—playing to his base of supporters, enraging his opponents, but nonetheless engaging all sides in the spectacle of his hungering body. For Aretxaga, these sorts of relationships are characteristically found on the edge of the nation-state—her use of Bhabha in particular aligns her project with postcolonial theory. Focusing on the social state, however, reveals that a similar dynamic might be found at the core of the national polity. Ralph’s protest embraces the abjection of the unemployed by playing on the inevitable fascination his audience has with this abject status. In doing so, however, it draws into conversation anyone unwilling to blithely contemplate “dying in public” as a legitimate consequence of labor refusal.

### ABJECTION AND INCOME

Before I can take this analysis further, we must look at some related ethnographic material. Ralph’s starvation protest in part took inspiration from a previous effort. Beginning in 2014, Michael (Micha) Fielsch devised a moveable public installation of mock gravestones in protest against Hartz-IV benefit sanctions. Having himself received numerous sanctions for refusing low-wage work, he endeavored to research deaths that could be linked either to the low level of Hartz-IV benefits or to the issuance of sanctions on those benefits. He then created some sixty cardboard headstones in the shape of crosses, each bearing a short narra-

tive about the person it represented (see [Figure 2](#)). Most of these headstones describe suicides.<sup>4</sup> Some, however, represent deaths from exposure or can be linked to trauma derived from an eviction. One particularly poignant cluster of crosses represents a single father and his three children. They died from asphyxiation after the father received a benefit sanction, failed to pay his power bill, lost the power in his apartment, and improperly installed a gasoline generator to generate electricity.



**Figure 2.** Micha’s headstones arranged by the Brandenburger Tor. Photo by Michael Fielsch.

Micha and his fellow activists have set up the mock gravestones many times in Berlin, but they have also been invited by activists across Germany. Permits are required in every case, but aside from applying for these and setting up the crosses, Micha and his fellow activists do very little. They generally stand to one side in yellow vests, next to a small kiosk holding brochures in multiple languages. They sometimes receive a stray comment or question, but usually they do not interact with passersby. The people who happen on the installation often take some time to cotton on to its purpose, but they get a better idea after reading the narrative on several crosses. The official title of the installation (*Memorial to the Victims of Agenda 2010*—a reference to the political reform program that included the Hartz reforms) is emblazoned on a large banner, providing the only substantial hint of an explicitly political engagement (see [Figure 3](#)).

For the most part, viewers treat the installation as an ordinary tourist attraction, quietly reading individual narratives and discussing what they see among themselves. The mock graves are, to use Debord’s famous term, “detours” of those



Figure 3. Micha's installation with banner. Photo by Michael Fielsch.

mock graves that stand near the German parliament building in downtown Berlin to memorialize the “Wall dead” (*Mauertote*—i.e., those killed attempting to cross the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989; see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Crosses for victims of the wall in Berlin. Photo by OTFW.

Residents of Germany and international tourists habituated to the memorialization of victims of Nazi and state socialist persecution almost universally treat Micha's installation with great respect. This proved particularly poignant on a day in the fall of 2014 when the mock graveyard was set up in front of the Prussian-built New Guardhouse (*Neue Wache*) on Berlin's famous boulevard *Unter den Linden*. This piece of decorative architecture now serves as Germany's official Memorial to the Victims of War and Dictatorship, after serving a similar function for the East German regime. I spoke to a number of those viewing Micha's installation

on that day, and many expressed outrage at Hartz-IV as a particularly cruel arrangement:

"In my opinion, Hartz-IV simply doesn't address the reality of people's lives."

"I know a lot of people who have been pushed to the edge [of society] like this."

"It's just a symptom of a society in which some people have been made superfluous."

"We have to also think about these sorts of people, about what kind of society we have."

More conservative-looking observers often seemed rankled by the installation, but noticeably remained circumspect. One man simply answered my query with his own question—"Why should I think anything?"—before turning away. Others refused to engage with me altogether, maintaining a downbeat and simmering speechlessness. A smaller group tentatively ventured to frame the installation as a form of manipulation:

"Actually, the benefits should be enough for anyone. But the specific cases are sad."

"It just seems like this has all been expressed in a very populist way. Specific examples have been searched out to make their point."

"It seems senseless that someone would [kill themselves] when they are just two years from [leaving the Hartz-IV system to go into the] retirement [system, where they can't be sanctioned]. Why not just wait out the two years?"

It is notable that these latter sentiments are only the result of a direct ethnographic confrontation. Micha found them to differ quite markedly from the sorts of reactions he received more spontaneously.

In the broadest sense, we can describe both this protest and Ralph's sanction starvation as attempts to carefully integrate the theme of death into the politics of Hartz-IV. Micha's "cross action" (as he informally describes the installation) was set up next to Ralph's table on the first days of the discussion vigil described above, emphasizing their connection.

For Micha, a fascination with death has long roots. His father died of suicide when Micha was six, and Micha himself often felt close to taking his own life

when facing various familial and occupational travails. Intensely forthcoming about these painful periods, he nonetheless manages his personal presentation to careful effect. While he felt pride at his installation's obvious effectiveness (and was particularly gratified to have been invited onto national talk shows and the like as the result of his activism), he seemed to draw a more deeply personal satisfaction from the way his installation generalized his own deeply held and emotionally complex relationship to death. Ralph claimed to free himself from the fear of death through his political work. By contrast, Micha seemed to find a political achievement in confronting the public with the sorts of morbid concerns he knows quite well from personal experience.

In either case, however, the viewer of the protest is confronted with an abject and vulnerable human body. Even a mock gravestone stands for the corpse of the person being memorialized, and thus for their vulnerable personhood. This abject material pushes the observer into a position of transfixed contemplation—"beyond dialogue" in Debord's terms. One does not engage with the mortal remains of a deceased person, and thus cannot relate to that person in any process of identification and disavowal. We might start a more profound analysis of Micha's protest, then, by asking why interrupting this process is so important.

We might begin by describing Micha's protest as organized around the category of life. There is a clear concern here for the loss of life. In this sense, his efforts (like Ralph's) might fit into the mold of a "biopower" that seeks to exert "a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it" (Foucault 1988, 137) by surpassing the limits of the established social state. Nonetheless, there also seems to be something more here. The point of Micha's protest is not simply that some people have died under the Hartz system and that policy should be better designed to preserve life. These are very pointedly deaths that have occurred for lack of monetary benefits, and the challenge to the public comes not in fostering life but in guaranteeing income. After all, it is more than conceivable to argue that deaths by suicide should be prevented by better mental health policy, that deaths by accident should be prevented by better consumer safety laws, and that deaths during evictions should be prevented by more careful law enforcement. The challenge Micha sets to the public is to imagine that these deaths occurred specifically for lack of an income. He seeks to construct an account in which not simply the lives of the unemployed matter but also the connection these lives have to a system of labor discipline that pervades market and state alike. A similar spectacle would not be needed to argue for better mental health



policy or police tactics, but it is needed to communicate the notion that deaths can be linked specifically to labor discipline.

It is certainly true that the signature protest actions undertaken by both Micha and Ralph could not function without some basic concern for life woven into German society and politics. Michel Foucault's biopower is unequivocally a part—even an important part—of the politics of the social state. Nonetheless, for both Micha and Ralph it is the moment of benefit sanction that allows a political display to crystallize. This contrast becomes particularly clear when we turn back to Ralph's hunger action, during which he declared that death was indeed best avoided but would at least mean the end of sanctions. Life and death do not define the limits of the social state—in this case, the figure of sanction seems to loom larger than both.

Another way to put this issue: Micha and Ralph seek to anchor political subjectivity in the experience of being sanctioned and falling below the social state's "existential minimum." The rigorous rationalization of the income of Hartz-IV recipients is worth mentioning here. Since 2003, a good deal of public discussion has occurred in Germany about the levels of Hartz-IV benefits. Every year, the government publishes a detailed budget describing how a benefit recipient should spend their money (see [Figure 5](#)). A single person living alone is eligible for a "standard benefit" (*Regelsatz*) of €391/month (not including housing support, which is based on actual rent and utility payments). The government expects this to include spending of €138.31 for food and non-alcoholic drink, €32.84 for clothing and shoes, and €24.63 for transportation. In one informant's formulation, it is the minor categories such as education (€1.49/month) and "use of hotels and guesthouses" (€7.74/month) that appear particularly "perfidious" (*perfid*).

The exacting nature of these rationalizations does not always militate against recipients' immediate interests. For example, a widely discussed 2010 decision by a panel of federal judges established that children whose parents receive Hartz-IV benefits should be entitled to an additional category of benefit to cover items such as fees for field trips and athletic leagues. These small material victories nonetheless encourage the conception that the lives and incomes of Hartz-IV recipients are perfectly rationalizable. In relation to this sentiment Micha's protests seem particularly poignant. The mortal remains of former Hartz-IV recipients freeze the process of rationalization whereby a particular income is deemed appropriate for a particular person. Above all else, it is the relentless abstraction of public debate about benefit sanctions and the Hartz system that is brought to a halt in contemplation of Micha's headstones. To use [Aretxaga's \(2003\)](#) term, Micha's protest

# HARTZ IV REGELSATZ 2020 das ist in 432 € enthalten

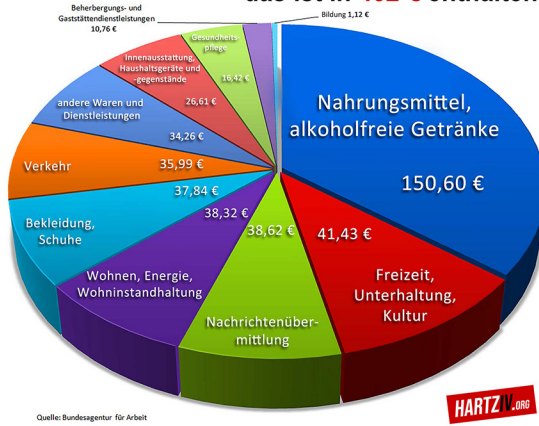


Figure 5. A pie chart showing suggested government expenditures for Hartz-IV recipients. Image by HartzIV.org.

reveals the social state as a “maddening state” when it tinkers endlessly with the incomes of the unemployed, producing rationalizations that, in spite of their formidable staying power, cannot be sustained in an encounter with the abject.

## MONEY AS ABJECT

From the foregoing description, it might seem that, regardless of how life and economic value are intertwined, bodies remain an indispensable ingredient in spectacular protests for basic income. Aretxaga’s interpretation of her own fieldwork also points us in this direction. She associates the most profound forms of political protest with corporeal substances operating on a “primordial” level of symbolism. Based on this analytical move in particular, a strong sense emerges from her work of the body breaking into anticolonial resistance by the sheer force of its own corporeality. In my fieldwork, there is good reason to come to a similar conclusion. Both Ralph and Micha’s protests are unthinkable without abject materials of a specifically corporeal nature.

Nonetheless, an example from Switzerland suggests that this corporeal dynamic forms part of a bigger picture. In 2013, a group of activists dumped about half a million dollars’ worth of *Fünfräppler* (five-cent coins) onto the Federal Plaza in Bern (see Figure 6). They argued that each resident of Switzerland should be granted a monthly allowance of 2,500 SFr (roughly equivalent to US\$2,500) for basic needs, and should only engage in work for money beyond this basic amount.

The pile of coins they dumped onto the public plaza were meant as a symbol of the economy they wished to see—one that was, at its core, about abundance rather than scarcity, about common well-being rather than selfish needs. Basic income activists often described this effort as crucial in building support for a plebiscite in 2016, during which a basic income proposal was defeated by a margin of three to one.



**Figure 6.** Commencement of the “coin action” in Bern. Photo by Stefan Bohrer.

Press accounts of this protest action across Europe frequently mentioned the cartoon figure of “Dagobert Duck” (known in the United States as “Scrooge McDuck”), who is frequently depicted as swimming in piles of gold coins. As others have pointed out (Shell 1993, 12, 112; Kristeva 1982, 109), money is a prominent symbol of abjection, especially when represented in the form of gold coins. Here were a group of protestors dumping the concrete manifestation of value onto a public plaza, presenting the result both as enjoyable excess and recognizably abject refuse.

The parallel with Micha’s and Ralph’s protests is striking. Notably, while Ralph, Micha, and other activists in Berlin had gained some notoriety prior to this moment, it was only following the action in Bern that they released their signature protest efforts. Micha, for his part, shrugged off my suggestion that he took inspiration from the protest in Bern (tending to shrug off all such talk),<sup>5</sup> but it is hard not to notice that he devised the cross action shortly after finding out about Bern.

What is crucial in all three protests is that abjection looms over the social state. A starving body or a mock gravestone can serve as the point through which to access a politicized dynamic of identification and disavowal. But so, too, can a big pile of coins. Rather than being rooted in the body and life, the politics of the social state seems to include the corporeal as a part, albeit a particularly intense part. In the Bern protest, we see an embrace of basic income and a refusal of the social state's labor discipline that plays out through an experience of money as the abject remainder of a shared social life. Indeed, we should be moved by this fact to consider the ways in which bodies and money can be interchangeable. Nancy Munn (1992, 20) has described "value transformations" as those moments in which "appropriate and possible relations of power" come to bear in exchange. While Munn's fieldwork happens in a context quite different from my own, this approach points us toward some basic facts—for example, that bodies need food and that food is bought with money. The power involved in these equivalencies is at stake in Germany just as much as in Papua New Guinea. Because there is a kind of smooth transformation that can be intuited as each of these things changes into the next; we cannot simply describe any one of them as independent categories. Arguably, the very notion of value suggests that there cannot exist a politics centered on bodies alone (or, for that matter, on life alone), since the making of bodies is always entangled with the making of other things. Where transformation is constant between the corporeal and external materials, and even between the symbolic and the material, the larger horizon proves to be a politics of values, rather than a politics of life.

What thinking about the social state in this "Munnian" way should suggest to us is that there exists a situated engagement with economic value that can be disrupted and made abject in fundamental ways. In the terms offered by Munn, the social state offers a site authorized to facilitate the transformations of value. Where the social state is fundamentally called into question, the ongoing conjunctural transformation of value is halted in favor of the abject. Such halting very much includes the rationalization of unemployment benefits as an ongoing process at the core of *Sozialstaatlichkeit*. Spurred by the protest in Bern, both Micha and Ralph gave a particularly corporeal spin to this process. The larger dynamic, however, is one in which the suspension of the social state's role in labor discipline forces a reckoning with the constructed character of value—that is, with the fact that real power relations exist in the market, and not just the automatic equilibrium of strictly private and individual desires. *Sozialstaatlichkeit* operates as a guarantor of labor not just in so far as the state operates as a distinct institutional

apparatus with power over individual unemployed persons but indeed also in so far as the principles of the social state allow labor discipline to persist even when the commodified values distributed within the market are transformed into commodified values distributed by the bureaucratic state.

For my analysis this means that the same spectacular jolt that interrupts the disavowal of the unemployed in Ralph's and Micha's protests can also occur in an encounter with money. While one could pick up a handful of coins and walk away, the forces that mitigate against doing so make the coins inert. This same inertness, however, gives the coin action on the Federal Plaza in Bern its fascination. Coins that would normally function in ongoing value transformation have been instead inserted into the public sphere as an inert mass and thereby a spectacular object of fascination. To borrow Ralph's formulation of "a life that is not worth a life" (*lebensunwertes Leben*), these coins might be described as "money not worth money" (*geldunwertes Geld*). Coins whose function has been disrupted in this way subsequently also threaten to disrupt the function of coins of a similar face value elsewhere. The result is a threatening subversion of value occasioned precisely by a relaxation of labor discipline in the form of a basic income.

On a functional level, the contemplation of scooping up five-cent pieces from a public square engenders a discomfort similar to the one that Ralph's audience might have with his "dying in public," or Micha's audience might have when considering a chain of events that lead from the sanctioning power of the social state to a lonely and isolated suicide. In each case, things removed from the ongoing conjuncture of value transformation appear to threaten the stability of ordinary life. The coins on the plaza in Bern are caught between their assumed value and the impossibility of that value being redeemed, haunting the viewer incapable of contemplating basic income and tantalizing those willing to embrace its possibility.

### **LABOR, VALUE, AND THE SOCIAL STATE (OR, JOKES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO POLITICAL ECONOMY)**

With this, we come to something of an impasse. If abjection can occur around anything that is valued, and it does not have to attach to the body in any exclusive way, then is there any cause to think that labor plays a special role in the formation of economic value, and that basic income would therefore threaten the experience of economic value in some unique or fundamental way? In comparison to later thinkers, who largely reduce economic value to privately held preferences and the quasi-natural operation of marginal utility, and earlier thinkers who posited labor simply as the material source of value, Marx's argument in this area

(which is his core argument for theorists such as Postone and Kurz) is built around the notion that the very category of labor mediates the construction of social situations, and especially economic value, in a systematic way. In Weeks's (2011, 2) terms, most crucial here is the "eclipse of laboring activity" behind *labor* as a general term for anything done for money, and indeed anything similarly rationalized in economic terms. The sense that a particular activity can be reduced to its status as labor provides a means not only to rationalize one's own activity and compare it to the activity of others but also to intuit what is common in the constitution of those activities.

As a result, the loss of labor discipline can be interpreted both as a form of unfairness (i.e., the sense, however warranted or unwarranted, that some groups or specific people are favored in the distribution of state benefits) and as a loss of something more basic (i.e., the means whereby one can understand a practicing self in an authentic social context). For the movement in favor of basic income and against benefit sanctions, arguing that basic income can be distributed fairly proves important. Yet this does not lie at the core of protest actions such as those carried out most iconically by Micha and Ralph. For both of them, the encounter with abjection symbolizes a willingness to explore that possible loss of self engendered by basic income. Ultimately, what is important about the category of labor is that it both effaces the particularity of any activity undertaken under its aegis and, simultaneously, gives that activity a distinct value. Basic income requires, at the very least, the contemplation of an existence without this highly constitutive double move.

In simple terms, then, basic income policies threaten the possibility of *activity without value*. Clearly, this does not mean that these activities would be drained of meaning or of broad moral values in any simple way. Where basic income affords care for loved ones, the making of art, more authentic political and social engagements, technological invention and the like, clearly meaning and moral value are at stake. The fact, however, that even these obviously worthy activities might depend on a policy that denies their transformation into immediate value-equivalents means that "appropriate and possible relations of power" (Munn 1992, 20) might become disrupted even in the pursuit of commonly held beliefs when they are supported by basic income.

Part of the problem here is that economic values can be consistent, basic, and systematic in a way that broader assessments of people's actions generally are not. Ralph's and Micha's protests (as well as the coin action in Bern) suggest that the unease occasioned by a substantial move away from the economic valuation of

people's actions can only be countered by confronting the public's unease with the abject excess already inherent in the constitution of a fully achieved commodity economy. In this sense, we might see the activists involved not so much as advocating for basic income (remember that each of them only points to basic income indirectly) as exposing the incomplete constitution of the "social market economy" (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*) as currently constituted—only implicitly calling on basic income as a way out of the spectacular theatrical arrangement that their actions construct. Ultimately, the type of basic income activism described here belies the notion of the commodity form as a mere impersonal mechanism for separately deciding each person's preferences and equally optimizing individual needs, asking that socially constituted forms of evaluation be flushed into the open as genuinely social processes.

In this sense, proponents of basic income policies seek to remove some activities from the commodity economy, leaving open the specification of these activities in a possibly uncomfortable way for those accustomed to a disciplining social state. A basic income monetarily supports activities that cannot be transformed into commodity values through a rationalized inclusion in social state policy. In immediate terms, this would seem to imply not simply a loss of discipline but indeed also a breakdown of the mechanism of value transformation that this discipline is ostensibly responsible for maintaining. In a more subtle way, however, it suggests forms of activity permanently poised between liberation and anomie—liberation because one is concretely able to do something that satisfies one's own ends, but anomie because these ends do not immediately enter into equivalence with the ends of others.

Ralph has a joke that helps explain some of what is at stake here. He says that basic income will always remain a problem even if it becomes instituted, because "everyone knows at least one asshole who really would just take advantage of it" and fail to make good use of their time. His more serious position is that the great majority of people who receive a basic income would use it to improve the world in one way or another. Micha takes a similar line, frequently arguing that basic income would mark a historical watershed in human creativity. Narrowing these beliefs down to a discussion of individual cases is a joke precisely because the point of a basic income policy is to *not* prejudge the value of people's activities or according to some fixed measure. Dividing those who deserve a basic income from those who would "just take advantage" covers up and denies Ralph's larger effort to deconstruct the social state's central focus on controlling the lives of the unemployed. But it does so in a joking way, and the result is to allow an exploration of

this control through the joke's impact. Although unlike the hunger action in many ways, Ralph's joke resembles it insofar as it signals a certain resignation from trying to simply argue for basic income on principled grounds of rational disinterest. Rather than asserting basic income as a political prerogative, describing this joke's "asshole" (*Arschloch*—a symbol of abjection even in its synecdochic reference to an entire person) instead puts the assumption that basic income is impossible out into discourse for amused contemplation.

### CONCLUSION

I have included my key conclusions about the social state in the section above. Here, however, I would like to make some further comments about abjection, protest, value, and politics. Let me begin by suggesting that some of the forms of power that anthropologists once looked for on the edge of the nation-state should now be looked for at its core. Aretxaga saw a certain kind of engagement between Irish paramilitary prisoners and their British captors: the disavowal of the "savage" exterior of the nation meant a colonizer/colonized and captor/prisoner dynamic that could only be countered in spectacular ways. We might thus be led to assume that the colonial encounter defined the British nation in a fundamental way by.

There is substantial truth to this. Nonetheless, we can see a similar dynamic (or perhaps the same dynamic under a different guise) at the core of the social state. The unemployed operate as the abject other of the nation-state insofar as it operates as a rationalized social state. Like the colonized other, the unemployed are the locus of a certain disavowal that requires a spectacular engagement to fully address.

To understand why this is the case, however, we have to ask not just about the social state but also about economic value as a phenomenon entangled with rationalized "social-state-ness." The unemployed—and especially the unemployed targeted by benefit sanctions—prove troubling to the public, but when demonstratively presented as the abject remainder of the social state, they are not easy to evade. Yet it seems telling that a pile of coins can serve a similar function. The issue is not simply with the bodies or selves that the unemployed incarnate; rather, it is with the larger sphere of value that includes these bodies alongside money as a similarly abject material.

In this sense, the ultimate problem for the constitution of the rationalized social state seems to revolve around the hegemonic relationship between economic value and labor discipline, rather than simply around the lives and bodies of the unemployed. Where the social state's role in labor discipline is threatened, value is



undermined in such a way as to make both bodies and money abject and therefore available as spectacle. Weeks is right to accentuate the positive—that is, the possibility in basic income policies of “a life no longer so thoroughly and relentlessly dependent upon work for its qualities.” At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that this possibility proves troubling because lives dependent on work for their qualities are a settled constant precisely under supposedly advanced social state conditions such as those existing in Germany. After all, it is a tacitly understood sign of this “advancement” that activity without economic value might exist as a kind of negative state of being, a threat to one’s ability to practically go about daily life with some constant guarantee that what one is doing makes sense in relation to the activity of others.

Basic income policies thus constitute a disturbing disruption of forms of deeply held value built not just into the economy but also into the social state that supplements and balances private employment. My informants—quite remarkable in their roles as dedicated activists but also quite ordinary in their roles as unemployed people—must contemplate a social state whose rationalizations at once include them as potential workers and exclude them as actually existing unemployed people. Their way out of this impasse, which it seems many more will encounter in the years to come, is both spectacular and abject.

### ABSTRACT

*This article describes the protest efforts of a group of unemployed proponents of basic income in Germany. These efforts are theorized around the concepts of spectacle and abjection. Hungering bodies and corpses figure prominently. Ultimately, however, the spectacular character of these protests can be traced not just to the vulnerability of human bodies in a shared social space but also to the logic of value in a capitalist society. Where goods are quintessentially encoded as the result of labor, and especially where the social state systematically supports the organization of everyday life through the labor market, basic income can only emerge in the form of a spectacle that challenges popular conceptions of labor and economic value. [Germany; basic income; value; labor; protest; spectacle; abjection]*

### NOTES

1. See, for example, Daniel Häni and Philip Kovce, “Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen: Lasst Arbeit Erfüllung werden” (“Unconditional Basic Income: Let Work Be Fulfillment”), *Die Zeit*, October 31, 2015.
2. The term *Sozialstaat* (social state) is used much more often in Germany than is *Wohlfahrtsstaat* (welfare state), although both are roughly equivalent. In keeping with local usage, I refer to the “social state” throughout.
3. I use *labor* and *work* interchangeably in this article. Both translate as the German word *Arbeit*.

4. Micha prefers the term “free death” (*Freitod*) to “suicide” (*Selbstmord*). I use *suicide* here because there is no common English usage equivalent to the former.
5. It is worth noting that a protest inspired by Micha’s cross action appeared in Vienna a few months after its first installation in Berlin. Micha was glad to see this, and was largely uninterested in whether or not he was credited or even asked to collaborate with the Austrian “protest artist” responsible.

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