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**Research Report**

## Evidence of Laziness

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**Policy Paper – FRIBIS Winter School  
Evidence of Laziness**

Alina Plitman\*

Laziness is the crucial critique element behind the UBI. Traditionally, the skeptics of UBI are concerned that people will not work at all or – even worse they will refuse to take on the jobs that 'nobody wants to do'.

Thus, in the German debate around Bürgergeld in 2022, it was normal for politicians to be concerned about the decline of work value (dpa, Tsp, 2022). 'Those who work should earn more money than those who don't' was the main thrust of this debate (Markus Söder, 2022). And even when academics argue for an adequate level of payment, concerns about the unfair treatment of people with low incomes through the German social and tax system are widespread (Pohl, 2022). Although *Bürgergeld* is far from being a UBI, politicians have often bandied around the metaphor of the 'neighbor who gets up early and goes to work' as the polar opposite of a self-interested egoist who 'designs his life at the neighbor's expense' (BZ Redaktion, 2022). This example brands the common social practice of considering laziness the opposite of work as a vice, thus reinforcing the widespread view of people as lazy and unwilling to work unless forced to.

Rawls argued, 'So those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds' (Rawls, 1988, pp. 257, footnote 7, 1993, pp. 181, footnote 216). Elster echoes this view, '[...] it is unfair for able-bodied people to live off the labor of others' (Elster, 1986, p. 719). But is it true that the surfers of Malibu do nothing? And in what sense are they lazy?

This thesis about the beneficiaries' behavior appears to be axiomatic, although there are neither studies nor historical examples to support it. But most advocates of UBI would reject this thesis.

Below I shall take a look at what is behind it. Firstly, there is the view that the exploitative inactivity of UBI recipients is infallible, an observation that I cannot accept.

Let me start my analysis of 'laziness evidence' with a historical retrospective (Brunner et al., 1972, pp. 155, 158, 164, 205). So, where did the notion of laziness come from? From Hesiod to Jewish-Christian tradition, work was not valuable in itself but as an activity that provided a livelihood. It was necessary and enhanced the person concerned as someone before God. Only in Early-Socialism did laziness obtain two different understandings. While Marx's work is an honorary tribute to the working class in 'Realms of freedom', Lafargue (1887) compared the right to work with the right to misery and requested a reduction of working time to only three hours per day. His view on laziness as the right to leisure finds itself again in modern debates about double leisure standards that are 'good for the rich and bad for the poor'. Also, according to Russel: 'The idea that the poor should have leisure has always been shocking to the rich' (Russell, 1932, p. 7).

I challenge this view as beyond criticism because there is no evidence to support it. I question whether a religiously based conception of laziness, which is undoubtedly essential in a culture-forming context, can provide a normative basis for research and policy in the secular society of the 21st century.

The various forms of evaluation of leisure reflect the differences in social status, revealing a specific intuition about the role of education and socialization in human behavior. This is nothing new. Since Aristotle, we have been aware of the importance of education in defining virtues (Aristoteles, 2006, p. 1103b 25). They imply that people with different social statuses also have different ways of using their leisure – for self-development or being lazy.

But if we don't use the juxtaposition of work and laziness as a contrast of virtue and load, what is laziness? The difference between the two can be understood on the justice level – individual or collective. The basic needs lead to the first, while social obligations and duties result in the second.

Although effort minimization in terms of avoiding physical and cognitive demands is assumed to be a natural preference in human behavior (Hull, 1943; Kool et al., 2010), some people show task engagement for intrinsic motivation reasons alone, irrespective of extrinsic rewards or explicit feedback (Satterwaite et al., 2013). Even if the motivation of effort minimization leading to the preference for doing nothing only applies to situations associated with higher task demands (Kool et al., 2010), there is evidence that intrinsically motivated actions are not brought about through remuneration or fear of error (Fröber & Dreisbach, 2014). Individuals choose an action without prior notice to receive additional money for their efforts, although no action would also lead to the same consequences in their opinion.

There is no reason to be inactive when it comes to work. At first glance, laziness implies the absence of action. But individuals are less likely to prefer being inactive if they have an opportunity for action. So this theory is inadequate in explaining what laziness can be.

When considering laziness as the right to enjoy leisure activities or as a desirable quality of life, we have to exclude such candidates as leisure and denial of action. For leisure is not an activity in itself. It is the time or – more precisely – the quality of time not spent on work-related matters. This is additionally related to the particular mental state regarding certain activities. E.g., if I play piano, I have the desire to play piano, and I enjoy that). Thus, this understanding of leisure is comparable to the idea of 'Muße' in German. The second – the denial of action – must be rejected because of the absence of evidence in psychological studies. For mentally healthy people prefer to act even if they don't have any particular reason to do something.

I suggest two candidates for laziness: idleness and the inability to recognize the moral duty to work.

### **Idleness**

The first candidate for an analysis of laziness is idleness. We can exclude the ability of mentally healthy people not acting. On the contrary, it is more likely that people will have various motivational reasons to act, such as increasing earnings or increasing social status. The decision to work or not to work is not the only decision between working time and leisure. There is also the decision between the eventual contradiction between higher earning and higher social role because the relationship between them can be inversely proportional. Thus, incentives to work can be motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically – through a sense of more self-worth due to social status or additional money.

Similarly to Elster's concept of able-bodied people, can the denial of acting be caused by the idea of able-minded people? In this case, idleness must result from mental disease and be excluded from ethical analysis. For the restrictions on the able-bodied must apply equally to the able-minded.

Secondly, the refusal to act can be caused by the inability to understand the core of the 'moral obligation to work'. The following section will explore the moral duty to work and its consequences.

Thirdly, idleness can be about moral reasons that reject feelings of obligation. This can be shown with van Parijs's model of Lazies and Crazies (Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 104). He distinguishes between two different sorts of individuals with respect to their understanding of real freedom and maximization goals. The Lazies prefer their leisure and thus enjoyable jobs. The Crazies, for their part, care about their income, prestige, power, and associated advantages in terms of consumption. They prefer jobs that allow them to purchase whatever they wish.

In this model, Crazies are more diligent than Lazies. They are ready to work more and under

worse conditions. Their motivation is egoistic however. Finally, it is only about consumption. Why are Crazies' goals ethically relevant and why do they pretend to be universal? How can self-centered motivation and greed end in virtuous activity? This is possible in the paradigm of a means to an end. However, the ethical worth of this paradigm is questionable.

The next point that the model of Lazies and Crazies picks up on is the assumption that leisure can be (or must be) spent only in the surfer-of-Malibu way. But why? What is meant by this assertion? The thesis 'when you can't do anything with your own time, you reach for consumption' (Adorno, 1969, pp. 645–655) may be relevant. Similarly, 'Crazies spend time at their workplace without being productive because they complete their tasks at a formal level only' may be true. The point here is that we cannot measure the virtue of activity only by whether someone is willing to spend a certain number of hours at a conventional workplace.

Similarly to leisure, the content of time spent is more essential than just the number of hours. What is the desirable content of time? I propose to use moral obligation to answer this and will explore this further in the next section.

### **The Moral Duty to Work**

Let's look at the terminology – duty or obligation? The moral responsibility to work must be distinguished from the need to work to live. The need to work does not affect moral responsibility. Either the moral responsibility to work exists for all members of society, or it does not.

My proposed work component – 'social significance' (Plitman, 2022) – reflects the moral duty to work. I don't mean this in the sense of contract conditions, voluntarily undertaken or incurred (Brandt, 1964; Hart, 1958). Instead, it is about moral responsibility. A duty generally requires obedience (Rawls, 2005, pp. 63–84). Duty is a moral commitment (indispensable, categorical), while the obligation is weaker and means a commitment to act under certain

conditions. In German, we would perhaps say 'Verbindlichkeit' instead of 'Verpflichtung'.

So, I will use 'moral duty to work' to emphasize the intrinsic core of this commitment. Recognizing it doesn't need external force, rules, authorities, or peer pressure. Individuals will feel the duty to work because they understand the necessity of their participation in the social process. They recognize that all benefits of communal, social life are impossible without reasonably taking part in social cohabitation.

Is there a moral duty to work? Gorz links the duty to work to the social order (Gorz, 1984). If we consider work a human activity, let us assume there is also a moral duty to work. Then how can an obligation to activity be the result? A moral obligation cannot arise from a natural need. In that case it would be hypocritical and unjust to attach a physiological condition to a moral duty. It is fundamentally wrong and manipulative to present an activity that man cannot naturally refrain from as an object of virtue or censure.

Personal free will determines what kind of activities a person will perform. The claim is not primarily about being active or inactive but rather about the exact activity and which action to choose from all possible ones. In this sense, moral duty can be linked to the types of activity with social utility or significance. The general measure of this can be the understanding that living together in a society requires participation by all community members. There are various tasks that members of society are expected to perform together, and these tasks, which no one person can achieve alone, characterize any community in the most primitive sense of a social contract, according to Nozick or Rousseau.

Robinson Crusoe doesn't have a society. He doesn't have to care about others. Nor can he consume public goods. He has only that which he can produce himself. In our modern society, we cannot deny the existence of consumption of public goods. We cannot do without roads or medical care. Whatever the situation, we use the commodities that other people produce. In order

to be fair, we must create something others can use for their part.

Elster argues that it is 'unfair for able-bodied people to live off the labor of others (Elster, 1986, p. 719). But which people are meant here? At first glance, this is a criticism of all those who receive social benefits without contributing anything in return. A need to earn money to live thus justifies the moral duty to work. What about when someone doesn't need to make money to live, because they have a large inheritance, for example? Are they also obliged to work?

To clarify, I will construct two examples of the consumption of public commodities. Society generates various non-monetary resources such as (1) street lighting or (2) a beautiful view from an expensive real estate. In example (1), consumption is not limited to one consumer. Several residents can use the same illuminated street. In example (2), one consumer's consumption precludes the consumption of the same resource by others.

I assume the moral duty to work as a justification for the consumption of resources in some form or other every day for all members of society.

Some of the socially generated resources can be well quantified and have a particular monetary value – the value of street lights, their maintenance and electricity costs, as well as the statistics of crimes on this street and the charges for police deployment, for example (1). Others can be less quantified but still have a monetary value, as shown in example (2) – be it the price of a particular property or an overnight stay in a hotel room with an ocean view.

What about the classic rentier – a person who does not need to earn a living through daily work? Although still able to work, this person enjoys life, financed by the capital gains they can make by a lucky chance, without doing work for this purpose. Clearly, this person uses all the resources provided by the others without offering anything in return.

A possible objection to rentiers paying capital gains tax from their income and VAT on all their purchases does not work because even the poorest members of society must pay their share of taxes and still participate in providing socially relevant resources. From this point of view, the rentier only consumes without providing anything himself.

Thus the justification for a duty to work is not the need to earn money to live but rather recognition of the social order in which every member of society is expected to take on a reasonable share of the socially relevant tasks. Independent of the way the community member earns their living, the moral duty to work is justified through everyone's consumption of publicly produced goods. All these goods are made possible for each member of society only through membership of that society. Therefore, everyone is also obligated to produce their part of the public good. Otherwise, the existing social order will be unjust.

In other words, in a just society, members of society must also make an individual labor contribution to the production of publicly relevant goods, even if their livelihood is otherwise assured and they are not dependent on any compensation. Moreover, members of society perform publicly relevant work without being reimbursed for it. The recognition of their social membership forces them to do their part in producing various public commodities. Sole consumption is selfish and morally reprehensible. An essential perspective transfer here is that neither work nor laziness must be defined through earning money. The crucial difference here is that not only rich people can be lazy. The moral duty to work comes from a sense of dignity and not the necessity to earn. It is not about expropriation and redistribution of resources and properties but rather an issue of a just social order where everyone has the same rights and commitments.

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