AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Germany and the World at the Dawn of 2013
Report of a Listening Post held in on 15th January in Frankfurt

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents some of these themes.

Experiences and Irritations

Seven female and five male adults attended the session. Some invitees had had to withdraw at short notice due to urgent job commitments. Three of the people were new to Opus. Apart from participants employed in social and consultatory areas the professional fields of Economics, Medicine and University were represented.

The initial observation was a statement that seeking personal advantage in the fields of banking and politics persisted. Another reported how never-ending bureaucratic rules and regulations were blossoming, but not in the interest of oiling functional processes. The aim seemed rather to be a shift away from accepting personal responsibility and self-protection from any judicial liability, but leading to disadvantages for those concerned (eg. as regards freedom of movement for children in kindergarten). One member recounted a bicycle rider's violent attempt to enter a regional train that had closed its doors and was signaling departure without any recourse to danger and damage. Another expressed his annoyance that in the current commemorative celebration of the Grimm brothers no mention was made of their political involvement and the risks they took: merely the fairy tale collection was deemed newsworthy.

The group then turned to the following topics:

o direct communication goes haywire as a result of the lack of reliability and inter-dependence in human relationships: electronic gadgets have gained the upper hand even where people sit face to face in restaurants or should be paying full attention other to traffic participants; in spite of financial incentives for families less and less children are born in Germany. This disinclination may possibly have its roots in the public climate towards children: children as a disturbance.

o Objects and their exchange value have assumed priority (students focus on learning for the test instead of depth analysis. Politics apparently limps behind the voting public's wishes).

o Yet there is a seeking of symbols for trust and reliability (Couples attach padlocks to bridge railings and throw the keys into the river — many have tattoos done. Members subsequently report that there were other positive experiences going through their minds yet they did not express them).

- Most residents in Germany enjoy a comfortable standard of living, but what about the losers (new luxury apartment blocks are shielded from noise by the cheaper, rented accommodation built directly on main roads — traditionally new housing was initially lived in by the poor until the construction was thoroughly dried.)

- One member described a quasi-surreal exit from the swarms of shoppers in a shopping mall by not taking the escalator but using the dark stairs and suddenly being alone. This became a metaphor for finding alternative routes / back roads.

Themes

- Non-committedness and outward appearance on the one hand, in conflict with the desire for reliability and genuine contact with the other

- Tendency to blame others instead of assuming responsibility

- Discrepancy between the fact that life in general in Germany is good to us and the tendency to debase it. Fear of developing something constructively.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world, their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

In the group a discussion arose as to why so many negative trends had been stated. Is it also permissible to express last year's positive experiences? It became apparent that there were inhibitions to speak for oneself and express divergent experiences. Quasi unintentionally the group delved into the question who was to blame (Wording of the invitation? Conveners?) There was consensus that there was willingness to place the guilt on someone or to assume the guilt personally rather than taking responsibility — possibly an endemic consequence of German history.

Access to never-ending information (Internet...) whose sources are often dubious and impenetrable offers apparent space, yet also brings both insecurity and disorientation. These may be the causes of increasing (bureaucratic) rules and overregulation and ultimately of (violent) infringement of them.

Simultaneously there is a desire to belong. This may be evident in the tendency towards adaptation and conformity. This is shown in the preference of simplistic polarities such as right / wrong, good / evil. When someone accepts responsibility, he becomes visible and open to attack, risks may be encountered and there may be failure.

Someone asked whether it is not enough to just do your job well. The majority felt that it is not enough. There is more to it. The comment led to a search to define what 'more' means. There were no unambiguous answers nor solutions. Accepting responsibility commences with a temporary halt of an activity, creating an objective distance (cf. staircase metaphor). This is prerequisite to permit quiet and space, to observe exactly what is the nature of the disturbance — what is satisfying. One member stated that he does not basically feel disturbed by what others report, but rather inspired to think situations through. With this the wish is expressed for a different and more personal manner of belonging far removed from mere conformity. Nevertheless it is not easy to nail down responsibility. It is a question of grounding, of oscillating between alternative poles, a perception of disturbance (e.g. trends of overregulation, the widening gap between rich and poor in a rich country and the search for opportunities to shape and ways and means to do so). One must be prepared to take a risk, to experiment even in spite of fear of plunging into chaos. There have

never been solutions or suggestions that are valid forever. There were many open ends. *(unsolved questions)*

Conveners: Barbara Schneider and Diethelm Sannwald