

**"Germany and the World
at the Dawn of 2012"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The initial observation came from a member who had astonishingly had to revise negative prejudice about treatment as hospital patient. One female member described how a happy family get-together in a restaurant with exuberant children had caused rankling undercurrent with guests nearby. They were not directly asked to lower their volume, but upon their departure had been pointedly and disconcertingly informed: 'There is a serviette lying under your table.'

Further experiences were recounted of both aggressive, even destructive tendency but also totally contrasting behaviour. There was in fact a perception of a need of genuine contacts, yet a trend to divert one's glance, to avoid undertaking any revision of presuppositions and to opt for right/ wrong solutions. The following were described:

- aggressive behaviour in traffic and in public, but also helpfulness especially towards the elderly or handicapped. There was a conspicuous tendency to avoid hectic or emotional reactions to societal developments. The question arose whether this attitude might not *per se* be disturbing.
- Waste of resources – eg. street lighting left on and switching off apparently impossible. This led to the question what might be learnt from countries lacking energy resources.
- Retreat to the personal professional sphere, yet local protest actions can evoke public endorsement.
- Hectic and cheap sensationalism in the political field. Gimmicky showmanship replaces rational research. Certain political celebrities pursue their own image status, show outlandish recklessness in the face of imminent 'deluge' and embody a trend towards distracting from genuine problems. On the one hand it is difficult to admit and endure the fact that simple solutions for major crises do not exist. On the other hand politicians have surrendered all power eg. of influencing the Economy.

- Contact can evolve from direct questions, listening, taking fresh routes, even breaking rules. One Iranian mother always took her child to the kindergarten too late; it never occurred to the staff to ask why, they assumed cultural disparity. A child, whose mother speaks no German, is considered totally unresponsive in therapy sessions until someone suggests asking for an interpreter. All school and other tests for children employ only items in German without foreign language components.
- Breaking rules can be destructive – eg. exceeding speed limits – but may create a subjective impression of being in control. Citizens express their dissatisfaction directly in protest actions more frequently, not merely in Arabian states, but also in Western Europe eg. when local construction projects appear overdimensioned. It was asked whether such protests serve or undermine democratic ends.
- Traditional values appear to be disintegrating, but respect does still exist for constitutional tenets as basis of general conduct; apparent where these are still widely discussed.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

- Image is more salient than reality; image is given more credit than credibility, reliability and proven competence as shield against disruption through disorientation and drop of standards. The consequences are violence, loss of trust and disregard of society's basic conventions.
- personal, private, and professional sphere assumes the role of secure haven in a world that is threateningly uncontrollable.

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.

The experiences described are symptoms of some subliminal sense of foreboding. The main crises that affect us, such as the financial crisis, climate change or aftermath of globalism are basically man-made and our joint responsibility: spectres we have summoned forth and can not request to merely disappear. We cannot ignore the consequences of global developments, nor can we elude them however hard we attempt to steer a new course. Hand in hand there goes a loss of grounding culminating in insecurity and retreat. Those who claim the crises can be mastered are deluding us with promises of a carefree future.

As in Bion's basic assumption we observe 'flight/ fight' reactions. We oscillate between retreat into a world of the unreal/ fictional/ superficial and on the other hand resistance and/or polarisation. Both appear inseparable.

The group experienced the extent of their involvement in this movement. One strand of discussion led to arguing the right or wrong, better or worse of today or days long past. By such polarisation the group fled from the process of attempted comprehension. Division processes are a protection from precise observation. The group did contrive to return to the task in hand and work on this experience as perception. One member pointed out that none of us are inseparable from whatever steers society and fluctuate in both directions – flight or resistance. It is impossible to perpetually focus on what forces may be ultimately influencing daily life, one is obliged to abide by rules pragmatically and ignore complexity. Simultaneously one has to decide where the framework offers scope to claim and assume personal responsibility. There may be a possibility in violating rules to gain insights, but it may also prove disruptive. Establishing contact alone is a dead end, important is how contacts are communicated.

The experiences recounted here are on the one hand symptoms of hectic handling of a complex situation, on the other hand expression of a need for orientation in a world in perpetual flux without any clear destination (Stock markets, Euro currency, democracy...)

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