AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Germany and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of an OPUS Listening Post®
held in Berlin on 11th January 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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 everyday lives': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

12 people participated at the listening post in Berlin. There were just as many women as men, two persons more than expected and despite snow and ice all in time. Even the external showed normality in abnormal times.

The first part began with the question what would be particularly important to the participants with respect to the situation of society. There was a thoughtful exchange, in which all participants participated.

The terror attacks in Berlin, Istanbul and Israel were mentioned. Many participants shared their concern about the threat of terror but also distanced themselves from the threat. A certain calmness or controlled and limited affection was expressed. It was said that a terrorist attack in Berlin had to be expected and therefore no one was emotionally overwhelmed. The Berlin attack was compared to other even worse attacks in Paris, Istanbul or Israel. The rationality and calmness were justified by the fact that the probability of getting hit by a terrorist attack is low.

The objectivity in the discussion with respect to the Berlin attack was remarkable. Several participants later expressed their astonishment to the lack of emotional concern.

One participant told about her irritation when a friend showed little concern after the attack in Berlin with the reference to the "few" victims. Another participant said that the media made it difficult to develop direct and personal feelings towards such incidents.

Concerns were frequently expressed towards the increasing populism in Germany, Europe and America, the strengthening of right-wing extremist political opinions and the election of Trump as president of the United States. One participant pointed out to the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. The threats of cruel developments in the distance, bloody religious wars, the complete disregard of life and humanity in parts of Africa were also discussed. The digital world was described as threatening, at least annoying, because it seems to control an increasingly large part of the society.

The participants divided themselves into three groups: a men's group, a women's group, and a mixed group. The groups identified three main themes:

Theme 1: Quotation of feelings
Theme 2: Threats for democracy
Theme 3: Loss of real feelings

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, 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, participants 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.

Analysis 1: Quotation of feelings

The "quotation" (German: "Kontingentierung") and "irritation" of feelings was regarded as an important theme of the evening. The quotation of feelings did not only help against the threat of terror, not letting it come too close, but also helped against being overwhelmed and keeping a distance. Quotation of feelings was also referred to as feelings getting a cold. Examples were a self-restraint of giving money to beggars or an difficulties to pity the victims of the terrorist's attack in Berlin, also due to the strong media coverage of the events.

A resistance in the group to elements of exaggeration of worries and fears was noticeable. In various contributions, it was expressed that rationality and normality were appropriate responses to the threat of terror. Thus, it was pointed out that terrorism was not a real personal danger and does not have a high real probability. Violence and hatred are nothing new and have always been part of the history.

In contrast to the normality and rationalization, however, the group also expressed irritation. The emotional detachment from suffering was questioned – example were the criticism of the friend, who showed little interest in the terror attack in Berlin because of the low number of victims; or the expressed wish, that one can distinguish between distancing from abstract danger by terror-ism and the concrete sympathy with affected persons in the professional as well as in the private environment. Expressed far away threats, outbreaks of normality and danger of a

society getting out of hand showed that fear and uncertainty remain in spite of distance.

Hypothesis 1: The terror attacks lead to a distancing. In the midst of the real threat of terrorism, flight and wars there seems to be a great effort to preserve rationality and normality – in the group, this was also observable externally: by "defying the snow", giving the word to every member of the group, an equal share of women and men in the group.

One remains capable of acting and being "normal" and repels the fear. This is accompanied by a certain coldness of affection and feelings – towards terror, the actions against terror which affect us, but also towards the victims.

According to this, two interpretations are possible: On the one hand, the limitation of emotions means that the terror has failed. Its purpose of transforming the society into a terrorized one is being turned down. However, danger remains in the distance and cannot be suppressed. On the other hand, the cooling of feelings implies a loss whereas the success of the strategy of distancing is doubtful. Compassion and joint responsibility are a challenge, but one wants to stand up to it and find space for emotions.

Analysis 2: Threats for democracy

A second main issue was the threat to society because of populism and the right wing political drift. Participants mentioned the AfD ("Alternative für Deutschland", German right wing party), the election of Trump as the president of the United States and the forming of an authoritarian state in Turkey, as well as the suppression of women in patriarchal societies. All of these developments question the core elements of democracy.

Core elements of democracy are the protection of minorities and respect for human rights. So it also seemed to be a part of ourselves that is threatened. One participant reported about his son who lives in Istanbul and wants to stay there despite the authoritarian political structures.

The observation was formulated that the rejected and repressed own parts are assigned to strangers by populists and right wing politicians. Expressed was the concern that people become blind to reality, naive and fearful and blame strangers for it. At the same time, hope was ex-pressed that by means of discussion and argument the fear could be reduced and the reality could be sustained. Reported was about a conservative family in a village community which caused irritation among the others by their way of living. An open minded discussion with commitment and great participation took place which, however, couldn't change anything and the misunderstanding remained.

The group discussed the necessity of political solutions. As reasons were found for the projection of fear, hatred and exclusion like poverty, deprivation and the growing

inequality through neoliberalism, the desire for political protection was formulated. Politics should provide protection to the individual so that members of society are ready to open the borders for those seeking protection and give them the chance to integrate into our society.

Hypothesis 2: The growing populism with its projections, right-wing extremist forces and violence against women are experienced as a threat. We observe a lack of respect for the others – the refugees, the deprived, the women. We see the core of democracy to be threatened, which in itself is important to us because preserving equality and respect to others also protects us. If the resolution of conflicts and the holding of discourses are not successful and we strive for better politics we actually feel very helpless.

Analysis 3: Loss of real feelings

The third central issue was about reports that parts of the society are determined by the digital world. It was stated that in the digital world real feelings are lost and replaced by digital relation-ships, which are hardly controllable. There would be a risk that relationships with others will only be pretended. The unconnected muddle of real world on the one hand and virtual digital world on the other was expressed, the virtual being no longer controllable and leading to a loss of feelings.

One participant told about the Pokemon GO game in India which had just been released there. People were staring at their smartphones, stumbling through the streets, endangering not only the road traffic but also disregarding cultural sights such as memorial and sacred places like temples. The loss of real connections and of the ability to be alone is seen in adolescents who are fixated on Facebook. This was seen as another negative development of digital communication.

The power of digital processes was discussed, but the group gave only a slight emotional echo. There were even positive aspects mentioned, for example in social networks: digital communication would bring new technical and social possibilities so that it could also be experienced as enrichment.

In the end, the question remained whether the virtual power makes us worry or whether we only observe it.

Hypothesis 3: The digital world is seen as a threat because of loss of control, real feelings and real relation-ships. We feel a virtual power making demands on society, but we are not strongly affected emotionally. The possibilities of digitization are also seen as enriching. The digital world even offers relief from threats and challenges in the real world.

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