



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Germany and the World at the Dawn of 2017  
Report of an OPUS Listening Post®  
held in Frankfurt in January 2017

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**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.*

Six women and five men attended the meeting of whom two women were newcomers.

One member observed that speed and efficiency are becoming increasingly important guidelines for strategy consultants in the field of economics. Instant statements and solutions are expected; depth and long-term analyses of problems are now less in demand.

Another member pointed out the extreme difficulty in even contacting the appropriate body or institution. Any voice mail request at a call centre takes on the nature of an endurance test, bureaucratic hurdles must be surmounted, may even assume discriminatory character as exemplified in an application for dual nationality after Brexit.

Reliability and credibility appear to be deteriorating (eg. the odyssey of a tenant seeking the repair of defective plumbing from facility managers until someone ultimately admitted it was his job).

One cyclist reported how she had been criticized for cycling on the cycle path and getting in the way of a dog; another time she heard complaints that she had not thanked a dog-owner for pulling a dog away from the cycle path.

With increasing frequency issues that are basically political are being delegated to courts of law for decision-making. There is a revival of populism, black and white

polarities are replacing any thoughtful consideration especially where one's personal stance is concerned. One reporter categorically refused to interview a police speaker who coordinates police youth work since she was unable to provide sensational insights into youth gangs; these do not exist in Frankfurt; he was only interested in spectacular events that would have made a salacious story. There are more and more citizen pressure groups seeking attention and promotion publicity so that their original authenticity becomes blurred. Complexity of our reality is reduced to the level of the spectacle – frequently in the field of nutrition (new fads for the right food are constantly introduced, countless ceremonies for drinking coffee).

On the other hand there is a need for opting out which may explain the need for the public ceremony of coffee-drinking as a sort of oasis. One young couple was attempting to eliminate smartphones in organizing their contacts. It appears necessary to retain composure (an American had asked one member – before the USA election – "Are you aware how many crooks we've already had as President?" There was an evident implication: We, too, will survive this one!). One member kept watching an old film and was reminded that there has always been bad news. This observation led to a longing for greater distance and the resolution not to pursue every news item. On a holiday trip to Canada one member and her husband had experienced a beneficial deceleration of lifestyle and this had continued upon their return. A survey of church colleagues in a newly built city area were astonished to hear that the citizens were not seeking events but a place of peace and quiet.

Keeping calm enables decision-making on where and when the individual can participate and where this is not the case; one member reported that it is possible to achieve a special goal where one's will is strong enough; with immense persistence and effort people had succeeded in getting the health insurance companies to refrain from compiling patients' medical history on to electronic health passes as originally planned. Astonishingly the group did not initially comment on this concrete example of data protection.

## **Themes**

1. **Lack of reliability and respect**
  - Tendency toward black and white polarity
  - Desire for reduction of complexity
  - Pursuit of spectacular news without concrete consequences
2. **Speed: Fact of life and response (Search for niches, escape, composure, indignation)**
  - Self-dramatization as instrument (Politicians, in catastrophes, self-promotion)
3. **Acceleration and superficiality in medial discourse prevent deeper comprehension**
  - Personal strategies are necessary
  - Polarising generalizations are totally inappropriate attempts at solutions

### **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.*

The diversity of reported themes, for instance speed and efficiency as strategic guidelines or the tendency to put events or oneself into dramatized limelight are corollaries of an encroaching loss of limits and boundaries, a derailment as it were, and deregulation accompanied by defence mechanisms to protect against the fear of disintegration, the loss of traditional values and attitudes such as credibility and reliability. Renouncing limits offers a chance, the chance of liberation from old shackles. The tendencies that were reported and deplored by the group, however, also fulfil the function of distraction from those fears initiated by the loss of limits. Risk is immanent in a world that is threatening due to the loss of transparency, increasing arbitrariness and complexity.

(Self-)dramatizations serve to defend against real encounters and impede personal involvement. The speed aimed at as strategic guideline is radically different from the speed that gives children pleasure (roundabouts and spinning tops...) that furthers their development and progress towards an independent personality. It also clashes with the adage.: Festina lente or: More haste, less speed.

In an affluent society such as in Germany, people expect to get everything immediately that is "in" such as the satisfaction of various and variable oral fads ("they all seem to be constantly sucking on something or other"), use of smartphones and other digital gadgets. Ultimately these fantasies can not be satisfied. They may even be hearkening back to infantile greed. Looming behind them are fears and depressive conditions in the face of the struggle for resources, the crumbling of social cohesion and personal insecurity who one as man or woman really is and stands for.

The re-emergence of populism, the emphasis on nationality, the search for a strong man ("Messiah") or some happening to solve all problems can be interpreted as reaction to the dissolution of all secure limits and boundaries; new and even tighter boundaries are drawn up as protection, like the siding up circle of a wagon trail in a night camp. The alternative is a balancing act between the pull of delimitation and the temptation to fence oneself in. It requires the ability to endure ambivalence, to keep watchful distance (seek oases, deceleration), to acknowledge what I am unable to alter and where there is room for action which should be taken when I as subject decide to do so.

In the group there was a subtle but unspoken concern not to be swept along in the wake of the reported tendencies. That may well be why the big topics such as the question of refugees, climate change ... were not explicitly expressed. There was an

implicit need to retain an anti-simplistic attitude to preserve the potential of taking action or permitting it to develop.

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