



An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

LISTENING POST

Germany (Berlin) at the Dawn of 2019

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND 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.

We were 17 people, more women than men and more elder than younger people from different parts of Germany. Part 1 of the LP was marked by a rapid onset and then a quite constant flow of contributions as well as by openly expressed differences of opinion. There was still a predominantly cordial atmosphere of familiarity and security and some laughing.

The group initially tended to protect familiarity and homogeneity and relate to problems "outside." Less own experiences were described in everyday life than the problematic parts of society: inability of politicians, poverty in parts of the society e.g. pensioners, right-wing forces in Germany and in Europe, threat of climate change. Later personal discomfort was formulated. It stood more or less unconnected next to a likewise formulated personal well-being.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Three subgroups formulated two major topics:

Theme 1: We are isolated and unconnected.

Foreignness, demarcation, disconnectedness and isolation were predominantly described as problematic and negative. Physical proximity, but disconnectedness without communication on the train, as well as separation from each other on the streets, on which one does not look at each other, or separation and foreclosure in extreme parties.

Diversity was also described as exaggerated: as an expression of a traumatization in East

Germany of people who had never personally experienced the GDR, as an expression of fear of loss with material security – the more security, the more fears? – or as a remnant of a neurosis of therapy seekers without a real need for therapy.

However, difference consciously lived diversity were also felt as expressions of life and self-confidence. The advantages of anonymity in the city were emphasized. Berlin was named as an example of inspiring diversity by which one can learn from each other. It was formulated that we long for differences and strangeness in order to get in contact with each other and to cross borders.

All in all, a tension between the desire for encounter and closeness on one hand, and the pressure to isolate oneself and one's own identity on the other was formulated – it is at the same time a conflict and a theme that connects.

Theme 2: We are fine.

A characteristic element in the discussion was that the participants talked about deep feelings, disappointment, anger, and even hatred, that they yet expressed an emotional distance or at most disappointment, combined with personal wellbeing. Some contributions to the discussion began with the fact that the personal situation is perceived as good. In one of the groups in the second part of the LP, the main theme was called "happiness, love, partnership, prosperity".

In a nutshell, one could express the mood as: We are fine, we see the diversity, the strangeness, the society falling apart, but this does not touch and worries us deeply, we even find sensitivities and insistence on the own ("each his own product") as exaggerated, exhausting, humorless, weak, even shameless.

There were two situations of amusement that expressed this: There was amusement about the saying that Berlin was "rough but hearty". This was formulated after a report on isolation and speechlessness on the train to Berlin, at the end of which unexpectedly a friendly farewell took place. There was also laughter about the bag that was handed over to the bakery in the GDR (because bags were scarce) – after a discussion about avoiding packaging waste and responsibility for the environment.

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.

In the final discussion, reassuring examples were given of what one can perceive in society as positive or contribute to it. At the same time, however, the perception of a real threat to society and humanity seemed to be pushed back.

The theme of disconnectedness and isolation was predominantly associated with negative emotions, such as discomfort, helplessness, ambiguity or ambivalence. It was also expressed as a threat to democracy by contradictions, compulsion

and conflicts, for example through the unfair distribution of goods and nationalism / racism. At the same time, the participants expressed their wellbeing. How can one interpret this ambiguity?

If it is a correct assessment that the group, representing the society, recognizes a fragmentation into groups and isolation, but emotionally predominantly sees individuals are doing well, this could be an indication

- that on one hand, the fragmentation is not significant and we need not worry about nationalism, speechlessness, hate, etc., because we are safe in our wellbeing – it comes to mind that the German economy is presently in a state of prosperity and Germany is so far mostly spared from natural disaster;
- that on the other hand, we are unable to feel the actual threat, because it causes too great fears – it is noteworthy that the current historical situation often coincides with the fragmentation of social groups in the Weimar Republic which was followed by Hitler and Nazism.

Two hypotheses were formulated:

1. We are isolated and threatened, but we come to terms with this and feel safe. The ride on the Berlin S-Bahn S1 is a picture for it.

In the group discussion, society was described as consisting of groups that distinguish and revolve around themselves. Terms were used such as: conflict, splitting-off, split society, demarcation, isolation, fragmentation, disconnectedness. The Berlin S1 was seen as a picture for this topic. The S1 travels through different parts of Berlin, from the old East to the old West Berlin through poor and rich districts, city and nature, starting and ending in places of Nazi crimes in the north (Oranienburg) and in the south (Wann-see). Passengers on the train are isolated, do not communicate, and do not look at each other, starting a conversation is seen as an attack.

In fact and besides this the S-Bahn is a relatively well-functioning means of transport that runs regularly and comparatively reliably. You get where you want, passing places and people without getting too close.

Taken together, the picture shows a state of a society that sees threatening things, but does not feel affected by it, shields itself and does not want to talk about it.

2. Misery threatens us, which is difficult to change; we do not bear and deny it. The seriously ill baby is a picture for it.

In the group it was told about a baby of a Syrian family. The baby is in hospital in Berlin, 400 km from the family home. The father visits the child alone, has no information and is given the choice between death or a multitude of operations for the child. Actually, the baby is a picture of hope – the baby is the future –, born of a couple (in addition to the statements of love and attachment in the

group), but in this case, the future, the baby, is ill and giving only the choice between death and severe trauma. In reaction to this story the picture of a poster of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland, right-wing party) demonstration "we regret nothing" was mentioned.

The image of the sick baby was only once taken up in the group, but formulated as a main theme in the small groups as "death, trauma, self-denial".

Similar the story about the baby which was not picked up in the group, other threats to society were mentioned, but at the same time toned down; examples:

- threatening nationalism, which can go over;
- conversation and information that are positive, make things clear and help (for the father of the sick child), but do not avert the misery (the dying baby);
- private commitment that is strong, but politics leaves us alone;
- naivety, which protects us against looking into abysses, but does not recognize the complexity of the world and does not use the possibilities of our educated middle class;
- injustice and distress, which is seen but does not seem to threaten us;
- politicians who do hard work, but the complex world is not overcome,
- shame that no one takes in refugees, but hopefulness that a solution will be found.

In group theory terms, we see this as being in a fight-flight mode.

Conclusion:

Even 70 years after the end of the Nazi tyranny, the memory of it is alive in society. With regard to Germany in its particular historical situation, the situation of society between "well-being" – retreat into the private (we are fine) – and "denial" (denial of perpetration in Nazi Germany, denial of history) means remembering the crimes of the National Socialists to seeing them revived in the right-wing parties, and at the same time seeking satisfaction out of the economic success and commitment welcoming refugees.

One could ask of how to get out of an indifference to threats (leaving the train) – this would not only be valid for Germany, but also for other countries. It is to be hoped that society will not remain in one of the two attitudes, but overcome a blockage, gain clarity and come to thinking and acting. First steps were taken in the group by a warm atmosphere and mentioning

- unscrupulousness and inhumanity in society,
- scepticism about too much unanimity in the group,
- lack of courage to address hardship and inhumanity

- lack of time, space and power to understand differences and to find answers to im-portant social questions,
- scepticism towards a delegation of problems to politicians (politician bashing) in-stead of self-authorizing and becoming active (refugee work).

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