

21st Karlsruhe Dialogues 2017 Pluralistic Society and Its Enemies

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Prof. Dr. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha

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Introduction

The theme of this year's Karlsruhe Dialogues, "Pluralistic Society and Its Enemies", is a pressing one for many reasons: populism, the increasingly visible emergence of intolerant nativist and nationalist movements, as well as the expansion of radicalisation and extremism in several variations and in many places, including places nearby, have become obvious and empirically observable phenomena – on the one hand. There is also indifference, selfishness, disrespect, lack of appreciation, dis-enchantment with politics, and withdrawal into one's own private sphere and/or (depending on one's financial situation) into consumerist society – on the other hand. But peer pressure and social control, both within and beyond the online realm, also continue to put the pluralistic democratic constitutional state under pressure.

In our globalised world, we are not observing merely the continuation of trends that we discussed over the past few years, but rather their intensification. An intensification on the international geopolitical level and on the national-regional level. Many long-standing projects and attempts at international cooperation, intercultural dialogue, as well as the already achieved transnational successes in problem solving, are being threatened. But peaceful diverse neighbourhoods and the fruitful exchange of cultures in our cities are by no means self-evident linear developments and achievements of modern pluralistic societies.

In the series of elections coming up later this year, the Netherlands will be the first to vote, less than two weeks from now. What, we could ask ourselves, is going on with the Netherlands? It was once the European model, in both theory and practice, for an open pluralistic society, for intercultural exchange, and for multicultural coexistence. Was that merely a cherished myth? What mistakes – including our own! – can we learn from?

Over the past 20 years, the Karlsruhe Dialogues have taken up topics that could certainly be labelled "Enemies of Pluralistic Society". Allow me to formulate three main theses.

Thesis 1: The increasing complexity in our world has created a great need and a hardly realistic desire for the reduction of complexity.

You might remember that in 2012 we took up the topic "New Obscurities in a Globalized World". Due to the financial crisis, crises of the prevailing order had become highly visible, and were being experienced on the local level. Who was responsible? What share of the responsibility could be attributed to a lack of national and international supervisory bodies? And are such structures in any way realistic in times of shockingly uninhibited flows of money and capital?

At the same time, widespread and inscrutable political upheavals had their effect. This included the hopeful rebellions of the *Arab Spring*, which primarily seemed to offer democratic participation and new perspectives to the young population. In the West, however, talk of the *disenchantment of democracy* was making the rounds. A lack of clarity and an inability to discern consequences lead to uncertainty. They create space for a lack of objectivity, for unilateral interpretations, for populist manipulation, as well as for the rise of seemingly legitimate – in terms of plebiscites – authoritarian personalities and regimes. The idea that the strong man is (once again) in demand makes me – and not only me – shudder!

It is primarily a peculiarity of the currently prevailing constellations that has led to the complexity, and possibly also to the unmanageability, of the present national situations, which are all very different from one another.

Thesis 2: *Highly dynamic complexity-increasing processes are all taking place at the same time. They have a strong influence on cause-effect relationships and therefore directly limit the design and control possibilities of individual social processes.*

Politics, constitutional state institutions, civil society, and – increasingly – science's knowledge-based capacity to make predictions, are all being affected. In addition to this, there has been an increasingly discernible loss of trust in central social institutions.

The slowness of institutions in and of themselves and the frequent absence or inadequate nature of international, inter-departmental, and interdisciplinary communication represent a growing and largely unresolved challenge for pluralistic democratic societies. Solutions can only be found when problems have become sufficiently recognised and publicly perceived.

Consensus-building, a necessary precondition for functional democracies, takes time. It also, however, needs reliable information, a sense of responsibility, empathy, and the capacity to act. In the international context of institutionalised governance, decision-making often does not function at all, or at least not adequately. Genocide, famine, international organised crime, trafficking in humans – in Europe, too – and much more, are sad testimonies of conditions that point to serious dysfunction. Dysfunctional international governance subsequently acts as an ‘enemy’ of pluralistic society, as it opens the door for ‘simplifiers’, populists, conspiracy theorists, and for a frustration with politics.

The consequences of and omissions in intervention policies will be one of our topics tomorrow. The devastating restriction of freedom of the press and freedom of expression, the dismantling of the rule of law – the main pillar of pluralistic democratic societies – as well as the emergence of authoritarian regimes, the (self-)castration of parliamentary rights, and the origins, responsibilities, and effects of ‘failed states’: Our speakers will provide information on all these complexly interwoven social processes. As usual, they will report and analyse in brief, seeking out solutions; and they will certainly not always agree with one another. Changes in perspective and the broadening of horizons remain the method and guiding principle of the Karlsruhe Dialogues. And this is particularly true of our topic this year.

The renewed emergence of ideologies and conspiracy theories in the form of closed ideas and beliefs that are often difficult to verify promotes the spread of simple ‘truths’. Not just ‘fake news’, which, in Karl Popper’s terminology, can indeed be falsified as something ‘fake’ and untrue, but also so-called ‘alternative facts’, which can be touted on the spot – but which can also be exposed. All these are enemies of pluralistic society that should be taken seriously. Differentiated approaches and representations, which would be appropriate for the complexity of our rapidly changing social constellations, are becoming increasingly difficult. There is a lack of time, money, and attention.

And here we must learn to better deal with a phenomenon that has long been known in sociology, one that we still encounter in a condensed form today: the problem of (self-)immunisation. In self-reinforcing online communities, in specialist and expert circles, in cultural communities, interest groups, and civil-society NGOs, as well as in political groups and institutionalised lobbying organisations, there is often a tendency to avoid questioning and criticism. We are happy to be a part of communities that are well-disposed to us! To this extent, both a critical attitude and a basic willingness to express oneself against the mainstream of the group are indispensable preconditions for living forms of the diversity of opinion.

The campaign-like intensification of the suppression of opinion consists in the conscious organisation of unilateral cultures of deception and assertions and in the denial or even the active professional defamation of the counterargument. In particular, the exponentially growing possibilities of social networks, the internet, bots, and trolls have created a situation that is no longer transparent. It functions in a self-referential manner. All these are symptoms and also intensifiers of a negative attitude toward knowledge-based, critical, and open pluralistic societies.

Thesis 3: We have underestimated the mobilising potential of employing emotional and stereotypical categorisations of 'good' and 'evil', of desired and not desired, and of traditional partial identities.

Let me first clarify: Stereotypical categorisations can be helpful as initial orientations. They are in any case unavoidable, but they are, positively interpreted, incomplete, and in the negative sense they are highly problematic, since they are usually false and can be quickly politicised: Old divisions that one believed had been overcome, as well as conflicts that were never truly resolved, can be rekindled through negative stereotypes. It should scare us to see just how quickly this can happen!

Let me first, however, mention the positive, solidary mobilisation of the *community of helpers*. Here in Germany in 2015, we saw a record number of donations, in the amount of 5.5 million euros, as a result of the refugee crisis. 34 percent of the population donated to many different initiatives. In addition, there is the truly remarkable number of volunteer helpers, particularly in refugee aid. At the same time, however, we have had a dramatic increase in arson attacks, racist assaults, intimidation, and humiliation. According to a preliminary estimate by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, in 2016 there were a total of 970 attacks on refugee shelters and about 2,400 attacks on refugees outside the shelters.¹ The *Amadeu Antonio Foundation*, together with *Pro Asyl*, has found even higher figures. These include 102 arson attacks.²

The targeted spreading of new stereotypical generalisations and categorisations always has a more or less mobilising effect. National, ethnic, religious, and cultural attributions to oneself and others are often superficial, and even more often divergent. They are social constructs that, as such, must be deconstructed.

In his book "Identity and Violence"³ from ten years ago, the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen described the situation of a 'plural monoculturalism' that could be observed in many places, and asked pertinent questions concerning the model of multicultural society.

We live side-by-side, coexisting when things go well, but we do not live *with* one another. As the political developments within Europe demonstrate on their own: Intolerance, brutality, insults, and disrespect to the point of openly racist actions go unpunished all too often.

¹ Federal Ministry of the Interior, Tweet, 06.02.2017; https://twitter.com/BMI_Bund/status/828622779004178432 [03.03.2017].

² Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (ed.): Chronik flüchtlingsfeindlicher Vorfälle; https://mut-gegen-rechte-gewalt.de/service/chronik-vorfaelle?&field_date_value_5Bvalue_5D [03.03.2017].

³ Sen, Amartya: Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny, New York 2007.

How can we avoid the blanket discrimination against Muslims and other minorities as well as the quick attribution of blame for the problems of a ‘misguided multicultural policy’? How do we meet those who do not share our commitment to pluralistically oriented values? Against the backdrop of the goal of an ‘interculture for everyone’, it is necessary to demand the respect and acceptance of our pluralistic values and our lifestyle from everyone. In this regard, the Canadian **John Ralston Saul** recently criticised Europe’s failed immigration and integration policy.⁴ He points to the long-term continuity of Canada’s controlled immigration plan, which is supported by an impressively broad majority of the population. Saul was president of the PEN International Association of Writers from 2009 to 2015. In 2014, he was a speaker at the 18th Karlsruhe Dialogues, which were on the topic of the “World (Market) Society: On Trade with Goods, Data, and Humans”.

With these relatively abstract theses and exemplary explanations, the **main thesis**, which is crucial for this year’s Karlsruhe Dialogues, can now be specified:

Pluralistic democracies are under pressure. They must be supported in an active, critical, confident, and committed manner.

As recently as last year, under the title “NationEUrope: The Polarised Solidarity Community”, we took up the ever-deepening rift between two images of society: on the one hand, the affirmation of heterogeneity, plurality, and solidarity; on the other hand, the tendency toward homogenisation, radicalisation, and isolation. Democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, freedom of expression, the protection of minorities: These and other achievements of the citizenry, which have been won over decades – and some of which have been won over centuries – are now all too recklessly taken for granted or even considered disposable.

We must take a much closer look at the objective situation of young people, which could hardly be more different between the southern European countries and Germany, but also at their subjective feelings, their expectations, attitudes, and disappointments. Continuous dialogue and responsible action are therefore utterly indispensable. Brexit would likely not have won a majority if university students and other young people had been brought into the debate more, and especially if they had turned out to vote. If this is the case, we must ask ourselves: What role do education policies and offerings play in these developments? What are we doing wrong?

In his famous and still extremely relevant work “The Open Society and its Enemies”,⁵ Karl Popper was primarily concerned with the – on account of ideologically predetermined worldviews and aspirations to political power – limited unfolding of the free and independent powers of people, which are so crucial for social development. For a long time, open markets and democracy were seen as solution models that were mutually dependent and that would inevitably lead to an improvement in people’s living conditions. In the meantime, we have come to realise the following: Increasing numbers of people are afraid – we will discuss whether this fear is justified or not – and are calling these ideas into question. The markets, which are becoming increasingly global and non-transparent, seem to refute these long-held and cherished basic assumptions.

New challenges are obvious, and so are the old ones. Qualified analyses, solutions to problems, and rapidly implementable programs cannot be achieved quickly. This is even truer if they are to be adopted on the basis of consensus-bearing democratic culture.

A pluralistic society of coexistence is, in its objectives and in its ties to the constitution and the rule of law, more difficult to explain and to understand than authoritarian forms of rule. To ensure that it

⁴ Saul, John Ralston: „Lasst sie in die Zukunft schauen“. Warum Kanada die Integration von Flüchtlingen besser gelingt – und Europa das Problem falsch angeht, in: Der Spiegel, No. 6, 2017; <https://magazin.spiegel.de/SP/2017/6/149411873/index.html> [03.03.2017].

⁵ Popper, Karl: The Open Society and Its Enemies, London 2002 (1945).

is appreciated, we need more formats, qualified discussions, attractive possibilities of action, and a citizen consciousness that knows the significance of participating in democracy. This includes a clear commitment to a constructive culture of disagreement. Thanks to our generous sponsors and partners, the Karlsruhe Dialogues have been able to contribute to this for the past 21 years.