

# The New Democratic Generation

Anyone who has concerns about human and civil rights has occasion to question whether our democracy has a firm basis. In this new century it is faced with immense and, to some extent, frightening challenges. Constitutionally free societies are not only targeted by internationally operating terrorist networks, they are also confronted by a league of dictatorships stepping onto the world stage with ever more self-confidence thanks to their economic and technological strength. When the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to an imprisoned Chinese human rights activist and a whole series of countries remain absent from the prize-giving ceremony then they are expressing their approval of suppression of freedom of speech in China. Amongst other things, the capability of these dictatorships, using sheer economic power, to force other states into becoming an anti-democratic front shows that we are entering a new political epoch.

## **The strength backing up democracy**

It would be naive to trust in continued democracy purely on the strength of a well-proven constitution and because parliaments and law courts function. A democracy hewn in stone is of no use at all unless it is firmly anchored in the hearts and minds of the people and is a part of their daily lives. There are plenty of examples of states being democratic in form but whose citizen do not live in freedom. In a highly developed democracy on the other hand the basic rights have percolated down into the way life is lived – in all areas of society. Many of our friends in the young European democracies can tell tales about what a rough road it was. They are still having to wean themselves off old practices and ways of thinking. “It’s so cosy not having to have responsibility” were Kant’s words in his famous works on Enlightenment. People living under a dictatorship who have had it firmly impressed upon them not to interfere with politics often find the hurdle to becoming personally committed very high.

Even here at home, in Germany, there is much to be done. There is no place here for arrogance. Many – even in politics – still believe democracy is a firmly installed system as laid down in books and that it is sufficient merely to tend this system. But this cannot be all. Without the firm support of the people democracy is a lost cause. With 1933 in mind, this is one of the most important lessons we Germans have learned from our own history. When we consider the future of our present democracy then we require democratically-minded men and women. These are the children and young people of today.

## **Democracy is activity**

If democracy is to be a part of our hearts and minds in order for it to be lived out then it is a question of education and upbringing. It can only then be renewed and refined from one generation to the next. Understood in this way democracy is the manner in which people can peacefully and independently shape their lives together with mutual respect for each other’s rights. It is not merely a “set up” but also activity. If I am granted freedom, but can neither do nor effect anything myself, then that is still a long way from being democracy. When citizens feel more inclined to be active beyond what the law allows them to be then democracy sheds its skin in an exciting manner which we are currently witnessing.

During the process of democratic development there is a constant interplay between citizens and the state. At times both attain a certain degree of democratic maturity where one of them is further ahead than the other. Occasionally state institutions or parties are unable to deal with self-assured democratically-minded people. On occasion people are not sufficiently acquainted with procedures such as referendums, which are abused by powerful minorities for their own ends.

### **The ability to communicate**

On both sides there are often feelings of reservation, prejudices or even the idea that one is confronted by enemies. But it is always a matter of information and communication, of knowledge and, above all, education. Decisive for the proper functioning of democracy is the extent to which communication is regarded as an essential point in current political conflicts.

Some time hence I was visited by two sixth-form pupils. In a competition organised by the Federal German President they interviewed me as a witness of the anti-atomic power demonstrations in the eighties. A central theme was the Hamburg “Kessel” of 1986 where the police surrounded a mass of demonstrators and held them for several hours on the Heiligengeistfeld. As council member for the Greens in Hamburg I enjoyed the privilege at that time of being able to talk to “both sides”. Was it of any use? As I continued to talk I noticed that I basically constituted a gigantic problem for my young interviewers (with dire results), which we members of the local parliament were then unable to resolve.

In just such moments of crisis the extent to which the situation depends on the ability of those responsible to communicate “with the other side” becomes clear. This also applies to disagreements within in firms, in commerce, in families and in other walks of life. Today we have long reached the point of being able to realize that in such situations the sly fox is the one able to measure the limits of the communication skills of his adversary. Since the eighties things have progressed a lot despite the fact that “accidents” still happen now and then. The police learn how to mediate in conflicts, political parties put on interesting discussions with people upholding different viewpoints, members of parliament are rated on the internet, managers receive coaching, company bosses do practical training among people belonging to a different world from their own – beyond school, education plays a huge role in professionally solving problems among people of opposing views and to take on fresh ways of looking at things. The Republic in its early years with its hostilities and coarse tools is scarcely recognizable today. I think that we can feel a little proud of this.

### **The Republic as a place of education**

Education, which has contributed to the maturity and civilization of the Federal Republic is not just lifeless knowledge standing on the bookshelf, it is also democratic and social responsibility and decision making. This competence is often “simply gained” through trial and error – particularly painful and at high cost during demonstrations – or through reading in the evening and also through simple knowledge of people on the basis of prudent reason and the consciousness of not always being in the right oneself (something we might wish of the Chinese Communist Party).

This singular phenomenon is worth a moment's consideration. We are speaking here of the processes of information beyond our own sphere of education. Apparently, with its increasing preparedness for communication it would seem that democratic society is a huge education centre. This is a basic hope of the Enlightenment: freedom cannot be suppressed because in the long term people cannot be prevented from thinking and communicating their thoughts. If they communicate then they are enhancing their own freedom. And it is precisely in this that the trust in democracy lies – that dictatorship leads to stupidity since the mindless repetition of the phrases of the Great Leader is no solution to the problems of society.

Thus, if adults – even in old age – can learn democracy, where can children learn it? It is now obvious that we are getting onto school. At least thoughtwise. The significance of this establishment should not be underestimated. It is the only public establishment in which all young people spend a considerable part of their lives.

### **Which young people are we talking about?**

If we compare generations, it is not only the adult inhabitants of our country who have changed since the fifties. Young people now are also different from what they were in those days. If we ask the present-day state whether it is on a level with the citizens of today then we should also ask whether the schools of today are on a level suitable for today's youth. Many children and young people are far ahead of us, the post-war generation. It is true that they are not required to go out into the potato fields, yet deal very well with the chaos of their environment and the uncertainty of their future lives.

It was not always the case in history that teachers learnt from their pupils. Only the cleverest of them did, such as Socrates for example. The teachers of today are confronted with the best-informed young generation of all time, and pupils often help their teachers in finding their way about in computers and the internet. The emancipated society, so detested by fundamentalists, is not only full of dangers and temptations but also full of excellent chances and learning possibilities. As the poet Hölderlin put it: "Where there is danger the chance of deliverance grows too." Many processes in everyday life which used to be taken care of by officials and people in higher positions are today managed as a matter of course by children and young people – particularly when they are in a position to do so but their parents are not. Amongst the immigrant society this is an advantage that cannot be praised enough.

### **Recognising what young people are capable of**

In as much as a young person is involved in taking care of everyday matters in a sensible manner then his competence will grow. He becomes a specialist. He has something to say. A spur to learning how to do it correctly. A young pupil of this kind is doubtless worth taking advice from in such things as fairness, leadership and school development. Amongst those concerned with school development one hears that pupils are the real professionals when it comes to teaching. There is a certain amount of truth in this; he is the one to notice best of all when he is not learning anything. But where, in how many schools in Germany is this competence made use of by the education system?

In the principal's department in many schools in Germany there is an invisible notice directed at the pupils: "You may not enter here" as though behind closed doors something indecent, not fit for young people were taking place. This is regrettable. In order for a child to identify with democracy he must experience a simple feeling in school: the joy of having a say in negotiating and organizing things. And he must feel the confidence that adults take his viewpoint seriously. But this requires a genuine opportunity to have a say in matters. It is hardly surprising when pupils have no interest in meetings in which nothing of any seriousness is to be decided.

### **The democracy test for schools**

Here we are looking at a vast field of possibilities for the democratization of an institution which in competition with other parts of society is confronted with the question: am I really an ideal model? In this connection one could formulate the following basic principle: in a democratic society with a future, schools must be more democratic than what other institutions are on average. Since, as an institution, it really must be a model for other fields of society and therefore take the lead as a good example.

When there is great excitement in Germany once again due to the arrival of fresh PISA results this excitement should not be purely limited to the achievement of pupils in school subjects. The question of what school achieves is just as important. Does it provide our democratic citizens of tomorrow with learning opportunities which really motivate and train. Does school permit the pupils to have a say in decisions when it is a matter of some seriousness?<sup>1</sup> Does it give them the chance of taking on the responsibility for important matters or is this participation merely limited to tidying up the classroom? It is a matter of attitude, not only of pupils but also of the school. Does school see pupils merely as pupils or as future citizens active in a democratic republic?

Whoever sees school from the outside and has the school of his childhood in mind runs the risk of reducing school to teaching and to gaining knowledge in school subjects. Achievement in school subjects is doubtlessly important. The content of school subjects is a reason for learning and something which pupils can make use of. But learning does not merely take place in school subjects but everywhere. In the meantime a central aspect in the new school syllabus in many German federal states is the teaching of skills in such things as making judgements, changing one's perspective, solving conflicts and taking active part in organization. Democracy is no more just a special topic dealt with in lessons on politics.

### **Learning without humiliation**

With a view to teaching democracy it is important to support the new conception of learning connected with it. A school cannot be obliged to teach democracy when the aim of teaching is purely out-dated instruction in school subjects. The OECD key competencies, on which all PISA examinations are acceptedly based, offer a foundation for this. They successfully describe the conditions for life in a multi-faceted global society. "The ability to relate well to others" is at the same time a simple but fascinating skill; a counterpart to the friend or foe attitude, to political or religious fa-

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<sup>1</sup> It would be desirable if schools took note of the quality of standards of the National Plan of Action "For A Child Friendly Germany" adopted by the Federal Department for Family, Senior Citizens and Youth, and adopted it themselves.

natism painting everything in black or white and pre-occupying itself with demarcation.

Growing up without violence, humiliation or shame is a necessary ingredient. A school does not have to be brutal or tyrannical in order to shame its pupils. A pupil can be shamed when school marks are given without pedagogical sensitivity. The seeds of catastrophe can already lie in the quiet offence and the desperation felt, in the simple lack of attention, as shown by those who ran amok in Erfurt and Winnenden.

The same applies to the young arsonists in Hoyerswerda and elsewhere. They were not triggered by reading Hitler's "Mein Kampf" but by a fatal mixture of hatred of foreigners, social desperation and their socialization in an isolated police state, the GDR.

Most young people who go over to becoming rightwing extremists or islamists feel anger, they have developed a hatred of society, of the state, of people who look different, of the weak and of minorities. The school has the duty of offering these young people the positive counterpart of co-existence and with it the zest for de-radicalisation: humane, fair, sensitive, and above all for uncovering their buried feelings of what is morally right.

What is education for if it does not feel responsible for imbuing the most elementary pre-conditions for human co-existence?

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