

Angst in Politik und Wirtschaft

Report on a Workshop of the Progress Foundation in Schwarzenberg,
July 11th to 14th 2002

Today's Western societies are confronted with an increasing uncertainty and a growing complexity. As a consequence individuals feel disoriented and confused by an increasing number of real and possible threats; anxiety and fear are the results. Though the political representatives and the business leaders more often than not try to convey the image of being free of anxiety and fear, it is plausible to assume that they too are ridden by these feelings. As anxiety and fear have not been central topics of the political discourse up to now, it is most important to address the fact that they are all-pervading phenomena in our society.

Following an invitation of the Progress Foundation, fourteen guests spent two days discussing the issues of anxiety and fear in society. The disciplines represented at the symposium were economics, law, political science, medical research, theology and philosophy. The broad range of professional backgrounds (researchers, journalists, a consultant and a parson) was a big help in approaching the topic from different perspectives and to gain insights from practical experience.

As anxiety and fear having been neglected to a large extent by economics and by political science, the discussion in Schwarzenberg was based mainly on a selection of seminal texts from other academic disciplines: philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, socio-psychology and theology:

- HOFFMEISTER, JOHANNES: Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe.
- KIERKEGAARD, SÖREN (1961): Der Begriff Angst.
- ARISTOTELES (1999): Rhetorik.
- KRINGS, H. / BAUMGARTNER, H. M./WILD, CH. (1973/1974): Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe.
- DELUMEAU, JEAN (1978/1985): Angst im Abendland – Die Geschichte kollektiver Ängste im Europa des 14. bis 18. Jahrhundert.
- RIEMANN, FRITZ (1961/2002): Grundformen der Angst.
- BOESCH, ERNST EDUARD (1976): Psychopathologie des Alltags.
- SCHWARZER, RALF (1981/2000): Stress, Angst und Handlungsregulation.
- STRIAN, FRIEDRICH (1995): Angst und Angstkrankheiten.
- RICHTER, HORST-EBERHARD (1992): Umgang mit Angst.

- KÖRTNER, ULRICH (2001): Angst – Theologische Zugänge zu einem ambivalenten Thema.
- REITHER, FRANZ (1997): Komplexitätsmanagement – Denken und Handeln in komplexen Situationen.
- KRÄMER, W. / MACKENTHUN, G. (2001): Die Panik-Macher.
- NEUMANN, FRANZ (1954): Angst und Politik.
- MARCUS, GEORGE-E. / MACKUEN, MICHAEL-B. (1993): Anxiety, Enthusiasm, and the Vote – The Emotional Underpinnings of Learning and Involvement during Presidential Campaigns.
- FACHHOCHSCHULE KÖLN: Angst am Arbeitsplatz kostet 100 Milliarden.
- MARTINOVITS, ALEX / SCHNOZ, DOMENIC (2001): Bedrohungsempfinden der Bevölkerung im Zeichen der Herbstereignisse (GfS-Angstbarometer).

Anxiety and Fear – A Philosophical Approach

The philosophical perspective served as a first approach to the issue. The participants discussed anxiety and fear as philosophical concepts. SÖREN KIERKEGAARD's (1961) reflection in 'Der Begriff Angst' proved to be a very useful starting point. KIERKEGAARD perceives anxiety as a basic sentiment of human life related to the human condition of liberty and the freedom to choose. In KIERKEGAARD's view anxiety therefore is not directed to any specific threat, but is a necessary characteristic of human life (dt. Lebens- oder Grundangst). Fear, as he sees it, is caused by the perception of a specific threat (dt. Furcht). Though KIERKEGAARD's conceptual distinction seems to be very plausible the discussion showed that it is far less sharp than it seems to be. Nevertheless it has served very largely as a useful instrument during the two-day's dialogue.

There was no disagreement that it was – and that it is - a fundamental shortcoming of modern liberalism not to take into account that fear and anxiety exist as a matter of fact. Obviously a blind spot has been caused by the fact that totalitarian regimes in general and communism in particular were considered to be 'Ministries of Fear'. By contrast liberal societies were – and are - judged to be free from anxiety and fear.

The participants were unanimous in thinking that by now we have to understand that the individual freedom may be and possibly is causing anxiety and fear. However, it was pointed out that, on the other hand, the individual freedom may be and possibly is endangered by anxiety and fear.

Anxiety and Fear – Perceptions in the Past and in the Present

Historical research seems to prove that anxiety and fear are constant issues in human history (vgl. DELUMEAU 1978/1985). However, people have been coping in different ways with anxiety and fear in the past and today. There is strong evidence that due to the fact that in the past people, though they had far less information than today, had the impression that they knew much more than we do. As a consequence their main reaction to the risks of life was a feeling of fear, whereas our reaction tends to be to a large extent the feeling of anxiety. The discussion elaborated on a certain number of strategies aiming at transforming today's anxiety in manageable fear. However, the participants were not too confident in the success of this endeavour: In spite of overactive interventionism and an even accelerating scientific progress a significant reduction of anxiety and fear is not achieved. On the contrary, further interventionism and scientific progress seems to lead to an ever increasing perception of uncertainty, thus increasing anxiety and most probably, though to a lesser extent, to fear.

Anxiety and Fear on the Individual Level

When analysing anxiety and fear it is useful to distinguish the individual level and the social level. On the former level the relation of an individual to its environment is the starting point. Psychologists seem to agree that any disequilibrium between an individual and its social and natural environment may cause anxiety and fear. According to four different kinds of disequilibrium four different forms of anxiety can be identified. As RIEMANN (1961/2002) suggests 'Angst' occurs (1) whenever an individual feels that he becomes excessively dependent on other people and on social or natural circumstances, (2) whenever an individual feels losing his contact to the external world, (3) whenever external changes threaten an individual's actual situation, (4) whenever an individual has the impression to be engaged in an inalterable situation.

The discussion centred on different strategies to cope with 'Angst'. There was a common understanding among the participants on two points: (1) Anxiety and fear are not to be seen merely as negative feelings; insofar as they motivate individuals to focus their attention on threatening situations, they are a prerequisite of any constructive action. However, it was pointed out that (2) anxiety and fear may blur the perception of reality and hamper the rationality of decision-making. Inactive fatalism and blind activism may be the results. Both reaction, though very different, are equally destructive.

Anxiety and Fear on the Social Level

On the social level the ambivalent character of anxiety and fear is reflected in a pessimistic and in an optimistic point of view of social theory. From a pessimistic viewpoint anxiety and fear are perceived as emotions of discomfort. The emotions of discomfort are meant to be the direct consequences of a social situation that differs from an ideal; 'Angst' is an ever present feeling in any society that pays tribute to an ideal. In other words: 'Angst' is the price that has to be paid by any society that has a dream. Whereas this view may be tempting to lead to a passive fatalism, the optimistic approach is more prone to lead to an active strategy: From this point of view the aim of any institutional setting cannot be to eliminate anxiety and fear in society, but to create the conditions which allow the members of society to cope constructively with the feelings of anxiety and fear. It was highlighted that it is of the utmost importance to allow for trial and error, exit and voice. There was a common understanding among the participants that public welfare institutions are far less good an answer to the pervading sentiment of 'Angst' in our society than is hoped for by many people.

Anxiety and Fear in the Political Process

The relation between the citizens and the politicians is not a simple one. On first sight it deals mainly with the demand and offer of public goods; a closer look reveals that the citizens are also interested in ways and means to cope with their anxieties and fears; i.e. that the politicians' success does not depend only on providing public goods, but also on helping the voters to deal with their 'Angst'. This objective may be achieved either constructively or destructively: thus the relationship between citizens and the politicians was seen either as a neurotic, a therapeutic or a demagogical arrangement.

The discussion in Schwarzenberg dedicated much attention to the question how democratic political regimes, as opposed to totalitarian regimes, deal with the feelings of anxiety and fear. It became quite clear that democratic regimes are much more able to cope constructively with 'Angst' and 'Furcht'. However, it was quite clear too that under certain conditions even in democratic regimes the destructiveness of demagogues may have its chance. This will most probably be the case when over a long period of time no politician was able and/or willing to address the ever present feeling of 'Angst'. MARCUS/MACKUEN's (1993) essay was helpful in showing that a certain level of anxiety and fear stimulates the citizens' interests in policy and politics.

The participants were unanimous in seeing the ambivalence of the media. They are most useful in that they give an articulate 'voice' to the otherwise inarticulate feelings of anxiety; on the other hand they may

be quite dangerous in inflating private anxieties and fears, thus creating the conditions for panic irrationality and thoughtless activism.

Final Remark

It seems to be not only my feeling that the symposium in Schwarzenberg was a success: Obviously the topic addressed is a major problem of our society. Though it had not been possible to include articles written by economists in the selection of essays, the text-documentation proved to be useful in that it triggered off a lively discussion among the participants.

The discussion itself was most gentleman-like in that every participant tried successfully to listen with an open mind to what the others had to say, and in that every participant was keen to share whatever knowledge and information he had with those who were strangers to his scientific discipline.

It is by no means a mere nicety to say that the hospitality offered by the Progress Foundation contributed greatly to the conviviality which was itself a major cause of the seriousness and of the intensity of the discussion.

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