Threats and dangers as a relevant world experience: How public discourses and ways of social learning fit with our *anxiety culture* and what can be done for its overcoming.

A position paper and intellectual stimulus (May 2016)

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To be successful in establishing good living conditions was seen at all times as a crucial challenge for a society and its individual members. With regard to the building up and preservation of efficient social systems, this idea is basically linked to the constructive aim of overcoming obstacles and achieving some kind of optimization. As far as the constructors of such social systems are concerned - and with constructors I mean thinkers as well as shapers - their task is to be optimistic in finding solutions, and they often do so in the context of the institutions in which they work. The typical way politicians, entrepreneurs or teachers present themselves within their social function still conveys this image: They know or pretend to know about the problems of our living together in society, but they find the best solutions and are engaged to make them work.

Optimization understood as a contribution to social progress is indeed a key concept for facing all aspects and problems of social communities since the age of the French Enlightenment. This concept remains valid to this day and legitimates any effort for change or reform, or at least provides the rationale for "best practice" solutions. Even most forms of theoretical research in the social sciences have been geared towards the constant improvement of operating social systems.

But this optimistic perspective totally changes if we turn our gaze away from the constructive part of social life and turn it to the everyday conditions of the members of social communities. We suddenly find the aspects of construction and optimization vanishing in favor of what we may call "the evidence of the operating model of society". To give more insight into this shift it is revealing to take a glance through the forms of public communication or topics that are gaining temporarily importance in the mass media or other institutional contexts. In such fields of public debate, the wish to succeed in a good way of life within society, or to maintain it, is very often not conceptualized as a challenge for each member to give his or her individual

contribution in a positive and helpful way. On the contrary, what we can observe in any precarious situation is that thinking and speaking about the conditions of a good way of living together in society are strongly shaped as a public discourse about threats and dangers that the whole community is compelled to face.

Issues about threats and dangers in public life are presumably more often discussed in highly civilized societies, as it is true that their complex social systems are extremely susceptible to disturbances. Moreover, such disturbances affecting the concept of social community are likely to be felt as threats and dangers if the achieved degree of security and satisfaction provided by the individual members of the social union is basically high, a fact we can take for granted in all thoroughly organized forms of society. There are a lot of widespread examples to be found in Europe and the United States, but also in many other parts of the world. Among today's main problem fields which affect us all in a global dimension we may think of global warming and its consequences, nutritional behavior, health hazards, migration and national isolationism, unemployment or the ensuring of pension schemes. More directly felt threats are emanating from social phenomena like terrorism, racism, corruption, or bullying.

It is evident that these problems focused within the perspective of our modern civilization have to be reoriented around the point of view of societies which live under inner and outer conditions that provoke severe crises and emergency situations - which can be due, for example, to the lack of natural and living resources and of course to all kinds of warfare and strife. The struggle for overcoming such crises and traumatizing living conditions is essentially accompanied by discourses dealing with threats and dangers in social life. However, we have to be aware of the fact that those very critical social situations are very often lived through in political systems characterized by unfreedom and the absence of democracy, what normally leads to the oppression or political exploitation of any public utterances referring to those threatening realities. As a consequence we have to recognize that discourses about threats and dangers in public life assume a totally different character depending on whether they are freely discussed in a state of democratic basic order or censored under the conditions of a political system based on oppression.

The democracies of our western world, being addicted to social ideals in many regards, are constantly very eager on all levels to minimize or better eliminate the crucial factors of

disturbance which act against the chosen way of living together. Let's take the example of the free market economy or — as we prefer to conceive it in Germany — the free social market economy: No state committing to this economic system can ever ignore its great susceptibility to failure. The most recent economic crisis of our western world has shown that the complexity of today's national financial systems, which are completely interrelated, makes it nearly impossible to continue invoking the fundamental ideals — and this even less, when the effects of a financial showdown are discussed in public. This is why the main themes of the public discussion on this worldwide financial crisis are all about threats and dangers, evoking aspects like the bankers' greed or the inflation of risky financial bubbles. We have to admit, however, that such forms and contents of the public debate actually do not help to surmount the crisis in a sustainable way.

The observations made so far may be considered consistent with the fact that there are a lot of social initiatives arising with a primary consciousness of social threat scenarios, among them the foundation of new political parties in many states of Europe, which base their programs in the awareness of actual threats and dangers to social life. Such programs are not really guided by fundamental visions of a better social union — even if sometimes they pretend to be. „Yes we can", the Spanish equivalent „Podemos" or the German „Wir schaffen das" („We will make it") are slogans which do not say more than that we are able to fight against and will finally overcome the crucial threats and dangers we are right now facing in our civilized world. So for example, the fight against special cases of corruption reveals themselves to be more important in the public perception of this problem than the more general task to work on the optimization of a system which definitely has to be free of corrupting behavior. Or, to take another example: Protective measures against the dangers of environmental pollution are normally considered to be of high importance to keep ourselves healthy, whereas the development of environmentally friendly production forms seems to be easily neglected. We even witness that the political commitment to renewable energies is being openly discussed as if it were a way of threatening economic progress or — paradoxically — as if it would imply in itself a fundamental risk to the environment. We finally end up with the observation that all democratically based commitments to principally positive aims in our societies are publicly discussed in terms of threats and dangers to social life. This is the reason for which we may claim that our modern civilized world has spread

what I propose to call an *anxiety culture,* by which most of the discourses and debates in our mass media, the Internet and our public institutions are profoundly marked.

Let us think a bit further and ask whether the big influence of *anxiety culture* — beyond its reality in public mass media — may be as well recognized in more private contexts of everyday life. As a matter of fact, we all note the experience that in a moment when some special danger is felt as highly threatening in society, the explicit anxiety discourse referring to it in mass media and institutions normally finds a direct response in individual worries and fears discussed within the family or among friends. We can easily find examples giving proof for this phenomenon with regard to recent or current times of crisis all over the world and especially in Western Europe: Let's think of the worries about some kind of war breaking out in a special situation of political conflict, the fear of foreign infiltration triggered by migration waves leading to massive inter-ethnic encounters, the reaction to unexpected acts of terrorism as have happened twice in Paris in 2015 and recently in Brussels, the sudden appearance of unsolved health problems with dangers of infection, caused by viruses like Ebola or Zika for example, or unexpected events of climate disaster like floods or hurricanes. In those times which are felt and declared as social crises the worries and fears being uttered in public life as a rule correlate with main concerns in private discussions. More than this, we then find a high willingness of many citizens to get involved, to give contributions and to demonstrate their individual attitude. This kind of privately based activity sometimes spills over into the public debate where on that occasion — even if to a very limited extent — discourses may be co-compounded by less official, less relevant and less representative voices.

It is not exaggerating when we say that the consciousness of threats and dangers in public life is a very constant and basic, sometimes even personal perception of all educated and enlightened citizens in our modern world. In this sense we are all characterized by an essential memento to various forms of social responsibility, a sensation we often realize in combination with a certain pressure to act according to ethical principles. But even if we are mindful of our social responsibility we cannot fix the patterns of our acting in any pre-described way. Our states organized as free democracies rather require that the solutions to important problems of social life are negotiated as a result of controversial discussions being part of what we can call a complex social discourse. This means in any case a discursive

process which has to turn out as a basically constructive way of integrating individual, collective, and institutional contributions. On the other hand we have to admit that the manifestation and perception of such social discourses in public life are often very weak in non-critical periods which usually do not provoke more than the occasional and hardly perceptible taking up of those topics in the media. As a consequence, the constant need to reflect on important and relevant issues of our social life is fulfilled in a very unbalanced way, so that we are shifting from phases of excitedly held debates in times of crisis to often long-lasting phases in which the same and still relevant topics are neglected or treated with lethargy in public as well as in private contexts. Neither of these two forms of treatment, however, are able to give the required space for a considerate gain of knowledge and competences with regard to those topics implying relevant threats and dangers in society.

In many countries there are focused information and awareness programs, supported by the public educational system, which aim at correcting this deficiency and which quite often form part of the regular formation activities at schools. Those programs adopt a calm and reflected attitude in dealing with relevant social issues having to do with threats and dangers in public life, whereby their perspective usually goes beyond any current crisis. Such educational programs treat phenomena like climate change, social violence or large-scale immigration from a rational point of view, based in valid argumentation, and they rely on ethical convictions and social values that comprise freedom, solidarity, humanity and common responsibility for future generations. My point will not be to argue against such programs and their good intentions which perfectly fit with our western moral concepts. But we have to see clearly that such a way of educational treatment puts the learners in the initially explained optimistic position of constructors of a good social community which is definitely not the position adolescents identify with when they participate in such educational programs and have to find a critical stance towards the threats and dangers they feel being involved with. The mere vision of a good or better world seems to be of little use as a response to the concerns of our anxiety culture. But nevertheless it still works without alternative in efforts to act against any threat scenario on the basis of social responsibility and solidarity.

Within our western values system we have gotten used to this particular way of facing threats and dangers in public life and we accept to give in to the pressure of recommendations for actions which are characterized as well-meaning, which pass as scientifically justified and

which are generally given in a moralistic tone. On the one hand there is hardly any criticism against this handling of our social problems, but on the other we have some reason to doubt the efficiency and success of such educational measures as long as their intended sustainability is defined as a change of social action patterns on both small and large scales. One of the main disadvantages seems to be the fact that there is little room left for the learner to grapple with possible threats and dangers in relation to his own biographical circumstances and to acknowledge and respect the factors of worrying and fear being real in his own life. If we claim that the individual dealing with perceived threats and dangers has to lead everybody individually to social practices which must be learned in each case to be answered for in communication, we cannot deny that these social practices have to be integrated in discursive contexts whose main character should not primarily be instructive or moralizing. On the contrary, the real challenge is to reserve open spaces for contradiction and alternatives that permit leading controversial debates. These should finally lead to discourses which are concentrated on consensus finding on the basis of independent thinking and a self-organized level of reflection. I would dare to say that these complex exigencies are still far from being fulfilled within school programs and educational measures supported by public institutions.

I am afraid that the so-called anxiety culture we constantly live through and find obvious with many topics is not yet sufficiently respected within the learning programs offered by our educational system. There seems to be indeed a certain disharmony between our well-meaning pedagogical measures for an adequate perception of threats and dangers and the dramatic character of public media discourses dealing with these problems. Pupils certainly start important learning processes with the help of pedagogical initiatives, but they are left alone with personal worries and fears in confronting threat scenarios drawn from public discourses and the media, if the ultimate solution they are offered is nothing more than the vision of a good world. I'm definitely not against the maintenance of an optimistic world view, but it might ring hollow against deeper insights into the world's misery and won't help to find convincing arguments for an efficient reaction to perceived threats and dangers in social life. We may not be aware of these deficits within the protected frame of a learning group at school working on better patterns of social behavior. But there is reason to fear that adolescents and, later on, young adults are not sufficiently prepared to handle with our daily threat scenarios in an appropriate and reasonable way as long as they don't find an active part

in the critical discourse making of our society. We should be afraid of a young generation developing superficial mechanisms of anxiety reduction, just to suppress their latent fears, a behavior that can easily lead to a lack of concern with regard to personal experiences with the undeniable threats and dangers of our days. Eventually, this mood of ease and peace is inviting us all to take part in a fun and consumer society where there is little room for feeling anxious, concerned or responsible. Nevertheless, this lifestyle attitude reveals itself to be socially unstable, because it is not founded upon the ability to achieve a balanced judgment on facts which are openly discussed in terms of real or perceived threats and dangers in our society.

The instability of a carefree lifestyle feeling in which modern civilization wants to embed us all is likely to be proved every time a social conflict has become extremely topical — as for example the immigration problem in Europe right now. What we notice under these precarious circumstances is the extremist outburst of a social behavior frivolously mismatched to our social values, breaching all dams of social norms and breaking the barriers of a decent discourse making within our civilized societies. We can take Donald Trump as an example when he successfully reacts with verbal aberrations to the US anxiety culture in a moment when it seems to be ready for deviating patterns of social behavior. But in a very similar way, right-wing populist parties in Europe — the *Front National* in France, the Netherlands' Liberty Party and the German Alternative-Party *AfD* — make use of the same discourse elements with success and thus contribute to the social acceptance of racist thought patterns in Europe. It is particularly frightening that the mainstream experience made in such outbursts exceeding social norms is close to be described as a new form of solidarity among those who consider themselves concerned and that it justifies in greater parts of our societies a new thinking and acting on the grounds of using violence. I'm convinced that we have reached a point where our education policy should react to this alarming development by strengthening all efforts to reach a calm, reflective and reasonable way to handle with what is publicly discussed as a threat scenario in our society, and that we should head for innovative measures to be taken within our social education system to achieve this goal. The urgency of this pedagogical task is obvious in the face of a daily wider spread extremism against everything that, and everybody who, is reputed to be hostile from a nationalistic point of view. Many of my German friends are like me very much worried about all forms of social clustering that lead to the identification with movements like *Pegida* in Dresden or private militias as a

reaction to the events of sexual harassment in Cologne. Such social initiatives could possibly be forestalled if schools and other educational institutions have more impact on the development of a reflective, critical and enlightened society firmly based on the principles of human rights. More pedagogical programs have to be worked out to pursue this line, inciting the individual to independent and constructivist learning processes which are able to sustainably prevent all forms of simplifying, credulous and intolerant positioning with regard to social problem fields which are perceived and openly discussed as threats and dangers. I am convinced that this aim marks a very important pedagogical task with respect to a better future for all of us.