

“Using dialogue in building social cohesion in times of crisis”

Keynote SIETAR 2019, Dr. Cathleen Bochmann

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Society is kept together by a variety of things: a shared history, culture or religion, participation on prosperity, sometimes a common language and, of course, a political order.

A political order that’s grounded in shared norms and expectations. Meanwhile, rapid technical innovations, increased globalization, economic pressures and migration are factors that constantly work towards a transformation and – as a by-product - often towards a fragmentation of society. So to keep our societies together, we have to work out what unites us and what divides us, and how to deal with those forces, in establishing social cohesion.

In my country – Germany – the urgency of dealing with the question of social cohesion became clear in the wake of the European refugee crisis. In 2015 and 2016 about a million refugees arrived in Germany. While one part of German society admirably rose to the task of welcoming hundreds of thousands of people, forging connections, friendships and helping their new neighbors getting settled, other parts of society quickly started very vocal protests against the influx of asylum seekers. In my hometown, Dresden, a xenophobic and islamophobic movement – Pegida – Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident became the voice of the angry citizen’s movement. Ten thousands of people joined weekly demonstrations in early 2015. This movement quickly developed into a political party structure, of a right-wing populist party, that effortlessly won seats in every single state of Germany, our national parliament and recently the European parliament.

Ever since then, we've had palpable tensions within our society. Caught in the middle was the municipal administration. Mayors and city councils, as well as the local administration are the ones who have find appropriate housing and jobs for refugees. They arrange and provide social security and language classes and get kids settled into local schools and daycares. Local politicians are also the ones who directly encounter their neighbors in front of the town hall or central market square, protesting the arrival of a bus with refugees on board. And they are the ones dealing with threats and the anger, hateful graffiti's sprayed on walls and bus stops or who have to manage Nazi demonstrations with the local police.

So what we had was a serious crisis. But what defines a crisis? Differences of opinion and political values are after all normal within a democracy. Political scientist Robert Dahl would argue, that vocal, strong and autonomous societal movements that compete with one another and that challenge the state actually enhance democratic quality. Yet, the overwhelming majority of Germans and outside observers would argue, that our political system currently is at least somewhat in a state of crisis. As are countless other countries with eroding or fragile social cohesion. So let's figure out where the crisis is.

Democracy is defined by pluralism. Pluralism thrives on conflict. People, by nature tend to fight for their opinions, interests and passions. As Harold Lasswell put it: we constantly have to figure out, "who gets what, when, and how". This fact indeed is the reason, why we, as humans, developed larger political structures in the first place. A political order is meant to facilitate that fighting. Alexander Hamilton writes in Federalist Paper 15 "Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint." Thus, conflict within the boundaries of the political order is fostered and seen as an opportunity for learning, especially in the wake of new political

challenges. Instead of grand societal harmony or some utopia of a calm and steady equilibrium, a practiced tolerance of heterogeneity is encouraged.

That's where the crisis starts. Crises emerge from aggravated and perpetuated conflicts where no such tolerance exists anymore - conflicts where the standard political problem solving procedures prove insufficient in tackling the problems. Without intervention and learning, those types of crisis-laden conflicts potentially threaten the existence of the political system. That's because over time, they erode the normative consensus in society, central elements of civic culture and ultimately deprive the political order of legitimacy.

In 2015 in many towns and cities, the local authorities were hopelessly overwhelmed to solve this crisis. Nevertheless, they had to fix it somehow. And that's when several public and civil society actors and academics like our research project stepped in. Like firefighters, the groups came into local communities putting out the socio-political fires burning everywhere. And how did they do it? Dialogue.

Dialogue is the central mechanism through which competing social groups can engage with one another in a peaceful way. I use the term dialogue in a very broad way for any two-sided form of communication, be it face to face, in large groups, virtual or in real life. There really is no alternative to communication.

Specifically, what we need, are forms of communication, which even in those sharp crisis-laden conflicts won't decline further into polarization, radicalization and hostility. Instead, we need to transform the conflicts into commonly acceptable decisions at the local level and beyond. We also need to make sure that not only the results, but also the process of communicating itself, will work towards the enhancement of social cohesion.

So we have to face a difficult task and walk a fine line. On the one hand, we need to defend democratic and civic values, human dignity, the right to seek asylum and to make sure, that we absolutely do not feed into xenophobia and hate. On the other hand, it is essential, to take those angry citizens seriously and not devalue them.

There are two reasons to not simply dismiss the angry citizens. 1) is a normative argument: As long as they are not extremists, who operate outside the confines of the political order, their voices deserve to be heard. Not to do so, would simply be undemocratic. 2) is a functional argument: social and political exclusion and marginalization empirically seems to work with extremist political groups, somewhat. But in the case of mere populist or in our case, vast numbers of disillusioned liberal-middle to right-conservative angry citizens, exclusion merely feeds into their anger and actually strengthens the movement. It seems somewhat fatalistic and certainly isn't progressive or morally pleasant, but you cannot ignore those 25, 30, 40 percent of the population.

So what do we have to consider, if we try fixing those societies through dialogue? First of all, not all forms of dialogue are actually helpful. Human history has given us a vast variety of structuring and organizing dialogue. Councils by elders or chiefs, the Agora of the ancient Greeks, the Imperial Diet as the deliberative body of the Holy Roman Empire, convents, Jirga's, Shuras, Tings, town hall meetings, parliamentary debates, summits, workshops, conferences, Fishbowls, World Cafés, Round Tables and so on.

Approximately 50 different models of dialogue can be used to connect citizens and political leaders. Each model creates specific modes of interaction between humans. Each model comes with a set of rules regarding desired proceedings, behavioral expectations for participants and - if they exist – for moderators and facilitators, as well as goals. Some aim at creating solutions to practical problems, some stimulate intellectual debate, some focus on

building empathy. Each model of dialogue provides a framework to what is happening, what is allowed to happen and what is inappropriate in a communication setting.

So what we need to do, is work out, how a particular version of organizing dialogue works in a specific context. This research is not only of practical relevance, but also highly interesting for social constructivist theory building and Ethnomethodology. So what we need, is an integrated research agenda, including political science, sociology, intercultural and communication theory, psychology, organizational development, education and so on. On the strength of our past experience I argue, that it is extremely useful to create a typology of dialogue formats based on where in a conflict they can use their specific potential for the best. This typology is based on 4 phases.

Before a conflict arises, a critical development can be averted or alleviated. For that, we need preventive dialogue formats like dilemma discussions, where participants are faced with a morally ambiguous situation and discuss and vote on courses of action. Another example are salons and coffee house discussions, which aim to foster refined and knowledgeable conversation. Those root in a long 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition in France and other European countries and are currently experiencing a revival. In the US there are national issues forums, where citizens deliberate on topics like civil rights, education or energy. Political simulation games fall into that category, but also open door or open house days, for example at an accommodation center where asylum seekers live.

What these models of dialogue have in common is, that the particular *topic* of discussion is less relevant than the *effect* they aim to have on the individual. What those formats do, is increase the chances that in a societal crisis, people can cope with diverging viewpoints and controversial discussions. They teach to tolerate ambiguity and heterogeneity. The more used

people are to the rules of good controversy, the easier it is to establish a certain objectivity later on.

Once a conflict increases, in the second phase, problems are seen as more pressing, the need to articulate yourself rises. People are calling for recognition of the issue and responsiveness. Therefore, in a democracy, the problem needs to be placed in the public sphere and worked on. A dialogue format in that stage faces the task of distributing information, working on disparities and keeping the formation of the political will open. This function of distributing information has to be thought of as a two-sided process. Not only from the municipalities to the citizens, in the form of explaining policy, but also from citizens to the local officials, in the form of consultation. The audience of such a dialogue is a resource of knowledge, that municipalities can and should utilize. The benefit is a clearer overview of different dispositions in society.

Fitting dialogue models for that stage are discussion formats, e.g. fishbowl discussions, where participants can join and leave a discussion autonomously in a setting of concentric rings. Another example are 21st Century Town Meetings, that have citizens discuss in small groups, with a team of editors gently steering the discussion and utilizing computer technology to keep track of the proceedings and to facilitate votes on the issues.

Some conflicts however get to the point, of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> phase, where the opposing parties start to be convinced that further discussions are to no avail. The fighting parties perceive little to no common ground and high polarization. "Actions instead of words" become the new trajectory. This is also where normal conflict ends, and a crisis begins. There are two possible strategies: escalating and de-escalating.

Escalation can be an unwanted effect of failed communicative efforts, e.g. because inadequate dialogue formats were chosen by politicians. It's a given that any communicative setting can be escalated by people, if they are determined to do so. However, some types of dialogue are specifically tailored towards escalating.

First, there are those, that serve to increase in-group cohesion, coalition building and the closing-of-ranks. More unity within the group allows clearer distinction from the opposition group and a more effective use of power resources. Closed social media bubbles serve such a purpose, as well as any forms of meetings, conferences, clubs or get-togethers, which raise high barriers to attendance. If you only allow selected folks to participate, you are giving them a safe space, while allowing them to tighten their preconceived opinions. More homogeneity also leads to more willingness to participate in the discussion. The less cognitive dissonance you trigger, the livelier the debate gets. So whereas in the earlier stage the goal was to make the dialogue public, at this later stage the goal is to make it private or semi-private again.

The second type of escalation formats works parallel to those. Those dialogues can be used deliberately to create more attention to political demands and to overcome resistance, without having to compromise. The goal is a win-lose scenario. This success usually comes at the price of decreased social cohesion. Public demonstrations and big marches fall into that category. Another option is collecting signatures for a petition, especially if the goal is a referendum, which would provide a formal endpoint to the conflict, but also further increases polarization. That's because a referendum usually breaks a complex issue down to a yes/no question. It also needs to mobilize as many people as possible to choose one of the sides. Such a formal decision might be the end of a debate, but what those escalation formats are usually missing, is the integration and care for the losing side of the conflict.

De-escalation formats are the ones who work towards re-establishing common ground and decreasing polarization. What these dialogues do, is healing emotional injuries, building appreciation and trust. The final objective is enabling the conflict parties to compromise again. This helps regain the ability of decision-making in the political system and strengthens social cohesions. Those dialogue formats all have one thing in common: They provide channels for the need to articulate oneself in a small-group or even one on one setting. They reduce distance, literally. It seems actually quite simple: look the opponent in the eye, make everybody listen before they speak, talk about emotions and motivations as well as the topic.

World Café dialogues are quite successful in that regard. They provide a relaxed atmosphere, free drinks and food, writing on a paper table cloth and small group settings, which can be steered by the hosts using questions on flash-cards. *Thérapie Sociale*, or Transformational Social Therapy as it is called in English, is another example, which has been used in very difficult urban areas like Parisian banlieus, crime hot-spots in American cities and the West bank. This format works by helping people directly address the hatred and violence that separate them and prevent them from working together. The method of an Appreciative Inquiry Summit attempts to overcome deficit centered, backwards looking and reproachful communication by revealing and strengthening positive narratives of the individuals that often already contain the best solutions. All in all, however, it is much easier to transform a conflict at its earlier stages than de-escalate a crisis later on.

Using such a typology that looks at communication in the context of a crisis-laden conflict also gives insight, why traditional participation methods for citizens fail in situations like the 2015/16 refugee movement and the angry citizen protests. Until recently, most formats of voluntary citizen participation were developed within infrastructure projects. You wanted to build a new tunnel, so you created a task group and had citizen join and consult with the



administration. You were debating the local budget so you included citizens as stakeholders either online or offline. It might have been controversial, but in the end, the debate was about policy, not society and its cohesion as a whole. The situation 2016 showed clearly, that issue-based deliberation methods didn't work in emotion based conflicts. That's because they called for an unobtainable high level of objectivity and neutrality. The more citizens felt, that their emotion driven demands weren't met by the types of dialogue the local officials had to offer, the more hostile the angry citizens became.

So how do we deal with such conflict in a constructive way? What guidelines should we give to municipalities on how to use dialogue in connecting citizens? First of all, we need them to create a better skill-set of analyzing the circumstances of societal conflicts in a way, that not only looks at the issues itself, but also at the levels of emotion and cohesion. Administrators are often very business-like or matter-of-fact when they look at political conflict. We need to train them to better understand and react to the emotional forces of citizens.

We also need to increase knowledge in the political system about how communication can be organized effectively, what great variety of formats there actually are and how each of them works. We've done surveys among local officials that found, that almost all of them first resort to panel discussions with a short Q&A for citizen involvement. This one "dialogue fits all" approach actually worsens the situation in a heavy conflict.

More and more cities also utilize the knowledge of local conflict consultants or participation consultants and even create new positions within the local administration for people, whose job is to actively work towards a culture of constant communication and involvement. Think about it, if your relationship is in trouble, you might use marriage or family counselling with a therapist. If there's conflict at the workplace, you might implement additional training for

managers or get an external mediator. Why shouldn't towns and cities have such a professional working with them?

All in all, those courses of action don't single-handedly save social cohesion. Nevertheless, they play an important role. German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde once said: „The liberal secularized state lives by pre-requisites which it cannot guarantee itself. This is the great adventure it has undertaken for freedom's sake.” We're all in on that adventure. We all need to contribute to the integration of society. We all need to actively work towards creating the pre-requisites of democracy. There's no alternative to dialogue to achieve that goal.