

Powerlessness, Shaming, Isolation and Envy

Country Report Austria

By Martin Schenk

An Interview in the Austrian media. The human right expert of Diakonie criticises the lack of quality in asylum procedure. A few days later the ministry for inner affairs wants to take him to court and sends an accusatory letter to the judges. An irritating action in a democracy, where the adequate answer is discussion and the discourse of pros and cons. It is an authoritarian approach and an intimidating message to all who have opposite opinions. (see also „The authoritarian path)

- Diakonie provides legal advice service for refugees in the asylum procedure. That is part of an independent method of checks and balances which is vital for a democracy. The ministry of interior wants to cancel this free legal advice service.

- Ethnic Profiling: Everything that has to do with „migrants“ is cancelled or reduced: the very helpful „Integration-Year“, education for long term care „migrants care“ or inclusive school projects.

- We are all facing cuttings in the social field, especially for marginalized people and persons without a lobby. Projects to help unemployed people are cancelled, social assistance and counseling centres are reduced. The province of Lower Austria has passed a law to abolish the guaranteed minimum income for refugees, but concealed within that law is a cut to the housing benefit for people with disabilities. The word “refugees” is used, yet cuts will then be made to everyone’s housing benefit, including that of all Austrians. That’s how it works. Or, take the so-called “cap” on family allowances: the name “asylum-seeker” is called, but then the guaranteed minimum income for all children is abolished.

A concerted effort is being made to make Austria less attractive not only for refugees but also for recipients of the guaranteed minimum income, for the disabled and the chronically ill. Social problems are increasing even though, overall, society is becoming ever richer, particularly right at the top. But it’s always those right at the bottom who are blamed. “The unemployed”, “guaranteed minimum income claimants” and “the asylum-seekers”. This is a way of exclusively conducting the distribution and justice debate “right at the bottom”. The ten per cent of the population with the lowest income and least opportunities are left to fight

over the crumbs. For the past hundred years, these discourses have threatened to go on running in a continually repeating process in which the particular group that loses out due to a fundamental social change is blamed, reviled and vilified for its own worsened social situation.

Who are the player oft the far right ?

- Student Leagues: Very tiny groups, male networks, have connections to far right and neonazi movements.¹ Now an recruiting base for officers in cabinets and ministries.

- Several internet websites

Responsible for hate speak, fake news and ideologies of social exclusion. Some of the writers are now running the communication unit in the ministry for interior.

- „Die Identitären“: origins in France 1990ies, are a kind of NGO network with public campaigns and actions.²

Value and Dignity

Today, the debate is more hysterical than ever. A “state of emergency” is announced, internet forums are overflowing with baiting and hatred, an authoritarian nationalism is increasingly supplanting a social, democratic Europe, and the political debate is once more entrenched at the front line of “identity”³.

One contradiction is particularly evident: while human rights are being increasingly annulled in the context of asylum and the basic social rights of the poorest ten per cent of the population are coming under pressure, one hears much dogmatic insistence on “our values” in almost every speech, as well as in every other newspaper article. Ethical and moral attitudes are being discredited, yet at the same time “values” are demanded and put on a pedestal. One irritating tendency is that the more values are talked about, the less human rights play any role in the discussion. Our basic values, enshrined in constitutional law, also encompass the

¹ Stille Machtergreifung: Hofer, Strache und die Burschenschaften (Hans Henning Scharsach 2017).

² Rechtsextreme Organisationen in Österreich: www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/rechtsextreme-organisationen

³ Bachinger, Eva; Schenk, Martin (2012): Die Integrationslüge. Antworten in einer hysterisch geführten Auseinandersetzung, Deuticke Verlag.

European Convention on Human Rights – such as the right to apply for asylum, the right to family life, the right to basic social and financial security and the right to be treated equally. Yet these human rights, which should apply to everyone, are being increasingly trampled underfoot in Europe as well.

Do we talk about values only to stay silent about human rights? Here, an interjection obtrudes. The term “values” comes not from the field of ethics, but from economics. Value expresses the degree of importance that we bestow on an object, how we evaluate it and the amount of money that we consider it to be worth. The usual yardstick of value is price. “In the realm of ends, everything has either a price or a dignity,” as Immanuel Kant put it. And philosopher Konrad Paul Liessmann enlarges on the point: “The search for values, the question as to where values are formed, the assertion that must be an education in values, the interpretation of human rights as values, the ideological talk of “communities of values” – all this indicates that we are no longer interested in the dignity of the human being, but are instead on the point of enforcing our preferences and the underlying ends-oriented yardsticks of value.” Liessmann asserts that the term “values” makes human dignity into an object of speculation.⁴

The Authoritarian Path: Five Steps

The authoritarian path is a learning programme from Hungary, Poland and now Austria. The first step is to mobilise feeling against minorities. They may be refugees, or Roma – in any case, groups who are suited to being made into “others”. Researchers call this process “othering”. The evil-doers come from outside, that is the basic pattern. In step two, people affected by poverty are harassed. Homeless people in Budapest, those on minimum security here, unemployed people there. Fundamental social rights are suspended or deliberately avoided for those at the bottom of the social heap. Step three on the authoritarian path means restricting the right to demonstrate and undermining supreme courts. We are familiar with that from Poland, but also from Spain after the protests against social cutbacks following the financial crisis. Step four targets NGOs and civil society, attempting to denounce and weaken them. That is a constant pattern from Poland, Hungary, Russia or Turkey. In the fifth step, pressure is put on critical journalists.

“Every step was so tiny, so unimportant, so plausibly justified, that no one understood on a daily basis what the whole thing was to mean in principle, and where all these ‘tiny steps’

⁴ Bachinger, Eva; Schenk, Martin (2016): Wert und Würde. Ein Zwischenruf., Hanser.

would one day lead.” Milton Mayer⁵ wrote this in his study of the experiences of people in the 1930s in Germany. And added: “On a daily basis no one understood, just as little as a farmer in his field sees his grain grow from one day to the next. But every action is worse than the last one, yet only a little bit worse.” Meyers study is shot through with eerie observations and exact descriptions of daily life: “The outward forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring: houses, shops, meals, visits, concerts, movies, holidays. Only you live in a world of hate and fear, and people who hate and fear do not even know themselves that, when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed. You have accepted things that you would not have accepted five years ago, or one year ago.”

Don’t engage in anticipatory obedience. Defend institutions. Search. Learn from people in other countries. And talk to one another, a lot. Those are some of the twenty principles that Timothy Snyder cites in his slim volume “On Tyranny”⁶. A professor of history at Yale University, he observes authoritarian paths for a living. His small book reads like the instructions for use of a medication, that citizens should always have at hand as an antidote. Take a deep breath. Don’t drift. “Every story is ‘breaking’ until it is displaced by the next one. So we are hit by wave upon wave but never see the ocean,” Snyder writes, describing the hysteria trap into which authoritarian policies are driving us.

Scapegoat Story and the Winner Story

In the last few years two ideological strands have become interwoven. The scapegoat story with its core statement: “If they were not there everything would be better” and the winner ideology: “Everyone can win if they only want to.” You look up to the winner and down to the scapegoat. You agree with the winner and throw out the scapegoat. “If they were not there everything would be better.” Finding a group that is to blame for anything and everything, including what is going wrong in a community. And imagining that everything would be better if they were no longer there.

That links up directly with the ideology of the winners. Or, the other way round: if you don’t make it, it is your own fault. This ideology is particularly effective because it shames “losers” and affirms “winners”. It supports those who have made it and holds down those who are on

⁵ Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free*, University of Chicago Press, 2013

⁶ Timothy Snyder: *Über Tyrannei. Zwanzig Lektionen für den Widerstand*, Beck 2017

the ground. The “losers” are called on to remain “fair”, to accept defeat with congratulations to the “winners”, ultimately to identify with the latter. Life – an Olympic idea. “You have to be in it to win it,” but please stay on the ground floor. And keep smiling! The great disappointments, the defeats, the cracks, must not be noticed, since no disappointment is really respected. All disappointments are played down or converted into invented stories of heroism.

Food we cannot eat but still need for life

Not be noticed means to be excluded. This is why the desire for a just society is so fundamentally connected to the desire for recognition. The answer lies in the gap between “What do I have?” and “Who am I?” We have to focus on the feelings, the needs and the emotions, which are at work behind the current debate. This is not just about fear, but also about powerlessness, shame, isolation and envy. We all share a fundamental need to be able to receive and create recognition. Where we are able to shape our own lives, receive recognition and experience social equality, trust grows and hatred diminishes.

What is strengthening and what is debilitating? Food is something we eat. But there is also a kind of food that we cannot eat and still need for life. There are, above all, three strengthening “sources of sustenance”. The first one is friendship. Social networks and sustainable relations are empowering. The opposite has a weakening effect: solitude and isolation.

The second source of sustenance is agency. That means that I am holding the steering wheel of my own life. The opposite is powerlessness: that eats into us. Can we achieve anything by ourselves, and is there any point in taking action? The concept of “agency” plays a central role in passing on strain and stress, demands, assessments and reactions. It is a matter of keeping a grip on the world and perceiving demands as challenges.

The third source of sustenance is recognition. It is about experiencing more recognition and respect. The opposite is being shamed. That is toxic. You do your level best and get no benefit. The burden of daily life with tight finances brings no “rewards”, such as a better income, recognition, support or going up in the world. It is more the contrary – you risk losing your present status. This bad stress, that arises in such a “gratification crisis” (Siegrist,

2008), works particularly where people earn nothing and don't have a say. If these feelings of powerless continue we learn helplessness: we find it normal not to achieve anything. Anyone who notices that they cannot achieve anything despite their best efforts will sooner or later give up. The toxic cocktail consists of three ingredients: high demands, low and low recognition. That is like driving at top speed with the handbrake on. The central effect is always a violation of social mutuality.

These three "sources of sustenance" should not just be interpreted individually but they also raise questions for our institutions and society: schools, social security offices, job centres, retirement homes, etc. Do they provide nourishing sources of sustenance - or are people made more fragile in these places?

Envy: you or me (but not us both)⁷

Are you envious of people on minimum benefit (in Austria called *Mindestsicherung*)? Are you envious of those sleeping in emergency accommodation? Are you envious of the unemployed? Is envy a feeling that grips us when we notice that someone else owns something big, beautiful and impressive that we would like to have ourselves?

No, replies philosopher Robert Pfaller. First, envy is not about something big, beautiful and impressive. Secondly, it is not about *us* getting something, but about others *not* getting something, and thirdly, we don't want it ourselves.

But one thing at a time. Envy affects what is nearby, similar, tiny, and different. My neighbour's car, my colleague's enthusiasm, the smartphone next door. It's not the millionaire that I envy but, as Aristotle said 2000 years ago, the person like myself. The one who has a few euros more is the one who makes me mad, not the millionaires with their tax havens. Envy is a phenomenon of proximity and of fine differences.

Secondly, it is about the other person not having it. If I get what I envy the other person for I am not happy at all; I just look for another little detail to begrudge them. If I envy my neighbour's car because it is such a lovely colour, and then buy exactly the same coloured car, will I be content? No, then a new little difference will bother me, e.g. the cool car radio.

⁷ Schenk, Martin; Rümmele, Martin (2017): Genug gejammert! Warum wir gerade jetzt ein starkes soziales Netz brauchen. Mit Karikaturen von Gerhard Haderer, AmPuls Verlag.

The discontent will only go away if someone smashes into the parked car and it is a total write-off. Ultimately envy wants the annihilation of the envied object.

We do not really want what we envy others for. Would the man who envies the woman drawing the minimum benefit her allegedly wonderful life really want to swap with this poverty-stricken woman? No. He would say that he did not mean it like that. But her minimum benefit should be reduced!

That is narcissistic logic. The envious person sees the person envied as their “other”, i.e. their whole remaining world, their “absolute horizon”. The rule is: you or me – but not us both. Consequently: if you have it, then I can’t have it. And the fantastically deceptive reverse: if you don’t have it, then I have it.

Envy is socially destructive of solidarity, a poison that divides people with similar interests. In a disagreement about better wages in an English company, workers went without part of a wage rise in order to prevent a rival group being put on the same level as them. The reason for not granting something to another person is so strong that you accept the disadvantage yourself. Put the other way round: envy harms you personally because you renounce something beneficial to yourself. Envy numbs your own enjoyment.

Minimum benefit is a good example. In Lower Austria and now in Upper Austria, asylum is put forward as a ground for cutbacks but this affects single parents, big families, caring relatives and thus harms everyone. That fact is forgotten through envy felt for refugees. That is how pickpockets do it: they always need someone to distract the victim so that the other one can steal their wallet or purse. Envy is the enemy of good relations and the friend of the more powerful. It is an instrument to divide those who could really join forces to improve their own living situations. When envious people would rather deny themselves something rather than begrudge it to the object of their envy, they are blind to this, which is harmful to them and serves the much more powerful...

That is the only way we can understand why some people envy those on minimum benefit the vast sum of four euros they get per day.

There’s nothing to laugh about. Don’t enjoy yourself

An email lands in my mailbox. Re: the broadcast last night. “I heard the discussion on TV,” writes Waltraud V. “My opinion is that whoever has always paid in enough will have enough

to live on when they are old. That is only fair, whoever went to work always paid in. The state must then maintain me – that is what some people think as well.” And she continues: “I had an operation and was sent into retirement. The reason was that I was no use any more. All right, what was I to do? But to top it all, they deducted 16% from my pension as I had only worked for thirty years. That did not bother anyone and I always went to work and am now being punished with deductions. I only have a small pension. I was told “you have a husband”, but that’s not fair in my opinion, as I worked my whole life up until the operation. I’m not entitled to a bigger pension only because I’ve got a husband?” The email ends with two sentences: “They don’t want to work and I don’t see why people like that are supported. They just laugh and say, we’ll get everything anyway, why should I work?”

This letter contains all the social contradictions, exemplified in the conflicts in which the letter-writer finds herself. Only those who work are to get a pension, Waltraud V. decrees at the start. Conversely, she indicates that anyone who has paid in too little does not get a pension. That’s how it is. Bad luck. No one needs to get upset. Then, however, someone does get upset. She herself. About the fact that she had worked up to her health problems but was then forced to retire and now gets less. Which she does not think is fair and now means that she depends on her husband. She orders others to laugh and would like to herself. She refers to what she was deprived of as her own, when comparing herself with a group defined as different. She was obviously not the one who drew up the rules that give women a high risk of poverty when it comes to their pensions. Pensions are claimed as her property when she refers to others but the rules do not apply to herself.

The life that is not lived and is considered not possible is lived by the others and thus seems possible. Two things happen. On the one hand, the repressing of a person’s own wish for an independent livelihood and, on the other, subjection to the authority that makes this wish impossible. And it is the others who laugh. That is expressed in many internet posts. The others are laughing when I have nothing to laugh about. That also means: the others are enjoying themselves although I am not allowed to. I have to do without what I would really like to have or would like to be, what I enjoy, what is fun, what enables a good life. But at the same time I am envious of all those who treat themselves to it. This is a locked-in enjoyment that lives disconnectedly. And the origin of the German word *genießen* (enjoy) is quite different: the Middle High German word *geniesz* indicates a common *nutznieszung* (benefit). Enjoyment in its original sense is not an especially solitary, narrow and

consumerist act, it is a shared one. Together we enjoy the fruits of the earth. That does everyone good. The word *genießen* is also related to the word *genesen* (recover).

Philosopher Robert Pfaller⁸ says: “Because we have ourselves begun to hate what we want and we enjoy it clothed in this hate, we need the fiction of the other as being genuinely in possession of happiness, and we hate this person just as much as we hate this happiness. Because we can’t admit to ourselves that we have preferred to hate happiness to happiness itself.”

Our own powerlessness spawns a claim to power over other powerless individuals. We fantasise that they enjoy what we wish to enjoy but which has been denied us through the prevailing conditions. That is a merry-go-round of “rebellious self-subjugation”. Another mechanism that estranges us from our needs and those of the neighbour is identification with the attacker. That means becoming equal to the one who forces something on us. Scaring other people helps people not to feel the anxiety they have, to quote psychoanalyst Anna Freud. “You only have to play that you yourself are the dangerous man whom you could meet,” the older sister advises her small brother. “Then you don’t need to fear anything.” That game is self-destructive in the long run.

These findings lead to four perspectives: the opposite of powerlessness is agency; the opposite of envy is being able to enjoy; the opposite of offence is receiving appreciation, the opposite of isolation is sustainable relationship.

1. **Putting people into a position of strength.** Enabling agency and empowerment. We have to encourage people to use their opportunities for action – at work, at school, in the village. It is about constructive action and meaningful activity.
2. **Not just repeating “anxieties and worries”** like a mantra and thereby making the whole of society neurotic, but tackling the fettered opportunities for fulfilment, and uncovering the enjoyment that you deny yourself. The worse your own self-denial is, the tougher you will be on the more vulnerable. Anyone who is unable or no longer allowed to enjoy becomes “hard to stomach”.

⁸ Robert Pfaller: Wofür es sich zu leben lohnt: Elemente materialistischer Philosophie. Fischer 2011

3. The third perspective is that of taking offences seriously and not glossing over them with a platitudinous “it will all work out”, not giving an inappropriate reply or offering deceptive hopes. **The issue is about showing recognition** and not denying people respect and dignity in their daily life.
4. To promote friendship, sustainable relationships, come together. Against isolation. Situations „face to face“ in „real places“ with „rhythm“.

Things are getting worse and more risky. Feelings of injustice meet feelings of powerlessness. There is a clear link between uncertainty and a loss of control, on the one hand, and ideologies of devaluation and marginalisation, on the other. Mutuality is broken, tacit agreement has been unilaterally ended. The most important clashes in history have been conducted about this borderline of respectability. Through the participation in affluence, education and social security gained through struggles in the 1950s, the vast majority of workers and small self-employed people were integrated into the social centre of respectability. This social model is now being called into question. Everyday work is characterised by a growing level of dependence and less recognition. The conditions of recognition play an important role.

But “not being noticed” also means “being excluded”. Pierre Rosanvallon⁹, a democracy theorist, argues that today the longing for a just society is linked to the wish for recognition. And it is precisely here that a renewal of democracy must start: with those whose lives are in the shadows, who are not represented, who are not visible. In Paris, Rosanvallon has founded a “Parliament of the invisible”, that is a forum for the stories of people who would otherwise have remained in the shadows: of young people who fight their way through, of workers in the low-pay sector, of the old man in the . For many it has become difficult to still interpret society and themselves in its midst. “It undermines democracy if the many soft voices remain unheard, quite ordinary are neglected and apparently banal life stories are disregarded.”

Beware!

⁹ Pierre Rosanvallon (2015): Das Parlament der Unsichtbaren. Edition Import Export.

There is something in our lives that is really important. Certain needs that have to be met. They include sources of sustenance that cannot be eaten but are still needed for life. Psychologist Abraham Maslow lists five shortages that, if they are not covered, make us receptive for all kinds of extremist talk: hunger and thirst, violence and unemployment, isolation and loneliness, a lack of respect and appreciation, letting your own potential go to waste. “Anyone who is constantly hungry will follow those who promise bread. Those who guarantee safety will get hearers among people who are scared and traumatised,” is the analysis of network-researcher Harald Katzmaier. “Those who offer participation will resonate with lonely people. Those who say: as you are, you are a valuable person, will be heard by those who never stand in the light of recognition. Those who are squeezed into hierarchies will welcome people who enable new scope for action as liberators.” Anyone who no longer has these basic needs on their radar will not be able to counter ideologies of social exclusion. Above all, awareness has declined for how those who are not on the sunny side of the street need appreciation, dignity and integrity.

Apprentices, for example, are only viewed in terms of their function for the employment market. Only “half the personality” of the young people doing vocational training comes into the focus of public discussion, criticises youth researcher Bernhard Heinzlmaier: “Political and business leaders are completely indifferent to what people do outside of their work situation, in their political and leisure-time activities, relationships and families. The political establishment has to pay for this at every election. The apprentices who don’t feel sufficiently appreciated by the establishment have become passive rebels against the system.”

Sociologist Didier Eribon¹⁰ supplies a further consideration. When he went back to his native city of Reims to retrace his family he found that the factory workers among his relatives all vote for the rightwing extremist party. Eribon writes that “we have to interpret the approval of the Front National at least partly as a kind of political defence by the lower classes. They try to defend their collective identity, or at least a dignity that has always been trampled on and now is even not respected by those who used to represent and defend it.” Workers had turned into “socially disadvantaged groups”, proletarians into the “uneducated classes”. Stakeholders calling for their rights had become a collection of victims and needy individuals. Some turn into objects of social and moral pedagogy, into deficient under-class dimwits that

¹⁰ Eribon, Didier (2016): Rückkehr nach Reims, Suhrkamp.

are good for nothing. Others are regarded as objects of victorious welfare, as eternal victims who need everything. But never as actors, as protagonists. There are sources of sustenance that we can't eat but still need for life. Anyone who does not stand in the light will trust those who what is at risk of disappearing from everyday life: respect and dignity.

Martin Schenk

<http://eingschenkt.at/about/>