

Living with different opinions

by Marita Brune

A crammed funicular railway climbs its way up to the top of Monte Generoso, 1700 metres above sea level. The weather is beautiful, the passengers are mainly tourists from the German speaking part of Switzerland, who want to make the most of the last warm days in Ticino. Also a few people from Germany are present.

Among them are two families with their children, the parents in their mid-thirties: one family from the German speaking part of Switzerland, the other from Germany. The latter father has no eye for the breath taking scenery. He is too busy explaining his view of the world to his Swiss friends. And he is doing it on top of his voice so that everybody can or must overhear him.

He gets worked-up about these „idiots“ in Germany, who are protesting against mandatory masks and who – what complete nonsense! – are demonstrating against the restrictions of constitutional rights. Smoothly, he veers off to Donald Trump and American politics. Hopefully, he says, he [Trump] won't be re-elected for he'd be a disaster for the USA. And anyway, he goes on, it would be best to have a woman to do the job to put an end to male posturing. A 'black' woman would be best.

This is how he carried on and on, always at the top of his voice, but above all, it is his tone of voice that sends a clear message: I know the run of things! Everybody with a different opinion is an idiot. Obviously, he is sure that his fellow travellers share his views and fully agree with him.

«Possessing the truth»

And here lies the main problem: it is not the distinctive views of people like that. Mandatory masks, constitutional rights and Trump certainly may be discussed. But please, more objectively and matter-of-fact. Donald Trump, for example, has waged fewer wars than his predecessors, even compared to Nobel peace laureate Barack Obama. This alone does not necessarily make you a supporter of Trump and it will not turn him into an "angel of peace" either. You can still criticize deliveries of arms to Saudi Arabia e.g.

However, such distinctions are lost completely when people are merely making sweeping statements and dividing their fellow men into "do-gooders or despicable bad guys". Those who making sweeping statements always feel themselves to be in the right, on the side of the good guys – and thus they are in the sole possession of truth, especially if the mainstream media propagate the same. Those with different opinions are simply ignored, not listened to, not worth disputing with.

People like to stick to their kind, be in conformity with those who share the same opinion. If needed, dissenters are excluded and marginalised with harsh words or even slander.

Disdain prevents debate

The passenger on the funicular railway who so self-assuredly proclaimed his "truths" is by no means an exception. Especially in Germany, but also increasingly here in Switzerland discussions are led with such disdain, that a genuine discussion is prevented. If those with divergent opinions are labelled „idiots“ from the onset, no exchange of opinions can arise. Thus, opposing camps are created leading to unbridgeable divides. Democracy does not work like that.

In Switzerland we are well accustomed to debates where different opinions are clearly stated, where a spade is called a spade. The political opponent though must be able to save face and share a drink after the debate. Otherwise, direct democracy in our small country would not have been possible. Everyone is aware of the fact that we depend on each other and therefore must cooperate. We cannot afford to fall out with each other to an extent where we cannot face each other anymore. And we don't want to either.

Tolerating dissent

It would be a great advantage to all of us to remember this virtue and to allow again for different opinions once in a while, without breaking off relations; to exude goodwill in all contro-

versies and to assume – until proven otherwise – that the other person is also acting with

the best of intentions. We must not accept disdainful and disrespectful debates.

Bookreview,

The beginning of the end of freedom of opinion“

Peter Hahne: “Are you out of your minds?
Stop language police and terror of bureaucrats“

by Marita Brune

The German journalist Peter Hahne* deals with the restrictions of freedom of opinion. His very pointed thoughts, supported by numerous current examples from the world of science, the media and everyday life, are briefly summarised here. This summary is, of course, no substitute for reading his book „Seid ihr noch ganz bei Trost!“.¹

Mainstream does not tolerate counter-positions

In his chapter „The beginning of the end of freedom of opinion“, Hahne draws what at first sight seems to be an astonishing conclusion: there are no more debates because we are all always in agreement. This impression is created because counter-positions are banned from the public sphere – debates in the media, discussion events, church conferences and TV talk shows. Everyone would adhere to the code of only expressing mainstream opinions. „Or at most: all against one. Debate has been abolished because the mainstream tolerates no opponents.“²

Where is the good old culture of debate?

Hahne, born in 1952, asks himself: „What has happened to our good old culture of debate? In the past, sparks flew, and if people dealt with each other in a halfway civilised manner, tolerance regulated standards. There were relentless clashing positions – and disputants who were giving one another a run for their money. Today, mutual tolerance has long since become general acceptance, a first-rate deception. What doesn't fit is made to fit: people are stigmatised, positions made taboo.

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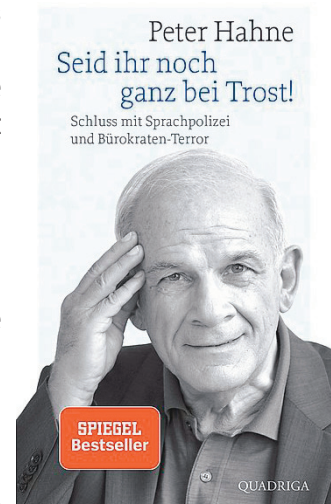
Self-righteousness knows no bounds. What and whom we do not accept is put on the index.“³

Just don't allow any dissent!

We can observe the result every day in our environment: people avoid talking about „dangerous“ topics; keywords such as Corona, Greta, climate change, gender, Trump, etc. are at best briefly touched upon to test what the other person thinks about them. If one senses even a hint of disagreement, one prefers to turn to other topics. One fears disdain, a quarrel and divisiveness due to the index that exists everywhere. In order to avoid dissent in the family, among colleagues, in an association, one prefers to turn to trivial matters. One's opinion – as long as it does not correspond to the FAZ, the Süddeutsche, the Spiegel, the TAZ and the Neue Zürcher Zeitung – is only expressed in small, familiar settings where one can be sure of unity. In this way, different camps and atomised communities are increasingly created that no longer have discussions with each other.

Dictatorship of opinion in science as well?

Dictatorship of opinion has long since reared and disrupted the scientific world as well. „There are real hunts for undesirable university professors, unbearable bullying or exclusion from all communication. It runs according to the motto: Anyone who has anything against gender or Islam can no longer teach mathematics or sinology.“⁽⁴⁾ This treatment of un-



popular positions and professors has become so blatant that the Deutscher Hochschulverband DHV (German Association of Universities and Colleges) issued a statement against it in 2017: „The dispute over the better argument is part of the essence of the university. The human search for truth and knowledge is inconceivable without contradiction and the controversial struggle for arguments and evidence. Against this background, the DHV observes with growing concern that the culture of debate and argument is eroding in the free world. Responsibility for this is also borne by a climate of opinion that demands ‚political correctness‘ in the pursuit of tolerance.“(5) After a fundamental affirmation of political correctness in the sense of responsible use of language, it goes on to say: „If, however, dissenting academic opinions run the risk of being stigmatised as immoral, the claim of tolerance and openness is turned into the opposite: any constructive debate is nipped in the bud. Instead of a spirit of new beginnings and curiosity, this leads to cowardice and ingratitude.“(6)

**“Competence to be affected”
instead of factual arguments**

Hahne highlights a special anti-scientific aspect of the dictatorship of opinion: the “competence to be affected”. It was initially known from the drug debate of the 1990s, where drug addicts could „refute“ any factual argument with their alleged competence arising from their addiction. „True is where the heart of the zeitgeist beats“, Hahne says today. „In this way, any factual contradiction is defeated by emo-

tion. No one can stand up to the dictatorship of sentiments.“ As an example, he cites the German „Willkommenskultur“ (welcome culture) of 2015: one was not allowed to be against it, „even the smallest critical enquiries (by now everything has been proven true, really everything!) were forced back as intolerant, one had to accept the mainstream. Full stop!“ (7)

„It already helps to be personally affected and indignantly offended in order to come under the protective cover of the do-gooders,“ clarifies Hahne and quotes the journalist Jan Fleischhauer: „The more offended and indignant a group appears, the more certain it is of the public’s attention and the state’s offers of protection.“

We are not condemned to go along with this madness any longer. „A genuine personality can endure the clash of opinions and does not need the exclusion of the opponent,“ Hahne is convinced. He explains, „What is important is that we free ourselves from the dictatorship of general acceptance and zeitgeist-dictated pseudo-truths and once again deal with each other in a more tolerant way, that we are allowed to despise positions and still treat the person with respect.“

1 Hahne, Peter. Seid ihr noch ganz bei Trost! Schluss mit Sprachpolizei und Bürokraten-Terror. Köln 2020

2 Ibid p. 20

3 Ibid. p. 19

4 Ibid. p. 21

5 Resolution of the 67th German University Association Day 2017, quoted from Hahne, ibid. p. 21f.

6 Ibid. p. 22

7 Ibid. p. 24

