"Elites and civil society must build bridges"

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Political scientists Wolfgang Merkel and Edgar Grande talk about societal cleavages, the conflict over borders, the rise of the AfD, and the power of civil society.

Today we often talk about our society drifting apart. How did this cleavage come about?

Merkel: Divisions are not new in highly complex societies, but the past three or four decades have seen the return of class conflict. Socioeconomic inequality has increased, and it is now intersected and overlaid by a cultural fault line between cosmopolitans and communitarians. At the heart of the cleavage is the conflict over borders.

Grande: The research community has long assumed that such dominant divides would become less important and that politics has been undergoing a transition to a more or less open competition over issues. The opposite is true. The primary lines of division, so-called cleavages, continue to dominate the political debate. However, it is no longer the class conflict, instead a new cultural-identity line of conflict is most politicizing. These conflicts generate new political polarizations. They lead to a politicization of civil society and private relations, extending as far as the level of individual families.

Merkel: The situation is currently exacerbated by the discourse communities of cosmopolitans and communitarians who are not seeking understanding or accommodation. The cosmopolitans assume that every citizen must be a citizen of the world. They advocate abolishing borders or at least making them very porous. Nationalist communitarians, on the other hand, want closed borders and a strong state. Political parties and actors must attempt to defuse this conflict rather than exacerbate it to ensure it does not threaten the basic social and democratic rules of good coexistence.

How did it become so divisive?

Grande: The conflicts we are now observing stem from structural developments of the past forty years. They began in the 1980s with denationalization, which led to an economic, political, cultural, and ecological dissolution of boundaries. Political counter-reactions were already apparent by the late 1980s, when the new nationalist populists began to enter the parliaments. The recent crises – the financial crisis and the refugee crisis – have certainly contributed to making such contention particularly intense in European countries.

Merkel: Structures are not alone in fueling this process; political actions are doing so as well. Globalization is not a natural phenomenon. It is driven by liberal economic interests and paradigms. We should not forget that in the long postwar period we Germans, with our atrocious past, had built up a political taboo against xenophobia. This taboo was broken by the uncontrolled opening of the border in 2015, which was a serious political mistake by the Chancellor and the Grand Coalition she led. At first, there were good reasons for opening the borders. What was wrong was to then produce a "pull effect" by announcing that there was no upper limit to asylum and to pose for selfies in refugee camps. This mistake was a midwife for the birth of the AfD [Alternative für Deutschland, a populist party], which at the time was just a small association of right-wing liberal economics and law professors, but then took a chauvinistic nationalist turn.

Grande: I have to disagree with you on this point. The political potential for a new national populist political movement had already existed in Germany.

Merkel: Yes, but only potentially. The postwar taboo impeded the rise of a nationalist and xenophobic political party.

Grande: The divide had already existed in Germany in the 1990s. The far-right Republicans emerged in the 1980s and moved into the state parliaments and the European Parliament. Later, the DVU (German People's Union), the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany), and populist parties such as the Schill Party were successful at the state level. However,

unlike the case in other Western European countries, the new line of conflict was partly absorbed in Germany by the Christian Democratic Union parties. The AfD had its initial political successes before the refugee crisis and would also have been politically successful without it.

Merkel: But certainly not to the same extent! The AfD was initially conservative and neoliberal. Now we have an aggressive chauvinist and nationalist party that is preparing to become a people's party in East

Germany. That would not have happened without the political mistakes of 2015 and 2016.

Grande: The crucial thing is that this party has learned to play strategic politics. Like other radical national populist parties, it works specifically by breaking taboos and violating boundaries of political correctness.

Merkel: OK, but the point I want to make is that Germany had a postwar taboo on establishing any legitimate party to the right of the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union parties) in the party system. That taboo no longer exists.

Grande: Now it's getting interesting because I see that we have different interpretations of this new line of conflict. I think that such interpretations as "to the right of the CDU/CSU" are misleading, to say the least. The crucial point is that the new cleavage has changed the basic coordinates of politics. In the new political space parties like the AfD are not "right-wing" parties, they are radical national populist parties …

Merkel: … in other words, they are on the right.

Grande: No, but that does not mean I want to trivialize them. The crucial point is that our categories of right and left are predominantly defined in socioeconomic terms. But when an additional dimension of conflict based on cultural identity emerges and acquires independent significance, the basic structure of the political space changes, as does the positioning of parties in the political space. That is why the old categories we use to locate parties – right or left – are no longer appropriate in every respect.

Even the people's parties have lost their importance …

Merkel: Catch-all parties like those we knew in the 1960s and 1970s no longer exist. The social context has changed a lot. In the heyday of the people's parties, we had relatively undifferentiated societies, relatively little individualization, and strong collective organizations such as trade unions and churches. These organizations supplied the voters for the catch-all parties, but they are now crumbling.

Grande: The people's parties have long shown themselves to be relatively adaptable to new developments, but it is indeed questionable whether they are able to represent substantial political alternatives in a way that is attractive to voters in the new political constellation. In this respect there are good reasons why this type of party is in crisis.

Are there also positive developments among the parties?

Merkel: From the voters' point of view, there is a greater range of options to choose from. If I am ecologically and culturally progressive, but don't want to redistribute wealth too much, I choose the Greens now. If I want to redistribute a lot, I choose the Left Party, not the SPD. If I want to close the borders and prefer nationalism, then I no longer choose the CDU but rather the AfD. Party supply and voter demand stabilize each other. In our polarized multiparty system, it will be difficult to form strong and stable coalitions.

How can you overcome the communication problems you mentioned at the beginning and bring people together again?

Merkel: The communicational divides are deep. The elites must build bridges, should focus more on understanding, and should not be exclusionary. For today, contrary to Habermas's theory, language is not a means of understanding; instead, it serves to further exclusion, self-confirmation, and the dominance of world views.

Grande: That is why the crucial question revolves around the role civil society can play in resolving conflicts, especially when it is itself part of these conflicts. There are strong civil-society actors, such as churches and sports clubs, that have a great deal of experience in addressing and integrating different social groups. For me, there are several key questions that wait for an answer. Which actors are in a position to build bridges? What are the essentials for doing so? How can these essentials be acquired?

Merkel: I absolutely agree, but a vital democratic civil society is not possible without a strong democratic state, for civil society is not in and of itself beautiful, good, and true. The Pegida movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) is also part of civil society, its dark side, so to speak. The positive thing is that after every nationalist, even racist, demonstration, there are often stronger mobilizations of tolerant civil society.

How must research adapt to these new conditions?

Merkel: Empirical research on democracy has ever larger amounts of data at its disposal, but the orienting role of theory must not be neglected. Only by combining theory and empiricism can we generate scientific knowledge. In addition, we have experimental methods that have been developed in psychology and behavioral economics to study behavior. We are not seeking a paradigm shift but methodological pluralism instead.

Grande: On the one hand, social science research needs new concepts and key terms. Only then can those working in this field fully understand new, fluid, and hybrid forms of political mobilization that are neither social movements nor political parties, such as the new leader-centered movement parties that have emerged in Europe. On the other hand, research, especially civil society research, should take greater account of the local level, and recognize that social capital is produced locally. As a result, local case studies are increasingly needed to examine the processes of creating new social capital, such as local civil society involvement during the refugee crisis.

The interview was conducted by Kerstin Schneider and Harald Wilkoszewski.

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From the archives

Born of papers

Many sketches, minutes of meetings, and expert opinions had to be written before ideas took the form of institutes. There were discussions about comparative social research, management, urban studies, peace research, consumer research, and environmental issues. Researchers were not the only ones expressing their views; Federal Ministries, the Science Council, and institutions such as the Federal Environment Agency also weighed in. The ideas that were implemented and those that were rejected are preserved in the written memory of the house, arranged in historical layers.

Files on establishing an "International Institute for Comparative Social Research," 1972–1975, Archive of the WZB (Photo: Thu–Ha Nguyen).