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Towards Rational Discourse



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Expectations

The June 1996 Times Literary Supplement had an advertisement about a literary event in London, presenting two Finnish novelists as follows: "Welcome to listen to the striking texts from the darkest corner of Europe". However, intellectually it is very difficult to identify modern Finland with a dark corner, and in June the corner is in fact the best lit in Europe. So, obviously we are facing some barriers of communication between the Central-European 'core countries' and the cultures on the geographical margins of Europe.

With a decision to try to break down at least some of these barriers, I entered the Kolleg. I was curious whether cultural differences would be more important than differences between the various disciplines. And I was very eager to see how a Kolleg of scholars works as a miniature model of a discursive organisation. Would discussions result in some degree of a consensus between the different scientific views, or is scientific discourse rather dissense-oriented, working primarily through displaying new, unexpected ways of seeing things? And what was the situation in the real world outside the Kolleg's walls? Had the two parts of Germany succeeded in creating a constructive dialogue and were they experiencing a gradual dissolution of former disparities?

The first impression was an unexpected barrier of a personal and cultural kind. I had come to WIKO to work with problems of individual and collective rationality and was enthusiastic about German social philosophical ideas of discursive ethics and a communicative, rational society. In contrast to this, it was frustrating to find out that my own discussion competence was so badly restricted by language deficiency. If I seemed to show a fairly serious face in the colloquia, this was only a sign of trying to understand what was really said in the course of discussions in German. Later on, with the help of the Kolleg's language course and daily attention to newspapers and television, my understanding capabilities started improving. Still, a nagging feeling remained that maybe something important in the course of discussions might have passed my attention.

Work

My own work aimed at understanding how collective goods such as a good environment can be produced in a society so widely absorbed by individual rationality. For instance, all dominant models of consumer behaviour are based on the assumption of individual utility maximizing. An interesting theoretical problem is how useful these models are in explaining collective choices and in what way consumer theory should be developed to include the social dependence of individual choices. To put it briefly, I aim at developing a socio-economic view of consumer behavior that better takes into account that the individual is always making decisions in a social context. The work at the institute included three central themes.

The first theme was to analyse the changing conditions of consumer choices when society is changing from modern toward what is called postmodern or post-traditional society. Not only are the preconditions for rational collective choices in the postmodern era impoverished by

the weakening of social norms and solidarity and by the short-term, shifting attitudes towards life and life goals. Also, consumption and related activities gain new importance in the social structuring of society and as a means of self-identity. Society will be increasingly structured around consumption instead of production, because class differentiation is becoming more diffuse and work is increasingly losing its structuring and integrative capacity. Society's economic prospects will also be increasingly dependent on consumer demand. Earlier we used to think of social structures such as social class as determinants of consumption. However, the new idea of consumption as a structuring and integrating force in society means that consumption and activity patterns will create new social structures and not vice versa.

Consumption in the form of new cultural taste differences or patterns of ways of life can create weak social bonds and feelings of belonging to or being distinct from a group. However, the resulting structures, the new 'imaginary communities' are often temporary and often based merely on images conveyed by the mass media. Therefore — I argue — consumption can merely act as a weak integrating force in society. Loose, affective bonds created through imaginary communities will not solve the collective goods problem, because co-operation for collective goals requires a stronger commitment from participants. This, again, can be created only by rational public discourse.

The second major theme of my work at the Institute was to analyse on a more general level the hidden ideological controversies of contemporary development in Europe, that is, the discourse between liberalism and its critics. Underlying many discussions we often find a controversy between individual-rights liberalism (or its more extreme versions such as libertarianism) and some kind of a contractarian version of liberalism. Examples taken from economic practice both in the public and private sectors of the economy show that there is a tendency to emphasise the individualistic market liberalism at the cost of the contractarian model. In my essay I have argued that Europe should find a better balance between markets and communities instead of relying on markets alone.

A society devoted to extreme market liberalism can be criticised for lacking interest in the questions of justice and democratic procedures, as well as in the role of traditions and virtues. This kind of a critique of liberalism comes partly from within its own quarters, such as John Rawls's critique of the principles of welfare allocation and Jürgen Habermas's ideas of public discourse as a procedural way to a just society. But extreme market liberalism has also been criticised from more fundamental points of view. By the latter I refer to the communitarian

critique of liberalism. Among others, philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor emphasise the importance of virtues, traditions and social norms. All these can be learned and internalized in communities. The more pragmatic American communitarian movement (with Amitai Etzioni as the leading figure) also wishes to revitalize communities and, through them, voluntary co-operation.

Thus, we still need communities to help to create socially-committed behavior to produce collective goods. Moreover, they are needed as places to practise virtues and internally satisfying life and as anchors of cultural identity. I also argue that the American and the European concepts of communities and communitarian thinking diverge somewhat from each other. In Europe, nation-states will also remain important forms of communities because of the common cultural and historical background people share. It is thus unlikely that nation-states in Europe will disappear at the intermediate level between the global and local communities. They also seem to serve best as those communities in which citizens can claim their rights, take part in public discourse and act as political actors. Instead of the striving for 'euro-citizenship', the acceptance of difference and multiculturalism should be made the universal principle for Europe.

I should add that, especially while working with these broader issues of European development, I was very much inspired by the ideas of several other Fellows; first of all by Klaus Günther's theory about discourse on norm appropriation, by Mike Power's critique of Audit Society, and by Enrico Rusconi's thoughts about the possibility of creating European participatory citizens, Demos. Not to forget former Fellows, such as Albert O. Hirschman and Claus Offe, whose work I have benefitted from.

My third theme was more directly connected to consumer choice theory. Individual rational choice models are inadequate when explaining choices of collective goods. Instead, I propose conceiving of consumption as rational discourse. Models based on individual self-interested utility pay attention neither to the social dependence of the choice nor to the dependence of the outcome on how other consumers behave. Whether the preferred collective good will be produced at all depends not only on the consumer's own choice but also on whether others will contribute. So, we need to broaden the concept of rationality to also include information about social norms and commitments to them.

However, adding social variables to present models will give only partial help and contradicts the basic assumptions of the model of individual rational choice. Thus, many things suggest that consumption may be portrayed as rational discourse rather than as a clear-cut choice. The

notion of discourse refers here to the following procedures: First, to self-reflexive processes when the consumer sets his/her preferences in a priority order. Second, to societal discourses aiming at a consensus about the desired collective goods and norms necessary to secure co-operation toward them. And third, to the consumer's dilemma when he/she has to make the choice between co-operating or free riding. In all these discourses, the importance of having at least some universal norms and values becomes obvious, since they act as reference points for the discourse. Thus, in my interpretation, the forthcoming postmodern era does not mean a total disappearance of universal values, rather it means a constant critical reflection of them.

Conclusion

All in all, the Wissenschaftskolleg can be said to be close to an 'imaginary community', because shared experiences and emotions towards the institute and its routines created affective bonds between us. Also the temporariness of being a community member belongs to the picture. But the Kolleg was in many ways also a discursive community. One interesting controversy of this fellow-year was the "Biologen-Historiker-Streit" between biological and socio-historical explanations of social behavior. At least in this discourse no consensus was reached and both parties kept talking past each other. Despite a variety of disciplines and themes presented in the colloquia, it was comforting to observe how many analogies can be found between the sciences and how similar the theoretical and methodological problems are. Recognizing this helped us at least to approximate rational discourse in the Kolleg.