

## **Dealing with Values in the Back Alleys**

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I come from the very heart of Old Europe, from Berlin in Germany, and I myself have been raised on all the cultural values that are often derided in other parts of this world. I studied musicology. This meant until recently, this meant concentrating exclusively on classical, European music. I love literature, the visual arts, the theatre, and I love going to the opera – all the bourgeois culture is my home. And I am firmly convinced that these cultural treasures should be protected and that every human being has the right to share in them. Logically, in my professional life I bear responsibility for art and culture at the local government level, where I am director of a district cultural office in Berlin. But my daily work is less to present art, much more to fight against social and cultural exclusion, to foster participation and empowerment, and I do that on a local and on a national level, because the world in which I work is not a perfect world framed by Goethe, Beethoven, and von Gogh, by Bayreuth or Salzburg, by exquisite museums and concert halls and the public who frequent them. My context is the poorest district of the German capital, Berlin-Neukölln, Some seek to disparage Neukölln by calling it the “Bronx of Berlin,” overlooking the fact that living in the Bronx is a great deal more exciting than living, for example, in Queens. Life in Neukölln, with a population of 310,000, is vibrant. The people in the streets come from around the globe. Some 165 nationalities live cheek-by-jowl in the district. It sounds like in Babel after the demolishing of the tower, only very few speak German. Every sort of cuisine is on offer; fashionable lifestyle accessoires are on sale next to 1-euro junk articles, and phone centres advertise the cheapest rates to Albania and Zimbabwe. A lot of artists find the space they need to work in Neukölln, appreciating low rent levels and the open-mindedness of the local population, who take eccentric behaviour in their stride. But the social basis of this colourful world is poverty.

Poverty is relative. A few months ago, I showed a colleague from Buenos Aires around the poorest parts of my district. At some point she asked where the poor quarters were. When I consider the Buenos Aires favellas, which I was to experience shortly later; when I consider the gigantic poverty-stricken regions of this world, it is only natural and right to see things in relative terms. But measured against the standard that Germany has achieved and is desperately trying to maintain, the place where I work bears the mark of poverty. By the official German definition, many of the people with whom and for whom I work are poor. Many are children and adolescents. These are the back alleys of prosperous, highly technicized, globally oriented societies, places of refuge or abandonment for people who are not longer needed or at least not for the moment. Their lives are defined by unemployment, educational deprivation, low occupational skills, and poor health. Many of these back alley denizens are immigrants (over 50 per cent). I don't want to bore you with statistics, but I must mention the 25 per cent overall unemployment rate in my district and the 55 per cent immigrant unemployment rate.

There are neighbourhoods like the one I'm reporting on in many big cities in Germany and Europe. The problems are similar even if the causes sometimes differ. But the future consequences of this agglomeration of problems and the widespread exclusion they cause are catastrophic everywhere. Personally, I am firmly convinced

that the attacks in Madrid, Amsterdam and London were possible because people – especially young people – experienced this catastrophic situation and reacted with hate. The life is not peaceful and happy in the jungle of the back alleys.

The main challenge we are confronted with is the falling birth rate and the growing up of children and young people. Theoretically, there is no problem if we look into the back alleys of our cities. There's no lack of children in Neukölln, the primary schools are full to bursting. Far more than half the babies born in the district have immigrant parents. There are primary schools where 85 to 95 per cent of school beginners have a non-German-speaking background. One school has not a single German-background child among beginners. We might not consider this a problem if we weren't aware of the typical educational career facing these children. In the course of ten years at school, many fail to acquire an adequate command of German. Neither home nor school offers them sufficient opportunity to do so. Since education is closely linked with linguistic ability, many children leave school without any qualifications. Obtaining more advanced school-leaving qualifications is a matter of luck for immigrant children. Their future is marked out: little chance of vocational training, little chance of getting a job outside the family network. They resign themselves to a life on welfare, topped up by a little work on the side, for in Germany, too, the social security safety net is becoming thinner.

How much damage can be done to people's self-confidence, to their self-assurance when they experience at an early age that they're not really welcome in society, that equality of developmental opportunity is not for them, that they have to come to terms with living in their own community in poor neighbourhoods from which there is no escape, that they are condemned to hang around uselessly without work, perhaps trying some little deal. They react by developing an exaggerated tribal pride. It is more than surprising that not more young people seek refuge in religious or political fundamentalism or in violence. Such young people who have experienced the society into which their parents have thrust them primarily in terms of personal failure and rejection are not very interested in the rules that govern the German society in which they live. They learn them above all in the breach. They know nothing about why these rules have come into existence. The rules are grounded in an extremely remote, abstract, ethical system of fundamental values, the fruit of untold societal experience. I don't know how it is in your home countries, but in Germany, leaving aside epigonal religious instruction, we shy away from openly discussing with our children and young people the ethics that decide individual and societal, private and political action. How can young people who come from completely different social, ethnic, and religious cultures rooted in different value systems get to know the basic ethical consensus that prevails, despite all differences, in the host country ?

In juvenile prison?

When it comes to the worst, which is often the case, young people find their own ideals, their own values in fortress-like, self-constructed ghettos governed by laws that draw crocodile tears from us natives; ghettos where the fundamental values and fundamental rights we prize, such as equality between women and men or the right to the free development of one's personality, have no currency. I mention only forced marriage, a key topic, especially for young people with an Islamic background. A young Islamic woman of Turkish origin was recently shot dead by her brothers because she had escaped from a forced marriage and was attempting to build a life for herself outside the traditional rules. Young males applauded the murderers quite publicly. This brutal death epitomizes the clash between incompatible worlds with

incompatible fundamental values. Many girls and women, immigrants as well as natives, reacted with a polyphon rejection of forced marriage as incompatible with the fundamental right of self-determination. Young males, in contrast, invoked the moral concepts like shame and honour prevailing in their value system, particular the duty to respect the decisions of the family, to whom all else was to be subordinated. This is a point where a determined No can and must be pronounced. There can be no considerate middle course. The very foundations of the immigration society model are at stake, and whoever wants to live in this country must accept the foundations on which it is built. Only a firm stand is of any use. But what is about the acceptance of what is diverse? Life is more complicated than philosophy.

Luckily, everyday life is less overshadowed by such extreme cases. But they focus attention on the problems underlying daily aggression, conflicts, wrong or misunderstand action, failures to grasp or communicate opportunities, neighbourhood disputes, and inarticulateness. The metropolises of the world gather together people guided by widely differing ethical notions and fundamental values, ideas and values with deep societal and often religious roots, instilled as self-evident cultural traditions. Just as I was raised on the Protestant work ethic so admirably analysed by Max Weber, certain principles, such as respect and absolute obedience towards one's elders, are internalised in other cultures, for instance in Far Eastern countries. Especially when people live at close quarters, differences in their conceptions of life and their basic values put great distance between them. And the more unconscious and therefore disregarded these differences are, the greater will be the distance they impose. Saying No is not always a help, being offended or a punch neither. Each must listen to what the other has to say.

My country is not trained in immigration, and a lot of native people have a problem to accept it. For that Germany suffers from a gap between self-perception and reality. We see ourselves as a civilised nation grounded in a common, rather one-dimensional understanding of our cultural traditions, while cultural diversity is growing on our doorstep – largely unnoticed and disregarded. We foster and safeguard our cultural heritage (which naturally involves innovation and creativity), we pass on our ethical accord, while the cultural languages and cultural forms of immigrants develop far, far away from the temples of our culture. In the cleft, hybrid identities and hybrid cultures are germinating and growing, which are perhaps what the future holds for us. This gap, constituted by a multitude of fissures between different cultures and social strata, is an integral aspect of my field of work in the back alley Neukölln. Art and culture does not have the force to eliminate the underling social causes of this cleft. But they do have the power repeatedly to thematize and to scandalise social deformations and to provide media in which they can be addressed. But first of all we have to discover this treasure of cultural diversity in our back alleys.

With their profuse resources of expression and language, art and culture can build communicative bridges – not to distract or to harmonise but, in a multitude of ways, to acquire and convey knowledge about one another. Art has its own communicative capabilities: it can exploit, intensify, exaggerate, and provoke unaccustomed, unusual ways of thinking, and transfer them to other levels. It can deconstruct complex situations. It can create artificial situations where variants of problems and solutions can be addressed in play, where other, strange, opposing roles can be assumed, where sentiments and factualities difficult or impossible to verbalise can be formulated. Art also profits from its social impact, lending greater self-confidence and articulacy to people at a disadvantage in verbal (intellectual) communication. It can

offer them forms of expression other than verbal language in which they can be very successful. For these reasons I am passionate concerning art education at school.

We developed a major project in our back alley Neukölln to exploit some of the opportunities art offers for building bridges between young people, for putting the crucial subject of values on the agenda. The project was supported by the Federal Ministry for Youth. In Germany cultural budgets have no funding for such topics. German cultural policy is explicitly interested only in the flagships of the German high cultural heritage. And local money is scarce.

I would like to report briefly on our project, because in exemplary fashion it brought together the topics this session is addressing: "Culture, Young People and Cultural Diversity." We achieved considerable success, especially among the young, and the basic idea was so simple that it could be reproduced anywhere.

The project was entitled "Good Sons, Good Daughters – Misunderstandings in Community Life" The project primarily addressed the many young people living in Neukölln, many of them from an educationally disadvantaged immigrant background. We adopted three points of departure:

1. Our door-opener question was about the good daughter, the good son. Everyone would like to be or to have been a good son / a good daughter, everyone would like to have a good son / a good daughter – and we all know the sort of problem that can arise when parents and children have different views on the subject. The differences are naturally compounded when cultural differences come into play. We forced us not to weight but to compare. We collected all these ideas – in many, many interviews and workshops with children, adolescents, and parents in our multi-ethnic district, the ethnic communities – we have a lot – were intensively involved, of course.
2. In such a multi-ethnic context, even when people behave with the utmost courtesy (and perhaps especially then), misunderstandings can occur in day-to-day life, at school, in the street, when shopping, in conversation, in encounters in hallways; misunderstandings that can escalate into conflict without those involved knowing why: the notorious critical incidents. The briefest of our examples: Is it allowed to make eye contact during conversation with an older person in a superior position? In Europe it is impolite if you don't, in Iraq or Vietnam it is impolite if you do. In collaboration with young people we collected a large number of critical incidents and tried to discover the differences in politeness and behavioural norms that cause many conflicts, and to identify the value concepts underlying them. Even at the collecting stage it soon became clear that, if people know or at least sense the reasons for strange or hurting behaviour, the edge is taken off misunderstanding and conflict.
3. Spurred on by a very conservative debate about fundamental values in Germany, the purpose of which was primarily to prevent the adoption of a general immigration act and to uphold traditional German values, we sought to discover the value systems of immigrant communities in Neukölln, making clear that the others have values, too – often forgotten. It seemed obvious to us that we should talk about values precisely with young people. Our investigations were underpinned by comprehensive philosophical, science of religion, educational science, and literary studies undertaken with the help of Humboldt University Institute of Comparative Educational Science. We identified key value concepts and concentrated on those that played an important role in all the value systems under study. The concepts concerned were obedience, respect, honour, shame, and tolerance. Of course, something happened repeatedly that is also happening

right here and now, probably also through translation: the concept “shame” (“Scham” in German) for example, has a wide variety of meanings. What “shame” means to you in your language is probably quite different from what I associate with it in mine. A word-for-word translation is not enough: the connotations clustering around a concept have to be laboriously explained. Our exacting procedure proved to be the right one, because by enumerating the vast range of values, meanings, and words we laid bare the underlying dimensions of many conflicts and the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of resolving them. Finally, we concentrated on the Turkish, Arab, Far Eastern, and German cultural backgrounds. In the course of the project, in discussion with young people, our choice of values (I repeat: obedience, respect, honour, shame, and tolerance) proved to be completely right: it offered endless material for debate and dispute.

On the basis of these three approaches we developed an exhibition which in many ways resembled experimental set-ups, archive situations, Internet cafés and chillrooms rather than a conventional presentation of art. Our motto was “to give the invisible a platform” – because we wanted to give concrete form to something abstract, impalpable, so that we could work on it. Two artists translated three critical incidents into experience spaces, five movable tool bars were equipped with written and visual materials on the five value concepts: lexical definitions, philosophical, sociological, ethnological studies, fairy tales, comics, reproductions of pictures: everything conceivable. Interactive computer games and courses on the topic were developed with young people in workshops before.

In between there were many art installations, big and small, by young artists of widely varying cultural origin, partly entries in a competition, partly from the collaborating University of the Arts. All addressed the topic “Good Daughters, Good Sons” in some fashion or other.

The exhibition was fantastic; many, many young people came, mostly with their school classes or in other groups; many came more than once. But many adults, too, women’s groups, teachers, community organisations and clubs, etc. debated the many facets of the exhibition with a frankness I had never experienced before. Best of all, however, were the discussions that unfolded during the guided tours for young people. Many of them came from so-called “Hauptschulen” general secondary schools in our three-stream school system, the schools that collect those “left over,” those alleged to be scarcely amenable to education, most of them from immigrant families. The most important age group was thirteen to sixteen, not necessarily an easy age. They were welcomed by our young exhibition guides: always one from a German background and one from an immigrant background. It had taken a long time to find and prepare these young guides. They had grown up in Germany, had been to school and university here. They were well aware of their double identity and at home in this double identity. Just their names tell something about their Turkish, Polish, or Spanish roots, but they remain fully conscious of these origins. We urgently need these “established” young immigrants to bring the others on board – or tell us to build new ships. They can act as interpreters in both directions.

The guides informed visitors to the exhibition, gave them tips about where there were things to discover or try out. They brought them to the critical incident stagings, steering discussion towards the values of different cultures. The young people were astounded. They discovered people like themselves who

spoke perfect German and had “made it.” Being an outlaw was clearly not an inevitability. With their view of the world thus called in question, something happened that we had hardly dared hope for: intensive discussions on honour, on shame, and on obedience and respect. Tolerance fell somewhat by the wayside, but was nevertheless discovered to be necessary. The accompanying teachers hardly recognised their students in these communicative, highly reflective young people. They were clearly giving serious thought to values, to ethical principles for the first time – no-one had ever encouraged them to do so or considered them capable of doing so. Issues of difference and the conflicts it can cause between cultures were identified and examined on the basis of conflicts within their own groups. When the exhibition had come to an end, all too soon, we continued working on these basic values in artist workshops, using all sorts of media – performance, theatre, photography, creative design, video. The aim was to enable young people to develop creativity themselves, beyond that what is to be seen in the mass media, to formulate their positions by the means of art themselves, beyond rough hip hop. We considered it very important – and it is also for me a fundamental principle – to work with professional artists who react differently to young people than do art teachers or handicraft enthusiasts. And youngsters whose active creativity ended mostly in switching on the MP3-player started to work with arts. We are hoping to continue this work with new money, if it can be raised. In the moment we “play” with languages, including research on new youth languages developed in the back alleys, of course together with the youngsters. This all is worth while – we saw young people proud to be able to create something, a pride completely without aggression.

In describing this project, I have tried to convey a small impression of our work with all the difficulties with which it has to cope, but which is also spurred on by great hopes for the future. We in Germany – a country long unaffected by immigration and which is only reluctantly coming to accept its status as a country of immigration – mostly see only the difficulties, burdens, and conflicts of multi-ethnicity. All too rarely do we recognise the opportunities offered by this treasure on our doorstep, the cultural diversity of the world. Opportunities we must grasp. A city like Berlin, a district like Neukölln has absolutely no other option. Children and young people are the key. I know many immigrant children who possess this treasure – the ten-year-old Palestinian children who are fluent in three or four languages, little Turkish girls who perform acrobatics in ballet dress and headscarf, children, who play in a school orchestra in which instruments from all over the world sound strange but euphonious. All too often, this treasure is lost because no-one makes it their business to nurture it – neither parents nor the public education system. The acrobatics are laid aside, the headscarf remains. The three to four languages are forgotten and not even reading and writing skills in the mother tongue survive.

I repeat: art and culture cannot eliminate societal and political shortcomings, but they can show children and young people other perspectives, allow them other experience, allow them to grow and strengthen. Art and culture can teach them pride in their own cultural origin, makes them aware of their own power, can give them the wherewithal for expressing themselves and perhaps making their voice heard. And they must and can do so with all due respect for cultural diversity, because we all stand to win. In my alphabetically sorted personal library, the Germans Heinrich and Thomas Mann, the Hungarian Sandor Marai, the Italian Dacia Maraini, the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Argentinian Tomas Eloy Martinez, and the Viennese Jew Robert Menasse stand side by side: a trove of world culture. Something of this diversity of world culture is also borne by all the children and young

people whose futures are so uncertain. It is up to us to help them thrive. It is up to us to give future to the cultural diversity in our cities – in the front as well as in the back alleys.

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