

Social Division and Social Cohesion – Product or Process? A Micro-Perspective Approach fostering a shared Understanding of Community, Culture, and Education

Strengthening the transatlantic relationship between the United States of America and Germany

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Introduction

The American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) at John Hopkins University conducted an exchange project among sixteen participants, eight from the US and eight from Germany. The participants were given the task to look at two partner cities, Akron, OH in the U.S. and its sister city Chemnitz, Saxony in Germany. While in completely different regions of the world both cities are facing aspects of social division and questions of identity looking at them from a macro-perspective. For the first part of the project all of the participants met in Akron, OH for one week. Participants split up into small groups based on areas of interest and were asked to explore social cohesion and social division aspects. This group of authors focused on community, culture and education. As for developing a valid and shared understanding of gathered experiences going around Akron on the one hand and parts of reflection during several group discussions on the other hand, it seemed to be practical, to start from the individual micro-cosmos. From this approach the authors can state, that a line can be drawn from the micro to a macro perspective. Part 2 of this essay will be published as well after Chemnitz' overall impact in April 2020. For this article, the authors focused on the following areas: 1) Community, Culture and Education – Core Aspects of Social Division and Social Cohesion, 2) Experiences of Social Divisions in Akron – A reflective Micro-Perspective and 3) Social Cohesion in Process – Basic Requirements and the Importance of Shared Values.

1 Community, Culture and Education – Core Aspects of Social Division and Social Cohesion

1.1 Community

As humans, we seek community. Communities are collectively formed by individuals and groups, both online and offline. Essentially, communities are unified by different sets of common practices, beliefs, ideas, rituals or shared values towards the common good. However, they can also be brought together by external factors such as environmental shifts or economic changes. Communities can also be formed by commonalities such as, race, gender, age and religion. What binds communities together, regardless of how they have been formed, is a collective interest towards a common goal.

1.2 Culture

Culture reflects the upbringing, socialization, education as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal views based on each individual's perception. Culture in terms of interaction processes has the charming ability of opening our minds and therefore putting us in some mode of recognizing and sharing other people's perspectives. It is the art of everyone's interpretation of how they see themselves and others. Our relationship to culture allows us to construct narratives that help us draw meaning of the world we live in. Culture is the language or with which an individual expresses themselves and can make themselves understood.

1.2 Education

Education includes formal, non-formal and informal experiences within a particular society. In comparing the formal educational system of the United States of America and Germany, we learned that both systems engage students for the first time at five or six years of age. Pointing out some differences of the framework, focusing on Germany first, schooling from elementary to a potential university degree is made available to everyone for free. Parents also have the option of enrolling their children in either public or private school. All students complete

kindergarten-elementary school but once completed there are different tracks¹ for students and their families to choose from.

In contrast, the educational system in the United States varies greatly depending on a number of factors: 1) access to well-funded school districts, 2) history of segregation, 3) privation of public schools and 4) standardized testing.² Most important of all: for the rich there is choice and for everyone else there is standardized testing. Education has the overall function to form the habitual knowledge-based backbone of a person's factual knowledge, thinking processes and (inter-)acting abilities. Formal education is focused on factual knowledge, which can be tested in different forms but also the development of i. e. social soft skills (tolerance, respect), social norms and values, ethics is more and more gaining importance in/for society. Non-formal education³ opportunities can be located within communities where the individual is rooted (youth centers, sports clubs, non-profit organizations). Informal learning processes⁴ are taking place wherever the individual is entering any form of interaction with others outside of formal or non-formal kinds of education (the kitchen at home or the bar next door).

2 Experiences of Social Divisions in Akron – A reflective Micro-Perspective

In writing this essay it was very important for us to include the definitions of the words we chose to use as a lens to view social cohesion and social division. Through the process of defining these terms it quickly became clear to all of us that we each shared very different points of view, even in the way we would communicate with one another. At times this made the process difficult. Add to that very limited instructions and structure, we often couldn't find a middle ground. So much so, that our definitions became quite an accomplishment. A negotiation of sorts. These conversations forced us to discuss these terms from personal experiences highlighting our core differences from how we experienced schooling, gender, race, ethnicity to how we each as individuals make sense of the world. We spent three days highlighting our differences and experiencing them as such but were confronted with the reality that we needed to come to a consensus. The very thing that brought us to this exchange was one of our biggest obstacles. We were all committed to understanding one another but had no sense of what that should look like. Was it an article? Was it a conversation exchange that could broaden our understanding of the terms we chose? Was it complete chaos and discomfort?

It was complete chaos and discomfort. Four individuals who had very little in common but agreed to go through a process to understand social cohesion ended up socially divided. We knew we did not have any kind of foundation for our work. We had spent three days having conversations in an attempt to extract information from one another in the hopes of writing an article but we never really discussed what we hoped to get out of the experience. The three days became about product and not process. As a result, our group nearly imploded. We sat at a table silently waiting for someone to speak. We had hit a wall, we were running out of time and we didn't even know what was next. Maybe these insights may sound familiar to some of our readers. It reveals a process characterized by unstructured ideas and methods, no guidance through frameworks and basic agreements and not knowing at all where to start. So what lessons can be drawn from this for a broader picture of our societies? The following and final passage of this essay will outline and sum up some of the reflexive learnings the group came up with out of their own process.

¹ The Options range from secondary school (9th or 10th grade), gymnasium (12th grade) or vocational gymnasium (13th grade). Each of those degrees will lead to different choices and will inform future decisions like how to proceed in terms of education if its vocational training or studying at a university including Ph.D.-programs.

² For example, access to well-funded school districts is limited and not the standard. This is a result of a history of segregation and more recently the privation of public schools via charter schools. Additionally, the use of high-stakes standardized tests has reduced options for parents seeking a more creative and engaging learning environment for their children, leaving them with little to no choice. However, if parents can afford to send their children to private school, their children do not have to take high-stakes standardized tests.

³ It differs from its counterpart (formal education) by not resulting in any form of examination leading to a formal qualification or degree as a requirement to continue learn/study at a higher level. Those organizations in the field of non-formal education are offering a various number of choices for each individual and are mostly based on personal preferences respectively interests or talents.

⁴ Informal places and/or educational processes are namely family, circle of friends, study groups, free-time activities, religious groups and so on. Education in its different available forms is overall facilitating and offering possibilities of participation and attendance in socio-cultural life as well as contributing to the individual's meaning-making processes.

3 Social Cohesion in Process – Basic Requirements and the Importance of Shared Values

Social division and social cohesion are defined as core aspects of this AICGS project. Therefore Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) summed up four reasons: 1) globalization, 2) growing cultural diversity, 3) new communication technologies and 4) inclusion of additional members describing the decline of social cohesion⁵ (p. 580). But both terms are phenomena, conditions or results that can be observed in social interaction processes between individuals within specific groups or between groups and communities, even if we recognize since around 1968 “an intergenerational shift toward Postmaterialist values, bringing greater emphasis on freedom of expression, environmental protection, gender equality, and tolerance of gays, handicapped people, and foreigners” (Inglehart/Norris 2017, 443). Going back to the group process experienced in Akron/Ohio, we knew that we had missed a step. In discussing social cohesion on the first day, we briefly talked about the importance of shared values. For example, in Germany there is a shared value that education is important and should be made available to all. As a result, it is free of cost. Values inform the foundation of a process and help guide the result. We never discussed what our shared values were before starting our project. We did not set an agreement on how we wanted to work with one another or what we were working towards. On the last day we were forced to hit reset. Through honest and at times uncomfortable exchange we decided to draft a working agreement. This agreement and framework outlined our expectations, and values. We wanted to shift from a product driven dynamic to a process driven one. This would allow us to be supportive of one another, welcome failure without judgment, encourage active listening and honor each of our experiences. Once we wrote our working agreement there was a palpable shift. It was as if we were all meeting each other for the first time. We were able to get rid of competing agendas and a need for a final product. Instead we were able to finally really see one another in an authentic and meaningful way.

The author’s conclusion: For social cohesion to be successful there needs to be a shared value system. Whether working in a small group in a hotel lobby, to cities that are figuring out how to adjust to shifting demographics, to nations responding to the impacts of globalization and climate change, we know “emotionally-charged cultural issues cutting across economic lines have hindered the emergence of a new coalition” (Inglehart/Norris 2017, 452). There needs to be an understanding and commitment to shared values. But how can this work out in practice? While our educational backgrounds brought us together, cultural differences, traditions, different backgrounds stood in the way of reaching a middle ground. Patience, respect for one another and the intellect to use these basic human qualities, these played in the end an important role to coming together. Compromise, the ability to put aside one’s ego and personal identity, for the sake of the group. “Social Cohesion is present when individuals and groups with different cultures, values, beliefs, life styles, and socio-economic resources have equal access to all domains of social life and live together without conflict” (Schiefer/van der Noll 2017, p. 584). Intelligent compassion, a mixture of intellectual abilities, emotional intelligence, and a shared awareness of the group goal was key to the transformation process.

The gift of a conscious, reflective mind was key to navigating through the various dimensions of working in a group, with a group, for a group. It was also key to restoring general understanding of why we came together in the first place. This process opened up the space to eventually creating time and a middle ground to come together once again, to try again and aim together, working and shaping things for the common good. Now we all have minds, yet the reflective part is not always there. Through the business of everyday life, thinking reflectively is easily forgotten, easily set aside. Mindfulness is not as easy as it should be. But it should. Because if it is absent, we can see how behavior, even among the most educated, privileged can easily spiral out of control. How can our education(-al system) play a (better) role in building this reflective conscious mind (Schön 1983, 1987)? (What if) we can delve deeper into the qualities of the reflective conscious mind?

⁵ Globalization and inclusion of additional member (states) like they originally state it, are coming from a macro-perspective view, focusing on socio-economic aspects, political dimensions and geographic perspectives. For the purpose of this Essay the authors are transforming these findings and reflecting them through a micro-perspective lens on a group process.

If the Akron experience stands mainly for social division looking at the example of the political sphere, which seemed to be far from its community needs. While officially, discussing only questions of attracting people and businesses through a prospering moneymaking environment, social aspects were not addressed at all. They played no role in any talks at any time, except in community work projects, where people come together and care about their individual needs and focusing on making Akron a social inclusive place to live. Social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, (in)equality, objective and subjective quality of life are six dimensions of social cohesion described by Schiefer/van der Noll (2017). This shows that social cohesion is a complex but highly valuable product and a never-ending, interesting development process. A mix of reflection and negotiation at the same time. However, based on our experience in Akron that can be incredibly difficult, creating fertile soil for the seeds of social division to sprout. Like weeds it can grow out of control. Therefore a conscious and reflective mind is necessary. Finally, an unaddressed issue in our group that is important for us to explore both broadly in terms of social cohesions, but also within our group is POWER. In terms of community, culture, and education, Who gets to set the value system of a society? When discussing capitalism, racism, access to resources, etc., Power is central, is within and across these systems, and deeply impacted the U.S. educational system. Our guiding question for our group process, and for societies broadly speaking: How do we shift existing power structures that influence Communities, Cultures, and Social Cohesion? In our group, we began to explore these answers through our group process. It became clear to us that if communities do not lean into the discomfort of their differences to arrive to a place of shared consensus while being guided by shared values, achieving social cohesion becomes very challenging or nearly impossible.

Literature

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