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The Search for a Sense of Togetherness

In Germany, we don't need a new concept of 'Heimat'. Instead, we need places where people feel included and effective

Read this article in German.

Talk of '*Heimat*' - a word which combines feelings of homeliness with the less wholesome political connotations of "homeland" in a uniquely German way - is once again all the rage and, as on similar occasions in recent decades, it can be relied upon to raise the political temperature in Germany to fever pitch. Especially those on the Left are supposed to have deficits in this regard: either they should finally develop a "relaxed" relationship to the *Heimat*, or at least to the term, it is claimed, or they should engage in discourses to reinterpret the concept in a positive sense, so that *Heimat* can also find a home among the Left. But it remains unclear what problem this is actually intended to solve. Instead of getting bogged down in discourses about touchy-feely instant identities, left-wing politics should concentrate on how we can enable people to exercise political judgment once again through their own actions and to actively shape their livelihoods in cooperation with others, and thereby develop stable identities of their own.

Do we even have a problem with the notion of *Heimat*? Nowadays most people are quite relaxed about it. For some, *Heimat* means grandma's recipe book, familiar landscapes, urban life or simply home. Others want to fly the flag. And for increasingly many people, *Heimat* means an automatic Wi-Fi connection. *Heimat* is a life history, a very personal feeling of familiarity and belonging. It becomes tense only when this private feeling is supposed to be politically generalized by being passed through an ideological lens and when individual parties or political currents want to perform identity management for the citizens by offering a ready-made notion of *Heimat* that specifies what it must look like, what is supposedly worth preserving and who belongs. When used as a political slogan, talk of "THE" *Heimat* is too arbitrary and too contaminated and it is always associated with exclusion, a "defending-

one's-patch" mentality and chauvinism.

Global capitalism and the need for flexible human beings

To be sure, there are also people on the Left who are now trying to counter this with a congenial notion of *Heimat*, one intended be inclusive, dynamic and open to the world. This is supposed to demonstrate a down-to-earth attitude and thereby defuse the impression of the allegedly detached, cosmopolitan Left, but without embracing the ugly aspects of the *völkisch* proponents of Heimat. But what is this supposed to achieve? Who is the intended audience? Ultimately, most of the political energy invested in this effort will have to be expended on eliminating irritations and making demarcations.

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The debate over the politics of Heimat diverts attention away from the real issue of how people can freely choose their own identity. If anything can be generalized, then it is that people associate belonging, self-effectiveness, participation and control over their own biographies with the places with which they identify. And things have been in a sorry state in this regard not only since yesterday. The integration of people fleeing persecution and poverty is the least of the problems. Already two decades ago, the sociologist Richard Sennett described how the new global capitalism geared to short-termism and rapid profits calls for 'flexible human behavior': those who are not prepared to adapt to the demands of the accelerated economy to constantly reinvent themselves have a problem. As flexible human beings become uncertain about their professional biographies and lose their confidence in social security, their longing for other places of rootedness, recognition and community grows.

Today we have reached the point where capitalism as a form of life in which everything, including the individual human being, is reduced to its economic utility appears to be less a promise of an autonomous life than a compulsion to permanently optimize one's life in conformity with the market. Modernity's promise to provide security, which is based on the

ever better mastery of risks and on social progress, is no longer being fulfilled for many, if one thinks, for example, of the massive expansion of the low-wage sector or of low pension expectations. Large sections of the middle class are afraid of a loss of social status and find the major social disparities unacceptable. An aggravating factor is that the decades-long reference to political constraints and the lack of alternatives mean that social debate has dried up and democratic commitment has been devalued. Today many people feel that their needs and individual destinies are no longer represented by public institutions and officeholders. At the same time, however, they no longer find points of access through which they can find their bearings and give their concerns political expression, such as those that were long provided by the political, social and cultural resources of workers' movement organizations.

Strengthening democracy at work

None of these problems is solved by offering people schematic notions of *Heimat*. Left-wing politics wants to and has to promote social cohesion and facilitate emancipation. Uniting to promote change instead of providing consolation—this is what it has always offered and this remains correct. Part of this is ensuring the basic requirements of a decent life: fair work, a strong welfare state, an inclusive education system, access to the digital world, being able to get from A to B by public transport and affordable rents. But we also need once again a practice of democracy that challenges people and enables them to make a difference through their political thinking and social action. This presupposes that people are once again taken seriously, certainly also as regards their fears, but above all when it comes to their ability to join with others in actively shaping society.

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If participating in shared reflection, decision-making and planning is also to be possible for those who are less mobile, who are tied to their places by fate rather than by choice and today have to bear the brunt of the crises and social contradictions, then politics and democratic renewal must begin above all in people's immediate vicinity: in the neighborhood, in the economy, in the workplace, in schools and universities and in local communities. For while right-wing populists try to reduce the bewildering complexity of the social and political environment by appealing to new them-and-us schemes, and thereby promote a

culture of dependence and incomprehension, we must contribute to people's ability to take possession of the world again for themselves—so that this can serve as a source of meaning and community.

This is no easy task, but there are concrete starting points: more elements of workplace democracy—for example, measures designed to give employees a greater say in how companies are run—enhance employees' scope for action; indeed they do so precisely where many conflicts are most manifest in current and impending transformation processes, whether the issue is digitalization or environmental sustainability. Although they are currently still niche phenomena, certain more far-reaching forms of economic solidarity, such as energy cooperatives, workers' cooperatives or open workshops, can serve not only to bring local economies more strongly into line with the needs of the population, but also release people's creative and cooperative abilities.

Strengthening the municipal level

On the other hand, there is not disputing that political parties must raise the claim to utilize and shape public institutions. But, specifically at the local level, they need to develop once again more strongly into social parties that are in close exchange with people and initiatives that are searching for or working on solutions. Here politics is not only limited to acquiring power within institutions, but initiates concrete changes beyond the level of government by engaging in social cooperation and forging social alliances. Especially the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, with its still large membership, has a good basis for this. Municipalities are actually strong units whose right to self-government is enshrined in the Basic Law. However, low turnouts in local elections are indicative of how little confidence citizens have in local politics. This is also a consequence of policies that leave municipalities underfunded and reduce the room for political maneuver at the municipal level by privatizing public infrastructure. That has to change because municipalities play a decisive role in shaping people's immediate living environment.

Politics should not be sealed off from the fears of society. And it must draw the right conclusions from these fears.

Aside from holding local referendums, there are many examples of mini-public spheres that can provide orientation for political decision-making at the municipal level and imbue local politics with tangible meaning. They range from local consultative 'future councils' (Claus Leggewie) on the energy transition and public

transport, through participatory budgets and citizens' juries that decide on social projects, to municipal versions of the now famous 'Anthill' in Iceland. This was the grassroots movement responsible for the first Icelandic National Assembly held in 2009 at which randomly selected citizens drew up proposals for a new constitution, which were then commented upon by large sections of the population through social media (though they were ultimately blocked in parliament by the new conservative government). The proposal is not to establish institutions that compete with parliaments and magistrates, but to explore new ways of combining democratic representation with new democratic forms that use the ideas of the many and promote exchange. This can lead not only to more appropriate and practical answers, but also to a sense of togetherness beyond right-wing identity politics. Democracy as an everyday practice provides everyone with an opportunity to become effective in a complex world. It heightens the awareness that, in future, most people will be able to live autonomous lives that bear an individual imprint only if social and solidarity-based thinking and community interests are once again accorded central importance. And finally, it can break with the fatalistic view that nothing can be changed and can awaken the belief in an open future that is susceptible of being shaped.

But what about the state?

This presupposes a conception of the state that sees citizens not merely as passive recipients of services, but instead as 'productive' members of society. In future, the state, which in recent years has acted primarily as a crisis manager dealing with the failure of the markets, must fulfill two tasks. On the one hand, it must repair its institutions so that they are once again able to perform the task of taming and regulating above all the global economy. Much of this can be accomplished only in cooperation with other countries. On the other hand, the state as 'facilitator' (Elinor Ostrom) must make available the necessary development tools—social spaces, platforms, knowledge and financing—for projects and democratic experiments geared to promoting the common good.

Politics should not be sealed off from the fears of society. And it must draw the right conclusions from these fears. Neither nostalgic notions of *Heimat* nor paternalistic approaches will prove to be sustainable in this regard in the long run. People do not want to be confirmed in and held prisoner by their concerns. Rather, they want to liberate themselves from them—through the experience of being able to contribute to a successful life by their own efforts. Then *Heimat* does not have to be politically fabricated and imported from the outside, but may emerge once again amongst the people through their own efforts— in all modesty.



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