

# Proactive Tolerance as a Social Resilience Factor in the Context of an Anti-Identitarian Social Ethics

## An Exploration on the Basis of a Social Psychological Understanding of Identity

*Lars Schäfers*

For a long time now, the world has been characterised by deep uncertainties in the sense of multiple upheavals and crises. With the Corona pandemic, they have reached a new peak. The pandemic acts as an accelerator of insecurities, fears, populism and fundamental criticism of politics, society, and the media. These fears and an accompanying fundamental distrust in democratic institutions are being nurtured and exploited especially by movements and parties of the right-wing populist-extremist spectrum in Europe. The post-socialist Eastern European states in particular have a reputation today as strongholds of populism.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, right-wing populist-nationalist parties are often strong in Eastern Europe, and in some countries, they also assume offices in the government, e.g. in Poland and Hungary as the former models of the transformation from socialism to democracy. The rise of these parties and movements in the 2010s, along with an increasing response to their nationalist identity politics,<sup>2</sup> represents a dangerous adversity for the values of pluralist and liberal democracies.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of the drastic experiences with the Corona pandemic, there is therefore a renewed debate about how societies and individuals can become more crisis-resistant, or in modern terms: more resilient.

This diagnostics of the contemporary forms the background for the following Christian social-ethical reflections, inspired by the concept of proactive tolerance, which was developed within the framework of the German-Ukrainian project “Tolerance at the European frontiers – the dimension of Ukraine”. Within the project, tolerance was examined as a “key virtue of democracy”<sup>4</sup>. The necessity of a well-founded definition of

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- 1 Cf. for example von Beyme 2019.
  - 2 Cf. on this instructive and clear Müller 2019.
  - 3 Cf. Fukuyama 2019.
  - 4 Vogt /Husmann 2019: 3.

the concept of tolerance, as was undertaken within the framework of the Ukraine project under the term “proactive tolerance”<sup>5</sup> arises not least from the fact that this is a container concept, which, as key virtue for modern pluralistic societies, can be attested a high normative value. The downside is that tolerance often remains blurred in its diverse contexts of use and can degenerate into an inflationary buzzword. The term resilience, which will be the focus of this article, shares this fate of a buzzword with a steep career, into which many different semantics can be placed. The concept of identity can be added to this series of container terms, not least because of an inner logic. Accordingly, the modern – and today variously discussed and interpreted – key concepts of tolerance, resilience, and identity span the horizon of reflection of the present article. All three terms have a special relevance in multiple crisis and conflict situations like the present ones. It is the aim of this article to put all three terms into a hermeneutic relation.

This contribution begins with the presentation of a social-psychological concept of identity according to Heiner Keupp and Jochen Sautermeister (1). This concept combines personal and collective identity patterns on an empirical basis and implies the procedural search for a resilient identity at the intersection of the psychic inside and the social outside. On this basis, a brief presentation of the concept of resilience follows after an interpretation that also mediates the individual-ethical perspective with a social-ethical view on the basis of the resilience studies conducted by Clemens Sedmak (2), which can be linked to a social-psychological understanding of identity. As right-wing politics challenges the resilience of identities, a further development of the specifically socio-ethical dimension is needed. Therefore I will undertake an investigation at recent research on a decidedly anti-identitarian social ethics<sup>6</sup> as a normative framework concept for the present reflections (3). Finally, the outlaid reflections will be condensed and summarized once again and I will draw references to the role of the concept of proactive tolerance (4). After all, however, only a few milestones can be pointed at, and this selection out of a broad field is condemned to remain fragmentary, provisional. Nevertheless, there are resilient answers to be given which will certainly stimulate further thinking.

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5 Cf. fundamentally Vogt/Husmann 2019. Cf. also the contribution by Rolf Husmann in this volume.

6 Cf. the articles in issue 1/2020 of the social-ethical online journal “Ethik und Gesellschaft”: Becka 2020; Lesch 2020; Möhring-Hesse 2020.

This article chooses as starting point of reflection the current critical situation in which the supposedly crisis-proofed collective identity are promoted particular by right-wing populist forces<sup>7</sup>, with the aim of unifying<sup>8</sup> and combating plurality. This choice has been made because this phenomenon is an almost worldwide mega-trend of recent years that endangers democratic core values such as tolerance. In terms of identity theory and ethics, the following will therefore deal with the concept of resilience, which will be further developed. I will focus on the content of the term and on the potential, described by it: the potential of being able to behave in and through permanent disturbances and social and cultural processes of change in such a way that future disturbances can also be overcome, while preserving one's own identity.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the topic of resilience and identity is consistently depending on the normative reflection of the correlations between person and society. A social-psychological understanding of identity – including a meta-normative bridging function between the personal and the societal sphere – is helpful in this regard. One can also say that the question of identity is about the “moral structure of the individual in the social”<sup>10</sup>.

### *Social-psychologically determined personal identity*

The complex question of identity is above all a modern phenomenon. But the meanings and definitions of identity are so diverse that a clarified concept seems almost unobtainable. Following closely the thinking of the theological ethicist and psychologist Jochen Sautermeister as well as the social psychologist Heiner Keupp, a social-psychologically determined understanding of personal identity will be presented here. It is based on Erik Erikson's use of the concept of identity for the psychosocial development of the human being, in which experiences of loss and crisis play a central role.<sup>11</sup>

According to Keupp, identity unfolds through a subjective construction process in which individuals seek a “fit between the subjective 'inside' and

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7 On the definition of right-wing populism, especially in contrast to the principles of a pluralistic, tolerance-based democracy, cf. especially Müller 2017.

8 Cf. especially Bauer 2018.

9 Cf. to this approach Frankenreiter 2018: 180.

10 Cf. Hunold 1993.

11 Cf. Erikson 1973.

the social 'outside'<sup>12</sup>. This understanding of process-based identity work as “fitting work”<sup>13</sup> in the course of a person's various phases of life is shaped by the respective complex conditions and contextual preconditions, and also limitations in society. In interactions with other persons, this process-based identity work usually involves an unconscious attempt to maintain an identity balance<sup>14</sup>, in which the person on the one hand wants to keep in touch with the socially mediated expectations and requirements of others, but on the other hand also wants to assert his or her own singularity as a person.

If the person is succeeding in this lifelong procedural balancing and integrating act again and again, the false form of a fragile and diffuse identity – as well as that of a rigid, supposedly unchangeable identity – is equally avoided.<sup>15</sup> Thus, identity has the character of a meta-norm.<sup>16</sup> However, the actual or supposed questioning of one's own personal and cultural identity in times of instability and multi-layered processes of change, as it is currently the case, makes identity a problem – and thus a task because of its permanent fragility.<sup>17</sup> According to Sautermeister, the normative goal of an identity that can be certified as having integrity “always implies an awareness of the difference and strangeness of the ways of acting and the lifestyles of people who strive to live together in mutual recognition despite all their differences.”<sup>18</sup>

A pressed and questioned identity, on the other hand, will easily accept a supposedly strong, stable and unambiguous collective meta-political identity offer<sup>19</sup>, such as that of right-wing populists and nationalists. Therefore, the political and social conditions as well as cultural and religious resources of meaning are relevant for creating successfully an inclusive personal identity in recognition of their necessary plurality. This marks the specific object of social-ethical reflection, because, according to Walter Lesch: “Since social contexts and individual questions of identity are closely connected, the topic is also social-ethically relevant and can only be outsourced at the price of an unworldly social theory. This is especially evident in the return of the identity problem in the distorted expressions

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12 Keupp 2017: 201.

13 Keupp 2017: 201.

14 Cf. Krappmann 2005: 9.

15 Cf. Sautermeister 2017: 51.

16 Cf. Sautermeister 2013: 202ff.

17 Cf. Sautermeister 2017: 49.

18 Sautermeister 2017: 51.

19 Cf. Frankenreiter 2018: 190ff.

of identitarian excesses.”<sup>20</sup> Social ethics as a normative theory of social structures, from a social-psychological identity-theoretical point of view does the job of analyzing and identifying the social and structural conditions that are “necessary for a free and responsible identity work of all individuals under the respective social conditions.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is compulsory to examine identitarian politics as a captious collectively oriented resource for the identity of the individual. Since these identity resources are usually opposed to the values of a liberal, pluralistic democracy characterized by tolerance, and since they are therefore destructive, it is important to ask, from a normative point of view, how societal defenses against the anti-democratic forms of these identity politics can be strengthened. This is the starting point for my reflection on a socio-psychologically and social-ethically interpretable understanding of resilience. This will then be integrated into the normative framework of a correspondingly resilience- and tolerance-promoting anti-identitarian social ethics.

*Resilience according to Clemens Sedmak: An identity-practical and individual-ethical grounded...*

Resilience is a much-used broad-spectrum term<sup>22</sup>. Literally, the dispositional term resilience means something like: “to return to the original state.”<sup>23</sup> It originated in the natural sciences and was first used in the human sciences, particularly in psychology. In the meantime, however, it has also made a career in politics, social science and social ethics. The concept of resilience, with its considerable breadth of reception<sup>24</sup>, is particularly popular in times of crisis,<sup>25</sup> when individuals, but also societies, are challenged in their powers of resistance: “In view of the growing awareness of the diverse global risks and challenges facing today's societies, the question of preventive 'protective factors' has increasingly been raised in recent years, which enable the social system to deal with manifold unpredictability and to withstand various crises.”<sup>26</sup> Resilience discourses, which are currently being conducted on an interdisciplinary and societal

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20 Lesch 2020: 9.

21 Sautermeister 2017: 58.

22 Schneider/Vogt 2016: 181.

23 Schneider/Vogt 2016: 182.

24 Cf. Weiß et al. 2018.

25 Cf. Vogt/Schneider 2016: 180f.

26 Fathi 2019: 25.

basis, are a contemporary diagnostic indicator of a growing awareness of upheaval and crisis, but also of solutions, for which the concept of resilience seems to be attractive.

The Christian ethicist Clemens Sedmak developed a concept of resilience that links its political and social dimensions with the inwardness of the subject of action. According to Sedmak, resilience is a “competence of adversity”<sup>27</sup> and thus “a certain form of dealing with adversities (stresses, disturbances, pressures, disruptions) in a prosperous way”<sup>28</sup>. Sedmak emphasizes the central importance of the inwardness of the human being for its identity formation. In his approach to epistemic resilience, Sedmak refers above all to the inner-psycho preconditions of resilience. Sedmak understands identity in this context as the self-concept in relation to the environment, including the ability to deal constructively<sup>29</sup> with external circumstances in the sense of identity work<sup>30</sup> with resilience as an inner strength that can be cultivated.<sup>31</sup> Resilience thus enables one to “flourish under adverse circumstances, especially when familiar stability has been lost.”<sup>32</sup>

*...and social-ethically advanced concept of resilience.*

Not only individual but also collective subjects can exhibit resilience in this sense. A society can be a “resilient society.”<sup>33</sup> With Neil Adger, social resilience can be defined “as the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change.”<sup>34</sup> However, it must be added that internal stress and disturbances of a society have to be managed, too. In times of multiple crises<sup>35</sup>, the model of a “multi-resilient society”, equipped with a

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27 Sedmak 2016: 236. Sedmak develops a very comprehensive understanding of (epistemic) resilience in his study “Innerlichkeit und Kraft” (Innerness and Power), which can only be reproduced in a few basic features in the following.

28 Sedmak 2016: 235.

29 Cf. Sedmak 2013: 69.

30 Cf. Sedmak 2013: 33f.

31 Cf. in detail Sedmak 2013: 226ff.

32 Sedmak 2016: 236.

33 Cf. on the term Ostheimer 2017 in the context of the socio-ecological discourse. Cf. also Sedmak 2013: 375.

34 Adger 2000: 347.

35 Cf. Vogt 2017: 308, following Ulrich Brand.

“basic robustness” against crises,<sup>36</sup> is even more obvious. According to Sedmak, social cohesion, and thus an important precondition for a society's resilience, can otherwise be damaged.<sup>37</sup> Sedmak therefore characterizes social resilience as connectivity, as the inner cohesion in a well-ordered society, which must be characterized by a sense of justice and trust.<sup>38</sup> Right-wing populist identity politics, which leads to social difference by using a criterion of demarcation, has such an understanding of social cohesion and social resilience in mind that only homogeneous groups can represent.

On the political level, Sedmak is concerned with “deep politics”: This means that politics is shaped from a culture of personal inwardness.<sup>39</sup> In this context, specifically political emotions also play an important role.<sup>40</sup> This politics provides the members of the society with the necessary resources and the needed framework conditions to develop their own inner identity in openness to the diversity of identities in a society<sup>41</sup> and thus to be less susceptible to closed collective identity offers.

Therefore, in the following, in the sense of a concretization of Sedmak's<sup>42</sup> abstract thoughts, such “right-wing” identity politics<sup>43</sup> will now be considered in more detail. It will be used as an example to illustrate the extent to which tolerance can be interpreted as a social resilience factor against the background of closed identity constructions.

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36 Cf. Fathi 2020.

37 Cf. Sedmak 2016: 242.

38 Cf. Sedmak 2016: 242ff.

39 Cf. Sedmak 2013: 361ff.

40 Cf. Vogt 2017.

41 Cf. Sedmak 2013: 363.

42 This is illustrated by himself in Sedmak 2013, however, with a variety of concrete examples of individuals who have developed an appropriate resilience.

43 In contrast to such “right-wing” identity politics, which essentially aims at the collective defense of (majority) privileges in a society, “left-wing” identity politics, in clear contrast, are concerned with the organization of minorities and the fight against their discrimination and oppression (cf. Riedl 2020). Resilience and tolerance are also important in such minority identity politics, but in the context of the objective of recognizing minority identities and not as defenses against (supposed) majority identities.

*Right-Wing Identity Politics as a Challenge to Social Resilience*

The offer of right-wing collective identity politics seems to be seductive especially in times of multiple crises, complex contexts and the accompanying experiences of identity poverty<sup>44</sup>. According to the Second Vatican Council, identity temptations can be seen as a current sign of the times, which therefore requires a Christian-social-ethical research.

Those identity offers – with demarcating-intolerant semantics and a moral claim to sole representation of a nation or a people<sup>45</sup> – are to be unmasked as mere constructs. Walter Lesch describes them pointedly as follows: “identitarian fictions of state and society lack any empirical basis. They exaggerate the splendor of one's own culture and exaggerate the threat of masses supposedly ready to rush in. They polemicize against minorities and diabolize their claims in grotesque disaster scenarios.”<sup>46</sup> Since these mostly anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic<sup>47</sup> identitarian politics from the right-wing populist spectrum are opposed to the values of a liberal democracy based on plurality and tolerance.<sup>48</sup> The main task of an explicitly anti-identitarian social ethics is to deconstruct identitarian metapolitics and, at the same time, to offer alternative identity-creating interpretive schemes.<sup>49</sup> However, there is a serious danger that, in pursuing a fundamental critique of populist identity politics, one is in turn pursuing identity politics: One “should not react to populists symmetrically, according to the idea: Because you exclude, we now exclude you. Here one would fall precisely into the trap of opposing a populist identity politics with a liberal one, the morally good collective against the other, bad characters.”<sup>50</sup>

An anti-identitarian social ethics unfolds an open concept of collective identity that does not dissolve into a total identification, but constructively takes up the needs associated with collective identities (such as belonging somewhere, community, and orientation in their ambivalence) and works on them in dynamic pendulum movements.<sup>51</sup> Based on the social-psychological approach described above, which sees personal identity in procedu-

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44 Cf. Sedmak 2013: 363.

45 Cf. Müller 2019: 18.

46 Lesch 2020: 14.

47 Cf. on these central dimensions of right-wing populism especially Müller 2017.

48 Cf. Fukuyama 2019.

49 Cf. Möhring-Hesse 2020.

50 Müller 2019: 21.

51 Cf. Becka 2020: 20.

ral-dynamic interaction with social claims and collective identity offers, the importance of the latter should not be ignored or even demonized. Experiences of identity poverty and the need for its alleviation have to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, it is necessary to critically reinterpret, if not deconstruct, collective identity offers, especially where destructive identity politics is pursued with them.<sup>52</sup>

According to Sedmak, a critical reinterpretation of collective identity can succeed, for example, on the basis of a narrative mediation of social resilience.<sup>53</sup> Such an approach can take shape, for example, in the form of a cultural conception of identity that does not understand itself in terms of demarcation (from those on the outside), but rather feeds on the very opposite attitude as a constitutive element of identity.

*Excursus: Brague's narrative identity of Europe as a counter-draft to the right-wing populist concept of the Occident*

The narrative identity of Europe developed by Rémi Brague is a particularly noteworthy example of such a “cultivation of narrative resilience”<sup>54</sup>, also and especially against the problem horizon of right-wing identity politics in Europe. Brague's approach<sup>55</sup> does not define Europe in relation to people from other cultural backgrounds by demarcation. According to him, one of the roots of European identity, from the time of the ancient Romans onwards, was to be open towards the foreign and to allow oneself to be enriched. For the identity work of the individual it implies the ability to transcend oneself: no demarcation and no devaluation of foreign cultures and identities, but the critical, but fundamentally tolerant and proactive confrontation with them. Brague calls the mode of such a personal practice of the individual in this Roman attitude “self-Europeanization”<sup>56</sup>. Especially with regard to identitarian politics, which cultivates the narrative that Europe's identity as a “Christian Occident” must be defended against Islam and refugee migrants, coming from the outside, Brague's narrative appears as a constructive counter-concept.<sup>57</sup> With this cultural narrative, the “Christian Occident” is not understood in accordance with

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52 Cf. Becka 2020.

53 Cf. Sedmak 2016: 237.

54 Sedmak 2016: 237.

55 Cf. Brague 2012.

56 Brague 1996: 99

57 Cf. from a social-ethical perspective, in detail Schäfers 2016.

the right-wing populist identity proposition as a demarcation against “the others.” Moreover, Christianity often functions as a partial element of an outwardly closed understanding of Europe and the Occident by right-wing populist movements. Their supporters sometimes justify this by claiming that it is their intention “to pursue Christian goals and to stand up for human rights, persecuted Christians or the 'Christian Occident'.”<sup>58</sup> This is another reason why Christian social ethics in particular must face this problem in the format of an anti-identitarian social ethics.

*Conclusion: Proactive tolerance as a social resilience factor*

This article explores the links between the three key concepts of identity, resilience, and tolerance. The starting point is the finding that questions of identity are of great importance today, both for the individual and for society. In times of multiple crises, unifying collective identities are attractive, which supposedly simplify the difficult process of constant identity work for the individual, cultivating his inwardness in constructive confrontation with the social context. According to the understanding presented here, the competence of resilience helps both the individual and society to resist such seductive offers and to develop further despite adverse circumstances. From the point of view of social ethics, the issue of identity is about providing the individual access to social resources that promote his or her identity work. This requires an appreciation of a diversity of identities in an open and plural society. Especially proactive tolerance, as developed in the Ukraine project, is a virtue that can foster this attitude. In this respect, it can be described as a social resilience factor. Proactive tolerance means an appreciative, committed interest in plurality, in those who think and live differently. In this respect, it prevents the emergence of conflicts by building trust.<sup>59</sup> Proactive tolerance creates the possibility of reciprocal dialogue, which in the best case is cultivated as mutual enrichment. This requires consolidated individual-personal identities “which do not feel threatened by deviating opinions or other forms of behavior”<sup>60</sup> and a society's identity that is decidedly understood as open and plural. The need for this is evident in view of the resonance that anti-pluralist right-wing

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58 Strube 2015: 25. Sonja Angelika Strube is the person in Germany currently doing the most thorough empirical work on the intersection of parts of conservative streams of Christianity and right-wing populist ideology.

59 Cf. Vogt/Husmann 2019: 6f.

60 Vogt/Husmann 2019: 7.

populist identity politics has. A decidedly anti-identitarian social ethics deconstructs such collective identity offers without negating the needs of people for a successful cultivation of identity and the overcoming of identity poverty. Social ethics has to prove that a constructive identity culture can rather only develop sufficiently in liberal, pluralistic democracies. According to Sedmak, societies can gain resilience competence if they build up inner cohesion and connectivity despite the plurality that has developed. In pluralistic societies, proactive tolerance is therefore an important target value in order to promote resilience-enhancing cohesion.

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