

Tolerance as a Question of Public Goods and Social Places

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An essential characteristic of our society is its plurality. Social milieus, lifestyles and forms of life, subcultures, social movements and regional conditions have been continuously differentiating for several decades, so that individuals are becoming increasingly dissimilar in their realities of life. Social development trends, such as demographic, technological or ecological change, give this differentiation process an additional boost. At the same time, structural inequalities are becoming more pronounced: Social differences between “above” and “below” are increasing. Wealth is growing and child poverty is becoming more entrenched. More and more people fear for their share of social prosperity. Infrastructures are crumbling. Services of general interest are decaying. Entire (rural) regions see themselves left behind, while social, economic and ethnic segregation divides major cities.¹ These inequalities threaten social cohesion to the extent that forms of mutual tolerance and reconciliation of interests are called into question. The fact that racism, hatred and incitement dominate social media and violent excesses against minorities, refugees and the homeless disturb the public, weakens cohesion as a subjective experience and trust in the social environment.

In addition, there are growing differences in the structure of public institutions in rural areas as well as in urban centers. They are linked to opportunities for participation and determine living conditions. When the bus only runs once a day, the local elementary school closes, or a visit to the relevant administrative office requires a half-day's drive, the sense of social participation and balance of interests erodes. Deficits in services and institutions that are fundamental to everyday activity are correlated with a lack of common good. Expectations of alignment are disappointed, experiences of difference are nurtured, and a sense of grievance arises. The dismantling of social infrastructures weakens and endangers cohesion. The more pluralistic and open the social fabric becomes, and the more it becomes disconnected and unequal, the more urgent the need for forms of social integration. The question of how to maintain social cohesion in

1 Cf. Kersten et al. 2019.

an open society is increasingly becoming a crucial one. Against this background, the following article argues that the lowest common denominator in a complex, lifeworldly and culturally differentiated society is based on shared, democratic institutions and infrastructures. To the question of what binds open societies together and promotes tolerant attitudes, one answer is public goods and Social Places.

Tolerance as a relational skill

In times of profound social upheaval, divisions and polarization, democratic guardrails are needed: Strengthening cohesion is therefore indispensably linked to stable democratic values and attitudes. Alongside diversity, openness, trust and solidarity, one of them finds expression in the value or normative practice of tolerance. Tolerance² is a key virtue that enables democratic behavior.³ It enables cooperative coexistence in societies in which “the plurality of cultures, worldviews, and views of humanity [] is understood not as a threat but as a richness”⁴. This attitude of mind is based on voluntariness and it has both a “rejection component” and an “acceptance component.” Other values, views, behaviors or ways of life are recognized but not shared. According to this, tolerance⁵ has a functionalist moment for living together in a democratic society.⁶ In order to develop tolerant attitudes, people depend on structural conditions. They need to relate to each other, to meet and experience each other in order to have positive lifeworld experiences with “the others.” This is where the contact effect comes into play, according to which personal contact between different social groups under certain conditions leads to a reduction of

2 There are various ethical, religious and philosophical approaches to the concept of tolerance. Relevant systematisations can be found in Forst 2017 and Vogt/Husmann 2019.

3 Cf. Vogt/Husmann 2019: 3.

4 Ibid. 8.

5 Critical voices, however, see the performance of the concept of tolerance as limited: effective relationships of domination are faded out, because “only the powerful can afford tolerance, the powerless cannot tolerate the powerful, they can only duck” (Heitmeyer 2002: 272). Exaggerating the meaning of the term would be a gateway to interpret social inequalities as diversity, to become indifferent to it and thus to ignore and tolerate its systematics and structure (cf. *ibid.*).

6 Cf. Forst 2017: 32 ff.

stereotypes, devaluations, demarcations and xenophobia and promotes the development of trust and tolerance.⁷

But if a lack of reference is to be transformed into the ability to relate, people need appropriate spaces and framework conditions. Encounters depend on public and social infrastructures that offer opportunities for contact. An “institutional framework” is crucial for the development of tolerance and cohesion.⁸ It needs firmly installed pathways to other social circles. In short, it needs a framework of public goods.

The value of public goods

Public goods are understood to be services and institutions on which citizens absolutely depend for their free development in a democratic society and with a view to the equality of their living conditions. These include education and training facilities, medical care, mobility and security, transparent administration and legally bound jurisdiction. In this context, it is important to note that public goods are of a different quality and significance than common goods. Common goods (commons) start from the friendly idea of discursive understanding and mutual solidarity. Public goods, on the other hand, are always related to a state and legal order. Thus, questions of power, the assertion of interests and the ability to reach a consensus come into play to a much greater extent. In any case, public goods, unlike commons, are in need of a state.⁹ They lay the foundation for the usually unquestioned everyday actions of people.¹⁰ Therefore, public goods also tend to become self-evident – and thus to fall out of social and political consciousness. Quite wrongly, because their integrating function deserves full scientific and political attention despite their unpretentious appearance.

Public goods resemble a second nature of differentiated, technologically and infrastructurally highly developed societies. The fact that we receive medical care, that our children can attend schools, that we can use roads and transport routes safely and reliably, that we do not have to buy police protection, advice and social support or even access to justice – we take all this for granted.¹¹ But it is precisely this infrastructure framework

7 Cf. Allport 1954.

8 Cf. Vogt/Husmann 2019: 12.

9 Cf. Vogel 2007.

10 Cf. Böhnke et al. 2015.

11 Cf. Vogel 2007.

that forms the preconditions of social cohesion! Public goods serve the common good and the public spirit. They convey trust in the social environment because they are accompanied by the possibility of leading a future-oriented life in equal living conditions.

The value of public goods is that their existence enables cohesion and is at the same time an essential prerequisite for a functioning democracy.¹² Public goods represent the idea of equalization and equivalence, of “social equalizing”, as Angela Kallhoff writes in her book “Why Democracy Needs Public Goods”.¹³ According to Kallhoff, they materialize ideas that are linked to a coexistence in society that is oriented toward democratic, constitutional and welfare-state principles. According to Kallhoff, public goods have a strong normative side – especially when their value is discussed, it is not only about the quantity of goods, services or institutions, but also about the quality of living together.

Perspectives on public goods

If we emphasize this normative side of public goods, then questions of distribution also come into view and questions of priority and privilege. To whose benefit and possibly to whose burden are public goods, services, institutions provided? Who finances them? Who benefits from them, who bears them without being able to use them? What social equalization effects, but also: what inequality effects do they produce? As this perspective suggests, public goods are objects of conflict. Ever since they were established, they have been at the crossroads between the state's performance of its tasks, civic demands and entrepreneurial activities.

When we talk about public goods from a social science perspective as a basis for enabling cohesion, we must also consider them in terms of their conflictual nature. This is largely due to the fact that they are subject to change. Especially in times when social disparities are gaining in importance, when demographic change is challenging the relationship between young and old, when infrastructures of energy supply and transport infrastructure are developing into core issues of public negotiation, public goods are becoming a field of conflict. They are far more than a beacon and the air we breathe. There is no municipal catalog of public goods that can be opened and worked through. They change with society,

12 Cf. ibid.

13 Kallhoff 2011.

which is itself changing. And this change is taking place in demographic, sociocultural and technological terms, particularly in the municipality and local area. A key factor in their dynamic form is the fact that public goods are produced at different times by different people under different conditions. This brings into play the perspective on the actors, the labor force. Public goods are not just there, they have to be produced again and again. This requires personnel who educate, provide, advise, dispense justice, plan and safeguard – and do so with a certain quality and professionalism. The perspective must also be directed to the producer side, which brings concrete production conditions into view: High-performance public goods require a working environment that is conducive to performance and attractive. The question of assuming responsibility for public goods is not just abstract and often empty rhetoric about the relationship between the market, the state and civil society. It is also the question of attitude, of professional self-image, of the consciousness of those who work as teachers, as medical professionals, as counselors, as law officers, as public service providers. Where, if not in these places of work, do we expect work ethics, commitment and professional knowledge – and not just job culture and service by the book.¹⁴

Furthermore, the connection between public goods, the common good and social cohesion has a temporal dimension: On the one hand, public goods have a conserving, security and supportive side. But they are also the capital of the future, with the help of which socio-economic balances in aging societies with growing socio-spatial disparities can be established and new socio-ecological challenges (new mobility and energy supply concepts, organization of regional economic cycles, etc.) can be shaped. Public goods as results of a policy of the “common good” are a change to the future, they have innovative power and illustrate creative potentials that are inherent in a society. In this time-relatedness of public goods, which are produced in the past and further processed in the present for the benefit of the future, their hybridity is shown in a special way. For they develop as future resources and future investments and thus in a complex and tense field of state, municipal, market-related and civic activities. Whether water supply, public services, care or medical services – public goods have different actors that change in the course of history and can be shaped in many ways with a view to the future. In this way, public goods as historically shaped resources and as a change toward the future also strengthen local

14 Cf. Schultheis et al. 2014.

democracy and social cohesion. As future-related goods, they unfold their value for shaping society and generational responsibility.¹⁵

The Concept of Social Places: New Infrastructures for Social Cohesion

Services of general interest and public goods are motors of social and territorial cohesion. This relationship is becoming increasingly conflictual because the distribution and provision of public goods responds to spatial differentiation processes. Out-migration, ageing, migration and the fragmentation of the world of work provoke spatial disparities and experiences of difference. Not only are the differences between urban and rural areas increasing. Inequality between municipalities is also growing within rural areas.¹⁶

The federal political and constitutional goal of striving for equal living conditions for all citizens (Article 72(2) of the Basic Law) finds itself challenged by fundamental social changes: While urban agglomerations are booming, attracting younger people and causing rental prices to skyrocket there, numerous rural regions are shrinking in return and becoming demographically homogeneous areas characterized by visible vacancies. In places where high migration rates and a rapidly ageing population are a social reality, there is a growing sense of hopelessness. Dwindling public transport networks, dwindling leisure activities and dwindling clubs characterize the attitude to life. Particularly in rural areas, there are conflicts over the use, distribution and management of services of general interest and public goods. Their successive dismantling always means a loss of places of encounter and social participation – and therefore a threat to social cohesion.

But there are new social constellations that make more than a virtue of necessity and find their own local answers to infrastructural gaps. Social Places are one of these responses. They emerge in many forms in very different regions of the country and respond to specific spatial problems, such as vacancy, lack of tourism, loss of public space. They are preceded by civil society ideas, voluntary initiatives or concepts that think against the trend and thus enable regional scope for action in a creative and innovative way. The basis is formed by the resources, the potential and the commitment of citizens in concrete terms and of regions, municipalities or

15 Cf. Vogel 2020.

16 Cf. Fink et al. 2019.

districts in general. Social Places do not necessarily have to be a physical place or a project, but rather initiate processes that go beyond themselves by addressing different actors and forming networks.

Nevertheless, these Social Places depend on certain institutional prerequisites and framework conditions so that they can emerge and be stabilized. Five points should be mentioned here:

First, they depend on a functioning public infrastructure and an efficient administration. They need a public framework, legal certainties and a guaranteeing administration. Social Places do not develop against or without public structures, but with them.

Secondly, the possibility of not only installing a project but initiating a process is crucial, as it is not about enabling temporary projects again and again, but about setting processes in motion that can have a sustainable effect according to the precautionary principle. A change in funding policy away from project funding to process funding is overdue here.

Thirdly, for the initiation and stabilization of Social Places, above-average committed and innovative actors are required. No one can be forced into voluntary work, but they can be encouraged! Citizens who do not just sit back and do nothing need appreciation and space.

Fourthly, another central point is openness in the administration for participatory processes and innovative cooperation. Conflicts can arise in the development of Social Places, which do not have to be destructive, but can have productive effects for the respective places and regions. It would be helpful to have the administration “on screen” as an important partner in the production of cohesion and to recognize its role as a democratic infrastructure.

Finally, fifthly, Social Places need supraregional attention and involvement. Only then do they function and not develop into representatives of local narrow-mindedness and parochial politics. Social Places need networks and recognition beyond the narrow local context.

The “Concept of Social Places” (CSP) emphatically defends the principle of equivalence of living conditions, the guarantee of public goods even in so-called structurally weak regions and the comprehensive provision of services of general interest in line with needs. It stands for new forms of social and territorial cohesion. It helps to find social balances in times of growing socio-structural and socio-spatial inequality. Social Places are social crossroads. This is where people meet, this is where bridges are built between their worlds, this is where the public sphere is established, this is where social participation and co-creation is possible. In pluralistic societies, it is important to create spaces and opportunities for interaction, exchange and yes: also to tolerate each other. The existence of Social

Places enables tolerance, paves the way for further individual democratic attitudes and has a positive effect on social cohesion. A policy that aims to create democratic infrastructures and institutions has to think from the local perspective and to make Social Places a priority. It must create a public framework in which civil society can develop.

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