

Thoughts on Inhumanity Today

The large and small violations of humanity that can be perceived every day are causing permanent irritation and indignation. The merry-go-round seems to be spinning faster and faster, and we are watching helplessly, not knowing what to do.

Outrage, that is, the surge of emotion, however, blocks the mind and prevents us from seeing through the situation at hand. It is not only those incidents and conditions that we take offence to, but also those that influence our views. Complex problems have never been solved by emotions. As much as empathy with those in distress is natural and legitimate, only a rational approach can offer the prospect of looking behind the scenes and finding ways out of the dilemma. This should not be based on a single idealistic approach, as otherwise there is a danger of turning insights into one-sidedness by means of preferences and prioritisation.

One aspect is the perpetual flow of information that reaches us daily and concerning some kind of injustice, violence and manipulation. The density is irritating and also the fact that there are political forces that want to either discipline or destabilise society with such measures, as well as a number of media that - consciously or unconsciously - work into the hands of these forces. We must not make the mistake of assuming that this is only the case in the present. A look back at the past shows that, despite all the small epochal distinctions, it has never been any other way: world history can therefore also be understood as a mere struggle between right and wrong. In addition, there is the contradiction that we like to blame "non-Western" societies, systems and concepts for their weaknesses and dubiousness, but like to overlook the fact that in our own cultural environment, too, errors in thinking and behaviour are constantly part of the daily routine.

The postulate of creating a humane world in which peace, freedom and prosperity (for all) are among the highest values was already part of the programme of Christianity in the long period of the so-called Middle Ages, without being able to remedy the countless shortcomings over generations. Then, in the age of the Renaissance, it was the humanists who brought the pre-Christian sphere of thought back into focus, which contains much profoundness and farsightedness. Then it was the so-called Age of Enlightenment, which not only proposed to separate concrete knowledge from faith, but also raised humanitarian causes to the status of a global principle: The whole world was to benefit, thus also all those who were not founded on the same cultural and intellectual roots that characterise the essence of the so-called Occident (e.g. rule of law, human rights, democracy, etc.).

Such a principal can only work, even within "one's own scope", if the vast majority of people are in favour of it, not only as an orientational model passively acknowledged, but also as an active programme to which "everyone" and "always" constructively contributes. If this is not the case - and the general development so far does not give cause for optimism - then this goal will remain utopian for the nominally few, who may even find themselves in the position of having to tremble for their personal survival.

What is the resulting rationale? The combination of (even well-intentioned) reason and violence (in the broadest sense of the word) is not a good combination, as is well known,

and has already caused much harm. Therefore, only the path of convincement (and not mere persuasion) seems to be suitable to serve the humanistic core objectives. The foundation for this is solid knowledge, which must be constantly updated and critically questioned so as not to fall prey to errors, misunderstandings and disinformation. Then suitable channels are needed to bring the humanist perspective to broader sections of society in various doses, because without their support, no irreversible change can be brought about. However, it is careless to play with emotions in this communication, because the spectrum of emotions (strong images, headlines, fake news) proves to be a minefield that can never be crossed without damage. The basis for humanistic action, however, also includes a certain distance from one's own maxims, so that conceptions about the question "How are they to be realised?" do not become a monopolistic dogma that stands in the way of the actual goal.

Harald Heppner, Historian, University Graz