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A compass in turbulent times

Imparting expertise in the Akademie für Soziale Demokratie (Academy for Social Democracy)

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What does Social Democracy mean in the 21st century? What are its central values and objectives? How can it be implemented in a practical manner? These questions are the focus of an educational project recently launched by the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)*. This article will be outlining the key issues in the establishment of this academy, as well as the expertise that is imparted here, while also addressing the question as to how this provision of expertise can be evaluated.

What is at issue? - Objectives and target groups

In summer 2006, the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* began the process of setting up the *Akademie für Soziale Demokratie (ASD)*, something which entailed the development of a new seminar programme, including the content and orientation, which would be on offer nationwide. The foundation formulated three concrete goals for this project:

1. Providing a meaningful theoretical and practical foundation in the fundamental issues of Social Democracy.
2. Increasing the level of identification with the core values of Social Democracy.
3. Strengthening motivation to undertake political action.

These three goals are the expression of a value orientation. The objective of this educational project is to impart a fundamental orientation from the standpoint of Social Democracy: How can Social Democracy be described today? What are its most important objectives? And what concrete policies are associated with these objectives? Even beyond this value orientation, the objectives also relate to the central concern of political education itself. The project deals with the development of democratic attitudes and a desire to participate in the process. Participants should be able to utilise the educational opportunities provided by the *ASD* to bolster their ability to critically examine political processes while facilitating their active and successful integration therein. Participant's skills in democratic action should also be strengthened.

The target group is comprised of dedicated individuals in voluntary political and business positions, intermediaries in political communication and political leaders at all levels. In other words, this project has been directed at a relatively large group of people, including such individuals as members of the works councils at chemicals groups, politically active university students and chairpersons of state parliamentary parties.

What skills are required? – Surveying potential participants

The Politische Akademie (Political Academy) of the *FES* wanted to develop an educational project with the aforementioned goals, yet it was not clear whether there would be significant demand for a value-oriented, programmatic educational project, nor did they know what specific expertise the participants would be looking for. As a result, in November 2006 initial outlines of the content and concepts for this academy were drawn up and presented to potential participants as part of a systematic survey conducted to determine their interests and needs. The number of responses – 429, which equates to a response rate of greater than 30% – demonstrated a high level of interest, while also providing clear indications of how these seminars should be designed.

"The seminars should be very concrete, and allow for the development of feasible concepts based on the vision of "Social Democracy" in the first quarter of the 21st century." "It is essential that the discussion of values be linked to the concrete political objectives whose realisation in the everyday political sphere and in governmental action is to be achieved." These were two quite typical responses from this survey. Answers to various questions, some of them (partially) open-ended, regarding the seminar concept and the content of interest to them can best be summed up with: "Theory is great – but it has to be relevant in actual practice." The overwhelming majority of potential participants demonstrate a great deal of interest in theoretical and value-oriented principles of political action, showing that a clear orientation vis-à-vis fundamental political issues is a core area of interest. At the same time, this value orientation should always be linked to concrete actions in order that it can provide standards by which participants are able to evaluate their own political activities. The following comment is a typical expression of such sentiments: "The seminars should develop evaluation criteria for practical politics and examine the individual decisions (e.g. healthcare reform, tax policy) in light of the principles of Social Democracy."

Taken together, the requirements of participants as identified through this survey and the objectives of the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* demonstrate that the expertise to be provided at the *Akademie für Soziale Demokratie* can best be described as the skills of democratic orientation and action. On the one hand, the seminars offer participants the opportunity to clearly describe the ideas of Social Democracy, to differentiate these from those of other political movements and to classify individual policies in light of this information, yet the orientation that is thus gained can also serve as an inspiration to increase political involvement, or to further develop political action in order that it is better directed and more effective.

What is Social Democracy? – Content

An educational programme which intends to teach skills in orientation and action pertaining to the fundamental themes of Social Democracy must by definition confront the decisive and difficult question: What is Social Democracy? The following two exclusions are of help in trying to define this concept:

- Firstly, Social Democracy is not a rigidly defined or unchanging set of values; instead, it is something which must be continually renegotiated and delineated anew.
- Secondly, Social Democracy is a set of political values which goes above and beyond the political programme of any single political entity such as a party.

Even so, the fundamental documents and declarations of principles of individual parties such as the SPD and international party groups such as the Socialist International or the SPE naturally offer important points of reference for describing what it is that characterises Social Democracy. In addition, current academic debates also have their place in the description of Social Democracy. Of particular importance here are the works of *Thomas Meyer* on the theory and practice of Social Democracy (*Meyer* 2005, 2006), as well as the concrete analysis of Social Democratic policies (e.g. *Merkel et al.* 2006).

If an attempt is made using political documents and scholarly findings as a basis from which to find a definition of Social Democracy for the work of this academy, then a concise form of this would be as follows: Social Democracy is the equitable realisation of the core values of freedom, equality and solidarity, and of effective positive and negative freedoms.

This definition forms the basis for the content of the academy's seminar modules and is integral to all seven seminars now on offer. A seminar entitled "Grundlagen der Sozialen Demokratie" (Principles of Social Democracy) explores this fundamental definition in greater depth, while six other seminars examine what this fundamental orientation means in actual political practice for such

fields of Social Democracy as "Sozialstaat" (The Social State), "Globalisierung" (Globalisation), "Wirtschaft" (The Economy) etc. (cf. www.fes-soziale-demokratie.de/seminarangebote.php).

When and where are these skills taught? – Times and locations

When and where can the specified concepts best be taught, and what is the best manner in which to discuss these materials while also making the greatest possible effort to take the needs of participants into account? The written study conducted in advance was able to offer decisive guidance in this regard as well. Preferences for the time frame were particularly clear, with more than 90% of respondents stating that weekend seminars would be best. This conclusion was repeated with similar clarity for evaluations that were carried out while the project was underway. Seminars during the week were thus out of the question, and seminars were instead offered from Friday at 6:00 p.m. to Sunday at 1:00 p.m.

The choice of times also helped with the choice of seminar locations, for most of those targeted by the academy are short on time, meaning that long journeys would be an additional hindrance with regard to attending the seminar. As a result, the seminars are held locally throughout Germany. At present, for example, Würzburg, Bonn, Leipzig and Berlin can be found in the academy's annual programme.

How are these skills taught? – Methodology

The basic principle in all methodological considerations is the "Beutelsbach Consensus" (1977), whose importance for the educational work undertaken by the *FES* has been described in detail (*FES* 2005) and to which only a reference will be made here: The *Überwältigungsverbot* pertains – in other words, there shall be no form of indoctrination; controversial content shall be accepted ("things which are controversial in the worlds of science or politics must also be presented as such in the learning situation"); and the principle that participants should be able to independently identify and represent their interests shall be followed in the learning process. When designing the methodological arrangement of the ASD in particular, considerations were characterised by a number of challenges:

- 1) The broad scope of the target group gives rise to heterogeneous participant structures (e.g. with regard to educational background, age or profession, as well as participants' experiences with, and knowledge of, Social Democracy).
- 2) The range of topics covered by the seminars is relatively broad, e.g. "Globalisierung und Soziale Demokratie" (Globalisation and Social Democracy).
- 3) At approx. 16 seminar hours, on the other hand, the time frame is relatively constrained.
- 4) Orientation and practical knowledge cannot be prescribed; instead, participants must be able to acquire, experience, conceive and live it themselves.
- 5) Attempts to provide both theory and practice are fraught with difficulty.

In order to deal with these challenges, a complex mix of methods must be developed. The exchange of experience, theoretical inputs, discussion and the elaboration of shared standpoints in heterogeneous groups must be combined methodically such that the objectives of Social Democracy can be put to open discussion.

To accomplish this, scholarly presentations – things which are often banished from adult education, yet have been greeted very positively by participants in our seminars – have always constituted a part of the seminars. Even so, much more emphasis is placed on methods that are characterised less by input, and more by their ability to activate participants, promote their involvement and integrate them into groups. Examples include working groups which are followed by a presentation and

discussion (usually with textual input), simulations, exercises and working in teams of two. These forms of work have proven their worth as a response to the aforementioned challenges – often in multiple ways:

- 1) Group work not only allows participants to become aware of their varying experiences with socialisation and education, but also renders their varying expectations transparent. Differing levels of existing knowledge are also utilised to promote mutual support.
- 2) The procedure of dividing work and assigning it to individual working groups, after which the results are consolidated, makes it possible to cover broad themes within a limited amount of time.
- 3) By discussing various experiences with Social Democracy and comparing different perspectives, it is possible – together with the support of additional inputs (texts, contributions by the seminar leader etc.) – to generate growing orientation pertaining to the fundamental themes of Social Democracy.
- 4) The exchange of practical experiences, group work, the provision of training in methods of argumentation and communication in various roles and the analysis and evaluation of individual policies all serve to increase the practical expertise of participants.
- 5) Group members' varying professional and political backgrounds help to promote the integration of theory and practice. An example of this is the exchange conducted by a JUSO (Young Socialists) university group leader studying business administration with a works council chairperson on the subject of protection against dismissal.

Who does this? – People

When it comes to selecting personnel, great attention is also paid to the overarching objective of teaching the theory and practice of Social Democracy in a manner suitable to the participants. Seminar leaders at the academy are not only distinguished by their outstanding teaching skills and knowledge of the field, but also by their practical experience with Social Democracy. The role they are playing is an important one, as they must serve as experts who are able to contribute their knowledge and expertise, while also functioning as moderators organising and configuring the learning and group processes.

Two other groups play an instructional role in these seminars. Academics – referred to as the "academic staff of the academy" – provide an overview of the theme from a scholarly perspective on the first evening of the seminar. Instructors include such individuals as *Prof. Dr. Gesine Schwan*, *Prof. Dr. Thomas Meyer* and *Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Merkel* (cf. www.fes-soziale-demokratie.de/lehrkoerper.php). Political practitioners are invited to take part on the second evening of the seminar, where politicians discuss practical approaches for action with the participants. Political contacts to date have included Dr. Angelica Schwall-Düren, Erhard Eppler, Hannelore Kraft and Ute Vogt. Each of these groups has an important role to play: while the academics impart a theoretical foundation, the politicians explain the practical ramifications, offering potential points of connection for establishing identity. This ensures that the seminars also promote exchange between the worlds of academia and politics while fostering an understanding of political action.

What is achieved? – Evaluation

The question as to how the effectiveness of political education can be measured has repeatedly been the subject of debates concerning youth and adult education (cf. *PPB* 2006, *AB* 1/08). This question becomes particularly complex when it is not organisational or practical skills such as rhetoric or the ability to control processes that are at issue, but democracy skills. It is not our intention to strive for

an answer here; instead, we wish simply to describe the instruments used at *ASD* for evaluation and their results, or, more specifically, on researching the effectiveness of our seminars with regard to the skills being taught. Evaluation measures such as cost controlling or other similar tools that are employed in the interests of optimising the utilisation of resources are not being presented.

As a new project, it was of decisive importance that the product being offered be subjected to critical examination in order to provide a basis for further development, which is why there is no measure, seminar or publication of the *ASD* that was not evaluated.

Quantitative surveys

Each time a measure was carried out, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in which individual aspects of the seminar were evaluated (e.g. location and time, methods, knowledge and methodological skills of the seminar leader etc.), general appraisals made (e.g. "How would you rate your learning success?", "How would you rate the seminar as a whole?") and personal information provided. The data thus obtained has been extremely positive, for example: On a scale from 1 (high) to 5 (low), most of the participants in 2007 and 2008 rated their learning success as either 1 (18%) or 2 (66%). Answers to the question "Would you recommend this seminar to others?" were also worthy of note, with 95% of participants in 2007 and 2008 saying they would recommend it to others, 5% saying they would do so with reservations, and no one at all stating that they would not recommend it.

As tempting as it might be to see these welcome results as a sign that nothing further need be done, this would be a mistake. This data is important to the further development of these seminars, yet this data is of only limited importance when it comes to evaluating the concrete effectiveness of the project, i.e. the question as to whether participants' orientation and practical skills have actually increased.

Qualitative survey

A variety of methods are also used to obtain qualitative data, e.g. through open questions in questionnaires issued upon the end of the event, oral and written feedback exercises and one-on-one discussions. In one instance, upon the end of a measure the participants were queried using a guideline-supported interview conducted by a social researcher. Information obtained in this manner must also be subjected to critical examination, for subjective distortions arising from social desirability or strategic truths may arise in this context, yet this data allows us to more reliably estimate the effectiveness of these seminars. These surveys show that a significant proportion of participants regularly highlight the orientation knowledge they have gained: "Clearer idea of the core values of Social Democracy"; "Clearly distinguishing Social Democracy from the Conservatives and the Left Party"; and "Finally I am once again able to say what Social Democracy stands for" are typical of such comments. The majority also offer very positive evaluations when it comes to practical skills, e.g.: "I have acquired some good arguments"; "I am now better able to justify why things that simply felt right in the past are actually right"; and "I really feel like being active in this field again." With practical skills in particular, qualitative surveys also provide ideas on where we can develop in future, as when such things as "more practical solution approaches on location" are demanded".

Long-term observation

Valuable ideas for the evaluation of political education can also be drawn from long-term biographical studies (cf. *Ahlheim/Heger* 2006, 176 ff). In the case of the *ASD*, for example, the observation of socio-political "career paths" can be quite useful when trying to determine whether

participants' democratic orientation and practical skills are sufficient. In spite of the fact that the project has only been running for two years, initial results are very positive, although here too, manifold methodological problems inhibit the assignment of one-dimensional causations (to what should socio-political career success be ascribed? Political education might be a variable here, and numerous other influences are also conceivable.)

What comes next? - Outlook

If the project were to be evaluated now, after two years, it would be given positive marks overall. A new, value-oriented educational opportunity is generating increasing demand, and the results of evaluations have been decidedly positive. At the same time, a number of ways in which this project can be further refined have also been identified. In addition to the continuous updating of seminar content, efforts to expand the ASD in three areas have been launched:

1) Diversification: Additional formats have been developed to supplement the seminars in order to reach new target groups. Various conferences have been developed especially for top political players, for example, which make allowances for their scarcity of time; these also help to promote the further refinement of the academy's curriculum and offer additional training to seminar leaders.

2) Blended learning: In order to conduct follow-up for the seminars, an online area was created which is only open to the participants of ASD events, offering information and opportunities for interaction in order to strengthen the events held at the academy.

3) Books on Social Democracy: ASD publishes books for each seminar module in which the key content and controversies pertaining to the seminar themes are presented and dealt with didactically. These not only facilitate preparation for the seminar, but also help participants to digest the results afterwards, promoting an independent approach to the theme in question (www.fes-soziale-demokratie.de/lesebucher.php).

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