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How to Deal with Party Politics at School?

[Parteilpolitik in der Schule?]

A little rebellion now and then...is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government. The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all.

[Thomas Jefferson]

Might the teacher's political point of view not have an impact on his pupils concerning the way he is going to deal with current political issues? According to the above discussed caricature [interpreting a political caricature is the previous case Engelhardt discusses, HL], this neither caused any difficulties nor did it have a negative effect in a political sense. Hence, whatever political party the teacher might belong to or favor, it should not have an effect on the way this caricature is interpreted or evaluated.

However, what happens if domestic political affairs become a subject of discussion within a lesson? No doubt it is evident that these discussions are good and necessary, but pupils will not be satisfied with that as such. They want to know which side is actually right or, at least more righteous: either the one or the other. Does a teacher not have to pronounce either for or against a side, and, will his way of thinking not always give a subjective perspective on his most favorable party? Can this fact be prevented at all? Further on if, apparently, this issue could not be prevented, do we have to accept that the so-called *principle of actuality* ["Aktualitätsprinzip"] is obsolete?

Considering the case that the teacher might be able to evade his political point of view – however, is not the mere decision of discussing a certain issue in his lessons a subjective one? Even though he might not be conscious of it, is he not going to favor those affairs which will shed a rather positive light on the party he favors? Clearly spoken: Will not a *CDU* (Christian Democratic Union)-orientated teacher have more trouble in discussing the *Spiegel*-affair than a teacher who favors more the *SPD* (Social Democratic Party) or *FDP* (Free Democratic Party)? Moreover, will he not – in order to ease his conscience – try to persuade himself of the fact that the lessons learned are not likely to be developed according to this subject matter but rather to another topic?

Asking such questions means affirming. Yet, do we have to ask the questions, at all?

For instance, a teacher steps into his classroom in order to teach an art lesson. The 15 year-old secondary school pupils are awaiting him – the latest edition of the weekly magazine *Spiegel* lies on the table in front of more or less half of them; nobody is prepared for an art lesson. Nothing about it is supposed to be provocative – a discussion about the *Spiegel*-affair is

considered as more vital than an art lesson. This has been a result of their teacher's way of "spoiling" his pupils concerning discussions about political issues: As soon as anything occurred, which attracted public attention, he did not hesitate to answer their questions. However, they have not been spoiled but moreover have been used to talk about those issues particularly with him, rather than with other adults who have refused to discuss with them so far. ("This is not suitable for a child of your age, you lack the knowledge to understand the issue", and so on). Although, it is supposed to be a generalization to assume that all pupils always ask for a discussion on current issues, it is said: as soon as pupils recognize that their teacher might be a sparring partner – whom they do not find anywhere else – their interest and awareness in mass media and information increases significantly.

Now, how to raise interest? Talk about the world's issues, since your pupils are part of this world! As one learns English only, where English is spoken, and mathematics, where something is calculated, one will only start to become interested in politics, where politics take place. Obviously – Heinrich's [medieval king] *Walk to Canossa* or *Bismarck's Opus*, the great issues of politics -, those have been dealt with at school for ages. However, the small cases of political parties such as lacking concepts, fighting jealousy or, their revengefulness and those subtle aspects of humanity?

Genuinely, these characteristics are closely related to our fortune of today and tomorrow. Therefore, I have to learn one important aspect: Firstly, before I am allowed to discuss and participate in current issues – which everyone does unconsciously, e.g. while having a conversation with one's neighbor. Secondly, before I will have an influence on those issues, which are meant to be the public opinion and henceforth this opinion is supposed to have a larger effect on today's policy than it has in general: I must have learned to consciously take a closer look. The skillful way of looking – which could be seen as a piece of art -, is a politi-

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cal-related act of collecting facts, of becoming mature and involved in order to judge and therefore willing to have an influence on decision-making: what should have a larger impact on a lesson in politics than this? Although newspapers are a *primer* for those who start to look out for, observe and evaluate politics, these at the same time misuse current issues in order to make a mockery of everyday politics.

Not everything that is related to current political issues is suitable for school. Therefore, we have to decide which topic we favor according to the above-mentioned principles. For instance, *Spiegel-affair*, *Cuba crisis*, *Telephone-affair*, elections or a strike that affects pupils and parents – should I exclude those topics from my lessons because my pupils are not “mature” enough for it? Or, considering these topics, do they not contribute to the pupils’ maturity? Further on, if school does not talk about that in particular – who else could explain it to them? Which other institution than school could filter the huge amount of information for these adolescents?

It is said, that it would appeal to more teachers to accept responsibility for this, if they saw the opportunity to teach these issues in a proper way, so to speak, bound hand and foot, with a clearly stated beginning and an ending. This, in particular, is seldom successful at a start; for instance, in terms of methodological aspects that might or might not be suitable for this topic or, because of the necessity to improvise hopelessly. Every failure, and, to be overwhelmed by the issue seems to prove that “there is no way to deal with *this* in a lesson”; pupils lack all prerequisites. This is the reason why we will focus on the *Spiegel-affair* and considerate it as a topic of a lesson. The affair should set an example, i.e. the developed model based on the case must be – in a wider sense – transferred to almost every issue of domestic politics.

The following outlines of lesson-planning and lessons themselves, which dealt with that topic, date back to approximately three to four weeks after the *Spiegel-affair* had happened: There was no need for a warm-up in class, due to the fact that the word *Spiegel* already triggered plenty of utterances. As far as the above-mentioned teacher is concerned, she provided a brief, almost objective introduction on the case according to the known facts of the affair. The pupils’ sympathy was remarkable, they asked for more and more details on the circumstances. However, the teacher seemed not to be satisfied after she had finished the lesson. She asked herself, “What was the pupils’ sympathy all about? Wouldn’t the pupils have followed any other presentation as attentively as they did, regardless of which political or other subject matter?” In addition, the teacher had to ask herself if she had had an impact on their political knowledge at all, and, if she, although she tried not to, had not had presented the topic from a rather subjective point

of view. Had she not excluded important contextual information due to her refined (“didactic”) reduction of the topic? Hence, the most unease feeling was undoubtedly related to how she should carry on after that outline? Of course, pupils discussed it, added new details, asked, considered, stated. Eventually, after an hour the lesson was over and the topic finished. Regarding the case, did this recent discussion really cover the most important political aspects? Moreover, how should she check the pupils’ comprehension?

We will now focus on a more detailed analysis of a best practice example. The matter of concern deals with the so-called *Ahlers Case* which had been the epicenter of public attention at that point of time.

First Lesson:

The teacher of a ninth grade asked to take notes of the facts, without saying a word about it during the lesson. The pupils worked on the task for almost fifteen minutes. This was the weakest work of a student:

1. Konrad Ahlers – editor of the *Spiegel*
 2. Ahlers was arrested with a woman in a hotel room by night.
 3. He sat in prison.
 4. He came back to Germany placed under arrest, protected by the police.
 5. He was arrested at Frankfurt Airport.
 6. Arrest in Spain was illegal.
- After fifteen minutes one of the pupils, who wrote down most of the facts, took the lead of the discussion: He read out aspect by aspect while his colleagues agreed or disagreed; they reached an agreement on the final statement as a group. Those who did not mention one of the key points added it to their notes. By the end of the lesson every pupil had written down the same amount of key points. The above mentioned six key points of the weakest pupil were developed to seventeen due to the moderation; it was added:
7. It would only be allowed to arrest him, if he committed a murder or another crime.
 8. A telegram was sent to Spain.
 9. Signed by Interpol; this signature was forged because Strauß sent it.
 10. German Federal Criminal Office (= FBI) says: “Arrest in Spain is illegal”
 11. Strauß had lied to Bundestag (= congress) and to the Germans.
 12. He made use of the rights of the minister for foreign affairs.²
 13. He placed arrest on Ahlers. However, this was only allowed by the minister of justice Stammberger.
 14. No apologies for his action.
 15. Therefore: government crisis
 16. FDP (Free Democratic Party, Germany) ministers resigned.

2 Strauß was minister of defense.



17. New government election should take place.

Purposely, the teacher asked for a discussion leader among the pupils, because he did not want to interfere in the first place. This strategy minimized the risk to correct the answers immediately or, to avoid that some of the pupils might fear that they could say something wrong. The result of the lesson: The pupils gained knowledge of several facts without the teacher's input.

Second lesson

The pupils had to prove their key notes by articles published in newspapers and weekly magazines. Afterwards, they had to study the facts that were given in the press releases in order to judge their key points right or wrong. In addition, uttering such as "I am sure, I heard it on the radio the day before yesterday" was accepted as long as nobody opposed.

Result of the lesson: The pupils learned the difference between facts on the one hand, and, assumptions and judgments on the other hand. The facts had been proven by the collected material.

Third lesson

This time, the pupils should find out more about the assumptions made during the last lesson, such as: the government wants to destroy the *Spiegel*. Now, in the third lesson, the discussions became lively and class routine was broken up. However, those teachers who oppose to the *principle of actuality* believe that every lesson that deals with current affairs is as chaotic as this one seems to be. In the classroom, rumors and suspicions, based on discussions out of school, clashed. Such a confrontation usually happens in those cases where we talk about opinions and not about facts. Young people have to make such an experience, too – here, they got the opportunity. The teacher himself was asked to pass on a statement afterwards: "Nobody is able to resist any of those assumptions; but, it is not worth to argue about it – in a couple of days, after the investigations in the Bundestag are finished, we will know more about it and can talk about facts again."

This class needed not to watch the investigation in the Bundestag together: more than half of them listened to it at home. The next lessons should now deal with this investigation, which had been recorded partly by the teacher.

Forth and Fifth Lesson

Where had our assumptions been proven by facts, where had these been disapproved? However, the most important thing seemed to be, that we got a detailed view inside the structure and tasks of the parliament. Moreover, they showed us how to control power; governance, which has to be followed by every party because any party and any politician is not free to resist the misuse of power. Further on, in particular

young people should know about this abuse of power – that had happened in the discussed case.

In fact, this aspect – to come to power – is one of the most vital aspects of democratic, political education. Where, if not in school, agree pupils on the importance of a politically strong opposition! However, it is essential that the teacher does not construct a case SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) contra CDU (Christian Democratic Union, Germany). Moreover, he should establish this case as an example in order to show that power needs to be controlled. It is not about victory or defeat of the one or the other party – it is about the victory of our democratic base. Therefore, these two lessons should be considered to gain knowledge of the institution – in fact, these two lessons are supposed to be taught as such: this sets the pupils' minds to it forever.

Now, it is obvious why we have refused to consider knowledge as something that has to be learned by heart: If pupils do not realize, why constant confrontation between government and opposition is necessary to protect misuse of power and, why democracy without parties is no democracy – then, how should this be provided by a canon of knowledge, which had been learned by heart? In particular, children develop deeper understanding on this purely by talking about the *Spiegel*-affair in school, and not because they are guided or even manipulated.

Sixth lesson

This lesson should show how the former lessons set an example for teaching. In order to do that we do not focus on current affairs such as *Cases Augstein, Ahlers, Strauß* anymore, but concentrate on the underlying concept: The existence of a major and peculiar difference between the legitimate need for security of the state (national security) on the one hand, and the legitimate need of the citizen to be informed about everything that has happened in the state on the other. If we do not oppose to the need of the state to declare everything as top secret, any information would be blocked. However, if we do not oppose to the individual need of the citizen to receive as much information as possible, any reasonable state secrets could not be kept. Both cases will harm democracy: Concerning the former, democracy will deny the freedom of information – concerning the latter, democracy can be established under specific circumstances. With regard to these, secrets could be kept because otherwise this democracy could not be defended militarily against foreign enemies. Between the necessity of the freedom of information and the equal necessity of secrecy has to be reached a compromise. Yet, assumption of an agreement that is set "in the middle" is an illusion. Nobody is able to tell where this middle is situated. Further on, the formula "As much freedom as possible, but also as much secrecy as necessary" will not



lead to a solution. We are already successful, if pupils recognize these different tendencies. We put an emphasis on this assumption if we deal with both cases and show which impacts these might have on democracy: Firstly, the claim for freedom of information will distract the claim for secrecy if it is maintained in an absolute and radical way. Secondly, the claim for need of secrecy will also distract the freedom of information if it is maintained in the same radical way. (As far as the *Telephone*-affair in 1961 is concerned, this antinomy becomes even more obvious.)

As long as pupils learn that neither the one nor the other extreme claim will result in a solution, but moreover, will be dangerous to the basis of democracy, they might realize that only one single law can solve these different interests between two claims in order to conduct political activities. If this law carries out either more needs of information or more needs of national security – this is no decision of “right” or “wrong”, since either the one or the other decision is legitimate for democracy: The imagination of the elected parties, which claim is more legitimate, and, which have the power to govern, have an impact on what the law resembles; apparently, the decision is based on a “more” or “less” concerning the freedom of information or the national security, respectively. It will never be based on a “neither-nor-solution” for or against these claims. The reason for that can be found in the basic law or in the constitution.

Afterwards, the pupils might want to argue for or against a “more right” or “less right” law; the one side will favor more freedom of information, the other side will favor more national security – the pupils should get the chance to discuss this issue. Thus, teachers should try to show them how pointless such discussions might become, according to their age. This is the edge of a mind of fourteen or fifteen year-olds. The mission is complete when they accepted and experienced the difficulty of the problem and how those contradictions differ in reality. Teachers should state that even if they reach the age to be allowed to vote, they are under an illusion to believe that they could have an influence on these decisions: Which party they ever might vote for, hoping that this would favor more freedom of information compared to another – as soon as the former governs, it will, regardless of its former principles, now favor more national security. In contrast, the latter party, now opposition, will force the government to introduce a law, which will have a beneficial impact on freedom of information. This is not meant to be disloyal to former principles or even opportunism; it is the intrinsic nature of government and opposition.

In conclusion, if we succeed in transferring higher politics into an example such as the *Spiegel*-affair, then we are able to cope with any allegation of bringing party politics into the classroom because of the

principle of actuality. This allegation has only little impact on teaching. Yet, it will be encouraged by taking a view on the next lesson.

Seventh lesson:

Meanwhile, an hour of investigation at the Bundestag on the behavior of the minister of defense (Strauß) cleared up the situation. On the one hand, some claimed to force him to resign. Alternatively, the others want him to be rehabilitated in the interest of national security. In the classroom, pupils feel uneasy; they want to go beyond the importance of the discussed example. Now, after they have gained deeper knowledge of it, they want to know more about this unique case: They want to allude to the “Case Strauß”. They want to be informed of what will happen to the minister or, furthermore to the government? The teacher cannot provide an answer. They ask: What could happen? The teacher advises them to consult the basic law and in particular, to search for articles §§ 62-69, called “federal government”.

According to the advice, something amazing occurred: The pupils read the basic law, not because it is part of a lesson and they have to read it by no reason, but because they want to know something particularly, and the answers that are given in §§ 64-67 become a part of their knowledge without the teacher’s ambitions. On the contrary, if they had acquired this knowledge only a year ago by learning it by heart, they would not be able to reactivate it for a test now.

Finally, according to the following step, the teacher might finish the sequence: Everyone observes how the case develops during the next weeks. How to observe correctly has been learned before! However, the pupils want to know after all, what their teacher thinks regarding the case: Should Strauß retire or not? The more teachers tried to be as objective as possible, the more explicit they can now reveal their opinion by the end of the investigation. – Provided that they do this explicitly as their private opinion, and provided that they allow other opinions, or even provoke these. All opinions exist parallel and without the attempt to harmonize them, especially, if they are (hopefully) controversial and as long as they have been argued correctly. Extreme opinions need to be discussed or corrected according to the above-mentioned effects.

Further, the teacher needed not to guide his pupils through the following process of the affair; he enabled his pupils of how to take a closer look, a political related skillful way of observing. Actually, it is only necessary to spend a couple of hours on the case if changes in the government take place and a trial is stood.

Those overlook the impact of the exemplified character of our picture, who either state: “Yes, I can consider holding a couple of social study lessons once a year like that”, or those, who understand this kind of



lesson as something that occurs or occurs not because not always is a *Spiegel*-affair waiting for us. In fact, arguments – if not always compared to that affair – happen daily as soon as we have a glimpse into the newspapers. It is not the importance for “big politics” that counts, but it is essential that the matter of concern produces discernment.

The basis of our work were the following discernments: “Political power can be misused – Democracy without parties does not work – Permanent discussions between government and opposition prevent us from dictatorship – We face a tremendous danger of freedom as long as not enough people feel responsible for public welfare – The liberal democracy relies on the fact that everybody feels responsible for everybody and that as many as possible have the obligation to act responsible.”

According to those statements, it is not limited to the *Spiegel*-affair to produce these discernments, but basically every political discussion that catches the pupils’ interest due to the fact that it will have an impact on their lives. It seems to be pointless to show which knowledge had been gained within these no more than ten lessons: operation of the parliament, task of the president of the Bundestag, the meaning of an hour of investigation in the parliament, the opposition’s role, parliamentary committees and their work, Articles §§ 62-69 of the basic law, different courts that were involved in the case and so on and so forth. But, this knowledge and comprehension are not required to be met by pupils in order to discuss an actual problem – if this would be the case, we might have to wait until doomsday. This knowledge will be conveyed at the same time as the problem will be displayed. Those who criticize that we will need more time to explain the opposition’s role and importance only than we need for the *Spiegel*-affair in whole, should consider this: Even though the opposition’s identity is explained in a his-

torical way and covers the beginnings of democracy – what opposition is meant to be and what impact it has, can only be clearly displayed through the current case. Furthermore, teachers can spend hours on well-meant indoctrinations to show that public opinion has much more influence on politics today compared to the past: However, if you do not explain how public opinion influences a concrete case, your pupils might not understand your underlying theory.

Social science lessons are training for political thinking. Complaints are based on apolitical thinking that has been heard, according to the *Spiegel*-affair. Complaints such as Germany “seems to be at that point again” were heard, which is supposed to be a comparison to Nazi-Germany. Here, the incompetence of many well-meant, but in the end apolitical people occurs: The incompetence to see the difference “between governments, which rely on law, but sometimes violate it, and regimes, which basically deny the prevalence of law in favor of pure usefulness or subjective force”.

How our democratic state works, and that it is healthy as long as public opinion and press are free – to show this, was the aim of our lessons. From that point of view the *Spiegel*-affair was not a scandal – it would have been a scandal for a democrat, if a not informed public and an idle opposition had not had an influence on its development.

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