

Five hypotheses on a social challenge for the future

1. I was in Tokyo when I was asked if I would be available to speak with you today. I was visiting Japan and the People's Republic of China with Chancellor Merkel and a government and parliamentary delegation. I accepted the invitation although I was aware that I would not have much time to prepare for our discussion. But you were interested in hearing my views, and I would like to hear yours. So many thanks for the invitation.

There are more pleasant topics than right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism in Germany. But these are part of daily life. The recent events in the small town of Mügeln in Saxony show that only too clearly. Perhaps you have been following the story. At a local festival in Mügeln, eight Indians were suddenly attacked by a mob and chased through the town. I'll come back to this xenophobic incident in a moment.

You will be hearing a very critical analysis from me. So let me start by making one thing equally clear: the conditions in the Federal Republic of Germany in 2007 cannot, in my view, be equated with the conditions in the Weimar Republic in 1932/33 – politically, economically, or socially. Except for one question: how stable and robust are our democracy and our constitution?

2. Let me begin by recounting one particular episode – an episode which had some repercussions. Early this year, a Jewish school and children's nursery in Berlin were defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti. Someone had written the words "*Juden raus*" – "Jews out!" – on the facade of the building. SS runes were daubed on the children's toys. When we assembled in the synagogue for a prayer service to show our solidarity after this incident, one of the rabbis asked: "How do I explain this to the children?"

I am trained to work with children: I have studied education and worked as a teacher. Even so, I had no answer to this simple question. I was lost for words. I later recounted this story, exactly as it had happened, at a meeting with the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies. I subsequently read a commentary in the Jewish newspaper, the "*Jüdische Allgemeine*", which went something like this: so this is what things have come to. Even politicians are dodging the issue.

The reason why I have started by recounting this episode and its repercussions is that I really don't have any ready-made answers – and also because I believe that sometimes, even politicians have a right to be lost for words. But the author of the commentary was wrong in one respect: I'm not dodging the issue. And even though I can't provide a road map for a solution, I can at least describe what is **not** a solution. And that's better than nothing.

3. For years, I have been asking the Federal Government the same question every month: How many offences and violent crimes with an extreme right background have been registered in Germany? The findings are alarming. On average, 2.5 offences of this nature are recorded nationwide every hour, and 2.5 violent crimes are registered every day. These statistics are "provisional" – and they understate the case. Cross-references with other sources show that the real figures are two to three times higher.

So the number of victims of extreme right violence is correspondingly higher as well. That means that once again, right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism pose a real threat to people's lives and physical integrity here in Germany, and have done for some time. It is proven beyond doubt that in the ten years from 1990 to 2000 alone, at least 100 people died as a result of such violence. An up-to-date list would certainly be longer. But that list doesn't exist – at least not officially.

That brings me to my **first hypothesis**: the dangers posed by right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism are still being underestimated and played down. For as long as I've been a Member of the German Bundestag, there has never been a genuine and serious debate on this issue with any tangible outcomes. There have been appeals, there have been demonstrations and there have been action programmes. But there has never even been a comprehensive analysis of the situation.

4. The target of my criticism here is mainstream politics and also the various relevant media, not the many civil society initiatives or the dedicated academics working on this issue. Numerous surveys, sociological studies and well-founded opinions are available which could be classed as policy advice and should be taken seriously. So far, however, they have generally fallen on infertile ground. But we ignore them at our peril.

This brings me to my **second hypothesis**: right-wing extremism is generally treated as a domestic policy or judicial issue. That is a short-sighted approach. It is short-sighted because it focusses on repression

rather than prevention. It is short-sighted because it ignores all the factors which contribute to right-wing extremist views and actions. And it is short-sighted because it absolves society and individuals of their responsibility.

The much-vaunted "strong state" is not an answer to latent right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism. That is partly because the so-called "strong state" is regarded less and less as a democratic, social and just state. People sense this. They are becoming disenchanted with democracy. But that opens the door to the extreme right "comrades" and their nationalist slogans.

5. We see this happening at present in the new federal states in particular. The favourite explanation is that this is one of the legacies of the GDR. Yes, it is, in part. But this is a superficial explanation – as are the responses which invariably follow. Let me give you some examples. Eastern Germany, it is claimed, is suffering from a tolerance deficit. Here's another one: the new federal states lack a courageous civil society. But my own conclusion is far more alarming.

The fact is that in the new federal states, civil society itself is steadily vanishing, especially in rural regions. These regions are becoming depopulated: there are no jobs, and for many people, there is no future. Anyone who can do so flees to the west, leaving the elderly and low-skilled behind. This is a snapshot of the situation – but it describes a real problem which cannot be resolved either by the police or the judicial system.

Many people feel demoralized, increasingly in the western regions of our country as well. They feel powerless to deal with the situation. They want to assert themselves – so they assert themselves by humiliating others. This is not a justification – but it is a clear starting point that is actively exploited by the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD), for example, or the *Kameradschaften*, the informal associations of right-wing extremists.

6. Let me come back to the recent incident in Mügeln. In fact, it is quite typical, on two levels. I'll start with the local level. The mayor of Mügeln promptly responded by denying that there was any right-wing extremism in Mügeln – certainly no organized extremism, and no xenophobia either. Let's just remind ourselves: a mob of 50 people attending a local festival suddenly turned on eight Indians.

I hadn't heard of Mügeln before, so I decided to find out more about it.

Within half an hour, I found out that a few years ago, there had been a youth club in Mügeln which right-wing extremists had taken over and proclaimed a "nationally liberated zone". The NPD polled almost 10 percent of the vote at recent elections. And there is still a mail order company registered in Mügeln which, among other things, supplies music that promotes xenophobic hate.

A mayor who doesn't want to see this really is turning a blind eye to the problem. But the problem lies much deeper. It seems that Mügeln indeed does not have an organized extreme right scene which prepared the ground for the pogrom in the town. Instead, the community itself gave vent, quite spontaneously, to its nationalist feelings. And that's much worse. Yet the mayor still claims that he and his beloved town have been slandered.

7. Let's look now at the second level, namely federal politics. Its response was no better, but followed the usual pattern. First, there was an appalled outcry. This was followed by mutual recriminations by the political parties. As was only to be expected, there was a debate about whether right-wing extremism should be a matter for the Ministry for Family Affairs or the Ministry of the Interior. Then the real issue was sidestepped, with calls for the NPD to be banned at long last.

In other words, the response at federal level was no better than that of the local politicians. The media also reacted as could be expected. There was a burst of outrage, which evaporated after a week. The subject vanished from the headlines and from people's minds. And that brings me to my **third hypothesis**: right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism are still generally being dealt with as separate incidents, not as an ongoing challenge.

Again, I would exempt from this criticism all the projects, coalitions and organizations which wage a daily battle against the extreme right's strategies and practices and which act as positive advocates of tolerance and democracy. But unfortunately, they are not very popular at present. In fact, in the latest federal programme, they were dropped altogether. The task of combating the right has become a matter for the public sector and has been placed in the hands of mayors like Mügeln's.

8. I have talked about Mügeln as a recent example, but in doing so, I have indirectly resorted to a cliché: the cliché that this is an East German issue. The fact is that in the German debate about right-wing extremism, it is generally treated as a marginal, youth or East German issue. And that's wrong. This is a nationwide problem which is deeply embedded in our

society – in east and west. It is present everywhere, all the time.

Some years ago, there was an attempt to introduce dual citizenship in Germany at long last. The Greens were in favour, the SPD seemed inclined to go for it, and my party took the view anyway that it was long overdue. Then the CDU/CSU took to the streets in the west of Germany. They collected signatures, and a great many people came along and asked: "Is this where I can sign a petition against foreigners at long last?" There is evidence that such motives and sentiments exist nationwide.

And here's another similar example: Chancellor Schröder wanted to recruit computer experts from India to work in Germany. The CDU countered with the racist slogan "*Kinder statt Inder!*" – "Children, not Indians!" And now people from India have been attacked in Mügel. There is no direct link – but the politicians who wonder what could have prompted such outrages are often the very ones who lay the fuse that activates this latent racism.

9. My first hypothesis was that the dangers posed by right-wing extremism and racism are still being underestimated. That is dangerous. My second hypothesis was that right-wing extremism is generally treated as a domestic policy or judicial issue. That is short-sighted. My third hypothesis is that right-wing extremism is generally treated as an isolated incident. But that is disproved by the daily reality.

By the way, there is a further strand in the debate. It goes like this: right-wing extremism and racism exist in all the major EU countries – in Austria as well as in France, Italy or Spain – and a stable democracy must be able to cope with it to a certain extent. To my mind, this is a cynical attitude. The fact is that before right-wing extremists become a threat to democracy, they already pose a threat to people.

This argument also underestimates right-wing extremism itself. We know from the NPD that it is pursuing a clear strategy and is doing so very successfully. Its aim is to get into power: first at local level and then countrywide in what it likes to call the "Fourth Reich". We cannot and must not accept this as Central European normality. This is not normality, and it must be condemned.

10. So far, I have described my view of how not to deal with the problem. So my **fourth hypothesis** is this: we need a cross-cutting inter-departmental policy strategy at long last which is based on sound expertise and aims to strengthen civil society. I know this sounds like the usual politicians' cliché, so let me flesh out this rather lifeless phrase with some practical

policy proposals.

We – and by that I mean the Left Party – have been calling for some time for an independent monitoring unit on right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism in Germany, based on the EU model. It could prepare rigorous analyses – that's important. For without these rigorous analyses, we cannot develop intelligent strategies to combat right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism.

I talked at the start about statistics which understate the case. I believe there are two reasons why this is happening. In many cases, the extreme right background to a crime is often not recognised in the local investigation, or is deliberately denied because politicians are worried about the image or economic attractiveness of their municipality or the country as a whole. An independent monitoring office would not face these constraints.

11. My second proposal is based on my fourth hypothesis, namely the call for a cross-cutting inter-departmental approach. I have suggested appointing a Bundestag commissioner for democracy and tolerance, who would work with the Federal Chancellery and coordinate all activities designed to combat right-wing extremism and racism – this is also to ensure that we break away from the limited focus on domestic policy and justice here.

I believe that all departments of government have a responsibility to tackle right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism in all policy areas: education, the municipalities, European policy, culture, social policy, sports policy, financial policy and so on. That is why we also need a new structural approach which is conducive to this comprehensive strategy.

Both proposals, incidentally, are very much in line with a recent initiative by the Moses Mendelssohn Center and numerous non-government organizations. They are suggesting that the Federal Government publish an annual report on anti-Semitic activities. Both of the new institutions – the independent monitoring unit and the commissioner for democracy and tolerance – could be helpful here.

12. I would also like to talk about two other proposals which are currently being discussed. The first concerns a renewed legal effort to outlaw the NPD. In light of experience, I am very sceptical about this. The previous attempt to ban the NPD failed when the Federal Constitutional Court found it impossible to determine which factors supporting a ban related to the NPD itself and which came from police and intelligence service informers within the NPD. This problem is still ongoing.

The second proposal is to organize a democracy summit involving all the relevant groups within society, from politicians to the churches and trade unions. Yes, we could convene this kind of summit – but it wouldn't solve anything. At best, it would provide some sort of impetus and signal our determination to work together to address the challenge of right-wing extremism.

But that would be all, which brings me to my **fifth hypothesis**: in the fight against right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism, an "uprising of decent people" – with those in positions of responsibility soon drifting away, as we witnessed after the attacks on Jewish people in Düsseldorf in 2000 – will no longer help. What we need is a marathon effort by all democrats and a willingness to stay for the long haul.

13. In the last part of my statement, I would like to talk specifically about anti-Semitism. We had two major events in Berlin over the last few days: firstly, the reopening of Germany's largest synagogue in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg, and then the formal opening of the Chabad-Lubavitch Centre in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. Both were rightly hailed as signs of a German future in the new Berlin.

But there are signs of something else as well: we only need to look at daily life. Synagogues are protected with concrete bollards. Jewish children's nurseries need a police guard. Jewish festivals or commemorative events merit the highest security status. And Gideon Joffe has challenged Berliners to see if they are tough enough to wear the kippah for a day in their city.

There is no normality for Jewish people in Germany. And the normality which does exist is anything but reassuring. Berlin defines itself as a cosmopolitan and tolerant city. The diversity of its cultures and religions is promoted as an enrichment and an opportunity. That's the Senate's official policy – and it's experienced by millions of Berliners every day. But daily life is not a carnival of cultures. The situation is more complex than that.

14. There are numerous surveys, studies and research papers on the issue of "anti-Semitism". Some of them were commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, so I don't need to quote any figures to you. Anyway, they are sometimes conflicting, and some of the methods or definitions used to quantify "anti-Semitism" are contentious. But I don't want to pass judgment on any of that today.

However, all the surveys prove one thing: there is a latent anti-Semitism which is fuelled from various sources and which can be activated at any time, even extending to crimes of violence. Again, this applies equally to East and West Germany. And again, just as there can be xenophobia without foreigners, there can also be anti-Semitism without Jews. It seems that these phenomena take on a life of their own in German society.

I realise that it is not just a German phenomenon but is encountered worldwide. But anti-Semitism in Germany still leaves a uniquely bitter aftertaste. Incidentally, that's why, from the early 1990s onwards, I campaigned actively for the monument to the murdered Jews of Europe – and I am pleased to see how much interest it has generated since it opened.

15. But anti-Semitism is a very particular form of hatred of others who are different. It is not only found at the right-wing end of the spectrum. There is massive anti-Semitism in Islamist milieus. It is found on the margins of the left. And it is even found within political parties which regard themselves as very liberal and consider themselves the true party of the centre. I am talking about the FDP.

I recall very clearly how FDP politician Jürgen W. Möllemann launched his "Project 18" as a vote-gathering exercise and, in doing so, exploited anti-Semitic prejudice. Even the name of the project enraged me, for as I'm sure you know, "18" is code used by old and neo-Nazis. It stands for the first and the eighth letter of the German alphabet: "A" and "H", for "Adolf Hitler".

Something that could well have been intentional in Möllemann's case may be a simple lack of awareness in others. I myself always react sensitively to the use of the word "*Mauscheleien*" – which comes from a word meaning "to speak Yiddish", but also meaning "to cheat" – in news broadcasts on the public networks when corruption is uncovered in business or politics. I am no advocate of compulsory literature, but I do think that Victor Klemperer's *The Language Of The Third Reich: Lti, Lingua Tertii Imperii* should be better known that it is at present.

16. The fact is that strange alliances are sometimes emerging. Left-wingers march at pro-Hezbollah demonstrations. Neo-Nazis are joining forces with Muslims who glorify violence. And entirely justified criticism of Israeli policy – in fact, I have criticisms myself – becomes blurred with pure hatred of Jews. I have seen it myself in Berlin. Supposedly clearly defined political camps become fluid, unpredictable, and dangerous.

I recently met with some social workers in Berlin's Neukölln district.

They have formed an association to combat violence and xenophobia. They work actively at local level, where various communities live side by side, where their children go to school and where the parents – if they are not out of work – are employed as greengrocers, pharmacists, teachers, cleaners or in cafés.

They described to me very credibly and based on their own experience how the world's major conflicts are reflected in the young people in the community. There are gangs who define themselves either as pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, and which are increasingly carrying weapons. They lie in wait for each other at night and assault each other. These are 12 to 16-year-olds – the young generation. This is happening in Berlin, a tolerant, cosmopolitan city.

Closing sentence:

I don't have any workable solutions to this either. But as this last example also shows, right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism are not an accident of history, but a political and, above all, a social challenge for the present and the future.