

B... new world

Maybe the head has closed too early. Maybe we are still clinging to what has become established as mythology: Rock 'n' Roll, May 1968, Woodstock and hippie culture, punk...

Not that we don't see the shortcomings: But together with the optimism, the spirit of departure, and the whole cultural scene, in my youth there was probably still hope for a profound change in the world. What can I say: I (and many colleagues I talk to) no longer understand the world. And often that is the first sentence exchanged when you see each other again.

Of course, we don't live in a dictatorship or in a world with fewer opportunities than 50 years ago. But for the first time, we see obvious efforts to suppress opinions or at least remove them from public discussion. Fantasizing, designing futures, speculating, letting your imagination run free today leads into a real minefield. And quickly you end up in social contempt, exclusion. That seems, regardless of whether you say things that might be true, to be the wonder weapon with which the undisciplined crowd can be brought into line.

What shocks me most is what I call a moral reversal. Next to the Gulag and an already often exaggeratedly described "red" threat, the main accusations made against the Soviet system were state-sponsored denunciation, the mistrust sown between parents and children, and the instrumentalization of psychiatry as a tool of oppression. Elements that today, in the democratic West, are found again without hesitation as legitimate actions. Denouncing (to the police or any self-appointed internet police), declaring people crazy ("tin foil hat"), advising children to employ advocates against their parents, all this is today, not even 40 years later, approved without batting an eye.

It is also interesting that, in the same breath, methods that the West used quite transparently and with a certain pride against the communist bloc during the Cold War are now portrayed as criminal and inadmissible. Certainly, Russia, North Korea, China, and Islamist terrorist groups quickly and well understood how to use the internet and social media for their propaganda. Just as the West, 60 years ago and throughout the Cold War, flooded the Eastern bloc with pro-Western media (Radio Free Europe and many others) with superior financial and technical means.

Who won the Cold War, if today the methods of the USSR are spreading here so widely, without (anymore) anyone finding anything wrong with it?

That is a lot to take in for an individual who, until the end of the 1980s, heard a completely different discourse. But that's not all that has changed. Whereas you could previously prove anything with statistics, today it is computer models that can support any claim. Good old Winston Churchill would probably despair at these super statistics, because he wouldn't have the knowledge to falsify them himself. But such models are fed by people who know what they want the bottom line to be.

The ever-increasing modeling of the present and the future is also the basis of a new understanding of science. New technologies were introduced in the past when their risks were acceptable, which did not mean that they were zero. If I just look at the topic of electricity, today we rely on a technology that is not secure, in the hope that the necessary progress (in battery technology) will come at some point and that our choice will then also be economically viable. That is playing va banque with something existentially important like electricity (and only because certain computer models predict a climate crisis for us).

Comparable as a risk technology is the ever-increasing burden of radiation that humans have to bear. Despite knowledge of radiation dangers, more and more new sources are being put into operation without restraint. If you ask about the dangers, you are told they have not yet been researched, as if that fact alone would eliminate the risk. And it's the same with nanotechnology. Despite the danger of asbestos, which was clearly recognized years ago, more and more new tiny particles are being released onto our lungs... even into our toothpaste, sauces and beauty creams.

Another point that makes things difficult for me is the total de-privatization to which we are exposed. Of course, I stand for freedom of opinion and do not want the development of the internet and social media to be influenced, slowed down, controlled, or forbidden. Everyone has a personal responsibility here, how far they want to let these things into their life, how far they want to be influenced, and how they deal with these tools.

However, we lose all our nuances if we play along with these toys. In the GOAT discussion in football (who is the Greatest Of All Time?), I would certainly have argued very drastically in a private conversation with a friend to explain to him why only one can be that, and not held back with destructive judgments about the other. I knew that this happened in private and that you can add a bit more to impress the other person. To a stranger, I would have said how I see the matter... but without spreading much negativity about my second choice. And it would never have occurred to me to pay for a newspaper ad so that the world would know how I see it. In the internet age, this distinction no longer exists: The GOAT discussion splits the football world into two camps, and even people who have nothing to do with the sport have an opinion. And they defend it as if only the demonization and hatred of one would make the other shine in the best light.

We don't need censors, but we would do well to weigh our words more carefully again, both in private and in public.