

WEDELL, MICHAEL: The Berlin Wednesday Social. On the possibilities of conversation in the political circles of Berlin, in:Hake, Joachim | Salman, Elmar | Schneider, Maria-Luise (Eds.): Versammeln. Berliner Erfahrungen. 25 Jahre Katholische Akademie in Berlin, EOS 2015, p. 195-206.

The Berlin Wednesday Social

On the possibilities of conversation in the political circles of Berlin

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1.

Professional dialogue belongs to Berlin's political scene. Whether it is in breakfast meetings hosted by politicians, journalists, scientists or lobbyists in cafés on Berlin's Unter den Linden boulevard, at a parliamentary evening, in official appointments in the ministry, the association, a party and last but not least: the so-called background rounds:

All too often, these conversations are characterised by fast encounters, quick commonplaces on the political situation, a superficial togetherness. And it's also the statements and objections on a panel that often are as predictable as Sicilian puppet theatre: We do not exchange opinions; we stage our positions.

The professional conversation in Berlin's political community is subject to its own rules and strictly follows the Borchardtian razor: "it could be important". Whether it actually is, will then be sounded out casually over wild herb salad or the plat du jour. All too often, the amount of surprise is within safe limits, and so is the knowledge gained sometimes. But there might be an indiscretion in it for the interlocutors, or at least a more elegant expression or a term for what hopefully everybody will think soon. Or we can see a constellation at the next table, whose conversation we don't even have to overhear to be news. This is the hard currency, that we need to keep succeeding as political insiders: the information flows like dry sparkling wine.

2.

Things were quite different for the salon culture! To debate with each other, to simply listen, to grapple with words, to argue in a spirit of mutual respect, to gently shift positions and to reach a better understanding of things – that's what it was about.

The Berlin Wednesday Society met every second Wednesday between 1863 and 1944. It was named "Free society for scientific entertainment". All 16 members were recognised experts in their field of expertise and mostly held special positions in public life. It was not a place to discuss day-to-day politics. At the start of the event, the respective host, a member of the Wednesday Society, gave a lecture from his scientific field before continuing to exchange ideas with the audience over food and drink. The creation of such societies was not uncommon during this time, because "they stood in the tradition of bourgeois enlightenment, when scholarship and entertainment were still linked" (Klaus Scholder).

The Wednesday Society was re-established in 1996 in Berlin by Marion Gräfin Dönhoff and Richard von Weizsäcker following the traditions of the Wednesday Society of 1863. The quality of this society – both, the old and the new Berlin Wednesday Society – and of its debates is still visible in its publications and minutes but especially also in its list of members. In the period from 1863 to 1944, its members included the surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch, the philosopher Eduard Spranger and the physicist Werner Heisenberg. Prominent members of the Wednesday Society since 1996 included Helmut Schmidt, Richard von Weizsäcker, Günter de Bruyn and Wolf Lepenies.

3.

This salon culture cannot simply be transferred to the present. We cannot copy it; but we can try to create something new in its spirit. The Berlin Wednesday Social, founded in 2010, interprets this culture using today's methods and orchestrates it with the media of our time.

The salon does not only take place at the previously determined location at the scheduled time – it is also continued on smart phones – on YouTube, Twitter or live, via “social streaming”. Brain researchers, prime ministers and festival directors, cardinals and ministers – at this salon, they speak, they are asked and they try to answer. We also seek continuity when it comes to facilitating the event, because it is beneficial if the host not only understands the concept, but also embodies it: dialogue is at the focus.

It is still part of the self-concept of the new Wednesday Social to spend “a nice evening” with one another, to enable discussions, offer suggestions and to eat and drink well together – because food is more political than ever, as Dieter Kosslick noted at the 19th Wednesday Social.

4.

Over twenty Wednesday Socials have already taken place. In cooperation with the German Retail Association and the Federation of German Wholesale, Foreign Trade and Services, METRO GROUP has been hosting the event for more than five years. In Brussels, it is organised together with the Federation of German Food and Drink Industries (BVE). For the future, there are plans to launch the format in the cradle of salon culture, in Vienna.

The Wednesday Social wants to be more than an event with prominent guests, good food and even better conversations. At the same time, it is an instrument of modern advocacy. It is part of a new approach of companies to do political communication. We call this approach responsible lobbying.

This form of lobbying differs from the classical form, both with respect to the content of the lobbying (content) as well as in how we communicate and cooperate with policy makers and other stakeholders (process). At its focus is open dialogue, which is designed as real dialogue: talks that lack transparency or heated public exchanges, which are part of classical lobbying, are replaced by a multidimensional learning process that is based on a simple realisation: Companies are part of a problem, they sure are responsible for a large proportion of the excessive and uneven resource consumption – but they are mainly part of the solution. We believe that through active commitment, companies can better contribute to the improvement of social conditions than most other players.

Yes, you read that right. Advice, mutual learning, experimenting and looking for new solutions, assuming responsibility and more – companies are thought capable of all these things. But decisions should be taken by politicians – separated from interests? It has been becoming more and more apparent for quite some time: There is no social system that can bear a clearly-defined responsibility by itself. Today, for the big issues, there is only shared, joint responsibility. This has consequences. Our concern is not that representatives from business, academia, civil society and politics talk to each other too much, but that there is far too little dialogue and that the dialogue takes place within foreseeable limits: The speaker talks for a long time, the audience has little opportunity to ask questions, let alone to start a conversation with each other.

Responsible lobbying operates in a completely different way than its classic prototype. It's not the ones who achieve a short-term advantage over their competitors who will get the highest score, but those who foster the interaction of competitors in order to achieve social progress. Social progress, in this case, means to facilitate a step in the direction of living and doing business in a sustainable way.

What digital communication can contribute to this is the necessary speed and transparency,

which allows social progress to happen with the required urgency. And we experiment with this new transparency at the Wednesday Social, a hybrid of face-to-face and virtual dialogue.

5.

Success – to conduct a political debate swiftly and with the necessary openness – will depend not only on the concept, but above all on the guests.

Whether they are cardinals or artists: what the guests of the Wednesday Social have in common is the will to try new things. This is why the theses are made available online before the actual speaking engagement takes place, why questions from an online forum are welcome, why the debate will continue after the event – this is unusual in the the political circles of Berlin and something that sometimes still needs to be explained. But it is these “technical features” and the self-imposed standard to be a really good host that make the Wednesday Social what it is. Volker Wieprecht, who has facilitated almost all of the Berlin Wednesday Socials, remembers many special moments: “Of course I can think of a number of highlights, such as the screaming silence of the entire audience when Jörg Asmussen was speaking. The laughter caused by a guest when he explained his shopping habits to the speaker, using the example of the shirt he was wearing. The uproar that was caused when a representatives of the agro-industrial complex accused Dieter Kosslick of being deeply naive and ignorant. The anger of some attendees when I asked Cardinal Woelki about Tebartz van Elst, while he read the riot act to the trade industry. At every Wednesday Social so far, something unexpected happened because the guests and speakers opened up to each other.”

6.

A couple of weeks before the event, we publish the guest’s theses on the internet. Anyone can read them – and join the discussion and ask questions. These questions will also be taken on board by the host on the night of the event. If the online questioner is in the room, he has the possibility to add to the question or to ask a follow-up question. If not, then at least his or her question will be discussed.

Putting the theses online increases interaction, participation – and the anticipation for the evening.

We also want to make available more channels for discussion during the event. Throughout the evening, our audience can network on Twitter, using the so-called hashtag #mgber and share their opinions and arguments on social networks. This also makes it possible for people to participate who cannot be present in person.

The follow-up is transparent, too: Just a few days after the event, the complete presentation and a video summary is made available to the public on our website and on a dedicated YouTube channel. In the video review, the guest speaker and the attendees get their say, we ask them for their opinion on the subject and on the evening itself. What is important for its success: It is not so much the METRO employees or association members who get a chance to speak. Rather, we want to hear what those have to say who have a different view of the issues.

Not only do these instruments provide a higher visibility of the event, they also noticeably increase the quality of the Berlin Wednesday Social through integrating different groups.

It is exciting to increasingly incorporate digital communication channels in these activities,

whether it is about positioning ourselves with regard to a particular topic or about advertising political events: We do not only want to support this process – we want to be pioneers.

This is why we are experimenting with “social streaming” services, such as Periscope, which broadcasts the presentation of our speakers live on Twitter. Twitter users can watch the presentation in real time and soon will be able to ask questions without being present in person – this form of participation was inconceivable as recently as the start of the event series.

Of course, not everything works out as we would like it to. Of course we would like more female speakers, but if we want to invite those responsible for certain topics, then there are more men available than women, for the moment at least. Nevertheless, we make a point of asking women to speak at our events. However, our experience has been that female speakers turn down the request more easily than men – once, it was even on the grounds that the format was too transparent.

And finally, it has happened (very rarely), that a speaker only confirmed under the condition that no video of his would be uploaded on YouTube. Or that the theses are only sent to us a few days before the event. But these are exceptions and we are working on coming up with an even better way of explaining why the theses and the open communication are integral aspects of the self-conception of the format. And it takes time for the scepticism to settle and for there to be trust in new instruments.

But we are sure that social media are transforming politics. The loss of communicative sovereignty, which is caused by our instruments, hopefully also leads to more opinions – rather than polished press reports.

The Berlin Wednesday Social as seen by its guests:

“Debating, yes, arguing, and yet enjoying cordial encounters over good food and drink – this is what I experienced as Metro’s guest.”
(Rainer Maria Woelki, Archbishop of Cologne)

“The Wednesday Social is a place of dialogue, because all different stakeholders will be invited to this format and exchange takes centre stage.”
(Klaus Müller, Federation of German Consumer Organisations (vzbv))

“The Wednesday Social has become the exchange platform for the trade industry in Berlin, because it is different than other formats in the Berlin scene!”
(Christoph Minhoff, Federation of German Food and Drink Industries (BVE) and German Federation for Food Law and Food Science (BLL))

“I enjoyed attending the Wednesday Social, because it is a place of dialogue, of listening. It is a pleasure to see that there are still these places of encounter in Berlin’s political community.”
(Winfried Kretschmann, Minister-President of Baden-Wuerttemberg)

“The Wednesday Social is important for the trade industry because it gathers all different stakeholders in one room – politicians, NGOs, the industry, suppliers, trade, churches – in one room.”
(Stefan Genth, Managing Director, German Retail Association (HDE))

“The Wednesday Social is also important for our operative business: It enhances our reputation and

we can bring together customers with other customers, with policymakers or NGOs to engage in discussions that they can only find here. Thus, the Wednesday Social is also an important loyalty element for our sales."

(Frank Jäniche, Head of Sales, Metro Cash & Carry Germany)

7.

These are a few things important to us with regard to our speakers and guests: Conflict is a good thing. We do not want to pat each other on the back. We do not want to mutually reinforce each other's opinions. Instead, we want the cardinal who discusses shop opening hours with us. The globalisation critic and slow food activist who speaks his mind about consumer education and pre-school. Or the President of the Federal Cartel Office who tells us about the market power of trade companies.

We value this opposition, it is important for our event: Still – do the Berlin Wednesday Socials manage to create the real conversation? Not always, of course. Not every evening can create the combination of real listening, of being open to new views, of letting go of the need to control all aspects of the communication. Even here, there are sometimes prepared statements, and from time to time, the audience and the speaker do not really listen to each other, or only listen to themselves.

Sometimes, the political realities, the political bubble that is Berlin, catches up with us. But other things prevail: the desire for new things, for another night, for listening. Or, as one guest put it: "It is intellectually refreshing."

8.

Whether it is the Silk Road, the Salt Road, the Incense Route – trade routes date back to the earliest times of mankind. They demonstrate the importance and significance of global trade for the history and development of humanity. Trading is much more than the exchange of goods and merchandise.

Trade always has always been and still is an exchange of culture, science, art, research, knowledge and mutual understanding.

With the Berlin Wednesday Social, we want to promote this understanding. Because today's complex regulatory and political issues cannot be swept aside with quick and easy solutions. On the contrary: The task of responsible lobbying is to create a platform and a network that bring us closer to solutions. This only works by engaging in continuous conversation in a contemporary format on the right issues with the right people.

Why should this be important for the political work of an international trade company? The internet was not invented to do better lobbying. The digital infrastructure expands our possibilities for action in virtually any respect. But in doing so, it also accelerates almost everything. "Markets are conversations" – this is what the "Cluetrain Manifesto" already said more than 15 years ago. Companies have to become faster and better at understanding and addressing the needs of their stakeholders. In interconnected markets, it will be increasingly important to earn the trust of stakeholders and to cultivate a new form of dialogue at different levels. Dialogue is becoming extraordinarily demanding in our complex, greatly accelerated and globalised world. Information and feedback flows faster. But it is also business models, solutions, and products that can be scaled

so quickly nowadays that we need this swift feedback. This applies not only to risks – it seems obvious in this case – but in particular also to opportunities of sustainability.

Sustainability researcher, economist and sociologist Ortwin Renn says that it is the task of companies “to constantly align their goals and strategies with the requirements of sustainability and to mediate between consumers, producers and the public.” He continues: “There is increasing evidence that innovation requires companies to cultivate contacts with other enterprises, social groups and political institutions that go beyond the normal work in associations. Such unconventional networks offer the breeding ground for new solutions, which avoid social costs and can perform desired functions with a minimum of environmental and social burdens.”

A strategic space such as the Wednesday Social wants to do exactly that: enable conversations between guests, speakers and hosts that can create something new and set things in motion. Our wish for the Berlin Wednesday Social is for it to continue to be a meeting place for unconventional conversations between all those who care about social progress. Be our guest!