

Eveline Metzen (Körper-Stiftung)

## **Change in Values**

The change in values which has occurred over the last two decades in both Germany and the United States has been perceived and evaluated quite differently in each country.

While the portrayal in the media has been rather negative, research comprises a diversity of approaches. On one side, debates over values are affected by terms like self-expression, autonomy and equal rights; on the other side, the image of moral decline dominates the discussion.

In Germany, it is migration and the associated new cultural and religious influences, which are heating up debate over values. Consequently, values come under scrutiny and German identity is being examined in depth.

In contrast to Germany, the debate over values in the United States focuses on such topics as Civil rights and liberties - Triggered by large-scale restrictions in the course of *homeland security*.

### **1. Values - What are its sources, who delivers their contents?**

The influence of the biggest institutions, which transmit values (State, Church, Parties), is either replaced or fully compensated for by smaller autonomous subsystems (syndicates).

The heterogeneity of a society, which progresses through *migration* and its cultural as well as religious influences, results in a change of customary and identity-generating values. In this respect, Germany and the United States differ from each other. While integration and ethnic diversity in the U.S. represent inherent values, the same issue provokes fiery debate over values in Germany.

### **2. Individualism versus Community/Public spirit**

In Germany, an emancipatory aspect of the change in values can be observed, towards the model of a self-determined, emancipated human being; A result of more autonomy in life and in working environments. Critics equate this emancipation with individualism and therefore suspect it of weakening social cohesion. In the United States, this type of individualism, as an expression of independence and liberty, is one of the most important values.

What about the glue holding our societies together ?

In the 60s and 70s, Germany was believed to be lacking in public spirit, and thus experiencing decreasing dedication. Today, service to society **has** become more attractive due to new types of political participation and social engagement. In addition, the retreat of the welfare state makes public commitment **a** necessity. But: Does this commitment reach across all milieus and is it therefore effective in a religiously, culturally and socially heterogeneous society?

In the United States, public spirit and commitment traditionally belong to self-image. For a long time the individual pursuit of wealth and self-actualization did not play a conflicting role. The balancing act seemed natural. 9/11 led the country to close ranks, yet again. However, four years later the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe revealed big breaches in solidarity and willingness to get involved.

Has the balance between individualism/self-actualization and service to the community begun to totter? Does the heavily cited *American public spirit* still bridge social and ethnic differences?

### **3. Family**

How has family changed? New types of families have developed: the “patchwork family”, single parents, same-sex families. All of them have caused a fervid discussion on values, particularly with regard to how a family should be structured and lived. At what level has the value “family” been assessed, meaning how strongly is it supported politically, socially and by corporations? In the current debate, catchwords such as “compatibility of family and work” and „family midwives” are very popular. Traditional family constellations are disappearing (due to mobility, divorce etc.) – the result is often a gap. Disorientation and helplessness prevail.

### **4. Education and Upbringing**

Education has always been regarded as a commodity of high renown as well as a value in itself; a classical humanistic education was usually meant by this. What constitutes education today? What significance is attributed to education and upbringing and who is in charge?

Social disruption is primarily and most clearly linked to academic performance, whether the latter is successful or not. Good education and educational opportunities alone lead to prospects of promotion and lasting development perspectives, making our societies competitive and economically effective in the global market.

Values education in school?! Personality development represents an integral part of the educational mandate. Schools do not seem to be adequate to the task of doing more than to impart knowledge. Yet, they are taking on educational responsibility and personality development more than ever. Social and cross-cultural learning, integration, creative and artistic development as well as sex education, violence, drug and alcohol prevention have all become the responsibilities of schools. How do Germany and the United States make allowance for these developments?

As a result of the discussion on the change in values, there is a pressing call for discipline. At the same time, however, the abuse of discipline is dreaded. Which skills nowadays belong to the school value-canon in both the U.S. and Germany?

### **5. Age**

American as well as German society is growing old. Society has to tune in with this development and adapt its image of age with new realities. It is important not to exclude those persons, who are beyond the prime of life, from active society. The United States are pioneers in this issue – not just for reasons of necessity.

In the United States, elderly people are seen more as an employee and know-how reservoir. Germany has also come to a crossroads: it has to begin to see older people as human capital and deal with them more carefully. Does a change in values take place? What kind of operational consequences does it bring, or must it bring, with it? An age-based design of working places, exchange of experiences between the generations, appropriate further training ( life-long learning) or a new inter-generation contract?

## **6. Value Change regarding adolescents**

Since the 14 . *Shell Youth Study* ( *Shell Jugendstudie*), an extensive, updated analysis, presenting the values of German youngsters, has been available. There are exciting cognitions to be made about future social developments and transatlantic communication, when the results are compared with those of the United States: Do the values of German and American adolescents differ? Which are the most distinct differences? What conclusions can be made about future cultural communication?

The *Shell Youth Study* specifies the change of value as follows:

“ Today’s youngsters are pragmatic. They mix their values cocktail in a way that suits them: diligence and power, family and security, creativity and standard of living - everything works at the same time. (...) Since the 80s, a profound change of values has occurred: The ideologically propped atmosphere of previous generations, characterized as rebellious and fed up, is gone. The mentality of adolescents has shifted from a socio-critical group to the societal centre.”

- 1 Politics and parties: The interest in both is highly regressive.
- 2 Activity and security have become more important. Security, organization, diligence are combined with modern values like creativity, tolerance and pleasure.
- 3 The drive for change in values: Girls and young women. They are more confident and ambitious these days. Taking responsibility is as important to them as to boys.
- 4 Family and work are not mutually exclusive. Actually, they are central, coequal objectives. Both are important for personal happiness.
- 5 Commitment: Despite their low interest in politics, adolescents are socially active in their private environment (always connected with personal opportunity and benefit). Associations, educational institutions and self-organized clubs are well received and more popular than citizens’ groups, Greenpeace, aid organizations, unions or Amnesty.

6 Europe and globalization are reality and are seen as personal opportunity.