

CONFLICTS ABOUT SOCIAL INEQUALITY  
AND THE DISPROVED THESIS  
OF A DIVISION IN GERMAN SOCIETY

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Steffen MAU, Thomas LUX, and Linus WESTHEUSER,  
*Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*  
(Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2023, 540 p.)

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According to a popular narrative, the COVID19 pandemic aggravated tensions and conflicts within our societies. In many countries around the globe, these tensions became visible in protests, some of which involved violence. Observers diagnosed a polarisation developing between those who followed the government rules that had been devised to help manage the pandemic, and those who objected to those rules: the two groups no longer understood one another. In the objectors' camp of those who objected, surprising alliances emerged: voters who had long been supporters of green parties marched alongside members of the far right, while the same slogans were shouted by both devout Christians and self-declared miracle healers and esoteric quacks. The term of choice to describe this strange mixture, used both by these groups themselves and the media, was "concerned citizens". There is a considerable risk, so the narrative concludes, that this polarisation of the political debate could continue and lead to a fundamental division in the social structure of society, meaning that people not only fail to understand each other across the divide but also stop interacting altogether.

These developments, as well as the accompanying public discourses, have been keenly observed by sociologists. As regards the German-speaking countries, several book-length sociological analyses of these events have been published over the last two years. To mention just a few: Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey's [2022]<sup>1</sup> book, *Gekränkte Freiheit* [Aggrieved freedom], focused on the worldviews of "concerned citizens", and relying on an expanded version of the Frankfurt School's theoretical framework for studying the authoritarian character, explored the dynamics of opinion polarisation at work within this group. With an eye on the general population, a government-commissioned study in Austria led by Alexander Bogner [2023]<sup>2</sup> also found strong polarisation

<sup>1</sup> Carolin AMLINGER and Oliver NACHTWEY, 2022. *Gekränkte Freiheit: Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus* (Berlin, Suhrkamp).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander BOGNER, ed., 2023. *Nach Corona: Reflexionen für zukünftige Krisen. Ergebnisse aus dem Corona-Aufarbeitungsprozess*

in opinions and heated debates between opposing camps on particular topics. However, while acknowledging the polarisation of the political debate, Jürgen Kaube and André Kieserling [2022],<sup>3</sup> in *Die gespaltene Gesellschaft* [The divided society], questioned the empirical validity of diagnoses that suggested a more profound social division. Rather, they suggested that such division was a media phenomenon, and theorised that a certain *Angstlust* motivated authors and media to reproduce this narrative.

These debates—academic and public—form the backdrop for the book reviewed here. In *Triggerpunkte: Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*, its authors Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux, and Linus Westheuser compile and discuss empirical insights on recent conflict-laden debates in German society. Yet the authors are careful to make it clear early on in the book that the diagnosis of a division within society cannot be empirically validated. Conflicts, they emphasise in line with Kaube and Kieserling, are a somewhat natural element of modern society, and their presence alone cannot be taken as an indicator of a more profound socio-structural division [cf.: 25f]. “Conflicts are conducted with passion and intransigence, but do not necessarily have to be an expression of progressive polarisation” [20; my translation]. Rather, conflicts are strategically used and managed, sometimes even generated, by various actors pursuing their own interests in an economy of attention. “The public (and unfortunately often also the academic) discourse has so far suffered from the fact that the often highly stylised form in which conflicts appear in the media is used to infer a polarised deep structure of society” [245; my translation]. Hence, polarisation is not the prime empirical phenomenon analysed in the book; instead, as the authors explain, it is a vehicle that helps them gain a deeper understanding of important conflicts in contemporary society and their localisations in social structure: “Who is arguing with whom about what?” [20; my translation].

In exploring this question, the authors focus on conflicts that concern inequalities. They discern four “arenas” of such conflicts: one classical arena in industrial society (top–bottom inequalities, where conflicts concern questions of distribution and socio-economic status) and three post-industrial arenas: inside–outside inequalities, where conflicts concern belonging and boundaries; us–them inequalities, where they

(Vienna, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften).

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen KAUBE and André KIESERLING, 2022. *Die gespaltene Gesellschaft* (Berlin, Rowohlt).

concern recognition and rights; and today–tomorrow inequalities, where they concern ecology and the sociopolitical management of time [see table on: 49].

Mau, Lux, and Westheuser discuss each of these arenas in chapters three through six of their book. Their empirical analyses are based on three data sources [cf.: 33–36]. The authors designed and commissioned a questionnaire survey of a representative sample of the German population ( $n = 2530$  participants); they carried out six focus-group discussions, three in Berlin (November 2021) and three in Essen (May 2022); and in addition, they used data from continuous social panel studies, especially the *Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften* (Allbus) and the *European Social Survey* (ESS). One central instrument of their analysis is a polarisation index, which indicates the degree to which a statement received strongly opposing reactions [cf. Van Der Eijk 2001].<sup>4</sup> Ranging from 0 to 1, the index tells us how strong the polarisation is for a given statement: the closer to 1, the higher the polarisation. If, for instance, 50% of respondents strongly disagree with a statement and the other 50% strongly agree, the polarisation index would be 1. It would be 0 if all respondents gave the same answer. If the answers were distributed evenly across the answer options, the polarisation index would be at 0.5 [cf.: 65–66].

A second instrument of analysis is the scheme by Daniel Oesch [2006],<sup>5</sup> according to which one can distinguish eight social classes: employers and liberal professionals; small business owners; technical professions; managers in business and the public sector; sociocultural professions; production workers; office clerks; and service workers.

The comparison of the polarisation index with the percentage of agreement with a statement provides interesting insights across the four conflict arenas. For instance, in the statements understood to refer to top–bottom inequalities relating to socio-economic status, Mau, Lux, and Westheuser find that statements with high agreement rates rank lower on the polarisation index. For instance, 81% of the respondents agreed with the statement that “there is just not enough respect for ordinary people”, and the polarisation index is at 0.18, indicating that the statement is somewhat uncontroversial. On the other hand, the statement that “poverty is a question of how hard one is willing to work” gets an agreement

<sup>4</sup> Cees VAN DER EIJK, 2001. “Measuring Agreement in Ordered Rating Scales,” *Quality and Quantity*, 35 (3): 325–341 [<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010374114305>].

<sup>5</sup> Daniel OESCH, 2006. *Redrawing the Class Map: Stratification and Institutions in Britain, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland* (Houndmills/Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan).

rate of just 39% and a polarisation index of 0.44 [see: 78; my translations]. In these top–bottom conflicts, then, there is a negatively linear relation between agreement and polarisation. While both statements have the highest agreement among production workers, the statement on respect has the lowest agreement in the sociocultural professions class, and the statement on willingness to work hard has the lowest agreement among those in the technical professions.

In the arena of inside–outside inequalities, where conflicts often concern immigration policies, the situation is a bit different. The statement with the highest polarisation index was one with average agreement: “There should be an upper limit for accepting refugees from Arab and African states” found agreement with 38% of the respondents, yet its polarisation index is at 0.5. Production workers have the highest average agreement rate, while the most disagreement came from the class of sociocultural experts. Thus, if placed in order according to their agreement rates, the values of the polarisation index have a curve-like rather than a negatively linear shape.

In the arena of us–them inequalities, where conflicts concern the distribution of respect and recognition—in particular for persons with fluid or non-binary gender identities—the relation is, again, negatively linear. In the arena of today–tomorrow inequalities, where conflicts concern the environment, we find a curve-like shape for the polarisation index.

Throughout the chapters, these quantitative results are skilfully interwoven with materials from the focus-group discussions. For instance, the statement cited above on an upper limit for migration from Arab and African regions was sometimes justified in the discussions with reference to the possible pull effects of doing otherwise: “The more good we do here, the more jump into the boats” [direct quotation from a group discussion cited on: 138; my translation].

In drawing all their data together, Mau, Lux, and Westheuser found that some statements obviously have a higher potential to cause heated debate and polarisation than others. It is in this context that the authors introduce the concept that gives the book its title, *Triggerpunkte*. In physiotherapy, trigger points are irritable spots in skeletal muscles that cause pain in particular parts of the body when pressure is applied to them. Taking this metaphor, the authors define trigger points as “neur-algic points where particularly charged conflicts are activated” [27; my translation; see also: 245–246]. The empirical relevance of this concept was corroborated by the repeated observation that when certain topics—or even just words—were mentioned within the group discussions, the

atmosphere heated up and the debate became increasingly dominated by the affective, and not the cognitive, components of the participants' attitudes.

The authors formulate the thesis that the dynamics of trigger points are caused by their rootedness in the substructure of moral convictions that Barrington Moore called the “implicit social contract”. They trigger emotional reactions because they address and question values that the individual takes for granted. Four types of trigger points can be distinguished, according to the authors: Unequal treatment, violations of normality, fears of being excluded, and behavioural expectations. People become emotional if they are confronted with social situations in which some individuals or groups receive better or worse treatment than others. Their anger increases when their ideas of normality are violated, when they feel threatened by social exclusion, and when they think they are being forced into following new rules that conflict with their usual behaviour [see Table 7.1: 276]. In other words, they are more likely to react aggressively if their moral expectations of formal equality or deservedness, common sense, stability, and autonomy are not met.

For Mau, Lux, and Westheuser, the current picture of the political debate in Germany is one of conflict, but not division or polarisation. These conflicts arise when people have the impression that the “implicit social contract” is under threat, and when certain actors—among them politicians and the media—further these conflicts to increase their share in the attention economy. Trigger points ignite conflicts even between social groups who have much in common with each other, and their emotional dynamics push people to ignore these commonalities. At times, political actors use such trigger points to further their own strategic aims [see in particular 375–8]. As a result, there is a politicisation of the margins, meaning that people and groups who did not or would not have participated in democracy in earlier decades have now started to do so, motivated by opinions and ideas that are far from the opinions and views of the majority in the middle.

The wide level of interest in and the positive reception of this study in Germany apparently took its authors by surprise [Mau, Lux, and Westheuser 2024, 207].<sup>6</sup> Steffen Mau, who had already been a well-known media expert before this publication, received countless invitations to take part in interviews and discussions across all forms of public

<sup>6</sup> Steffen MAU, Thomas LUX and Linus WESTHEUSER, 2024. “Ja, aber’: Gesellschaftliche Konflikte verstehen. Eine Replik,”

*KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 76 (2): 207–220 [<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-024-00964-0>].

media. Most commentators and reviewers lauded the study's meticulous design and the book's accessible narrative [cf., e.g. Liebig 2024; Nassehi and Saake 2024].<sup>7</sup> Some, however, questioned its political assumptions and implications. Stefan Lessenich [2024],<sup>8</sup> who almost twenty years ago published a co-edited volume on Germany as a divided society [Lessenich and Nullmeier 2006],<sup>9</sup> criticised the book's apparent assumption that the average opinion was equivalent to that which is normal and desirable. He claimed that the authors of the study had used "neither practical sense nor analytical instruments" to assess the existence of a potential "extremism of the middle". Some of the book's findings, he claimed, were in fact calamitous, and he criticised Mau, Lux, and Westheuser for refraining to mention their problematic character. For instance, across all social groups, there is a sizeable percentage of agreement with the statement that one cannot say anything critical about migrants or gay people without being insulted and called intolerant. For him, thus, the book's success was no surprise: "Here, Germany is portrayed as one would like it to be and as it would like to see itself; here, the self-description put forth in Sunday's political speeches is largely fulfilled" [Lessenich 2024: 190; my translations].

Putting aside his tartness, Lessenich has a point regarding the methodology. Throughout the book runs the image of a citizenship that cherishes consensus and shares democratic values, but at times falls prey to political actors who use conflicts to pursue their agendas. The authors' research design neglects the possibility that the opinions in the centre of the opinion spectrum might indeed be illiberal, xenophobic, or otherwise anti-humanistic. This would have required a comparative anchor, derived either from theory or earlier empirical data.

There is another interesting instance in which, despite their high level of methodological reflectiveness, the authors fail to observe a possible finding. Interestingly, all four types of trigger points that the authors found—unequal treatment, violations of normality, fears of being excluded, and behavioural expectations—are pro-social convictions.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan LIEBIG, 2024. "Soziologische Aufklärung," *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 76 (2): 199–205 [https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-024-00963-1]; Armin NASSEHI and Irmhild SAAKE, 2024. "Über und unter der Oberfläche," *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 76 (2): 193–98 [https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-024-00965-z].

<sup>8</sup> Stephan LESSENICH, 2024. "Gesellschaftstragende Soziologie". *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 76 (2): 187–92 [https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-024-00962-2].

<sup>9</sup> Stephan LESSENICH and Frank NULLMEIER, eds, 2006. *Deutschland—Eine Gespaltene Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/New York, Campus).

The attitudes they describe are not about the individual's life goals or a transcendent meaning of life. Their moral reference is always to society, and trigger points gain their power because of their possible threat to the functioning of that society (as we know it), as too much conflict-triggered frustration may lead to estrangement. As a result of the methodological design of this study, however, we cannot know whether this pro-social attitude is indeed empirically present; it might just as well be an artefact of the methodological setting. It might have been the frame that the study participants felt most comfortable to construct in the social situation of a survey or a focus-group discussion—more comfortable, at least, than other frames, like individual goal achievement or transcendent harmony. Thus, the message of a consensus-oriented, balanced, and at its core liberal citizenship is not an empirical finding, but remains an assumption.

This is also a strange aspect of the book's scholarly and public reception so far. The book has been widely read as a contribution to the debate on social divisions sketched above in the opening paragraph. And indeed, despite the authors' claim that the book is about dynamics of current social conflicts, parts of the book clearly extend beyond this topic to explore those moments that trigger irritation in public debates, thus undermining rational and consensus-oriented deliberation. The book deserves that broad readership—not just because it is a good book but primarily because the insights it contains may serve as a starting point for a debate on how societies should deal with heated media conflicts and polarisation. This debate cannot be conducted in academic journals or the feuilleton. Perhaps, aside from its deserved success in terms of sales, the book could also encourage a debate on how to adapt our current methodologies; not just in terms of data collection and analysis but, more importantly, in terms of how we disseminate our results and continue to work with them, apart from putting them in print. If that happens, *Triggerpunkte* may even have a longer-lasting impact.

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