

**Values and experiences**  
**Preview of the European Forum Alpbach 2013**

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*(Check against delivery)*

I am very honoured to stand here today. I was asked to speak in English, which I will do gladly. Furthermore, I was asked to address the general theme of next year. You have chosen two intriguing concepts, each of them difficult to deal with, but quite daunting when you put them together. What is most noticeable about the combination is that it brings several challenging tensions to the fore.

Let me start with the first: Experience is something quite messy. It denotes processes and events that happen to us and which we attempt to make sense of. Out of this flow or unexpected ruptures, we distil consciously and unconsciously something which we experience as somehow consolidated. The result is often ambiguous, especially when we arrive at a judgement of 'good' or 'bad' experience. Such value judgements make sense only when embedded into a larger context, be it a life trajectory or related to our antecedent expectations which were either met or turned upside down. Experience is difficult to contain: We want to ask what it 'tells us' because we are looking for guidelines to help us shape the future. Experience is therefore always context-dependent.

Values, on the other hand - and we have just concluded by speaking about values in the previous discussion on borders - are meant to convey certainty. They claim to be unambiguous and are very much in demand in times when we are looking for orientation. It is therefore not surprising that the previous discussion ended with values. They usually come in the plural and among themselves they compete for priorities. Moreover, they are subject to historical change even if some changes take a bit longer. And, contrary to experience, they claim to hover above a specific historical situation. They claim context-independence.

Your task therefore will be to explore how to negotiate the tensions between experience which is rootedness in different contexts and values which seek to be as context-independent as possible.

The immense variety of the human condition is obvious in the present era of globalisation, which confronts us also with different kinds of values. The controversial 'clash of civilizations' was based on the assumption of an unresolvable conflict between values. To invoke values, therefore, cannot mean to speak only about Europe. We know too well today that Europe is not an isolated continent, as different values from outside Europe are claiming for space within our borders. The previous discussion on borders reminded us also of the existence of a generational divide: younger people associate borders with their own mobility, to move *out*; while the older generation expressed the fear of the Others, the foreigners, moving *in*. This is one of many examples that experience is also a

generational phenomenon, that it differs for each generation. It also gives a first strong hint, that experience shapes values, but does not tell us exactly how.

There are other gaps between experience and values that open up along societal fault lines. Take, for example, the possibility of a widening gap in Europe today between an elite, which is cosmopolitan, well-educated, mobile and supportive of more Europe; while other segments of the population see themselves as threatened and therefore rally behind populist movements or see salvation in a re-nationalisation.

Faced with the challenge how to negotiate the manifold tensions between experiences and values I would like to pose three questions. They are very simple and you can answer them for yourselves.

**Question 1: Which personal experience do you value most in retrospect?**

If I were to collect your answers, we would probably converge on something akin to a kind of experience from which we have learned something, which either confirmed or contradicted what we thought, hoped or how we behaved. It is the kind of experience that has met its own reality check. We need these reality checks from time to time to know how to move on in the future. The reason why we want to know more about the future is because we all have this human urge of wanting to control life circumstances and the outcome of our actions to the greatest extent possible.

**Question 2: Which collective experience has been the most important for you in the past ten years?**

This brings us back to the previous discussion again. We addressed the issue of the crisis, and discussed whether it is a financial, economic or a political crisis. It is all of them together. Crises are usually mixtures of overlapping sub-crises. Why we are hit so much by the crisis in Europe right now is that the difficulties of the political project are aggravated by an economic crisis. If we were still on the economic upswing, the political crisis would not be so evident. The experience of crisis, whatever final explanation or rationalization we come up with, undoubtedly is a *collective* experience, shared by many people, even if there are individuals which are hit by it in a singular way.

If we agree that collective experiences exist and that they are the cause of worries and anxieties, raising existential questions about orientations, values, where to go and what to do, then we also realise that even longer time spans can be involved in shaping collective experiences of entire generations. If we go back further than the past ten years that I have asked you to consider, we would come up with different answers depending on how far we go back and where. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht recently published a book called *After 1945: Latency as the Origin of the Present*. It is about the post-war generation, about the collective experience that has shaped one part of Europe since the end of the Second World War. Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that 'Europe' itself has become a shared experience, replacing at least parts of the collective national experiences. A different example

would be the Sputnik shock which shook up an entire generation in the US. For everyone living through it this was a collective experience re-ordering institutions and shaping the outlook of the US towards the rest of the world. The same applies to the generation of '68 and what it meant in Europe or the Vietnam War in the US and so on. These collective experiences take longer to consolidate. There are historical circumstances leading up to them but it is without doubt that they leave a major impact especially on the generation living through them.

While we can agree on the importance of these collective experiences as they are seen to have had a major impact, we do not necessarily agree on which lessons we can or should draw from them. This needs interpretation and I belong to those who think that history does not *teach* us anything but that we can perhaps *learn* something from history. To come back to our current situation, there is even less agreement on what caused this collective experience that we see as a crisis. If causes were simple to determine, historians could not continue discussing to this very day what caused the French Revolution.

### **Question 3: Where do you see the greatest gaps between individual and collective experience?**

How do individual experience and the more consolidated, collective experiences that define a cohort or even an epoch relate? When Walter Benjamin was writing about 'the loss of experience' which he saw as one of the horrendous consequences of World War I he and other intellectuals and artists were pointing to the processes of alienation, of becoming up-rooted that individuals underwent. This was perhaps an extreme, but gaps between the individual and collective experience arise all the time. It is in these gaps where the negotiation between the differences in experience and the difference in values take place. If I were to give a tentative answer, I would say that the most glaring gaps today lie in the rising social inequalities. In their various manifestations that we see everywhere, they could easily become an explosive mix, re-shaping values in unpredictable ways.

But there is yet another challenge related to a gap between individual and collective experience: how to cope with the increasing diversity of values. There are cultural values, religious values, values coming from outside of Europe and confronting what we call Western values. Within the framework of a democratic and pluralistic society, I see no other way but to negotiate these values. There cannot be any absolute values that are not negotiable in a pluralistic democracy. This also holds for values to which we ascribe a high priority, like fundamental rights (human rights, constitutional rights and so on). The reason is that values claim to be context-independent, but once they are embedded in specific historical contexts, their context-independence can no longer be maintained. They need interpretation. Moreover, values can be in contradiction with other values. Hierarchies of values change over time, as do the priorities a society accords to them. In practice, this means that we must learn to embrace contradictions, including values that contradict each other.

Nevertheless, values are related to experience, they are rooted in experience. Somehow they are anchored in the messiness of life, but it is very difficult to unravel precisely how. In order to do so (or at least try to), I offer two reflections that come – how could it be otherwise? - from my own experience.

### **Reflection 1: Experience and Experiment**

First, experience is closely related to experiment. I work for a European project, namely the European Research Council, which funds frontier research on one single criteria: the principle of scientific excellence. I am reflecting here on what I see as a commonality between experience and scientific experiments. *Erfahrung* in German has a slightly different root from *experience* and *experiment*, which developed together with modern science in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. What people try to do, both with their personal experience in their everyday lives and what they do as scientists in setting up an experimental system, is to reduce the number of surprises that could possibly come up in order to maximise the yield in insight and knowledge and hence the productivity of the experiment. While one wants to allow some surprises, one does not want to have too many. In other words, one wants to control the experimental variables that make it up. Of course, in an experiment in any scientific setting the researchers have the advantage that they can control what is happening. That is the whole point of it. A laboratory has an inner world which is to be controlled as much as possible while relating what happens there to the outer world which cannot be controlled to the same extent. The purpose of controlling the inner world is to be able to intervene and manipulate.

This is not possible in real social life. Nevertheless, also in everyday life, we assess, we shift through evidence. We ask ourselves what has happened to us and what our experiences mean. We seek to unravel their underlying causes because we have this basic urge to find explanations. Human beings want to find explanations for whatever happens to them. Before science took root in its modern form, people looked for explanations for their everyday experience in magic, in religion, or in other forms of explanation. Since then, we have a kind of unstable mixture of explanations stemming from our own experience and from science-based explanations that have entered our daily lives. In order to make sense of these experiences, we *e-evaluate* them. I think the word *value* in *e-evaluating* what happens to us, is an important clue. Taken together, experience and its evaluation form an experiential system of reference and orientation which is relatively stable.

Yet, as in an experiment, things may sometimes go wrong and this can also happen with experience. This is the key to how values change. This year we are celebrating the publication of a little book that is fifty years old. The author was Thomas Kuhn and the title was *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn was the first one, even though his predecessor, Ludwig Fleck, had already addressed the issue in the 1930s, to say that from time to time, we have paradigm changes in science. The Ptolemaic model made room to the Newtonian, which, again, was followed by Einstein's theory. How is this possible? Kuhn's answer is, in highly simplified terms: In the course of normal scientific practices, that is, working under an established paradigm, anomalies accumulate over time. One may discover, for instance, that the data do not exactly fit into the theoretical framework, and people start to

ask why. At some point, the anomalies just become too numerous. Then something may occur that Kuhn using a metaphor from psychology, calls a *Gestalt-switch*. You certainly know the pictures from psychology where at first sight, you might see a woman with a hat, but then you see a rabbit. This is an example of Gestalt-switch. In science, this would mean that seemingly all of a sudden a novel explanation is found that fits the data better. In doing this, the paradigm undergoes change in which the entire scientific community participates and agrees to work with the new paradigm.

Perhaps something similar is happening to values. From time to time, we have a paradigmatic shift in values. Let me just give you one example: we had a major paradigmatic shift in European history from societies where one of the highest value was honour to the world we live in today. Today, we only witness perverse forms which are a kind of leftovers of societies for whom honour was the supreme value in form of honour killings. But just take a look at Austrian literature: Arthur Schnitzler's *Leutnant Gustl* reminds us what an honour society was like just some 100 years ago. The change is enormous. We no longer see *honour* as the value that binds a society or if we see it, we do not value it positively. This is what I mean by a paradigm shift occurring in the value system of a society.

If experience can lead to re-value values (*Umwertung der Werte*), it becomes all the more important to know which experience we take as compelling evidence for readjusting values and transformations of the reference system. This brings me to the second reflection.

## **Reflection 2: If values underpin ends, experience underpins means**

My second reflection is still related to the idea of how we evaluate collective experience and how it is related to values. This is where the tension between accountability and responsibility comes in.

To put it briefly: accountability presumes that everything can be counted and measured, put into performance indicators and marked by best-practice. It accepts only explicit criteria, which is why it often is accompanied by the call for transparency. We have recently seen the rise of what Michael Power has analyzed in *The Audit Society*. This "audit society" arose with the new public management, a different way of measuring how institutions perform, be it universities, government institutions or other public administrative bodies. New public management takes its performance indicators and the assumption that everything that can be measured has to be measured from the private sector. Michael Power makes it very clear that this form of accountability is indispensable for *any kind of governance*. It is not something that one can just push aside.

Now, as Michael Power and others have shown, nobody can argue against accountability as it is an indispensable part of any kind of governance. The problem arises when the means begin to overtake and eclipse the ends. Then performance indicators take on a life of their own and then there is no room left for anything except evidence as defined by those who define it and trust its perfection. In other words, the kind of accountability practiced in many institutions of our society becomes so instrumental that it becomes more important than the objectives. The means become the end. But the

point I want to make is the following: Somehow the objectives and ends are related to the values we have. We strive for something that we value. But if we only look at accountability and if the instrumentality of it takes over, the means indeed become the ends and the ends, together with the values to which they relate, fall out of sight.

The other pole here is responsibility. Responsibility relies heavily on judgement, on personal evaluation of whether the best means are used to realize the ends under given circumstances. It leaves much room for interpretation and it is highly subjective.

Accountability gives us standardisation: It streamlines behaviour, it emphasises performance, indicators, outcome and impact. The means take on a life of their own. They become a self-fulfilling prophecy and they become more important than the ends.

Responsibility is linked to something else. We trust persons and their (fallible) judgement to choose appropriate means in order to achieve the ends. But what if the means are not appropriate and what if people behave in a less than responsible way?

How can we best balance or even reconcile accountability and responsibility?

The relationship between experience and values is therefore far from obvious. It is tension-ridden, especially in times of volatility when neither our experience nor our values can be taken for granted any longer and when a point is reached where neither is trusted. We should therefore start exploring what we take to be our experience, to assess and ascertain it carefully. Only then will we arrive at a result which we can trust to redefine our values and orientation towards the future.

In conclusion, we think we know what experience is and we think we know what values are - but something is missing in between. Values are real stabilisers. Values function in a society as guiding posts, as ideas, even if we know that they will never be fully lived up to. But having an idea which is also an ideal, having a guideline with values underpinning it, allows social pressure to be put on people who do not want to strive to reach these values and live by them. However, the stabilizing function that values exert may not be sufficient. Therefore, I am looking for a dynamic hiatus, a dynamic link between experience and values. And I think this has something to do with anticipation, with expectations, the general theme of this year's conference, but also with imagination, especially political imagination, as we have just heard it in the previous session.

The German historian Reinhart Koselleck wrote about what happened in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And he marked out the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the time around 1750 and called it *Sattelzeit*, 'the saddle time'. One may fall off on one side or the other but it offers stability in between if you keep going. Koselleck argues that around 1750, for the first time in Europe, and in the experience of Europeans I would add, a divergence of what he calls the *horizon of experience* (*Erfahrungshorizont*) and the *horizon of expectations* (*Erwartungshorizont*) arose. According to Koselleck, this divergence

allowed the possibility to conceive the future as an open ended horizon. Before that, the idea of the future was limited. It was linked to life after death, to an afterlife of a different kind or it was simply confined to the short lifespan experienced by most people then. For the first time, however, an open horizon in the mid-eighteenth century opened up for everything that happened afterwards, giving rise to industrialisation and to the scientific, technological achievements that we have transformed our societies ever since.

No one today is so naive to believe, even less to wish, that we can go back to one of the grand projects that animated the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the horrendous atrocities it brought forth in the name of its megalomaniac experiments. Nor is it the time to have blind faith in scientific and technological progress. The challenge that I see is a different one: To realise that the world we live in is largely a world of our own making. This entails to search for and explore the links, tensions and contradictions between experience and values. But it also calls for a re-examination of the dynamics inherent in our aspirations and anticipation. Whatever negotiations between experience and values will occur, the dynamic part comes from transcending both by injecting a third element: aspiration and anticipation.

I wish the Forum Alpach 2013 much success in moving closer to its aspirations.