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An Intellectual Provocateur

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Meeting Hans-Hermann Hoppe was the result of an unplanned coincidence in the Summer of 2005. Actually, I had travelled to Gummersbach at that time to meet Roland Baader in person. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation—an organisation associated with the German Free Democratic Party—was holding a seminar on libertarianism at the Theodor Heuss Academy there. I didn’t know most of the announced speakers at the time. In retrospect, I can say that a remarkably broad spectrum of liberal thinkers and publicists gathered in this place during those days. And as is to be expected when different currents of liberals, libertarians and anarchists come together for debate, it very quickly became extraordinarily lively.

Although I was initially disappointed not to meet Roland Baader, who had to apologise due to his already ailing health at the time, it quickly became clear to me what intellectual benefit I would be able to draw from the seminar. I remember Rahim Taghizadegan luring speakers such as Robert Nef and Jörg Guido Hülsmann out of their shells with questions. Stefan Blankertz spoke with a lot of commitment in his voice; Hardy Bouillon had a puppet speak on his desk to increase the audience’s attention; and when a seminar participant read out the speech text of the absent Roland Baader for him, it became very quiet in the hall. André Lichtschlag was active behind the scenes selling books and papers. At that venue I first met him in person, which subsequently had clear journalistic consequences as well.

However, Hans was also one of the speakers that day. After just a few sentences of his speech, I realised that he placed less emphasis on the beauty of his words than on the precision of the thoughts he was explaining. With the scientific clarity of a researcher, he placed his thoughts on various rhetorical petri dishes in order to isolate their modes from external influences from other considerations. “In paradise,” he explained, “everything is present in infinite abundance. So nobody has to overcome scarcity there. But there is certainly one good that is scarce there as well. And that is the place where I stand.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

How would it be possible to overcome such a situation of scarcity if—under the circumstances of paradise—things were done correctly? Certainly not by force! On the contrary, at best with the consent of the person who stands in their place (taken first in time) and who voluntarily vacates it for the other person.

Hans liked—and apparently still likes—to describe his own criticism of structures that he does not like as “radical.” With this argumentatively uncompromising approach, he definitely succeeds on the one hand in conquering certain intellectual grounds that others not yet have set their feet on. But on the other hand he not infrequently spreads fear among the many who still move their thoughts in more traditional ways. Even an outstanding thinker like Erich Weede, who was a speaker at the very conference as well, felt compelled to call for caution. Does Hans actually lack a sense of proportion from time to time?

As a lawyer who still has not given up his hope for the chances of a legally and sensibly balanced democracy, I do not follow Hans in all his theories and hypotheses. But I am thankful for his uncompromised efforts to describe and criticize given structures of our western administrations. In effect, the chance acquaintance of Gummersbach led me to his book about Democracy, the “God that failed.” And, like Detmar Doering put it in his review of the book for the Schweizer Monat, I felt his “visible delight in the role of the enfant terrible.”

Yes, Hans wants to provoke his readers and his political opponents as well as his scientific critics. And that for he has released from complacency. Accusations and false allegations of those who are not willing to rethink their own premises can no longer reach him. On the contrary, he gives the impression that at one point of his career he consciously and willfully drew all his attention solely to the very subject he is examining and therefore he can look past all angry insults. As an intellectual and as a scientist he knows that all empirical knowledge can change by virtue of greater and later knowledge. That for even the most intense critic at any time can turn out to be just temporary. So why should one get upset about it?

From a rhetoric standpoint that inner attitude of Hans’s working shows a conclusive overall picture. As a speaker he does not long for the approval or the cheers of his audience. Rather he offers the image of a thinker who reveals his thoughts standing at the lectern. In the long run this independence from his recipients might turn out to be exemplary for academic teachers as a genre. Because being free from any desire to please and not looking for applause provides a lot of additional time for intellectuals doing their core business of examining their subject.

One could psychologize long term about the roots of this kind of intellectual independence. I will refrain from doing so since this is not my area of expertise. But it is already noticeable that Hans once found the mental strength to take distance from the Marxist theories that had shaped his early life as a scholar so intensively. I draw a conclusion from that observation: Deep intellectual honesty includes a willingness to question the results of one’s own work at all time.

And since the history of science shows that nearly all major scientific or intellectual progresses were based on the detachment of convictions believed to be certain, the effort to trigger a fundamental crisis requires the willingness to stand offside the predominant assumptions.

Hans has even come beyond the point that Friedrich Nietzsche defined as a person’s worth that could be measured by how much loneliness he is able to endure. His intellectual seclusion has by no means turned him into a hermit. Acting from the proverbial edge of the western world on the banks of the Bosporus his thoughts are hovering into the intellectual discourses of Europe. And since the European democracies of these days are wavering out of their proven dogmatics into a historically unseen anonymous system led by unaccountable bureaucrats, political thinkers are well advised to focus their attention critically to the writings of Hans. Probability suggests that he has not yet found the answers to all questions that have to be dealt with now. But it is certain that he has formulated tasks that have to be completed in the near future. Maybe the lost key isn’t under the lantern but rather off the side. Perhaps the intellectual search must continue into the unexpected.

Years had passed after Gummersbach. Subsequent seminars were held in Bodrum. Again unexpectedly, I met Hans and Gülçin at “Sprüngli” in Zürich. Whenever you think he’s withdrawn, he suddenly is back in the middle of it all.

1. See also discussion of Hoppe’s paradigms of the Garden of Eden, or the Land of Cockaigne, the *Schlaraffenland*, etc., in the footnotes in Thomas Jacob’s contribution to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)