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Austria

AN INTERCULTURAL FIELD OF LEARNING IS CLEANED UP

Lost chances in Carinthia, Austria

After years of coming and going and of continuing protests, the Austrian Parliament, in June 1988, came to a decision of greatest moment and with negative consequences for intercultural social life on the level of the local community and the schools: in the most southerly federal province of Austria, Carinthia, where an ethnic minority (once a „majority“) speaking Slovene as its mother tongue has been settled for about 1000 years and for about 100 years has been fighting for its survival in the face of constant pressures to assimilate and Germanise, in this area it is planned to introduce a school system similar to apartheid, starting in autumn 1988. The German and Slovene-speaking primary school children, who so far, as a result of local tradition have been taught together, will henceforth be divided according to „linguistic criteria“ and taught in separate groups and classes (¹).

The parliamentary parties' political justification for this decision is that these segregationalist measures would remove a long-standing conflict between the German-speaking majority and the Slovene-speaking minority, and that the intention was to satisfy both groups according to the principle „each to his own“. The sociological principles that have objected to this approach from the very beginning are, however, based on completely different premises. One of these premises states that there is no genuine „minority problem“ in this region, and that the ethno-political conflict about the school-language, and indeed about bilingualism in general as an aim of intercultural learning, is only a pretence construct, although one of real-politik.

All the definitions of the problem and the identifiable areas of conflict mentioned are due to social processes which are marked by a permanent state of crisis resulting from technological upheavals, rationalisation, impoverishment in frontier regions and

1) The background and historical development of the conflict dealt with here are presented in detail in two books: P. GSTETTNER und D. LARCHER: *Zwei Kulturen, zwei Sprachen, eine Schule*. Klagenfurt/Celovec 1985. P. GSTETTNER: *Zwanghaft Deutsch? Klagenfurt/Celovec 1988*. Both books can be obtained from the author or directly from the publishers (Drava - Verlag/Naša knjiga, Paulitschg. 5-7, A-9020 Klagenfurt/Celovec).

agricultural areas, the threat of mass unemployment, the tendency towards monopolies in the world markets, the exploitation of the third world, etc. The consequence is that the forces of economic and socio-political integration in society are all on the wane, which is also shown by the fact that increasing numbers of groups are disintegrating, or at least threatened by social ostracisation.

The present government's policy of „the turning point“ has helped to portray the declining ability of society to integrate economically as a conflict of cultures or interests between and within ethnic groups. The topic is now indeed a „minority question“ or a linguistic quarrel. The minority which speaks or feels differently is excluded as alien, and is put under increased pressure to assimilate. It is then accused of an ostensible lack of willingness to adapt and integrate into the majority society: it should simply speak German if it wants to be accepted and understood by the majority.

Whilst the economic and social causes of the conflicts in society are denied, the latently present ethnocentricity can be lived out as „patriotism“ on the one hand or as an aggressive xenophobia on the other. These potentials then affect the actually existing and historically developed ethnic differences in the manner of an amplifier, acquiring its direction as a result of political propaganda work: the politically thematised conflict is in fact directed and encouraged in such a way that the state is required to act; the state, the political parties, the „Strong man“, the elected representatives etc. are now called upon to act, to step in, to define solutions to the conflict, to regulate language, to order segregation.

In this tense climate all the educational institutions have an important duty to provide enlightenment and understanding, even if these institutions alone can never solve the underlying social conflicts. Nevertheless they can have a positive influence upon the intellectual and cultural climate in the Province, since they have a part to play in the decision as to whether future generations will continue to be brought up in the spirit of insensitive ethno-centricity and traditional enemy figures, or whether they will be sensitised to new forms of community life oriented towards mutual understanding on the basis of intercultural openness and curiosity. The educational institutions could develop best and furthest in these last-mentioned directions if they themselves could practice daily a form of life that approaches closest the desired social norm; and this brings us to the priority for a common bilingual education in all family, school and professional educational contexts; to this purpose sociology remains willing to provide argumentation and cooperation. However, the realisation of this concrete utopia in Carinthia is prevented by the historical passions and the products of irrational fears as a result of an irrational policy, which reaches its peak in the propagation of the permanent „Abwehrkampf“ (the fight by a volunteer army after World War I against Yugoslavian forces to keep southern Carinthia as part of Austria).

For years now, political propaganda has been aimed at making the Slovene minority responsible for the „unrest in the Province“ and for the „lack of rights for German Carinthians“: it is claimed that the Slovenes have established themselves in the border areas out of all proportion to the ethnic numerical strength; that there are a large number of Slovene businesses, banks, cooperatives and cultural institutions, whereby „German Carinthians have been excluded from jobs; in the Slovene schools it is claimed that there is a „monopoly for Slovene teachers“ – according to the propaganda used by the German nationalists in the school dispute.

Actual or imagined threats are shored up ideologically by recourse to social demagoguery and enemy figures tarnished by prejudice. The local Carinthian history is an ideal basis for the recourse to such aspects, in that the German nationalist ideology has for the last 100 years used the enemy figure of the „Slovene“ in order to gloss over its own various identity crises, in order to strengthen the inner integration of „Germanity“ and in order to anchor the nationalists' own claim of „One people, one Empire (Reich), one language“ in the consciousness of the authority-trusting masses. This process is carried out with more or less differentiation and division of labour: one time the old anti-slavic emotions are stirred up, and we are reminded that „the slavs“ (who in the Nazi era belonged to the category of „sub-humans“ (Untermenschen)) have already tried twice to tear Carinthia in two in order to take possession of the bilingual area by force. Another time the new anti-communist emotions are roused, and anyone who professes membership of the Slovene ethnic group is stamped as belonging ideologically to the communism of the partisans and Tito. In all this the official political groups often leave the propagation of the „tough“ language to the neo-fascist and extreme right wing groups: final solution ideas, „enough is enough“ slogans, the call for a strong hand, inundation fantasies, calculations of the amount of foreign infiltration and control, demands for apartheid, etc., are generally not devised at party headquarters. However, once the mood has been set in this way – not least by appealing to dark and violent instincts –, then official politics can rely on this mood, can amplify it whenever it fits into the plan, and can also subdue it if it brings back all too clear memories of the politicians' own brown (= Nazi) past or present.

The sociologists who have been involved intensively with the Carinthian majority/minority problem since 1980 unanimously believe that a common bilingual education is the best means of meeting the demand for intercultural learning. No method of pupil-separation and partition according to a linguistic basis of organisation can replace the feeling of living and learning together provided by a common educational experience in school – even if the separate teaching is polished up by „integrative measures“ afterwards. Investigations which have also been carried out in other multicultural societies have shown

- that the conscious learning of two languages does not represent a fundamental difficulty for children;
- that two languages can be learnt at the same time without any difficulty, given good didactic organisation;
- that the good mastery of the mother tongue significantly simplifies the learning of the second language.

It is a fact that the politicians responsible in Carinthia not only lack any sociological or linguistic competence, but are also closed to any and every scientific argument. This circumstance reinforces the status-quo, in which the Slovene language is far from enjoying equal worth or equal status in public dealings. As a result, the children with Slovene as mother tongue are handicapped by conditions that prevent the development of a high learning motivation: In official Carinthian political culture, not only is bilingualism thought very little of, the Slovene language itself is discredited and its speakers subjected to many prejudices.

For Slovene-speaking children the emotional strain begins with the registration for school, with the question of whether the parents act on the necessity to declare their

language, and register the child for bilingual teaching with the school director. For most children this method of registration represents the first socialisation hurdle, a hurdle which is made all the more difficult by the fact that there is only one bilingual public kindergarten in the whole of Carinthia.

As a result of the absence of bilingual kindergartens insecurity and strain arrive early in the parental home. Later, this pressure is by no means relieved in the parental home, since the teaching staff at the bilingual schools is itself in a position where it feels constantly subject to suspicion and discrimination as „Slovene nationalist“ and „communist“. The school authorities reinforce this psychological pressure on the teachers of the second language, or at least they do nothing to improve the climate and to inform the public of the high value of bilingual education.

If as a result of the organisation measure of segregation the Slovene-speaking children experience an additional educational devaluation of their mother tongue, so that it is finally used merely as a private language (the language of home and farm), then the negative consequences of such a deficient socialisation can easily be predicted:

- Under pressure to assimilate, and hardly secure in this own Slovene mother tongue, the pupil's ability to learn German without difficulty is seriously endangered. Given the utmost importance for scholarly success of the ability to speak and communicate well, the danger exists that the ground is prepared for an adverse identity development.
- If the linguistic identity of the children is not recognised, if the child is not able to communicate or count upon understanding through its own mother tongue in relevant school situations without difficulty, then the child's feeling of his own worth is seriously handicapped and most probably also damaged.
- Leaving aside the psychological and social handicaps that the child suffers as a result of deficient socialisation conditions, a injured feeling of one's own worth can become a further fundamental cause of school problems and of later personality problems.

Unconditional respect for and the equal treatment of linguistic identity are ethnical and psychological postulates that are basic to any intercultural education and should not be affected by the parents' language. The new school provisions in Carinthia have imposed their reactionary segregation programme in the face of these postulates. This move will prove to be of great consequence in the future:

Firstly, the children of the majority population will be isolated from the rest of the common cultural inheritance, they will be „freed“ from hearing (or even joining in) their neighbours' language. The majority will be released from the obligations that arise from the fact that it too is responsible for the development of a peaceful culture of community and bilingualism.

Secondly for the Carinthian Slovenes as a minority, the way is paved for a solution which will finally get rid of all the problems that are ascribed to the very existence of this ethnic group: once the Slovenes are set apart, fenced off, identifiable in isolated groups and in parallel school classes, and have become the object of special integrative measures, then sooner or later (probably sooner) they will themselves prefer to be invisible in order to avoid the continuous stigmatisation; ie. they will want to make themselves unrecognizable, even smaller, more modest, more insignificant, to the point where they disappear by themselves — and thus the „final solution“ to the

ethnic group question will come about all by itself.

The perspective that Carinthia will in this way become „Slovene-free“ in a few years cannot be very beneficial to the image of the Austrian Republic, especially since Austria is aiming for an honourable position within the European Community, in a union of states which is increasingly beginning to think upon its multicultural base and its intercultural future opportunities.