

Polarized Worlds

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The **41st Congress of the German Sociological Association** will undoubtedly be marked by a shaken world community, in several respects. The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has persistently moved to the center of global discourses. With the shutdown of many societal functions, concerted action between politics, public health, and mass media, a populace that was in many cases insightful, and rapid development of vaccines, an amazing feat of adaptation was accomplished. Nevertheless, the pandemic has spread worldwide; and not everyone has been equally affected by its consequences. Depending on continent, region, but also class or gender, pre-existing inequalities such as polarization seem to be exacerbated. Measures of containment are not global but nationally hemmed in. Drugs and vaccines are difficult or impossible to access in many regions. At the same time, in better and well-supplied countries, people doubt the reality of the virus and protest the measures. Parallel to these contradictory events, other phenomena have come to a head, in whose contexts disadvantages, exclusions and differences are (made) visible.

Let us recall the numerous activities of Fridays For Future, which focus their efforts on climate changes occurring worldwide and do not rely on individual behavior in their protest, but on structural cuts. Fridays For Future gave young people around the world a voice and drew attention to generational differences. Outrage and anger at the lack of structural change, ongoing violence, abuse of power, discrimination, and exclusion from the promises of modernity such as the claim to specialness, freedom, autonomy, and justice are also uniting people under the hashtags #blacklivesmatter and #metoo. Spread in global networks, movements like these develop a strong mobilizing power: their demands spread globally, are appropriated locally and fed back into the world society. Consequently, sociological discourses are challenged with an unusual urgency - whether it is about their theoretical lines of tradition, or about the analysis of empirical phenomena. Against this background, the DGS congress will focus on lectures and discussions that take up the interest in polarization processes: How depolarizations arise, how do they proceed, and with what consequences are they associated? But also: What runs counter to them, irritates them or cancels them out? We are interested in contributions that trace these preconditions, processes and consequences in as many different social constellations as possible.

The concept of polarization is certainly not a novelty in sociology, but it seems to have gained renewed relevance as a result of current events. In addition to its importance for the description of contemporary social developments, we can look back on a comparatively long history of the conceptual complex 'polarization, polarization and polarity'. Already at the '6th German Sociologists' Congress' in 1928 the multipolarity of thought locations was discussed in connection with attitudes of liberalism, conservatism and socialism. We want to broaden the concept of polarization at this point without giving up a genuine sociological access. In doing so, we emphasize, among other things, that polarizations are not only significant in the political realm, but can equally have, for example, an aesthetic, socio-economic, or cultural dimension. Polarization defines identities. One is what one is different from. Religious affiliations, scientific orientations, cultural practices, consumption styles, and styles of entrepreneurial action define themselves by what they reject, almost independently of what they are and do. At the same time, the concept of polarization lends itself to asking structural questions about the social location of living conditions.

We use the concept of world in the plural - that is, we deliberately do not speak of 'the polarized world' but of 'polarized worlds'. The reason for this is that we want to observe and understand more precisely the extent to which polarization processes occur in many forms, coexist, but also can clash and influence each other - with their respective 'worlds'. What orientation services have become so attenuated in a society, in its everyday life as well as in its professional actions, that polarization, if the diagnosis is correct, gains such a dominant status? 'Worlds' can be understood here as realities as well as horizons of social action and experience in their respective different contexts and cultural perspectives via their practices to their materialities and ecological embeddings. Under 'polarized worlds', polarizations between different worlds as well as within them can thus be taken into account. Accordingly, we are interested in the comprehensive cleavages and differentiations as well as in processes of reintegration and the symmetrical or asymmetrical relations of the social that emerge as a result. Examples are the relations of the local to the global, of the virtual to the physical realities, the fractionations in the realm of the human and the life like social microcosms and their social macrocosms. As a level of mediation, organizations at the meso level that link distinguishable worlds come into question. Finally, we are interested in the fact that sociology or sociologists themselves can intervene in polarization processes. In this sense, the polarized worlds we are interested in overlap with the world of sociology in many ways. The discursive and everyday use of world concepts is also of interest, such as the conceptualization of the three worlds (First, Second, Third World) during the 'Cold War' or the more recent dichotomous division of the world into Global South and Global North. Recent debates on decolonization and the related question of our participation in the reproduction of imperial conceptions of the world follow on from this.

1. Phenomena of polarized worlds

Current social conflicts and social movements (for example #blacklivesmatter, Fridays for Future but also the Gilets Jaunes) point to the renewed conjuncture of polarization. This also raises empirical questions about the current constitution of 'polarized worlds'. Recent research, which looks at the past 200 years, indicates that the 'social gap' in terms of income and wealth is today less strongly determined by class, but by place of residence or citizenship- and thus by socio-spatial position. In addition, two opposing trends can be identified that intervene in the global structure of income inequalities and influence corresponding perceptions: On the one hand, inequalities between countries are decreasing; on the other hand, recalling Milanovic, Piketty, and so on, inequalities within countries as well as between income classes across countries are increasing. Here, questions of the scaling of 'world' also intrude: Does the horizon of social belonging refer to the nation-state (communitarianism) or to humanity (cosmopolitanism)? Taking social spaces into consideration, we also find it worthwhile to ask at what spatial dimensioning and at what range social relations are experienced as world community or world society. What is the relationship between social and spatial practice, for example with regard to mobility? To what extent does the advancing digitalization change shared experiences, affiliations and social relations?

At the same time, we would like to point out the historicizing dimension of the congress theme, its reference to time and future horizons. We are not only concerned with danger and risk, but also with the scope for thinking and shaping, with changeable ideas of 'it-could-also-be-other', with utopian as well as dystopian moments of worlds and of being-in-the-world. The human-induced consequences of climate change polarize the relationship between younger and older generations, the poor and the rich, and the negotiation of what kind of

world can be lived and survived in. The associated conflicts about shaping the future are complex, but equally elementary: How, for example, can the production of food, a distribution of land and ocean areas, or a global energy production look in the future that is fair and does not destroy livelihoods? Negotiations of the future also shape the present. In recent years, numerous studies point to political polarization processes that can be described in terms of a growing distance between different positions and opinions. New entanglements of milieus along the axis of factuality/contra factuality, pro and contra evidence-based approaches, and much more are worth mentioning here. Different polarizations can also be seen between and within (world) religions. Used as a stepping stone, they intervene in political, economic and private dimensions of polarization. For example, polarization processes in the labor market, as well as in areas of reproduction such as education, care, and health care.

2. Effects and impacts of polarized worlds

The consequences of polarization for social cohesion, for democracy and social change, for the formation of opinion in the public sphere and for the opportunities for conflict regulation are increasingly being discussed. Does polarization per se pose a threat to social cohesion and democracy, or is it (also) a necessary component of social change? This question arises for the struggles and disputes of marginalized and exploited social groups, but also for the debates in the middle classes and the intellectual understanding of world views that can be agreed upon. For polarization can also be accompanied by unusual alliance-building, new perspectives and new cohesion - or it can prevent them. This means that polarization processes do not necessarily lead to powerless and abandoned lifeworld's, but also to new contexts and strategies of coping and confrontation that need to be understood. When it comes to major social challenges, is polarization more part of the problem or part of the solution? Thus, on the one hand, polarization can endanger democratic processes and institutions; on the other hand, it can strengthen orientation and participation and enforce transparency and accountability. What spaces and formats does society provide for reflecting on polarization, promoting insight into its contingency, and asking underlying questions about how people live together? What contribution does sociology make to this reflection and balancing?

Experiences of flight and migration inscribe themselves globally in countless biographies - the death of fleeing and migrating people in the Mediterranean has become a drastic symbol of hierarchized worlds. Humanitarian interventions such as the rescue of shipwrecked people have become the subject of extreme polarization in Europe. While on one side there are calls for greater isolation, others are fighting to end it. Does polarization need to be overcome or rather factored in? Both occur empirically in projects of world(s)improvement. The importance of these questions emerges particularly clearly in historical perspective. While the 'Communist Manifesto' still names a clear carrier group of a desirable new social order, today multiple actors are identified, which are expressed in terms of 'multitude'. In this context, special attention has recently been paid to the polarization instruments of a digital society. The so-called 'social web' generates new alliances that exercise social and political power and contribute to the equalization of inequalities, but at the same time can generate exclusions through differently distributed access possibilities. Platforms become virtual places to be drawn to and used to draw undecideds from gray areas to particular sides. At the same time, these platforms undermine established structures of power. With regard to social networks, it can also be observed that they are becoming increasingly open and 'colorful', for example through transnational contacts and relationships (but not necessarily in all milieus). On the

other hand, there are also clear closing tendencies of the kind that ideologically/mentally closed groupings are gaining in importance, following cultural rather than material distinctions, reinforced by the possibilities of digitization ('echo chambers'). Here, an overarching question is to what extent digital support systems or socio-technical systems contribute to a reduction or reinforcement of social inequalities. After all, systems like these not only fail to eliminate prejudices, they can accentuate them and drive social divisions.' Digital twins,' representations of real people as increasingly rich and complex data conglomerates, have been little studied, and a social assessment of the extent to which they can or should actually be the basis of opportunity allocation has yet to be made. To what extent, for example, are findings from genome sequencing meaningful? What is the significance of process-produced data in the workplace, for example for performance evaluation? Accordingly, we also want to discuss mechanisms that contain (undesirable)polarizations or ask about compensation possibilities.

3. Sociology of polarized worlds

Almost 100 years after the debates of 1928, which poles and/or worlds is sociology talking about - and which is it not? And which poles are particularly prominent in certain periods? The classical repertoire of sociological answers, meanwhile, includes perspectives on fields, systems, social circles, situations and forms, milieus and life worlds, or worlds of justification. In addition, 'new discoveries' and 'rediscoveries' include (social-cultural) class, fragmentary differentiation, sub-sense worlds, human differentiation, or imitation rays. We understand these as an open list, the processing of which can be a subject of the congress. It is not exclusively about more or less novel differentiations. With the concept of polarization, gradations of its intensity are addressed beyond the differentiated, reaching as far as compartmentalization. This, in turn, establishes relationships to further dimensions of inequality and multiplicity. Following on from this, it must be asked to what extent the location of observation determines experience and action. Which worlds can only be grasped from certain and determinable world locations? What relations between them can we assume: in the form of competition, conflict, peaceful or hostile takeover, persuasion, persuasion, translation, suppression, interconnectedness, interdependence and much more? In turn, how does polarization itself relate to other concepts, such as contradiction, dialectic, dichotomy, binarity, paradox, ambivalence, indifference, antagonism, or alienation? How do polarization and fragmentation relate to each other? Can the perception of polarization be thought without mobilization? Do the attempts of so many polarized worlds to influence each other cancel each other out, or are different worlds accompanied by unequal chances of assertion? How do we make 'social worlds' and 'social polarities'? What role do bodies, materialities, practices or semantics play in this? Where and how are polarizations enacted, realized, and marked? The arbitrary or involuntary production of strict difference is also not a new phenomenon. Social media, digital online platforms, as well as the so-called dark web offer previously unknown possibilities of communalization as well as polarization. Moreover, observing the sociality that emerges here and the practices that constitute it as polarizing is not self-evident and requires sociological reflection: how is it possible that social worlds differentiate and that these worlds are then also evaluated as 'polarizations'? What is the significance of technology corporations such as the 'Big Five' (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) in the development, shaping and regulation of this digital sociality?

Finally: Sociology cannot treat itself as a great exception, it is in many ways part of the construction of 'polarization' and of 'world(s)'. It observes and already thereby creates differences; it defines, measures and cuts world(s) in this way; it creates its own conceptual

worlds, also takes a stand in public debates, which in turn can be observed as polarization. Many of the contemporary existential crises and phenomena that are part of polarized worlds test the methodologies of sociology. What some consider a plurality to be a strength of the discipline is, in a mild case, called 'multiparadigmatisis' (Luhmann), which in more severe cases can apparently lead to the division of a (specialized) society. Even if this polarization is or goes particularly close to us, the focus of our topic is that we live in a world full of polarized worlds on multiple levels that are related to each other in multi-layered ways. Understanding such constructions, relations and effects better should characterize the 41st Congress of the German Sociological Association.