

Translated excerpt

Nils C. Kumkar
Polarisierung

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Translated by David Burnett

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Introduction:

The Overview Effect of Polarization

Just because you're paranoid,
don't mean they're not after you!

– Nirvana, “Territorial Pissings” (1991)

Is society polarized or not? The question is much more complicated than it seems at first glance, but this book will provide a simple answer. Politically speaking, polarization is all but inevitable. Thus, the important and meaningful question is not *if* society is polarized but which kind of polarization can be turned to good use in which situations and how. The problem with this simple answer, however, is that it's likely of little use to the reader, or even worse: the reader might be inclined to use it the wrong way. Because the simple answer can be misconstrued as long as we fail to realize that our widespread fear of society being polarized or divided is inherently foreshortened, lopsided and misleading. Unpacking this misguided question is therefore perhaps even more important than the simple formula contained in the answer. Because – as I would like to show at the end of this book with my deliberations on why right-wing populist mobilization is so successful in the first place – polarization only seems scary because it is *perceived* as such.

Anyone who has ever grappled with a complicated problem knows that a misguided question can seriously hamper your progress, because you simply fail to realize what's holding you up at the same spot over and over again. Typically, when encountering patently false solutions, we have a tendency to hunker down even more, grimly determined to find the correct answer, without, of course, even bothering to ask if maybe the question was a red herring to begin with. This might have to do with the fact that most of us learned to “answer questions” in school, “stupid questions” being seen as an attack on the authority of teachers and hence frowned upon. Or with the fact that we find it so hard to bear when a situation lacks clarity that we positively shun the step back into even greater unclarity by asking, “What exactly is the question here?” Whatever the reason, misguided questions are among the most stubborn obstacles to political (and other types of) communication. The underlying premise of this

book is that the apparently so simple question of a polarized populace is in many respects a misguided question.

The first thing you notice in situations like this (if you didn't know it deep down already, but just didn't know how to respond) is that you're simply not making any progress. The equation can't be solved with any satisfaction, no matter how you break it down. Rents refuse to go down no matter how much support there is for private investment in new buildings, and fact checks fail to alleviate the uncertainty about which political actor is telling "the truth" and why. And so it should be obvious that the question "How divided is society and what can we do about it?" which is being asked in countless variants and giving rise to many correct yet contradictory answers, that this question is getting us nowhere, at least not if we want to find a definitive answer or do something to counteract the division we are witnessing. With that in mind, this book does not begin with the solution but with the problem posed by the problem itself.

It is very likely that you, as a reader of this book, are concerned about the growing rift in society or that social cohesion is being eroded. It is probably the reason many of you picked up this book in the first place. If that's the case, you're certainly not alone: two-thirds of Germans are worried about this development, at least according to the participants in a representative survey conducted in early 2024.¹ This concern is not only big, but growing. The clamor in the press has grown as well, with the relative frequency of "polarization" and similar terms having doubled in the past two decades, and "social division" having tripled.² The concern about social cohesion – or at least the political market for it – is so large that even the German Federal President has written a book on the topic, complete with a prescription for how it can be remedied.³ Reviewers quickly criticized the book for offering up dull feel-good platitudes, claiming it didn't live up to the hype, that it neglected the experiences of East Germans, and that no mention was made of the President's own very pro-Russian policies in his earlier capacity as foreign minister. They all agreed that it could have been an important book but that it roundly failed to satisfy.⁴ Polarization clearly worries

¹ R+V-Studie, "R+V-Studie. Große Angst vor politischem Extremismus" (February 19, 2024), online at: <https://www.ruv.de/newsroom/themenspezial-die-aengste-der-deutschen/pressemitteilungen/2024-02-19-aengste-der-deutschen-angst-vor-politischem-extremismus> (all URLs last retrieved in May 2025).

² Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023), 9.

³ Steinmeier, Frank-Walter, *Wir* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2024).

⁴ See, e.g., Jörg Lau, "'Wir' von Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Ein Buch, sie alle zu therapieren," *Die Zeit* (April 19, 2024), online at: <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2024-04/wir-frank-walter-steinmeier-buch-bundespraesident>; Stefanie Witte, "Frank-Walter Steinmeiers neues Buch. Vom gescheiterten Versuch, ein Wir-

people, even if they disagree about what exactly it means and, above all, how to deal with it. But this fits the diagnosis, since politely agreeing on what you disagree about and how best to resolve it would no longer reflect a state of polarization.

The disconcerting thing, however, is that when sociologists try to pin down the phenomenon of polarization and social division a completely different picture emerges. A book on the subject, called “Trigger Points,”⁵ made a stir in Germany in late 2023. Despite the title, and the authors going out of their way to clarify that it wasn’t intended as a “sedative,” public discussion about the book understood it less as a diagnosis than an all-clear signal, as the authors themselves admitted in retrospect.⁶ The population is ultimately not as polarized as it seems – this was the empirical conclusion of many reviews, not least of all, presumably, because it’s the most newsworthy conclusion given the broad public consensus that we are, in fact, living in a polarized society. It is worth taking a closer look at the specific diagnosis in the book underlying the impression of a false alarm. Namely, that when the population is surveyed about a variety of conflict issues there is no initial tendency to splinter into two hostile camps or mentalities. In many cases they assume an intermediate position, and the fault lines, more importantly, are clearly different depending on the topic addressed. This fundamentally challenges the standard narrative of polarization, which serves as the premise of much empirical social research. This standard narrative understands the polarization of society as a polarization of *attitudes* among individual *members* of this society, whose political opinions are said to be drifting ever farther apart, whereas the number of people occupying moderate positions is supposedly on the decline.⁷ The result is two large groups increasingly hostile to each other: a centrist, one-humped “dromedary” society has now become a two-humped “camel” society, to use the pithy terminology suggested by Steffen

Gefühl zu schaffen,” *Der Tagesspiegel* (April 17, 2024), online at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/frank-walter-steinmeiers-neues-buch-vom-gescheiterten-versuch-ein-wir-gefühl-zu-schaffen-11526416.html>; Gustav Seibt, “Buch des Bundespräsidenten ‘Wir.’ Morgens ein Wir und der Tag gehört dir,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (April 26, 2024), online at: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/steinmeier-bundespraesident-wir-1.6625585>.

⁵ Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023).

⁶ Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, “‘Ja, aber.’ Gesellschaftliche Konflikte verstehen. Eine Replik,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 76 (2024), 207-220, online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-024-00964-0>.

⁷ For the sake of completeness it should be noted that there are at least two conceptualizations of polarization, with reference primarily to issue-related attitudes within the population, and which will not be treated separately here but will be addressed later on: the concept of affective polarization, focused mainly on how the members of different large social groups mutually assess each other (very much in terms of attitudes, just not regarding political issues), as well as the concept of elite polarization, whose focus is to what extent the political positions of competing parties diverge. I will take a closer look at these concepts in chapters 3 and 4 in particular. Finally, there is sometimes talk of “income polarization,” when social inequality intensifies. This problem will not be addressed in this book, seeing as it is not particularly relevant to the debate on polarization.

Mau as a means to condense this narrative.⁸ Here the Right, there the Left. Here the communitarians, there the cosmopolitans.⁹ Here the old, there the new middle class.¹⁰ But if the attitudes are no longer drifting apart and, furthermore, the opinions on various issues are distributed in such a way as to cut across each other (so that, say, the dividing line in the clash over migration runs completely different than that over gender equality) there can be no talk of such large and increasingly self-contained ideological groups. Incidentally, the problem of this discrepancy between the public concern about polarization and less conclusive empirical findings also exists in an essentially similar set-up in the United States, the classic example of an even more polarized society. The research does in fact bear out that the attitudes of people in the United States increasingly align with two clusters broadly reflected by the two-party system there – the Republicans on the right and the Democrats of the left – with members of these two clusters being correspondingly hostile to each other.¹¹ But researchers have also discovered that the majority of people have much more similar opinions on a range of issues than one would think when looking at political discourse in the United States,¹² that, indeed, their views are much less different than even they themselves believe.¹³ But why do they apparently fail to notice this? And if they don't seem to notice it themselves, why don't they at least take comfort in the findings of social scientists, opting instead to see an ever greater polarization? It is the underlying hypothesis of this investigation that this discrepancy is not sufficiently explained by the misperception of these people or by the fact that they are being subtly deceived, their minds poisoned with hatred. It is my view that the discrepancy between public debate and empirical findings, a stubbornly enduring feature of social communication, cannot be resolved unilaterally by accusing either sociology or the public debate of having missed the mark. This book, in other words, is neither a warning cry nor an all-clear signal but a way to limber up our minds and gain a different understanding of the problem of polarization, to acknowledge its urgency and at the same time recognize that it's misguided to

⁸ Steffen Mau, "Kamel oder Dromedar?" *Merkur* 874 (2022), 5-18.

⁹ For a critical assessment, see Floris Biskamp, "Kein Kommunitarismus, nirgends. Eine Retraditionalisierung wird die Sozialdemokratie nicht retten. Replik auf Carsten Nickel," *Leviathan* 48, no. 1 (2020), 70-89.

¹⁰ Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019); for a critical assessment, see Nils C. Kumkar and Uwe Schimank, "Drei-Klassen-Gesellschaft? Bruch? Konfrontation? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Andreas Reckwitz' Diagnose der 'Spätmoderne'," *Leviathan* 49, no. 1 (2021), 7-32.

¹¹ Alan I. Abramowitz, "It's Only You and Me and We Just Disagree: The Ideological Foundations of Affective Polarization," *The Forum* 19, no. 3 (2021), 349-364.

¹² Morris P. Fiorina, Samuel A. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, "Polarization in the American Public: Misconceptions and Misreadings," *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008), 556-560.

¹³ Matthew S. Levendusky and Neil Malhotra, "(Mis)perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016), 378-391.

see it as a problem of increasingly polarized political views. To put it another way: we should entertain the possibility that both sides are right. *You're not wrong* if you gain the impression from your daily experiences that society is polarized. And *sociologists are not wrong either* if they find, from their point of view, that society is not polarized – indeed, that it is extremely unlikely theoretically speaking for a society to be divided this way, since the manifold, intersecting and countervailing tendencies of differentiation, say, in the economy, politics or religion, hardly ever converge in common let alone stable dividing lines.¹⁴

The others are the chickens: The overview effect

It is inherent to the phenomenon of social polarization that it presents a different face depending on where you look at it from. To make things even more challenging, polarization as an order of communication is built up in particular when it is described in different ways from various perspectives. And when you look for the point from which you can purportedly measure it objectively “from the outside” precisely the way it is experienced “from the inside” it subsequently becomes invisible, which by no means robs it of its power on the inside. I will go into more detail on this none too simple idea in the first and second chapters. At this juncture, though, a metaphor might be helpful. The relationship between the general population and sociological empiricism is a bit like the relationship between patient and doctor in a joke related by Slavoj Žižek:

a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain of seed but a man; however, when he is cured . . . he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared – there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. “My dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.” “Of course I know,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken?”¹⁵

The completely correct realization that, according to opinion polls, we do not live in a polarized society does not do people any good if in the moments they encounter “society” they, likewise correctly, experience it as polarized. Given that social scientists on the one

¹⁴ Jürgen Kaube and André Kieserling, *Die gespaltene Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin, 2022); Nils C. Kumkar, “Die Spaltung der Politik. Vom politischen Mehrwert einer haltlosen Behauptung,” *Freie Assoziation* 25, no. 2 (2023), 10-28.

¹⁵ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 351.

hand and the general population on the other seem to share the same reference problem – “polarization” – one might think that sociologists should simply explain to people that the thing they dread has no basis in empirical reality. But this, in fact, is part of the misunderstanding. The one (our sociologists) looks at the patient and can’t find anything remotely seed-like about him. The other (the people) looks at the chicken and sees precisely that: a chicken, which is well known to eat grains of seed. And neither side is wrong! Public opinion polls find no clear, society-wide confrontation between large, politically well-defined groups, but when people observe the political discussion this is how they see it, and, perhaps more importantly: this is how it plays out in the end. The right-wing AfD party relentlessly increases its share of the vote from election to election, families are divided over Covid measures, the tabloids revel in physical violence against “climate gluers,” while “war hawks” and “Putin lackeys” berate each other on the Internet . . . The chicken eats its seed!

If the joke about the chicken and the man doesn’t seem very plausible to you, since it seems rather obvious that a man who insists he’s a grain of seed would have nothing to fear from a lone chicken, then perhaps another image will help, admittedly one less forced than the joke: namely, that the earth is a sphere surrounded by a life-threatening environment – a fact we’ve been aware of ever since the first satellites, and then the first humans, were launched into those hostile surroundings. And yet before these technological leaps no human had ever seen the Earth from afar; its spherical shape had hitherto only been a mental construct. Those who now looked down at the Earth from a completely new vantage point were fascinated by what they saw and reported having a totally new appreciation for their planet of origin: the extremely thin atmosphere, the interconnectedness of everything, the fragility of our home base in the cosmos – all of which seemed to underscore the short-sightedness and senselessness of political conflict, the sheer vanity of so much human behavior.

This psychological phenomenon, dubbed the “overview effect” by author Frank White¹⁶ and generally considered a reasonable description of the intense experience reported by astronauts¹⁷ despite some skepticism on the part of scholars in the broader application of the term, has been used by a wide range of actors to provide a new perspective on the problems of humanity. The iconic photo of the Earth, *The Blue Marble*, taken in 1972 by astronauts of the Apollo 17 mission, a slightly modified version of which is supposedly the most

¹⁶ David, Leonard, “Space Philosopher Frank White on ‘The Overview Effect’ and Humanity’s Connection with Earth,” *Space.Com* (2022), online at: <https://www.space.com/frank-white-overview-effect>.

¹⁷ David B. Yaden et al., “The Overview Effect: Awe and Self-transcendent Experience in Space Flight,” *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 3, no. 1 (2016), 1-11.

reproduced image in the world,¹⁸ is a staple of visual imagery in the environmental movement as well as in ethics classes. *The Blue Marble* came to symbolize the notion that we're all in the same boat.

Some journalists and of course the propagandists of commercial space travel take the view that the transformative experience of seeing the Earth from afar can save humanity from itself, because only from up above does one see how everything is interconnected.¹⁹ It is not my intention at all to deny the reality of this experience, on the contrary: viewing the Earth from afar is indeed a very real experience and illustrates in a tangible way how we can expand our awareness by removing ourselves from daily experience. But you commit a categorical error if you take this impression for something more real than the experiences of those who are caught up in day-to-day conflicts and problems here on Earth, or if we think that we can somehow rectify the latter with the former. The fact that we on the Earth's surface can only *imagine* the spherical nature of our planet and can only render it meaningful for our actions in a roundabout way, this is no less real than the Earth's sphericalness itself – and herein lies the crucial parallel to the question of polarization.

Thus (and not solely for this reason), the overview effect as a cure for people misguidedly caught in their petty struggles has three fatal flaws. Indeed, there's no surer way to accelerate global warming and the destruction of our natural habitat than sending a small but relevant minority into space to enlighten them about sustainability. Furthermore, we should bear in mind that the Apollo 17 crew could hardly have taken the photo at all if the defining world-political conflict of that era, the Cold War, hadn't fueled the space race in the first place. In a certain sense, these supposedly transparent and illusory conflicts were the actual driving force behind a development that supposedly exposed these very conflicts as illusory. If, in the end, we want the experience of interconnectedness to go beyond the religious or pedagogical and have practical political repercussions then it has to be politically reinterpreted and reintroduced into the very field of conflict it sought to counteract in the first place. When

¹⁸ Sebastian W. Hoggenmüller, "Die Welt im (Außen-)Blick. Überlegungen zu einer ästhetischen Re|Konstruktionsanalyse am Beispiel der Weltraumfotografie 'Blue Marble,'" *Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung* 17, nos. 1-2 (2016), 11-40. It was this essay, recommended to me by Franz Hoegl in a private conversation, where I first encountered the overview effect.

¹⁹ Becky Ferreira, "Seeing Earth from Space is the Key to Saving our Species from Itself," *Vice* (October 12, 2016), online at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bmvpqxq/to-save-humanity-look-at-earth-from-space-overview-effect>; Kate Yoder, "How the View from Space Might Be Key to Saving the Planet," *Grist* (February 9, 2022), online at: <https://grist.org/climate/overview-effect-view-of-earth-from-space-astronauts-climate-change/>; Mike Wall, "The View from Space Could Change the World, Virgin Galactic Says," *Space.Com* (February 11, 2019), online at: <https://www.space.com/43288-virgin-galactic-space-travel-overview-effect.html>.

demonstrations for more climate protection put the blue marble on their banner, then this, like the appeal to science, is a political and hence a *conflict*-oriented act. Invoking the overview effect as evidence of a truth that transcends partisan dispute is itself a commitment to this struggle, documenting its truth as well.