
INTERVIEW: 'DESPITE FEAR, WE SHOULD FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES'

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DW: The symbolic nature of Monday's truck attack has certainly hit home. On Germany's most widely read newspaper, Bild, the word ANGST is spread across the entire front page. Professor Furedi, how would you describe what's going on in the German psyche right now?

Frank Furedi: I think Germany and other Western societies, when they suffer these kinds of attacks, are particularly fearful because of their random quality. One of the important aspects of this kind of threat is that it is not focused on a particular individual or a particular target. The message that it sends out - which is more important than the actual number of people killed - is that that anybody is a potential target. That's what random violence like this does.

And I think that when people know about being intentionally and randomly targeted, it often has a fairly short term effect for a short period of time. People feel fairly anxious and insecure. I'm not surprised by the German reaction; it's the same as we've seen in other western societies. But in Germany, this threat is coupled with a powerful sense of cultural insecurity, along the lines of: What have we done? We've got people in our midst who are potentially our enemies, who hate us. And I think that gives it an even more difficult dimension. The enemy is no longer out there, the enemy is within.

If it turns out that Monday's attacker was a refugee - or rather someone registered here seeking asylum who was literally waved in and welcomed by the German people last year - do you think rage can act together with fear and that these can intensify each other mutually?

I think it's too early for that yet. I was talking to a colleague about this earlier this week, a psychologist, and he said at some point these attacks are going to unleash a more powerful backlash - and a more powerful reaction. I think that's true. There will come a point at which people are just so fed up. Then something will happen. But I think from what I understand of the German situation that this is still fairly limited, surprisingly limited. And although some people are trying to provoke a reaction and make fairly unhelpful remarks or comments that are just going to fuel the passions, I don't think that at this particular moment in time that's going to kick in. I think at the moment you have this kind of combination of numbness, you feel numb, culturally insecure and a bit scared.

The response in Germany and in Berlin, in particular, wasn't just fear. On Tuesday, the Christmas markets were closed, and then the next day people went out to show that they're not going to let the terrorists win. How do you assess that response?

Well it's a very positive response. I mean that's more or less what happened in London after the July 2005 bombings. That's what happened after the Bataclan shootings in Paris in 2015, when people went to dance, or also in Brussels, you had parties. Very often when people feel that they've been trampled upon and really violated, there is this positive aspiration to display resilience, and I think that's what this reaction demonstrated.

There is a message that says, look we're fighting back, we are not going to take this, and we are not going to change the world we live in, just because you are terrorizing us. That's really what you've got to build on: those kinds of positive responses. That's got to be normalized rather than the more passive fatalistic fear response.

[UK | Professor em Frank Furedi (University of Kent)]

Furedi: "History shows that attacks create a sense of solidarity"

Could this even make German society stronger?

It can. History shows that whenever people are under attack, it does create a sense of solidarity and that's how communities have been forged in the past. So there is always that possibility. But that requires a common narrative about what's happening. At the moment Germany is a bit too divided for that to occur.

People have different versions of events, as to how to deal with the situation. I think Germany is going through a period of cultural uncertainty about what it means to be a German and who they are as a people. I think for that reason, the kind of solidarity that is occurring is temporary rather than enduring. But there is no reason why it should not occur, because people have this capacity to bounce back and understand that they have to take responsibility. This is not something that police and security officials can contain and deal with. And that's the message that one needs to send to people in Germany. At the end of the day, the safety and security of a society and the community depends on what people in that community do.

What would you say to someone who says that now Christmas will never be the same - or that Christmas has been killed?

I would say, well, take a reality check. Take a deep breath. There have been some very bad events during Christmas time in the past. Just enjoy it as much as possible. And show that we are alive, that the Christmas spirit lives on. We are going to celebrate and make our young people, particularly children, happy. Rather than focusing on the bad things, we should focus on the positives.

Frank Furedi is Emeritus Professor at the University of Kents School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research in Canterbury, UK. He is an expert on fear and has published numerous books on the sociology of fear, education, therapy culture and parenting.

The interview was conducted by Gabriel Borrud and will be broadcast this weekend on DW's radio weekly WorldLink.

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