

Founding Statement of the Institut Solidarische Moderne

Released on January 31, 2010 in Berlin

It is time for new political concepts. We face life-threatening social hazards that call for politically feasible answers. The problems of our world are clear: from the current resource-destroying concept of growth that is increasingly approaching economical - as well as ecological - limits, to the substantial gap between the private accumulation of wealth and widespread poverty, from the daily violation of human rights, to manifold new conflicts and threats to peace. Such problems are well-known, and they have been debated at countless international meetings, but they have increasingly become worse over the past two decades. The hegemony of political and economic neo-liberalism is certainly one reason for this deteriorating situation., While it presumed to be free of ideology, promoted as the only path, and celebrated as a triumphal success, this system has, in reality, had devastating consequences for humanity, nature, and society.

A substantial political response to the ideology of neo-liberalism is long overdue. Too often it has been declared that (unfortunately) there is no alternative to this ideology. This is not true. But there are many other things on this planet that really have no alternative. If we want to find long-term solutions for problems – instead of fighting symptoms in the short-term – we also need long-term, networked, thinking. And to this there really is no alternative. Political positions are, in fact, never without alternatives. But a real political alternative to neo-liberalism would require a deep understanding of the interaction between ecology and economy, and take into account the social and cultural needs of people. It must be based on principles of free self-determination and create solidarities that traverse borders. The alternatives to contemporary neo-liberalism will not emerge by themselves, they need to be constructed, conceptualized, and experimented with collectively. The common search for these alternatives requires a decisive contribution from all those within our society who are asking for them, as well as a transformation of these contributions into a political majority in democratic elections. It is for this reason that we have founded the Institut Solidarische Moderne.

What is happening?

We live in a world where nearly every social responsibility has been eschewed and an economy that relies mainly on short-term yields. Global competition depends on what the profiteers call “cheap” labour, “cheap” food, and “cheap” energy, all of which have proved to be devastating from a social, cultural and ecological point of view. Even the economic “efficiency” of these competitive practises are in doubt. A growing number of people suffer from political systems that have, in one breath, declared their powerlessness or incompetence to save financial markets, even as these political actors have continued to show themselves capable of protecting “systemically relevant” particularist interests and well-prepared to carry out massive and highly expensive interventions.

The citizens of democratic states have increasingly witnessed, and become victims of, the sometimes creeping and subtle, other times rapid, cutbacks of individual and social rights. This crumbling democracy comes hand in hand with the implementation of comprehensive control and surveillance systems, as well as other mechanism to discipline, lull, and generally immobilize the population. They experience the ongoing domination of patriarchal structures, the disenfranchisement immigrants, and the discrimination of everyone that does not meet the normative standards of the majority society. The economy that has long abandoned every ecological responsibility. We face a disenfranchised society that has suffered enormous setbacks and restrictions to its diversity. “Turbo capitalism” and “post democracy” – such are the global characteristics of really existing neo-liberalism. As those in western, relatively affluent societies suffer from these conditions, will largely resigning themselves to them, there are many other places where people simply starve and die.

As national and global neo-liberalism profits from political disappointment and social apathy, the “disenchantment” with existing political parties and unquestioned individualism contributes to shaping contemporary social conditions. The daily business of neo-liberal “modernity” could be described as a long complaint about the political perplexity and the inactivity of citizens while it simultaneously promotes this state of affairs. Neo-liberal politics in fact feed on social lethargy, lack of political interest, social demobilisation and democratic abstinence, in short: on lifeless democracies.

Where to start?

A living democracy demands the political realization of values such as freedom, equality, autonomy and participation, justice and solidarity. Those who dismiss these values as second-

ary to the organization of society will easily abandon the principles of democracy, including the idea of a state that guarantees the survival and right to self-development for all citizens.

If we want, however, to put these values into practice in our societies it is essential to question the existing concepts and to think about alternatives that will revive democracy on the basis of democratic self-determination.

For a Modern Solidarity!

Debates attempting to define “the left” have all too often created divisions within leftist movements; the question “what is the left?” can also paralyze action and decrease political capabilities. The goal today, as ever, is rather to bring people together in order to develop and expand emancipatory alternatives to prevailing policies. Such alternatives need to be based in solidarity. Establishing emancipatory concepts is a historical task that, even today, remains a challenge. Every historical period has faced setbacks and obstacles to this task; ours obstacle today is that of neo-liberal hegemony. And it remains crucial that we find means for common action in order to establish a solidarity-based society that guarantees equal rights, freedom and self-determination.

“Industrial modernity” brought about an economy of commodities, but it also inherited the principles of the Enlightenment, out of which the ideas and the actions of the “classic” left emerged – namely, equality and justice, solidarity and democracy. The social concepts of the industrial age, and the “industrial left” in particular, concentrated on the equal distribution of wealth produced by the society. The critique of capitalism was ignited by calls for justice, above all where material wealth was unequally distributed. Social action aimed at realizing the principles of the Enlightenment through forms of solidarity, and the increased participation of the “labour force” in the economic management of rising social wealth. The industrial left, however, became constrained once modern industrial capitalism reached its limits in terms of growth and resources, thus raising the question of a “post-industrial left.” The industrial left’s tendency to focus exclusively on labour, meanwhile ignoring other, equally important, social activities in the fields of reproduction, political engagement, education and leisure, revealed itself to be a detriment to political action and solidarity. While during this period the left emphasized capitalism as a system based on the exploitation of vast majorities by privileged minorities, its major flaw was to have neglected other oppressive mechanisms such as the systematic oppression of women by patriarchal power structures.

On the basis of the broad prosperity of post-war societies, which was largely achieved by the organised worker's movement, a vast spectrum of new social movements began to emerge in western “post-modernity.” The environmentalist movement, as well as the anti-war and women's liberation movements, gave birth to a new, alternative left that was also attuned to non-material needs and new social issues such as freedom of individual expression and self-determination, cultural diversity and democratic participation, gender justice and the protection of the natural environment.

But perhaps something got lost in these movements – namely, the critique of industrial modernity and its actors. Many of the “old” social problems remained even in the “new” capitalism of services, knowledge and information. Immaterial labour and the growing focus on self-development certainly did not solve or render redundant the issue of the distribution of material wealth. Whether in the world's capitalist “centres” (where they were often obscured by economic growth), or its “margins” in the societies of the Global South (and perhaps even more in the relationship between these two) the old problems persist.

What must be done?

Given the track record of democratic and left-wing organisations and movements, which shows notable historical successes, but also many strategic errors, the contemporary left is obliged to defend and stand-up for a new concept of modernity. This contemporary left must strive for a modernity that unites and expands both the “old” leftist call for the just distribution of socially produced wealth and the “new” leftist emphasis on self-determination. At the beginning of the 21st century the left faces the undeniable problems of a changed world – this world that has yet to be shaped on the basis of solidarity. By the term Modern Solidarity we wish to affirm a process of necessary reconciliation between the emancipatory approaches of both the industrial era and postmodernity in order to further efforts in developing socio-economic solutions to the problems of our times. Today we must struggle for equal participation of all citizens, for equal access to all assets produced by the society, for public guarantees of acceptable living conditions, and for the equal chances of survival for everyone.

We need a political struggle for cultural self-determination and democratic participation and we also need a political concept that ensures equal public esteem and support for different life styles. Our “modern times” call for political struggles for an ecologically sustainable economy that relies on renewable resources and that takes into account the social cost of damages to the climate and environment. In short, we need to struggle for a just world where

nobody lives at the expense of others and where conflicts are peacefully solved in the spirit of cosmopolitan solidarity.

Modern Solidarity must provide new directions for the emancipatory criticism of capitalism, patriarchal structures and the dominant social order – but it need not re-invent the wheel. Struggles for the redistribution of material resources and struggles for the recognition of social diversity must be brought together. In order to achieve emancipation for everyone and a society liberated from dull, oppressive, and patronizing practices and structures, Modern Solidarity needs new concepts of criticism that both draws attention to the prevailing power structures and focuses on democracy. More precisely, it must reveal how existing democracies have been steadily dismantled, and how that process has affected all those that would benefit from real democratic conditions.

Finally, Modern Solidarity must overcome the intellectual and political expropriation of the old and new social movements by capitalism. The left of the Modern Solidarity must fight against the empty promises of liberal-capitalism that free markets bring increased social welfare. It must struggle against the privatisation of public services and infrastructures and against the industrial-capitalist bubble of growth without limits. Such efforts will necessarily contribute solutions to the question of distribution. In addition, a Modern Solidarity must question the artificial rhetoric of “flexibility” and reveal the ideology behind the assertions of permanent growth and the fiction of unlimited possibilities of self-development that “flexible capitalism” and “knowledge society” claim to provide, Modern Solidarity stands for a broad-based social movement that strives to achieve economic, political and cultural rights alongside all those citizens who oppose the prevailing tendency whereby responsibility for social production is transferred from the public sector into the direct ownership of private individuals. Modern Solidarity must fight for maintaining and expanding an infrastructure of public goods that promotes solidarity-based financing. In all these fields, and in many others, the social aspirations held by the majority for a modern, solidarity-based, political organization of society –aspirations that are certainly realizable - must also be transformed into an adequate political majority.

What are we going to do?

The Institut Solidarische Moderne wants - wherever possible – to initiate a public conversation that is characterised by this process of transformation. The association brings together political actors from both public organisations and political parties, as well as those from

academic sciences and social movements who are motivated by a desire to create alternative programmes and alternative policies. The association defines itself as a think tank for future political projects and organises its work within a framework intended to provide open and innovative possibilities for the participation of everyone who feels a connection to the project of a Solidary Modernity. We believe that more discussion and political resistance are needed to fight the prevailing neo-liberal order that has manifested itself in multiple ways. This belief has been the crucial factor for founding the Institut Solidarische Moderne and it orients our guiding principle: we wish to be a forum for public debate about a counter-proposal to prevailing neo-liberal policies. The association seeks – among other things – to forge thematic links around the knowledge that solidarity-based political action and ecological change are inextricably linked. Tangible and sustainable success can only be achieved if the ISM becomes a venue for individual and political, European, as well as international, “crossovers”. By bringing together thinking and acting on a socio-political level the association is making new and visible links across the political landscape in order to create common ground among multiple actors. This is the necessary basis to shape alternatives.

To a certain degree, we need “only” spread and popularise existing knowledge about political problems. Beyond this, we will still need to face the substantial questions of our times. Together, we will ask what social-political alternatives are available in order to reach workable answers.

Pressing Questions

Social economy: How can we insert social and ecological concerns within economic globalisation? How would the international economic and financial order be reshaped if national economic structures were fully democratized? How might labour be transformed in a way that revives and expands the struggles of the past – which are currently endangered -- to humanely organize work? How might public interest in its social productivity be maintained (or replaced)? How can the just distribution of the general social productivity be achieved among all members of the society through increasing the financial basis of the public sector and despite the globalisation of economy? What would be the main characteristics of a sustainable financial policy that is committed to the principle of solidarity across generations in the face of ageing societies? How can a solidary modern economy be organized beyond traditional parties and forms of wage-labour?

ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE: In what way must the transformation towards a ecologically sustainable basis of renewable resources proceed if the goal is qualitative improvement instead of quantitative growth and without new social dislocation? How can we transform the capitalist global economy that relies on fossil fuels towards an economy that invests in a sustainable management of our planet? What are the control measures the individual nations and Europe have to establish in order to set in motion this process of transformation? What are the consequences for the living conditions in western democracies? How can the industrialised nations of the north practise “ecological solidarity” with the people in those countries that suffer most from the consequences of climate change? What are the characteristics of a new global food security system that ensures a life in dignity for everyone without super-exploitation of the earth?

HUMANIST EDUCATION AND CULTURAL EMANCIPATION: How can educational opportunities be effectively democratised? How can comprehensive education programs offering professional qualification (i.e. modern technical education), be implemented that would also provide democratic, aesthetic, cultural and social competences? How can gender stereotypes be abolished and how can tolerance for a multiplicity of ways of life be established within heterogeneous societies? How might democracy be promoted in the production and consumption of cultural goods? And how might the political independence of media be ensured, enabling it to realise its educational mandate within a democratic society?

GENDER JUSTICE: How do we achieve gender justice in all social fields and simultaneously help women, as well as men, to free themselves of traditional, patriarchal stereotypes? How do we effectively fight violence against women and girls on a global level? How do we distribute forms of reproductive work, which has historically been shouldered by women, between men and women and at the same time create appropriate public recognition of that work as a source of social wealth equal to the production of goods? How do we overcome unjust hierarchic division of labour between men and women, and establish economic independence for all women? How can we better enable women to implement their right to equal participation in shaping social conditions? How can we overcome heteronormativity on a social level?

DEMOCRATIC WELFARE STATE: How do we use assets, financed on the basis of solidarity, in the fields of education, counselling, and healthcare in order to provide high-quality services that are accessible for all citizens? How can basic social rights and individual self-determination be ensured through the public action of everyone? How can the institutionalised, industrial-society based characteristics of welfare states, which rely on labour and performance, be transformed into systems based on civil rights that take into account the reality of a changed concept of wage-labour? How can wealth be more equally distributed, and paid labour redistributed within society, so that various forms of socially useful activity also provide social security for all of the members of that society?

What political steps must the rich “developed” societies of the “global North” take in order to transform both the mode of distribution of growth (overwhelmingly achieved by exploitative forms of production) and the distribution of material losses, without the resentments and racism, exclusion and a loss of democracy that tear apart societies? And moreover, in the face of this question, how would the definition living standards be changed if it no longer relied on the assumption of permanent growth of material wealth?

GRASS-ROOT COSMOPOLITANISM, GLOBAL SOCIAL RIGHTS AND RULES, EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY: What would a human rights-oriented cosmopolitanism look like that values the multicultural diversity of world culture? How can conflicts be resolved without violence in a world that has increasingly privatised military violence and evaded existing international human rights standards? How much influence in shaping global processes and phenomena should be granted to supra-national organisations, institutions, and regimes and, by contrast, which grass-root movements, “from below,” are indispensable for a democratic society? What would the distribution of tasks across regions and nations, as well as European and global bodies, look like? How can we create non-military concept of security and how can it be politically implemented? How can a reform of the European Union -- in the spirit of Modernity Solidarity -- be achieved and how might Europe act as a workshop for ideas, as well as a bridge, for producing alternative political forms and social development processes?

DEMOCRATIC AWAKENING AND SOCIAL DIVERSITY: How can the self-empowerment of men and women be supported and how can we strengthen the fundamental rights and freedoms

of citizens? How do we create democratic institutions that return “all power to the people”? How can regulation be organized and democratically controlled in such a way that it becomes a resource for the self-organisation of society, instead the instrument of state paternalism? How can we, given that a large part of the European population are immigrants, establish the right to political participation on new and expanded grounds? How do we overcome the technocratic policy integration between institutional levels and strengthen decentralised, self-administrative competences? How can parliaments be strengthened relative to the executive power and what are the necessary steps for parties to reform and open themselves to the real participation of all the citizens in a society? And in what ways can we promote economic democracy? What measures must be undertaken to create a democratic society that resists forms of institutionalised racism, as well as racism in daily life? How can the right to privacy and individual self-determination be guaranteed? And how, finally, do we organise solidarity in a way that does not impose norms, but rather guarantees individuality in a diverse and heterogeneous society?

Many pressing questions, but also so many answers. The time is now – to both ask these questions, as well as to find solutions that can be politically realized.

It is time for new ideas. The Institut Solidarische Moderne is committed to seeking them: open to innovative approaches, thinking in networks, and acting collectively, we wish to proceed by asking questions. And we believe that in doing so we will find answers that make another republic, another society, another world possible, here and now, before our very eyes, together. We do not wish to remain closed in on ourselves. Everyone who desires to contribute to the shaping of Modernity Solidarity is warmly welcome!