

Doable Versus Desirable

By Bodo Hombach

When asked why U.S. intelligence services were spying on so many people around the world, John Kornblum, the former U.S. ambassador to Germany, promptly replied: “Because we can.” His response could also be an axiom for our times. Today, we can do so many different things because of the many new technological possibilities we have.

That’s nothing new. Inventors are always tinkering with new ideas, in the hope of turning them into something functional. They seldom wonder whether their inventions will ever be useful for the general public.

Often these inventions come about as a force of nature, without passing through political processes. And only when they enter the mass market with sellers scrambling to find buyers does it dawn on the guardians of public interest that there might be some risks and side effects.

Many new technologies only appeal to small groups of people. But some of these technologies change the behavior of whole societies – and with major consequences.

We live in an age of attainable utopias. If he were still alive, Jules Verne would struggle to find an idea for his next novel that would be unimaginably new. Our technical civilization, driven by the electronic and digital revolution and cheered on by competition and the global market, offers more new ways of doing things.

In the past, shortages challenged people. Today, we’re challenged by excess. In technologically advanced regions, no other generation has experienced such a democratization of progress. Nor have our primary and secondary needs ever been so sated.

But such unlimited possibilities have a darker side, too. The question arises as to whether progress is accompanied by dangers to our quality of life or to that of future generations.

Social psychologists predict our excitement of all the possibilities will be followed by a hangover that we can’t remedy with an aspirin. The trouble is that our calculations are incorrect; debt and credit aren’t distributed equally. The wonderful achievements of the Internet – global communication, the availability of knowledge, the growth of transparency and participation – have long been overtaken by spam, cybercrime and surveillance on a large scale. As in the past, when new worlds were discovered, power today is concentrated in the hands of a handful of digital doers; we regular folk are subject to a new form of colonization.

In the 1980s, Germany’s Social Democrats started questioning all these new changes, arguing that “just because something is possible doesn’t mean it’s desirable.”

The phrase caught on. Critics of what was doable gained the upper hand, slamming on the brakes with the effects still evident today. People became suspicious of the spirit of invention and the courage to innovate.

If only the party had chosen a slightly different phrase like “We want what is desirable and will do all we can to make it possible,” the pendulum wouldn’t have swung the wrong way, and today, there would be a broader consensus. Materialists and

idealists would hammer it out and meet half way. After all, it's good to have a view on things, but it's even better to have a long-term view.

There will always be tension between the doable and the desirable. It will arise from the different ways of perceiving reality. Some say economic growth is a prerequisite for wealth, sustainability and social equilibrium, according to the motto: you can only distribute what you have already produced. Others say this is madness and see consumer economies as the devil's work and source of all evil.

No one should be surprised when rational arguments meet with prejudice, factual questions turn out to be fundamental problems and responsibilities clash with principles or when fear battles hope, the rich oppose the poor, and progressives fight with conservatives. Problems arise out of unequal personal and collective development.

Thankfully, there are strategies to handle the gap between the doable and the desirable – ways and methods that might not end the conflict but help address it in a constructive way.

Democratic structures at every level offer alternatives to resolve conflicts. Transparency and involvement create trust and engagement. Factual explanation raises the complexity of arguments and reduces the complexity of conflict. For sure, most problems can't be solved by just saying stop, but they can be reduced into smaller parts, removing the sense of a huge threat. Progress is achieved step by step.

Relational dynamics are another decisive factor. Conflicts become more solvable if there is sympathy between adversaries. In troubled times, consensus and consideration are valuable because both are so rare. There's a certain amount of irrationality that flows through all social discussions. There's also a destructive self-interest that tends to recklessly oppose the general good. Both are enemies of the desirable new.

You can't do more damage to a good thing than by defending it with the wrong means. Everyone loses.

The antinomy between desirable and doable is not a dilemma, but a sign of a high degree of civilization and development. At this level, a society can allow itself to discuss the facts and also attitudes. Both meanings are binary stars of a shared system. Each change to one means a change to the other.