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Peter C. Dienel: Eulogy for a Deliberative Democracy Pioneer

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Peter C. Dienel
Eulogy for a Deliberative Democracy Pioneer

The announcement of Prof. Dr. Peter Dienel's death reads, "Our beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother, brother-in-law and uncle died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of 83." It was the end of a long, unusual and highly productive life. He was the inventor of the "Planungzelle", or "planning cell", which he thought up in 1969 or 1970 and first conducted in 1971.

He is the pioneer of what has become the deliberative democracy movement. His invention was followed by the Citizens Jury (conceived in 1971 and first conducted in 1974), the Televote (1974 or 1975) and the Granada 500 in Britain (early 1970s), precursor to the Deliberative Poll.

I first learned of Peter's work when he wrote me in the late spring of 1985. He had heard of the Citizens Jury process from an American visitor and wrote to say that he thought we were doing similar work. Since my wife and I had already planned a trip to France, it was easy to add a visit to Germany as well.

We were warmly greeted by him and his wife Dorothea. They were very gracious hosts, not only to us, but to a succession of needy students and even people leaving prison and needing a place to stay, one of whom was living in their house at the time.

Almost immediately we settled down to talk about our mutual inventions. I speak fluent, but flawed German. He spoke perfect English. Our conversation went back and forth between the two languages. Soon my wife and I noticed that he had an amazing dexterity with the two languages, switching in mid-sentence from one to the other without misplacing any verbs, all the while speaking with great clarity.

On the second day of our visit, he started to answer my questions about why he had decided on a particular detail of the process by saying simply: "For the same reason that you do it that way." This was so odd that I felt compelled to say something absurd. So I interrupted our conversation by suddenly saying, "Your mother is named Elisabeth, isn't she?"

Dienel: "Yes, but why do you ask?"

Crosby: "And your daughter, she is Elisabeth too, isn't she!"

Dienel: "Yes, but why do you ask?"

Crosby: "Because mine are too." It turned out that my Elisabeth was born on June 30, 1963, and his Elisabeth was born on July 7, 1963.

In 1985, Dienel's Institute for Citizen Participation and Planning Methods was in the middle of conducting one of its largest projects. Over two dozen separate

Planungzelle were being run across Germany on the future of energy production. This appears to be the largest project ever conducted where randomly selected citizens were gathered in a deliberative setting to discuss the same topic in meetings lasting more than one day. It was commissioned by the federal government, but regrettably, just as the project was completed, the CDU took over from the SPD as the majority in the German parliament and the results of the large project were ignored.

Peter Dienel did his graduate work in the sociology of religion. Indeed, he studied theology for some time. He worked at a conference center before getting a position as professor at the University of Wuppertal. He said that the discussions at the conference center allowed him to see how fruitful discussions between people could be.

At the University of Wuppertal his staff consisted of a secretary and graduate students. Using these meager resources as a base, he and his Center accomplished an amazing amount over the years. He was constantly searching for projects or trying to set up conferences to get people to appreciate the virtues of using small groups of randomly selected people to study public policy questions.

The last time we visited Peter and Dorothea he was in his middle 70s, but vigorous as ever. He greeted us at the door of his house and insisted in taking both our bags in hand to take us upstairs to our bedroom. His age showed only in that his English was fading a bit and Dorothea had to help him, something that she never had to do when we met. From what we could see in our few visits, Dorothea was a wonderful support to him. Her intelligence, warmth and common sense added a stability to the somewhat chaotic life he led.

His accomplishments were all the more unusual given the era and culture in which he lived and taught. In the Germany of the 1970s and 80s it was still the norm among professionals to use the formal “you” when addressing colleagues, even ones with whom you had worked for years. The German professor who headed a department was considerably more powerful than department heads in the United States, and correspondingly more isolated from informal contacts among colleagues. Yet Dienel’s empathy with everyday people was such that he overcame these cultural barriers and saw the virtue in gathering randomly selected groups of people together to discuss public policy. That he did this in Germany before anyone thought of doing it in America shows not only his innovative mind, but his deep commitment to overcoming some of the elitist tendencies in democracy that a number of American scholars had complained of, but had done nothing practical to rectify.

Peter died suddenly on December 13, 2006 because of a fall. He was still working vigorously promoting the Planungzelle. He will be missed, but there is no doubt that his work will live on, and democracy the world over is the better for his contributions.

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