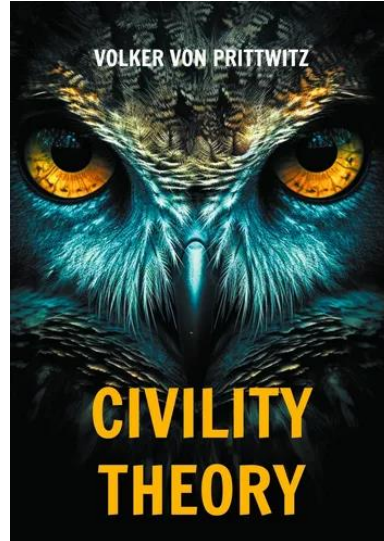# What does civility theory mean?

A talk between Felix Zachau and Volker von Prittwitz

The theory of civility has developed based on long studies and current reflection. Felix Zachau, research associate at Civility gUG, talks about this theory with the author, Volker von Prittwitz.

Hello Volker, I would like to start our conversation with the cover of the book *Civility Theory*, which particularly appeals to me. What do you associate with the owl on the cover?

Probably similar to you and everyone who looks at the cover: first of all, that sharp, captivating look that seems somewhat menacing. The cover owl has something mysterious about it that some people associate with a fantasy novel; traditionally, however, the owl stands for wisdom and prudence - all associations that I like for the theory of civility. This is because it can be used to analyze society and politics with a keen eye; it reveals hidden connections between civilityand human development, but above all enormous political potential.

Many people think of *civilization* when they hear the word *civility*. How do you feel about the derived term *civilized*?

The word *civilization* contains the term *civil*, which traditionally stands for civic coexistence. In this respect, the concept of civilization has the potential to provide knowledge and orientation. However, in the history of colonialist thought, the derived terms *civilized* and *uncivilized* have been used to exclude and disparage third parties - a fundamental contradiction that challenges theory formation. In view of this, the concept of *civility* is defined as mutual respect in the awareness of shared responsibility, whereby commonalities between all participants come to the fore.

So civility also in view of our common history as humanity?

Yes, human groups have often fought each other, but humanity can only survive if it is aware of its shared responsibility - see the common fight against superior predators in the past and the current challenge of jointly reducing anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions so quickly, strongly and comprehensively that the Human-Earth system can continue to exist.

Why did you decide to develop a theory with this practical orientation?

Everything we do or don't do depends on how we understand our situation and which concepts and thought models we use as a basis: theory. This is why the widespread theory-bashing (together with ideas of immediate practicality) is counterproductive. Humanity does not see itself as humanity enough - a fatal theory deficit.

Lack of theoretical development as a practical obstacle?

Only those with good, insightful theory can be successful in practice. Practicality without theory leads to failure and self-destruction.

What do you think about in particular?

The lack of understanding of politics among the public, and in some cases even in the social sciences: Unlike the natural and technical sciences, which have been pushing the development of technology for centuries, the social sciences have so far failed to provide practical politics with a viable framework understanding that could inspire innovative politics - a deficit that contributes to politics floundering in narrow-minded interest logic, power logic and friend-enemy thinking, or even becoming completely helpless and disoriented. See, for example, the Middle East conflict.

And do you see the theory of civility as an alternative to this?

Theory as such always remains theory and should therefore not be confused with social or political practice. In addition, a pluralistic view and handling of different theories also has its own value in terms of freedom and knowledge. However, in view of the situation in the world, we should, indeed must, critically question common patterns of thought, such as theories of international relations, and seek to develop alternatives to them. This is precisely what the theory of civility serves.

A claim that you and all those who advocate the theory of civility must live up to.

Sure.

In terms of civility theory, society (with politics and the state) is examined according to the guiding criterion of mutual respect in the awareness of shared responsibility (civility). Thus, the logic of relationships and forms of mutual action (types of interaction) each exhibit a certain level of civility (from a lack of civility to developed civility). Of particular importance here is whether thinking and acting is one-dimensional or multi-dimensional.

Quite abstract. Can you explain that?

According to Max Weber's definition, those who are able to assert their own will in a social relationship, even against the resistance of others, have power. According to this, people only think and act in one dimension: Power. The same applies to egocentric interests or friend-enemy thinking: The entire complexity of the situation is always reflected in one dimension (power, interest, friend-foe relationship).

If, on the other hand, players jointly recognize fair procedural rules, an independent rule dimension arises in which the recognized rules are applied, possibly by special rule actors; in addition, there is an operational dimension in which the actors involved, for example players, can act freely and on an equal footing. The question is no longer simply: who has the power or what self-interest am I pursuing? Instead, the situation can now only be understood two-dimensionally in the interaction of an independent regulatory dimension and an independent operational dimension - a more complex constellation. However, this opens up new coordination possibilities for the general benefit. Conflicts can thus be resolved peacefully in two dimensions and corresponding fair procedures are in principle open-ended (see democratic elections, for example) - an incentive for all participants with enormous peace and welfare functions. Finally, based on mutual respect and a shared sense of responsibility, further independent coordination dimensions can develop, such as factual dimensions, aesthetics, reflection, empathy, wit and humor.

Together, this results in different levels of civility: from absent to low and open civility to two-dimensionally secured and multi-dimensionally developed civility. This allows society and politics to be analyzed quantitatively - a fundamental innovation.

You distinguish between the general and the particular theory of civility. What do these terms mean?

While the General Theory of Civility deals with fundamental concepts, typologies and explanatory models of civility, the Special Theory of Civility refers to individual areas such as law, state, politics,

economy, play and sport, culture and art, family and neighborhood. The general theory underlies the particular theory of civility.

You often read and hear that generalizations are actually not so good. Why are general statements important in the theory of civility?

Specific facts should be analyzed as such. However, good science strives for statements with the highest possible empirical content, i.e. for statements that are as comprehensively valid and accurate as possible. The theory of civility is particularly rich in content and surpasses common area theories, such as theories of international relations, through its universality, and conventional system theories through its accuracy.

Do you see any real chance that the theory of civility will establish itself as a particularly empirically sound theory?

Why not? Useful things usually prevail, at least in the end. And the theory of civility opens up a wealth of new possibilities for social science research, political education and policy advice. However, it relativizes conventional thinking in categories of interests and power - not an easy situation, especially for young academics. However, it is also an exciting challenge for all those who search for truth and face up to urgent challenges.

If you had to choose one thing that readers would take away from the theory of civility, what would it be?

I am happy to leave it up to readers to decide what they take away from the book, but I consider the discovery of different levels of civility and the possibility of analyzing society and politics according to civility criteria to be a breakthrough. To the extent that the theory is discussed, this is likely to result in enormous scientific and praxeological developments - including effects on the further development of artificial intelligence.

Participants:

Prof. Dr. Volker von Prittwitz: Freie Universität Berlin/Otto-Suhr-Institute for Political Science; FU Website: www.userpage.fu-berlin.de/vvp
E-mail: vvp@zedat.fu-berlin.de
Managing Director of Civility gUG, Berlin : www.civility.berlin
E-Mail: info@civility.berlin

Felix Zachau: Research assistant at Civility gUG: info@civility.berlin

Book formats: Paperback (Books on Demand): Prittwitz, Volker von 2023: *Theory of Civility* (ISBN-13: 9783757883652); ders. 2023: *Civility Theory* (ISBN-13: 9783757860844); E-Book (German): ISBN-13: 9783758385995; E-Book (English): ISBN-13: 9783756872640