

Crossing borders in *Die Welle*

In his 1965 novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Kurt Vonnegut wrote “there's only one rule I know of, babies – God damn it, you've got to be kind.” In this paper, we will be exploring a few of the myriad of ways a loosely ochlocratic coalition of individuals can transform into a more autocratic social system as was performed in the 2008 film, *Die Welle*. Notwithstanding it's typical definition for structures of governance, a group of individuals can be said to be “ochlocratic” when social norms, priorities, and opinions are not established by a particular agency or individual, but rather established by normative opinion – that is, by the majority. While it is easy to see how this system of school-yard rule can create situations that resist modern ideas of fairness, or equality, the focus will remain on a particular weakness of the system that leaves groups vulnerable to a sort of willful annexation of the individual.

Given proper circumstance, free societies run a risk of turning autocratic when conditions do not meet the needs for the average member to be thought of as prosperous. Historical examples include government seizing more control and authority in pre-World War II Germany and Italy by popular support. The scheme used by Rainer Wenger in *Die Welle* is not much different than those used by his macro counterparts. Wenger's strategy begins by aiming to unite the students of the Autocracy course he is heading. His speech to them is notable because the promises of unity and glory fed to his students do not cite any concrete examples as to what would constitute “unity” or “glory.” However, Rainer did not stay completely vague with his students. By giving the class small suggestions on self-improvement; seating re-arrangement designed to optimise academic performance; and naming the alternative class offered on Anarchism as the class' common enemy, Rainer was successfully able to unite principally disjoint individuals into a unit that was engaged and interested in pleasing Rainer.

Because individuals possess specific ideas as to what “unity” or “glory” might be, Rainer's vague utilization of such ideals allowed the individual to fill in any blank spots. Similarly, Adolf Hitler was able to perform this same kind of trick on the German public by utilizing traditional German “nationalism, success-worship, and self-exaltation.” (Meier, 2000) Furthermore in Italy's Benito Mussolini was able to achieve the same kind of vector by communicating a romantic vision of the reestablishment of the Roman Empire. (Scott, 1932) This power of suggestion proved to be extraordinarily powerful with Rainer's students. Having armed themselves with a self-fulfilled unity, as if by magic their perceived differences melted away. It follows, that this allowed them to engage with Rainer as an enthusiastic unit, opposed to Rainer attempting to engage them as individuals.

On a more individual scale, the transition to a participant in an autocratic system shows less uniformity in growth than is present when observing the individuals as a group. Instead of each member growing as a result of the existence of Die Welle, members tended to normalise such that it became hard for the members inside the group to distinguish flaws or differences among each other. Before they were initiated in Die Welle, members had no trouble assimilating themselves into small factions or cliques. In their small groups, or strictly individually, they were forced to make academic and social progress on their own. This system worked well for some students, like Marco, Karo, and Bomber who were each able to leverage their unique abilities in order to thrive in either their academic life or social life. On the other side of the coin, Dennis and Tim's status remains bleak with Dennis unable to organize the school's play in his vision, and Tim socially incapable of breaking into a crowd of friends.

With the inception of Die Welle, all subjects party to the experiment were placed on a level playing field. Marco lost the social influence he was able to wield, and Karo's reasonable objections to

Die Welle's parameters were completely ignored. Perhaps the most surprising change of heart came from Bomber's resignation as school bully and into a figure of strength and protection for Die Welle. What's more, the former downtrodden student's status was elevated into far beyond it's previous reach. Completely disparate types like Bomber and Tim began to scheme together, and Dennis was able to command the school's play into his vision with the support of other Welle members.

Despite whatever their net effect was for the individual, this type of homogenisation was reinforced by the group's expectation of the individual. Social support in Die Welle was granted on the condition that the individual almost unquestioningly support the movement. Behavioral scholars have reported that even “an individual's perception of the amount of social support they receive can play a larger role in one's life than the actual support they are given.” (Baqutayan, 2011; Fanney, 2012) This gave, at the very least, some sense of legitimacy to the individuals who lost standing from joining Die Welle. The price of being accepted by the large group was a loss of their social standing.

Rainer's ascension into Mr. Wenger did not come with the costs associated with being a regular member of Die Welle. Instead of Rainer's status normalising with the rest of the group, as would be the case in a democracy or a ochlocracy, his only continued to rise. Because of the member's unwavering allegiance to Wenger his perceived social support seemed to grow. Dissenters, like Karo, were ostracised by their classmates; and occasionally ignored by Wenger when they failed to conform with Die Welle.

Wenger's support system failed to actually work within positive conditions. Fanney (2012) points out that “self-esteem plays a large role in how one perceives partner responsiveness.” Taken to an extreme, Rainer's goal legitimised themselves because of the overwhelming response the students had to Die Welle's inception.

What we can call Wenger's ego resulted in a veiling his judgement. Despite very serious warning, he allowed Die Welle experiment to continue, even going so far as to cite his own contrived rules as justification. A stirring example was Wenger reminding Tim not to name the classmate who had graffitied the town hall with a huge, red, Die Welle logo. The irony being that it was in fact Tim who had defaced the building after an organised romp through the town with other Welle members defacing other parts of the town. Had Wenger been able to use sound judgement, it would have been plain to see the issue staring him in the face. The experiment was getting out of hand.

To further underscore, the strength of Wenger's willful ignorance: the relationships he kept that are the most likely to be taken seriously by any participant in their kind he neglected during the week of this experiment. Nearing the end, Wenger's wife Anke, grew more suspicious of Wenger's intentions, and strategy. Going so far as to explicitly call him based on her observations, and her apprehension of a looming Tim near their home; he revealed himself in an argument displaying bitterness toward the previous success Anke had accrued as a teacher while he received little. By this time, Wenger was so lost in this fog that he constructed, it will take Marco striking Karo for Wenger to attempt to put an end to Die Welle. But it is not until Tim's assault of Bomber and subsequent suicide that I feel Wenger begins to understand the impact that this experiment had on his students, and how seriously they took him.

It is not difficult to see how easily we can cross these borders into something that we have swore we would never cross again. By allowing ourselves to cross over into extreme versions of ourselves, or by choosing to needlessly homogenise in order to maintain social standing; we can vector into something that we never intended or even thought was possible. We can, however, improve the existing structure we do live in, in order to form a stronger barrier between ourselves and ourselves

under autocracy. All parties in Die Welle came with some form of baggage that they carried throughout the film. Tim was a lonely student, Bomber was a bully, Rainer was envious of other's success. Perhaps, following Vonnegut's rule could have easily nullified any suggestion of an autocracy. Given: Bomber made honest attempts to be kind to others, other students found it within themselves to be more inclusive of Tim, and Rainer graciously accepted and encouraged his wife's success, then the social structure that managed to gravitate these individuals toward Die Welle's mess could simply go away. The result would be that of a different kind of homogenisation, wherein individuals would not be reconstructed to be the same, but could at minimum perceive the social support necessary for a positive social environment that Fanney (2012) describes.

Works Cited

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