

Americans are staying silent on issues out of fear (683 words)



Pre-reading

1. How would you define “freedom of speech”?
2. Do you feel that you have freedom of speech in Germany? Why or why not? Where are the limits? Also include social media in your considerations.

Questions

1. Summarise the reasons given in the text why people do not dare to openly speak their mind even though freedom of expression and opinion is a civil right.
2. In the beginning the author describes the situation back in communist Europe and ends this description in paragraph 3 with the sentence “[u]ntil now, perhaps”. Examine this kind of introduction and explain its effect on the reader.
3. Analyse the further line of argumentation. How does the author try to convince the reader? Also point out stylistic devices used in the article.
4. The author finalises his text by pointing at the allegedly unheard political centre, the “Exhausted Majority” who agree with the statement “people I agree with politically need to be willing to listen to others and compromise” but believe that their views are not reflected in political discourse yet. Comment on this evaluation of the current political discourse.
5. The main topics that are not open to freedom of opinion as mentioned in the text are related to sexual orientation, immigration and, foremost, Islam. Assess how these topics are dealt with in your society.

Sample answers

Pre-reading

1. Information gleaned from www.equalityhumanrights.com (shortened and abridged):

Article 10: → protects personal right to hold one's own opinion; includes right to express one's views aloud (e.g. public protest or articles, books, leaflets, television, works of art, internet and social media)
 The law also protects the freedom to receive information (by other people or reading any magazine one wants).

Restrictions: duty to behave responsibly and to respect other people's rights, for instance one should not try to incite or encourage racial or religious hatred

However, freedom of speech is of great importance for journalists, who must be allowed to criticise governments or other public institutions without fear of prosecution; it is a vital feature of any democratic society (as can be observed in ongoing discussion about Erdogan in Turkey).

2. Topics to discuss:

- *Jan Böhmernann and offence against Erdogan (had to remove video from the Internet)*
- *freedom of speech regarding political parties (AfD)*
- *difficult topics such as immigration*
- *freedom to protest (e.g. G8 Summit Hamburg)*
- *social media as an issue in which freedom of speech should be observed more strictly*

Questions

- 1.

- *Social pressures force people to think in a certain way about certain topics.*
- *Many members of the public now feel uncomfortable about expressing their own opinion on difficult topics such as Islam, sexual orientation and immigration except among people whom they trust and who are of the same opinion.*
- *Political freedom has never existed in the United States (regarding racism and homosexuality).*
- *Certain restrictions are necessary to make democracy work (e.g. not spreading fanatical views).*
- *However, many people regularly lie about their political opinions because they are afraid of government repression or being offended or insulted by fellow citizens (particularly on social media), colleagues/class mates.*
- *In the United States, particularly since Trump came to power, right- and left-wing parties have started to dissociate themselves from each other more distinctly, and people are expected to clarify which side they are on.*
- *Compromises are no longer accepted/wanted among electorates, and many people feel they need to conform instead of openly expressing their attitude towards these controversially discussed topics.*

2. *In describing the situation in communist Europe and the Soviet Union the author begins his article by creating a rather dark and negative image. He uses an enumeration and lists a number of reasons why the living conditions back then were almost "unbearable" for the inhabitants (para. 1), underlining all the negative sides of oppression. At the end of the first paragraph, he points out that people got crazy or even killed themselves, highlighting these facts by using hypotaxes.*

In the second paragraph, the author describes the then existing constant fear to express one's real opinion even among family members, which is hard to understand for people born during the last 30

years. The reader is willing to totally agree with the author so far and is rather puzzled when he continues with an ellipse: “until now, perhaps” (para. 3). In using this stylistic device the author bluntly pushes the reader back into the here and now and thus to the core of the article. With the negative description of the former living conditions, this comparison appears to the reader as quite shocking. The reader is thus absolutely interested in getting to know why the author is of that opinion as well as animated to reassess his/her on perception of his/her personal freedom of speech particularly regarding the abovementioned sensitive topics at the end of the paragraph. At the same time, this introduction can be interpreted as containing an implicit warning.

3. The author continues to support his thesis that America is heading towards a limitation of freedom of speech according to facts and figures based on a survey. By referring to a survey, the author appears to be well informed and to quote reliable sources and thus tries to gain the reader's trust. In the next paragraph the author refers to history again and presents well-known issues, namely ongoing racism against black people as well as the discrimination against homosexual and transsexual people, which only slowly diminished after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. To show that his thoughts are not limited to one perspective, he admits that some kind of restriction is necessary for democracy. However, already in the next sentence he catches the reader's attention by using the strong word “disturbing reality” which indicates that this is the factual situation the country is facing. He focuses the word fear by using “in” twice in the two following sentences, drawing a connection between the introduction and the situation today. He relates the disturbing situation to Trump, contrasting hate speech and political correctness in America's political discourse. He uses metaphor and repetition when saying: “Defiance of the latter fuelled Donald Trump's electoral rise. Outrage at the former fuels anti-Trump resistance” (para 9). The following explanation of the political developments in America helps the reader to understand why citizens don't feel free anymore in expressing their political opinions. Instead of ending his text with an appeal, as one would assume, he uses suspension marks which leave room for individual thought. Thus the author again encourages the readers to rethink their own behaviour without offensively pushing them to agree or disagree with him.

4. The statement means that people are longing for a more open and constructive political discourse and that they are rather dissatisfied with the current political situation in which right- and left-wing parties appear to be absolutely unwilling to work with each other and to cooperate. As the United States is deeply split in the way they feel about the current president, this perception of political discourse appears reasonable. Apparently, you either like or hate Trump and his politics, particularly as many highly controversial issues are permanently part of the daily news, e.g. the recent Kavanaugh – Ford sexual assault hearings which caused thousands of people to protest, or Trump's recent comment on the wildfires in California, when he blamed foresters for the massive destruction the fires caused so far, which got many VIPs to attack Trump on social media. As stated in the text, Trump often uses politically incorrect language and has very strict views on immigration, climate change, and women who claim having been sexually harassed. As a consequence, when it comes to these topics, there seems to be only one attitude acceptable without any grey areas, even though many perspectives and attitudes in between clearly exist. All in all, it seems understandable and plausible that those who feel neither sympathy for the very liberal nor the conservative party may feel a bit lost, as there is no real option in between as long as the main purpose is to strictly differentiate one from the other.

5. Individual answers: ideas:

- There are many controversial topics in Germany as well, particularly since the recent rise of the AfD.
- Immigration is the most divisive issue due to the wave of refugees in 2015, which caused turmoil and fear among many people (also because of terror attack Berlin Christmas Market and a spate of sexual harassment in Cologne on New Year's Eve).
- There are ongoing protests between supporters of left-wing and right-wing politics.

- The recent riots in Chemnitz which involved refugees being chased down the street have left many people deeply disturbed.
- It can be difficult to express either that one sympathises with the AfD, or to say that you totally agree or disagree with refugee policy.
- Regarding homosexuality or transsexuality, Germany appears to be more and more open (at least the younger generations) and the topic does not appear as sensitive as the whole immigration debate.
- However, freedom of speech on certain topics with certain people around or in school may be difficult/ comparable to the situation in America, so that people do not feel comfortable expressing their real opinion and thus tend to lie or say nothing instead (comparable to AfD – almost no one openly expresses that he/she would vote for them or supports their attitudes despite rising election results).
- Also, social media have become a platform for hate, insults and offences → people should think twice before posting something → social media should be limited/controlled more strictly, and people who publish offensive material (concerning race, religion and sexual orientation) should be punished
- Islam also remains a very controversial issue (e.g. recent knife assault on mosque in Frankfurt), as many non-Muslims fear “islamisation”, which in turn sparks debates about such topics as wearing a headscarf (veil) or the burqa ban.

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