

Rother Baron:
The Palm Wine Convention
*Seventh Conversation with Paula:
Talk about Voting Rights and Parties*



On Paula's small South Sea island there are no prisons and no army, no parties and no property. She looks at what we take for granted with the astonished eyes of a child.

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"With her wrap-around dress, on which exotic birds screamed in bright colours, her face that seemed to be carved like out of ebony, her thick black hair, in which the sunlight sparkled, and her supple feet whose smoothness formed a striking contrast to the cracked asphalt, Paula looked so alien to me that I stared at her as if she were a hallucination."

from: [How I got to know Paula](#) (Conversations with Paula, Introduction)



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Our Picture of Other People

One of the things that worry me the most is when people you feel particularly close to all of a sudden no longer seem to be who you thought they were.

I am not talking here about the trivial fact that you can never fully get to know another person, that you can always discover new facets in others that can surprise you in a positive or negative way. What I am thinking of is rather a face that blurs before my eyes, a face that loses its shape like a river overflowing its banks.

From a purely rational point of view, this is not even something to be particularly surprised or even frightened about. After all, we never see other people as they really are. What we perceive of them is rather a result of certain memories, of experiences we share with them, and of hopes or fears we associate with their acquaintance.

In a certain way, we thus impose a mask on all persons we approach emotionally, which they have to wear in our presence. Even if this mask is immaterial and only exists in our own subjective perception, it has such a powerful effect that the other adapts his behaviour to it and develops a "being-for-us" on the basis of it, which he only shows in his encounters with us.

The latticework of this cage of expectations is so dense that it only breaks open in rare exceptional situations, allowing a glimpse of the truth it has repressed. This reinforces the threatening effect that such exceptional situations exert on us.

These rare moments not only reveal to us that what we had taken for the appearance of the other person was in fact only the phantom of dreams, fears and half-unconscious memories that we ourselves had projected onto the other's face. Rather, in the melting of the mask that we had put on the other, the little box of the world view into which we tend to squeeze the rather incomprehensible, chaotic world events, suddenly discloses itself in all its ridiculousness.



Paula's November Depression

With Paula, I have only once experienced such emotional turmoil. That was when she had to move her visit to me from August to November because of matters at home that could not be postponed.

The whole time, the weather was dreary, typical for this time of year. At times the fog was so thick that even the houses on the opposite side of the street could only be recognised as shadowy shapes. The trees were completely lost in the fog, their arms stretched out into the void, helplessly throwing off their last leaves.

Especially for Paula's visit, I had studied the event lists of all possible cultural institutions, I had made plans to go to the cinema and the theatre, and I had even thought about going to the zoo. After all, you can still enjoy life in November if you don't let this gloomy month dictate your mood.

But after just a few days, I could hardly get Paula to go out of the flat. She spent most of her time hanging around on the sofa, listlessly leafing through old magazines or just looking out of the window with empty eyes. When I spoke to her, she gave – which is quite uncharacteristic of her – only monosyllabic answers. And when I mixed one of her favourite cocktails to cheer her up, she only thanked me with a mirthless nod and then left the drink untouched on the coffee table.

Of course, the November depression is a widespread phenomenon, which – because it is temporary – is not very worrying in most cases. In Paula's case, however, I could hardly bear the silence that spread through the flat due to this. Something sinister emanated from this silence, like from a burglar you suddenly hear in the room next to you at night, knowing that he will steal the dearest thing you own.

Paula was simply no longer Paula. She, who usually jumped from one idea to the next with the energy of a young cat and always had some sort of mischief on her mind, was now lying wearily on the sofa like an aged house tiger. It was hardly bearable to watch!



The Guru of the Party Convention

In my despair, I finally did something that I normally try to avoid in Paula's presence: I turned on the television. The very illustrated emptiness that I usually didn't want to let pollute my days spent with Paula now

seemed to me as a lifeline. I hoped that Paula, who normally never watched television, would be roused from her lethargy by the unaccustomed flood of images.

Unfortunately, the first thing that appeared on the screen was, of all things, the broadcast of a party conference. When I switched on the TV, the party leader was just delivering his carefully rehearsed speech, characterised by the usual alternation of monotonous self-praise and the histrionic "this-is-unbearable-we'll-make-everything-better"-crescendo.

Although Paula yawned deeply, she had turned to the screen. As quickly as possible, I switched to another programme. On no account should the returning spirits be stifled by the cultivated boredom of the party conference!

To my surprise, Paula protested when I flipped to another channel. "Switch to the other programme again, please!" she begged me.

After I had complied with her request, she looked with growing interest at the questionable rhetorical skills of the fidgeting guy at the lectern.

It's remarkable what party conferences are good for, I thought to myself, while I was both astonished and relieved to see the re-kindled fire in Paula's eyes. After all, since I had not warned her about the autumn trip out of selfish motives, I felt not entirely innocent of her depressive mood.

"I have never seen a guru who has so little charisma and yet such a great effect on his community!" Paula finally remarked in amazement.

"In fact, he's not a guru, but the leader of a big party," I corrected her with a grin.

Paula looked at me uncomprehendingly: "A party?"

For once, her inquiring childlike gaze, which was usually the prelude to a series of probing questions, was not unpleasant to me. After all, it was a clear sign that her in-

terest in the world around her had reawakened.

"In our country, the parties are an essential element of democratic participation," I explained to her. "With a nation of several million people, you can't make all the decisions yourself. That's why we have a representative democracy – which means that we elect representatives who then decide the central political issues on our behalf. The parties fulfill a key role in this."

"So this supposed guru is a kind of advocate I can turn to when I need help with something?" Paula asked.

I shook my head. "No, that's just the party's top representative – the one who holds the shop together, its face to the outside world. And the parties themselves are neither advocates, nor do they make the political decisions themselves. Rather, depending on the proportion of votes they receive in the elections, they send representatives to parliament, where the decisions are taken."

"And why can't I elect the representatives themselves directly?" Paula wanted to know.

"Because the parties ensure that the representatives they send follow a certain political direction," I explained. "Moreover, they are all professionals who know how to act in politics and how to implement certain ideas politically."

Paula frowned. "So what now? Do the parties only send representatives to parliament, or do they make the decisions themselves?"



Democracy or Chieftaincy?

Gradually I began to feel a little annoyed by her questions. But I should have known better: Paula always wanted to know everything in detail!

I took a deep breath, then clarified: "When I said that the parties don't make the decisions themselves, I only meant that they first have to send representatives to parliament, who then debate the political deci-

sions with the representatives of the other parties. But of course the parties stand for certain contents and programmes, which they try to implement in parliament – otherwise you wouldn't need them."

Paula brushed a curl out of her forehead. "So each party sends its leaders to parliament, where they struggle with the leaders of the other parties to get their positions accepted?"

I shook my head again. "No, it's not like that at all. There are many more politicians in parliament. After all, it is a representation of the people, not a representation of the parties! That's why people from all regions of the country should be represented in parliament."

Paula took a sip of her cocktail. "Does that mean that the parties only roughly determine the direction, but the final decision is made by the representatives of the regions?" she then asked.

"No, that's not the case either," I sighed. "The representatives sent to parliament by the parties have to abide by the party's decisions. In parliament, they form a parliamentary group, which then usually votes unanimously. One of the most important tasks of the chairperson of a parliamentary group is to ensure that the faction discipline is observed."

Paula laughed mockingly. "What you have is probably more like a chieftaincy than a democracy ..."

Once again I felt cornered by her. Paula knew exactly what I meant! She deliberately misunderstood my words to provoke me. "You can't do without hierarchies," I retorted somewhat irritated. "Otherwise, the parliament would not be a decision-making body, but a mere debate club."

"But didn't you say earlier that debating is precisely the purpose of the parliament?" Paula objected.

"That's true," I admitted, "but at the same time, the parliament has to be able to decide. And for that, the debates need a certain structure and direction."

"If the debates in your parliament look like the ones at that party conference" – Paula pointed at the TV –, "then they don't have much to do with debating anyway. That guru there, whom you call the party leader, is still holding his monologue!"

"Well," I had to concede, "the party conventions today are more like show events for the public, where the parties put their representatives in the right light. The discussions about the central decisions usually take place in advance."

Paula was still not satisfied with my explanations. "To be honest, I have the impression that you rather stage democracy than live it," she grumbled. "When we have important decisions to make, we come ..."

"Yes, I know," I interrupted her, "you gather on the beach, drink palm wine and discuss

until the last person agrees with the decision. But with a nation of 80 million people, that's just impossible."

"Well, listen!" returned Paula, slightly miffed. "Whenever we talk about such things, you act as if democracy were only something for small island communities. Are you seriously saying that the more people live in a community, the less democracy is possible? Then you might as well abolish democracy altogether in your country!"

"I'm sorry," I apologised. "I didn't mean to offend you. But you have to admit that democratic decision-making processes are harder to organise here than in your little island paradise."

Paula looked at me challengingly. "Let's just give it a try!" she suggested. With that, she rose from the sofa, picked up a pen and paper and sat down at the table. Then she announced with pretended pathos: "I hereby declare the Constitutional Convention open!"



Constitutional Reform at the Kitchen Table

There it was again – the flash in her eyes! Finally, Paula was cured of her November depression. So at least this time our intercultural dispute served a good purpose, I said to myself.

That's why I didn't hesitate for long and willingly let myself in on her little revolutionary game. I didn't really care what the outcome would be. What was more important to me was that I could be warmed

again by Paula's enthusiasm, by her childlike pleasure in the free flight of ideas.

Paula's way of letting her thoughts do somersaults and of elaborating even the craziest mental figure that came up in the process had something extremely stirring about it. After we had worked half the night on our constitutional reform, I too had the feeling that I had changed the world. Even today, when I look at the result of our night's work, the feeling of liberation that spread through me at that time still rises up in me.

Here are the central points of our draft (where we could not agree on a common position, the corresponding passages are in italics):



Paula's Constitutional Ideal

Key Elements of a New Form of Democratic Participation

1. The formation of parties shall be prohibited. Anyone who prevents others from freely and independently forming an opinion through the creation of cliques or group pressure is excluded from the process of democratic decision-making until further notice.

2. The process of democratic discussion shall be factual and issue-centred, not personalised. For the purpose of decision-making, relevant subject areas shall be defined in a broad discussion, which shall be conducted in parallel in all media. Working groups will be set up in all constituencies.
3. The type and number of subject areas and thematic groups declared relevant can be adapted to the current development at any time. If in a sufficient number (*Paula: in 25 %; I: in 50 %*) of the constituencies working groups on a new subject area are established, corresponding working groups must also be formed in all other constituencies.
4. Every member of the community, irrespective of nationality, is free to participate in the various working groups.
5. The working groups shall elect representatives from their midst to the local assemblies for the specific subject

areas. From these, representatives are sent to the regional assemblies, which in turn appoint representatives for the federal assemblies of the working groups.

6. In order to be nominated as a representative for a subject area, appropriate proof of qualification must be presented. This can be done by corresponding certificates of relevant studies and/or by proof of practical experience. *(Paula: A certificate of knowledge about autodidactic further training can also be recognised, provided that it is proven by appropriately qualified contributions to discussions in the working groups.)*
7. All discussions are streamed live on the internet and can be commented on there. In addition, summary reports of the results will be posted on the internet and published in the local bulletins.

8. The decisions taken at the federal assemblies of delegates for the various subject areas shall be discussed again at the lower levels. The local and regional assemblies can propose amendments and must be heard before the final decision is taken. *(Paula: ... must vote in favour of the final resolution in order to make it legally valid. If national regulations are not indispensable, different resolutions can, if necessary, be passed at the local and regional level.)*
9. The federal delegates for the various subject areas shall jointly decide on the taxes and duties to be levied and on the distribution of the funds to the subject areas. The tax burden shall be graduated according to social criteria. In order to avoid disputes between the representatives of the subject areas, a minimum percentage shall be fixed to which each subject area is entitled.

10. The federal delegates for the subject areas elect representatives from within their own ranks to lead the negotiations for the country in international bodies.
11. The federal delegates as a whole nominate a "primus inter pares" who is sent to meetings with the leaders of other countries. *(Paula: There is no "primus inter pares". The leader principle is abolished without compromise. Meetings with countries that stick to the leader principle are attended by alternating representatives of the federal delegates, who are chosen according to a rotating principle and depending on the topics discussed.)*
12. All delegates shall be elected for a term of two years. They may be removed at any time by a vote of no confidence. The maximum period for a delegate's mandate shall be four electoral periods.

Picture Credits

Cover: Ceremonial kava drinking on Tonga (kava: plant with a relaxing, slightly inebriating effect); from: Buschan, Georg: [Die Sitten der Völker](#): Liebe, Ehe, Heirat, Geburt, Religion, Aberglaube, Lebensgewohnheiten, Kultureigentümlichkeiten, Tod und Bestattung bei allen Völkern der Erde, Abb. 48. (The customs of peoples: love, marriage, childbirth, religion, superstition, habits of life, cultural peculiarities, death and burial among all peoples of the earth, Fig. 48). Stuttgart 1914: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft.

P. 2: Efes: Woman over flames (Pixabay)

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