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Kilian Semmelmann – Stop being the current

## STOP BEING THE CURRENT

Kilian Semmelmann is this year's winner of the St. Gallen Wings of Excellence Award. He studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and will attend the 43<sup>rd</sup> St. Gallen Symposium as Leader of Tomorrow.

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Kilian Semmelmann is German and a Master's student of psychology in Munich, Germany. After training as an industrial management assistant, he worked as a purchasing agent while simultaneously obtaining his German Abitur at evening school. Fascinated by the mind and brain, he decided to study cognitive science in Osnabrück, concentrating on psychology, computer science and neurobiology and working on projects at MIT and UCSD. In 2011, he started his graduate work in neuro-cognitive psychology at the LMU Munich, focusing on visual attention and possibilities for using the Internet as a research method. He is currently finishing his degree at Brigham and Women's Hospital Harvard Medical School.

### Abstract

While the many protests in Germany, Austria, Spain, the USA, Britain, Chile and other countries over the last years mediate the impression that our youth is highly courageous and fights for its opinions, that is only half of the truth. One of the driving factors seems to be fear, not courage. Fear of being unemployed, of having no chance getting higher education and being exploited in their jobs. My argumentation states that it is up to us to take away these fears and allow pupils, students and employees to reach for their chances and encourage them to be courageous; encourage them to be human. The way I propose to achieve this is the way of imitation: by behaving as role models that show courage, younger generations should quickly observe and imitate, thereby being the youth we ask for. Thus, it is up to us to build a platform for the younger generations

to show courage, before they are able to take that chance.

### Is our youth streamlined?

Fall, 2009. On the peak of student protests against inequalities of the educational system in Germany and Austria, several lecture halls of Universities were occupied by the protesters. It cost the Deans either the use of police force, several weeks of negotiations or strong acknowledgements to the students to calm and resolve the situation. In some of the over 60 cities in Germany that took part in the protests, the officials even cut off the food supply to forcefully evict the occupants from the buildings<sup>1</sup>.

November 10th, 2010. About 50.000 students<sup>2</sup> protested under the slogan "Demo-lition" against the increase of a tuition fee cap from 3290 to 9000 Pounds, what would result in a huge increase of costs of higher education

for British students. A part of the mob even violently attacked a car carrying Prince Charles and Camille, chanting "off with their heads"<sup>3</sup> before the escort intervened.

December 18th, 2010. Following first protests in Tunisia, the people of over 15 countries joined the Arab Spring movement and protested against their governments, continuing until today. It lead to resignation of leaders, civil uprisings and major protests in the whole Arab World and is viewed as one of the main impulses that caused the Syrian civil war.

May 15th, 2011. Due to an unemployment rate of over 40% of the Spanish youth<sup>4</sup> a huge wave of protests started to wash over the country, totaling up to 6 to 8.5 million people over the next Months<sup>5</sup>.

September 17th, 2011. Starting in New York City, the Occupy movement enraged hundreds of thousands of

people, calling themselves “the 99%” to fight against inequality and the global financial system that seemingly only profits the upper 1% of the population. Within the following year, nearly one thousand cities<sup>6</sup> over the whole world joined the protests, with their people getting arrested, pepper-sprayed, beaten or even killed in the process<sup>7</sup>.

Yesterday, January 31st, 2013, at Noon. The Bavarian Government announced<sup>8</sup> that nearly fifteen percent of the state's population gathered, went to their local town hall and waited about an hour in huge lines to sign a petition to force a referendum to get rid of tuition fees for Universities. While this movement of over 1.3 million people was mainly carried by the students themselves, they were able to motivate elderly and middle age citizens alike to join their cause.

While this list could be continued with examples from Iceland<sup>9</sup>, Chile<sup>10</sup>, Puerto Rico<sup>11</sup>, Canada<sup>12</sup> and others, these major examples should already show that today's youth is certainly able and willing to stand up and fight for their opinions and rights. What nobody would have imagined a decade ago, became a yearly reoccurrence: A huge group of our young generation gathers, forms and expresses their opinions, fights against being oppressed and exploited, even with their health at stake. This allows concluding that our youth starts to believe again; believe in their own ideas, in their rights and that they, as few as they may be, can change the

whole system for a greater good, only by being courageous enough to go into the public and raise their voices.

So if you ask the question whether our youth exhibits unconventional thinking and expresses its opinions, I have to argue in their favor.

### **So, all is well?**

Well, it is not that easy. If we take a look at the topics presented in these protests, it becomes obvious that it is not only courage that drives these young people on the street, but rather their fear of the future. Education, unemployment and unequal distribution of wealth are the driving factors of their protests. These problems become even more apparent if one takes a look at recent studies: about 65 percent of the Austrian youth prefers a stable job over success in their field<sup>13</sup>. That means that they prefer to work in a boring, life-long dead-end job, instead of taking the risk to make a mistake and become unemployed. This can be expanded to a global scale, as a report by the UN just revealed that “worries related to job security” is one of the main concerns of today's youth<sup>14</sup>. A good comparison of the current situation of our young generations would be a game of Whack-A-Mole: Whose head is up, will most likely get hit. Who expresses a strong opinion, will most probably be shut down. Who makes a big decision, will be the scapegoat if he fails. Who makes an unusual proposal, will most probably be ignored. And humans are not stupid - at some point they see that the easiest way to play the game is to shut up. Because they won't get rewarded, if they are resistant. They won't be promoted if they argue about standards and traditions. They just face the risk of losing their job because they offended someone, made a mistake or just were at the wrong place at the wrong time. And that is what they try to avoid at all costs. Identifying the reason behind that is simple, of course. Watching even the strongest nations crumble, experience how the middle class disintegrates, seeing thousands of young, educated people leaving their home country to find a job of any kind

in a foreign nation: that is frightening and leaves one startled.

But we can go even further. If we take a look at who is actually protesting, we will find a large homogeneity. Taking the Occupy movement as an example, we can see that it is the white, educated male from the middle class<sup>15</sup> that expresses his opinion on the street. Surprisingly it is neither the lower nor the upper class that is protesting and rallying for change. While the former might already have given up hope for a change to the better, despite being the group with the most desperate need, the latter does not join such movements because that might stain their flawless CV they built up with great care, always keeping in mind what a potential employee wants to see and read. But the latter would be needed in such protests, connecting the streets with governments, excelling at mediating and using their education to form clear, precise and effective claims. Instead, one part of society is

frustrated and disenchanted, the other half acts as a cowardly bystander and hides behind their papers to keep a low profile.

So if you ask again whether our youth exhibits unconventional thinking and is making big decisions, this time I would have to disagree. They are in fear of becoming delinquents in today's unstable world and prefer staying under the radar, so they do not drop out of the rat race.

### **What can we do?**

Being a neuroscientist by training, I propose a rather simplistic approach, namely the use of scientific knowledge. Mirror neurons for example. Mirror neurons are fascinating little fellows. Sitting on the inferior frontal and parietal part of your brain, these neurons fire when you perform an action or -

and this is important - if you observe someone performing the same action<sup>16</sup>. While this sounds unspectacular, the inferences we may draw are immense: By observing someone behaving in a certain way, our own brain intrinsically performs that action and therefore consolidates this behavior. To put it in other words, we learn to do what others do without actively doing it. While there is still dispute about the exact purpose of mirror neurons, most scientists agree that they are important for learning, language acquisition and the understanding of social interactions - the exact areas we need to improve, if we want to have a courageous, self-conscious youth. Another example of the influence of others on our own lives would be John Hattie's studies: after analyzing the response of over 250 million pupils, he argues that it depends on the teacher how pupils learn and how successful they are<sup>17</sup> - not on learning methods, fancy school systems or similar factors. You have to realize that one single person is able to coin the abilities of twenty teenagers, directing them into one direction or another. On top of that, a longitudinal study of 3500 Bavarian pupils showed that intelligence is not the most driving factor of success: it is rather how motivated they are and how they learn to solve problems<sup>18</sup>. While these and other studies are from different fields of science, they all argue for the same mechanism: we, regardless of how complicated we as humans seem to be, will always be biological machines that can be shaped not only by intrinsic motivation, but also by a huge part of extrinsic influences. Being determined by such a strong factor from our surrounding leads to two main consequences:

First, if we criticize that our youth is not courageous but swimming with the

current, then this is our own fault. We have to keep in mind that they observe what others do, evaluate its efficiency and then copy the most suitable behavior. So if we keep our head and voice low and are having success with that, they will recognize this as a viable strategy and do the same. They will swim with the current, to be on the safe side. Because we show them. We are the people who rate students and applicants. We employ people; we decide who gets scholarships, grades, opportunities. We decide about chances and show how one can be successful. We

are the issue. We are the current. Because all we look for, all we promote, are grades, internships, experience, short studies, fast accomplishments, be ready, be smart, be there. We need to stop that. We need to look at personality, we need to promote thoughtfulness and we need to confront young people with the need for diverse thinking. Otherwise we destroy free thoughts, creativity and productivity. Otherwise we destroy the future; ours and theirs.

The second and more important consequence is that if we want to have a courageous youth with opinions and critical thinking that makes big decisions, we need to exhibit exactly that. Observe and imitate. We need to give examples, we need to open our doors to new ideas. New people. We need to use the momentum of mass movements, commitment, the creativity and the force to show people how it is right what they are doing. We need to employ people with opinions, use them to criticize our work, need them to promote unusual ideas. We need to show them that they are valuable because they are not clones, but individuals, with flaws and uniqueness. We also need to stop relying solely on our own thoughts, our own values and our own experience. We are just a small,

puny part of this world; we need to be open for others. We need to stop requesting perfect CVs from applicants. We need to start employing people that don't fit the pattern; we need to employ them in our companies, offices and labs. We need to give them a stage on which they can dance. We need to encourage them to come up with unusual theories, listen to them and promote non-standard approaches. We need to stop searching for machines and look for humans again. We need to stop being ourselves and endorse a highly open environment with opportunities for everyone. Let them show what they are able to do. Lead them. Your position is not in the back at the battlefield of society. It is at the front line, where everyone can observe you fighting for what is right. In the back you might live longer and be much safer; but to inspire people to be courageous, you need to show them the way by being courageous. A leader should be at the very front and use his strength and mind to push those up that were not so gifted in life. Not leave them behind.

Coming back to the question, whether our youth is courageous, I finally can answer that it does not matter if they currently are. Some are, some might be, others can't be, some won't ever be. But it is up to us, to be courageous enough to encourage them to be, no matter their background and views. It is up to us, to give them the chance to swim against the current. It is up to us to take away their fear. You want courageous people? Encourage them. You want unusual ideas? Reward them. You want our youth to swim against the current? Stop being the current. Start being the opportunity. Be a leader and change the ways how people behave. Be the change.

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