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Beyond the political principle: Applying Martin Buber's philosophy to societal polarization

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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Marc Pauly** *University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

Abstract

Societal polarization has given rise to opposing groups that fight each other as enemies and that have very different ideas about what should be done and about what is the case. This article investigates what tools there are in the philosophy of Martin Buber to address this societal polarization. Buber's notion of community, the relationship between means and ends, his opposition to the political principle, the notion of an I-Thou dialogue and his conception of truth are presented as relevant for overcoming societal polarization. The article also presents the case of Daryl Davis as manifesting some of these Buberian principles.

Keywords

dialogue, Martin Buber, polarization

1. Introduction

To be a politician or a journalist means living with threats of violence, and it appears that the number of such threats is increasing. According to a Dutch newspaper,¹ in the Netherlands, it is not only right-wing politicians who need heavy police protection, but increasingly also centrist and left-wing politicians face threats both online and on the street. Similarly, the Dutch national broadcasting service recently decided to remove its logo from their vehicles due to hostilities encountered by its employees.² These examples illustrate the more general phenomenon of an increasingly hostile political and societal climate where political opponents are viewed as enemies and treated as such.

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As the two examples given illustrate, this societal polarization has both a normative and a descriptive strand. Normatively, there is the debate about what we should do as a society, which policies we should adopt. Discussions about what to do about racism, religious extremism, the Corona pandemic and climate change are often not a civilized exchange of views but shouting contests or Internet flaming wars. There also seems to be a tendency to just stay among like-minded people which can lead to a complete segregation into opposing camps which do not talk to the other side. But besides this normative polarization, there is also increasing descriptive polarization: People disagree on what the facts are, on what reality is. Not only is there a discussion about what to do about racism, there is also discussion about the extent to which racism exists. Not only do people debate what to do about the Corona pandemic, some people question the scientific evidence, scientific expertise or even the existence of the Corona virus. We can see an analogous phenomenon in the debate about climate change where climate change deniers either deny the existence of climate change or that it is brought about by human actions.

To counteract this increasing polarization, there have been a number of societal initiatives to get people from opposing political views talking to each other again. The Dutch journalist and anthropologist Joris Luyendijk organized dialogues under the title 'Kunnen We Praten?' together with the newspaper *De Correspondent*. For these dialogues, Luyendijk invited people who had lost trust in political parties and the political system to share their experiences. With a somewhat different aim, German newspapers including *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* have cooperated in organizing discussions in the project 'Deutschland spricht' where people with radically different political views are brought together in conversations. These examples illustrate that various kinds of dialogue have been seen as useful in overcoming societal polarization. This raises the question about the theoretical foundation that we should use for such a dialogue. More generally, it suggests that philosophical traditions focusing on dialogue may have something to offer for dealing with societal polarization.

In this article, rather than returning to the Socratic tradition, I turn to what might be called the second wave of dialogical philosophy. This second wave consisted of Christian and Jewish philosophers whose main works appeared in German around 1920: Ferdinand Ebner, Franz Rosenzweig, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy and Martin Buber. Specifically, it is Martin Buber's work that I want to investigate to see whether we can distil from it ideas that we could use to counter the societal polarization we see today. Buber's work is promising in this respect because it brings together a philosophy of dialogue with a political philosophy that can be viewed as an extension of his dialogical thinking. This is a promising combination when it comes to addressing societal polarization. Furthermore, Buber himself has been actively involved in what we might view as an example of societal polarization: the conflict between Jews and Arabs concerning Palestine. My thesis in this article is that to counteract societal polarization, a Buberian approach suggests not aiming for societal change primarily through vertical state power, the political principle, but rather through horizontal relationships that aim to establish community. Such a community focuses on interhuman relationships which do not objectify the other but which are what Buber calls *I-Thou relationships*. To achieve this end, we must use means which already partially embody the end we wish to achieve.

Dialogue is an important example of such a means when it aims for truth not as a form of simple correspondence with reality, but as a form of trust and faithfulness. To argue for these claims, I will identify these different elements of Buber's philosophy and illustrate the implications of each element for social polarization. Furthermore, I shall discuss a more extended case study illustrating these different elements at work.

For the reader interested in Martin Buber's philosophy, this article works out the consequences of his thought for addressing societal polarization, singling out the key notions of his philosophy that can be employed for this task and showing how this can be done. For the reader interested in societal polarization, the article shows how Buber's philosophy can provide us with an approach to addressing societal polarization that (1) is theoretically coherent in being grounded in a particular kind of (I-Thou) relationality, (2) conceptually unifies diverse practical examples dealing with polarization, (3) suggests particular policies and initiatives against polarization and (4) fits with social scientific research on polarization. To work out this Buberian approach to societal polarization, each section focuses on a particular concept or conceptual dichotomy in Buber's thinking, first describing it and then applying it to the problem of societal polarization, illustrating it with one or more examples. Sometimes these examples will refer to initiatives of particular individuals and sometimes they will refer to more systemic or institutional changes that one could argue for on the basis of Buber's philosophy.³

After spelling out the notion of societal polarization in more detail in the next section, sections 3 to 7 present the conceptual tools that Buber's philosophy offers us. These are the notions of the social and the political principle (section 3), community (section 4), dialogues aiming for I-Thou relations (section 5), a particular conception of truth (section 6) and prefiguration through means that are aligned with ends (section 7). To illustrate how some of these notions can be put into practice, section 8 describes the case of Daryl Davis. While this individual has (as far as I know) not consciously tried to put Martin Buber's philosophy into practice, his actions nonetheless can serve as illustrations for some of the Buberian principles described in sections 3 to 7. Finally, the concluding section 9 reflects on the role of conflict and confrontation in Martin Buber's philosophy.

One way of interpreting the suggestions coming out of Buber's philosophy is to see them as alternatives or additions to other existing approaches to societal polarization that are not meant to completely replace these. Similarly, when it comes to the conceptual dichotomies presented below, Buber does not say that we should always choose one over the other (e.g. the social principle over the political principle). Rather, he wants to stress the importance of one side of the dichotomy and argue for giving it more room. In line with Buber's philosophy that emphasizes opening up over imposition (see section 5), it is up for the reader to decide how much of Buber's philosophy can usefully be applied to a concrete case of societal polarization and how.

2. Polarization: Conceptualization and examples

Researchers in political and social science have used different conceptualizations of polarization. In a recent survey article associated with the European project *Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation* (BRaVE), McNeil-Willson et al.

define polarization as ‘the process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in Manichean “black and white” terms, as resulting from an essential conflict between two different social groups’.⁴ While they do not see polarization as necessary or sufficient for violent extremism to arise, they do see polarization as providing the context which can enable and enhance such violent extremism. In the scientific literature, they identify different causes of polarization which they group into four categories: (1) socio-economic factors (e.g. inequality, diminishing social welfare, privatization, segregation), (2) historical factors (e.g. lack of minority representation, insufficient discrimination laws and law enforcement, political influence of far-right parties), (3) cultural factors (e.g. narrow constructions of group identity, lack of interaction with other groups) and (4) communication-based factors (e.g. social media platforms, hate speech legislation).

Research has also addressed the relationship between polarization and democracy. Following McCoy et al., we can define polarization as ‘a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them”’.⁵ As consequences of this kind of polarization, the authors identify increasing difficulties in reaching consensus or compromise on issues, decreasing tolerance for the other side and declining confidence in public institutions. An important aspect of this kind of polarization is that it extends from the political sphere into other aspects of social life.⁶ The authors consider the future of democracy to depend on counteracting or at least managing polarization in such a way that it can yield a reformed democracy.⁷ In another article, Somer and McCoy see the key element of polarization as ‘how the process of polarization simplifies the normal complexity of politics and social relations’.⁸ They see both a causal link from polarization to democratic decay and from democratic crisis to polarization, and they consider populism and post-truth politics to be manifestations of polarization.⁹

McCoy et al. present examples from Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela and the United States as case studies of the kind of polarization they have in mind. In the case of the United States,¹⁰ they describe increasing party polarization in the 1990s and 2000s. By 2016, more than half of the Democrats had highly unfavourable views of Republicans and vice versa, an increase by more than 30% when compared to 1994. About half of the voters of one party feared voters of the other party. They observe fewer bipartisan consultations when it comes to passing legislation and decreasing respect for counter-arguments from the other side. The authors see Donald Trump as a president whose presidential campaign was anti-establishment and polarizing, pitting the hard-working White Americans (‘Us’) against minorities, immigrants and the elite (‘Them’). Associated with this increasing polarization, the authors see American democracy threatened by ‘unfounded accusations of voter fraud...refusal to unambiguously condemn violence, distortion of facts, attacks on mainstream media, and denigration of scientific evidence and expertise’.¹¹

As the American example illustrates, polarization is not just normative about values and policy choices but also descriptive in the sense that facts are contested. Opposing camps often disagree not only about what should be done but also about what is the case. The flourishing of conspiracy theories is a case in point. As the common expression ‘It’s

just a conspiracy theory!' illustrates, conspiracy theories are generally not seen to have high credibility. In fact, conspiracy theorists themselves often do not label themselves as such but as 'critical freethinkers'.¹² Traditional mainstream media often do not make room for the views of conspiracy theorists since these are usually not taken seriously. Instead, conspiracy theories are seen as a cultural or sociological phenomenon and belief in conspiracy theories as a subject for psychologists. As a consequence, adherents of conspiracy theories are pushed to alternative media platforms where they can discuss these theories with like-minded people, other 'critical freethinkers' who are different from the 'dormant masses'.¹³ On a social level, belief in theories which others see as conspiracy theories can put pressure on friendships and other social relations, in particular if a person is perceived to believe not just in one but multiple conspiracy theories.¹⁴ Belief in conspiracy theories also goes together with reduced trust: People who believe in conspiracy theories tend to have less interpersonal trust and they tend to have less trust in democratic institutions like the media and the government.¹⁵ Hence, an increasing number of conspiracy theories and people believing them can put strain on democratic institutions and manifest an increasingly polarized society where there is little interaction between 'Us' and 'Them'. As I will argue in the remainder of this article, the philosophy of Martin Buber contains some resources to address this polarization.

3. From the political to the social principle

When discussing the relationship between society and the state, Buber identifies the central tension as the tension between the political principle and the social principle. Referring to Bertrand Russell who viewed power as the central notion of the social sciences, Buber thinks that this constitutes a fundamental confusion of the political with the social principle. Buber does agree that power is present in all our social structures, but he denies that power therefore is also the most fundamental element. Fundamental for him is the social principle, people being in or entering into relationships with each other, a horizontal movement which is different from the vertical movement of power.¹⁶ The social principle governs the sphere of the social which Buber conceives of as the various ways in which human beings stand in relationships to each other and where these relationships create shared experiences and reactions.¹⁷ Viewing the political principle as fundamental means viewing the official structures of the state as determining human existence, as if human beings are made for the state rather than vice versa.¹⁸ Addressing societal polarization via the political principle would mean focusing on the state as the principle actor to deal with polarization via laws and policies, enforced through state power. On the other hand, the social principle would suggest to address the more fundamental level of human relationships by initiatives that create, strengthen and transform these relationships.

An important aspect of the political principle is that the vertical power that manifests itself through the state is a centralized form of power, whereas the horizontal relationality of the social principle is decentralized. Buber does not advocate complete decentralization, but he argues that we should give decentralization and the social principle as much room as possible, only turning to centralized power when this is necessary.¹⁹ An important concept that Buber introduces here is the notion of the surplus state ('Mehrstaat').

At any particular historical moment, the capability of human beings to organize their collective life according to the social principle, to freely create a just social order that governs itself, is limited. This limitation for Buber is the justification for the state and the political principle.²⁰ But the actually existing centralized state will usually go beyond this limitation of horizontal self-government, and this is what Buber calls the surplus state. Consequently, Buber sees it as our task to get rid of the surplus state, to reduce the state to the actually existing limits of the social principle.²¹ The exact borders of the state, and hence the exact demarcation between the social and the political principle, is one that cannot be determined abstractly, but needs to be considered anew in every historical situation.²² When it comes to the problem of societal polarization, the question becomes how much state intervention is needed to deal with the problem. Buber would caution us that policies intended to reduce polarization, for example, through regulating free speech, banning conspiracy theories from the Internet, anti-discrimination laws and so on, need to be questioned for two reasons: First, to see to what extent these state interventions can be replaced by bottom-up self-regulation. Second, to leave more room for decentralization, where different societal organizations may come up with different solutions for different contexts.

Historically, Buber sees the political principle as crowding out the social principle. He refers to this as the politicization of society ('*Politisierung der Gesellschaft*'), where the political principle invades more and more into the inner life of the different societal associations.²³ While Buber sees his age as one of increasing relativism when it comes to our highest values, the political principle seems to have remained untouched by this relativism and emerged as absolute; limiting the domain of the political principle has become an exception.²⁴ In arguing for more room for the social principle, Buber also mentions social and political movements. These should not just focus on the specific goals they want to achieve (e.g. a shorter working day), but they should aim for an all-encompassing humanization of social life, and that in working towards their goals, they should themselves remain humane as much as possible.²⁵ So while working within the domain of the political principle to achieve specific goals, we should not forget reclaiming room for the social principle both as a more general and more fundamental goal, and in the way we work towards our specific goals. This point connects to the relation between means and ends which will be discussed in section 7.

We can situate Buber's thinking in the tradition of anarchist socialism: *Changing the World Without Taking Power*²⁶ could be taken as a slogan for Buber's position. The most fundamental change for Buber comes through the social and not through the political principle. For this reason, while Buber would probably agree with the feminist slogan 'The personal is political', he would emphasize that the personal is not only and not primarily political.²⁷ Applied to a societal climate of polarization, Buber's thinking suggests to emphasize decentralized horizontal initiatives that build relationships among people, like the dialogues mentioned in the introduction. Top-down governmental measures like banning fake news or cultural practices perceived to be racist may be necessary depending on the historical situation, but they should only be chosen when the social principle is insufficient to deal with these issues. Furthermore, a Buberian approach to polarization would suggest non-governmental initiatives which build relationships between 'Us' and 'Them'. An example one could think of here is the West-

Eastern Divan Orchestra, founded in 1999 by Argentine-Israeli Daniel Barenboim and Palestinian-American Edward Said. The orchestra includes young musicians from the Middle East and was created as a project to further understanding between Israelis, Palestinians and nationals from other Arab countries. Barenboim expressed that he did not see the orchestra as a political project but as a project against ignorance, to build understanding concerning what the other side thinks, without trying to convert the other side to one's own point of view.²⁸

4. From society to community

Community ('Gemeinschaft') is one of the central notions in Martin Buber's social philosophy, key also to the utopian socialism that Martin Buber developed in his *Paths in Utopia*.²⁹ For Buber, community is the inner constitution of a shared life.³⁰ It is this shared life which distinguishes community from society ('Gesellschaft'), a distinction which he adopts from Ferdinand Tönnies. Whereas society is an association based on interest, community is an association based on life³¹: Society is an artificial order created to further shared interests ('Interessenverband'). Community, on the other hand, is an organic order consisting of people who stand in relationship with each other, relationships that have developed over time and space. While also society and the sphere of the social are based on relationships, they are different kinds of relationships which lack what Buber calls the Interhuman ('das Zwischenmenschliche').³² The relationships in a community are purposeless ('zweckfrei') and they involve dialogical I-Thou relationships (see section 5). Examples of community Buber gives are the family, the village, a community of faith and a people ('Volksgemeinschaft').³³ The last example, of particular relevance to the present article, is for Buber a community of fate ('Schicksalsgemeinschaft') which the combination of history, social arrangements, natural environment, shared experiences and so on has created. At the most fundamental level, Buber describes a community as a group of people that meets two requirements: they all stand in living reciprocal relationship towards a living center and towards each other.³⁴ The relationship with the living center for Buber means that community is also related to the divine: theologically speaking, community is the place where the kingdom of God is realized.³⁵ People who long for community ultimately long for God, and longing for God is really a longing for community, true connection and deep relationship.³⁶ This does not mean that differences between people disappear. Rather, community for Buber is dealing with difference in lived unity.³⁷

From a Buberian perspective, societal polarization can be viewed as a consequence of the absence of community. Polarization occurs when lives and experiences are not shared, when people live in separate spheres and do not develop organic relationships over a longer period of time. At the political level, community for Buber also involves communal decision-making without representation, where the community experiences, consults about and administers their shared life together.³⁸ The widespread use of political representation is for Buber one of the biggest problems of modern society. He sees an inverse relationship between the degree of representation a group uses to deal with shared concerns and the degree of community life within that group. For Buber,

community manifests itself primarily in the communal active engagement with what is of common concern and cannot exist without such engagement.³⁹

Buber's diagnosis of his time⁴⁰ is that community has been crowded out by society, just as he saw the social principle being crowded out by the political principle. Buber sees the political engagement of his time as largely fictitious, driven by interests and severed from the living reality of the people who are politically active. The politician and the voter are both propagating ideas without embodying them in their own lived realities and without engaging each other in and from these lived realities. Buber mentions as an example the idea of justice which is viewed by both voters and politicians as something to be enforced by law rather than as something that first can and must be embodied wherever people live with others.⁴¹ In his time, Buber sees only relics of community, and he sees the revival of communities as the task of his time. But how does one create community?

A fundamental tension in Buber's thinking about creating community concerns the (im)possibility of intentionally creating community. On the one hand, community cannot be created intentionally, there is no recipe for creating community. After all, wanting to create community means bringing people together with the goal of creating community, but the relationships underlying community should be purposeless. Community arises as a by-product.⁴² It arises when people respond to the challenges of life from a life that is shared, when people really interact with each other, have shared experiences and respond to these experiences from within a shared life.⁴³ Institutions cannot transform somebody into a human being fit for community.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Buber does discuss the possibility of educating for community, which Buber says cannot happen abstractly but only concretely through community.⁴⁵ One is educated for community by growing up and living in community. By participating in each other's lives, trust develops.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Buber's work also contains recurring discussions of certain ideas which we can identify as contributing positively to the creation of community. The remaining sections of this article will elaborate on these.

When it comes to applying Buber's notion of community to the issue of societal polarization, an analysis could point out the lack of community as the root cause of the problem. The different camps in the polarized debates do not form a community, the lives of those making up these camps are often very far apart. The people criticizing the institutions of science, democracy or the media are often not part of those institutions they are criticizing. From a Buberian perspective, demands for more transparency of these institutions and access to them receive a new interpretation: realizing such demands is important because it creates shared lives and community. Furthermore, initiatives like the dialogue projects mentioned in the introduction are steps in this direction: Talking to people very different from yourself is a first step towards building a shared reality and a shared life. At the same time, such initiatives are very limited in that they present isolated interactions which only let one person get a glimpse into the experiences of someone else. As an example of going a step further, Dutch-Turkish actress and writer Nazmiye Oral decided to live in the same house with a right-wing voter, sharing a life for 2 weeks and seeing her relationship to that person change.⁴⁷ Here, societal polarization is addressed by community creation at the smallest possible scale, between two individuals who physically come closer to each other and start

participating in each other's lives. At a larger scale and at a more political level, we can consider the Occupy Wallstreet movement which started in 2011 by occupying New York's Zuccotti Park. This movement instituted direct deliberative democratic assemblies for collective decision-making and can be seen as an example of Buber's conception of community since it eschewed representation and aimed for creating a political community.⁴⁸

5. The fine structure of community: From I-It to I-Thou relationships and dialogue

The most fundamental and most well-known conceptual distinction underlying essentially all of Buber's thinking is the distinction between two attitudes ('Haltungen') which a human being can take towards the world (human as well as non-human), the I-Thou ('Ich-Du') attitude and the I-It ('Ich-Es') attitude. As he lays out in his most well-known work *I and Thou*,⁴⁹ we can think of these two attitudes as two different ways of being an I. I-Thou relates to the world: it stands in relationship ('Beziehung') to the world and meets the world ('Begegnung'). I-It experiences the world: the world is not part of the experience other than as an object to be experienced, just as I-It is not a part of the world but separate from it. The relationship of I-Thou to the world is immediate ('unmittelbar') and non-instrumental, not an instrument for reaching a certain goal. I-Thou is about presence ('Gegenwart') and exists in the lived present moment, coming into existence through the other (Thou) becoming present. I-It sees the other as an object ('Gegenstand') and exists in the past where the other has become fixed and is no longer a living present reality. I-It is a subject that experiences and uses objects. I-It sees itself and others as individuals, as being individuated, separate and distinct from other entities with certain characteristics. I-Thou is a person that relates and connects to other persons. The motto 'Know thyself!' for I-Thou means 'Know thyself as being', for I-It it means 'Know thyself as such-and-such'.

Richter links the I-Thou attitude to the concept of recognition.⁵⁰ She points out that for Buber, recognizing the other means recognizing the other's uniqueness and individuality, and that recognition for Buber goes beyond the purely rational and cognitive level. When relating to a mass of people ('Menge'), I-Thou does not relate to the group as a mass but it looks for the person within the mass and transforms the mass into individuals.⁵¹ The 'Us versus them' dynamic of societal polarization precisely treats others as part of such a mass, be they conspiracy theorists or the government, Blacks or racists and so on. With respect to a single individual, I-Thou can relate to the other person in the form of a dialogue.⁵² According to Buber, such a dialogue needs to satisfy three conditions⁵³:

1. From appearances ('Schein') to being ('Sein'): According to Buber, many different appearances are part of a dialogue between you and me: We appear a certain way to each other, we may want to appear a certain way to each other, and we appear a certain way to ourselves. These appearances are part of a dialogue and they hinder what is the goal of a dialogue, that the participants present themselves ('mitteilen') as what they are.⁵⁴ This does not mean having

to share everything about yourself, but it means not wanting to appear to the other in a certain way. Authenticity in dialogue means letting the other participate in your being, in what/how you are at that moment. As a consequence of these considerations for addressing societal polarization, public debates are not conducive to dialogue because they will strengthen the desire to appear rather than to be.⁵⁵

2. Personal presentification ('*Vergegenwärtigung*') of the other: The intentional focus in a dialogue is on the other as a person and not on their opinions or positions. This means also accepting the other person the way they are, as a person who is essentially different from me.⁵⁶ Presentification here means experiencing the other as a whole in their present concreteness, without limiting abstractions.⁵⁷ This does not mean agreeing with the other's views, as these are separate from the other's essence as a person. In fact, for Buber, it is based on this fundamental acceptance of the other as a person that I can in full earnestness address them with my convictions, as the specific person they are. For convictions do not exist in a vacuum but they are tied to a person who is the personal carrier of these convictions, and it is this person that a dialogue aims at.⁵⁸ From this Buberian perspective, discussion fora on the Internet, especially when anonymous, increase polarization because they do not allow others to become fully present. Instead, we only get to meet others through their opinions, and even these are only present in an impoverished textual form, something far removed from the personal presentification Buber had in mind.
3. From imposition ('*auferlegen*') to opening up ('*erschliessen*') the other⁵⁹: Polarized debates might benefit from changing the goal of the discussion, from the imposition of opinions to the opening up of persons. Buber compares the difference between imposing myself on the other versus opening up the other to the difference between propaganda and education. The propagandist does not care about the other as a person but wants them to take on certain views. The aim of a dialogue is not to get the other to accept your views, but rather to open up the other the way Buber wants an educator to stimulate the student to become a person, the person they were meant to be. And this person may not end up having the views of the teacher, but the teacher trusts that through meeting the student and engaging them with the teacher's views, this growth will happen in ways the teacher cannot enforce. The will to influence the other is not the desire to change them by implanting my views in them, but rather the desire to see to it that what I have seen to be true also grows in the other in a manner appropriate to that other person. And because I believe in the truth of my insights, I can trust that they are also already present as seeds in the other and it suffices for me to water these seeds to let them grow.⁶⁰ We might view the difference between imposition and opening up as the dialogical analogue of the difference between the political and the social principle.

Besides the three conditions explicitly mentioned by Buber, we may add as a fourth condition another element that Buber discusses in his writings:

4. Spoken versus written word⁶¹: For Buber, the essence of language lies in its spokenness ('Gesprochenheit'). Philosophical movements like logical positivism or the Vienna Circle that aim for clarity and precision of language miss the point, according to Buber, because it is not the clarity of the proposition that matters but the clarity of the address.⁶² Buber stresses the importance of the spoken word since it enters into the sphere between two persons. It does not want to remain with the speaker but reaches out to the concrete hearer who is now present. The written word is always part of the past and never present. Buber's notion of truth is intimately tied to the spoken word, as will be seen in section 6.

Applying Buber's notion of dialogue and I-Thou relationship to the problem of societal polarization, a number of implications arise. First, the others should not be approached as a 'They'. Grammatically speaking, 'they' is the plural analogue of the 3rd person singular 'He/She/It', and approaching the other as a 'They' means taking on the I-It attitude and treating the others as a mass instead of addressing persons in that mass. An example illustrating such an approach in which the author is involved is the plan of a local organization for interreligious dialogue. It aims to address religious extremism by having a group of members of different religions visiting schools together to talk about their religious backgrounds. Triggered by the polarization around cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, the idea is to talk about religion and how they experience and deal with what may be viewed as attacks on their religion, be they verbal or in the form of satirical cartoons. This is then used as a way to get students to share their own reactions on this topic. In terms of Buber's four conditions for dialogue, the project aims for the visitors as well as the students to authentically share their own being (What does religion mean for me, in my life? How do I deal with attacks on religion?), as the concrete individuals they are. The aim of the visitors is to address the individual students in front of them, not by imposing their views but by confronting their own views with those of the students, in a spoken dialogue which aims to open up the students to different ways of being religious.

Where community is the goal for society as a whole, more I-Thou relationality is the goal for one-on-one interactions. While these goals cannot be produced, what Buber has to say about the preconditions for a proper dialogue shows that we can try to create the environment that makes such a dialogue more likely to arise. What does not help according to Buber is written verbal exchange, be it via posts on the Internet or via opinion articles in newspapers. We should move from a culture of debate to a culture of dialogue which also recognizes the non-cognitive element of human interaction that is associated with personal recognition and acceptance. The case study in section 8 further illustrates what such dialogues can look like in practice.

6. Truth as *emet* versus truth as *aletheia*

Dialogues may have different aims, and one such aim may be to arrive at truth. In his thinking about truth, Buber distinguishes the Greek term ἀλήθεια (*aletheia*) from the Hebrew term אֱמֶת (*emet*) just as when talking about faith he distinguishes the Greek

term πίστις (*pistis*) from the Hebrew term אֱמוּנָה (*emunah*). Whereas *aletheia* refers to disclosure or unconcealedness, *emet* is often translated as faithfulness or firmness. Buber conceives of truth as *emet* rather than *aletheia*.⁶³ In the context of a spoken dialogue, speaking the truth for Buber means three kinds of faithfulness⁶⁴: First, faithfulness with respect to an existing reality upon which, as Buber expresses it, the window of language is opened. Second, faithfulness with respect to the person addressed who is meant as the concrete person actually present. Third, faithfulness with respect to the speaker, in the sense that the speaker says what he means and that he means what he is, that is, what he means is tied to his personal existence and moves beyond appearances to being and authenticity.⁶⁵ A consequence of this conception of truth is that truth occurs in the spoken word and is nothing to be owned or possessed.⁶⁶ But while truth cannot be possessed, it is something with which we can enter into a living relationship.⁶⁷

Depending on the conception of truth chosen, we end up with different kinds of relations we can have to the truth. For truth as *aletheia*, the corresponding relation is faith in the sense of *pistis*. This kind of faith is about taking a certain state of affairs to be true. For truth as *emet*, the corresponding relation is faith in the sense of *emunah*, which is about trust in a person. Buber sees the development of Christianity out of Judaism as a development from the notion of faith as trust to the notion of faith as belief in a certain state of affairs.⁶⁸ But it is precisely the Greek notion of truth and faith that Buber sees in crisis.

For today's readers, Buber's text 'The Crisis and the Truth'⁶⁹ sounds like an appropriate description of our current post-truth age. Dating from 1945, Buber describes here that at the interior of the crisis which he sees to be spreading over humanity is the person without truth, the man who refuses to believe that there is a truth. Buber thinks that this crisis can be overcome by returning from the Greek notion of truth as *aletheia* to the Hebrew notion of truth as *emet*. Buber writes: 'Over your heads there is truth, and one truth for all, yet it enters your world only when you are doing the truth, each one his truth; when you are living with the beings steadily and solidly; then it happens, then you experience it as your own human truth'.⁷⁰ What Buber's analysis comes down to is the claim that the crisis of truth is really a crisis of trust and hence it should be addressed by using a notion of truth that is about establishing trust and truthfulness in an age of mistrust.⁷¹

Can such a conception of truth help with descriptive polarization, polarization around facts and fake news? Buber's notion of truth suggests that information campaigns and fact checkers will not be successful or at least not sufficient in addressing alternative facts and fake news. The reason is that truth conceived of as the unconcealing of reality (*aletheia*) does not help when the people or institutions doing the unconcealing are not trusted. Faithfulness to the world is only one of the three kinds of faithfulness involved in truth (as *emet*). What is left out is the interpersonal aspect of faithfulness which can only be achieved through initiatives that create trust. As an example of what such an initiative might look like, in the area of conspiracy theories, some philosophers have argued for the creation of 'communities of inquiry' where various kinds of expertise around a particular conspiracy theory are brought together from both adherents and critics of the theory.⁷² If these were to be communities in the sense of Buber, they would generate the kind of trust needed to overcome descriptive polarization.

Another example of an institution fitting well with Buber's conception of truth is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) established in South Africa in 1995 to deal with the country's past under the Apartheid regime. The aim of the TRC was to discover the truth concerning wrongdoings under Apartheid by setting up public hearings that involved victims telling their stories, often in front of the perpetrators. In these interactions, the three aspects of faithfulness associated with Buber's notion of truth can be seen to be at work: The victims address their stories, the truth they personally experienced, to particular others, often including the perpetrators. As the title of the TRC suggests, the aim was not only to establish the truth but also through this process to aim at reconciliation in a divided society. The TRC can be seen as an attempt to re-establish trust that has been destroyed. Opinions differ about whether this attempt was successful and whether reconciliation without justice (i.e. prison sentences for the perpetrators) is possible. Already in his own time, Buber considered real dialogue between people of different backgrounds and views difficult due to massive mistrust.⁷³ Still, for Buber, the aim would be to try to realize these dialogues which aim for truth in the sense of *emet*, independent of whether one thinks that these dialogues need to be supplemented by other processes.

7. Prefiguration: Means versus ends

Buber sees an intimate connection between means and ends: The end never justifies the means, but the means can destroy the end.⁷⁴ In the context of his philosophy of education, Buber writes that a goal is not a stable thing that waits to be reached. Rather, if one does not choose a path that already captures part of the goal, the goal will be missed. The goal will look no different from the path via which it has been reached.⁷⁵ For Buber, the separation of means and ends was also precisely the problem of the Russian revolution of 1917 and captures an important element of his criticism of Marxism. Socialism for Buber must not forget the relationship between means and ends.⁷⁶ Marxist socialism believes that coercion as a means or path will mysteriously transform into liberty as a goal. Instead, Buber's utopian non-Marxist socialism wants ends and means to be of the same kind.⁷⁷

The connection that Buber sees between means and ends is essentially the idea of prefiguration that figures prominently in anarchist thinking. The idea is that our actions to change society should prefigure the society we want to achieve, the initiatives we develop should in some way already realize the world we hope to achieve on a small scale or in some partial way. Buber expresses it this way: We need to create in the present the room presently possible for what we hope to achieve in the future.⁷⁸ In this way, revolution becomes not a break with what went before but rather a continuous development of the reality that has already been created.⁷⁹ An example of this kind of prefigurative initiative is the Occupy Wallstreet movement mentioned earlier since it created the direct deliberative democratic assemblies it also wanted to see for society as a whole.

When it comes to polarization, prefigurative thinking would similarly lead us to develop initiatives at a local level which we would also like to see happening at a national or global level. To take the polarization around religious cartoons as an

example, we would need to develop the kind of conversation in school that we would like to see happening in society at large, not avoiding certain topics but instead bringing them into the classroom. Kouwenhoven et al. describe a teacher at a Dutch high school who regularly discussed controversial topics in very diverse classes.⁸⁰ Asked about how she did it, she said that she built a connection with the students and their parents. This connection was also created through trips that she went on with the students, not only to European capitals but also to the beach and to Auschwitz. The Buberian analysis would see here the creation of a community at a small scale as a model for the community that we would like to also see at a larger societal scale. Similarly, the case study described in the next section can be seen as an instance of prefiguration.

8. A case study of Buberian activism: Daryl Davis and the Ku Klux Klan

The separation into ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ that underlies societal polarization can happen along a number of different lines. One of these is the notion of race which can produce different kinds of others, not just the racial minority but also the White supremacists. What could a Buberian approach to racial societal polarization look like? The case of Daryl Davis can exemplify different elements of Buber’s thinking outlined above. Daryl Davis is a Black American jazz pianist who has become well-known for befriending members of the American White supremacist Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The film *Accidental Courtesy: Daryl Davis, Race & America*⁸¹ is a documentary film about Daryl Davis and shows him in conversations with various (ex-)members of White supremacist organizations. Davis’ basic question is ‘How can you hate me when you do not know me?’, and with this question Davis started to get to know various members of the KKK and their families. While at first it was only Davis who was interested in getting to know the KKK members, over time they also turned out to be interested in his views. Davis went to KKK rallies where he was often welcomed by KKK members, offered KKK groups his bus for transportation when nobody else would, and he drove the wife and children of an imprisoned White supremacist to prison to be able to visit him. Davis now considers some of these people to be his friends. In the course of Davis’ developing relationships with these people, quite a few of the KKK members ended up leaving the KKK and offered their robes and hoods to Davis as a gift. As a result, Davis now has a collection of robes and hoods in his possession. Davis says in the film: ‘I never set out to convert anybody...some of them ended up converting themselves’.

The story of Daryl Davis has a number of connections with Martin Buber’s philosophy. The foundation of his approach is to build relationships with KKK members. He meets people face-to-face since he thinks they cannot really get to know him through email or Facebook. The interaction takes place via the spoken word, and his approach is based on the social rather than the political principle. In the film, this choice for the social principle brings him into contrast with other societal actors. One example of this is the Southern Poverty Law Center which fights racism by mounting court cases that aim at outlawing certain racist groups. A senior fellow of this law center expresses his doubts about the strategy chosen by Daryl Davis saying that their intention is to destroy or at least marginalize these groups, and that he thinks Davis is working on a ‘retail strategy’

whereas they are working on a 'wholesale strategy'. From a Buberian perspective, both of these criticisms of Davis' work come from the political principle. Rather than building relationships horizontally, the political principle advocates using power vertically, in this case legal power, to enforce certain views. But just as described in the third dialogical principle, Davis does not want to impose his views, he wants to open up the other person through building relationships. This is indeed a time-consuming strategy whose effect is arguably quite small, as the fellow of the law center points out to Davis.

Another aspect of Davis' approach is that he does not treat White supremacists as an indistinct mass but as a group of individuals who are different from each other. His interest in the views of an individual KKK member is genuine. As there is a lot of variety in the views that exist even at the political extremes, he tries to find out what exactly the beliefs of this particular individual are. And in the course of these conversations, Davis has learned not only a lot about the individuals, but also about the KKK, its organization and history. This has resulted in the absurd situation that some KKK members have turned to Davis with their questions about the KKK.

9. Conclusion: Conflict and confrontation

My thesis in this article was that to counteract societal polarization, the philosophy of Martin Buber suggests moving beyond the political principle of the state via society to community, trying to establish community through dialogical I-Thou relationships, a particular conception of truth as faithfulness, and strongly aligning means with ends. I have explained the relevant Buberian concepts and applied these to the case of societal polarization by giving examples of the kinds of initiatives these concepts would suggest. Furthermore, I have used these concepts to analyse the case study of Daryl Davis as an example of Buberian activism.

The point of this article was not a critical discussion of Buber's philosophy or its implications for dealing with societal polarization. There are clearly many points that his philosophy does not address: How to decide when the state and the political principle is needed, how to deal with power issues in horizontal relationships, whether his approach can also work with marginalized groups facing extreme power asymmetries, whether his dichotomy between the two kinds of truth and faith is justified and so on. Similarly, to what extent a Buberian approach to polarization would be successful remains an open question. What I do hope to have shown is what a Buberian approach to polarization would look like, and how it can tie together apparently disparate practical examples dealing with polarization by grounding them in an I-Thou relationality, be it on the level of one-on-one interactions or at a larger societal level. Buber's philosophy also suggests how to intervene with new initiatives and policies: through the interhuman and societal level rather than through the state. A Buberian approach also fits in with the research on polarization and extremism discussed in section 2. McNeil-Willson et al. propose resilience as the key characteristic needed by individuals to counter social polarization and violent extremism. Among the different traits they associate with resilience is what they call 'bridging capital', trust in people from other groups.⁸² A Buberian approach seems to be well suited to contribute to this aspect of resilience in particular.

As should have become clear from the case study, a Buberian approach to polarization means a different way of dealing with conflict. It does not mean to shy away from conflict but it leads to a different kind of confrontation.⁸³ Dialogue is also confrontation, but a confrontation based on the acceptance of the other which aims at addressing and moving the concrete person in front of me. Also when it comes to dialogue involving strong (political) worldviews, Buber asks what that worldview means to that person's life.⁸⁴ When Buber himself fails to confront the other person at the level of their lived experience, he considers the dialogue to have been a failure.⁸⁵

What are the limits of this Buberian approach to conflict? Related to discussions about *deplatforming* and *cancel culture*, are there views we should not engage with because they are too extreme and unacceptable? Interestingly, this is the very last question considered by Buber himself in his collected philosophical works, where he considers whether one could engage even Hitler in a dialogue.⁸⁶ Buber's answer is twofold: On the one hand, he considers nobody beyond redemption and he considers it our task to play a role in this redemption. On the other hand, he points to the practical human limitations in every concrete historical situation. Buber considers Hitler as a person unable to truly speak or listen to another. At the same time, the example of Daryl Davis illustrates that we may be mistaken about who is able to listen, especially when we engage with them over a longer period of time.⁸⁷

Buberian initiatives against polarization can be seen as attempts to change the world without taking power. This involves rethinking society as community and limiting the role of the political principle and the state. In fact, Buber's line of thinking may make us reconceptualize what the state is along the lines of Buber's anarchist friend Gustav Landauer. Landauer saw the state itself as a particular form of relationality, and he thought that one can destroy the state by entering into other forms of relationship, creating institutions that aim for true community.⁸⁸ The Buberian concepts presented in this article can be seen as means towards the kind of relational transformation Landauer had in mind, and as means to counteract societal polarization.

Buber was realistic enough to know that we cannot do away with the political principle completely. Just as there are different aspects to resilience, there are multiple strategies to effect societal change and to overcome societal polarization. Next to Daryl Davis, there are the street protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as legal actions to outlaw certain racist groups. These other strategies may be needed depending on the political and historical situation. But it is the relational approach of Daryl Davis that exemplifies Buber's philosophy and that may provide an underappreciated alternative approach to overcome societal polarization. This Buberian approach is time consuming and it may seem to produce rather small societal change. But it may be this kind of change that turns out to be essential in the long run.

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Notes

1. Valk (2020, 1, 10–11).
2. ANP (2020).

3. Buber's personalism and his insistence that true relationality cannot be institutionalized stand in the way of a completely systemic approach to societal polarization based on his philosophy.
4. McNeil-Willson et al. (2019, 6).
5. McCoy et al. (2018, 18).
6. McCoy et al. (2018, 20).
7. McCoy et al. (2018, 36).
8. Somer and McCoy (2018, 5).
9. Somer and McCoy (2018, 12).
10. McCoy et al. (2018, 28–31).
11. McCoy et al. (2018, 31).
12. Harambam and Aupers (2017).
13. Harambam and Aupers (2017, 119).
14. According to Wood and Douglas (2018, 248), one of the strongest predictors of whether somebody believes in a conspiracy theory is whether they believe in other conspiracy theories.
15. Wood and Douglas (2018, 246).
16. Buber (1962, 1006), from *Zwischen Gesellschaft und Staat*.
17. Buber (1962, 269), from *Elemente des Zwischenmenschlichen*.
18. Buber (1962, 1102), from *Geltung und Grenze des politischen Prinzips*.
19. Buber (1962, 958), from *Pfade in Utopia*.
20. Buber (1962, 888).
21. Buber (1962, 888–89).
22. Buber (1962, 952; 2019, 258).
23. Buber (1962, 995), from *Pfade in Utopia*.
24. Buber (1962, 1102, 1106), from *Geltung und Grenze des politischen Prinzips*.
25. Buber (2005, 198, 199), from *Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?*
26. Holloway (2010).
27. The link between Martin Buber and feminist philosophy has been investigated by Walters (2003).
28. Wikipedia entry 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', retrieved on November 5th, 2020.
29. Buber (1962, 833–1002); Buber's conceptualization of community differs from what has been put forth within communitarianism, see Siegfried (2018).
30. Buber (2019, 380), from *Bemerkungen zur Gemeinschaftsidee*.
31. Buber (2005, 187), from *Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?*
32. Buber (1962, 269–72), from *Elemente des Zwischenmenschlichen*.
33. All examples are discussed in *Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?*, Buber (2005, 188–91).
34. Buber (1962, 108), from *Ich und Du*.
35. Ferrari (2019, 78).
36. Buber (2019, 171), from *Worte an die Zeit: Gemeinschaft*.
37. Buber (1962, 813), from *Reden über Erziehung*.
38. Buber (1962, 852), from *Pfade in Utopia*.
39. Buber (1962, 997–98).
40. Buber (2019, 161–71), *Worte an die Zeit: Gemeinschaft*.
41. Buber (2019, 169).
42. Buber (2005, 189), from *Wie kann Gemeinschaft werden?*
43. Buber (2005, 189)

44. Buber (2005, 194).
45. Buber (2019, 307), from *Erziehung zur Gemeinschaft*.
46. Buber (1962, 820), from *Reden über Erziehung*.
47. Dutch TV program 'VPRO Zomergasten', August 2, 2020.
48. In its original intention, the Occupy Wallstreet movement was open to everyone to participate in and become part of the community. At the same time, it also illustrates a possible danger of community creation, namely that the community might position itself in opposition to others, creating a new 'Us' versus 'Them' dynamic: If 'we are the 99%', you are the 1%. Just as Buber considered communities at different scales (family, religious community, nation), the solution here is to develop various kinds of overlapping communities, all of which are grounded in the same kind of I-Thou relationality.
49. Buber (1962, 77–170).
50. Richter (2018, 60).
51. Buber (1962, 244), from *Die Frage an den Einzelnen*.
52. For more background on Buber's notion of dialogue, see Avnon (1998) and Mendes-Flohr (1989).
53. Buber (1962, 283–86), from *Elemente des Zwischenmenschlichen*.
54. Buber (1962, 275).
55. Buber (1962, 288).
56. Buber (1962, 277).
57. Buber (1962, 278).
58. Buber (1962, 278).
59. Buber (1962, 281–84).
60. Buber (1962, 421), from *Urdistanz und Beziehung*.
61. Buber (1962, 442–53), *Das Wort, das gesprochen wird*.
62. Biemann (2003, 14).
63. Buber (1962, 452), from *Das Wort, das gesprochen wird*.
64. Buber (1962, 452).
65. Buber (1962, 451–52).
66. Buber (1962, 812), from *Reden über Erziehung*.
67. Buber (1962, 264–65), from *Die Frage an den Einzelnen*.
68. Buber (1962, 651–782), *Zwei Glaubensweisen*.
69. Buber (2019, 85–86).
70. Buber (2019, 85).
71. Ferrari (2019, 63, 72).
72. Dentith (2018, 204).
73. Ferrari (2019, 72).
74. Buber (1962, 1107), from *Geltung und Grenze des politischen Prinzips*.
75. Buber (1962, 816), from *Reden über Erziehung*.
76. Ferrari (2019, 35).
77. Buber (1962, 850), from *Pfade in Utopia*.
78. Buber (1962, 850).
79. Buber (1962, 850).
80. Kouwenhoven et al. (2020, 14–15).
81. Ornstein (2016)

82. McNeil-Willson et al. (2019, 21).
83. See also Frost and Krone (2018).
84. Buber (1962, 814–15), from *Reden über Erziehung*.
85. In the prologue of *Gottesfinsternis*, Buber (1962, 503–603) describes two dialogues he himself has been involved in. The first of these dialogues ends in purely intellectual agreement without the dialogue reaching the lived reality of the other person. The second dialogue ends in intellectual disagreement where in the course of the dialogue both persons engage in the dialogue from within their lived realities and where an I-Thou relationship develops.
86. Buber (1962, 1121–22), from *Aus einer philosophischen Rechenschaft*.
87. In the film about him, Daryl Davis clearly positions himself against deplatforming, saying: ‘Give that person a platform, allow them to air their views, and people will reciprocate’.
88. Landauer (1910).

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