

# The measurement of the future

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We know them all – the short-term, medium-term, and long-term forecasts for the economy, employment, life expectancy, and the climate, and the procedure for forming these predictions is always the same. The researcher sets out from the here and now, looks at the change dynamics of past years, and weighs up what “disturbances” could occur by assessing what expectations of the future have to be adjusted upwards or downwards. In the profession, this is called “naive forecasting.”

In the Legacy Study (“Vermächtnisstudie”) undertaken by the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, the infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences, and the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT, we asked respondents for their predictions for the world of tomorrow. In the three-step inquiry, we asked people to tell us what was important for them at present, what should be important for coming generations, and what they expect will be important for people in the future. For most areas of life, respondents chose a response pattern under which the future did not measure up to their own present behavior, let alone their wishes for the world of tomorrow. The three data points took the form of a pitched roof: a low value for the present (“this is important for me”), a higher score for the legacy (“this should be important”), and a markedly lower score for the expected future (“this will be important”). Even though we ourselves have tended to interpret this course cautiously, in the public discussion it has mostly been cited as clear

evidence for people’s fear of the future in Germany or at least their feeling that everything would be different from today – and mostly worse.

The Legacy Study takes the form of a panel investigation. After the first survey in 2015, we conducted a second in the summer of 2018 with more than 2,000 participants. Newly added to the survey was the question of how respondents see the attitudes of people in Germany today. By this addition we were able to research a fourth dimension. Now we can not only learn about what respondents consider important today and what they consider will be important in future; we can also compare the views of respondents about their fellow citizens today with the forecast of their future attitudes.

The result was strikingly clear. In most areas of life, people’s diagnosis of the present corresponds to their forecast of the future. What our respondents think of others today is also what they expect of them in the future. One could say that they engage in a sort of naive forecasting. They draw a picture of a very stable society. No trace of anxiety about the future, of “everything-is-getting-worse,” of panic.

Diagnosis and forecast differ in three fields: in attitudes concerning upward mobility, family obligations, and relations between humans and technology. Specifically, respondents assume that people in Germany will take upward mobility much less

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seriously in the future. Instead of striving for “faster, higher, and farther,” i.e. of aiming for a higher status in society, respondents put more value to having more time and other non-material goods. A second norm that has long prevailed in Germany is also coming under pressure: dependence on the family. As our respondents see it, people in Germany will be far less guided by their parents’ attitudes towards life in the future, and will make fewer personal sacrifices in favor of their children. So what we can see is a twofold emancipation: from status orientation and family obligations. This will be accompanied by a greater dependence on technology. Respondents expect that people will put themselves at the mercy of technology to much greater extent than today – even when making such highly personal decisions as (unwanted) life-prolongation.

All these assumptions about future developments in and of society are important, but they do little to change the big picture people have: They expect stability and there is no evidence for a society of *Angst*.

But how do we then explain the many depressing diagnoses of today’s society, including the loss of social cohesion, growing societal divisions, and an emerging group of those left behind? The newly added question in the 2018 survey provides some clues as we can compare people’s self-perception

with their assumptions about their fellow citizens’ attitudes. In some areas of life, we find little difference between the two, while in others the differences are enormous – regardless of age, experience of migration, gender, education, income, and wealth.

Let’s look at the issue of gainful employment: Respondents find it very important for themselves and assume that also their fellow citizens put great importance to having a job with a salary. The results are the same for a range of other issues: Respondents find it important to understand the latest technology, to make sacrifices for children, to look good, and to refuse paying more for better medical care. Respondents also think that this is in line with what their fellow citizens think.

By contrast, the views differ completely on the importance of people’s own time, the desire for having own children, of a sense of togetherness (“we-sentiment”), and for work satisfaction. Whereas respondents place great value on free time and on having children, as well as on a “we-sentiment” and having work that fully meets their expectations, they see other members of society as under constant stress, hostile to children, lacking any sense of togetherness.

“People’s self-perception and view on other people’s attitudes differ – particularly on subjects that concern social cohesion.”

ness, and prepared to take on any odd job. Time, children, security, satisfaction – all these are areas that are important to the cohesion of a society.

Of course we could shrug off this irritating result by arguing that people wish to stand out positively from the crowd, that they wish to look down on others. We could even blame effects of interview techniques producing possibly socially desired answers. But it is not as simple as that. Why would the desire for distinction or social courtesy show up in some areas of life but not in others? Respondents could then be expected to describe others as layabouts and egoists, not as fellow citizens with a real interest in gainful employment. We think the findings go much further: They show real sentiments of distance, signs of alienation. Taking a closer look at these sentiments found in Germany society will be

the objective of future work on the Legacy Study. They represent questions that drive the research agenda of the WZB as a whole.

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## Audible science

In the mid-1990s, the performance artist and musician Frieder Butzmann (who describes himself a “crachmacheur”) was a guest at the WZB. With various working groups, he collected spatial impressions and work noises and undertook to illustrate fundamental social-scientific concepts acoustically. His intention, as he writes in the explanatory notes to the project CD, was to “fertilize the arts by means of scientific conceptual structures found primarily in collecting data, and, vice versa, to expand scientific work to include the everyday techniques of a musician, noise collector, or artist.”

*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin: Wir forschen weiter, CD, Berlin: WZB, 1995 (Photo: Thu-Hà Nguyen).*