



## Paths toward change at the WZB

From the founding of the WZB, to the challenges facing the institution and the future of the social sciences: a wide ranging conversation between Jutta Allmendinger, Jürgen Kocka, Friedhelm Neidhardt, and Meinolf Dierkes.

When you think back to your time as the first president of the WZB, Professor Dierkes, what was the most significant challenge you faced?

*Dierkes:* There were two major challenges. One was substantive, how to take the various WZB institutes, which were focused on different topics and spread across the city, and bring them together under a shared intellectual roof with a common orientation. The second, was the need for a physical roof, a shared building. Several potential spaces were considered, such as the top floor of the Europa Center, but James Stirling's new design for the former Reichsversicherungsamt won us over.



The WZB's objective is to continue to be a leader in the development of social science methods, theories, and empirical research. This vision is shared by (seated from left to right): Friedhelm Neidhart, WZB president from 1994 to 2000; Jutta Allmendinger, WZB president since 2007; Meinolf Dierkes, WZB president from 1980 to 1987; and Jürgen Kocka, WZB president from 2001 to 2007.

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*Kocka:* This design yielded a special combination of Wilhelminian and postmodern architecture that characterizes this building ...

*Allmendinger:* ... and will continue to do so. I am delighted that we can now add the two floors that the basilica lacked. It will do our work good to have them.

*Professor Neidhardt, the Stirling building had already become the new seat of the WZB when you took over as president. What were the challenges faced during your time in office?*

*Neidhardt:* When I arrived, my predecessor, Wolfgang Zapf, had relaunched the WZB with some very good

appointments. During my tenure the institution came under financial pressures stemming from problems in Berlin's budget. This meant that the German federal government had to reduce its proportional contribution to the WZB, despite wanting to increase its support. The situation loomed over the entire period I was in office. We had to redistribute budgetary resources without disturbing the peace while still continuing our work to the best of our abilities. We managed to do so only by significantly increasing third-party funding, but even that did not suffice. At the end of my term, for example, I had to dissolve my own department – The Public

and Social Movements. Even though the scholars who had worked there with me went on to good careers elsewhere, it saddens me to think back to that closure.

So far, we have spoken about the structure of the WZB, its home, and the necessary funding. Professor Kocka, what was the main challenge during your tenure as president?

*Kocka:* Friedhelm Neidhardt handed over to me a very successful and well-managed institution. Very quickly, however, it entered into a phase of profound change due to the retirement of numerous directors. By recruiting new directors, we were able to reorient the focus at a time when many new societal topics were arising, such as civil society, governance, and mobility, and integration. Global expansion was also on the agenda. By the end of my term, almost all the research units at the WZB had a new or modified thematic orientation. That was a rapid transforma-

tion that offered an opportunity for the organization to take on new research questions and new methods, but it was important to handle the process in a way compatible with the WZB community.

Let's now look at the WZB today. Professor Allmendinger, what were the issues that you wanted to address?

*Allmendinger:* First, we focused on forging closer linkages between the research themes at the WZB. That was achieved by clearly orienting the economic research to behavioral economics, for which we recruited two outstanding scholars, Dorothea Kübler and Steffen Huck. We also pursued this change by bringing in educational research, for which the WZB found a splendid researcher, Heike Solga. These three new units work closely with those led by Wolfgang Merkel, Michael Zürn, and Ruud Koopmans. Then, in 2017, we had the great fortune of attracting Macartan Humphreys, which gave the WZB



Wolfgang  
Zapf

Wolfgang Zapf (1937–2018) was president of the WZB from 1987 to 1994. When the institution moved geographically from the margin of West Berlin to the center of Europe after the fall of the Wall, Wolfgang Zapf moved with it, in terms of both content and organization. He integrated research groups from the Academy of Sciences of the German Democratic Republic into the WZB; worked on securing the institution politically, and intensified international exchanges. Social inequality was Wolfgang Zapf's life-long research theme. He studied the objective condition of people and their subjective experience. To mark Wolfgang Zapf's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in April 2017, the "Tagesspiegel" published an article entitled "Pionier der empirischen Soziologie" (Pioneer in empirical sociology), in which Jutta

Allmendinger paid tribute to the work of her academic mentor. An interview with Wolfgang Zapf can be found in the WZB oral history film series "Zeitzeugen" (Witnesses to History): [wzb.eu/zapf](http://wzb.eu/zapf).

a new research area that connects well to all the others. It was also helpful that we were able to close one unit and thereby free up resources for projects that span several different units. The second challenge we took on was to establish a wide-ranging and systematic development program for researchers and staff. We made it a priority to increase the presence of women and young people at the WZB. We introduced many independent research groups with support from the European Research Council, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation), and the Volkswagen Foundation. These groups are integrated into the seven large research areas of the WZB, and the proportion of women has increased significantly. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to be done. In Berlin, the capital of knowledge, we have to work together to improve the overall situation of postdocs.

**So you all had challenges to tackle. Which achievement are you proud of, Professor Kocka?**

*Kocka:* As a historian, I aspired to anchor historical thinking in research at the WZB. It was not a matter of simply adding historical research, but rather of attending to the historical dimension of problems facing our society. We achieved that goal partially, but only temporarily. I also thought it was important to make the WZB more visible and to improve its ability to communicate by increasing its contribution to public discourse. We developed new formats for events and supported all attempts to participate in public debates. I was especially pleased by the very good evaluation of the WZB in 2004, which showed we were on the right path.

**Professor Dierkes, when you think back to your tenure as president of the WZB, what gives you particular satisfaction?**

*Dierkes:* It was clear to me that the WZB had to improve its international networking, so I worked on

internationalizing the institution which worked well. We focused particularly on relationships with the United States and France, and turned increasingly to Japan, which at the time was a model of successful economic development.

**And which success during your time in office are you particularly pleased about, Professor Neidhardt?**

*Neidhardt:* Like Jürgen Kocka, I was especially gratified by the very positive evaluation of the WZB. From the outset of my tenure, it was clear that the Wissenschaftsrat (German Council of Science and the Humanities) would evaluate us with their own group of experts. The WZB at the time did not seem to be politically secure, so we had to be sure to achieve a successful scientific evaluation, and succeed we did! This was in large part because we developed a system of performance indicators that improved our internal ability to monitor our work and communicate it more effectively. We also engaged our advisory board to conduct an audit that prepared us well for everything else.

**Professor Allmendinger, you have just embarked upon your third term in office. What worked well during the first two terms?**

*Allmendinger:* This institution's contribution to the development of the social sciences: We participated actively in the establishment of the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, the Center for Research on Civil Society, the Cluster of Excellence on "Contestations of the Liberal Script," the German Center for Research on Integration and Migration, and interdisciplinary educational research. Our guidelines for career development and research ethics are in high demand in the academic community. The WZB's cooperation with the Berlin University of the Arts has facilitated collaboration between science and design, with great results, and we are bringing science into civil society – the series of

lectures we launched with the Museum of Natural History and the events that we organized in the district of Neukölln are prime examples of this.

**Let's look into the future. Where do you see the WZB's position in social research?**

*Dierkes:* It will definitely occupy a central place among the leading research institutions, both inside and outside the universities.

*Neidhardt:* I agree. The WZB is well positioned in terms of personnel, topics, and finances, but I think topics that used to be important in the social sciences will return to the agenda. One of them is research on capitalism, which essentially disappeared after the fall of the Soviet Union. Capitalism has not become any more socially compatible during its triumphant takeover, yet governing it through public social policy is still difficult under conditions of globalization. The urgent political challenges could be particularly well addressed at the WZB through cooperation between economists and social scientists.

*Kocka:* The WZB is on a very successful path because it continues to choose new societal questions to address. I agree with Friedhelm Neidhardt that research on capitalism would deserve a renaissance. The current structural change in the public, the widespread questioning of representative democracy, the crisis in the EU, and the erosion of the world order we have known for many decades are major new issues to study. The relationship between science, the public, and democratic politics is undergoing fundamental change. Other topics, too, will remain urgent, such as immigration and its consequences. The WZB will continue to have a lot to do.

*Allmendinger:* We have taken on these thematic challenges and will do so in future as well. The evaluation we underwent in 2018 did not impose any constraints, and, if all goes well, we will receive additional funding for digitalization. Then we will work together to find a worthy successor to Wolfgang Merkel in democracy research. We will become even more visible internationally. We will be leaders in the development of social science methods, theory, and empirical research, and we will speak out resolutely for the standing of science in society.

*The interview was conducted by Harald Wilkoszewski.*