

Verena Carl, Kai Unzicker

Anders wird gut

Berichte aus der Zukunft des gesellschaftlichen
Zusammenhalts

Abstract

In writing this book, we have come a long way.

This applies most of all to the topics that we will address in the next 200 or so pages. For although they have a common denominator – the upheavals of a crisis-battered present – they could not be more different from one another.

We write about a society that is seeing growth on numerous simultaneous fronts: both in its social and economic inequalities, and in the self-consciousness of marginalized groups, for example. We are telling the story of a country that, in a globalized world, is also increasingly feeling the local effects of global crises. This sometimes takes place directly, due to the droughts and floods of climate change, or through the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. But we are also experiencing it in a more roundabout way, through increased migration pressure, the return of war to Europe, and the rise of extreme right-wing forces almost everywhere in the Western world, for example.

In our book, we have focused on the challenges facing democracy and civil society: increasing alienation from politics, changes in the party system, demographic change, structural upheavals in the labor market, and new ways of consuming media and disseminating information. Throughout, we have always asked: Are we inescapably caught in a doom spiral – or on the contrary, do we have mechanisms at our disposal that will allow us to turn this change to the side of the good, and shape transformation creatively?

The discourse today, whether in the media, in politics or in private conversations, overwhelmingly paints the present in tones of the deepest gray. Fears of decline, and even an apocalyptic mood, are becoming widespread. Often, the only choice, if one exists at all, seems to be between different scenarios of catastrophe. For example: Either we leave behind devastated landscapes for future generations, because we have failed to slow climate change – or we renounce Germany as a business location and return to a stone-age society of self-sufficiency.

These concerns are understandable. But are they realistic? Is everything really coming apart? Or are we just experiencing an – admittedly radical – change? And don't we have effective tools in hand to manage it? Putting all blind optimism behind us, we want to ask ourselves this question: How can a changed society, a changed country, succeed in a new way? What can make us all resilient together as we face an uncertain, challenging future?

As an organization, we have been focusing on these issues for a long time. The Bertelsmann Stiftung has been working intensively on the topic of social cohesion since 2012. Our first study on this issue was published in 2013, and was followed by numerous others. Since then, we have examined various individual aspects in more detail, sometimes thematically, and sometimes in relation to a particular region or federal state. Three studies in particular have summarized Germany's mood with seismographic precision, allowing the derivation of specific recommendations for action. Since these will serve as a critical foundation for the chapters to come, we will outline them briefly here:

- ⊙ Recently, we used the example of the German state of Baden-Württemberg to study the issue of social cohesion and its changes in the wake of the pandemic. However, the results can be applied to the country's population as a whole. In this study, we examined and compared metrics for the German federal state for 2017, 2019 and 2022, with the 2022 figures naturally serving as the best reflection of the current state of research. For simplicity's sake, we will hereinafter refer to this study as the "pandemic study."
- ⊙ In 2020, we conducted a nationwide study on the topic of social cohesion in Germany, originally planned as a comparative longitudinal study, the survey also coincided with the first wave of the pandemic, so we were able to incorporate the changes that took place during that period. The primary focus was on the question of how perceptions of cohesion have changed among different population groups over a three-year comparison period, and what influence infrastructure and other factors – including population density, for example – have on these perceptions. In the following, we will refer to this survey as the "cohesion study."
- ⊙ The third study to which we will frequently return is from 2021, and looks at individual perceptions of fairness, broken down by age, gender, educational attainment and place of residence. As we will see, this thematic lens offers considerable insight into attitudes toward politics and the willingness to become involved in civil society, for example. We will refer to this below as the "fairness study."

So much for the topics and the research approaches. The observation that we have come a long way in writing this book is also true in literal, purely geographic terms. For we – and this applies above all to Verena Carl, the author of the descriptive portions of this work – wanted to juxtapose the academic surveys with stories from the real world, serving perhaps



a similar function as an exploratory drilling project in a geological research setting. We wanted to know: Who are the people behind the figures, and how do they deal in their everyday lives with the challenges presented by our crisis-tumbled era?

This journey, comprising a total of 4,892 kilometers by train and car, has taken us to very different places: from a village in Lusatia to the capital city Berlin, from a small Bavarian town to a district in Lower Saxony, to nine out of Germany's 16 federal states.

We have met with activists and volunteers, with deeply engaged private individuals as well as politicians, police officers and a school principal. We encountered people and initiatives that are addressing social change in their own ways, rethinking the old and taking unusual approaches to the myriad challenges of our modern society. They are fighting against democracy fatigue, advocating for civic engagement or for intergenerational justice and more diversity, and highlighting the issue of equal opportunity. Or, put another way, for what serves as social glue in a mobile world.

The answers to the day's problems are as varied as the people offering them. For example, there is the woman in Bremen who has joined with her neighbors to voluntarily collect the trash littered carelessly by others. There is the man in Ludwigsfelde/Brandenburg who gathers ideas in an informal citizens' council to present to local politicians. There are the two friends who have established a nonprofit village café in Saxony as a community meeting place in a town where the sense of disappointment is strong and political opinions are deeply polarized. There is the group of young migrant adults who are working in an anti-racist educational institution after the terrorist attack in Hanau, and in the process have gained new trust in their fellow human beings.

The forms we have chosen for our texts are as different as the people and their stories: sometimes traditional reportage, sometimes interviews, sometimes journal entries, sometimes a series of statements by people who are struggling together to reach consensus on a topic.

Again and again, we have had conversations and experienced situations that allow for multiple interpretations. We will start with a few of the negative ones here. Yes, the sometimes alternating, sometimes overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises of our present day can have a paralyzing effect. For example, the challenge posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting inflation. The treatment of refugees, the intensifying social question, the hate directed toward marginalized groups and the loss of trust in political actors. And finally, as the mega-crisis of the 21st century, human-caused climate change.

The abundance of these challenges can lead to an erosion of solidarity, increased distributional struggles, political apathy and a slide toward the radical fringes. Steffen Mau, professor of macrosociology at Berlin's Humboldt University, speaks aptly of "change exhaustion," which he observes is more prevalent for historical reasons in eastern Germany than in the west of the country.

But at many points, a positive, a more hopeful interpretation nevertheless remains possible, which ultimately also allows us to say with great certainty: "Different is good!" – if we do the right things. Because in fact, much is moving in a desirable direction: toward greater cohesion, better communication and innovative thinking. In some respects, what we found in our research is a kind of German jigsaw puzzle of hope: initiatives that are rethinking civic participation, making dialogue between hardened fronts possible again; individuals who are engaging with fellow human beings and their environments, and who are together giving a voice to groups that are still heard too infrequently in the societal dialogue; bright minds that are devising breathing, flexible, novel social arrangements to replace the rigid structures that no longer fit our existence, which is characterized by change and lifelong learning. This is what is needed to reorganize ourselves and make us fit for the future, especially with regard to future generations.

We quote here a 12-year-old from Ukraine, who we will visit again in our third chapter: "This is an adventure." These were the words with which he greeted one of our interviewees in Munich, who took him and his family in after their flight from Kyiv.

This child's willingness to see an opportunity for personal growth and learning even in a life-threatening situation made a deep impression on her – and on us! Because despite the mood of perpetual crisis, no one in this country has to fear for their lives. We do not live in a war zone. But we will nevertheless venture an analogy that might carry us from a gloomy perspective to the point of hopeful expectation: What if everything does become different – but good in a different way, if not even better? And what can we as a whole society contribute to bringing this about? How can the various aspects of social cohesion positively reinforce each other, meshing like cogs driving the transformation processes?

Finally, we have come a long way in a third sense: personally. The life stories of the two of us who worked on this book over several months in the spring and summer of 2023 can also be told as a journey. Even without slipping into overly emotional nostalgia, a personal look backward can trace just how far we have moved as a society over the past 50 years or so.



Because our life stories, as individual as they are, also reveal something universal: the pace of societal change. In the past, transformation processes took several generations. One hallmark of our times is that more and more changes now fit into the span of a single lifetime. Much of what we can identify today as changes in social cohesion can therefore be situated biographically. We grew up with three TV channels and telephone booths instead of cell phones, in a divided country, and in a time when neither cultural nor sexual diversity were prominent social issues. Even to our own children today, this often sounds like a tale from the distant past.

We – a social researcher and a journalist – are aware that there is no such thing as an objective regard. Whether we like it or not, we always bring our own perspective to our observations. This is colored in many places by our position in society, our life experiences, our gender, our occupation and other factors. In personal conversations during the course of this joint book project, we have noticed again and again: Even in our childhoods in the seventies and eighties, there were differences between our ways of life in the city (Verena Carl) and in the countryside (Kai Unzicker), between our experiences growing up in more or less traditional families, and between the different educational backgrounds that still shape us today.

At the same time, these few decades of shared life experience stretching from the Cold War to the globalized world of the 21st century have given us a shared foundation of optimism underlying all the current era's concerns. Just in the course of our lifetimes, we have seen so many positive and often surprising transformations in addition to the crises that we are reluctant to join in the general lament. We could certainly note here the end of Germany's division, but also the real sociopolitical progress, for example in the area of family policy. Examples include the introduction of parental allowances and the legal right to a place in a daycare center, both measures that help to distribute care work and paid employment more fairly, especially in two-parent families. We also note the realization of "marriage for all," which has put homosexual couples on a largely equal legal footing. This shows that we are not as helpless in the face of change as it may seem – and even that we can shape it. And many of our examples show this to be right.

This closes the circle. Much will be different. But for these differences to be positive, we need people, ideas and initiatives that ensure we are not stumbling blindly toward the changes to come, but are instead giving them direction and purpose. Social cohesion is constantly being challenged in new ways – but at the same time, surprising alliances and new forms of understanding are arising in unexpected places.

Personality psychologist and researcher Ernst-Dieter Lantermann describes the crucial difference between resignation and resistance on the one hand, and the willingness to actively shape change on the other, with the terms “insecurity” and “uncertainty.” This is not a semantic game. It has real consequences. For where insecurity leads to feelings of inferiority, powerlessness and panic, which can also slide into the denigration of others, the awareness of uncertainty can give rise to more openness and creativity when seeking to resolve conflicts. And we can anticipate that the people we meet on our journey will be bringing plenty of this along with them.

