

# Emergence and Development of the Quality-of-Life Concept in Germany in the 1960s to 1980s—Private Wealth and Public Poverty

Alban Knecht, January 2022

## Quality of Life—History of a Concept

The question of what constitutes a good life has long preoccupied people (cf. Land / Michalos / Sirgy 2012). The question of what responsibility the state has in this regard is not new either, as e.g. the discourse on bliss (“Glückseligkeit”) after 1750 shows (cf. Knecht 2020, chap. 6.1.2.). With the term “base of life” (“Lebensboden”), Otto Neurath (1981 [1931]) addresses the biological foundations of existence. Nevertheless, the term quality of life, beyond an early, medical eugenics discourse (cf. Kovács 2021), and a use by Pigou (1924, p. 14), who already used the term to distinguish “non-economic” from “economic welfare” (see also Knecht 2010), only became popular long after the Second World War.

In his work “The affluent society” (1958), the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith analysed a prevailing disproportion between private wealth and public poverty in the USA, which was suboptimal for citizens and society. Galbraith used the term quality of life in this sense in an article in July 1964 (Galbraith 1964), even before Lyndon B. Johnson, for whom Galbraith had worked as a consultant, used it in the election campaign on the occasion of his nomination as a presidential candidate in August 1964 (cf. Knecht 2010, p. 17 f.):

*So let us join together in giving every American the fullest life which he can hope for. For the ultimate test of our civilization, the ultimate test of our faithfulness to our past, is not in our goods and is not in our guns. It is in the quality - the quality of our people's lives and in the men and women that we produce. This goal can be ours. We have the resources; we have the knowledge. But tonight we must seek the courage. (Johnson 1965 [1964], p. 1012)*

The criticism of the materialistic concept of welfare was then taken up by other theorists: The British economist Mishan (1967) saw the economic costs arising from strict growth policies increasing disproportionately, although this was obscured by the concept of the gross national product. The modern mode of production would bring

with it pollution, noise and rubbish, but also the loss of old habits, an overburdening by an unmanageable supply of goods, an increasing anonymity of life and the devaluation of learned skills (see also Zapf 1972, p. 355). Such negative consequences of industrialisation should be corrected by political interventions in which quality should be given priority over quantity.

The criticism of that time is also illustrated by the novel *Ecotopia* (Callenbach 1975), which tells the story of a fictional US state. The state splits off from the rest of America in order to establish a society oriented towards ecology and humanity, and at the same time characterised by supposedly asserting post-materialism, aiming at euphoria and socio-technological hopes that social structures and processes could be analysed and actively shaped within the framework of an “active society” (cf. Knecht 2010, 20 f.).

## Quality of Life—A Concept Reaches Germany

In Germany, too, the term was associated with a critique of the idea that all social problems could be solved with the help of economic growth (see also Knecht 2010). The then trade-union IG-Metall chairman Otto Brenner spread the term in Germany by organising the congress named “Task Future: Quality of Life” (“Aufgabe Zukunft: Qualität des Lebens”) with over 1,250 participants in April 1972 (Günter 1972–1974).

In Germany, too, the term was meant to support the search for solutions to current problems such as environmental pollution, unemployment, scarcity of resources, but also the comprehensive thematization of working conditions, gender inequality, minority problems and democratic deficits. There was also great optimism in Germany that these problems could be identified, dealt with and solved in advance within the framework of state activities and programmes through an *active social policy*. A turnaround was to be achieved, beyond a view oriented towards economic performance, which placed the gross national product and standard of living at the centre of its

consideration, towards a more comprehensive *social policy* (Achinger 1971), which was to be more humane, democratic and holistic than post-war policy (cf. Günter 1973; Knecht 2010, p. 145).

Erhard Eppler, the then Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and “green” mastermind in the SPD, brought the concept into politics (Eppler 2021 / 2012). Although Willi Brandt had already proclaimed the “blue sky over the Ruhr” in the 1961 election campaign, it was not until October 1971 that the federal government adopted its first environmental programme, which triggered extensive environmental legislation. At the end of the first social-liberal legislative period (1969–1972), the election campaign saw the SPD use the campaign slogan “With Willy Brandt for peace, security and a better quality of life.” where the quality of life concept in its broad understanding also included the Brandt dictum “Dare more democracy!”, as the election programme makes clear:

*An 'increase' in production, profit and consumption does not automatically mean an 'increase' in satisfaction, happiness and development opportunities for the individual. ... Quality of life presupposes freedom, including freedom from fear. It is security through human solidarity, the chance for self-determination and self-realisation, for co-determination and co-responsibility, for the meaningful use of one's own strength in work, for play and living together, for participation in nature and the values of culture, the chance to stay healthy or to become healthy (SPD 1972, p. 27).*

In the election, the SPD received the highest approval ratings in the post-war period. Research programmes, e.g. on the *humanisation of working life* and the *citizen-oriented design of the social environment*, were launched (cf. Knecht 2010, p. 19).

## The Importance of Social Indicator Research

The emergence of the quality of life concept was also linked to social indicator research. Quality of life as a target variable was to link policy-relevant macro data with the living conditions of individual people (Zapf 2021 / 2014). The origins of social indicators lay in spaceflight: Scientists wanted to assess the side-effects of the space programme on American society and prepared a report for this purpose entitled “Social Indicators” (Bauer 1966).

The emerging computer technology was used for “simulations of society as a whole” (Zapf 1972, p. 367), which extended far into the future, in the report of the Club of Rome even into the year 2100. At the international level, the OECD began in 1970 with a *Programme of Work on Social Indicators* to orient future growth policy towards the goal of quality of life. Gradually, social reporting and household surveys were established worldwide.

Already in the initial phase, two currents emerged, which were later called the “Scandinavian / Swedish approach” and the “American approach” (Noll 2000, p. 8). The Swedish approach attempts to measure welfare and quality of life with objective indicators such as unemployment rate, poverty rate, weekly working hours, years of schooling completed, infant mortality and suicide rate. The American approach, on the other hand, examined subjective processes of perception and evaluation. It follows Campbell's formulation “The quality of life must be in the eye of the beholder” (Campbell 1972, p. 442) and was operationalised through surveys on satisfaction, experienced happiness or acceptance of democracy, the realisation of freedom rights, equal opportunities and distributive justice. The study of subjective welfare indicators was more in line with the post-materialist thesis that welfare is increasingly determined by immaterial components (Inglehart 1977) and is more strongly expressed by values such as self-development, self-actualisation and co-determination (Hillmann 2001). Critics of the subjective approach, however, pointed out that aspirations re-signedly adapt to circumstances (cf. Knecht 2010, p. 24, Zapf 1984, p. 25). The problematic nature of both approaches became evident through research into the Easterlin paradox: Easterlin et al. (1974) showed that increasing wealth over a longer period of time did not lead to higher levels of happiness; instead, the position in the social structure seems to be more important.

In Germany, subjective and objective aspects were soon combined (e.g. Zapf 1984) and later supplemented by studies on living situations and milieus, which emphasised aspects of social inequality more strongly. In the end, social indicators translated the “quality of life” back into quantities, which followed the social planning idea that experts and politicians paternalistically optimise the well-being of the population with the help of social indicators. The alternative idea of daring to be more democratic and to give more importance to

the needs of the citizens by means of citizen participation and self-administration has not been pursued (for the time being).

## Claus Offe's Analysis of Conflicts of Interest in Capitalism

In order to give the above political idea of quality of life a prominent place, it would have to be given a voice, formulated as a general interest and result in a policy that makes its enhancement the basis of socio-political decisions. For the implementation of such a policy, the central mechanism would have to be broken, according to which every person first maximises their income in order to then—usually by way of consumption—try to optimise their personal quality of life. Instead, the course would have to be set in a social process that would determine in which areas society should grow and how: A policy of growth in quality of life could then replace, in statistics as in life, the orientation towards a one-dimensionally understood economic growth.

In order to get a grip on the problem defined by Galbraith of the coexistence of widely developed private wealth and an increased poverty of the public community and services of general interest (Knecht 2013), far-reaching interventions would have to steer economic life in a direction in which not only individually attractive but socially meaningful goals would be pursued. Democracy would have to come before the market, so to speak. This shows the importance of the discussion of democratic mechanisms in the German discourse on quality of life and the emphasis on the fact that only the “freedom from fear” would make it possible to turn onto a path towards a high quality of life.

As early as in the late 1960s, Claus Offe, within the framework of a conflict-theoretical “theorem of the selectivity of political institutions” (Borchert / Lessenich 2006, p. 16), dealt with the question of how permeable politics is to the needs of citizens and which importance is attached to which issues in political processes (Offe 2006 [1972]).

In order for interests and needs to prevail in the political process, they must be capable of organisation and conflict. Offe found that special interests of large and relatively homogeneous status groups such as employees, the middle class or entrepreneurs can be asserted much better within the framework of the activities of associations,

trade unions and NGOs than widespread but diffuse needs. Especially general needs in the areas of housing, health, transport, education, legal order or leisure behaviour, which concern the physical, moral and aesthetic conditions of social coexistence outside the sphere of the market and distribution, are much more difficult to organise, although they are of great importance in (everyday) life. Such interests are often represented by existing organisations within the framework of their own economic, professional or occupational interests and are sometimes instrumentalised (cf. Offe 2006 [1972], p. 34), for example in the health system. Offe went on to say that interests must not only be organisable, but also capable of conflict. This capacity for conflict, in turn, is based on the ability of an organisation [...] to collectively refuse services, e.g. within the framework of strikes. Needs that are on the margins or outside the performance utilisation process and whose sanctioning means are of little consequence would have a reduced assertiveness (ibid., p. 34). Overall, according to Offe, this constellation means that interests that come from the economic sphere, although they are hardly democratically legitimised—among other things through organised lobbying—have a higher assertiveness than the interests of citizens. The fact that, for example, environmental issues repeatedly lead to forms of protest, but change little in the overall context of a production and consumption system that is harmful to the environment, may be related to this.

According to Offe, the organisation of the political system entails further problems: elections do not determine a specific way of dealing with special issues, projects or areas of action, but legitimise parties for legislation and government for the period for which they were elected. Within the resulting freedom of action, politicians are freed from the compulsion to organise majorities. The fact that parties represent relatively unspecific interests in order to remain attractive to a broad electorate leads to a certain selection of interests (ibid., p. 32). “The lowest common denominator required by electoral strategy ... lies at the observable level (by public opinion research) of privatised values, group-specific subsidy and compensation claims and traditionalist resentments” (ibid., p. 32). Furthermore, coalition pressure, electoral tactics and the government's great influence on parliaments (ibid., p. 36 f.) lead to a prioritisation

of politically explosive and urgent issues in political processes over those that also raise problems but are less acute and visible (ibid., p. 45). The consequence of these mechanisms or this “filtering system” (ibid., p. 38) ... is that democratic control by citizens does not necessarily lead to a policy that is more oriented towards quality of life, even if everyone wanted that.

## The Showdown of the Quality-of-life Policy

The hopes associated with the idea of quality of life for a reassessment of the importance of the economy and economic growth and a greater focus on people's needs lasted only for a short time.

The oil crisis in 1973 led to a worldwide recession and lower economic growth. Unemployment and the “new social question” (Geißler 1976) quickly replaced alternative ideas of growth and the idea of socially producing quality of life (Schmidt 2005, p. 76 and 96). Economic growth returned to centre stage as a universal problem as well as a means of solving problems. For Germany, Erhard Eppler sees this in the transition from the Willy Brandt government to the Helmut Schmidt government, who as an economist had responded to rising unemployment 'in a Keynesian way', i.e. by means of an economic stimulus programme (Eppler 2021 / 2012).

The issues neglected by the established parties in Germany after 1975 were soon taken up by the new social movements and citizens' initiatives, from which the *Green Party* emerged in the early 1980s. The founding member of the Greens, Petra Kelly, proclaimed in her book *Um Hoffnung kämpfen (Fighting for Hope)* that Green politics had to be “social, ecological, grassroots democratic and pacifist” (Kelly 1983, p. 31) and that the relationship between “economy” and “people” had to be communicated in a changed way: “Somewhere we have to ... make it clear that first comes people and then comes the economy” (ibid., 27). There should be “an increase in the quality of life in harmony with the need for cyclical renewal and the preservation of nature” (ibid., 25). So, while the SPD had turned away from the idea of quality of life, the Greens were now trying to occupy this position.

At the same time, the theoretical concept of quality of life in science was emptied of its utopian, socio-political content and increasingly

individualised and depoliticised (cf. Zapf 2000, p. 3). From the mid-1980s, the term gradually appeared in titles of studies in urban and regional planning, geography, medicine, and later also in titles of books on sport, wellness and life counselling (cf. Knecht 2010, 28; 2020).

The conditions analysed by Offe have become more acute as a result of the implementation of market-shaped governance strategies, increasing international competition and the enforcement of a neoliberal political style in Germany: Conditionalization of social benefits, activation policies, precarization of working conditions, higher demands on workers and the fear of losing one's job and being pushed to the margins of society tend to stand in the way of an individual and societal orientation towards quality of life and sustainability, forcing each individual even more into an economic system that achieves only very selective improvements in quality of life, but increasingly undermines the ecological foundations of life. The still high productivity gains flow into more and more consumption, not into a higher quality of life, whereby—a point underestimated by Offe—the profit interests of companies partly overlap with the consumption and income interests of citizens.

Even beyond the labour market, the changes are pointing in a different direction: the belief that the world could be controlled and planned through a forward-looking active (social) policy was increasingly lost as a result of the oil crisis, Chernobyl, forest dieback and high unemployment in the 1980s, and later through the climate crisis, the dotcom bubble in 2000 and the real estate and financial crisis in 2007.

The improvements achieved with regard to partial aspects (e.g. containment of acid rain and improvement of air quality in cities) have been counteracted by newly emerging problems: For example, the reduction of individual transport in city centres is being challenged by a huge increase in total (individual) transport, larger vehicle models and system-preserving measures such as scrap-page schemes. Higher energy efficiency and the abandonment of nuclear energy in Germany is accompanied by a strong increase in consumption. Dissatisfaction with increasingly precarious living conditions and the political system seems to be less and less absorbed by it and is expressed in the rise of extremist attitudes.

The ongoing discussion on quality of life shows that securing the long-term satisfaction of

people's original basic needs (beyond their market / demand power) can only work if democratic mechanisms are strengthened in such a way that the satisfaction of these basic needs is given a special place and, on this basis, the private as well as the public economy are each assigned a clearly

defined and regulated area of responsibility. Ensuring the satisfaction of basic needs must also include the long-term safeguarding of the natural foundations of life if quality of life is to be secured in the long term.

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