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The Importance of Research Infrastructures for the Development of Social Sciences in Europe

Max Kaase

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The Importance of Research Infrastructures for the Development of Social Sciences in Europe

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On October 6 and 7 in 1989 Michail Gorbatschow, then USSR Head of State, visited the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in Berlin to celebrate, with the GDR Leadership, the 40th Anniversary of the Establishment of the GDR. Very little is remembered of this occasion at a time when the GDR regime already was on the verge of collapse, with one exception: In speaking to Erich Honecker, GDR Head of State, and to the GDR Central Committee of the Communist Party, he supposedly coined the proverb “Those who are late will be punished by life“ – Wer zu spät kommt, den bestraft das Leben. While it is not clear whether he really said this at all, this proverb has now found entrance into the everyday language around the world.

Why would I recall this historical episode at an occasion like the one we are celebrating today - the official opening of FORS? Well, I do because there may be occasions in life where being late is not only a disadvantage, and in my view this is true for the founding of FORS . I will explain this in a moment.

In order to do so, I have to briefly think back into the early Sixties when I worked with Erwin K. Scheuch and Rudolf Wildenmann at the University of Cologne on one of the most sophisticated election studies ever conducted in Germany to this very day. It was one of our big frustrations that to conduct surveys, document them and make them accessible for analysis lacked both the academic and the technological infrastructure, not to speak of the fact that at that time social science data were scarce and difficult to come by. Those were the days when social science entrepreneurs like Warren E. Miller at the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor or Scheuch and Wildenman set out to do something about this problem.

For many of us young scholars to come to Michigan to attend the ISR Summer School was

¹ FORS inauguration speech, Oct. 22, 2008

just like coming to the Holy Grail, and we were impregnated for life with the sense that also the social sciences needed an infrastructure for research. Today the concept of networking is omnipresent; what happened in those days was exactly the establishment of a network of scholars who got involved in building such an infrastructure although we did not use the network terminology then. The German Data Archive in Cologne (ZA) was established already in the early Sixties first by Günther Schmölders and then further developed by Erwin K. Scheuch who also founded the Social Science Information Centre (IZ) in Bonn to systematically collect information on research projects in order to broaden the base for data to be stored for documentation at the Cologne Archive and to be distributed for secondary analysis by other researchers.

I left Cologne in 1964 with Rudolf Wildenmann to go to the University of Mannheim where he had become Professor of Political Science. The idea of an infrastructure for survey research, stimulated by our experiences during the Cologne Election Study 1961, there forcefully remained in our minds. Nevertheless, it took until 1974 when, through the unyielding efforts by Rudolf Wildenmann, the Mannheim Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (ZUMA – Centre for Surveys, Methods and Analyses) came into being on January 1, 1974, as a Service Unit of the German Research Council (Hilfseinrichtung der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft), and where I became its first director.

With this step, the infrastructure for social science research in Germany seemed to be well in place, and its major institutions, though located at different places, not only thrived, but also systematically collaborated. One problem, though, existed from the beginning, and that was funding. For instance, the German Research Council had initially decided to fund ZUMA for just five years, but this turned out to be unrealistic, and DFG funding – a real challenge to the internal logic of the DFG – did continue for 13 years. Efforts by all of the empirically minded social science research community in Germany and abroad, crystallizing in a paper by Wolfgang Zapf, Scheuch and myself, finally managed in 1986 to find secure long-term funding by the national and Länder (regional) governments for the complete set of institutes under the label of GESIS – Gesellschaft sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen (Organization of Social Science Research Institutes). Of course, the three major institutes – ZA, IZ, and ZUMA – remained fairly independent in their three locations of Cologne, Bonn and Mannheim, in fact too independent in the eyes of the funder Leibniz- Gemeinschaft (Leibniz-Society), resulting in a recent major reorganization with one

President and no longer three separate Directors.

The extremely difficult process, extending over more than forty years, of seeking funding and integration of the German social science infrastructure leads me finally back to why I think that not all who come late are indeed punished by life. In fact, as someone who has in many ways and for quite some time been involved in working as a reviewer for the social sciences in Switzerland, I strongly believe that with the establishment of FORS a major and important step has been taken not only to better support empirical social science in this country, but also to do this in an organizational framework which is ideally suited to serve this purpose.

For one, FORS, with the integration of SIDOS, does not only continue to fulfill the function of the Swiss Social Science Data Archive, but reaches beyond in being the place where the Swiss part of all major international comparative surveys is located, with great hopes for synergies in theory, methodology and research practice from which all Swiss social science should and will profit. Beyond this, FORS is expected to get involved in basic methodological research, and this not the least at a time when major developments in social science research methodology are happening; one example here is the question whether and at what time surveys will and can no longer be conducted as face to face personal interviews or telephone interviews for reasons of cost and willingness of respondents to cooperate. Furthermore, the location of FORS at one place – think of the problematic GESIS example – and its ties to the University of Lausanne which has already demonstrated to be, in many ways, a strong supporter while leaving FORS enough academic freedom to breathe, will surely become an important determinant of growing FORS strength. Another strength well worthwhile mentioning is the productive collaboration between FORS and the Swiss Statistical Office. And, finally, I am well aware that in Switzerland not everybody has been pleased with the decision to locate FORS in Lausanne. But FORS is already building a network across Switzerland to mellow such concerns and to see to it that Swiss universities interested in having a well-functioning social science research infrastructure in this country have an adequate say in FORS matters and contribute to the work done at FORS.

All those in Switzerland who have decided to support FORS as an essential actor in social science infrastructure building should know that their decision has come at a right time when one extends one's view across the Swiss borders to other parts of Europe (and sooner or later beyond). I remember a meeting with European Commission representatives a decade or so

ago at the Villa Vigoni at Lake Como when the scholars present were informed that “infrastructure” is a no-word for the Commission. Considering this, it is amazing how far we have progressed since. And it is not something to be taken for granted and lightly that the social sciences are now part of the infrastructure discourse in Europe and no longer only the medical and natural sciences (we are, of course, aware of the fact that, in comparison for instance to CERN, we are still nothing else but a rounding error when we talk about resources).

While there have always been isolated activities regarding research infrastructures, the first breaking point was probably a conference organized by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and the Commission in September 2000 in Strasbourg. After some deliberation and exchange of ideas, the European Commission set up a high-level Expert Group which, in February 2002, recommended the creation of a “European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures” – ESFRI – as an important part of the European Research Area. There is not enough time to describe the numerous and complicated steps which have been taken between 2002 and 2006 which have resulted in a major document “European Roadmap on Research Infrastructures” containing “mature” infrastructure proposals which had been elicited from major actors in the infrastructure field. Of the 34 projects identified for a so-called preparatory phase, five are from the social sciences, including CESSDA – the Council of European Data Archives (where FORS is participating), and the European Social Survey (ESS), the Swiss component of which is also located at FORS. And it is encouraging that the Heads of European Research Councils (EUROHORCS), the European Science Foundation and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft have recently prepared a Road Map to Excellence in Science where, as one of the goals, also belong – to quote – “World-class research infrastructures”.

To sum up: the members of the FORS Scientific Board (SB) strongly believe in the FORS concept and are willing to do everything in their might to help make FORS a success. I think that FORS has indeed just come at the right time and is, in fact, in comparison to other European countries well ahead in setting up a concise and powerful social science research infrastructure. This was possible because many in this room have shared such a vision and are willing to support it and will – hopefully – be ready to continue doing so. What remains to be said for now by me for the FORS Scientific Board is that we wish FORS success and creative minds to play its designated role not only in Switzerland, but also beyond.