

Center on Capitalism and Society
Columbia University
Working Paper No. 115

Free to Do *What* with Our Lives?

Edmund Phelps
December 13, 2019

Commentary by Brice Couturier, *France Culture* and
Richard David Precht, *Handelsblatt Magazin.*

Speech first presented on November 9, 2019 at the conference Berlin Wall 30, organized by the Academy for Cultural Diplomacy and held in Berlin on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin. A further draft of the speech was published as an op-ed by *Project Syndicate* on November 22, 2019 under the title “Dynamism, Innovation, and Germany’s Future.”

Free to do *What* with Our Lives?

Edmund Phelps*

Last month the city of Berlin marked the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It came at a time when Germany is wondering how to navigate over the years ahead – as are other Western nations.

I could not have been at the Wall on that day in November 1989 to experience directly the escape of East Germans from the communism of the Soviet Union. Yet I was one of the many swept away by that astonishing event. I remember as if it were yesterday hearing over the radio on Christmas Day that year the historic broadcast of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, three choirs and a quartet, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. In celebration of the fall of the Wall, they were performing Beethoven's 9th Symphony concluding with its "Ode to Joy."

Significantly, Bernstein called for the word *Freude* in the Ode to be replaced by *Freiheit* – "joy" replaced by *freedom*.¹ Thus he conveyed the extraordinary sense of *liberation* that had occurred. But the world had little idea of what would come from it.

* Edmund Phelps, the winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Economics, is Director of the Center on Capitalism and Society at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Mass Flourishing* (2013).

¹ After writing this comment, I came across a splendid essay, "Exulting Freedom in Music," on Bernstein and his direction of that concert by the highly respected critic and essayist on music, the late Klaus Geitel: <http://www.leonardbernstein.com>.

It is safe to say that Bernstein grasped early in his career – or even earlier in some course at Harvard² – that what a great many people come to want in their lives is not “happy pills” and endless weeks on the beach. They want to be free – free to create, explore, take initiatives, meet challenges, and imagine new things – thus to voyage into the unknown, as Nietzsche encouraged people to do.³ Many want to be free to act in the economy. This is modernism – and Germany was one in the handful of nations that came to embrace these modern values.

Rise and Fall

As is well-known, Germany was home to many path-breaking figures in music, philosophy and science in the High Modern Age, ca. 1815-1940 – among them, Beethoven and Wagner, Nietzsche, Einstein and Heisenberg.⁴ If an innovation is the creation of something new that changes *practice* in the economy, then Germany had a high share of innovations too: aspirin, the automobile, X-rays, gramophone records and the record player, contact lenses, and commercial film.

Of course, there cannot be much innovation in a country without a workable institutional framework. In post-war West Germany, reforms initiated in the 1950s by Chancellor Konrad

² Bernstein over the four years 1935-36 to 1938-39 graduated cum laude (music) and took courses in German, Italian, Philosophy, Comparative Literature and Government.

³ See Richard Robb, “Nietzsche and the Economics of Becoming.” *Capitalism and Society*, vol. 4, issue 1, 2009. Decades ago, Amartya Sen built on the freedom to “do things,” and Richard Sennett on having “agency.”

⁴ A huge history is Peter Watson, *The German Genius* (New York: Harper, 2011).

Adenauer's minister of economic affairs, Ludwig Erhard, introduced the "social market economy:" an economy having free markets – meaning markets could set prices freely – alongside government policies to secure fair competition and provide a welfare state. Proponents of this framework aimed to make the economy *competitive*, which was a promising departure from the *interventionism* of the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck in the 1880s and 1890s and from the *corporatism* under the Weimar Republic (which was narrow in scope) and that under the Third Reich (which was broad).

Yet, despite the marvelous innovation of its glorious past, there is clear evidence that Germany has recently suffered a *marked decline of indigenous innovation*. Data on total factor productivity (from Banque de France) show a sharp slowdown in annual growth from the period 1970-1990 to the period 1990-2010 in *Germany* while there was no slowdown at all in America and little in Britain that could explain it. Other data (from the OECD) show that in the ten years 1997-2006 the growth rate of total factor productivity in Germany was markedly lower than the growth rates in America and Britain.

Causes

What is causing this marked loss of innovation in Germany? There are several hypotheses.

A familiar hypothesis is that German corporations are

extremely hierarchical. A consequence, in this thinking, is that an employee who has come up with a new idea – an idea for doing things in a better way, for example – may not be *able* to present the ideas to the boss or even the head of some lower department. And the bearer of the new idea may fear that some higher officer in the company may take it as a criticism of his way of doing things. These hierarchies operate to narrow the possibility of innovations bubbling up from the grassroots of society.

Another hypothesis is that, although the social market economy made a company *free* to raise its prices, a company is *not very free* to dismiss an employee for business reasons. Germany's *Mitbestimmung* – codetermination – model gives workers the right to participate in managing the companies they work for – even when it comes to decisions affecting the future of the company and its jobs.

Yet another hypothesis is that people starting a new company in some established industry might *not* be very *free* to enter without encountering practices aimed to drive them out of business. (I don't see Schroeder's Agenda 2010 and the "Hartz reforms" as addressing these.) And those who do enter an industry may find that the long-established firms are able to win advantages from the state.

True, the EU Competition Commissioner, most famously Neelie Kroes and now Margrethe Vestager, have made strides to

open up industries to greater competition. But it appears there are still mountains to climb.

It is no wonder, then, that some German politicians, welcoming the limits put on competition, are reported to have proudly told Chinese officials that “we made markets social.”

These hypotheses come from subjective impressions and limited observations, but there is some additional evidence. The current issue of the annual World Bank report, *Doing Business*,⁵ ranks Germany 114 from the top in the *ease of starting a business*. In contrast, the US, in spite of the anti-competition practices in Silicon Valley, stands at 53, France at 30, Netherlands at 22, the UK at 19 and Sweden at 18.

So it must be said that in this respect the social market economy in Germany does not work to generate innovation as readily as America’s full-fledged capitalism.

More than Freedom

But a less-than-optimal functioning of markets – insufficient freedom, in other words – may be far from the *main cause* of the substantial loss of indigenous innovation and the rewards that typically come with it.

Beside the matter of *freedom* there is the matter of *desire*. In

⁵ *Doing Business*, World Bank, “Country Tables,” D8 2019 Report, p. 173.
https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/DoingBusiness/media/Annual-Reports/English/DB2019-report_web-version.pdf

Germany – over recent decades, at any rate – it appears that relatively few people have been *encouraged* or *inspired* to create new enterprises or to create markedly better ways to produce or better things to produce. (The *Mittelstand* are proud of their continual improvement, but total innovation has declined.)

In addition, there seems to be – among some people, at any rate – distaste for joining a corporation under private ownership and control.

Why is this? The Berlin commentator, Stefan Theil, discovered from his study of schoolbooks that young students in Germany and France are taught to view private enterprises and market outcomes through lenses that are strikingly different from those in America, Canada, Britain and Ireland. He wrote:

The history book on the 20th century used in French high schools ... describes capitalism as “brutal” and “savage.” “Start-ups,” it tells its students, are “audacious enterprises” with “ill-defined prospects.” German high schools ... teach a similar narrative with the focus on corporatist and collectivist traditions. Nearly all teach through the lens of workplace conflict between ... capital and labor, employer and employee, boss and worker.⁶

It is no wonder, then, that a large part of the German public have a broad feeling of distaste when an economist suggests that there is

⁶ Stefan Theil, “Europe’s Philosophy of Failure,” *Foreign Policy* (January-February 2008): 55-60. Cited in Phelps, *Mass Flourishing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 209-210.

likely to be a gain to society when entrepreneurs, having amassed the required capital, are permitted to form a company, choose its goals and set the directions for realizing them. A large number in the public – perhaps a majority – *dislike* that kind of economy.

Even the word “capitalism” appears not to be used. On a bus ride about a decade ago, a Harvard professor told me that, at the end of an interview for a German newspaper on the dire need for change in Germany, he asked the journalist whether she would be fired if she used the word “capitalism.” She answered, “probably yes.”

The differences in values across countries have resulted in difference in performance. America (along with Britain and France) has continued to be an “innovation nation,” while experiencing a decline in its male workforce participation rate, owing to the advent of new labor-displacing technologies. By contrast, Germany (and the Netherlands even more so) has moved closer to being a “trading nation,” while experiencing an *increase* in its labor-force participation rates!⁷ Yet, Germans surely do not wish for a future in which they have been left behind for lack of dynamism.

The crucial problem is that the drive to innovate in Germany is no longer comparable to the drive in America. Statistical data

⁷ Edmund Phelps, “Dangers in a Repeat of Historic Corporatism,” *Journal of Policy Modeling*, vol. 39, no. 4 (July-August 2017): 611-615.

compiled for the book, *Dynamism*, which my coauthors and I are publishing in March, show that the countries in which people are *most innovative* are the countries in which people *most cherish* the *humanist values* – independence, achievement, initiative and freedom.⁸ There cannot be much drive to innovate without possession of these values.

So the basic innovation problem in Germany appears to be that it has ceased to possess – at an adequate level, at any rate – the values that are the key to creating innovation.

What to Do?

To begin, it would be necessary for Germans to reconcile themselves to a need for capitalism. We all need to be clear on the meaning of the term “capitalism.” In the America of Jamie Dimon, chairman of JP Morgan Chase, “capitalism” is any organization that uses capital while, in Germany, nothing there is capitalism! I recall starting in 1992 a year’s work at the EBRD on capitalism in Eastern Europe, following the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. I asked Leszek Balcerowicz, the former Governor of Poland’s Central Bank and twice Deputy Minister, what he thought capitalism *meant*. He instantly replied that capitalism means “capital is king!” The owners of the capital – the capitalists – get to decide what to do with it. The necessity of

⁸ Edmund Phelps with Raicho Bojilov, Hian Teck Hoon and Gylfi Zoega, *Dynamism: The Values that Drive Innovation, Job Satisfaction, and Economic Growth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

having a very substantial sector operating under capitalism ought to be clear.

If this capitalism is to deliver important rewards, material and non-material, to a great many people in Germany, it will also be necessary to infuse the society with a great deal more dynamism than it possesses now, so that productivity and wage rates will be rising more rapidly and job satisfaction will be markedly increased. But to obtain this richer economy *more* than adjustments of the institutional fabric will be required.

It will be necessary to enable and encourage young people to acquire the kind of *values* found to fuel grassroots innovation. High school *ought* to teach that the economic system largely based on capitalism offers people chances to explore and to create the new. Further, high school students must read the Great Books from Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome to the Renaissance of Cellini and Pico della Mirandola, then onto the Early Modern Age of Montaigne, Cervantes, Hume, Voltaire and Jean-Baptiste Say to the High Modern Age of Melville's *Moby Dick*, Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Wagner's *Meistersinger*, Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, and much more – so that young people get a taste of the “voyage into the unknown,” which is central to the Good Life.

I would add that if Germany regains rapid economic growth, that would help the East Germans. But it will be important that the

East Germans help themselves by setting a course toward a new life. Germany's great philosopher, Nietzsche once wrote, "I want to hear not that you have escaped from a yoke [...] Your eyes should tell me brightly, free for what?" In the economic sphere, Germany – both East and West – has not cast off the yoke of pre-modern values that inhibit the inception of new ideas, risk taking and thus the kind of flourishing that comes from such a rewarding workplace. Now is the moment for Germany to cast off that yoke!⁹

⁹ I am grateful to my colleague and dear friend, Richard Robb, for suggesting this last sentence. (He knows I might have written it myself.)

I thank also Viviana Phelps for several of the points made here.

Politiquement, comme économiquement, le géant allemand donne des signes d'essoufflement

13.12.2019 – *France Culture*

Par Brice Couturier

Le système partisan est usé. Le pays ne crée pas suffisamment d'entreprises.

Sur le plan politique, le gouvernement de Grande coalition paraît usé. La nouvelle direction du SPD, qui avait menacé d'abandonner à son sort une CDU vieillissante, semble devoir se contenter d'une simple renégociation du contrat de gouvernement. Sonnés par leur défait aux récentes élections européennes (15%), qui confirment l'érosion persistante de leur électorat, les sociaux-démocrates paraissent incapables de décider de leur stratégie politique.

L'Allemagne traverse une crise sur les causes de laquelle les experts divergent

De son côté, la CDU ne cesse de perdre des électeurs aux élections régionales. Et Angela Merkel est de plus en plus contestée au sein de son propre parti. Au lendemain de la claque prise par les chrétiens-démocrates en Thuringe (22 %, soit une perte de 11 points), l'une des principales figures de la droite du parti, Friedrich Merz, a déclaré « *Il est impossible que le gouvernement continue à être gouverné de cette manière pendant encore deux ans* ». Les élections législatives devraient

avoir lieu normalement à l'automne 2021. Mais la chancelière tiendra-t-elle jusque-là ?

Merkel a confondu pragmatisme et prosaïsme

Sa fameuse réaction à l'afflux dans son pays de plus d'un million d'immigrés, en 2015, « Wir schaffen das ! » lui a valu, sur le moment, l'admiration des médias dans le monde entier. Mais aujourd'hui, en Allemagne, écrit Peter Kuras, cette formule lui colle à la peau. Si on la compare avec les trouvailles rhétoriques d'Obama (« *Change we can believe in* », exprimant l'énergie et l'optimisme) et même avec les slogans de Trump (« *Make America great again !* »), l'expression de Merkel dénotait davantage une forme de résignation qu'une marque de confiance. Et surtout, c'est le genre d'expression, prosaïque et modeste, qu'on attend de sa blanchisseuse ou de son plombier : « *On va s'en occuper* », « *on va le faire* »...

Cette expression, renchérit Kuras, reçue sur le moment, en Allemagne, comme la confirmation de la fameuse compétence de Merkel, de son habileté gestionnaire, est aujourd'hui réinterprétée. Et perçue comme emblématique d'une politique qui a confondu pragmatisme et prosaïsme. Une politique, qui a « *tenté, durant de longues années, d'enterrer l'idéologie sous d'épaisses couches de détails administratifs.* »

Un glissement général vers la droite

Or, l'idéologie se venge. Elle prend la forme d'un mouvement populiste et xénophobe, l'AFD. Fondé en 2013, ce parti a remporté 12,5 % des suffrages aux élections générales de septembre 2017. Depuis quatre ans, l'Allemagne ne cesse de glisser vers la droite. Sa politique migratoire, en particulier, a aliéné à la CDU une partie non négligeable de ses électeurs traditionnels. Du coup, certains au sein de sa direction sont tentés de suivre l'AFD dans l'identitarisme. Ils s'appuient sur des sondages qui montrent que 50 % des Allemands considèrent « *qu'il y a trop d'immigrés dans le pays* ». Ce sentiment préexistait à la crise de 2015, comme le montre l'étude menée par le sociologue Wilhelm Heitmeyer, mais elle les a accentués.

Certes, les marches organisées par l'organisation anti-musulmane Pegida attirent des dizaines de milliers de personnes, en particulier dans leur place-forte de Dresde, dans l'ancienne RDA. Mais les manifestations sur des thèmes de gauche en font descendre dans les rues bien davantage. 240 000 personnes ont manifesté contre le racisme, à Berlin. Mais la gauche, que ce soit le SPD, ou les Verts (9%), ou die Linke (9%), peine à traduire dans les urnes ces aspirations.

Le miracle allemand d'après-guerre

Sur le plan économique, la situation n'est pas plus brillante. Et elle témoigne de l'incapacité du pays à se réinventer.

Certes, l'Allemagne évite (de peu) la récession en cette fin d'année. Mais la croissance est en berne. L'économie est touchée par le ralentissement de la Chine, son premier client et par la guerre commerciale entre ce pays et les Etats-Unis de Trump.

Mais, d'après le Prix Nobel d'économie Edmund Phelps, les causes du malaise allemand sont plus profondes.

L'Allemagne a dû son redécollage et sa prospérité d'après-guerre à son fameux modèle socio-économique, l'ordoliberalisme ou « économie sociale de marché ». Il combine une forme de capitalisme encadré et régulé, avec un haut niveau de protection sociale. Il procure une grande stabilité, en associant les salariés à la gestion des entreprises. Les réformes « Hartz », adoptées sous l'impulsion du chancelier Schröder (SPD) ont donné, plus récemment, un coup de fouet à l'économie, mais au prix d'un durcissement des conditions d'obtention des bénéfices sociaux dont jouissent les Allemands – en particulier, les chômeurs.

Néanmoins, certains développements récents sont inquiétants. La productivité des facteurs (travail et capital) stagne depuis plusieurs décennies. Le pays dépose de moins en moins de

brevets. Et surtout, la création d'entreprises y est très faible, par comparaison avec son poids économique. Ce qui manque à l'Allemagne, selon Phelps, c'est l'incitation à innover. Cela a plusieurs causes.

Pourquoi l'Allemagne crée trop peu de nouvelles entreprises

D'abord, les régulations publiques favorisent les entreprises installées et découragent les nouveaux venus. Les marchés sont protégés de la concurrence. Le Rapport Doing Business de la Banque mondiale classe l'Allemagne au 114 ° rang mondial dans sa rubrique « facilité à créer des entreprises ». La France est 30 %, les Pays-Bas 22 °, la Suède 18°.

Ensuite, le système de cogestion a bien des avantages, en particulier d'apporter la paix sociale. Mais il présente aussi des inconvénients. Les salariés ont souvent tendance à favoriser les décisions qui les avantagent eux-mêmes, au détriment des intérêts à plus long terme des firmes.

Le système hiérarchique plutôt rigide qui préside à leur gestion ne stimule pas l'innovation. Alors que les pays asiatiques encouragent les suggestions des employés pour améliorer les process, en Allemagne, cela passe pour une critique de la hiérarchie et c'est mal vu.

Enfin, « comme en France », l’enseignement de l’économie et de l’histoire tend à présenter le capitalisme sous son plus mauvais jour (« sauvage », « brutal », « néo-libéral »), conformément à l’idéologie dominante chez les rédacteurs de manuels. Ce qui contribue à dissuader les jeunes diplômés de lancer des start-ups.

Une nation commerçante...

Tandis que les USA, la Grande-Bretagne et la France demeurent des nations innovantes, conclut Phelps, l’Allemagne, comme la Hollande sont en train de devenir des « nations commerçantes. »

Ist zu viel Glück Gift für die Ökonomie?

Laut einer Studie werden die Deutschen immer glücklicher. Doch wie wirkt das wachsende Glück auf die ökonomischen Strukturen in unserem Land?

05.12.2019 - Uhr Kommentieren - *Handelsblatt Magazin*

Richard David Precht

In seiner Kolumne, „Das letzte Wort“ widmet sich der Philosoph gesellschaftlichen, politischen oder wirtschaftlichen Themen.

Die Deutschen brauchen einen Ruck. Eine „andere Mentalität“ sogar, meint der US-amerikanische Wirtschafts-Nobelpreisträger Edmund Phelps. Bei seinem Besuch in Deutschland im August war er nämlich schier entsetzt.

Zu viel „Sozialismus“ und zu wenig Kapitalismus. Und erst die Schulen! Ein Hort „falscher Werte“! Der Kapitalismus werde als „brutal“ gebrandmarkt, „ökonomische Freiheit, Wettbewerb, Leistung und Erfolg“ würden nicht geschätzt.

In welcher deutschem Schule Phelps wohl gewesen ist? Und wann? Vor 30 Jahren in der DDR? In der Schule, in die ich ging, zählten Leistung und Erfolg jedenfalls ausgesprochen viel. In der Schule meines Sohnes ist es nicht anders.

Und der eine oder andere Lehrer, der den Kapitalismus zu brutal findet, hatte damals wie heute nicht viel Freude. Und trotzdem hat Phelps irgendwie recht. Mit der

Selbstverantwortung und der Eigeninitiative an deutschen Schulen ist es nicht weit her.

Und Mut zum Risiko lernt man dort auch nicht. Das Problem ist nur, dass es an alldem nicht deshalb mangelt, weil Leistung und Erfolg keine Werte sind, sondern obwohl Leistung und Erfolg hohe Werte sind!

Nun kann man es sich ja leicht machen: Deutsche Schulen sind halt von vorgestern, das Klassensystem ist überholt, die Notengebung anachronistisch, das Motivationssystem, das Lehrer in die Schulen lockt, bedenklich, und die Grundausbildung nach Plan und Vorschrift bringt eher Verwaltungsangestellte hervor als Entrepreneure. So weit, so richtig. Aber die Krux ist: Die US-amerikanische Durchschnittsschule ist auch nicht besser als die deutsche, sondern vor allem niveauloser.

Wenn es in den USA prozentual mehr Entrepreneure geben sollte als in Deutschland, dann liegt das jedenfalls nicht allein an der Schule. Viel wahrscheinlicher liegt es am – Glück! Denn tatsächlich sind immer mehr Deutsche glücklich.

In den gleichen Tagen, als Phelps die Deutschen ins Gebet nahm, veröffentlichte das Ipsos-Institut seine neueste Global Happiness Study. Danach ist das Glück in den vergangenen zehn Jahren in keinem Land der Welt so stark gestiegen wie bei uns. 78 Prozent aller Deutschen bezeichnen sich als glücklich. Der verbleibende Rest wählt vermutlich AfD.

In einem solchen Klima der Seligkeit schwindet natürlich der Antrieb. Ehrgeizig sind ja vor allem die, die mehr wollen, so wie viele Menschen in den Schwellenländern. Wer ständig hart schuftet, ist oft unzufrieden und kompensiert seine Unzufriedenheit durch Kaufen.

Für die Ökonomie ist das ein Idealzustand. Wer dagegen alles hat, um glücklich zu sein, der will nicht ständig neue Produkte erfinden und auch nicht ständig welche kaufen! Die Moral von der Geschicht' lautet: Zu viel Glück ist Gift für die Ökonomie!

Zufriedene Menschen erweitern ihr Glück nämlich auf oft seltsam unproduktive Weise. Sie beschäftigen sich mit Kultur, lesen schlaue Bücher und kommen darüber ins Grübeln. Fairness und Gerechtigkeit werden ihnen zu wichtigen Werten.

Der Glückliche empfindet Verantwortung gegenüber dem Unglücklichen. Er sorgt sich um das Klima in der Welt und die Hungernden in Afrika. Und mitunter erinnert er sich auch an die Werte seiner Kindheit, die ihm einst als deutsche Tugenden eingepflanzt wurden. Bescheidenheit etwa oder Genügsamkeit.

All das ist eigentlich das größte Kompliment, das man einem Land machen kann: glückliche, genügsame Menschen hervorzubringen, die nicht nur an sich selbst, sondern auch an andere denken. Und die nicht auf Kosten der Umwelt oder der Menschen in den Entwicklungsländern leben wollen. So weit, so schön.

Doch wenn alle so zufrieden wären wie die Deutschen, dann würde die Weltwirtschaft erlahmen. Und irgendwann wären auch die Deutschen nicht mehr glücklich, sondern einfach nur arm. Die Lage ist einfach zum Verzweifeln. Mit dem wachstumshungrigen Kapitalismus verpasst man das Glück, aber ohne irgendwie auch.

Dieser Text ist entnommen aus dem Handelsblatt Magazin N°8/2019. Das komplette Handelsblatt Magazin als PDF downloaden – oder gedruckt mit dem Handelsblatt vom 06. Dezember 2019 am Kiosk erwerben.

Mehr: Niemand hat eine Glaskugel – Die Zukunft der Welt können auch Experten nicht mit völliger Sicherheit voraussagen. Doch für diese Erkenntnis braucht es keine hohen Phrasen.