

THE EXTENDED LIFE COURSE

REFLECTIONS ON A MULTIDISCIPLINARY EUROPEAN SYMPOSIUM
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by

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This was not primarily meant to be another symposium on ageing, as is made clear by its subtitle “Consequences for our living together, or: are we becoming a society of single beings?”. The focus was on both the fundamental transitions witnessed in the life course in the last three to four centuries from an uncertain to a virtually secure lifespan, as well as on the effects this has had on our living together.

Thirty speakers from various parts of Europe met at the Friedrich-Meinecke-Institute of the Free University in West Berlin for a three-day conference about these issues. On the one hand, a number of academic disciplines were represented; above all history, medicine, biology, genetics, sociology, psychology, European ethnology, and theology. On the other hand, specialists were drawn from practical fields: federal and state statisticians for the hard demographic facts, representatives from continuing education programmes, ministers for health and health education, hospital and spiritual advisers, and counsellors for the dying. In addition, thirty postgraduate students were given the opportunity to take part in the proceedings as well as in a three-week preparatory course.

This report is aimed, more in keeping with the tone of the symposium, at stimulating the personal reflections of the reader on this topic than at merely reporting specific research results about it. Hence, neither the individual papers nor the lectures are specifically cited in this account. In Figure 1, I have attempted to summarize the basic concepts presented at the conference along with what were, in my opinion, the most important contributions to the discussion.

The three illustrations on the left side of the figure represent the conditions from “earlier”. The historical demographers and medical historians in attendance agreed not to refer to examples before the year 1680, due to the lack of reliable sources (e.g., parish registers for calculating ages, specific death rates, and life expectancies; or missing medical topographies for qualitative interpretations as to the causes of death,

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etc.). The three illustrations on the right side of the figure reflect conditions from “today”.

Naturally, one cannot take the years of 1680 for “earlier” and 1980 for “today” too literally. The conditions “earlier” had been in existence for centuries. Similarly, “1980” should not simply be equated with the period from January 1 to December 31 of that year. It is better to view them as arbitrary markers for a 300-year period. It is also obvious that this transition from “earlier” to “today” did not take place in the same manner everywhere, nor can it be viewed as a linear progression. This development also had its ups and downs, its accelerations and delays. It must be emphasized that the analogy of “earlier” and “today” simply represents a schematic framework that should not be confused with a pattern of rigid and irreversible development. Such an assumption could easily lead one to project erroneously a one-way developmental process into the future. However, the comparison of these two cross-sections 300 years apart does, in fact, earmark a variety of major differences in the observations on mortality, life expectancy, cause of death, and the consequential effects these factors have on individuals living together.

Initially, it was difficult for the participants to get used to such a broad interdisciplinary realm in which both natural and social sciences are involved and, beyond that, to adopt a frame of mind that allowed them to appreciate issues which were of general interest. Some were plainly not used to looking beyond their own specialities of discussing topics outside their narrow fields of research. The fear scholars usually have of contact with others, their reluctance to speak freely without the customary support of footnotes and references, and the inhibition to state personal opinions, when requested to do so, could only be alleviated by the pointed assurance that none of the conference papers would be published. The generous sponsor for this symposium, the Volkswagen Foundation, is highly regarded for the financing of and acceptance into its programme of such multidisciplinary colloquia without exerting pressure to publish. They offer the unique opportunity for experts from various disciplines and countries to exchange ideas at the supreme level of “What’s it all about?” instead of simply poking at the leftovers and scraps in science’s ivory tower. This holds true for us historians as well as for sociologists or genetic biologists, psychologists or theologians. All too often, we persevere in the one or the other historical time period, cling to this or that research aspect, and forget to order our contemplations, research aims, or results into the larger scheme of things. Especially, a topic such as that of this symposium, regarding the extended life course, concerns us all. Each of us is affected by it: ourselves, our relatives, acquaintances, neighbours, and friends. Whoever does have the privilege to do research in this area, whether physician or medical historian, psychologist, sociologist, or demographer, should not put off the demands for the integration of the quintessence of one’s work into a larger framework. The developments of the medical profession between 1680 and 1980, for example, have not only contributed to a decisive and radical change in our life’s biological security, but have simultaneously made an impact upon the resulting alterations in the individual, interpersonal, and communal or societal domains of life, which, in turn, was the centre of interest at this symposium. Medical history must, in my opinion, accept the responsibility of taking the other side of the

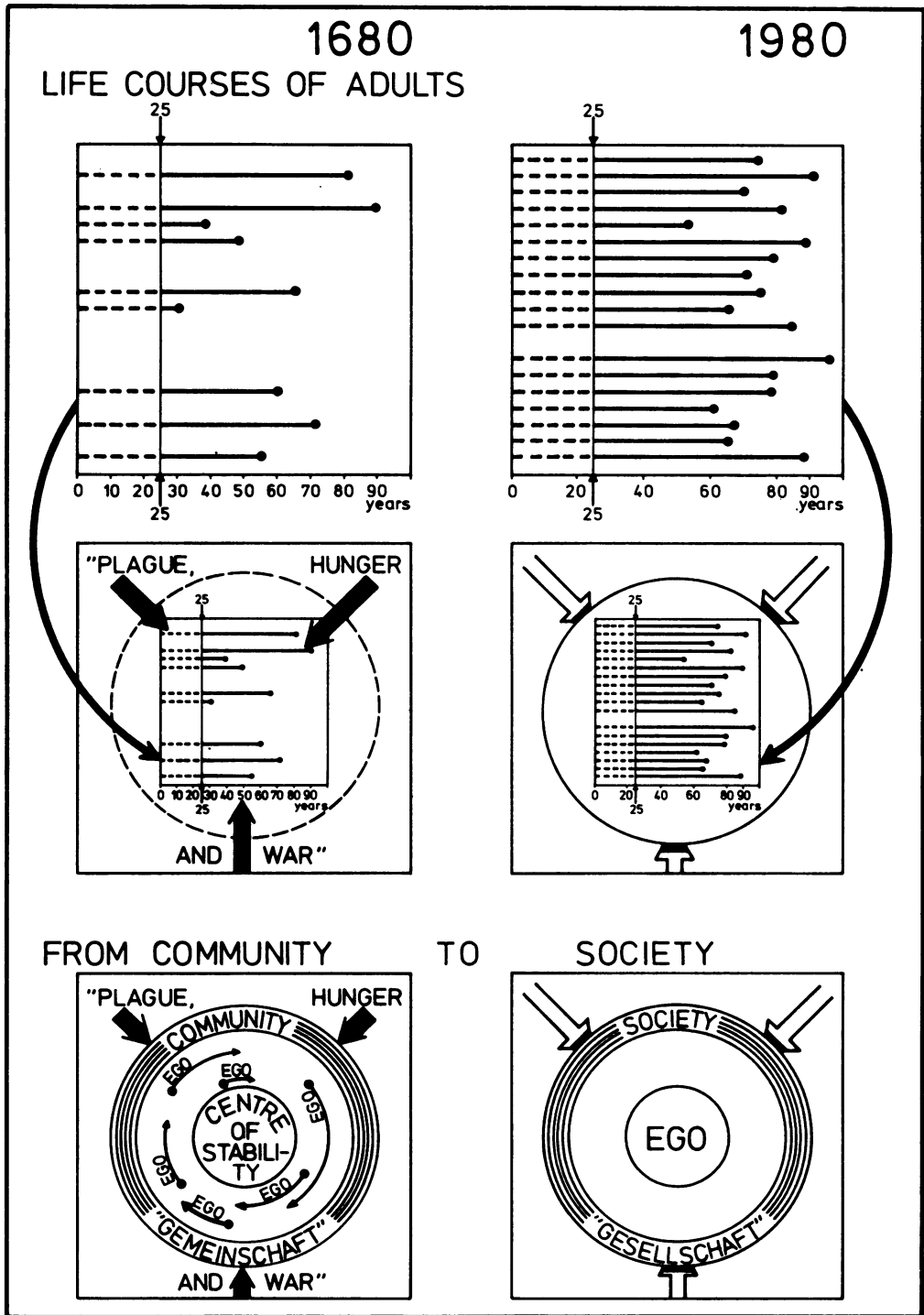


Figure I

The extended life course

Figure 1: Adult life courses and the question of stability in life. The three illustrations on the left represent conditions “earlier”, the three illustrations on the right conditions of “today”.

Top: Life courses of adults aged twenty-five and above. Three hundred years ago, about half of all life courses had already come to an end by that age (marked by the gaps between the lines). Today, most of us not only reach adulthood, but we also enjoy a relatively standardized length of life.

Middle: “Earlier”, the deadly arrows of the triad, plague, hunger, and war, easily went through a weak wall of counter measures (e.g., quarantines, grain magazines) and thereby were able to kill any person anywhere at any time. “Today”, this wall is quite solid. Most of us escape the deadly spears for a longer time.

Bottom: In “earlier” times, the permanently endangered EGO was forced, for survival reasons, to join a “Community” (= “Gemeinschaft”) and to accept individual restrictions imposed by its common goal. The focus of our ancestors’ world and world-conception was thus not EGO-centred. Today, we no longer need such survival strategies, since we are living a relatively secure life course even without them. We thus replaced the close living-together in those “bad old communities” with a free and independent life in a rather impersonal “society” (= “Gesellschaft”). We could—and did!—put our EGO in the centre.—This concept is based upon the fundamental work by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, originally published one hundred years ago (1887).

coin into consideration in conjunction with other disciplines, as is here the case. It is the purpose of this symposium review to provide an impetus in this direction. The convention impressed me personally in just this respect, which, in turn, accounts for the personal tone of this report.

The two illustrations at the top of the figure depict the life courses of a number of adults “earlier” and “today”. “Adults” refers to persons twenty-five years of age and older. We can assume that people of this age group have at all periods of time had their thoughts and made their corresponding plans in connexion with their life, its goals, and its structuring. This is not the same for children or adolescents. To the left, it is evident that repeated large gaps between the life-lines appear, whereas only one line is missing from the right side. “Earlier” only half of all those born reached their twenty-fifth birthday, whereas “today” practically everyone does.

Yet, in earlier times, even once beyond the treacherous infant and childhood years, one was never truly assured of one’s life. One might have died at forty as the result of an epidemic or a mother at thirty in childbirth. Yet, others managed to outlive the various life perils and bodily dangers, dying finally at the age of eighty or ninety due to old age. “In the midst of our years / surrounded by death’s fears”! “Earlier” yes—“today” no! Today, few people die decades earlier than expected. In comparison to our ancestors, most of us reach a standard age of seventy or eighty years. Our lifespan seems almost guaranteed. This would have been unimaginable a few decades ago.

The two illustrations in the middle demonstrate the prevailing conditions “earlier” and “today”. The uncertainties of the past were caused by the threat emanating from the triad: “Plague, hunger, and war”. Protective measures and defensive regulations could not effectively safeguard an entire population. The deadly spears of this triad could easily penetrate this protective shield at any time or place and wipe out a single life at a moment’s notice. In the meantime, the protective armour surrounding our life today has for the most part become impermeable. The mortal arrows of plague, hunger, and war are blunt; in any case, they demand more time today to reach the individual and pierce him. Increasingly, people manage to avoid them, and most lifespans have been extended as a result.

Since our ancestors were also apparently unable to manage without a minimum of security in their lives, they arranged themselves accordingly. It would not have been very useful for them to place their insecure ego right into the focal point of their lives, world, or ideology just when they were trying to develop their counter-strategies. Superindividual values were more often placed there, and promised more stability. For the individual, this could mean quite different values. For example, in rural populations the values of the farm and its persisting prosperity and its undiminishing reputation over the generations might have dominated. In urban conditions, this emphasis might have been more on a particular trade or otherwise the handing down of specific capabilities, knowledge, or skills. Each individual was recruited from such a community, which created this kind of centre of stability; from a farming lineage, a craftman's family or guild, or a circle of artists or apprentices. For the shorter or longer duration of this life, he placed himself in the service of these superindividual values and revolved around its centre. Even though these communities could seldom effectively ward off the lethal arrows of plague, hunger, and war, at least they promised protection, help, or relief in an emergency. To be a member of such a community was an irrevocable prerequisite for physical survival in earlier times. The individual was under its control. One referred therefore characteristically to the "bad old communities" at the symposium. Those who seek to return to this form of communal living in a fit of nostalgia should keep this very aspect in mind. "Community" cannot exist without disregard for and subordination of one's ego.

Are we then, in light of the ever-growing biological life security, becoming increasingly a society of single beings as the subtitle of the conference suggests? Are people by no means those "social creatures" that we have so long automatically believed them to be? Were they simply forced into being so for centuries due to adverse plague-hunger-war-circumstances solely in the interest of survival? Is man's true nature finally coming into the open as an individualistic single being at the very moment when these circumstances cease to exist, and he can live a secure life all alone outside of the previously necessary communities?

It was predictable that the resulting discussion concerning this topic would take a variety of directions after the central question of the symposium was presented in this pointed manner and made clear to each participant. Taking this situation into account, the six half-days were each dedicated to a topic-related issue, clearly structuring the discussion proceedings: (1) medical-biological-genetic aspects; (2) demographic-statistical aspects; (3) historical-medical and historical-sociological aspects; (4) aspects of "dying earlier" versus "dying today"; (5) European-ethnological and psychological aspects; (6) practical aspects (life-long learning, the planning of life-long careers in early adulthood, etc.).

The first three sections encompassed a long discussion about the hard facts concerning the increasing standardization of the human lifespan at a high level (around eighty-five years). While the ecological life expectancy, according to all those statistics gathered on the average age of death of all those born, as documented in the church and later state registrars' statistical records, appears to have doubled and trebled in the last three centuries, the physiological life expectancy—also referred to at the conference as the average maximum life expectancy for the human species—has

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hardly changed in the same period. Our “biological life shell” appears to have remained the same over the centuries. However, people today have been and are more often able to live this out to its fullest. The natural span of a person’s life has attained a guarantee for more years than before, and life appears more secure.

Admittedly, some of the speakers believed it to be predictable that the ecological lifespan would, moreover, approximate that of the physiological, due to an expected further compression of morbidity at the very end of life for more and more people. Yet before this is achieved and as long as a large gap between these two life expectancies remains more or less open for many people, we will continue to have—as was vividly demonstrated in the fourth section—a large problem with dying. The acute and usually speedy causes of death in earlier days from infectious or parasitic diseases have become statistically practically insignificant upon the vanishing of plague, hunger, and war. However, since we nevertheless remain mortal, although actual death comes generally later, we are carried off more and more by chronic afflictions. These are no longer spread over all age groups, but are concentrated in our advanced years. Many suffer a long time before they are finally released. It is just this manner of dying, or the manner of not being able to die, that many of us fear; the physical and psychological dependencies attached to this at the end of a long life. If the quality of our biological shell remains constant, perchance, or is only slowly extended in the future, while our ecological life expectancy continually increases at this hasty pace, then the compression of morbidity at the end of the life course might actually be a form of relief.

It is obvious—as was discussed in the fifth section—that the individual cannot establish a code of principles for himself based on these observations. It can always be different in the isolated instance. Anyone can at any age become the victim of an accident or malignant disease or succumb to the temptation of suicide. There are also new and temporarily incurable infectious diseases, such as AIDS. This does not alter the fact that our average life expectancy is still increasing, the average age of death continues to rise, and life is securer for an even longer period for most people.

These findings, however, do not yet simultaneously depict a positive evaluation of the development of an ever-increasing life period for ever more people. The entire sixth and final section of discussion dealt with the biologically secured life as not being at all equitable with a long, fulfilled life. The growth of life’s quantity has nothing yet to do with its quality. This brings us to the heart of the whole symposium: What are we to do with the extended life course? What does it do for us? What consequences can we draw for ourselves from these established conditions, developments, and trends?

The roots of this practical side of our discussion stem from the well-documented trends toward a growing individualization in our highly developed industrial society noted by many of the speakers. The demographers and population statisticians, particularly, from West and East Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Austria, delivered impressive figures demonstrating the declines in marriage and birth rates, as well as the influx of divorce, waiting periods before remarriage, and particularly single-person households. More than half of all households in West Berlin are made up of a single person (cf. 1982: 52.3%!). In the Federal Republic of Germany they make up one-third of all households. Even if a part of this is exclusively effected by demographic factors such as the much higher life expectancy of women (robust widows run a single-

person household longer), the trend towards a progressive individualism even for young and middle-aged adults was confirmed by the attending social psychologists and sociologists. Whether in terms of delaying legally binding marriage or foregoing or limiting offspring to a single child, growing reservations with regard to accepting long-term commitments were mentioned. In the same line of thought, it was emphasized that new forms of living together, such as communes and the like, are in no way synonymous with a revival of the traditional survival strategy “communities”. Just as misplaced is the comparison of the proliferating marriages without legal certification with a return to more tenderness and more communion in the style of earlier times. On the contrary, these are further proofs of hesitancy and procrastination, for it is not the partnership that stands in the foreground here, rather it is the striving toward more self-realization and personal gratification. It is not altruism but egoism that is the motive. Furthermore, more women than ever have a larger and more realistic option, due to their improved education, to live alone if they actually choose to.

If the discussion so far has correctly captured the historical and current development trends, then this, for each of us, implies a multitude of consequences for the individual, family, and society. For example, let us take the falling marriage and birth rates in many European countries in the last years, considering this increased individualism as its main cause. Startled by catchy media appeals such as “Is the German race dying out?”, politicians and ministries for family affairs in the Federal Republic attempted to reverse this trend with financial incentives. Referring to the long-term background mentioned above, it is predictable that such *ad hoc* measures can hardly have any effect in the long run. The more deeply-seated trend toward individualism cannot be broken by that alone. Increased child care opportunities or adding a second year of maternal allowance for newborns, will encourage but a few women to increased pregnancies and births. Likewise, it is doubtful whether the even stronger tax burdens foreseen for single-person households can compel the large number of die-hard bachelors to seek long-term partnerships. If man is given the opportunity, as attending sociologists repeatedly emphasized, to go through life as a single individual, then a growing number will indeed take this chance and use it. Nostalgic exclamations like “Back to the nuclear family”, or “Return to more community”, are not only unrealistic but utopian. From the perspective delineated in this symposium, they seem to be reactionary. “Communion” belonged to the “insecure life course”. These are interrelated. One cannot have the lately improved security in human life and simultaneously demand a close social cohabitation in traditional communities.

Single beings remain nevertheless single beings, even when they grow old. As long as the compression of morbidity at the end of a long life does not yet apply to all of them, nor does a speedy death necessarily follow a long life, a fear of dependency on others will affect many of them. They cannot expect that communities will rise up about them, or that someone will look after them out of communal feeling. Single beings die alone. They have even less of a choice than others whether to die within the bosom of the family or at home which is nonexistent for them.

Even though I contemplate this openly with no suppression—for I myself am one of

that majority living in a single-person household in West Berlin—I will by no means simply fold my hands and fatalistically await the rather unpleasant hour of this final state of being. First, everyone knows that being alone is not the same as being lonely. Loneliness can be perceived in a more noticeable and painful manner within a disturbed relationship between two people. Second, one can assume that our life's horizons narrow with age. The less concerned we become in the fourth quarter of life with the highly publicized activities and bustle of the robust members of the third quarter, the more important it becomes, I feel, to learn at least then to live for oneself. This, in turn, requires that we still have an operating life-goal at this advanced age, and that only under these restricted conditions can we ever attain it. A long and fulfilled life can only come to a close for those who have had an immaterial goal before them for the duration of their mortal lives, which has irrevocably given them meaning. Such a life-course must be planned for the long term and be abided by with a perseverance, beginning in one's youth and slowly replenished through the adult years. The foundation of life's edifice should be laid at twenty, if the structure is to stand erect at the age of eighty. Today, a fulfilled long life offers opportunities and goals for more of us than ever before in history. We should utilize this opportunity so that the many additional life years are not wasted.

Those involved in adult education have long been trying to draw our attention to something in this context that participants in the symposium mentioned again and again, namely the necessity of life-long learning. Many of our schools claim that they teach their lessons "for life and not just for school". However, some curricula still imply that "life" is still only made up of the time spent actively in one's career. Naturally, it cannot be expected that one should learn in detail at fifteen or twenty what one finally should do at eighty or eighty-five after retirement. However, it is important to develop an outline for life in those early years and to spark, establish, and then nurture interests that can endure for life, for a long life. They must be bred in such a way that they might still remain fulfilling within the restricted conditions towards the end, especially, if continually fewer of us await a metaphysical eternity thereafter. We have, after all, won some additional years on earth, but have lost our belief in eternal life. Life has grown altogether shorter. We must then also adjust ourselves to this in our life-planning. A bit more simplicity could be of assistance.

I would like to emphasize another consequence. Even if the ego in Figure 1 (on the right side below) is situated in the centre today, and I admit that this picture is appropriate in my case, this does not at all mean that whosoever's ego is there is accordingly alone in the world, my own, of course, included. Just the opposite: it is only due to the society surrounding me that I can exist as an ego today the way I do, seemingly free and independent. I am myself a part of it, a cog in the works, even if the works no longer have any meaning or purpose in life for me. However, I still have as a cog my duty to fulfil today. Even as a single being, I carry a responsibility, which is not only for the society that has grown impersonal, but concretely for the other cogs, which are closest to me daily and are in one way or the other meshed with my life. Those single beings about whom the symposium participants debated are not the singles-types, who play the part of the permanent "sunny boys" or "girls" and try to live comfortably at the cost of others. Since my career is that of a university professor, I have made up my

mind to be consistent—the reader may pardon the use of the pretentious word—and be a good teacher. This concretely requires three things; first of all to leave plenty of time for my students and to advise them for a long period of time if they wish. Second, a natural consequence of the established necessity for a life-long learning process is to make the knowledge that one has as a university teacher available to groups outside the university, such as in continuing education programmes.

The third and final consequence would then be the responsibility that we carry for those populations that are not yet as advanced in the development and trends identified at the symposium, but are already showing clear signs of the same. This applies to developing countries, even though this is manifest in quite different stages. I would by no means maintain that the trends there have to develop in the same manner as they did or as they are doing here, simply with a time-lag of two or three or four generations. It can certainly turn out completely different. However, if the average life expectancy is extended in these countries, no matter what the reasons, and the average age of death is raised, then this can only mean that life there will become more secure for more and more people. Then, if this development with all of its complexity had led us into more isolation-individualization, it is by no means totally unlikely that similar effects will also set in there. The traditional living together in communities (families, clans, village communities, etc.) will there too no longer be a prerequisite simply for biological reasons. Even there, the individual will feel free, sure, and independent. The fundamental change from “community” to “society” seems pre-programmed even there. What I see as my responsibility in this context, as the responsibility of all academics in the so-called First World, is to accept invitations to go to these countries as visiting professors even if such invitations are not as lucrative or as prestigious as invitations from richer countries might be. It is not the point, at that time and place, to lecture primarily about the whys and wherefores of the lowering to nonexistence of deaths due to infectious or parasitic diseases for us in the industrial world, nor of the disappearance of newborn and maternal death. It would be more appropriate to make an open presentation of the new problems we have acquired in place of the old ones. This is important just because those countries will also meet up with the same new and, for them, unexpected problems, if they continue to follow our development. One cannot have a high life expectancy and at the same time die predominantly from relatively rapid and merciful, lethal, infectious diseases. One cannot make deaths of newborns disappear without simultaneously trading them off with a high rate of death of the aged. One cannot guarantee, as it were, an individual a secure life and force him at the same time to remain in “bad old communities” in which his ego is disregarded. Should one from our side, in conjunction with such revelations, come to the conclusions in those countries that one should prevent such community-disruptive developments, one could also add that this would then not be done by some *ad hoc* measures at the financial or family political levels, for example. More long-range strategies must be set into action.

To get this started would be easier for them at this point in time than after the development has advanced to the stage we are at now. Hence, we have two partners standing face to face in the end, both of whom have their problems, and it thereby becomes a little easier to communicate as two equals and not as teacher to student.

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Many other points were raised at the symposium, some from along the fringes or in pauses and, above all, from the younger participants as well as the postgraduate students. The continually discussed horizon of death lies almost infinitely far in the future for them, more distant than ever before in history, in any case. Few of these younger people, however, gave the impression that they might be living in more security (even if statistically proven by yearly increasing life expectancies!). Problems closer at hand accumulate and are of more current interest for them. Environmental catastrophies take up much of their thinking and arouse the impression of a ticking time-bomb in many of them. However, the remaining symposium participants were also aware that the repression of plague, hunger, and war and the resulting life security for many of us today is a relative security but not a guarantee: the vanished *plague* and all other pestilences that have been eliminated up to now, have not left a permanent gap in the spectrum of causes of death. They have long since been replaced by other diseases, which in no way cause us any less trouble than the old ones. In order to fight *hunger*, we put up with herbicides, insecticides, and pesticides, whose undesirable effects obviously are not in our control. Finally, that the scourge of *war* might forever be banished, is likewise hard for some to believe, even after over forty years' interruption in Europe.

Our Christian ancestors prayed: "Protect us from plague, hunger, and war O Lord!", which certainly indicates their own powerlessness against the steady threat of this triad. Most of us have nevertheless not only forgotten how to pray to a god and to beseech protection against harm, but we have in the meantime traded the then concrete fears for much more diffuse states of anxiety; fears that we could, for example, go from being diagnosed AIDS-positive to having full-blown AIDS; fears that we could totally lose control of our "peaceful" techniques for the unimaginable propagation of foodstuffs or for energy production; fears that it could come to a militant short-circuit between the hyperarmed superpowers. Handling anxieties is in the meantime—as the psychologists explicated—much more difficult than managing concrete fears.

With this in the back of our minds, it is no wonder that a feeling of more life security does not dominate overall. Sometimes it takes courage to remain faithful to the consequences one has drawn from this symposium day in and day out; to be a "good university teacher", and especially, if one goes through life as a single person, belonging to the privileged, who will most likely be able to make a secure long life into a fulfilled long life for themselves and for others.