

Prof. Reinhard Wagner

Projectification of Society

**How projects permeate
all areas of our lives**

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Publisher and owner of the IPMA Trend Story: *Projectification of Society How projects permeate all areas of our lives*

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Like the dissemination of electricity during industrialization or new forms of working during the pandemic, projects are currently spreading to all areas of our society. However, this trend is about more than efficiently accomplishing a given task, as is already known in the economic world. Conversely, this trend is driven by people's need for self-actualization, engaging themselves in a demanding activity jointly with others and accomplishing it satisfactorily. This is a promising trend for solving the various societal challenges of our time.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Projects are nothing novel. There are a handful of stories dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries about projects realized with exceptional projectors' efforts. Those projects were mainly concerned with addressing societal challenges [1]. In the course of industrialization and the accompanying technological developments, projects were increasingly used to solve complex tasks efficiently. This was closely linked to the emergence of project management featuring a detailed planning and controlling approach to the implementation of projects [2]. Projects, together with the people involved, were primarily a means of accomplishing challenging tasks embedded in the context of a private company. Studies in various countries have found that nowadays, up to 50% of the total working time in the economy is already spent on projects, with the trend continuing to rise [3]. Based on this development, project management has been increasingly professionalized, with corresponding standards for the implementation of projects, for the qualification and certification of project personnel, and even for specific organizational forms and governance systems. This professionalization is largely ascribed to the role of project management associations, which, however, are criticized for focusing too much on the private sector and paying less attention to the other sectors of society [4].

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

With the focus on projects and project management in the economic context, a similar development in the broader society has remained almost hidden and is gradually becoming visible. "The formulation of diverse projects has now become the major preoccupation of contemporary man," Boris Groys [5] already claims twenty years ago in the New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory, continuing that "all members of our society are constantly preoccupied with devising, discussing and dismissing an endless series of projects." The importance of projects is emphasized in all areas of the creative sector: "Artists, scientists, politicians, producers, and all others... are united through one word with which they/we often name what we do: we do projects" [6]. In this respect, the practice of the projects differs from those in the business world, as the term primarily describes "a processual, contingent and open practice, which cannot be planned or controlled and also entails the possibility of ending in a disaster, without a result or in something completely different and unexpected" [7]. "Instead of being quantitative, building upon the retrospective accumulation of artworks as tokens of value, projective time would build towards the future, a yet-to-be, preconfigured outcome" [8]. Projects allow time and space for self-actualization, aiming at shaping

the future. This future can only be comprehended, experienced, and shaped through the temporary project. In the true sense of the term's etymological meaning, "of throwing forward and an accompanying sense of futural potential and promise" [9].

Volunteering or civic engagement in projects has likewise increased for years. For example, an interview with 'Fridays for Future' activists in Germany revealed that all activities, especially events, demonstrations, and camps, are planned and performed as projects. Similarly, the 'Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)' initiatives of a soccer club involved in the German Bundesliga, conducting physical fitness courses for kids and nature conservation projects using a project approach, are, in their own words, contributing to society [10].

In addition, there is an increasing number of development aid projects, projects that contribute to community development, urban or neighborhood development, to 'smart city' projects or projects aimed at refugee relief and integration [11]. Projects are even undertaken in the home or during leisure time. For example, the German do-it-yourself chain Hornbach has been advertising successfully for years with the slogan "Do your project." From the start, the campaign encourages a 'doer'-mentality and determination in creating. A magazine (figure 1) shows impressive ideas and the people who turn these ideas into reality. About their desire to do it themselves and their passion for projects.



Figure 1: Magazine of Hornbach in Germany for the realization of projects in the home or garden.

An empirical study in Germany [12] confirms the assumption that projectification is increasing in society and is now impacting the economy and all other areas of society (see figure 2). Nevertheless, it is evident that the economy has a clear lead over the different sectors in terms of projectification, in particular also the public administration, and that this becomes noticeable in a negative way, for example, in public infrastructure projects, such as Berlin's major airport [13]. One way

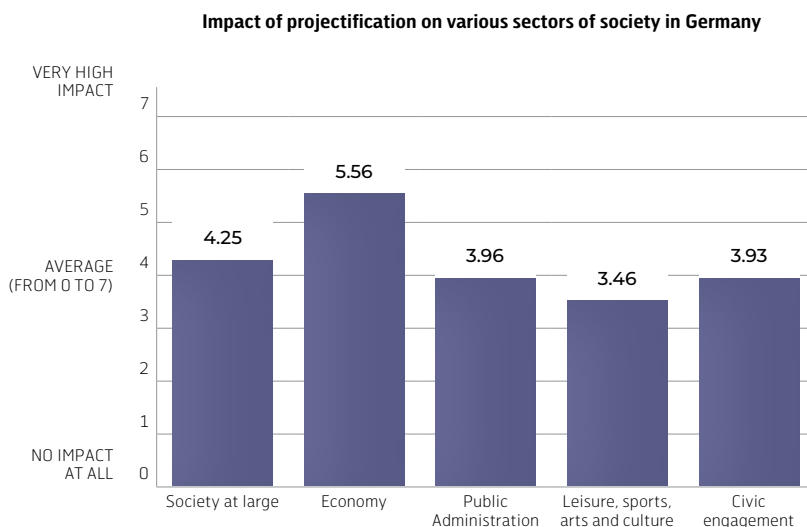


Figure 2: Impact of projectification on various sectors of society in Germany [12]

in which the gap could be closed is through more collaboration and experience sharing between the different sectors of society so that over time the gap can be reduced and society at large can be enabled to address challenges through projects.

CAUSE-EFFECT RELATIONSHIP

Researchers certainly still have a lot of groundwork to understand this development's exact causes better. However, authors concerning psychology, sociology, and philosophy are instrumental in explaining this relationship. For example, the philosopher Anders Fogh Jensen argues with recourse to the philosophy that projects are now a 'human condition' for humans, like the air we breathe or getting old. This development also marks a transformation from a 'Disciplinary Society' to a 'Project Society', which is "a response to the changing (and accelerating) world responding to three increasingly important factors: 1) the ability to reorganize quickly, 2) the ability to incorporate what accidentally happens instead of eliminating that the accident happens, 3) the ability to respond to feedback from the environment" [14]. The 'Disciplinary Society' was based on the principles of industrialization, which sought to exert power over individuals through strict organizational rules, tight schedules, and work routines to achieve the most economical processes possible. People were vicarious agents in a company and had to subordinate themselves and perform [15].

Sartre connects the concept of a project and the actions that someone undertakes within the setting of a project as an expression of liberation and free will [16]. "An action [in projects] is on principle intentional, directed to an end that is linked in turn with the recognition of a lack that is to be made good. Moreover, the desired end refers back to reasons and motives" [17]. What drives people to realize themselves in projects? An answer to this question can be found in the 'Self-Determination Theory (SDT)', which can be seen as "macro theory of human motivation that evolved from research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and expanded to include research on work organizations and other domains of life" [18]. Accordingly, people strive for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In other words, they want to show what they can do

as autonomously as possible, i.e., without external intervention, and to achieve the desired goals as part of a group [19]. Projects seem to be a suitable organizational form for these needs. The prerequisite, of course, is that the participants are given the appropriate creative leeway or can shape the project work independently. This also changes the image of people. Jacobsson and Söderlund [20] coin the term 'Homo Projecticus' for this, people who shape their lives through projects, implement a stream of ever new and more often interlinked tasks through projects and are comfortable with the temporary nature of the projects.

On the one hand, the increasing prevalence of projects in society will bring a growing number of people who are actively involved in projects and can thus render significant contributions to society. On the other hand, a special 'project class' may develop, which has an important role to play and therefore causes new problems, such as overwork with negative health consequences, or by forming an elitist group of people who use their abilities for their benefit. The two sociologists, Boltanski and Chiapello, sketch in their seminal book 'The New Spirit of Capitalism' a trajectory of modern society that takes us straight into a 'Projective City', or project society, in which "the project is the occasion and reason for the connection. It temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people and presents itself as a highly activated section of the network for a period that is relatively short but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available" [21]. So-called 'project heads' are the networkers who activate and assemble appropriate sections of dedicated networks based on already established relationships. "Several figures are proposed to incarnate this superior being a coach, an expert, an innovator, but the one that stands out is the project head, referred to here as the project manager" [22]. It will undoubtedly take some research to find out how far along we are on the path to this vision of a project society.

DISCUSSION

This trend story described the increasing prevalence of projects in all areas of society, together with possible causes and effects. Since the focus of project

management research and literature mainly dwells on professionally managed projects in the economy context, a development has taken place in society that has gone almost unnoticed. This trend has been underpinned by findings from the creative sector, social projects in society, and the results of an empirical study in Germany. The trend is explained by an increasing transformation of the project world, which was previously strongly influenced by industry and in which people were rather instrumentalized as a means to the end of achieving an owner's goals, to an understanding of projects as people's self-actualization. This is happening, on the one hand, against the backdrop of an increasingly volatile environment for action and, on the other hand, certainly a growing self-confidence among the actors, who are demanding and often getting more space to organize their activities. With recourse to the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and philosophy, their protagonists are already drawing the picture of a project society in which everything is realized as a project at all times, everywhere, and by everyone.

Further and more in-depth studies should address the relevant questions in this context in the coming years. These questions could include but are not limited to the following: How far has development progressed in our society? Which factors favor or hinder this development? What are the causes of the story, and how can they be promoted? What effects does the development entail? How can positive consequences be reinforced, and negative ones mitigated? International comparisons and longitudinal studies also provide interesting insights here. This trend description is based on little robust empirical data and requires

further quantitative studies. So far, these are only available for the economies of selected countries. These studies could certainly be extended to the whole of society. Here, the project management associations are called upon to conduct appropriate studies to lay the foundation for amplifying their support services, which have so far been focused primarily on the private sector. A central question will also be whether there will be enough people in the project society willing and able to step into the role of networker, as assumed by Boltanski and Chiapello. Could this create a two-class society of people committed to this specific role or not taking it on? The trend of projectification also sheds light on a major societal transformation, namely that from an industry-driven society to a project-based, liberated society.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Projects permeate all areas of our lives and society altogether. What has previously mainly been observed in the economy is now evident in other areas of society. This trend story aimed to draw attention to this development, which is vital to everyone. The main background of the development, the cause-effect relationships, and an outlook on a project society were sketched. It raises many questions for research, practice, and decision-makers in society that have been addressed and should now be answered concertedly. We still have too many questions about where we currently are on the path to a project society and what this path looks like.

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Dr. Reinhard Wagner has been active for more than 35 years in project-related leadership in such diverse sectors as Automotive, Engineering, and Consultancy, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. As Managing Director of Tiba Group Services GmbH, a leading PM Consultancy in Germany, he supports executives of industrial clients in transforming their companies towards a project-oriented, adaptive, and sustainably successful organization. Reinhard Wagner has published 40 books, several hundred articles, and blog posts in project, program, and project portfolio management. In more than 25 years of voluntary engagement, he served the German Project Management Association (GPM) as well as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in a range of leadership roles (including President and Chairman) and was granted for his international commitment with the Honorary Fellowship of IPMA and several of its Member Associations. Reinhard is Assistant Professor at the European University Alma Mater Europaea and Extraordinary Associate Professor at the Stellenbosch University and teaches project, program, and portfolio management. He can be contacted via reinhard.wagner@tiba.de.

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