

75 YEARS



A celebration of science: on February 26, 2023, the Max Planck Society celebrated its 75th anniversary at the Deutsches Museum in Munich.

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A MIRROR OF ITS TIME

TEXT: JÜRGEN KOCKA

Since its foundation in 1948, the Max Planck Society has not only established itself as a globally recognized research organization, but has also become an influential part of contemporary German and European history. Historian Jürgen Kocka demonstrated this at a ceremony to mark its 75th anniversary in Munich. Here is an abridged version of his lecture.

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The Max Planck Society (Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, MPG) was founded between 1946 and 1949 in the western occupation zones of post-war Germany as a modified continuation of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society for the Advancement of Science (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, KWG), founded in 1911. This was by no means a matter of course, as it was the aim of the occupying powers to weaken the defeated country's scientific potency in the long term. Moreover, knowing how deeply the KWG had been intertwined with the National Socialist war and extermination policies, they pushed for its dissolution and advocated alternative organizational models for non-university research in their zones. The fact that the legacy of the KWG nevertheless survived was due, in part, to the commitment of the German side. KWG scientists like

Otto Hahn and Werner Heisenberg fought for its preservation. They both enjoyed high international prestige and good international connections, especially with Great Britain. Despite the prevailing shortage of funds, the West German States were prepared to jointly assume the long-term financing of national research institutions, including the MPG – after all, they were counting on scientific excellence as a means of economic recovery and social reconstruction.

The occupying powers initially pursued different goals, but the emerging Cold War and the associated efforts of the Western Allies to bolster West Germany as a full ally against the Soviet Union proved decisive. It was only then that the Americans accepted the stance taken by the British, who had already been willing to accept German preferences in their





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Critical view: Jürgen Kocka emphasized, among other things, the MPG's role in relations with Israel and during the reunification, but also its political restraint.

zone. This cleared the way for the foundation of the MPG on February 26, 1948, in Göttingen.

The basic structure of the MPG was inherited from the basic structure of the KWG. On the one hand, it follows a corporatist blueprint: independent as a registered society; close to the state, but not a public authority or state agency; free-market-friendly, but not a free-market player. In these ways, it was positioned somewhere between the state and the free market. On the other hand, it is also characterized by the “Harnack principle,” a distinctly person-centered management structure that grants institute directors a considerable degree of freedom, decision-making leeway and responsibil-

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is Professor Emeritus of History of the Industrial World at the Free University of Berlin. He was President of the Social Science Research Centre Berlin. Together with Carsten Reinhardt and Jürgen Renn, he headed the research program “History of the Max Planck Society (GMPG)” from 2014 to 2022.

ity. Remarkably, this basic structure has endured for more than a century, despite changes in the details. While the first structural element is typical of the Federal Republic and can also be found in other areas of life, the Harnack principle is atypical of today's Federal Republic, is in a certain sense old-fashioned and, in this re-

spect, suitable for defining a unique selling point of the MPG. Both characteristics entail certain disadvantages, but at the same time are extremely advantageous as a prerequisite for the MPG's performance and success. It is worth retaining and carefully developing both. In its first decade under President Hahn, the MPG was one thing above all in terms of its objectives, its management personnel, its organization and its elitist self-image: a continuation of the KWG. The transition to the MPG did not mark a real break, but rather showed a great deal of continuity, as was the case in the West German economy and society as a whole.

However, the Allies required more than just a name change from Kaiser Wilhelm to Max Planck: they also prohibited the new organization from engaging in any kind of research that could be used for military purposes. This served to influence its policy decisions, away from certain areas of nuclear research, for example, and towards a focus on other fields, such as astrophysics, which soon became one of the MPG's most successful fields of research. They also demanded that the MPG conduct less industry-oriented research than had been undertaken by the KWG in the past. This demand supported the MPG's internally desired commitment to basic research.

The extent to which the MPG's development depended on broad historical conditions was also evident later, during the major turning points in 1972 and 1990/91. The year 1972 saw more than just a change in the organization's presidency. Looking back, the new President, Reimar Lüst, recalled that at the time of his election the MPG was “in a state of turmoil.” It was still dealing with the repercussions of the student protest at the end of the Sixties, and with the demand for co-determination raised internally by staff, especially assistants, and reinforced in heated public debates initiated by media critical of the MPG, and probably also supported by the in-

cumbent social-liberal government that called on German institutions and civil society to strive for more democracy. At a controversial general meeting in Bremen, the MPG finally succeeded in adopting new by-laws that anchored a measure of co-determination within the MPG, albeit reduced to co-consultation and to a much lesser extent than had been demanded in many cases and was enforced at the universities, for example.

Above all, however, 1972 marked the end of more than a decade of rapid growth at the MPG, and the beginning of a decade and a half of shrinking, stagnating, or at least barely growing budgets. The MPG had to learn to reallocate resources internally if it wanted to undertake new research and avoid stagnation in terms of content – a task with which it had remarkable success. This turning point resulted from the now far more frugal funding policies of the federal and state governments and ultimately from the overall crisis-ridden macroeconomic development.

cepted the task entrusted to it of establishing a density of Max Planck Institutes in the eastern part of the country comparable to that in the west of the republic within the space of ten years. It also accepted – as in its earlier years – political intervention in the decisions about where the new institutes should be built. But it was strong enough to reject further restrictions on its decision-making powers. Thus, it asserted that it would maintain its autonomy to decide on research subjects and substantive issues, as well as on the recruitment of the institute directors, according to its own established rules. It also almost entirely refused to take over existing facilities – a controversial political issue in the context of the unification process.

As a result, 18 new institutes were established in the eastern federal states within a decade, largely financed by newly provided funds, but also partly through internal redistribution from West to East. In the West, every tenth established post had to be cut within

and internal cohesion cut both ways. The management staff was recruited from outside to a greater extent than before. It became more international, more heterogeneous, and gradually began to open up to women as well. However, East German scientists were rarely recruited to the management levels, a practice that remains controversial to this day, but which corresponded with the thoroughly asymmetrical nature of German unification policy.

These examples may suffice to illustrate how much the development of the MPG was defined by the circumstances of contemporary history in general. However, they also show that the MPG always countered the initiatives and pressures acting on it from outside with its own standpoint and was never a pawn in major historical processes. It is significantly more difficult, however, to determine the influences and effects of the MPG on the economy, society, and politics, and thus its contemporary historical significance.

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In 1990, the MPG became a major player in the internal unification policy in relation to the sciences. The fact that German reunification took place primarily as an extension of the Federal Republic's body politic to the acceding new States, and not as a negotiation of a new order between West and East, benefitted the MPG: the MPG was able to preserve its own structure almost unchanged and extend it to the eastern part of the country. It ac-

a matter of years after 1990. The reconstruction of East Germany thus entailed a certain dismantling of the West, which succeeded without major internal upheaval. Overall, the number of Max Planck Institutes increased by almost 30 percent between 1990 and 2005, and the total workforce by more than 50 percent. This was an extremely rapid increase. Its consequences for the organization's capacity to control its own actions

The fact that the MPG as a basic research institution – unlike the KWG after its founding in 1911 – is predominantly publicly financed can be interpreted as recognition of the economic, social and political importance of science in the knowledge society of the 20th and 21st centuries. The MPG's tasks and its eligibility for funding were and are founded, in particular, on the important role of scientific research for ensuring the competitiveness and prosperity of the country (or individual regions). This is undoubtedly entirely justified, even if – or even because – the MPG's focus is on basic research. This is because basic research can drive innovation. Moreover, its official entreaty has never prevented close ties between individual institutes and individual industrial companies.

Examples include the Max-Planck-Institut für Kohlenforschung which had close ties to the early plastics industry thanks to the discovery of a



catalyst for the mass production of polyethylene, and the Max-Planck-Institut für Eisenforschung as well as materials sciences in general, at times nuclear energy, and, to this day, the life sciences. Overall, the open endorsement of industry-related activities in the MPG has increased over the decades, both practically and rhetorically, especially since the 1990s. Earlier reservations about the market-based application of scientific findings have since declined.

today in the calls for proposals of the European Research Council. The fact that the Federal Republic opened itself unreservedly to Western political culture after the Second World War and anchored itself in the West is considered an important pillar of its relatively successful history to this day, and not only in a historical science context. Through its early and intensive contacts – via studies, exchange, mobility, and cooperation – above all with American but also with Western

ranks with the Western countries and the economic upswing since the late 1940s, prestigious scientific excellence promised to meet this need to some extent. The MPG embodied such scientific excellence with its big names, its internationally recognized successes, and its policy of remembrance, which so emphasized the glorious tradition of German science in the KWG. Addressing its role during National Socialism and the destructive potential of modern science would only have been a hindrance; all this was suppressed for a very long time.

“Science is increasingly expected to take a socio-political stance.”

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The MPG also left its mark on contemporary history through its services to the state and politics, for example, through its diverse advisory services. With their extensive expertise in comparative law, the Max Planck Institutes of Law provide governments and parliaments with valuable legal expertise in many areas of domestic and foreign policy. In the first decades of the Federal Republic, the MPG at times took on quasi-diplomatic tasks when full diplomatic relations had not yet been established or were difficult, for instance with Israel prior to 1965. In some respects, it acted as a pioneer in establishing scientific, but also political relations across national and system boundaries. In addition to business, science was and still is an important driver of European integration. The MPG participated early and regularly in the major relevant projects of the European Community, such as Euratom, the European Space Agency (Esa), or

European scholars and scientific institutions, the MPG and some of its scientists made a significant contribution to this fundamental Western orientation of the Federal Republic – before the accelerated globalization since the 1990s contributed to a broader, worldwide internationalization of MPG relations. Now the constellation is changing again due to the war in Ukraine.

In terms of national history, the role of the MPG is also worth mentioning. After 1945, following the devastating defeat in the war, the disastrous self-discrediting caused by the crimes of National Socialism, and in view of the division of the country, the young Federal Republic could not draw on an intact national tradition to strengthen its identity, develop self-confidence, and find recognition. It had to look for ways to return to the community of states as an equal member. In addition to the closing of

If one reads how Max Planck presidents portrayed themselves, the speeches of German presidents and other top politicians, as well as the commentaries of domestic and foreign media from the early decades of the Federal Republic, one senses something of the high esteem in which the MPG was held as a place of prestigious, civilized, and sustainable science, albeit more between the lines than explicitly. Such overtones and nuances can also be perceived recently when one follows how the Nobel Prizes brought to Germany are celebrated in public and in the media – Nobel Prizes that are frequently and regularly awarded to scientists from the MPG, as is common knowledge. The MPG benefits from all this. But it has to earn it through continuous excellence, something it succeeds in maintaining. However, there is a limit to its historical effectiveness: the MPG is home primarily to the natural and life sciences, but also to law, the humanities, and the social sciences. It likes to promote interdisciplinary constellations because it prefers research areas at points of overlap that are not recognized at the universities, where they are not yet established, or at least not well established. As a result, it is actually well equipped for the scientific treatment of major contemporary and future problems, including the discussion of corresponding questions and answers in civil society.



A fresh start at a location with a tainted past: the Max Planck Society was founded in 1948 in the “Kameradschaftshaus” of the former Aerodynamische Versuchsanstalt (Aerodynamics Research Institute) of the KWG, which had conducted extensive military research for the Nazi regime. Standing to the left of Otto Hahn, the first Max Planck President, Adolf Grimme, then Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, attended as a representative of the state of Lower Saxony.

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However, the MPG remains very reserved in these respects. Even after the failure of the Starnberg Max Planck Institute for the Study of the Scientific-Technical World in 1981 and the dismantling of the Berlin Institute for Educational Research, which was very close to politics, socially committed, and multidisciplinary in its work, also around 1980, Max Planck scientists did not stop advising politicians and political bodies. They also succeeded time and

again in transforming central social issues such as nutrition, health, the environment, energy, Europe, or capitalism into scientific problems and working on them. But in an effort to achieve objectivity and normative neutrality, scientific and political argumentation were relatively clearly separated. For this reason, too, the MPG refrained from taking a public position on major issues of the day. Even in Earth system research, one of the MPG’s flagship projects since the

1970s, the public relations role remained limited to Paul Crutzen for a long time. Initiatives that would have involved political commitment, such as the proposal to set up a World Hunger Institute, did not find sufficient support.

Here, it is not possible to discuss further whether this restraint is the necessary prerequisite for fruitful scientific work in a normatively heterogeneous society like ours, or an act of self-restraint that overcautiously stands in the way of the full utilization of scientific potential. At present, the public increasingly expects science to take a socio-political stance. The MPG is devoting its attention to pressing big issues, for example with the planned research on the Anthropocene at the MPI for Geoanthropology in Jena. It remains to be seen to what extent the distancing of research from direct social influences can be maintained.

THE “HISTORY OF THE MAX PLANCK SOCIETY” RESEARCH PROGRAM

Between 2014 and 2022, independent historians reconstructed the development of the MPG between 1948 and 2002, placing the history of the MPG within the history of the Federal Republic in the context of European and global developments.

