

Under Discussion

“When It Comes to Global Transformation, Most Still Lies Ahead”

A Conversation with Dr. Georg Milde,
Publisher of the Journal politik&kommunikation

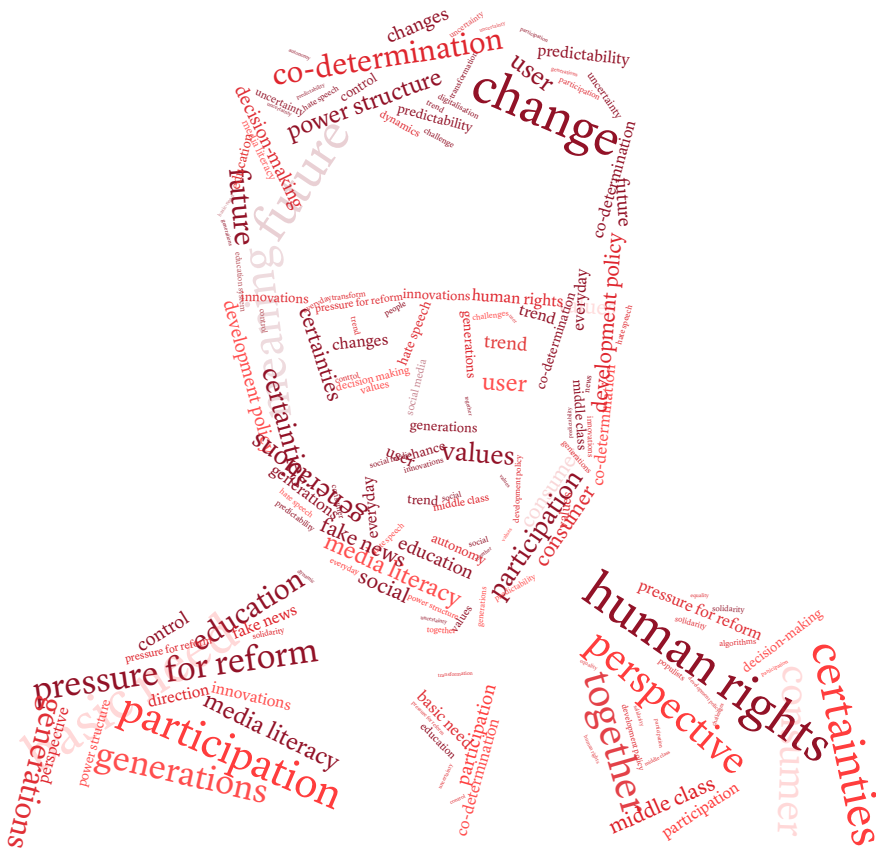


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Ai: Dr. Milde, for your book In Transformationsgewittern (In Thunderstorms of Transformation), you travelled around the world in 90 days and visited 16 cities, from São Paulo to Cairo and Nairobi to Shanghai. What was the purpose of this?

process cannot be precisely defined. It involves digital transformation in the work and private spheres, the growing power of algorithms, new types of political leaders, changes in individual habits, and much more besides. Not all these trends are related, so it is not possible to zero in on the transformation or even on a global formula. However, it is possible to follow the traces of the changes that are happening in different parts of the world. That's why I set off to visit a different country every week, so as to seek out the energy that is generating change.

Georg Milde: People have been talking about transformation for years now, yet this complex

Ai: Where did you find this transformational energy to be at its strongest, and where did you find it to be lacking?

and later on in my homeland, I noticed a sense of spiritual contentment. Of course, Japan and Germany operate at a high level, but I felt there was much more urgency in places like South Korea and China. However, the drive for transformation is not restricted to economic dynamics. Outside Europe, I repeatedly encountered instances where religious faith was a driving force – both among Muslims and among the growing number of evangelical Christians I met everywhere, from Rio de Janeiro to Seoul. In general, I observed that people feel most motivated when they discern meaning and an opportunity to participate in change. When this is not the case, people end up participating merely as consumers. Even if consummation amplifies and improves people's lives, it ends up working more as a narcotic. For instance, in the Brazilian favelas residents seem to prefer immersing themselves in telenovelas on their new flat screens than worrying about getting a better education for their children.

Georg Milde: The will for change is not directly linked to a country's economic strength. In Tokyo,

Ai: In your book you argue that we need to convey a greater sense of meaning. Who do you mean by “we” in this context, and what kind of quest for meaning do you have in mind?

in their droves, and nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. People are becoming more individualistic and pulling away from established structures. This gives them greater freedom but robs them of the predictability and certainties of the past. In times of change, many are looking for other ways of giving their lives direction and meaning – from yoga to self-help books promising a happier life to strict dietary rules. “Anything goes” may seem appealing at first, but at some point it becomes arbitrary. This was the unanimous view of people I talked to all over the world, from the US to India. Filling this new gap is one of the great challenges facing humankind, and particularly the question of how to meet the basic need for spirituality in light of the growing number of atheists. I believe educational policymakers have a duty to provide pupils with a broader and deeper education than is currently the case in many parts of the world. It should

Georg Milde: For years, the established churches and major political parties have been losing members

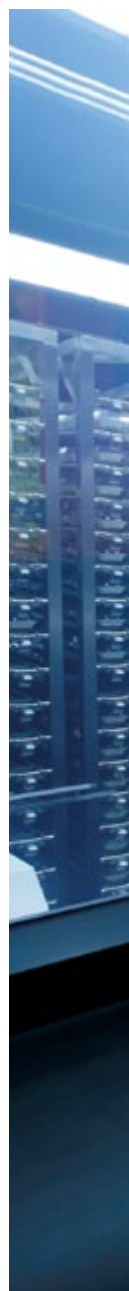
encompass life skills, different schools of thought and media literacy. This is particularly necessary in the Far East, where the focus of schools tends to be on rote learning rather than on encouraging students to think for themselves. Here in Germany, if future generations perceive greater meaning, they will not only be better developers and inventors, but also stronger supporters of the values and solidarity that make up our democratic system.

Ai: And this really applies to all the countries you visited? Or, to ask it in a different, more general way: when you're visiting 16 cities in 90 days, isn't there a danger that you will project your own – in this case Western – perspective onto the rest of the world?

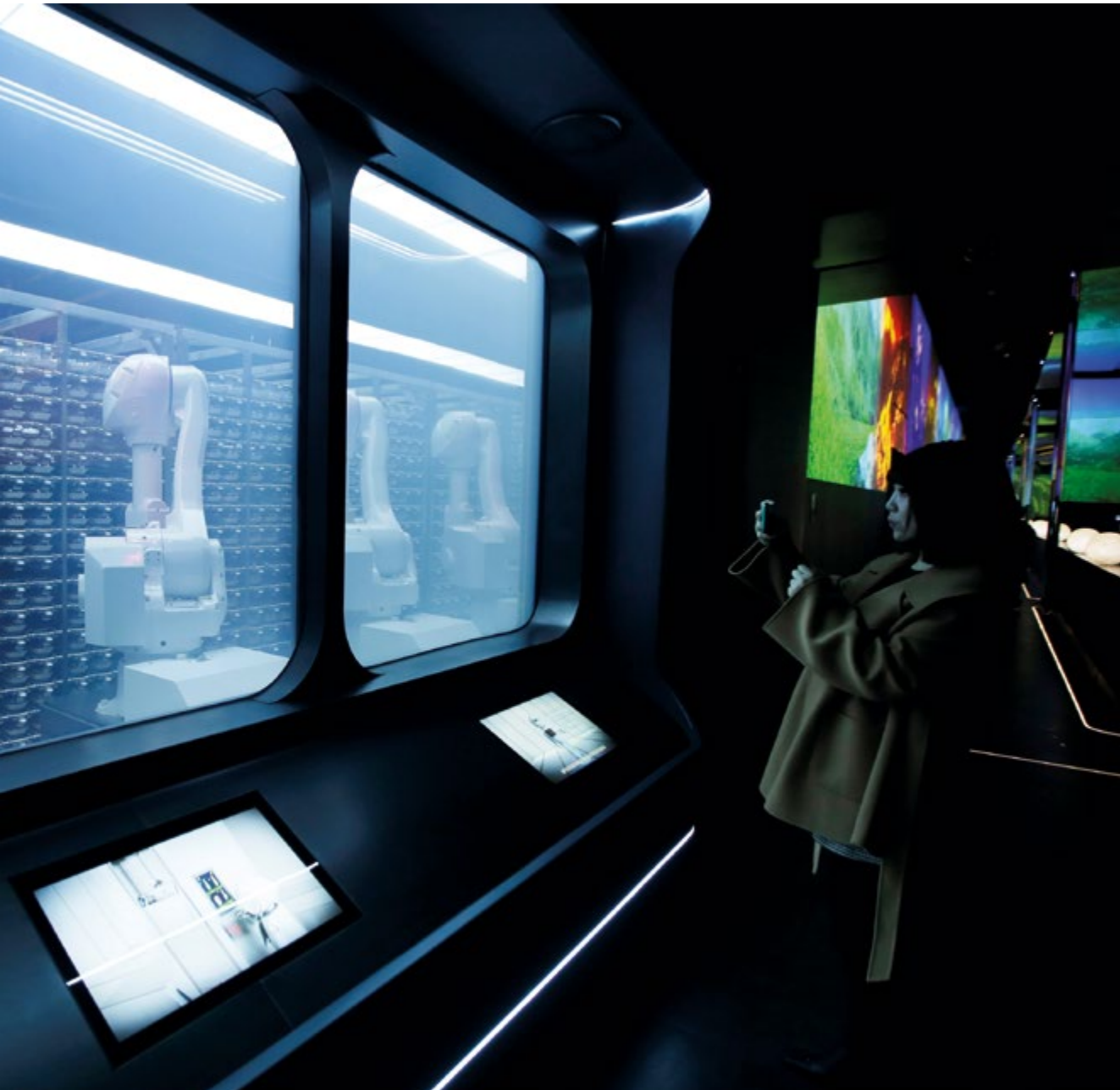
Georg Milde: Conveying meaning, like the search for meaning, is far from being a Western phenomenon. And in response to your second question, we should have the right to stand up for our values, including in other parts of the world. Not in the sense of a colonial moral police or as crusaders in the digital age – but also not with a laissez-faire attitude that subordinates everything to our own economic interests. Development policy must be linked to certain standards: human rights, equal rights, the prohibition of child labour. Again and again I met Europeans abroad who considered the local population to be barely capable of democracy. I find that arrogant, because it leaves behind people who are unable to change their country for the better. The resigned attitude of noting that “other countries don’t attach conditions to the money they send to Africa” is simply cynical. The same goes for the argument that Chinese citizens care less about blanket surveillance with facial recognition cameras because their culture places less value on the individual.

Ai: My question was not so much about relative values, but rather about the extent to which it is possible to gain deeper insights that go beyond surface impressions and existing beliefs during such a short trip around the world. It's not exactly a revelation that Japan and Germany are ageing and not particularly dynamic societies, and that the search for meaning is a widespread phenomenon. With this in mind, I'd like to ask what surprised you the most on your journey, and where did you have to revise your image of a country the most?

Georg Milde: It's easier to compare impressions when they are gained over a short period of time. When you spend consecutive weeks in Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing and Shanghai you really begin to understand how these neighbouring countries have all been influenced by Confucianism, but with very different results. In one country, the fear of losing face really holds it back, while in another it fosters ambition and tempo. In general, I was surprised by what I saw of the new global middle class. In many countries, it is the upwardly mobile who are rapidly becoming the guardians of vested rights, who are more inclined to entrench the old power structures rather than demand new forms of co-determination. Those who have laboriously climbed their way to the top, soon turn their energies to slowing down potential competitors coming up behind them. Before my trip, my hope was that these people would increase the upward pressure



for reform, but by the time I reached East Africa I knew that the opposite was true. I was also surprised by the intensity and violence of the conflict, indeed the hatred experienced by many people around the world in their daily lives. Of course I wasn't expecting to see the world through rose-tinted lenses, but the spread of fake news and hate speech, particularly through social media, is contributing to a major escalation of conflict – especially in countries like India. And finally, I had to change my view of



The power of artificial intelligence: Artificial intelligence is set to take charge of key processes in the coming years. Is humanity increasingly losing control as a result? Source: © Jason Lee, Reuters.

the so-called Generation Z – people born around the turn of the millennium. They are much more active and persistent than is generally thought by the older generations. On your question as to which image of a country I had to revise the most: here in the West we may reject much of what is currently emerging in China for political and ideological reasons, but it is happening, and with an enormous dynamism that will eclipse or even supplant many things.

Ai: Change or “transformation” is really nothing new. An aphorism often quoted in this context is: the only constant is change. I would therefore be interested to know what distinguishes the current change processes from previous phases. Or, to put it another way: couldn’t a book entitled In Transformationsgewittern (In Storms of Transformation) also have been written in 1990 or 2001 or 2008?

something totally new: in the years to come we will give up much of our personal decision-making autonomy. Artificial intelligence is taking over key processes, something that was certainly not the case ten or 25 years ago. In this respect we tend to think of product recommendations from Alexa and Amazon, but I suggest we also need to take a closer look at the voters of the future. En masse election advertising is already being tailored to the profile of individual social media users using algorithms – a tool that is a particular favourite of populists on the political margins. These escalations are intensifying the growing divisions in many countries, as previously mentioned. The power of artificial intelligence is increasing daily. We humans are gradually losing control and we will not get it back. All too often, today’s banks and fintechs no longer know what data lies at the heart of decisions about whether or not a customer is deemed credit-worthy. We may still be far removed from the “social scoring” of the Far East, but we have also opened a Pandora’s box. This raises new ethical questions: What is our position on autonomous weapons systems? And, on a more everyday level, will there come a time when we decide that public video surveillance has become too widespread?

Ai: At the end of your book you describe your return to Berlin and how your view of Germany had changed as a result of what you saw on your travels. How much have we already been affected by change, and what still lies ahead?

very different in twenty years’ time. I’m not really thinking in terms of spectacular innovations like flying taxis, but about changes in our daily lives that might seem minor at first. Care assistants for the elderly will be replaced by care robots, and automatic checkout systems will be the norm in supermarkets. What does this kind of change mean for our society? This is why our education system has to strengthen various skills. It is not only a matter of users and consumers, but also about our fellow human beings. How do we communicate with each other, how do we personally deal with new methods of communication? I really don’t believe the spiritual contentment that I noticed in my homeland at the start, and which I also encountered in Berlin-Mitte on my return,

Georg Milde: Of course we have been through periods of change in the past, but now we are facing

Georg Milde: When it comes to global transformation, most of it still lies ahead. Our lives will be

to be irreversible. There are also counter-examples that show how change is already being used in positive ways today, for example two German companies are among the world's leading AI researchers. But we must not rest on our laurels because the coming years will be decisive. Whole occupations are disappearing, but new ones are being created. The changes and the resulting uncertainty have consequences for individual social groups, but also, and above all, for voters: will the precariously employed online delivery driver, working in the gig economy, turn to populist movements, or can the established parties find a way to reconnect, despite their declining membership? Politicians need to address this question as a matter of urgency.

The interview was conducted by Sebastian Enskat.

-translated from German-