

The future has been looming since 1910

a very European view

For this new year, we are trying a provocative perspective with striking parallels in a hundred-year comparison. After almost 80 years without war and a level of prosperity that was unimaginable in 1950, the future currently appears to be a threat to many. Today, as a hundred years ago, people lament the demise of the good old days that never existed. Rich kids fall into depression when faced with a reality so different from the social media dream. Traveling around the world, from the Maldives to Dubai to the Caribbean is a given. The battle for food takes place in gourmet restaurants. And just like a hundred years ago, life is changing, only at an unprecedented rate.

Between 1900 and 1910 there was a quantum leap in industrialization with the mass production of goods and the decline of physical work. What was the noise of the dynamos in the machine halls is now the silence of the home office since 2020. Today we are experiencing the quantum leap of computers, of artificial intelligence, which, thanks to an escalating bureaucracy, relieves us of personal responsibility and thinking.



Image source: Wikipedia – Telegraph QE3 19

In 1910, the automobile and electricity led to higher and faster mobility - and faster work processes. Newspapers and cinemas provided quick news. Today it is the Internet and social media. Flights around the world are generally affordable. The Internet, video conferences and mobile phones determine the pace of our lives - and lead to ever faster work processes. Nowadays, instead of writing letters by candlelight, one types WhatsApp messages whilst at the toilet.

The social upheaval around 1905 was characterized by women's rights and their access to education, universities, work, their own money and even the right to vote. The aristocracy lost influence and power to the upper bourgeoisie. The patriarchy was already struggling with the loss of male dominance, which is now called stress and burnout.

Even today, the old white man fears for his privileges and reacts with stress and burnout. Many people perceive other cultures, the controversial gender discussion and the rapid technological development as excessive demands, many feel it as a loss of power.



Image source: pixabay.com

As early as 1910, the poor birth rate of the middle class was complained about. The growth was attributed to the colonial population. At that time the world population was around 2 billion people.

Today, as then, people are concerned about the low birth rate in middle-class families, mainly in Europe. We owe the explosion in the world population to over 8 billion to the Third World.

Around 1900 there was a huge rural exodus towards cities and industrial centers with social conflicts; Exploitation and poverty. All evils such as crime, prostitution, hunger and decadence were attributed to the cities. Rural exodus continues unabated in the 21st century. Comparisons to today are particularly evident in the third world. While Berlin was the largest city in the world in the 1920s, today there are hundreds of much larger cities around the world.

There was decline and rise then as now: England's global share of industrial production in 1850 was an enormous 65%. As early as 1900, the share of US industrial production was higher than that of England and France combined. And in 1945, the global share of US industrial production rose to 65%.

Today the USA, China, Japan and Germany are the leading economic nations – still. Every new economic power claims a more important position in global politics. The old world finds it difficult to respect India or Saudi Arabia as equals.

The political environment between 1914 and 1920 was characterized by the collapse of the monarchies. Back then, suicide bombers were Russian revolutionaries, while today we have to fear a culture that loves death more than life. In 2024, one has to fear for the preservation of democracies, be it through extremists of all stripes, radical political movements or AI, artificial intelligence.

The future is not a threat if you look back on our grandparents' time. Years in which you weren't even allowed to see a woman's knee. A large part of the younger population knows little or nothing about Sarajevo, or the machine war of 1914, the Holocaust, Stalingrad or Hiroshima. Peace in Europe became

a given. Many have never seen the Berlin Wall, not even a Morse code device, a typewriter, music cassettes or even the telephone booth in the restaurant. They know nothing about the poisoned gray landscapes around the factories of the last century. Nor that the golden 20s of the last Century were famine years. Forgotten is the second 30-year war from 1914 to 1945 - interrupted by a 20-year global economic crisis. We were quickly catapulted into the pleasant today and should be happy.

Change always creates winners. The spacious villas from the founding epoch around 1890 to 1920 bear witness to this. Today there are countless founders of start-up companies in many sectors who can afford a luxurious private life. The credo of losers is a saying attributed to Einstein: A pessimist always finds a problem for every solution. But the future belongs to optimists with realistic perspectives.

Günter E. Maier / Chairman of the Board of Directors of MPM SWISS AG
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