

On 9 and 10 May 2019, the JDZB will organize a symposium “Electromobility and Urban Systems – Innovation in East Asia in a Global Context” in cooperation with the IN-EAST School of Advanced Studies on Innovation in East Asia at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Below is an interview with its Director, Prof. Markus TAUBE.

The symposium is the final event of a German Ministry for Education and Research funded project. What exactly is it about and what are the main focus areas of the project?

Over the past six years, we have dealt with the question of how innovation evolves in society in different cultural and political contexts. We deliberately looked first at East Asian companies, which have shown an exorbitant growth in innovation in recent years and decades. We then examined how these differ from Germany and Europe, and whether we can perhaps learn something from the East.

We assumed in our work that innovation cannot simply be understood as “finding something new”, rather political structures, social preferences, and cultural influences strongly determine its direction, intensity and dynamics. This determines how (national) innovation environments are conducive for creativity and to what extent new technical solutions in society are then adopted and implemented. The different discussions about innovation in the field of “Artificial Intelligence” (AI) in Europe and East Asia clearly demonstrates this: while the discourse in Europe revolves around dystopian horror scenarios, in East Asia it has taken a more utopian-oriented approach that focuses on facilitating everyday life and improving opportunities using AI. As a result, we can also observe very different dynamics for innovation in AI in Europe and East Asia.

Why do you focus on the innovation field of electric mobility...

Innovation is a huge field and manifests itself in all areas of life. As a result we concentrated on a field that has outstanding dynamics and at the same time special social relevance. The development of new driving technologies, and here in particular electric mobility, as well as the inevitable accompanying innovations in our urban environments, perfectly meet these requirements.

The new (electric) mobility that we are currently experiencing in its first mani-

festations should be a key innovation for the next decades. It has the potential to fundamentally change existing structures, influence and power relations. Enabling national and regional systems to institutionalize them will be crucial to their relative competitiveness and to the formation of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Questions that arise in this context are, for example, which combinations of political regulations and decentralized innovation performance are productive, which parameters determine the acceptance (innovation, diffusion) of electric mobility in society and by consumers, and which strategies will German automobile companies employ to compete with ever-stronger Asian competitors.

... and urban systems?

The second pillar of our work is urban systems. These have established themselves in recent years as a central vehicle for innovation in technology as well as for complementary social reorientation, and they are themselves undergoing profound changes as a result of these processes. Applied innovation research must therefore always keep an eye on developments in our urban living environments. The changes taking place here are sometimes much more radical than we first realize. The nexus between electric mobility and urban systems is extremely pronounced, indeed the first group of topics cannot be processed without the latter. The feasibility of electric mobility as an element of multimodal mobility is directly linked to urban living environments and is directly influenced by (infrastructural and social) urban structures. At the same time, electric mobility creates new scope for coping with infrastructural, ecological, social and other challenges in urban environments.

What are the similarities and differences between East Asian societies and European societies?

Societies in Europe and East Asia are facing similar challenges in many areas, but they approach them against a background of



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different standards and value systems. This includes basic cultural ideas about the “right” individual lifestyle as well as social co-existence. In particular, the importance of individual self-realization is significantly different, which leads to considerable differences in identifying and solving (technical and social) problems. Of course, the different demographic structures and highly divergent political systems have a significant impact on the way in which innovation is fostered or blocked in individual societies. Nevertheless, there are many areas where we can learn from each other. In particular, differences and idiosyncrasies in how we cope with challenges can have a stimulating effect and initiate new solutions in completely different social contexts.

Ideas overcome boundaries. How can transnational phenomena – “institutional transfers” – be explained?

We do not live in isolation. Even if current protectionist-nationalist tendencies are gaining popularity in many places, we live in a globalized world. Our wealth and the dynamics of innovation are based to a large extent on cross-border exchange of goods and ideas. And yet the transfer of ideas, knowledge and institutions between societies is by no means trivial. These have emerged in specific social environments and have been “optimized” for them. Transferring them to foreign socio-cultural environments must therefore always be accompanied by adjustments and interpretations. As a result, there are no one-to-one transfers, but only transferable patterns. But this is precisely where important innovations emerge that can show new solutions.