

Literature Review

Diagnoses of the present: Current sociological research on a controversial genre of sociology

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Sociological diagnoses of the present aim to describe the current state of modern society and, as sociological publications, they are widely read and discussed by both academics and the broader public.¹ Publications such as *Social Acceleration* (Rosa, 2013), *The Society of Singularities* (Reckwitz, 2020), *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992), *The Silent Revolution* (Inglehart, 1977) and *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman et al., 1950) offer their readers sociological interpretations of the manifold changes currently taking place in society as a whole. As scientific contributions, they provide the scientific community with conceptual inventions and empirical insights; as contributions to public debates, they provide the wider public with sociological keywords for general orientation in turbulent times of crisis and transformation.

But sociological diagnoses of the present have been, and continue to be, not only eagerly produced, published, and received. They have also become a genuine object of sociological research in their own right. A recently published edited volume (Farzin & Laux, 2023b) continues the endeavor to compile, analyze and compare sociological diagnoses of the present and is thus firmly rooted within a trajectory of research that began towards the end of the 1990s and investigates these diagnoses as a specific variant of disciplinary knowledge. Rather than reviewing the content of the numerous diagnoses of the present and the attendant multiplicity of reviews,

¹ In the body of literature to which this article constantly refers, the terms “diagnoses of the present” and “diagnoses of the times” are used synonymously. This also applies to the few English-language contributions – see Osrecki (2015) as an example of the use of the former and Hammershøj (2015) of the use of the latter. For consistency and clarity, this review article follows the translation offered by Osrecki (2012) and only uses the term “diagnoses of the present.”

commentaries, criticisms, and replies from their authors, which by now make up a body of work that is almost impossible to overview, the literature reviewed in this article is concerned with exploring sociological diagnoses of the present as a distinct genre of sociology that has been and still is controversially discussed within the discipline and that brings sociology into contact with the general public in a specific way.

For introductory purposes, a *three-part definition* of sociological diagnoses of the present can be given, a conceptual core that most contributions share: Firstly, diagnoses of the present describe the current state of society as a whole; secondly, they propose that a large-scale process of social change has recently taken place that separates the current state of society from its past; and thirdly, they address not only social scientists but also the general public. As will be shown throughout this article, the elements of this definition are the foci of the research discussion and of scholarly appreciation and criticism of the genre within the discipline. At the same time, these definitory elements are also deemed responsible for the public success of works within this genre.

The aim of this review article is consequently twofold: to systematize the specific angles for reflecting on the production, reception, and circulation of sociological knowledge provided by this recent area of research, and, since this research is still mostly confined to German-speaking sociology, to make it accessible to a broader and international audience of social scientists. This endeavor is motivated by two concerns. Firstly, a concern to encourage broader reflection on sociology's epistemic practices and its contact with the public, so that research on sociological diagnoses of the present contributes to self-reflection within the discipline and to the broader program of a sociology of sociology. Secondly, the current research reviewed here would undoubtedly benefit by being conducted and discussed internationally. Opening up the ongoing scholarly debate in this way promises new opportunities for comparison to reveal the differences and similarities between national academic cultures, publics, publication infrastructures, and much more. Thus, this article does not focus on singular, albeit important contributions, but charts the current state of research systematically.

The first section provides a brief synopsis of how diagnoses of the present have been researched for almost three decades, summarizing what we know about this "genre" of sociology that remains rather controversial (1.). Then, three sections highlight particular pathways followed by current research. While these pathways usually intertwine within the discussion at large and within single contributions, this article differentiates them analytically.

The second section traces what we currently know about the history of diagnoses of the present. The state of research suggests that the genre's characteristics and boundaries, which will be discussed later, have emerged, changed, and solidified

historically. Therefore, this section follows these historical trajectories and demonstrates how research on this rather young genre also offers interesting insights into the longer history of sociology (2.). The third section compiles the typical characteristics of sociological diagnoses of the present, extracted from individual case analyses and comparisons. Generalization, temporalization, and publicness are what turns a publication into a diagnosis of the present, and these characteristics prove fruitful as a heuristic for further research on the genre, making it possible to distinguish diagnoses of the present from other types of sociological knowledge and neighboring sociological genres (3.). The fourth section examines how the genre's boundaries – especially its relations with empirical social research and theories of society² – and its role within the discipline are interrogated along this last pathway (4.). Instead of ending with a broad conclusion, this review article will critically examine the strengths and shortcomings of these three pathways of the current state of research and identify directions that further research might take at the end of each section.

1. What are sociological diagnoses of the present and what do we generally know about them?

Diagnoses of the present are widely received by the general public, as can be documented in a diverse media coverage comprising discussions in newspapers, journals, and magazines, radio programs, recommended reading lists and book reviews by publishers and critics alike, recorded and transcribed interviews with the authors and much more of the same. Their publication is also recognized as a notable event within the scientific community in sociology and associated disciplines, for example, by reviews, critical commentaries, and lastly genuine research that draws on the diagnoses' contribution to scholarly discourse. Complementary to these two, the public and social-scientific domains of discourse, a third, specifically sociological discussion has been developing around diagnoses of the present since around the end of the 1990s.

² This review article uses “theories of society” to translate the German term *Gesellschaftstheorie*. The relationship between diagnoses of the present and theories of society remains a point of contention in the body of literature reviewed here. It will be taken up in more detail at the end of the fourth section. To be sure, when “theories of society” is used throughout this article, it is used in an attempt to remain neutral towards the heterogenous arguments pervasive in the literature about what theory “is” or “ought to be” and what diagnoses of the present “are not” or “cannot be.”

This discussion seeks to understand sociological diagnoses of the present as a specific genre of sociology and their content as a specific form of sociological knowledge. In the 1990s, a predominantly German-speaking debate on *diagnoses* of the present and *diagnosing* the present arose in certain areas of the discipline that refrained from analytically reducing these publications to their content and propositions alone (Acham, 1997; Balog, 1999; Brock, 1991; Joas, 1988; Kruse, 1990, 1994; Lichtblau, 1995; Lohmann, 1993; Papcke, 1993; Schwinn, 1999). Towards the end of the 1990s, this debate was, in turn, partly framed in terms of theory development and partly commented on in terms of more general developments in sociology as a scientific discipline (Friedrichs et al., 1998b; Kieserling, 2004; Schimank, 1999). In the 2000s, these lines of discussion converged into comparative overviews, detailed interpretations, and secondary analyses, so that diagnoses of the present became a genuine subject of sociological research (Kneer et al., 2000; Pongs, 1999/2000; Prisching, 2003b; Schimank & Volkmann, 2002, 2007).³

Since the 2010s and after this initial phase of – not to put too fine a point on it – mostly stocktaking of individual cases, diagnoses of the present have been increasingly and more decidedly researched from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. Insofar as they constitute a specific *genre of sociology*, they have moved to the center of this discussion, whose concerns until now have encompassed additional questions such as their epistemic status, as well as the practices used in producing and receiving the *diagnostic knowledge* they contain (the most significant contributions in this category are Osrecki, 2011 and Volkmann, 2015). During the second half of the 2010s, an increase in the parallel production of diagnoses of the present and genuine research on the genre can certainly be observed. As comprehensive monographs (Bogner, 2018; Dimbath, 2016b; Prisching, 2018) and edited volumes (Alkemeyer et al, 2019; Hastedt, 2019b; Junge, 2016a) show, overall this partly interdisciplinary but mostly sociological research discussion revolves around the epistemic practices of sociological diagnoses of the present – what is it that makes a publication a diagnosis of the present, to what extent do such diagnoses differ from other forms of knowledge and types of publications in sociology, and what can be learned from the history of this genre?

The common aims of this research are to generate a tableau encompassing argumentative strategies, thematic scope, and – possibly surprising – differences and similarities between various diagnoses (see, for example, Dimbath, 2017; Müller, 2021; Reese-Schäfer, 2019d; Witte, 2016), to determine the epistemic capacities of the

³ Diagnoses of the present were also occasionally thematized in Scandinavian sociology (Hammershøj, 2015, 2017; Kristensen, 2008; Noro, 2004). This article includes these contributions while still characterizing the current state of research as *predominantly* German.

genre and the functional role it plays within the discipline of sociology (Dimbath, 2020; Müller, 1997; Osrecki, 2019c; Reese-Schäfer, 2019c) and, by analyzing the epistemic practices underlying diagnoses of the present, to obtain common standards or at least some much needed clarity for assessing the plausibility and validity of their claims (Beregow & Brichzin, 2024; Hammershøj, 2015; Hastedt, 2019a; Vogelmann, 2019).

Thus delimited, sociological diagnoses of the present are held to be fundamentally distinguishable from other, non-scientific observations of the present, such as literary and journalistic descriptions or aesthetic depictions of social change. Critics may doubt the strictly scientific nature of a diagnosis of the present. However, its *sociological* content, paired with its reception within the discipline and in contrast to diagnoses from other disciplines, guarantees that it belongs to sociology (Schimank, 2007, p. 13). Put differently, it is their sociological content that makes diagnoses of the present interesting to sociological research (Schlechtriemen, 2019, p. 147). As products of sociological epistemic practice, diagnoses of the present are seen as a distinct form of disciplinary knowledge with its own argumentative rationality and communicative logic. The widely shared conviction is that, since the second half of the twentieth century, diagnoses of the present have increasingly established themselves alongside – perhaps even in opposition to or competition with – empirical social research and theories of society as a “genre” of sociology (for example Knoblauch, 2019; Noro, 2004; Osrecki, 2011; Schimank & Volkmann, 2019). Designating diagnoses of the present as a “hybrid genre” (Volkmann, 2015, 2017) shifts the emphasis even more strongly to the fact that this genre addresses not only the scientific audience, but also a broad but relatively undefined reading public and thus establishes contact between sociology and the public – a relationship which in turn influences diagnostic knowledge of the present (Kieserling, 2004, pp. 38–40; Nassehi, 2001, p. 565; Osrecki, 2019b, p. 607).

To conclude this first synopsis, the notion of “genre” has become the fulcrum of the research literature on sociological diagnoses of the present. This makes it all the more surprising that attempts at a precise, *sociological* definition of genre mostly remain a desideratum in this discussion. Some exceptions can be found, such as conceptualizations of diagnoses of the present as a “communicative genre” put forward by Knoblauch (2019) and Osrecki (2011), drawing on conversation analysis and sociology of knowledge. But in general, the current state of research follows a more or less intuitive, sociological common-sense understanding of genre (Prisching, 2003c, p. 153, 2018, pp. 49–50). This simultaneous ubiquity and indeterminacy of investigating diagnoses of the present as a “genre” is in part responsible for the controversial status of these publications within the scholarly debate. While the ambiguity of genre should be duly noted, this review article follows the current state of research in so far as it takes “genre” to be an institutionalized category that pro-

vides orientation for the production and reception of diagnoses of the present as well as for those who treat them as a genuine research object. The next section discusses how this sociological genre emerged historically and how this history has been researched so far.

2. The shorter or longer history of how diagnoses of the present became a sociological genre

The first strand of current research on sociological diagnoses of the present concerns the genre's history. Although this history has not yet received much attention on its own (notable exceptions are Kruse, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2021; Müller, 2021; Osrecki, 2017; Reese-Schäfer, 2003), most contributions to the state of research include remarks about the genre's evolution through the twentieth century. Following the intuition that the genre emerged, changed and solidified historically, this strand of current research promises valuable insights into which epistemic practices, potentials, and limitations have been and are constitutive of diagnosing the present. However, one caveat needs to be mentioned from the beginning: Besides tentative observations on popular, widely received, and in this sense *internationally* successful diagnoses of the present, what we currently know about the genre's "shorter" history, especially about which kind of actors and drivers influenced its public success, is as yet mainly confined to German sociology. Likewise, what we know about the genre's "longer" history and its place within the overall history of sociology is mostly confined to European sociology. Before both these limitations will be taken up at the end of this section as an entry point to engage in broader reflections, the following summary of the historical trajectories so far identified will, where they are available, point to diagnoses of the present beyond German sociology.

The shorter history of diagnoses of the present from the 1950s to the present

While some diagnoses of the present such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology* (1960) and *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1974), and Ronald Inglehart's *The Silent Revolution* (1977) gained considerable international attention among scholars within the social sciences and the broader reading public from the 1950s onwards, researchers largely agree that publications of this kind solidified at the end of the 1980s into a distinct genre that shaped sociology's disciplinary profile. From that point onwards, sociological diag-

noses of the present experienced a “boom,” which can be seen in the quantitative increase in their production and their intradisciplinary and public reception. The growing corpus of scientific secondary texts as well as articles in newspapers and magazines are a case in point (Knoblauch, 2019, p. 220; Osrecki, 2017, pp. 469–470). In English-language sociology, too, the virulence of diagnostic descriptions of epochal caesuras can be registered in the 1980s and early 1990s (Savage, 2009, p. 224), the clearest examples being James Coleman’s *Asymmetric Society* (1982) and the work of authors such as Anthony Giddens (1990) and Zygmunt Bauman (1991). Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992) in particular, initially published in 1986, is held to be the ideal or prototype of the genre and, as a publication event noticed both in sociology and public discourse, heralded a phase in the history of the discipline in which diagnoses of the present established themselves as a type of publication and a research practice that was almost taken for granted (Farzin & Laux, 2023a, p. 1; Hammershøj, 2015, pp. 140–141).

Since then, the genre seems to have remained largely stable, although some variations can be identified. Diagnoses of the present from the 1990s and 2000s were inspired by social-scientific discourses on globalization and the remarkable career of “globalization” – which had, to be sure, long been a concept used by, not necessarily sociological, diagnosticians of the present (Osterhammel & Petersson, 2019, p. 7). In short, diagnoses of the present have increasingly focused on the global world or world society. Those produced by Francis Fukuyama (1992) and Samuel Huntington (1996), for example, were received in sociology as accounts of tectonic shifts in world politics, while George Ritzer described various processes of rationalization as a global “McDonaldization” (1993). At the turn of the century, Ulrich Beck transposed his initial diagnosis to a global scale – society had become a *World Risk Society* (1999). Regarding disciplinary self-reflection during the early 2000s, sociologists observed that diagnoses of the present and theories of society were perhaps not entirely decoupled from each other (Nassehi, 2001, p. 567), but the question of what role sociology plays within society had notably shifted to the terrain of diagnoses of the present and the criticism of this relatively young genre coming from within the discipline (Kieserling, 2004, pp. 37–38).

A central finding of current research is that the consolidation of the genre around the 1980s cannot be explained solely by these individual publications or by their relationship to theories of society. For, as the genre’s history within German-speaking sociology shows, political circumstances and changes in the media landscape were at least as relevant: German sociology’s contact with the public in the post-war period and the 1950s was strongly influenced by university reforms and re-education policies, which assigned sociology an important role in explaining the present state of society to the general public, a task that German sociology willingly took on, partly because it still lacked a larger, specialized disciplinary audience at

the time (Neun, 2018, pp. 20–29). During that time, diagnoses of the present established contact with the broader public primarily through being featured in the evening programs of the radio stations in the western zones. Listeners were imagined to be an intellectual elite stemming from urban, educated middle-class milieus (cf. Boll, 2004; Schildt, 2020, pp. 107–130). This popular image of “the” public was then taken up by academic publishers during the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to this dynamic, book clubs’ subscription models enabled diagnoses of the present to reliably find their way onto the bookshelves or living room tables of the broader public (Kathke, 2015; Osrecki, 2017, pp. 469–470). Within academia, diagnoses of the present could be understood as a counter-movement to an increasingly academicized sociology; outside academia, the genre was actively promoted by publishers who had discovered the educated middle-class reading public with its ostensible need for a diagnostic orientation as a promising sales market (cf. Römer, 2017, pp. 489–497). In sum, a closer look at these decades shows how both practices of production and reception of sociological diagnoses of the present were dynamically intertwined at the interface of science, politics, the public, universities, and publishing houses.

The longer history of diagnoses of the present since sociology’s inception

Current research thus concludes that diagnoses of the present began to emerge in the middle of the twentieth century and solidified into an independent genre towards the end of the 1980s. Working on the assumption that this genre is both relatively young *and* very old (Osrecki, 2019b, p. 604), the history of sociology offers a second and much longer timeline. This longer history starts with the claim, widely shared among researchers, that an intention to diagnose the present state of modern society as a whole characterized early European sociology at the turn of the twentieth century. As some authors argue, with varying emphasis and detail, early French, British and German sociological discourses took up present-diagnostic epistemic practices from disparate intellectual endeavors reaching back to the European Enlightenment and culture-critical impulses from philosophy and the humanities during the nineteenth century (Bogner, 2018, pp. 27–47; Dimbath, 2016b, pp. 32–38; Hammershøj, 2015, pp. 142–143; Kreuzer, 2019, pp. 28–31; Kristensen, 2008; Leanza, 2019; Lichtblau, 1995; Müller, 2021, pp. 18–24; Prisching, 2003c, pp. 154–160). The differences then lie in the details, i.e. the question of when and through whom exactly the (proto-)sociological diagnosis of the present may have come into the world. As far as the canonized founding figures of sociology such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and many others are concerned, cur-

rent research maintains that their descriptions of modern society are particularly exemplary for how diagnosing the present and theorizing were amalgamated in an almost organic way (Hillebrandt, 2010, p. 158; Junge, 2016b, p. 55; Kieserling, 2004, pp. 41–42; Nassehi, 2001, p. 554).

From this perspective, diagnosing the present is held to be part of early sociology's repertoire of epistemic practices. It is part of the legacy of the canonized classics that one can study them to learn how theory building and empirical-historical analyses came to be combined in consequence of an intent to diagnose the social change and societal crises that characterized the entry into the twentieth century (Müller, 2021). This tradition of sociological thought refrained from an ahistorical and formal description of social reality, but aimed at a historically saturated understanding of the present state of society as a whole. It led to what Volker Kruse (1990, 1994, 1998, 2021) has called German "Weimar historical sociology" and then petered out in the course of disciplinary professionalization and institutionalization towards the end of the 1950s – which was, interestingly, precisely the decade to which the "shorter" history dates the gradual emergence of diagnoses of the present as a genre of sociology. The controversial status of the genre is nevertheless reflected here in the question of who can be considered a precursor or founding figure, who can be retrospectively incorporated into sociology based on their diagnostic writings, who cannot, and where the disciplinary boundaries of early sociology are to be drawn.

Discussion

To summarize, current research on the history of sociological diagnoses of the present suggests that the formation and consolidation of the genre cannot be explained by publications or their authors alone. Long-term changes in sociology's disciplinary profile, in the institutional environments of universities and higher education policies, and not least in publishing, mass media and (imagined) publics must be considered. As researchers themselves have noted, there is still a considerable need for research in this area (Farzin & Laux, 2023a, p. 3; Knoblauch, 2019, p. 218; Prisching, 2018, pp. 38–39).

Interrogating the genre's history more thoroughly and being attentive to how the numerous and already well-researched diagnoses of the present from the second half of the twentieth century and onwards overlap with, or differ from, early sociology's attempts at diagnosing the present state of societies entering modernity – in short: a *historical sociology* of diagnoses of the present *prior* to the genre's emergence – promises to be a fruitful endeavor. One example can be derived from the publicness typical of the genre. When early sociology was still being founded as a

scientific discipline at the turn of the twentieth century, sociological descriptions of modern society were produced without a specialized scientific audience from among the discipline. Early European sociology's diagnoses of the present were of necessity contributions to contemporary public debates. Their authors published not only as scientists, but also as "social critics, journalists, political commentators and public intellectuals" (Osrecki, 2012, p. 315). Does this characterization, in a way that needs to be examined more closely, not also apply to those authors of diagnoses of the present who attract skepticism from within the discipline due to their popularity beyond its boundaries?

The genre's 'shorter' and 'longer' histories should encourage us to expand the historical panorama of the discipline to include a wide array of scientific and non-scientific actors and dynamics from within it. More specific starting points can be inferred from three further shortcomings of current research in this regard. Firstly, apart from theoretically guided assumptions, we know little to nothing about the composition of the genre's readership among the general public and its practices of reception vis-à-vis sociology (Knoblauch, 2019, p. 218). Historically, the institutionalization of imagined reading audiences as well as the changing composition of "the public" can be traced in relation to each other, which, in turn, would inform reflection on the characteristics and boundaries of the genre – and not least be of interest to all sociologists who want to engage in broader reflections on variants and limits of public sociology by taking a closer look at this specific genre.

Secondly, current research seems to extrapolate key findings from the genre's history up to the 1980s, mainly regarding its dependency on specific practices of publication and reception, into the 2020s. The genre seems to remain stable, although the practices of publication and reception have changed considerably during the recent decades – we just don't know exactly how. Given the digitalization of media landscapes as well as shifts in book market economies, university presses, and public publishing houses (cf. Thompson, 2011), the current constellation can certainly be fruitfully compared with the shorter or longer history of the genre.

Thirdly, analyses and comparisons of sociological diagnoses of the present show that the genre is by no means only produced and received as such in German-speaking sociology. Its history also suggests that diagnoses of the present, at least to some degree, orient themselves towards *international* production, reception, and circulation. But so far, the 'shorter' history of the genre has for the most part been analyzed solely with respect to German sociology and we still know too little about the 'longer' history of the genre in French, British, and US sociology – or whether such a broader, but *genre-specific* history exists at all. Against this background, researchers have recently raised the question of whether the genre may actually be a "German genre" (Dimbath, 2020, p. 66; Farzin, 2019, p. 142). Likewise, it remains entirely unclear whether there is a history of diagnoses of the present

beyond the canon (Alatas & Sinha, 2017). Following Connell (2007), we should ask whether instances of diagnosing the present can be found in the history of *southern theory* and what can be learned not only about the characteristics and boundaries, but above all about the history of this supposedly Western genre by comparison. Moreover, if it is true that the genre's 'longer' history starts with the classics of early European sociology, then it should also be asked whether diagnoses of the present can be found that come from elsewhere than Western sociology's "imperial standpoint" (Go, 2023). As Go (2023, p. 282) reminds us, this would require us to be attentive to diagnoses that come in other forms of publication – journalistic critiques and political pamphlets, for example – than the conventional academic monographs typical of that standpoint. To conclude, current research on the history of diagnoses of the present – taken as an important "milestone" in sociology's disciplinary history (Osrecki, 2019b) – should consider if it not only wants to investigate the genre's Eurocentrism further, but also if it is able and willing to reflect upon and widen the national limitations of its inquiries into the genre's history.

3. How diagnoses of the present typically work: Generalization, temporalization and publicness

One of the principal interests of current research into sociological diagnoses of the present consists in identifying the recurring, primarily but not exclusively textual characteristics of these publications. *Generalization*, *temporalization*, and *publicness* are regarded as discernable characteristics deemed typical and indeed constitutive of the genre. These characteristics are discernable, insofar as they are evident in the argumentative structures and discursive patterns of diagnoses of the present, and constitutive of the genre, insofar as to a greater or lesser extent they persist across many cases and are held to be what makes them genuine specimens of that genre. So far, the question remains whether one of these characteristics can be regarded as primary, rendering the other two derivative. What is certain, however, is that this strand in the research discussion offers a wide variety of observations and findings, which can be condensed into three analytically differentiated genre characteristics, and which I now present one after the other.

Generalization

Sociological diagnoses of the present describe the current state of society. Using the term "society" indicates that the common epistemic target of such diagnoses is so-

ciety as a whole. Current research maintains that this holds true even if some diagnoses put specific social spheres or fields, types of organizations, or even specific interactional phenomena at the center of their conceptual work and empirical analysis (Dimbath, 2016b, p. 287; Prisching, 2018, pp. 21–22; Schimank, 2007, p. 14). In this sense, diagnoses of the present are characterized by *generalization*: From a general perspective (Reese-Schäfer, 2019a, p. 1) or even a global viewpoint (Osrecki, 2017, p. 455), they typically synthesize particular observations into general statements about contemporary society.

Diagnoses of the present emphasize certain phenomena as significant for society as a whole inasmuch as these phenomena constitute the gravitational center of a broader social change (Gross, 2003, p. 37; Vogelmann, 2019, pp. 620–621). As a result of this strongly generalizing tendency, what constitutes society is often condensed into a single term that stands for both the current state of society and whatever the diagnosis's conceptual arsenal and empirical analysis are all about – a label such as “acceleration,” “singularization,” “risk” etc. literally encapsulates both (Bogner, 2018, pp. 31–40; Krähnke, 2016, pp. 8–9; Osrecki, 2019b, p. 604; Prisching, 2003a).

An important finding is that these generalizations proceed *selectively*. The selection of certain theoretical concepts and argumentative figures on the one hand and certain empirical phenomena on the other ultimately leads via a bundling arrangement to a generalized description of the current state of society (Friedrichs et al., 1998a, pp. 17–18; Lucke, 2000, p. 390; Prisching, 2003c, p. 176). Such generalizations lead to strong propositions that draw attention to specific aspects of contemporary society that may not yet have been registered (Prisching, 2018, p. 132). But they run the risk of creating a simplified representation of social reality (Schimank, 2007, p. 19). According to a criticism widely shared among researchers, the inherent selectiveness of the present-diagnostic snapshots of society entails the omission of empirical details and conceptual exaggerations (Gross, 2003, p. 36; Reese-Schäfer, 2019a, p. 8). As a result of their selective generalizations, diagnoses of the present are generally considered to have a more limited scope – like medium-range theories – and to depict the current state of society in a more ordered and intelligible way than other variants of sociological descriptions of society would allow (Müller, 1996; Reese-Schäfer, 2019d, p. 61).

Temporalization

Sociological diagnoses of the present not only refer to society in general, but also to its current state. In other words, the genre aims to highlight the peculiarities of the present by distinguishing it from the past, to illuminate how the current state of society is different from its previous state. The pivotal point of the argument here

is the emphasis on a transformation of society that is currently taking place, i.e. before the eyes of the authors and readers, and which is often transposed to an epochal scale. This *temporalization*, the making of a strong distinction between the present and the past, is so pronounced that current research regards it at least as an important, if not as the decisive characteristic of the genre (Osrecki, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Diagnoses of the present frame such historical caesuras not as slow transitions or accumulations of incremental changes against the background of long-lasting continuities, but as hard disjunctions resembling epochal breaks that are taking place “right here and right now” and thus affect “today and tomorrow” (Schimank, 2007, pp. 17–18). Researchers are almost unanimous in agreeing that this temporalizing claim about epochal breaks or ruptures is a typical argumentative move that has remained relatively stable throughout the genre’s history: While diagnoses of the present in early sociology at the beginning of the twentieth century were primarily concerned with the epochal distinction between traditional/pre-modern and modern society, diagnoses of the present from around the second half of that century onwards once again identified epochal transformations *within* modernity or breaks *with* modernity (Dimbath, 2016b, pp. 230–249; Hillebrandt, 2010). So, for example, modernity is distinguished from postmodernity or late modernity, modernity is followed by a second modernity, capitalist society is followed by late-capitalist society, industrial society is followed by post-industrial society, etc. (Prisching, 2018, pp. 167–168; Reese-Schäfer, 2019b, p. 35, 2019d, pp. 58–60).

Exactly how diagnoses of the present conceptually establish such strong contrasts between past and present, is the point at which the discussion branches out, but the common denominator is that the genre follows a presentist construction of the past. This requires a minimum of periodization, which individual diagnoses achieve by drawing on time-ordering narratives such as progress, decay, stagnation, cyclical return, generational succession and, above all, crises as decisive turning points (Dimbath, 2016a; Prisching, 2005). Diagnoses of the present thus relate long-term historical continuities to a single discontinuity affecting the present. The genre may accomplish this by following what Osrecki (2015) has called “retrospective realism”, i.e. distinguishing the present from an equally generalized past by drawing on earlier sociological descriptions of society, which are then claimed to have been adequate, almost realistic descriptions at the time.

This presentist approach may correspond to broader shifts in recent or contemporary sociology (cf. Elias, 1987; Savage, 2009), and leads to further effects registered and debated within current research on the genre. Firstly, diagnoses of the present are primarily interested in what is *new* about their particular present and claim to offer a *new* description of it, regardless of whether they are dealing with entirely new phenomena, or uncovering still hidden latencies (Matthäus, 2023, p. 199; Schimank, 2023, p. 156). Rendering such latencies visible – making the “silent” change affecting

society as a whole audible (Osrecki, 2019a) – is valued as an epistemological potential of the genre by some researchers (Luks, 2019; Mönkeberg, 2023, pp. 5–6).

Secondly, and compared to other variants of sociological descriptions of society, their claim to novelty may lead publications of this kind to suffer from not only inevitable, but also rapid obsolescence (Müller, 1997, p. 356; Reichertz, 2005, p. 47; Schimank, 2007, p. 10). Sociological diagnoses of the present are in danger of being overtaken by future presents – or their next diagnoses – particularly quickly. For this very reason they may then, retrospectively, be valued for having aged rather well if the processes of social change they diagnose do in fact persist (Siri, 2023, p. 57).

Thirdly, this danger of becoming rapidly outdated is in tune with the observation that diagnoses of the present must follow a specific timing to be successfully received as plausible interpretations of the present. Because their plausibility is in part dependent on synchronizing their description of society with the lifeworld experiences of their readership (Lohmann, 1993; Mundt, 2023, p. 64), diagnoses of the present can be published too early or too late, regardless of their factual adequacy (Dimbath, 2016b, p. 105; Hastedt, 2019a, p. 23; Prisching, 2018, pp. 28–29). “Correct” timing ensures that a diagnosis of the present is received as being published just at the right time (Lucke, 2000, p. 392; Schimank, 2023, p. 155).

Fourthly, diagnoses of the present not only look back into the past from the vantage point of the present, but also ahead into the future. By means of tentative statements about further developments, the presentist construction of the past is supplemented by prognoses (Dimbath, 2016b, pp. 289–318; Hammershøj, 2017; Reichertz, 2005). Diagnoses of the present thus enrich their description of immediate social reality with a prognostic, occasionally also utopian, sense of possibility (Farzin, 2019). This raises the question of whom the current epochal caesura should be diagnosed for and, assuming that it cannot simply be society as a whole, which addressees should decide whether the timing is right.

Publicness

Starting out from the assumption that diagnoses of the present address not only a scientific, but also a public audience, current research unanimously agrees that *publicness* is a typical characteristic of the genre. Diagnoses of the present are received by both audiences, draw the attention of both to the societal transformations they are attempting to diagnose and, not least, expose themselves to criticism by both (Junge, 2016b, p. 51; Reese-Schäfer, 2019c, pp. 23–25). As a “hybrid” form of sociological knowledge, diagnoses of the present are meant to be, and indeed are, received both inside and outside the discipline. Thus, positioned at the interface between

science and the public, they qualify as a “hybrid genre” that combines scientific practices with the communicative strategies of journalism and the mass media (Osrecki, 2011; Volkmann, 2015, 2017). The genre’s publicness leads researchers to the contentious question of whether diagnoses of the present should be understood as public science in the general sense (Dimbath, 2016b, p. 14) or as public sociology (Volkmann, 2015, 2017) to use Burawoy’s famous coinage (2005).

Regardless of how authors answer this question, this typical publicness has led research to a considerable number of findings that can be summarized as the epistemic potentials and limitations of diagnoses of the present resulting from the close contact between the genre and “its” reading public: Diagnoses of the present carry sociological knowledge into public debates and thereby promote reflexivity enriched by sociological concepts and analyses (Osrecki, 2019a, p. 279; Schlechtriemen, 2019, p. 147). Albeit with varying degrees of sympathy, researchers mostly agree that the genre contributes to a more general “sociological enlightenment” of society (Schimank, 2007, p. 17) and provides the broader public, facing an uncertain present and crisis-like social change, with much needed and eagerly awaited orientation (Gross, 2003, p. 35; Müller, 1997, p. 354; Prisching, 2018, pp. 143–144).

But being received by the broader public is not something that happens automatically to diagnoses of the present. Instead current research contends that they – and most likely their authors – actively engage with public discourse. They not only provide sociological keywords for public debates, but consciously intervene in them (Bogner, 2018, p. 19; Reese-Schäfer, 2019a, p. 7). As the discipline’s communicative form with the highest public visibility (Farzin, 2016, p. 143), the public equates diagnoses of the present with sociological expertise in general (Osrecki, 2019c, p. 43). Like interventions by public intellectuals, well-received diagnoses make a difference that is perceived as such in public discourse (Meyhöfer, 2021, pp. 243–246; Otto, 2016, p. 182–183). This latent or manifest claim to provide not only intellectually meaningful, but politically relevant interpretations of the times (Dimbath, 2016b, p. 313), leads some researchers to classify the authors of this hybrid genre as hybrid authorities who, often indirectly, claim leadership of public opinion on the basis of their social-scientific expertise (Kathke, 2015, p. 10; Kieserling, 2004, p. 37). Viewed from this perspective, diagnoses of the present compete with one another and with other scientific as well as non-scientific interpretations for the attention of their multiple audiences and ultimately for epistemic power and authority (Hastedt, 2019a, pp. 15–19; Meyhöfer, 2021; Schimank, 1999, pp. 418–419).

The genre thus raises awareness of the social relevance of sociology and provides the discipline with legitimacy, an academic service that sociologists and occasionally also funding organizations appreciate (Osrecki, 2019b, p. 609; Prisching, 2003a, p. 24; Volkmann, 2017, pp. 123–124). In contrast to these virtues of public outreach, however, diagnoses of the present are suspected of being too closely in con-

tact with their public audience, leading them to sacrifice disciplinary quality standards, conceptual accuracy, and empirical verification (Friedrichs et al., 1998a, pp. 16–17; Knoblauch, 2019, p. 232–233; Lucke, 2000; Müller, 1997, pp. 355–357). As a result of the genre's proximity to public debates and the general mood of the broader public (Lohmann, 1993), some critics see diagnoses of the present merely as media products aligned with the *zeitgeist*, symptomatic expressions of currently prevailing ideologies (Lange, 2002, p. 116). To be sure, such strong critique of the genre's publicness is not universally shared in current research. However, it points to at least four further epistemic consequences that arise directly from the genre's entanglement with the broader public.

Due to their public nature, sociological diagnoses of the present firstly tend to be normative: their selective generalizations are often guided, or at least “tinted”, by normative standards and value judgments (Schimank, 1999, p. 418). On the basis of their normativity, diagnoses of the present articulate calls for action addressed to society, i.e. the public audience, with moral overtones (Hammershøj, 2015, p. 147; Prisching, 2003c, pp. 171–173; Reichertz, 2005, p. 46). Secondly, members of the broader public not only appear as victims or agents of social change within the content of a diagnosis (Volkman, 2002), but are also addressed in different ways: as lay people interested in the current state of affairs, as contemporary witnesses affected by current events, as moral citizens or as politically engaged activists (Volkman, 2015, pp. 148–149, 2017, pp. 120–121). Thirdly, normative claims, even the ones that remain implicit, show themselves in the rhetoric and style of sociological diagnoses of the present, most notably in their tendency towards dramatization and alarmism (Bogner, 2018, p. 19; Dimbath, 2015; Kieserling, 2004, pp. 39–40; Schimank, 2007, p. 19). Fourthly, reflecting on the genre's normativity leads to the seemingly paradoxical finding that sociological diagnoses of the present are simultaneously too *critical* (normative and evaluative) and too *uncritical* (ideologically entangled) of their own present.

However, this paradox can be resolved if it is understood as the result of addressing and being received by two audiences, i.e. if diagnoses of the present are understood as a genre in whose production non-academic expectations and audiences play a role next to social-scientific ones. In addition to this normativity of diagnoses of the present, but comparatively little researched to date, other perspectival distortions seem to result from the genre's publicness. The shared social position of the diagnosticians and their readership may lead to a pronounced middle-class bias (Dimbath, 2018), while a certain “performative Eurocentrism” seems to be the result of imagining and addressing the broader public as a specific national audience through the interplay of the genre's practices of production and reception (Meyhöfer & Werron, 2022; Werron, 2023, pp. 176–179).

Discussion

Taken together, *generalization*, *temporalization* and *publicness* are preliminary results of ongoing research that form a conceptual tableau which can stimulate further research on sociological diagnoses of the present. These analytically differentiated genre-typical characteristics can be traced both through the broad lines of the diagnoses' content and through their argumentation at micro-level. Since they were mostly obtained by analyzing and comparing particularly "successful," i.e. widely received, examples of the genre, they are most probably representative of what makes a publication a diagnosis of the present and thus an authentic specimen.

This raises the further question, which can probably only be answered unsatisfactorily, of whether and how "unsuccessful" diagnoses of the present can also be analyzed in terms of these typical characteristics. Leaving the practicalities of finding such cases aside, this depends on whether one truly takes a successful reception as an essential part of the genre's definition. Moreover – something probably easier to tackle in future research – it remains unclear whether the tableau of characteristics will also prove to be heuristically fruitful for comparing "typical" diagnoses of the present with different, but sufficiently similar, cases such as ethnographic diagnoses of the present (Laux, 2023) and socio-autobiographies (Farzin, 2023).

Such comparisons would also counteract current research's tendency to rely too much on specific cases that are already well researched and are most likely representative, but that are only few in number and thus narrow in scope. This becomes particularly evident in the case of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1992), which has achieved an almost paradigmatic status as an ideal type of the genre. Enriching the selection of cases with a heightened awareness of the already well-researched characteristics of the genre and expanding comparisons in a more targeted way would most likely be a promising way to move the research discussion forward. This may also turn out to be an opportunity to gain new insights into what distinguishes diagnoses of the present from other forms of sociological knowledge and neighboring genres; another pathway of current research, which will be dealt with in the next section.

4. Blurred boundaries between diagnoses of the present and neighboring genres

The last strand of current research on sociological diagnoses of the present reviewed here concerns what distinguishes this genre from other genres in sociology. Although this research also draws on the tableau of genre-typical characteristics dis-

cussed in the previous section, a notably comparative perspective has emerged, insofar as research into *this* genre is accompanied by comparisons with *other* variants of sociological descriptions of the current state of modern society. The following summary shows that diagnoses of the present are treated as a distinct genre of sociology that is functionally related to neighboring genres within the discipline. As becomes particularly clear in the case of contributions that discuss diagnoses of the present as sociology's "third genre" (Noro, 2004; Osrecki, 2011, 2019a), empirical social research and theories of society are held to be neighboring genres of this kind.

Diagnoses of the present vs. empirical social research

In contrast to *empirical social research*, diagnoses of the present are characterized above all by their selective, combinatorial approach to empirical findings. Most authors agree that diagnoses of the present compile the results of empirical social research in collages or panoramas to lend plausibility to their contact with social reality (Gross, 2003, p. 36; Knoblauch, 2019, p. 231). Empirical social research in turn draws inspiration from the generalizations made possible by this approach: Diagnoses of the present provide empirical social research with an extensive reservoir of generalizable medium-range hypotheses, which can be adapted and operationalized depending on the needs of narrower research projects (Osrecki, 2019c, p. 40). Besides this seemingly symbiotic relationship, current research identifies sharp differences between the two genres. Although diagnoses of the present rely on anchoring their generalizations to empirical findings, questions of detail – including methodological issues (Hammershøj, 2015, p. 141; Reese-Schäfer, 2019c, pp. 23–24) – often take a backseat in favor of a wide-angle picture of the current state of society as a whole (Prisching, 2018, pp. 22–25; Schimank & Volkmann, 2019, pp. 238–239). Following from their rather loose approach to empirical social research, diagnoses of the present tend to exceed what we know empirically about current society; their strong generalizations lead to speculative tendencies that are controlled more by their theoretical plausibility than by dialogical engagement with data provided by empirical social research (Schimank, 2007, p. 17).

Diagnoses of the present vs. theories of society

This theoretical plausibility is provided by *theories of society*, and, to a considerable extent, it is precisely the interest in the differences between diagnoses of the present and the grand diagnoses of grand theories that are driving current research forward (Knoblauch, 2019, pp. 227–234; Prisching, 2003c, pp. 167–170, 2018, pp. 106–

116). Theories of society and diagnoses of the present share the aim of providing a general description of society by means of generalizable concepts and can thus be brought into conversation with each other, but researchers see the level of generalization each achieves as an important difference between the two genres (Nassehi, 2001, p. 553; Schimank & Volkmann, 2019). Both are concerned with a generalizable description of society, but, in the case of diagnoses of the present, their selective restriction to particular nationally or regionally limited societies becomes (more) apparent (Nassehi, 2001, pp. 560–562; Schimank, 2007, p. 15). Both genres also aim at a comprehensive explanation of large-scale transformations. However, diagnoses of the present are held to refer to only a few phenomena or even to one single but central phenomenon, mediating the overall social change through only a few societal contexts or even only a single one. The widely shared finding is that, in contrast to theories, diagnoses of the present have to ignore a considerable part of social complexity in order to arrive at a concise snapshot of turbulent change and social crises (Hartmann, 2023, p. 223; Reese-Schäfer, 2019a, p. 8).

The tendency for diagnoses of the present to cut off or fade out historical complexity seems to be a further important difference between them and theories of society. Both genres hold society's historicity to be a major driving force in current large-scale change (Bogner, 2018, pp. 10–13; Dimbath, 2016b, pp. 223–233; Hillebrandt, 2010, pp. 154–155). However, while theories place the current state of modern society within the context of long-term processes, diagnoses of the present strongly emphasize recent discontinuities and rapid structural change. Although theories of society may also historicize their object of inquiry in order to engage critically with the present status quo, diagnoses of the present are held to always view the present as a critical moment or crisis-ridden development, rendering society's past and present mutually exclusive (Osrecki, 2019a, p. 283–284; Prisching, 2018, pp. 99–102; Volkmann, 2017, p. 121). This leads to a further observation, which in all likelihood results from genre's publicness. In their attempts to describe social change, theorists predominantly claim conceptual novelty vis-à-vis a specialized audience of other theorists, while diagnosticians primarily claim the factual novelty of current social change experienced by, at least potentially, everybody (Osrecki, 2011, pp. 294–316).

Tracing the boundaries between diagnoses of the present and theories of society in this way, has led research to focus on these two genres as independent scholarly projects that are functionally related to each other. Diagnoses of the present draw on theories and refer to important theorists in order to be taken seriously as genuinely "sociological" descriptions and to be received and criticized within the discipline. Theorists in turn draw on diagnoses of the present as timely seismographs for the phenomena of social change, the novelty and possibly overall social implications of which may have up to now been overlooked conceptually (Kieserling, 2004, pp. 41–42; Osrecki, 2012, pp. 324–325).

Furthermore, some authors argue that sociological diagnoses of the present are a useful discursive resource for theorists in order maybe not to overcome, but at least to alleviate paradigmatic dogmatism and divides in the field of theory formation. From this perspective, diagnoses of the present potentially facilitate dialogue between rival theories and may soften the transition between old and new theoretical accounts; at least they provoke even the genre's harshest critics to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their chosen theory. Being written for a broader audience, sociological diagnoses of the present are also fungible for interdisciplinary collaboration and communication with experts from outside the field, especially where this exchange tends to be paralyzed by the specialist jargon of theories (Junge, 2016b, p. 52; Osrecki, 2015, p. 142, 2019c, pp. 44–45). This reciprocal relationship between diagnoses of the present and theories of society also suggests that the two genres should not be played off against each other, but rather taken as scholarly projects in their own right that could regulate one another or might balance each other out (Meyhöfer & Werron, 2022; Schimank, 1999).

Discussion

Attempting to delineate the boundaries of diagnoses of the present as a genre of sociology has produced a considerable number of observations on how it relates to its neighboring genres and how these relations may play out in terms of the division of scientific labor, compensation, and complementation within the discipline, between disciplines, and finally beyond academia, that is, in sociology's relation to the broader public. These insights may encourage us to search for other disciplinary "genres" and to reflect on their place within the discipline and beyond its boundaries. Since the question of how diagnoses of the present relate to theories of society has been the main focus of this strand of research, four desiderata can be identified. Firstly, while current research provides a rather clear picture of how diagnoses of the present incorporate empirical findings, how other researchers draw inspiration from the genre's generalizations in their empirical research projects has yet to be examined. It may be plausible to assume that empirical research takes note of diagnoses broadly discussed in the discipline and public discourse alike. However, whether and precisely how, in this sense, trending diagnoses of the present influence the content and design of empirical research projects (Lucke, 2000) – or, more generally, what "impact" the genre has in the discipline – is an important question for further research.

Secondly, and despite some attempts, it remains to be seen whether it is possible to identify scientific standards and quality criteria that could apply to this genre *in contrast* to theory development. As rigorous contributions to social-scientific dis-

course, “good” diagnoses of the present should, for example, be plausible, stringent, reflexive and heuristically rich descriptions of society that have been developed on a coherent theoretical basis and grounded in empirical research (Hastedt, 2019a, pp. 21–22; Reese-Schäfer, 2019c, p. 23). It seems that such a list could be continued more or less at will and most sociologists – regardless of whether they devote themselves to working on theory or in empirical research – would likely also claim these epistemic virtues for their research practices.

Thirdly, current research suggests that the difference between diagnoses of the present and theories of society is somewhat ambiguous, if not porous. The boundary between them begins to blur on closer inspection and may prove to be more permeable than treating diagnoses of the present as a “third” genre initially suggests. Irrespective of, but possibly encouraged by, how authors of diagnoses of the present view their affiliation to theory development, some contributors to current research hold publications such as Hartmut Rosa’s *Social Acceleration* (2013) and *Resonance* (2019) to be receivable as diagnoses of the present *and* contributions to theory (Mundt, 2023). Diagnoses of the present, moreover, may offer innovative perspectives for engaging in theorizing in a new or different way (Hoppe, 2023, p. 142). Conversely, it has been noted that theories contain present-diagnostic elements – even in cases where the authors most likely intended neither to participate in public sociology nor to produce keywords suitable for being taken up in public debates (Dimbath, 2016b, p. 51; Kristensen, 2008; Schimank & Volkmann, 2019, pp. 239–240). With regard to the multiple writings or entire oeuvres of authors widely discussed in sociology and public discourse alike, it has been noted that some of their publications are *more* diagnostic, while others are *more* theoretical (Hümmeler & Speck, 2023, pp. 18–19; Mundt, 2023, pp. 63–64). And with regard to the (micro-)level of argumentation in individual publications, some contributions to the current scholarly debate point out that theories of society are more or less permeated by “traces” of diagnoses of the present (Osrecki, 2012, p. 325). But how, then, can we still assert more or less clear boundaries between the latter and works belonging to their alleged counter-genre, theories of society?

Fourthly and considering how prominently current research uses theories of society as a comparative foil, its situatedness within German-speaking sociology, mentioned at the beginning of this review article, comes to the fore. The suspicion arises that the research discussion mostly follows a specific understanding of theory, which stands in the tradition of European sociology and the canonization of the classics of sociological theory, starting with Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, but is above all related to the “theory boom” in West German sociology during the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Moebius, 2021, pp. 113–119). Grand theories of society such as those put forward by Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, as well as theoretical impulses from Pierre Bourdieu and post-structuralist theorists such as

Michel Foucault, not only received remarkable attention from the German-speaking reading public (cf. Felsch, 2018), but in all likelihood shaped the notion of “theory” persisting in current research on diagnoses of the present. Not in spite of the fact that, but precisely because, more often than not, “theories of society” are used for comparisons while remaining vague or underdefined, the regional and historical situatedness of this counter-genre to diagnoses of the present should be considered more comprehensively. Otherwise, vehement critics as well as those who treat diagnoses of the present as scholarly projects in their own right run an equal risk of applying an abridged or even idealized standard of comparison to the genre. Tied back to the previous discussion of the genre’s history, this suggests that the genre’s boundaries to neighboring genres should also be investigated historically.

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