

## Was war Bielefeld?

**Eine ideengeschichtliche Nachfrage.  
Edited by Sonja Asal and Stephan Schlak – Bookreview**

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The collected volume harks back to a symposium in Weimar in February 2007, held on the occasion of the introduction of the first issue of the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. The different contributions try to figure out what »Bielefeld« was. »Bielefeld« neither refers to the medium-sized town in East Westphalia in Western Germany nor to Bielefeld University but to a certain strand in humanities, well-known since the 1970s for its theory-driven and interdisciplinary (historical) research, the so-called Bielefeld School. »Bielefeld« was not a consistent school building but a heterogeneous set of theoretical and methodological approaches, rather a social construction than reality, rather an idea and a state initially attributed by others. Beyond this, the editors emphasize that »Bielefeld« was more than an attributed state associated with certain ideas and semantics: As one of several reform universities, »Bielefeld« was a cipher for the academic and intellectual condition of the West German state. In accordance to Hans-Ulrich Wehler, one of the most prominent representatives of the »Bielefeld School«, the editors of the volume focus on the heyday of social history from the early 1970s and the foundation of Bielefeld University up to 1989 respectively.

To understand the rise of Bielefeld University as the centre of West-German historiography and sociology, the authors analyze the horizon of expectations of the 1960s and the basic ideas of reform. Like at an academic laboratory, at newly founded Bielefeld University, the ideas of Humboldt ought to be combined with the training requirements of a modern industrialized society. Despite many of the reform plans becoming already obsolete during the implementation phase, the microcosm of Bie-

lefeld University became the »secret capital of theoretical work« and of humanities. Despite the »style of thought« (p. 9) comprised different theoretical orientations and offered an academic home for completely different outstanding humanities scholars like Niklas Luhmann, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Reinhart Koselleck and Hartmut von Hentig, the volume asks if there had been a collective thought style, unifying scholars and students across the different humanities disciplines. Which idea, which sociological, intellectual and political ideas did shape the foundation of Bielefeld University and then lead to the label »Bielefeld School«. The different range of essays, varying between objective analysis, subjective retrospection and private impressions illustrate the foundation of Bielefeld University and the then following two decades, the theoretical concepts and paradigms.

Hermann Lübbecke's contribution sketches the scientific and political context of the foundation of Bielefeld University, the original idea of an elite university and the contingent developments that led straight away to adjusting these plans to the real needs of a West German university. Lübbecke describes the foundation of Bielefeld University in the context of the general expansion of universities and mainly apart from the metropolises in the provinces. Newly founded universities did not become full-scale universities but universities with a special profile and a functional differentiation, compensated by the assignment of extra resources. Helmut Schelsky further developed this concept to that of a research university for the education of elites: small student groups and an perfect professor-student relation, the regular shift between teaching and research and interdisciplinary exchange – which was intended to become reality in Bielefeld. Schelsky mainly managed the foundation of the university in Bielefeld, but shortly after its implementation the elite reform-university was caught up by reality. There was criticism of the elite concept, and there were demands for equality and equal opportunities at universities. Mainly the rising number of students in the 1970s led to an adjustment to the needs of a mass university. Lübbecke appreciates Schelsky's merits with the foundation of a specialized research university and the Center

for Interdisciplinary Research (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung ZiF) and the appointment of excellent scientists as professors.

Clemens Albrecht comes to a contrary result in his essay about Schelsky and the spiritual physiognomy of political conversion. He presents his reflections while conducting some exams about a »thought reflex«, a specific thought style of West Germany that he called the »Bielefeld-Syndrome«, generated from a spiritual physiognomy of a certain political conversion. According to Albrecht, the foundation of Schelsky's reflection on higher education and science policies was social reality. Concepts of science and education had been adjusted to the needs of modern society. As part of industrial society, culture means education towards functional objectivity – in contrast to Friedrich H. Tenbruck, who saw a need for a distanced science that enshrines the potential for the development of alternatives and cultural self-stabilisation in a scientified society. Albrecht calls Schelsky's concept, the adjustment of an idea to social reality, the »Bielefeld-Syndrome«. In its pathological form, the openness towards approved methods is transformed into hypostatized adjustments of reality. Albrecht deduces the keenness on adjustments in regard to reality to Schelsky's own past during the NS-era and his successful political conversion after the war. This conversion leads to pre-emptive obedience not only towards old and new authorities after the war but also towards new social realities that were condensed into terms like »Modern« or »Industrial Society«, »Globalisation«, »World Society« or »Knowledge Society«. These ideas became a normative bondage for the scientific community. This thought style, originated by politically converted intellectuals like Schelsky, has been adapted in Bielefeld and became ubiquitous then. Even more, this thought style has become a specific pathology of West Germany and has created a political style characterized by Albrecht as »adaptive modernisation« which these days comes to its limits.

Another leading figure besides Schelsky was the educationalist Harmut von Hentig who defended Schelsky's ideas and achievements. In the social upheavels of the 1960s as a social reality, Hentig argues against the »Bielefeld Syndrome« that Humboldt's idea of »solitude and freedom« as

keywords for autonomous research had been implemented as best as possible by Schelsky. He transformed necessary change into administrable reform. With the implementation of the university, the relation between idea and reality, the position of the idea, had been considerably improved. Rather, Hentig criticized that Schelsky's ideas of a research university, the premises for change, would never have been improved, would never have been realized if the given opportunities had not been grasped.

Interestingly, the three contributions vary in their judgement on Schelsky's commitment and accordingly in their judgement on the foundation of Bielefeld University. Lübbe and Hentig, who were both themselves engaged in the foundation of Bielefeld University, defend Schelsky, while Albrecht, a follower of Tenbruck, criticizes Schelsky for infecting Bielefeld and West Germany with the »Bielefeld-Syndrome«. Although one might argue in support of or against Albrecht's hypothesis, it is interesting that Albrecht continues a former discussion between Schelsky and Tenbruck. Independently, if one agrees with Albrecht's hypothesis about the »Bielefeld Syndrome«, one could ask if Albrecht is going too far. In his short essay he could not explain convincingly why this syndrome is typical only for Bielefeld and not for other reform universities like Regensburg, Bochum, Konstanz or Bremen. Political converts, as his description of Schelsky – probably not that prominent – might be engaged also in the founding committees of the other reform universities. Moreover, I would say that Albrecht overestimates the influence of Bielefeld. He stated that starting from Bielefeld the pathological form of that thought style has created a political style defined as »adaptive modernisation«. I would argue just the other way round that the idea of a modern, functionally differentiated society had become manifest by the foundation of Bielefeld University, and also that the foundation of Bielefeld was part of an »adaptive modernisation«.

Jürgen Oelkers in his essay analyses the educational reform of Hartmut von Hentig. Oelkers differentiates the two concepts of education, using the example of texts by John Dewey and Robert M. Hutchins. Dewey's pragmatic, empiricism-based pedagogy was observed at an early labo-

ratory school that was founded at the end of the 19th century and affiliated to the university of Chicago. Experiences were seen as part of the learning process, anticipating communal life in society, and they were seen as an »embryonic society«. Hutchins represented the concept of a humanistic idea of education which comprises a holistic personal development within the process of enculturation. Hentig synthesized both ideas: a humanistic education at a laboratory school that was affiliated to Bielefeld University. Furthermore, the foundation of an »Oberstufen-Kolleg« should interlock school and university. While Oelkers considers the laboratory school as a link between Paidea and pragmatism a great success, the idea of the »Oberstufen-Kolleg« was not realized as originally planned, and the »Kolleg« was transformed into a school comparable to the Senior High School.

The two essays of Markus Krajewski about the »intimacy of coding« and of Jürgen Kaube about Luhmanns slip box fit very well together. Both focus on the function of Luhmann's »Zettelkasten« and the interrelation between man and »machine«. Krajewski analyses the materiality of Luhmanns system of notes and which library-orientated and informational techniques of data handling and information processing were used: the slip of paper and the cards, the case, the writing utensils, as well as the system of notes and record-taking, tagging and the system of references. Krajewski cop a look at the self-description of the system, its design and the aesthetics of the production of annotations to highlight the internal communication and the interaction between man and »machine«. The self-referential system developed into an independent existence. In some way, Luhmann was dependent on his »Zettelkasten«, and the productivity of the »Zettelkasten« became itself an label for systems theory. On the one hand, the slip box made Luhmann independent of the library; on the other hand the »Zettelkasten« in his great extent tied Luhmann to the slip box and Bielefeld. The »Zettelkasten«, Luhmann was cited, was a reduction to built up complexity. While Krajewski focusses on the materiality and the communication processes, Kaube traces back the history of the slip box and he sketches how the »Zettelkasten« worked.

Two leading figures of the »Bielefeld School« were Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Reinhart Koselleck. In regard to the search for a collective thought style in Bielefeld as it is announced in the introduction, Frank Becker tries to identify – beside the well-known differences between Wehler and Koselleck – a common programme of the »Bielefeld School«. The differences between the two scholars start already with their different ways of socialisation and their careers that influenced also their historical work. Beyond all epistemological and contentual differences, they were connected by their interest in theoretical questions, their embeddedness in an integral social history, their aversion against narrative elements in history. In common had both the importance of the decades around 1800 as a boundary.

The essay of Wolfgang Braungart deals with the architecture and the buildings of Bielefeld University. As many others in this volume, Braungart appreciates the reform efforts along a modern university in an industrialized society, on the other hand he articulates discomfort with the cool and pedestrian rationality and functionality that is materialized in the university building. The university was intended as a closed system and planned as one university building, linked by Braungart to the concept of »the whole house« (*das ganze Haus*). All faculties, training and research should be accommodated in one building under one roof. All main university facilities like the cafeteria, the lecture halls or the library should be accessible via the main hall. The whole infrastructure, the arrangement of the seminar rooms and the offices was rationally planned within an alpha-numerical order. The concept of the university building provided a functional arrangement of all facilities, a training and research zone, flexibility and variability for future purposes and was supposed to leave the possibility for micro- and macro-expansions. Moreover, the architecture of the building and its surroundings should encourage a stimulating communication between students and lecturers, and the building should contribute to a stimulation and humanisation of the academic world of work. But this encouraging becomes a coercion to communicate, and finally Braungart doubts that the building invites to communication or even invites to stay. »Communication is everything.

The main thing is motion [...] Arrival is impossible; being home not allowed. No place. Nowhere« (p. 60). Braungart did not like the university building. Usually, modern architecture becomes ever more ugly and unbearable when getting older (p. 37), and only from a wider distance one might like to look at the building, even if still one can see the similarity to a well-fortified castle (p. 52). Meanwhile, the building has become a restructuring case – and Braungart leaves open if this also refers to the concept of Bielefeld University as such.

In the last two essays, by Gustav Seibt and Valentin Groebner, the authors reflect on their own experiences during their studies and their time as doctoral students in Bielefeld. They try to memorize »what Bielefeld was like«. Gustav Seibt came to Bielefeld for two semesters, mainly to hear Koselleck, in autumn 1983. His first impressions of Bielefeld were depressing and he felt better only during the summer months 1984. He travelled from Rome to a dusty Bielefeld, »the air smelled like Waldsterben«. He stayed in a little apartment in a crowded house, on the central market square a so-called »die in« was happening, people lying like dead on the square, demonstrating against the NATO Double-Track Decision. He attended classes by Reinhart Koselleck, Niklas Luhmann and Karl Heinz Bohrer and discussed the ongoing political issues during a winter of moral uproar, followed by a lovely summer. What was left was the memory of the dawn of a new (political) era. According to Seibt, the remains of the depressing 1970s had gone and the 1980s started. The next »contemporary witness«, Valentin Groebner, came a few years later, in spring 1989 to write his doctoral thesis. He memorized the affinity resp. the fixation to theory. Bielefeld was the sound of multi-clause sentences saturated with theory, with references to keywords like »class«, »civil society« or »state«; the layout of tables and their representations in curves, pie charts, diagrams; and the ritual in the different colloquia with harsh discussions and the pride to be a »Bielefelder«. In Bielefeld, theory was *a sine qua non*. Bielefeld was finally less a place than a mode of self-placing within historiography.

The essays range from historical treatises, saturated with footnotes, to personal memories. Nearly all essays answer the question of »What was

Bielefeld« in their own, subjective way. Unfortunately the arrangement of the contributions is sometimes confusing: What is the narrative that links one article with the next one? Between Lübbe and Albrecht, both were linked by referring to Schelsky, the contribution by Braungart looks misplaced, and also the contributions of Hentig and Oelkers should have been arranged together. The collection shows the heterogeneous ideas that were summarized under the label of »Bielefeld«. A certain strand in sociology, philosophy, history and pedagogy and literary studies – in short: humanities – that was often connotated with the use of theory and abstractness. Even more, Bielefeld was a space with a productive atmosphere and outcome, due to (or despite) a rationalized and functional organisation of work space and working facilities described very vividly in the article by Krasjewski. On the other hand, most of the articles describe »Bielefeld« in an ambivalent, if not in a critical or negative way (like Braungart, Albrecht, Becker, Seibt and Groebner). Whatever Bielefeld was: it was ambivalent and caused controversial emotions. »Bielefeld« was evidently linked and restricted to West German society, as many authors mentioned.

»Bielefeld« was well-known for the use of theory and a vivid and critical discussions. But some of the authors took umbrage at the often harsh style of criticism in Bielefeld. Wehler's ductus was combative (p. 102), his criticism of other methods, like cultural-, everyday- or intellectual history, was very polemic (p. 103). Sometimes the negative judgement on the »Bielefeld School« in some articles seems to be a continuation of a former discussion, but under opposite signs. Under the label of intellectual history, now social history is judged on. One gets the impression that still there are resentments left between social or intellectual history.

»What was Bielefeld?« Was Bielefeld the »Bielefeld School«, or was »Bielefeld« identified with the style of thought, described in Albrecht's study. It is unclear if the editors meant »Bielefeld« or »Bielefeld School« when talking about Bielefeld. Would Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who would doubtless assign himself to the »Bielefeld School«, also think of Hartmut von Hentig as a schoolmate? Insofar, most of the articles referred to »Bielefeld« in a wider sense. But when talking about »Bielefeld«, many other

disciplines were dismissed: economics, law and the natural sciences that would all define themselves under the umbrella of interdisciplinarity – that had become a label for »Bielefeld«, institutionalized in the Center for Interdisciplinary Research. Here it would have been very interesting to see how these blind spots fit to the concept of »Bielefeld«.

Although the short introduction tried to embrace the varying articles and to focus them on the question: »What was Bielefeld«, the answer is not yet clear – some of the contributors did not even answer this question. The essays by Hentig or Oelkers either contribute to a history of the foundation of the university or to the history of their discipline. Lübbe tries to figure out the idea behind »Bielefeld«; Becker focuses on the respective ideas of Wehler and Koselleck; Groebner frequently gives answers to the question of what Bielefeld might be; or Albrecht answers the question explicitly by a *tour de raison*, from Schelsky up to today. Finally Groebner's appraisal of »Bielefeld« as a mode of self-placing at the place of Bielefeld seems to be the best answer to the initial question. And if Bielefeld is a thought style, what has happened to this thought style during the last decades? What might Bielefeld be today?

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