

Examples

Symposium organized by Anthony Grafton
and François Hartog
20-21 May 1994*

Participants: Ann Blair (University of California at Irvine), Anthony Grafton (Princeton University — Wissenschaftskolleg), François Hartog (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris — Wissenschaftskolleg), Gérard Lenclud (Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris), Paolo Mancosu (Technische Universität Berlin), Glenn W. Most (Universität Heidelberg), Wilfried Nippel (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Freie Universität Berlin), Michael Werner (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris), Paul Zanker (Universität München — Wissenschaftskolleg).

Papers: Glenn Most: *The School of Athens*; Anthony Grafton: *Lorenzo Valla and Exemplar History*; François Hartog: *Exemple, Parallèle, Perfection*; Ann Blair: *The Example in Early Modern Europe: Between Natural History and History*; Paolo Mancosu: *The Use of Examples in Early Modern Mathematics: Descartes' Case*; Paul Zanker: *Venus als Vorbild*; Michael Werner: *La littérature nationale comme exemple (Gervinus)*; Wilfried Nippel: *Historische Beispiele bei Max Weber*; Gérard Lenclud: *Exemple, Catégorisation: Le Potlatch Kwakiutl*

We report with pleasure on the results of the informal discussion of examples in (and outside) historiography, which the generous help of the Wissenschaftskolleg enabled us to hold. We intended from the start to launch an exploration rather than to arrive at fixed results. We invited ten speakers (ourselves included) representing several disciplines; nine gave papers, and one other guest (the Berlin philosopher W. Schmidt-Biggemann) served as a learned and competent discussant. The papers ranged widely in subject matter and style: some speakers accepted our invitation to be entirely informal, others presented written texts. Happily (and against our expectations) language did not prove a problem, although at least four were spoken at various times. Several fellows of the Wissenschaftskolleg also attended some talks and took part in the debates. The discussions were simultaneously engaged and serious: the general atmosphere was that of a small working group rather than a normal conference, and all the better for that.

The first three papers addressed themselves most directly to the question we began from: was there really a single classic doctrine or method for

* The seminar was sponsored by the *Otto-und-Martha-Fischbeck-Stiftung*.

using examples in historical writing? The very way the question is posed suggests the common answer: no. Though the rhetorical tradition did establish conventions for citing examples of heroic action or comparing exemplary cultures, it also contained many tensions and offered considerable room for criticism, innovation, and fruitful self-contradiction. In each case, analysis of primary sources (Raphael's *School of Athens* and the relevant passages from *Thucydides*; Valla's *Gesta Ferdinandi regis Aragonum*; Leroy's *Vicissitude* and Perrault's *Parallèle*) made the general arguments vivid and helped to keep the discussion focused on the central theme of *historia magistra vitae*.

The three papers next presented addressed the use of examples outside history: in natural philosophy and encyclopaedias, in mathematics, and in classical sculpture. We had hoped that these cases might offer instructive parallels or contrasts, and in fact they did so: particularly striking, and perhaps most unexpected, was the fact that Descartes' use of mathematical examples showed a strong resemblance to the phenomena observed in very different disciplines. The discussion of encyclopaedias showed with great clarity how enormous an amount of intellectual energy was expended in early modern Europe on collecting skyscraper-sized mounds of examples in every imaginable field of study, whether scientific or humanistic. And the last presentation of the day reminded us that the monumental use of examples continues to the present and showed most elegantly how apparently identical gestures and forms (in particular, those of the Cnidian Venus) take on radically new meanings (in funeral statues for Roman matrons — not to mention post-modern installations).

Finally, the last three papers raised the second question from which we began: what happened after historical thought ceased to pivot on reflection about examples? Did they, for example, simply change allegiance and become mere instances used to demonstrate theories in cultural history or social science? Investigation of three complex cases (the literary history of Gervinus; the comparative sociology of Weber; and the anthropological investigation of the Potlach) yielded no simple results, though it did produce three elegant and instructive lectures. Speakers and discussants agreed that we need to know more about how instances work in the social thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — in particular, about how a single act, person or event comes to be seen as typical of an epoch or a whole civilisation. The final lecture, on the potlatch system, used Gallic wit to show exactly how a society can degenerate into an instance of a theory originally unconnected with it — to the point where the very society in question begins to imitate the version of itself provided by social scientists.

All participants seemed to enjoy both the formal discussions and the informal ones that went on over meals in and outside the Wissenschaftskolleg. All seemed to think that it would indeed be a good idea to stage a later and more formal version of this discussion, perhaps at the Potsdam Einstein-Forum.

Special thanks are owed to Frau A. Friedrich, whose intelligence and solicitude relieved us and the speakers of all practical worries, and to all the other members of the Kolleg's staff who collaborated to make the occasion a memorably pleasant one.