

Richard Biernacki

Social Institutions and Private Ideas



Born 1956 in Massachusetts. Started education at the University of Chicago (A.B., 1978) and worked as a journalist of politics before committing to academics (Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley, 1989). Received American Sociological Association Dissertation Prize for research published as *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (1995). Fields of publication: cultural history of work, comparative historical methods, classical social theory. Currently professor at University of California, San Diego. – Address: Department of Sociology, University of California, La Jolla, CA 92093-0533, USA. E-mail: rbiernac@ucsd.edu.

“If someone gets a chance to go to the Wissenschaftskolleg,” Reinhard Bendix told me in 1984, “they must take it.” That was the first occasion on which I heard mention of the institute. Fourteen years later I took Bendix’s comment as a commandment. Unlike many Fellows, I arrived in Berlin with the plan to mine locally available sources for a substantially new project, rather than to solidify my writing on a mastered subject.

My research interest was in understanding how German institutions for publishing and for using print influenced the development of German ideas about the “public sphere” and about nationhood on the threshold to the modern era – the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. In a word, my question was how the *institutions and means* of communicating ideas influenced their *content* in this fateful period for the development of German political culture. This approach seemed like a useful response to the general dilemma facing historians and sociologists at the moment: on the one hand, the older styles of explanations that view beliefs as a mirror of class relations or social development are becoming ever less plausible. On the other hand, the newer styles of cultural history, including those designed to illuminate the forms of political and national identity, brilliantly disclose hidden meanings of beliefs but often fail to explain rigorously how those beliefs are ultimately anchored or changed. My hunch was that investigating the means by which ideas actually get produced would promote more exacting and grounded reflection on this explanatory dilemma. More particularly, I wanted to investigate under

what terms of labor and of contract literary works were conceived and came to press, how they came to be defined as intellectual property circulating in a market for print, how their consumption was envisioned, and how these processes defined the role of the author. In Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, unusual business practices supported the precocious development of the notion of the incomparability of each author's personality and of the literary product, which now testified to the author's godlike individuality and creativity. It did not take long for inventive thinkers such as Herder to extend this revolutionary notion to develop a new vision of what a national identity consisted of. Herder simply reasoned that each nation, like an author, has a completely unique personality, unfolding by historical principles all its own, to which its literature gives spontaneous expression.

As my inquiry proceeded, however, I decided to center my work initially on explaining the invention and adoption in Germany of the underlying assumption in this cultural shift, namely, the absolute individuality of each author and freedom to create by autonomously invented principles. This idea was not only historically prior; but taking it as the *explanandum* made for a simpler, more direct historical argument from the assumptions embedded in publishing contracts and production practices to the assumptions about intellectual creation. In addition, however, the social "scientist" in me cannot avoid speculating on how my experience of the Kolleg as an institution may have encouraged me to adopt this focus on creativity in authorship.

Fellows at the Wissenschaftskolleg enjoy an unrivalled degree of freedom and support in their scholarly endeavors while they are also enclosed through much of the day in a minutely-organized institution. For me the very term "Fellow" in our everyday exchanges marked this strange combination: it called up the extraordinary privilege of a free thinker as well as the sense of an encompassing social membership. The single room I occupied at the Kolleg served as both work office and living quarters – just as I had requested. It was located in the "public" main administration building. A basic assumption in the normal world outside is that work, recreation, and sleep take place at different sites, outside an encompassing rational authority. When the insulation among these three spheres of life is breached and all are united at one place in a single organization, the individual enters what the sociologist Erving Goffman famously called the "total institution" of an asylum. To be provided every service for research and intellectual recreation made for a fruitful asylum indeed! As Goffman remarked, however, this also comprises the kind of setting in which people typically come to question the grounds of their own identity. At the least, dining, talking and typing by schedule side by side with a

corps of other producers provoked me to wonder why it seemed so natural to imagine that our work expressed primarily some unique personal spirit and individual history, why it was a free, expressive creation, peculiarly and fundamentally our “own.” A complete outsider might have perceived the Kolleg as a kind of writing factory with a warehouse distributing raw materials – library books.

Fortunately, the life of private conversation at the Kolleg and the realities of the wider Berlin environment dispelled such visions, which after all remained only a dream among eighteenth-century mercantilists and commercial publishers who recommended intellectual factories. For me, the conversations with natural scientists about originality in their fields and the rethinking that was necessary to explicate to them what adequate explanations in social science consist of, were most out of the ordinary. In the Berlin community, the colorful chance encounters are those I may remember best, such as the taxi cab conversation with a T-shirted Marxist driver who on weekends took off with a motorcycle gang, “Friedrich’s Angels,” on political education projects. In Berlin, the informal culture of the street still does not stand below the tall, ever-growing monuments.

For my research, the mass of authors’ correspondence in publishers’ archives in Berlin and nearby comprised an embarrassment of riches. The sheer quantity of letter-writing to publishers in Germany, in comparison with that in other European countries near the close of the eighteenth century, seemed itself a clue, and pointed to the need for a comparative perspective in evaluating the German case. (The riddle of the efflorescence of this letter-writing is solvable if one remembers how the increasingly widespread practice in Germany of alienating the manuscript to the publisher for temporary use in a small press run, as well as the practice of turning in bits of manuscripts throughout the year to avoid a printers’ backlog on the eve of the annual book fairs, intensified ongoing communication between publisher and author.) And, of course, it is only against the background of development in other countries that the sacralization in the German lands of the personality and originality of the author, which nowadays we almost take for granted, emerges as novel and significant for its era. To gain the advantages of such a comparative perspective, therefore, I also assessed the publishing sources for England, a case that shared a similar commercial trajectory but that bequeathed a remarkably different set of ideas about the public use of print and the property rights of authors. Now I am writing up the results of my research into a book. The copies of historical documents from Berlin I take into my hands every day in San Diego remind me of the ability of print to bridge not only time, but also place.