



BERLIN, AGAIN, FOR THE FIRST TIME
KATHLEEN THELEN

Born in 1956 in South Dakota, USA. Education: M.A. (1981) and Ph.D. (1987), Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. Teaching: Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, 1994– present. Assistant Professor, Department of Politics, Princeton University, 1988–94. Assistant Professor, Department of Government, Oberlin College, 1987–88. Fields: Comparative Politics, West European Politics, Political Economy of the Advanced Industrial Democracies, Labor Politics. Publications: *How Institutions Evolve: The Political Economy of Skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*. Cambridge, 2004. “The Paradox of Globalization: Labor Relations in Germany and Beyond”, with Christa van Wijnbergen. *Comparative Political Studies* 36, 8 (2003). “The Political Economy of Business and Labor in the Developed Democracies.” In *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, edited by Ira Katznelson and Helen Milner. New York and Washington DC, 2002. “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999). – Address: Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, Scott Hall, 601 University Place, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.

I understand that it is not uncommon for Fellows to come to the Wissenschaftskolleg with plans to write one book but then to wind up writing a different one. My experience may be a bit different in that I came to Berlin and wound up writing a different book from the one that I had just finished – or so I had thought. I arrived in Berlin in the summer of 2002 with a manuscript fairly close to done, eager to clean it up, ship it off, and move on to the project that I had actually intended for my year here. The manuscript with which I arrived was a book that analyzed political-economic institutions in four countries – Germany, the

United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States. The core question concerned the origins of some striking and very consequential differences across these countries in the institutional arrangements governing vocational training in general and firm-based apprenticeship in particular.

The book was organized around an examination of the genesis of these differences, asking the question “why did these countries pursue such different trajectories in terms of skill formation?” This I had already mostly figured out, having traced the sources of these differences in contemporary political-economic institutions back to the nineteenth century, in particular to the character of the political settlement and coalitions among three key groups – employers in skill-intensive industries, traditional artisans, and early trade unions. I was able to show how the development of skill formation in the early industrial period interacted with the development of collective bargaining institutions and nascent labor unions and employer organizations in ways that set countries on different national trajectories from very early on. The analysis of the four cases thus focused mostly on the early industrial period and in each case ended in the 1920s, by which time the contours of the systems that ultimately emerged were already present and quite well defined.

I did not ship the book off, however. Instead, and partly as a consequence of conversations with the historians and biologists at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I became increasingly intrigued with the related but somewhat different question of how institutional arrangements such as this, that are forged in the rather distant past, actually *make it* to the present – not an idle question, given the massive transformation of the political and economic landscapes in all four of my countries during the twentieth century. Leaving the other three country-cases to the side, I set about to track the evolution of German training institutions over a longer time frame, from the 1870s to the present. This aspect of the study was organized around a somewhat different but, I thought and think, even more compelling puzzle. In the literature on contemporary labor politics, German’s vocational training system has traditionally been seen as a crucial institutional support for the country’s high-skill, high-wage, high-value-added manufacturing economy. As such, the vocational training system has been viewed as a key element in a larger institutional complex that actively supported a production regime organized around a kind of “diversified quality production” that reconciled Germany’s comparatively strong unions with strong performance in world manufacturing markets. However, as the historical analysis of the genesis of the system had shown, the core institutional innovation around which the German system came to be built (in 1897) was inspired by deeply reactionary motives and was mostly designed

to weaken (definitely not strengthen and incorporate) the then-surging organized labor movement.

The question I asked was “how did we get from there to here?”, and answering that question brought me deeper into a set of extremely fruitful conversations with colleagues at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year. The dominant perspective on institutional change in political science is based on a strong “punctuated equilibrium” model – derived from the work of evolutionary biologists and interpreted for politics by a former Wiko Fellow, Stephen Krasner – that draws a rather sharp line between long periods of institutional “stasis” periodically interrupted by historic “break points” (“critical junctures” in the lingo) marked by radical institutional innovation. However, in the case of German vocational training institutions, I found that institutional arrangements often turn out to be incredibly resilient in the face of huge exogenous shocks of the sort that we might well expect to disrupt previous patterns and prompt dramatic institutional innovation. Germany did not lack for “break points” in the twentieth century – having, after all, experienced several regime changes including into and out of fascism, defeat in two world wars, and foreign occupation. But contrary to models of institutional development that lead us to expect big changes in the context of big historic breaks, what was more striking was the significant continuities in the system through these through historically deeply “unsettled” times.

However, it was not as if nothing had changed; indeed, as indicated above, this is a system that over the past century has evolved from a set of innovations designed mostly to weaken labor into what is today considered a pillar of social partnership between labor and capital. The analytic task, therefore, was to make sense of the incredible stability of some elements of the system through a series of rather major historic breaks, while also, however, capturing the subtle incremental changes that, in political and especially power-distributional terms, had over time turned the system completely on its head. Taking a snapshot of the system in 1897 and 1997, I was confronted with a set of institutions that, in the words of another former Wiko Fellow, Peter Katzenstein (he was referring to his now-grown children), were “completely different ... and exactly the same”.

In making sense of these developments and in defining my own position with respect to existing models of change, I profited immensely from discussions with other Fellows at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year. My project benefited most directly from frequent and very fruitful conversations with resident economic historian Hartmut Berghoff, who helped me navigate the extremely chaotic politics of the Nazi period and who did much more than his fair share in reading and commenting on chapters of my manuscript. Beyond Hartmut

and beyond the Wissenschaftskolleg, I also profited from stimulating interactions with historians at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, including especially Gerald Feldman (visiting this year in a most fortuitous coincidence), Hartmut Kaelble, and Jürgen Kocka.

I also had extremely interesting exchanges with the biologists and zoologists in residence at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year, especially but not only Tecumseh Fitch, David Raubenheimer, Steve Simpson, and Georg Striedter. Straight away, I got an earful from Miguel Rodríguez-Gironés about how the original “punctuated equilibrium” model was received among biologists generally and this spurred me on to think more carefully about how the concept had come to be deployed in my own field. In general, the more informal the conversation, the more productive and fruitful it proved to me, though the more formal session that Raghavendra Gadagkar and I organized between social scientists and biologists did bring in its wake a whole new round of conversations in which, among other things, Tecumseh reminded me of the difference (long forgotten after my high school biology class) between mitosis and meiosis – and managed to relate this to the concepts I was developing to describe different modes of institutional reproduction and change in politics –, and in which Georg Striedter and I exchanged notes on unexpected parallels between concepts that he was employing in his book on brain evolution and that I was developing to explain the development of political-economic institutions.

As a result of all these stimulating exchanges, my book became bigger, certainly in one sense, and I hope in the other sense as well. Through all of this the Wiko library and its phenomenal staff offered invaluable assistance, for which I am deeply grateful. There seems to be no end to their resourcefulness, efficiency, and patience in the face of a relentless stream of requests for books and information. Kevin McAleer provided much-appreciated support and reassurance on translations of obscure passages from obscure German archival sources. Susi Laqueur, whose unending warmth radiated throughout the Wissenschaftskolleg this year, seemed as pleased as I when I sent the book for review in April, and it is with a real sense of satisfaction (and closure) that I now leave Berlin with the book complete and forthcoming at Cambridge University Press.

Other projects did not languish completely. Moving to Berlin put me smack in the middle of my field of research, and so I was able to gather many of the materials needed for this year’s intended project on the impact of globalization on contemporary labor politics, even if a good bit of the writing remains to be done. Work on this project was supported by a workshop that I convened and that the Wissenschaftskolleg hosted (in November) on

the impact of globalization on welfare state and labor relations institutions in Germany and Japan. This project also profited from numerous conversations, some around a seminar table, more around the lunch tables, with Fellows whose interests and work dealt with related issues and problems, including especially Walter Mattli, Cornelia Vismann, Steve Vertovec, Rainer Schmalz-Bruns and Grażyna Skąpska. I am grateful to Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Christine von Arnim, and the entire Wiko staff for their professionalism and warmth, and through the year I marveled at the understated leadership exercised by Joachim Nettelbeck and Dieter Grimm to the immense benefit of all of us Fellows.

For many Fellows, living in Berlin means being mostly disconnected (in a very good way) from their usual scholarly networks and obligations. That was true for me as well, but being in Germany also landed me in the middle of a different set of longstanding networks with which I was only too glad to be reconnected. One of the joys of this year was being able to work more closely with colleagues at the Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung in Cologne. Together with the institute's director (another former Fellow), Wolfgang Streeck, I convened a conference in December on institutional changes in contemporary welfare states, and since that time we have been working on a jointly edited volume that is also now nearly complete as my time in Berlin ends. I have also thoroughly enjoyed renewing contact this year with the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, another important institutional and intellectual home for me here in Germany, where I had spent the 1990/91 academic year as well as a couple of very productive and enjoyable summers since then.

And finally, on a more personal note, living in Grunewald with my family gave Berlin a whole new look for me. Sometimes with my heart in my throat, but mostly with great joy and pride I watched my children, Andy (13) and Amelia (9), find their way in a country that, after many years and many return visits, I have come to feel somehow at home in. I had tremendous fun reviving my rusty German with Eva von Kügelgen, and Gerd Riedel's technical assistance (and wry humor) pulled us all through numerous *Pannen* in good shape. The famous Wiko kitchen lived up to its culinary billing, and Christine Klöhn and Katarzyna Speder showered kindness both on us Fellows and on the hordes of children we brought with us. It has been a year that combined intellectual stimulation with collegiality and friendship in a most wonderful mix, and a year much enriched by the presence of those that the Fellows brought with them – Anke Berghoff, Balthasar Hausmann, and Leslie Simpson, among many others – not to mention all those kids who knitted together a most unique and memorable community at the Villa Walther.