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1. A Straight Path to Academia?

Ulrich, what kind of student were you?

When I started to study, I perceived the university as a place of freedom, of exploration and of reflection – as an opportunity to find out what the world is really like. I can imagine that some people opted for higher education research with the intention of challenging something they dislike or at least consider questionable. This was not my way of thinking – at least not at the beginning. In my first year at university I was glad that I could now experience the university climate. Certainly, some features looked old fashioned. But only after I had really embarked on higher education research did I began to like combining critical analysis and considering improvements of higher education. Retrospectively, I believe that I did not enjoy university life from the outset so much because I liked learning and intellectual activities, but rather because I perceived it as contrasting with school, which I had hated.

I was a curious and hyper-active child. When I was about three years old, I often asked my mother what to do, because I felt so bored. She suggested that I count up to one thousand or had other ideas to keep me busy. When my parents sent me to a kindergarten, I came home and said that I do not want to go there anymore, because everything was so boring. My parents allowed me to give it up. On the first day in elementary school the teacher took me to the fourth grade to show the pupils there that I was already better than them in arithmetic – this was the first dramatic pedagogic mistake that I witnessed.

Obviously, as a son of a Lutheran minister and a mother who had been enrolled at university before she married, I was expected to be the best pupil in the village elementary school. But my mother coached me when I was in fourth grade to pass the entrance examination to the *Gymnasium* because she was convinced that we children in the village school learned less than pupils living in the town. My mother advised me not to go to the *Humanistische Gymnasium*, i.e. the most prestigious type of secondary education with an emphasis on Latin and ancient Greek and less on English, French, mathematics and the natural sciences, because I was more practical-minded than my older brother. I do not know whether she really meant it, or whether it was a trick, but sibling rivalry moved me to opt for Latin and ancient Greek.

Were you a good pupil?

I was very good in math and science and just on a pass level in Latin and ancient Greek. I hated the majority of my teachers. In retrospect, I would say that the school philosophy was *per aspera ad astra*, but most teachers did their best to let us feel the *aspera*. Actually, only about a dozen out of roughly 70 pupils reached the *Abitur* after nine years, while others had to repeat grades or move to other less demanding school types. My older brother decided to provoke our

teachers politically – almost half of them had been at Nazi boarding schools during the war. In contrast, I occasionally asked my mother to send a message to the school that I was sick – I just needed moments to forget school. My mother permitted me to forget school most afternoons and often woke me up at 5 o'clock in the morning and coached me in Latin and ancient Greek in order not to fail the exams.

I could only look back at my school in a slightly more relaxed way two decades later when I read a book written by an educational historian about the history of the German *Gymnasium*. My school, which was located in the town of Minden in North Rhine-Westphalia, was taken in this book as the prototypical case of a German *Gymnasium*. Additionally, I bought a thick book published on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of my school – one of the first non-church schools in Germany established in the wake of the Lutheran *Reformation*: Among others, I found an article written by one of my former teachers which I considered quite good.

How was your path to university? Were you supported in your choices and decisions by your parents?

In retrospect, I can say that there was a cascade of crucial strategic decisions at the time of my transition from school to university. First, I decided that I was going to work enough during my degree to earn all my living and study expenses. Second, I refused to do mandatory military service and applied for recognition as a conscientious objector. Third, I opted for a field of study which is not clearly linked to any professional area. Fourth, I decided to go to Berlin – the lively city at the center of the Cold War. But there was not any clear strategic plan as regards studying.

Only later in life did I begin to ask myself whether these early key decisions had been influenced by my parents. When I shared my thoughts with them they discussed them with me in a friendly manner, and they did not seem to push me at all into certain directions. But the religious home environment might have had an impact: Whatever you do, strive for something meaningful. Don't cultivate your anger, but rather be ready to forgive. Do not be afraid of those in power. And possibly in contrast to my parents: Don't trust any single religion, philosophy, ideology or any single academic school.

We were six children at home and experienced quite a wild daily life. But my parents decided twice to travel only with me, and these two trips were unforgettable. When I was just ten years old, my parents took me with them to visit a Protestant minister in the Netherlands. This man had said earlier that he never wanted to see another German in his life, because he had experienced the enormous cruelties of the Nazis such as euthanasia of people with disabilities. Now I could see as a young boy how he and my parents cried together, prayed together and understood each other. As a child born during World War II, I certainly was affected subconsciously by the political circumstances of

that time. My earliest memory is an encounter just before the end of the war – I was only two and a half years old at that time. My mother was allowed to join wounded soldiers on a boat floating down the river Elbe towards the west, because she had tuberculosis. When Russian soldiers stopped the boat and began entering it, I smilingly ran to them and asked them to show me their guns; one of these soldiers presented an egg to me – a treasure at that time. I later heard that the soldiers were so happy with me that the women on the boat remained unharmed. Possibly that was a good start for me being interested in people from other countries and to avoid xenophobia.

When I was 16 years old, my parents took me to the home of one of the most powerful business tycoons in Germany, the Krupp CEO Berthold Beitz. He said to me that I, my brothers and my sister probably were not eligible for the German needs-based university scholarship, because my father's income might be too high for that but not high enough to fund all the costs which we were likely to incur as university students. As a consequence, my sister would possibly be persuaded not to study. In order to prevent that, he would offer me a fellowship from the Krupp company – under the condition that I work there for a few years after graduation. I decided not to accept this kind offer, but this led me to tell my parents that I would fund my university studies myself. In fact, I already started working during the vacations of my final school years and spent all the lecture-free period of my first year at university as a postman. I also funded the subsequent years of my degree myself. Working as a postman was a wonderful job. It did not drain my energy for studying, and I thought that I did not have to be worried if I dropped out of university – I could work the rest of my life as a postman.

Why did you select sociology as a field of study?

I thought that my life might be too boring if my studies at university were already geared closely to future professional work. I wanted to find a field of study which (a) has nothing to do with the subjects taught in school and (b) does not lead directly to any prescribed professional area. Whoever I asked for suggestions either named philosophy or did not know any solution. I went to the public employment office for advice. They grilled and tested me and finally predicted that I could have a brilliant career if I became a mathematician. When I asked about likely employment opportunities after graduation, I was told that I could be a scholar in the successful case or a school teacher in the not so successful case. So mathematics was 'out' for me. My older brother Klaus eventually gave me an introductory book on sociology, and he told me that this discipline was a good combination of my social interests and my mathematical strength.

Selecting my field of study also affected my choice of university and the city. Sociology was a small field in the early 1960s – only offered as a major at three universities in three big cities in the Federal Republic of Germany at

that time. Only during my period of study did sociology become a popular field and expanded dramatically. I opted for Berlin which I considered to be a fascinating city – both a lively place and the ‘capital of the Cold War’. As I already said, I belonged to the less than one percent of boys of my age who refused to go to the army and applied for recognition as a conscientious objector – this was in 1961, i.e. the year the Wall was built in Berlin. So when I arrived in Berlin, I joined pacifists who demonstrated against increasing armament during this time of cold war, and I experienced how the majority of Berliners hated us and shouted that we were traitors who should emigrate to the East.

Did university turn out to be the desired place of freedom?

I was surprised to note that studying sociology – like most fields in the humanities and social sciences at that time – was hardly regulated at all. I had not expected that, even though I had heard in advance from my parents and my older brother that I could not expect to get advice from anybody at the university about what to do. I went into an office at the Free University of Berlin in order to register as a student, and I received two pages of instructions on the examination regulations for sociology. They stated that I was only required to pass two exams – in empirical research methods and in statistics – prior to the final examination process. I should register for the final processes whenever I felt ready – at the earliest after three years. The final examinations would comprise writing a thesis over a long period and thereafter having half a dozen written and oral examinations – three in sociology and three in minors from various areas of humanities or social sciences. Upon successful completion, I would be awarded a *Diplom* in sociology. Thereafter, I regularly bought the *Vorlesungsverzeichnis*, i.e. the book published prior to each semester, which informed about all the courses offered and all the academic staff of the university. I later found out that the names of the final exams and university degrees in Germany varied between subjects, but all first degrees at German universities up to almost the end of the 20th century were considered to be equivalent to master degrees in Anglo-Saxon countries.

I found out as well that some students went to about ten courses each semester, but others only to very few courses. About half of the courses were lectures (*Vorlesungen*) without any exam and the other half seminars (*Seminare*) or exercises (*Übungen* or *Pro-Seminare*), where an oral presentation by the student was the most demanding basis for assessment, but written tests of other modes of assessment were customary as well. Even though one could start with the thesis and the subsequent exams at the beginning of the fourth year of study, most students did so one, two or more years later. It was also possible to go on up to a doctoral degree without this initial university degree.

In sum, there was more choice than I had thought, even though I had prior information from my family and even though I had travelled to three universities in my final year of school in order to smell the flavor of this cryptic organization university at that time. More highly structured study programs became customary only a few years after I had graduated.

During my first year at university, I only went to three or four courses each semester. As I had earlier not been very fond of reading books, I wanted to become a little more bookish. I bought about ten books by the reputed German sociologist Theodor Adorno – not easy to understand for a first-year student – and half a dozen books by the Irish writer Samuel Beckett. This combination might sound strange, but I came to the conclusion that Adorno's critical theory fits to the title of Beckett's most famous theater play: *Waiting for Godot!* I did not spend much time in cinemas, student clubs, bars, etc. But in one semester, two other students and I met weekly and spent the whole night playing cards. We wanted to find out whether the classes were interesting enough for us not to fall asleep, even though we had not slept the night before attending them.

Needless to say, I saw no problem in reserving the whole lecture-free period of my first year at university for my work as a postman in order to earn money. I even worked 200 hours more than necessary in order to purchase books freely rather than to rely on the university library.

How did you feel living in the metropolis Berlin – the endless streets of five-story buildings?

Certainly, Berlin (West) – the official name of the Western part of the divided city – was completely different from the village I came from as well as from the small town where I had attended the *Gymnasium*. In my final year at school, I had also visited a typical small 'university town' – Göttingen – and another big city – Hamburg – in order to see what student life was like there. But I do not regret the choice of Berlin.

I was glad that I could change my accommodation easily once or twice a year. I lived twice – like many students in Germany – in a single room let by a widow, for whom the whole flat had become too large and boring and who liked to have breakfast or occasionally a night cap with 'her' student. I also lived some time in a student dormitory, in a flat jointly rented by several students, in a small flat of my own, etc.

About once a month I visited East Berlin; it was possible to get a day-visa directly at the border. My aunt and her husband – both medical doctors – lived there and frequently invited me to go to museums, theater plays and concerts as well as to visit artists. As an expression of gratitude I often took the risk of smuggling strictly forbidden items – for example pharmaceutical products – to East Berlin. These short tours to East Berlin were not only combined with such

cultural events, but of course also with in-depth experience of the political restrictions in the East. I was proud to become a smart smuggler, but other events also left a lasting impression. For example, once I could listen when my aunt advised a top athlete to give up top-level sports because she had already started suffering from the side effects of doping. Most impressively: A Japanese professor had asked me to arrange an interview with a top-level representative of the forbidden political opposition against the East German regime. I agreed to such a dangerous arrangement. I found out the telephone number of Wolfgang Harich – the most prominent of the outspoken intellectuals who had spent many years in prison. He agreed to meet us, and he came together with his partner – the highly reputed theater actor Gisela May – to my aunt’s and uncle’s apartment. We had an unforgettable conversation. At the end, Wolfgang Harich expressed his gratitude to my wife Yoko for all the arrangements and for the Japanese food by reading a very ironic poem – written by the German writer Kurt Tucholsky in 1925 – about everything being so big in Europe and everything being so small in Japan.

During the second half of my six years of undergraduate studies, my life was affected by the newly emerging climate in Berlin as the center of student protest in Germany and even as one of the major centers of protest worldwide. This happened even though I was not involved at all in protests against questionable issues in academia.

And how was the teaching and learning environment in sociology?

Sociology was a relatively new academic discipline and a very new field of study, but the traditional style of the German university still prevailed in sociology in the 1960s. The ‘academic freedom’ of the professors was accompanied by the ‘freedom of learning’ for the students: few mandatory features, as already pointed out, hardly any advice, much time to be spent on the thesis and other final exams, and all assessments relevant for the overall final grade completely concentrated at the very end of studies.

In a field with a relatively small numbers of students – such as sociology – professors permitted even young students to attend advanced seminars from very early on. Thus, in my first year of studies I could experience at what a demanding level a professor and advanced-level students – some even enrolled for ten years or so up to the completion of the doctoral thesis – communicated with each other. This certainly discouraged some young students and led to high drop-out, but I also noted the optimal strategy of survival: One had to volunteer for a presentation in a specialized area, to study the respective key academic literature and thus to become a specialized expert soon. One had to present the written version of the envisaged presentation some weeks in advance, and the professor would assess it, most likely ask for improvements or even reject it completely in advance.