Ambivalence and the Politics of Knowledge:
The Struggle for Change in German Higher Education

Paper prepared for a SCANCOR conference on
"Universities and the Production of Knowledge"
Stanford University, April 25-26, 2003

Hans N. Weiler[1]
Stanford University

This paper argues
- that universities are profoundly ambivalent institutions,
- that this ambivalence explains a great deal about their behavior that would otherwise remain inexplicable,
- that one of the most striking manifestations of this ambivalence can be found in universities' attitudes towards change, and
- that this ambivalence has its roots in a fundamental tension in modern society about the university's purposes.

While I would maintain that this set of observations holds true for universities everywhere, albeit to different degrees and in different ways, I will illustrate it by looking at the process of change (and non-change) in German higher education over the past ten years.

1. Ambivalence

Arguing that universities are profoundly ambivalent institutions does not mean, of course, that we don't find ambivalence elsewhere; what it does mean, however, is that the realm of higher education is characterized, comparatively speaking, by an unusually and quite exceptionally pervasive, persistent and unmistakable quality of ambivalence. This ambivalence, I argue further, is not just something that inheres in the culture of academia, but is in turn a function of societal and political contradictions about the role of knowledge and the purposes of the university. Ambivalence begets ambivalence, as it were.

"Ambivalence" is used here in two different, but related and complementary meanings: contradiction and uncertainty. In the first sense, ambivalence is defined, by no less an authority than Merriam-Webster, as "contradictory …. attitudes … toward a particular person or object and often with one attitude inhibiting the expression of another"; Merriam-Webster cites, as an illustration, an

---

[1] weiler@stanford.edu; http://www.stanford.edu/people/weiler

observation by the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn about the Apache Indians'
"ambivalent attitude and behavior toward death". The second meaning speaks of
ambivalence as "uncertainty as to which approach, attitude or treatment to
follow". I will show how pertinent a description this is of universities; Merriam-
Webster uses instead an observation about the English film which, according to
film critic John McCarten, "because of a nervous ambivalence toward its subject
matter … fails to produce the chuckles". The English film and this paper may
have this in common.

However, and not surprisingly, nobody says it better and more concisely than
good old Montaigne: "*Mais nous sommes, je ne sais comment, doubles en nous-
mêmes, qui fait que ce que nous croyons, nous ne le croyons pas, et ne nous
pouvons défaire de ce que nous condamnons.*" (Montaigne, 1998, 461)[2]

The notion of ambivalence has a rich and varied tradition not only in psychology
and psychoanalysis (from Eugen Bleuler in 1910 [cited by Merton 1976, 3] to
Sigmund Freud and the work of Joost Meerloo [1954] all the way to
contemporary scholarship in feminist psychology about "Mothering and
Ambivalence [Hollway and Featherstone, 1997], but in literary scholarship and in
the social sciences as well.

As some examples of the many fascinating literary analyses of ambivalence
(some of which use psychological or psychoanalytical constructs), I should
perhaps mention the work of Susan Cole (1985) on rituals of mourning in the
literature of different cultures, Shanta Dutta on Hardy (2000), or Dagmar Ottmann
on Tieck (1990).

In what I find, against the background of my own work on the international politics
of knowledge (Weiler 2001b), a particularly interesting argument, Homi Bhaba
writes about the "ambivalence of cultural authority" (1994, 34) in the postcolonial
world and, specifically, about "the ambivalence of colonial discourse" in which
"two attitudes towards external reality persist; one takes reality into consideration
while the other disavows it and replaces it by a product of desire that repeats, re-
articulates 'reality' as mimicry." (ibid., 91)

In the social sciences, Marx, Durkheim and, indeed, Montaigne, have pioneered
the concept of ambivalence, if not the term, but one of the particularly influential
contributions to the study of ambivalence remains that of Robert Merton, whose
work on the ambivalence of professions (1976, Part 1, 3-105) is particularly
germane to what I am talking about here, and will re-appear in a different scene
of this little play. It has been followed, more or less congenially, by a host of other
scholars, including Gary Thom (1983) and Andrew Weigert (1991), but still
remains a major milestone.

---

[2] But we are, I know not how, of two minds in ourselves, which is why what we believe we do not
believe, and cannot disengage ourselves from what we condemn.

I find in this context the work of Zygmunt Bauman on "modernity and ambivalence" (1991) particularly interesting in the way it casts the struggle of "exterminating ambivalence" as a "typically modern practice, the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life" (7), only to conclude that, in the wake of modernity, we have learned to "be living at peace with ambivalence" (15). "Once declared to be a mortal danger to all social and political order, ambivalence is not an 'enemy at the gate' any more. On the contrary: like everything else, it has been made into one of the stage props in the play called postmodernity" (279; see also Smart 1999).

This line of argument reminds me, incidentally, of the early Dahrendorf, who knew nothing about postmodernity and wouldn't have cared about it if he did, but who makes the point in his classic on "Society and Democracy in Germany" (1965) that German society stands out – particularly in comparison with Anglo-Saxon societies – in the degree to which it abhors ambivalence and uncertainty, and always longs for definitive and authoritative solutions that do away with ambivalence, preferably once and for all. He substantiates his point with an impressive and quite persuasive analysis of different social institutions – from the family to the courts, and from the trade union movement to politics proper – and defines this uneasy relationship to ambivalence as the true "German question".

Giorgio Agamben has, in his discussion of the sacred, some serious difficulties with the notion of ambivalence for which, as for so much else, he blames both Freud and the birth of anthropology, and which he claims muddies up the pure waters of an unambiguous meaning of the sacred. I cannot quite reconcile this stance with the seemingly rather ambivalent way he deals with the notion of "Forma di Vita", where I have the impression that, for all his militating against the notion of ambivalence, he might not be entirely beyond making use of the intellectual expedient of ambivalence. That would, of course, in my line of reasoning, prove him to be a true academic. I do, however, wholeheartedly resonate to Agamben's observation that "there is a moment in the life of concepts when they lose their immediate intelligibility and can then, like all empty terms, be overburdened with contradictory meanings" (1998, 80). That, too, is part of the story of ambivalence, and the history of the social sciences is an endless reservoir of examples.

2. Ambivalence and higher education

My argument about the ambivalent quality of universities should be easy enough to substantiate and has a rather decent pedigree in the literature (see, among many others, Cohen and March 1986)[3]. Universities could almost be defined by their own ambivalences, i.e., by their own "contradictory attitudes" towards a wide variety of objects: towards knowledge, society, change, authority, democracy,

---

[3] In another realm of educational policy analysis, I have made use of the notion of ambivalence in connection with the issue of centralization and decentralization (Weiler 1993).

3

and – most consequential of all – towards themselves. From whatever angle one looks at universities, there seems to be pervasive evidence of ambivalence – with the one notable exception of a rather unambivalent resistance to outside judgments about the university's ambivalence.

There is ambivalence
- about the relative priority of teaching and research,
- about the proper relationship between the university and the state, or between the university and business,
- about what and whom to include and to exclude from the pursuits of the university,
- about how centralized or decentralized the structures of decision-making should be,
- about how democratic or how authoritarian a university should be run,
- about the relative importance of the autonomy of the individual scholar and the autonomy of the institution,
- about how national or international an institution the university should be,
- about how regulated or deregulated the life of the university and its members should be,
- about the importance or obsolescence of disciplines,
- about the relative virtues of the status quo and of change, or of freedom and order –

to mention just a few.

It would be instructive to imagine for a moment a similar degree of ambivalence in any other social institution. Imagine courts of law were similarly ambivalent about what does and does not constitute admissible evidence. Imagine families were as ambivalent about how to take care of their children's health. Imagine a soccer game that was equally ambivalent about what should cause a penalty or how a goal is defined. Imagine even remotely similar degrees of ambivalence in traffic, in public transportation, in an orchestra, or in space travel – and it becomes clear how exceptionally ambivalent an institution the university is, and how important it is to appreciate this ambivalence if one really wants to understand how and why the university behaves as it does.

I will, in this paper, take a closer look at some of these instances of ambivalence, and use these examples as stepping stones to the further question of why this might be so. I will draw my examples primarily from the German variant of universities, partly because I have looked at German universities most closely in recent years, from both the inside and the outside (Weiler 1996, 1998a, 2001a, 2001c), and partly because I have – from looking at a number of other university systems – reason to believe that German higher education is both a reasonably representative and a particularly instructive variant of the general pattern.

I should emphasize that I am not addressing in this paper the question of whether or not, and on what grounds, ambivalence may be good or bad,

functional or dysfunctional for institutions of higher education. This includes resisting the temptation to suggest that ambivalence about its own goals and purposes can be a wonderful mechanism of defense for an institution such as a university that tries to avoid accountability for its results and accomplishments: as long as there is ambivalence about exactly what an institution is supposed to accomplish, it makes little sense to hold it accountable for whether or not it has achieved its goals.

I have already pointed out that there is a respectable tradition in the social sciences of dealing with ambivalence (or, to use Jim March's preferred term, ambiguity) as a characteristic of social organizations – a tradition that, in Robert Merton's words, is based on the "premise that the structure of social roles consists of arrangements of norms and counter norms which have evolved to provide the flexibility of normatively acceptable behavior required to deal with changing states of a social relation" (1976, 31). Not only Merton can think of plenty of situations in higher education that require that kind of flexibility; I can as well.

In fact, Merton himself is quick to make the connection to academia when he applies this notion of "potentially conflicting pairs of norms" to scientists and scientific institutions, and comes up with a whole batch of such conflicting pairs of norms. Let me highlight just a few samples:

Norm: The scientist should make every effort to know the work of predecessors and contemporaries in his field.
*BUT: Too much reading and erudition will only stultify creative work (*citing as one of his examples what Schopenhauer considered a major "sin against the Holy Ghost", namely, " to put away one's original thoughts in order to take up a book."*) (33)*

or

Norm: Scientific knowledge is universal, belonging to no nation.
BUT: Each scientific discovery does honor to the nation that fostered it. (34)

or

The scientist should recognize the prime obligation to train up new generations of scientists.
*BUT: He must not allow teaching to preempt his energies at the expense of advancing knowledge. (*He adds: Of course, this reads just as persuasively in reverse.*) (34)*

or

Norm: Young scientists can have no happier condition than being apprenticed to a master of the scientific art.
*BUT: They must become their own men, questing for autonomy and not content to remain in the shadow of great men (*some of the examples cited include Kepler and Tycho Brahe, Jung and Adler vs. Freud, etc.*) (34)[4]*

Leaving Robert Merton aside, all of us who have tried to make sense of the institution of the American university presidency owe a great debt to Michael Cohen and Jim March for their classic study on "Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President" (1986). Who with some experience in American higher education would not resonate to the following observation: "The college president has more potential for moving the college than most people, probably more potential than any one other person. Nevertheless, presidents discover that they have less power than is believed, that their power to accomplish things depends heavily on what they want to accomplish, that the use of formal authority is limited by other formal authority, that the acceptance of authority is not automatic, that the necessary details of organizational life confuse power (which is somewhat different from diffusing it), and *that their colleagues seem to delight in complaining simultaneously about presidential weakness and presidential willfulness.*" (1986, 197-198, emphasis supplied) Ambivalence, indeed, and I can vouch for the fact that this describes very well not just the American college presidency, but the German university presidency as well.

3. Ambivalence and the German university

It cannot reasonably be expected of an American audience to understand a great deal about the peculiarities of German higher education – or, more precisely, about how the German system of higher education differs from a remarkably peculiar American "system" of higher education.

Foregoing a lengthy descriptive essay, let me highlight the following four points[5]:

1. It is much more of a "system" than anybody would ever dream of claiming American higher education to be, where the individual institution (even within state-wide systems like California's) has much more of an identity of its own than you would traditionally find at a German university.
2. It is essentially a public system, again much more so than public "systems" of higher education in the States, with the vast majority of funds being provided straight from government budgets, and with fairly

---

[4] Since I don't read Robert Merton all the time, even though I should, I have only come across this particular list recently, *after* I wrote a paper reflecting on the experience of my six years as head of an institution of higher education in Germany. In this paper, I drew up a similar list of contradictions (or ambivalences) in the life of a university, and it is absolutely uncanny how remarkably these two lists resemble one another (see Weiler 2001c).
[5] See also Daxner 1999; Enders et al. 2002; Fallon 1980; Mittelstraß 1994; Rothfuß 1997; Teichler et al. 1998; Weiler 1998a, 2001a.

encompassing control over the use of those funds by the state bureaucracy. There are a few private institutions, all small and most of them highly specialized in business administration, computer science and other easily marketable subjects; their number is growing, but they remain a marginal phenomenon. Also, except for these private institutions, public higher education is entirely tuition free.

3. It's a federal system where the 15 states have largely exclusive jurisdiction over higher education, with some considerable participation by the federal government through such channels as supporting university investments, research funding, and student support (in this respect, there are some parallels to the US).

4. German reunification, which seemed to offer a unique opportunity for substantially redesigning key social institutions, such as the university, did in fact, and to the bewilderment of many observers, *not* produce any major change in German higher education. However, just when that historic opportunity appeared to have been missed, a significant movement towards university reform got underway and has, over the past five or six years, generated a great deal of change (Müller-Böling 2000; Stifterverband 2002; Weiler 2001c, forthcoming).

But back to the question of ambivalence. I had earlier indicated that there are a good many things about which universities are ambivalent. For this case study of German higher education, I will concentrate on the following five:

1. Ambivalence about autonomy
2. Ambivalence about change
3. Ambivalence about inclusion and exclusion
4. Ambivalence about universities as national or international institutions
5. Ambivalence about the role of students

3.1 Ambivalence about autonomy

Universities have traditionally and persistently been adamant about the importance of their being autonomous, typically meaning the rights of the individual scholar to be free of outside interference in his or her performance of academic duties in teaching and research.

In a remarkable accomplishment of living with contradiction, the university (at least in its prevailing European incarnation) has for an extended part of its history been able to reconcile this firm insistence on autonomy with the persistence of an institutional relationship between the university and the state that was both utterly non-autonomous and characterized by more or less total dependence on both the regulatory and providential tutelage of the state over the university – with the one notable exception, of course, of not directly interfering with the individual professor's "autonomy".

This traditional contradiction is very much at the heart of the kind of ambivalence in the contemporary German university that I am interested in. For reasons which I have treated elsewhere (Weiler 1999, 2000) there has been, over the last ten years or so, a significant political move in the direction of a more autonomous relationship between state and university, and in the direction of the conception of a university, by now enshrined in the higher education laws of several German states, that possesses a rather high degree of institutional autonomy and self-determination, in some instances all the way to significant control over budgetary and personnel matters.

One of the main arguments of the advocates for this degree of institutional autonomy (such as Müller-Böling 2000; Daxner 1999) has been the need for the university to mobilize its own resources more effectively behind a set of institutional goals and priorities that respond more adequately to the society's need for knowledge and training; the notion of more sharply defined "institutional profiles" has loomed large in these debates.

This kind of strategy is obviously on a collision course with the staunch advocacy of professorial autonomy in the traditional sense. What, under the old regime, the authority of the state had no right to interfere with – namely the rights and privileges of the individual professor – clearly is at least as much in jeopardy by "the university's" efforts to marshal synergies and mobilize its own resources by imposing a certain degree of direction and purposiveness on the aggregate of its intellectual resources (see Enders 1998, 59 and *passim*; cf. Altbach 1996).

The ambivalence that results from this development is obvious: "autonomy", long a unanimous and unambiguous battle cry for professorial rights, has suddenly become a two-sided sword and a highly ambivalent political agenda. Institutional autonomy competes with individual autonomy. Two different outcomes – the independence of the university from the state's bureaucratic tutelage and the freedom of a professor's research and teaching – are competing with one another in a political setting in which one is perceived to be inimical to the other: More autonomy from the state is seen (quite correctly) as giving the university's leadership more of a mandate to marshal the institution's resources behind the university's mission and thus to encroach somewhat upon the professors' unlimited right to his or her own academic agenda. At the same time, the unfettered exercise of the individual faculty member's autonomy is seen as undermining the very degrees of freedom that the university has gained in the battle for greater autonomy from the state.

The somewhat paradoxical outcome of all of this is a rather ambivalent attitude on the part of significant parts of the professoriate towards the notion of greater university autonomy from the state, and even a tendency to rather retain the considerable, but more distant and not very activist authority of the state as the lesser evil compared to the rather close and possibly quite enterprising authority

of a university president or dean to whom the state has delegated considerable decision making authority.

3.2 Ambivalence about change

In a slightly different sense, the situation that I have just described can also be cast as a profound ambivalence in the contemporary German university towards change. There is, on the one hand, a diffuse general belief in the intellectual inevitability and, indeed, desirability of change as a result of the ongoing process of inquiry and expanding knowledge. At a considerable level of abstraction, there appears to be a consensus that new knowledge is likely to generate new reality, that discovery, invention and understanding are bound to alter human lives and the conditions under which human beings interact with one another and with their physical and social environment.

At the same time, however, universities are notable for their resistance to change (or, as Mittelstraß puts it, their "structural inability to change" ["*Reformunfähigkeit*"], 1994, 17), particularly when their own institutional arrangements and conditions of work are concerned. Some of this resistance has to do with fear of the unknown, some with concern over losing acquired rights and privileges in the process of structural change (a situation for which the German language has coined the inimitable and untranslatable term "Besitzstandswahrung"), but there is more to it than that.

I can best explain what I mean here by the anecdotal, but patently representative, evidence of my experience during the 1990s at the Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder)[6]. There is much more of a story to be told here (see Weiler 1996, 1998b, 2001c), but the most interesting part does have to do with our efforts to move away from some of the hallow traditions in German higher education. One of the accounts of my experience that is now getting published is entitled: "How universities change, and why they (often) don't" (Weiler, forthcoming). This is not altogether fair inasmuch as we did manage to do quite a few things differently from how they were done before, but by all accounts, and given that this was a brand-new university, we should have been able to move much, much further.

In part, this is the story of the kinds of arguments that I have already mentioned: the concern on the part of the faculty over losing the prerogatives that one had

---

[6] Viadrina European University - a new, post-unification university about 60 miles east of Berlin, right on the Polish-German border and set up with a special mandate for both interdisciplinary and international scholarship, the latter particularly with a view to cooperation with Poland and the rest of Central Europe. As a new university, established at a time of rather momentous social and political change in that part of the world, the Viadrina was meant by its founding parents to be a "reform university", and in fact one of the reasons why I took the job as its first *Rektor*, or president, was the opportunity to become involved with what I thought could become one of the all-too-rare instances of reform in higher education.

just so arduously acquired, or simply apprehension over entering uncharted territory and departing from time-honored ways in which, for example, lawyers had always been trained, etc. One of the mantras with which I was confronted in the university senate time and again was "but this is the way we have always done it in ….." – you could fill in Cologne, Heidelberg, or Berlin.

But there was and is a more serious kind of resistance to change that, on the part of some of its advocates, reflected a genuine ambivalence between the value of change and innovation and the value of professional legitimacy. The argument goes roughly like this. It's a good idea to innovate and to change an institution, but in doing that, we run the risk of moving our university out of the mainstream of respectable academia, and put not only the reputation of our faculty, but also the chances of our students and graduates in jeopardy.

This is both a serious and a very instructive kind of ambivalence. It is, for those familiar with the history of German higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, forever associated with the fate of the University of Bremen which, as the prize it had to pay for rather boldly moving ahead into new directions of academic training (including the training of lawyers), was ostracized and marginalized in the academic world in ways that have even survived some of the innovations that triggered it.

Without a doubt, this is an awkward choice for a university to make, especially a new and unknown one. Does one seize on the chance of a new beginning, and risk not being taken seriously in the community of established and reputable universities? Does one try to distinguish oneself by being different, or by being particularly faithful to the existing institutional precedents, and what are the institutional and professional costs of either strategy? It is not surprising that, in situations like this, universities tend to "play it safe" and sacrifice change on the altar of academic respectability.

3.3 Ambivalence about inclusion and exclusion

A third kind of ambivalence in higher education has to with the issue of inclusion and exclusion. This is an issue that tends to be more acutely perceived at American universities, but has begun to haunt the German university as well as it undergoes a process of further and more competition-based differentiation[7].

---

[7] I had an interesting experience recently with a bi-national seminar of American and German specialists in higher education, which was to deal with the issue of "democratization in higher education" and had given the participants relatively free reign in how to define that issue for purposes of their own contribution to the seminar. The interesting thing was that almost all of the American participants defined the issue of democratization in terms of access to higher education, while almost all of the German participants defined it in terms of university governance and structure. There clearly is, at least at this point in history, a considerably greater preoccupation in the US than in Germany with questions of equity, which also reflects, of course, the much more differentiated nature of the US system of higher education. I predict that this is

Albeit to a different degree, there is by now in both systems of higher education a basic tension between the conflicting goals of openness and selectivity, of giving as many people as possible a chance vs. selecting the ones for whom academic success can most safely be predicted (Rothfuß 1997, 155-221). At least some of the current preoccupation in Germany with the introduction of consecutive degree programs of the BA/MA kind (Wissenschaftsrat 2000) reflects this tension and attempts to solve it, just as at least some of the American debate about affirmative action (Bowen and Bok 1998) is rooted in this kind of ambivalence.

There is, however, yet another kind of ambivalence in terms of inclusion or exclusion, and that pertains to the inclusion or exclusion of certain kinds of knowledge from the purview of the university. One of the more conspicuous manifestations of this issue were the curricular warfares over the shape and content of the undergraduate curriculum at many of the United States' universities and colleges in the 1980s (Berman 1992; Carnochan 1993). On the surface of these conflicts, the question was whether writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Langston Hughes or Tutuola belonged on the reading list of undergraduates alongside Dickens, Dante and Diderot.

That, however, is only the proverbial tip of a much larger iceberg. The real issue was, and continues to be, the much more fundamental question of the legitimacy of different kinds and traditions of knowledge, and of the grounds on which such legitimacy is established and claimed. The future of interdisciplinary programs is as much part of that issue as the debate about the "culturality" of knowledge (Böhme and Scherpe 1996, 7-24; Geertz 1983), the questions raised by feminist epistemology (Harding 1986), the growing debate about the "governance of science" (Fuller 2000), or the notion of a relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power (Weiler 2001b). In that more fundamental sense, the debate is far from over and is one of the more fundamental sources for the ambivalence of the contemporary university.

3.4 Ambivalence about universities as national or international institutions

It is remarkable how ardently scholars all over will profess the internationality and universality of scholarship, and how intensely at the same time universities as institutions are beholden in so many ways to national frames of reference. Here lies another source of ambivalence that makes it difficult for universities to come to terms with what they are, especially at a time when the relevance of national frames of reference is increasingly subject to questions (Teichler et al. 1998, 79-96; Wächter 1999).

---

going to change, and that there will be once again much more concern with access in German higher education as soon as Germany will have, as now seems inevitable, both tuition fees and more university control over student admissions.

It is, of course, true that knowledge and scholarship transcend national boundaries; but it is equally true that, especially where its teaching and training function is concerned, a university's mission (and in particular a German university's mission) is circumscribed in major ways by nationally defined standards, rules and regulations – from the training of lawyers to the training of teachers and from the entrance requirements for civil service positions to the equilibration between certain educational achievements and public salary scales. When it comes to defining desirable or legitimate outcomes of a university education, the nation state is alive and well, and has developed the recognition of such outcomes in career and income terms into a veritable art form[8].

The ambivalence regarding national and international frames of reference in higher education is exacerbated, however, by the increasingly transnational quality of the politics of knowledge. This refers not only to the general transnational quality of the production, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge, but more specifically to the growing international traffic of ideas and prescriptions about what universities are, and ought to be. There have been historical antecedents for this kind of traffic, as in the role that German university concepts have played in the United States in the 19th century (Fallon 1980), but nothing compares to the pervasiveness with which models of higher education have started to travel around the world in the last quarter of the 20th century. This latter traffic has been remarkably one-way in that it has essentially promulgated – with more or less success – certain traits of U.S. higher education in other parts of the world: Privatizing higher education, achieving more differentiated systems, creating entrepreneurial universities, fostering competition both within and between institutions – all of these and others have served as maxims for the reform discourse in many countries, with an implicit or often explicit reference to the model nature of American higher education (Clark 1998; Muller 1996; Weiler 1998c, 2002).

This development has some paradoxical elements. First, as national systems of higher education go, the U.S. "system" is probably the most idiosyncratic and least "comparable" system in today's world; few other systems have an even remotely similar degree of differentiation and selectivity, and the existence of a prestigious private sector in higher education is almost unique in the world.

---

[8] I used to tell in this connection the (true) story of the process of hiring two new faculty members at Frankfurt (Oder) – after all, at a university with a special international mandate. One of the two professors came from the University of Munich and one from the University of Warsaw. For an extended transitional period, German civil service regulations permit newly appointed professors to claim the reimbursement of travel expenses to visit their families as long as they still live in their old location ("Familienheimfahrten" is the official bureaucratic term for it.). Thus, the professor from Munich was regularly paid the airfare for going home to Munich over the weekend. For faculty whose families reside abroad, however, the official rules specify that travel can only be reimbursed to the nearest German border station. For our colleague from Warsaw, inasmuch as Frankfurt (Oder) is already on the German-Polish border, this meant that his reimbursement was limited to the taxi ride from the university to the railway station in Frankfurt (Oder) – but only, of course, if he could prove that he had unusually heavy books and papers to carry, because otherwise he was only entitled to the cost public transportation.

Second, and the constant invocation of American models for higher education reform elsewhere notwithstanding, the U.S. system stands out internationally as being remarkably devoid of any significant system-wide reform in recent times[9], especially when compared to the rather sweeping winds of change that have transformed, or are in the process of transforming, higher education in such countries as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria, or Germany.

Partly as a result of these paradoxes, and partly as a reflection of a more diffuse distrust of American precepts, the invocation of U.S. models in the higher education reform discourse outside of the U.S. has typically engendered a considerable, and mounting, degree of controversy. It would be worth a separate paper to trace this controversy in the German case, from its fairly innocuous beginnings in meetings of German and American university administrators (Müller-Böling 1998 to more recent indictments of the "infatuation with America" ("Amerikaseligkeit"[10]) in the reform discourse – notably well before the onset of the Iraq conflict.

3.5 Ambivalence about the role of students

In my own experience, students – whether at Stanford or at Frankfurt/Oder – have certainly been the most exciting part of spending a lifetime at universities – almost always more exciting than professors. As institutions, however, universities are far more ambivalent about students. They proclaim their unceasing dedication to the welfare and enlightenment of their students, but also moan about the students' constant claims on the institution's attention and resources. They, the universities, keep professing the importance of teaching as a criterion of good academic citizenship, and yet – again at Stanford as well as at Frankfurt (Oder) – recruit, promote, and reward their faculty primarily on the basis of their research productivity.

I am neither terribly fond of, nor particularly knowledgeable about, psychoanalytic theory, but I can't help being struck by the obvious parallel between this kind of institutional behavior and what people like Roszika Parker (1996, 1997) have had to say about "maternal ambivalence", where "loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side" (1997, 17). [Just to be on the safe side, let me hasten to add that there is, as Stephen Frosh shows, such a thing as *paternal* ambivalence as well; Frosh speaks of

> the specific complexity of the ambivalence surrounding fathering: to father a child requires something other than the traditional boundary-setting and prohibitive stance; but to reach out in a loving way requires a shift of

---

[9] Notwithstanding such developments as the groundswell of curricular innovations that Martha Nussbaum (1997) reviews.

[10] In the words of one of the most prominent (and thoughtful) critics of this kind of infatuation, the former state secretary of higher education for the state of Saxony, Hans Joachim Meyer.

masculine consciousness, involving not just some more gentleness but a whole gamut of alterations in relations of dependency, intimacy, vulnerability and trust. On the whole, the more fragile masculinity becomes, the more desperately men cling to its vestiges, doing the opposite of what fathering requires. (1997, 50-51)]

I do not want to carry the psychoanalysis of the university too far in the direction of parental ambivalence, but some of the parallels are, indeed, striking.

Even without recourse to psychoanalysis, however, students remain an important object and source of ambivalence in higher education. Two current developments in German higher education highlight the point. In the debate about the introduction of consecutive degree programs along the BA/MA model, which is primarily geared to allow for a substantive revision and improvement of the content of study and thus to upgrade the importance of teaching in the university, there is a striking incidence of the view, especially among faculty, that this reform will allow for the "sorting out" of large numbers of less qualified students after a first degree, and for concentrating on the worthy few that make it into a second-level (MA) degree program. Once again, there is substantial contradiction between the goals of a new policy and the way it is perceived and interpreted by a key constituency.

A similar tension surrounds the current debate on the right of universities to select their own students. This claim is now being pursued vigorously by several German state governments and has just a few weeks ago found a preliminary and as yet somewhat half-way endorsement in the Permanent Conference of Ministers of Education (KMK), the consultative body charged with coordinating state policies at the federal level. If implemented, which is likely, the new procedure would mark the beginning of the end of a centralized system of allocating admissions solely on the basis of a student's final high school grade point average. It can safely be predicted that a more important role of the universities in the selection of their own students will in time lead to a more differentiated system of higher education with a much closer match between a student's abilities and interests and the university's special capabilities and "profile".

Here again, however, a policy that seems to serve the best interests of the universities is greeted with considerable ambivalence. While the advantages of such a selection system are duly acknowledged, both the amount of work involved in making it work and the resulting differentiation of a system that still clings to the time-honored myth of equal quality across all universities cause rather serious apprehensions.

4. Whence ambivalence?

I have picked these from a much wider range of possible examples in order to illustrate the rather pervasive element of ambivalence that seems to characterize the cultural habitat of academia in general, and in Germany, in particular. There are other examples, such as the ambivalence about the meaning of institutional democracy in higher education, or about whether or not the university should involve itself in social issues, or the ambivalence over centralization and decentralization in academic governance. All of these, taken together, do indeed convey the image of an institution that is profoundly at odds with itself.

The question is: why would this be so?

My answer to this question has to do with the last part of the argument that I stated at the outset of this paper. I would argue that the ambivalence of universities is a fairly accurate reflection of the fact that both the state and society have profoundly ambivalent orientations towards higher education. The major dimension of this ambivalence has to do with the kinds of purposes that state and society consider appropriate for the university; this dimension varies – or rather: oscillates – between reaffirming the independence of the university in its pursuit of knowledge and invoking the right of society to have the university contribute to the solution of a society's problems. I think this is true in the U.S. as well as in Germany and other countries, except that in the U.S. the state, as in everything else, plays much less of a role in articulating norms regarding the purposes of higher education – notable exceptions, such as affirmative action, notwithstanding.

Faced with this contextual ambivalence about its own purposes, the universities themselves see no particular reason to overcome what for them seems to be a natural – or at least very comfortable – tendency towards an academic and cognitive culture that is in its turn profoundly ambivalent about its own identity and purpose. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the university has developed into the kind of profoundly ambivalent institution that I have tried to describe.

The ambivalence of society towards its universities is something that figured already in Robert Merton's concerns (1976, 32ff.). It has to do with the tension between society's deeply rooted respect for scholarship and scholars, on the one hand, and a similarly deep-seated doubt whether they really deserve the perks, the freedoms and the resources they receive.

There is, however, a more subtle and more recent kind of ambivalence in the society's perception of its universities, and that has to do with different conceptions of knowledge and its utility. Here there reigns, on the one hand, the time-honored notion of the academy as the place where knowledge is being pursued for its own sake. On the other hand, there prevails – in its crassest form – what has come to be known as the notion of shareholder value. In this kind of ambivalent perspective, scholars are at once seen as independent high priests of

knowledge, or as public servants of whom certain outcomes are expected. In Germany, one would still find a sizeable accumulation of views on either side of this continuum, even though the scale seems to have recently tipped in favor of the shareholder value side. The popular, or at least the external, conception of American higher education is that it has been in the hands of the shareholder value concept all along, much as that conception needs to be differentiated. The same Stanford that has established an extraordinarily tight symbiotic relationship with the fortunes (and misfortunes) of Silicon Valley (Lee et al. 2000; Weiler 2003) stands out internationally as a center of excellence in the humanities.

As far as the state is concerned, its ambivalence toward universities is even more pronounced and, in some instances, quite bizarre. In the German case and in some other European countries, the state constantly vacillates between regulation and deregulation, between control and autonomy, between the high-risk/high-gain dynamic of reform and the relatively comfortable and safe maintenance of the status quo.

But beyond that, there is a kind of ambivalence that seems to border on downright duplicity. Here I am coming back to German variant of the issue of autonomy, where I had already pointed out a fairly conspicuous movement in the direction of letting universities handle their own affairs more independently of the state. That, ostensibly, would go for the management of financial resources as well, and there is talk and quite a bit of action about block grant budgets – "Globalhaushalte" – in which universities would receive a certain amount of money to do with as they see fit. That sounds, at first sight, like a fairly reasonable implementation of the principle of autonomy. Except for one thing: in every case of globalizing university budgets that I know about, universities lose a sizeable chunk of the money they had before. The question is whether there is really a political concept of greater institutional autonomy at work – or just a skilful minister of finance having found another way of balancing a precariously imbalanced budget? The correct answer is probably, both of the above, and amounts to yet another indication of the profound ambivalence with which the state views universities (Weiler 2000).

Let me add one other thought to this reflection on the relationship between the state and universities, hopefully without becoming an accessory to yet another conspiracy theory. For beyond the question of specific policies like block grant budgets, there is something quite delicate about this relationship. That delicacy has to do with what I see as, and have written about, a relationship of reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power (Weiler 2001b). In this relationship, knowledge and power legitimate each other such that knowledge becomes an important source of legitimacy for a given order of political authority (look at the role of scholarly expertise in establishing the credibility of government policies) while, at the same time, an important part of the legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge derives from political decisions about qualifications for professional employment, standards of public contracting, and the acceptance of expertise. If

this is so, it imposes such a delicate burden on the relationship between state and universities that it might well account for the ambivalence of the relationship: While the state depends on the university at least in part for generating and sustaining the legitimacy of its authority, the university in its turn depends on the state at least in part for the legitimation of its knowledge product.

Thus, for a whole variety of reasons, both society and the state are rather ambivalent in their relationship to, and their conception of the purposes of, the university. Is it at all surprising, then, that universities have developed ambivalence into an art form of their own, and that universities define themselves in ways that maximize the strategic utility of ambivalence for the pursuit of their own goals?

It works very nicely: If universities do not like the troubles and frustrations of social involvement, they insist that their primary task is the disinterested search for truth. If, on the other hand and under different circumstances, the search for truth seems too ascetic and unrewarding, the involvement in the social issue *du jour* may provide a welcome distraction.

If lucrative contracts or grants from outside the university beckon, it is useful to remind everybody that the state has to leave the university with enough discretion to avail itself of such opportunities. If, at less opulent times, the effort to raise outside resources under the competitive conditions of the open funding market appears to be too much work, the role of the state as the legitimate provider of the university's wherewithal is duly emphasized.

Nor can the universities necessarily be blamed for making use of these degrees of freedom that their environment so invitingly grants them. They act, in some sense, perfectly rational. If state and society had similarly ambivalent attitudes about civil aviation or public utilities (and, as we know, sometimes they have), airlines and utility companies would probably do the same, or at least try.

Is this a bad situation or a good situation, or does it matter? Is what Stephen Frosh says about the relationship of fathers to their children - "Certainty is almost always destructive; ambivalence has many positive attributes." (1997, 52) – true for universities as well? Is, in a situation where markets become more important than state patronage, ambivalence no longer "the enemy at the gate", as Zygmunt Baumann claims?

The answer, unfortunately, is far from clear.

At its best, ambivalence in academia provides the very space for alternative answers without which the process of inquiry would remain a rather sterile affair.

At its worst, ambivalence provides a comfortable excuse to avoid asking the hard questions and finding the hard answers.

There is, alas, ambivalence even in analyzing ambivalence.

References

Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998

Philip G. Altbach (ed.), The International Academic Profession: Portraits of Fourteen Countries. Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996

Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991

Paul Berman (ed.), Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses. New York: Laurel, 1992

Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994

Hartmut Böhme und Klaus Scherpe (eds.), Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften - Positionen, Theorien, Modelle. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1996

William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998

W.B. Carnochan, The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993

Burton R. Clark, Creating Entrepreneurial Universities: Organizational Pathways of Transformation. Oxford: Pergamon, 1998

Michael D. Cohen and James G. March, Leadership and Ambiguity: The American College President (2nd ed.). Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1986

Susan Letzler Cole, The Absent One: Mourning Ritual, Tragedy, and the Performance of Ambivalence. University Park, PA and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985

Ralf Dahrendorf, Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland. München: Piper, 1965 (english: Society and Democracy in Germany. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967)

Michael Daxner, Die blockierte Universität: Warum die Wissensgesellschaft eine andere Hochschule braucht. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1999

Shanta Dutta, Ambivalence in Hardy: A Study of His Attitude to Women. London: Macmillan, 2000

Jürgen Enders, Berufsbild der Hochschullehrer. Ulrich Teichler, Hans-Dieter Daniel, and Jürgen Enders (eds.), Brennpunkt Hochschule: Neuere Analysen zu Hochschule, Beruf und Gesellschaft. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1998, 55-78

Jürgen Enders, Barbara M. Kehm and Uwe Schimank, Structures and Problems of Research in German Higher Education: An Overview and an Agenda for Further Studies, in Robert McC. Adams, Trends in American and German Higher Education. Cambridge: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2002, 85-119

Daniel Fallon, The German University: A Heroic Ideal in Conflict with the Modern World. Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1980

Stephen Frosh, Fathers' ambivalence (too), in Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (eds.), Mothering and Ambivalence. London: Routledge, 1997, 37-53

Steve Fuller, The Governance of Science: Ideology and the Future of the Open Society. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000

Stephen Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991

Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology. New York: Basic Books, 1983

Sandra Harding, The Science Question in Feminism. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986

Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (eds.), Mothering and Ambivalence. London: Routledge, 1997

Chong-Moon Lee, William F. Miller, Marguerite Gong Hancock, and Henry S. Rowen (eds.), The Silicon Valley Edge: A Habitat for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000

Joost A.M. Meerloo, The Two Faces of Man: Two Studies on the Sense of Time and on Ambivalence. New York: International Universities Press, 1954

Robert K. Merton, Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays. New York: The Free Press, 1976

Jürgen Mittelstraß, Die unzeitgemäße Universität. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1994

Montaigne, Essais de Michel de Montaigne, Livre II, XVI. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1998

Detlef Müller-Böling, Evelies Mayer, Anne J. MacLachlan, and Jutta Fedrowitz (eds.), University in Transition: Research Mission – Interdisciplinarity – Governance. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers, 1998

Detlef Müller-Böling, Die entfesselte Hochschule. Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2000

Steven Muller (ed.), Universities in the Twenty-First Century. Providence, R.I.: Berghahn, 1996

Martha C. Nussbaum, Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997

Dagmar Ottmann, Angrenzende Rede: Ambivalenzbildung und Metonymisierung in Ludwig Tiecks späten Novellen. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990

Roszika Parker, Mother Love / Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence. New York: Basic Books, 1996

Roszika Parker, The production and purposes of maternal ambivalence, in Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (eds.), Mothering and Ambivalence. London: Routledge, 1997, 17-36

Andreas M. Rothfuß, Hochschulen in den USA und Deutschland: Ein Vergleich aus ökonomischer Sicht. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1997

Barry Smart, Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality. London: Sage, 1999

Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft (ed.), 10 Jahre danach: Zur Entwicklung der Hochschulen und Forschungseinrichtungen in den neuen Ländern und Berlin. Essen: Stifterverband, 2002

Ulrich Teichler, Hans-Dieter Daniel, and Jürgen Enders (eds.), Brennpunkt Hochschule: Neuere Analysen zu Hochschule, Beruf und Gesellschaft. Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1998

Gary Thom, The Human Nature of Social Discontent: Alienation, Anomie, Ambivalence. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984

Bernd Wächter (ed.), Internationalisation in Higher Education. Bonn: Lemmens, 1999

Andrew J. Weigert, Mixed Emotions: Certain Steps Toward Understanding Ambivalence. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991

Hans N. Weiler, Control Versus Legitimation: The Politics of Ambivalence, in Jane Hannaway and Martin Carnoy (eds.), Decentralization and School Improvement. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, 55-83

Hans N. Weiler, The Changing World of Knowledge and the Future of Higher Education: Reflections on the Creation of a New University, in Steven Muller (ed.), Universities in the Twenty-First Century. Providence and Oxford: Berghahn 1996, 129-137

Hans N. Weiler, Different Ways of Decision Making in Higher Education and Higher Education Policy in Germany and the United States. Detlef Müller-Böling et al. (eds.), University in Transition: Research Mission – Interdisciplinarity – Governance. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Foundation Publishers, 1998a, 287-293

Hans N. Weiler, Wissenschaft an der Grenze. Zum besonderen Profil der Europa-Universität Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). Alfons Söllner und Ralf Walkenhaus (eds.), Ostprofile – Universitätsentwicklungen in den Neuen Bundesländern. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998b, 80-100

Hans N. Weiler, Higher Education Reform Between Utopia and Reality: A Report from Atlantis II. Ditta Bartels and Hans-Georg Petersen (eds.), Higher Education Reform in Germany and Australia: Challenges for the 21st Century. Berlin: Berliner Debatte Wissenschaftsverlag, 1999, 57-64

Hans N. Weiler, Universities, Markets and the State: Higher Education Financing as a Laboratory of Change. Jules L. Peschar and Marieke van der Wal (eds.), Education Contested: Changing Relations Between State, Market and Civil Society in Modern European Education. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000, pp. 79-92

Hans N. Weiler, Changing Patterns of Governance and Finance in German Higher Education. Helmbrecht Breinig et al. (eds.), German and American Higher Education: Educational Philosophies and Political Systems. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001a, pp. 41-58

Hans N. Weiler, Knowledge, Politics, and the Future of Higher Education: Critical Observations on a Worldwide Transformation. Ruth Hayhoe and Julia Pan (eds.), Knowledge Across Cultures: A Contribution to Dialogue Among Civilizations. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, 2001b, pp. 25-43

Hans N. Weiler, "Sowohl – als auch" und "Ja, aber" – Zur Ambivalenz von Hochschulen im allgemeinen und der Viadrina im besonderen. Ulrich Knefelkamp

(Hrsg.), „Blütenträume" und „Wolkenkuckucksheim" in „Timbuktu": 10 Jahre Europa-Universität Viadrina. Berlin: scripvaz-Verlag, 2001c, pp. 111-121

Hans N. Weiler, Amerika, Du hast es besser – Was man vom Hochschulwesen der USA lernen könnte. H.J. Buhr and C.-T. Germer (eds.), Benjamin Franklin Lecture 2001. Berlin: Universitätsklinikum Benjamin Franklin, 2002, 7-20

Hans N. Weiler, Proximity and Affinity: Regional and Cultural Linkages between Higher Education and ICT in Silicon Valley and Elsewhere. Marijk van der Wende & Maarten van de Ven (eds.), The Use of ICT in Higher Education: A Mirror of Europe. Utrecht: Lemma, 2003, 277-297

Hans N. Weiler, How Universities Change, and Why They (Often) Don't: The Politics of Ambivalence in German Higher Education. Martin Glaum, Susanne Pickel, Detlef Pollack, Anna Schwarz (eds.), An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Higher Education: The Viadrina Project (forthcoming)

Wissenschaftsrat, Empfehlungen zur Einführung neuer Studienstrulkturen und –abschlüsse (Bakkalaureus/Bachelor – Magister/Master) in Deutschland. Köln: Wissenschaftsrat, 2000

April 2, 2003