SYMPOSIUM IN MEMORIAM OF GERALD D. FELDMAN

Conference at the Deutsche Bank AG and Dresdner Bank AG, Berlin, October 23-24, 2008. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, Allianz AG, C.H. Beck, Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank, Evonik, European Association for Business and Financial History, Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte, Alfred und Cläre Pott-Stiftung, and the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Michael Jurk (Dresdner Bank AG), Martin L. Müller (Deutsche Bank AG), Andrea H. Schneider (Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte), Dieter Ziegler (Universität Bochum). Speakers: Johannes Bähr (Universität Frankfurt/Main), Volker Berghahn (Columbia University), Christoph Buchheim (Universität Mannheim), Philip Cottrell (University of Leicester), Barbara Eggenkämper (Archiv der Allianz AG), Peter Eigner (Universität Wien), Jeffrey Fear (University of Redlands), Martin H. Geyer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich), Manfred Grieger (Historische Kommunikation, Volkswagen AG), Herbert Hansmeyer (Allianz AG), Peter Hayes (Northwestern University), Peter Hertner (Universität Halle-Wittenberg), Carl-Ludwig Holtfreich (Freie Universität Berlin), Heidrun Homburg (Universität Freiburg), Tessen von Heydebreck (Deutsche Bank), Harold James (Princeton University), Jürgen Kocka (WZB Berlin), Urte Kocka, Werner Plumpe (Universität Frankfurt/Main), Norma von Ragenfeld-Feldman, Manfred Rasch (ThyssenKrupp Konzernarchiv), Gerhard A. Ritter (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich), Reinhard Rürup (Technische Universität Berlin), Edith Sheffer (University of California, Berkeley), Fritz Weber (Universität Wien), Harald Wixforth (Universität Bochum), Dieter Ziegler (Universität Bochum).

On October 31, 2007, Gerald D. Feldman died at the age of 70. Feldman was “one of the most respected and influential historians of his generation” (H-German), and his books on the social, political, and economic history of the Weimar Republic and National Socialism were both masterpieces of scholarship and standard reading for anyone wishing to understand what occurred in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. Feldman served as president of the Friends of the German Historical Institute Washington and was a member of its academic advisory board. Grateful for his intellectual and organizational work, the GHI Washington was one of the initiators of an academic symposium to commemorate and discuss Feldman’s life and legacy. With the co-sponsorship of leading German companies and the organizational support of the Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte, this symposium turned into a major event within the German historical profession, which was attended by over four hundred people.

The symposium began on the evening of October 23 in the Atrium of the Deutsche Bank in Berlin with an academic appraisal and private memories.
After a performance of Richard Wagner’s “Siegfried-Idyll,” Jürgen Kocka traced Feldman’s academic career, which included twelve books, fifteen edited books, and more than 130 articles. Based on intensive archival studies, Feldman’s work was engaged yet balanced, readable yet of exhaustive length and depth. Feldman acted as an important organizer of historical research and received many prestigious fellowships and prizes, while never losing his close contact with colleagues, archivists, and doctoral students. Highly personable, he established academic and personal networks in Berkeley, Berlin, Munich, and Vienna. Kocka’s overview of Feldman’s achievements was followed by three more private recollections. Barbara Eggenkämpfer spoke about Feldman’s work as historian, mentor, and friend during the project on the history of the Allianz AG that began in 1997. Urte Kocka gave insights into the Kockas’ friendship with “Gerry and Norma” – praising their humor as well as their love of good food and long operas. Most touching was the contribution of Edith Sheffer, Feldman’s last doctoral student at Berkeley, for whom Feldman was the first reader of her writing and an inspiring teacher. Sheffer said that she continued to use his jokes in her seminars and was “still writing for him.”

The following day featured four panels that analyzed Feldman’s major research topics and presented new research. The first panel was devoted to the war economy during the First World War, the topic of Feldman’s dissertation and first book, *Army, Industry, and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918* (1966). Chaired by Volker Berghahn, three lectures analyzed the role of banks and heavy industry in the German war effort. Werner Plume shared insights from his current research project on Bayer’s CEO Carl Duisberg. Harald Wixford examined the foundation and financing of the growing network of German war societies, a corporatist form of public-private partnership. Manfred Rasch’s presentation covered a neglected field of business history – the history of aristocratic entrepreneurs—arguing that the growing disorder of the war was reflected in the difficult balance between economic rationality and the struggle for an increasingly authoritarian monarchy.

The second panel focused on the history of the German inflation, which Feldman had analyzed in his groundbreaking monograph *Iron and Steel in the German Inflation, 1916-1923* (1977) and in his magnum opus *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1923* (1993). Carl-Ludwig Holtfreterich (panel chair) and Gerhard A. Ritter discussed the contribution of these books and the work of the inflation project financed by the Volkswagen foundation since 1977. While both scholars concentrated on the German experience, Fritz Weber and Philip Cottrell emphasized the overall European context. Weber examined the expansion of Bavarian banks
into Austria as a result of prewar investments, the loss of former territory, and
the dubious activities of some Austrian bankers. Although it took place in a
highly politicized context, the German expansion was cautious and based on
economic rationality. Cottrell’s presentation investigated the “rocky path” to
Austrian reconstruction in 1920/21. After the relative failure of the reconstruc-
tion plan of the League of Nations and the cooperation of central banks, the
reconstruction became a matter of business – with disastrous consequences
in the autumn of 1921. Martin H. Geyer set a different tone, analyzing the
war and inflation period with the tools of cultural history. Material want and
injustice, he argued, are crucial in understanding this era because they built
the basis for an economy of justice, in which right stood against order and
justice against law. Therefore, terms like dictatorship and democracy must be
used in a more cautious and differentiated way by historians.

During the 1990s, banking history became the center of Feldman’s research.
The third panel, chaired by Christoph Buchheim, therefore examined the
history of banking during the interwar period. Peter Hertner’s lecture con-
centrated on Feldman’s micro-sociological approach and highlighted his
methodological pluralism and concentration on actors and mentalities, argu-
ing that Feldman practiced a new political history, a trend that is once again
becoming fashionable at present. Jeffrey Fear gave an interesting account of
varieties of capitalism by comparing German and American banking regulation
policies. Despite similar debates and arguments, the political consequences
were quite different. Although both German and American small banks started
out with comparable market shares of 20-25% in the late nineteenth century,
German governments strengthened the smaller banks to support middle-sized
companies, whereas in the United States smaller banks lost their position
already before the First World War because of the different structure of the
banking business and their failure to lobby for their own interests politically.
Peter Eigner widened this comparative perspective in a lecture on the Austrian
banking sector and the dominant role of Rudolf Sieghart, the CEO of the
Österreichische Bodencreditanstalt. Sieghart established a personal network
of subtle corruption that infiltrated both the political and the economic sphere.
Eigner argued against the demonization of leading bankers and explained
Sieghart’s strategy as typical for this branch, which failed to adapt to the
changing economic and political conditions. At the end of the panel, Harold
James highlighted the essentials of the 1931 banking crisis. In contrast to the
current financial crisis, politicians then were unwilling to support the banks,
initially the Danat-Bank, as the risks were considered too high. Paradoxically,
however, the ensuing crisis resulted in a state-dominated banking sector
already before the Nazi seizure of power.
The fourth panel dealt with business history during National Socialism – a topic that had attracted Gerald Feldman since the early 1990s. Reinhard Rürup provided an overview of the research projects on the history of the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Society. Rürup argued that scientists saw the Nazi regime primarily as an opportunity for intensified research and therefore cooperated with the regime and supported its racial policy and war preparations. The emerging question of individual and corporate freedom of action was picked up in Johannes Bähr’s comparison of two leading entrepreneurs. While Paul Reusch, the conservative CEO of the Gutehoffnungshütte, kept a relative distance from the Nazi regime until he lost his position in 1942, Friedrich Flick embodied the systematic cooperation with National Socialism. Thus the scope of individual choices remained broader than often suggested. The cooperation between the state and companies was closely analyzed in Manfred Grieger’s lecture on the construction of two new dams in the Harz region. Grieger gave detailed archival insights into the problems of acquiring a labor force and building materials from 1938 onwards, which resulted in the systematic exploitation of forced laborers. Heidrun Homburg added two French case studies from the electrical industry, which again stressed the heterogeneity of German occupation policies.

The symposium closed with concluding remarks by co-organizers Dieter Ziegler and Hartmut Berghoff, who will be preparing a book with papers from the symposium, which will be published by C.H. Beck in 2009. In addition to this symposium, the Stiftung Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland (DGIA) has established a new Gerald D. Feldman travel grant to support German-American archival work. The Friends of the German Historical Institute Washington are working to establish an annual Gerald D. Feldman Lecture. Following the program, Norma von Ragenfeld-Feldman expressed her gratitude for this event and ended with touching words, including Mascha Kaleko’s poem “Memento”: “Before my own death is me do not fear for. Only before the death of those, which are me close. How am I to live, if they are no longer there?”

Uwe Spiekermann (GHI)