

Land of beneficial order

A brief visit to Germany
July 2014

Aldo Benini



Why Germany?

- In quick succession, three of my German friends would celebrate their birthdays – two of them round ones. Since I was in Europe anyway, it was both pleasant and efficient seeing them as well as a number of others nearby.

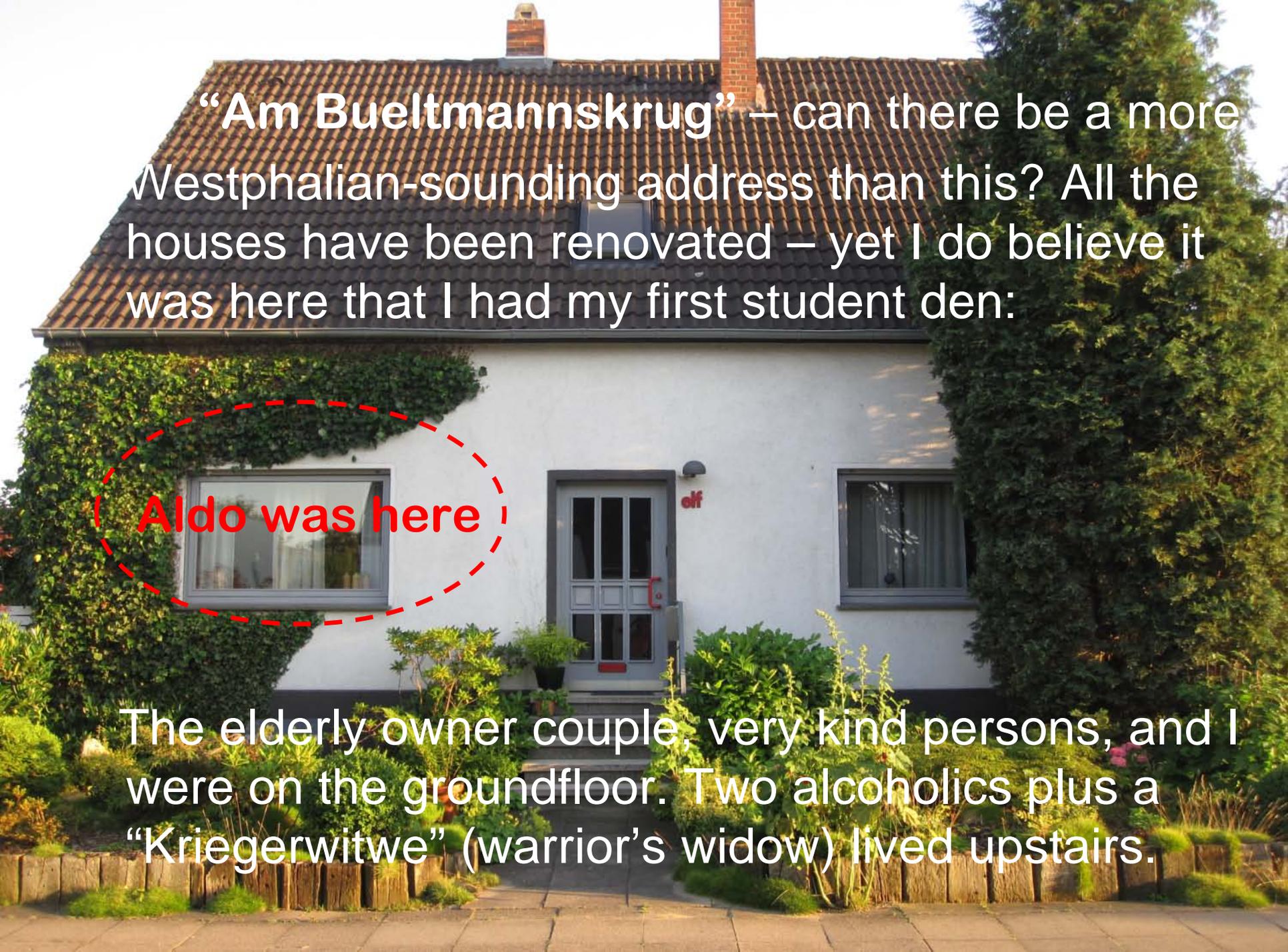


- The 80th of the lady who, way back in 1971, found me my first room in the university town of Bielefeld was the pivot around which my nine-day tour gravitated.

A sample of one
[or two if we count the university separately]



The birthdays were celebrated in three cities. But I shall focus on one place – Bielefeld – and share a few impressions from here.



“Am Bueltmannskrug” – can there be a more Westphalian-sounding address than this? All the houses have been renovated – yet I do believe it was here that I had my first student den:

Aldo was here

The elderly owner couple, very kind persons, and I were on the groundfloor. Two alcoholics plus a “Kriegerwitwe” (warrior’s widow) lived upstairs.

Clear and constant

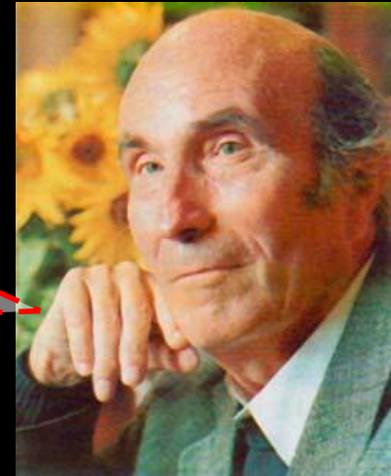
It would be inappropriate to disclose the identity of my friend **Frauke**. Let me say this much:

Apart from providing a much-needed landing pad in 1971, Frauke, for more than forty years, has offered friendship as well as an exemplar of the good life:

Clear moral conduct, beauty, living within one's means, hospitality and encouragement.



Hi, I am Luhmann.
So, really, you have
come for me all the
way from
Switzerland?



- In 1971, I came from Switzerland, drawn by the then already great fame of Niklas Luhmann, who would re-order German sociology as an intellectual supernova. Punctuated by two Africa periods, my adolescence in Bielefeld lasted until 1979.
- As a rather insecure young man, I was thus lucky to rely on Frauke's direction and savoir-faire. I needed her practical sense to come down from the ivory tower in which I received my sociological education.

Back to the towers

- The clean, imposing, stern towers of the university, stamped out of the green meadows in the late sixties, were still the same that I had known during my fairly long “tenure”.
- Now, of course, what had been touted as modern architecture no longer fascinated. I wanted to know what had changed in the people, in the contents of teaching, the culture.



Was Aldo here?
In an otherwise frosty
building, good people
created a home for him

..



The first thing I noticed this time:

Universität Bielefeld



First 60
seconds:



Do not bring animals!

Why need students be told that? Are they children?

Before I could contemplate sense or non-sense any further, some one pressed a leaflet into my hand, demanding asylum for Edgar Snowden. Thus ..

Against Empire



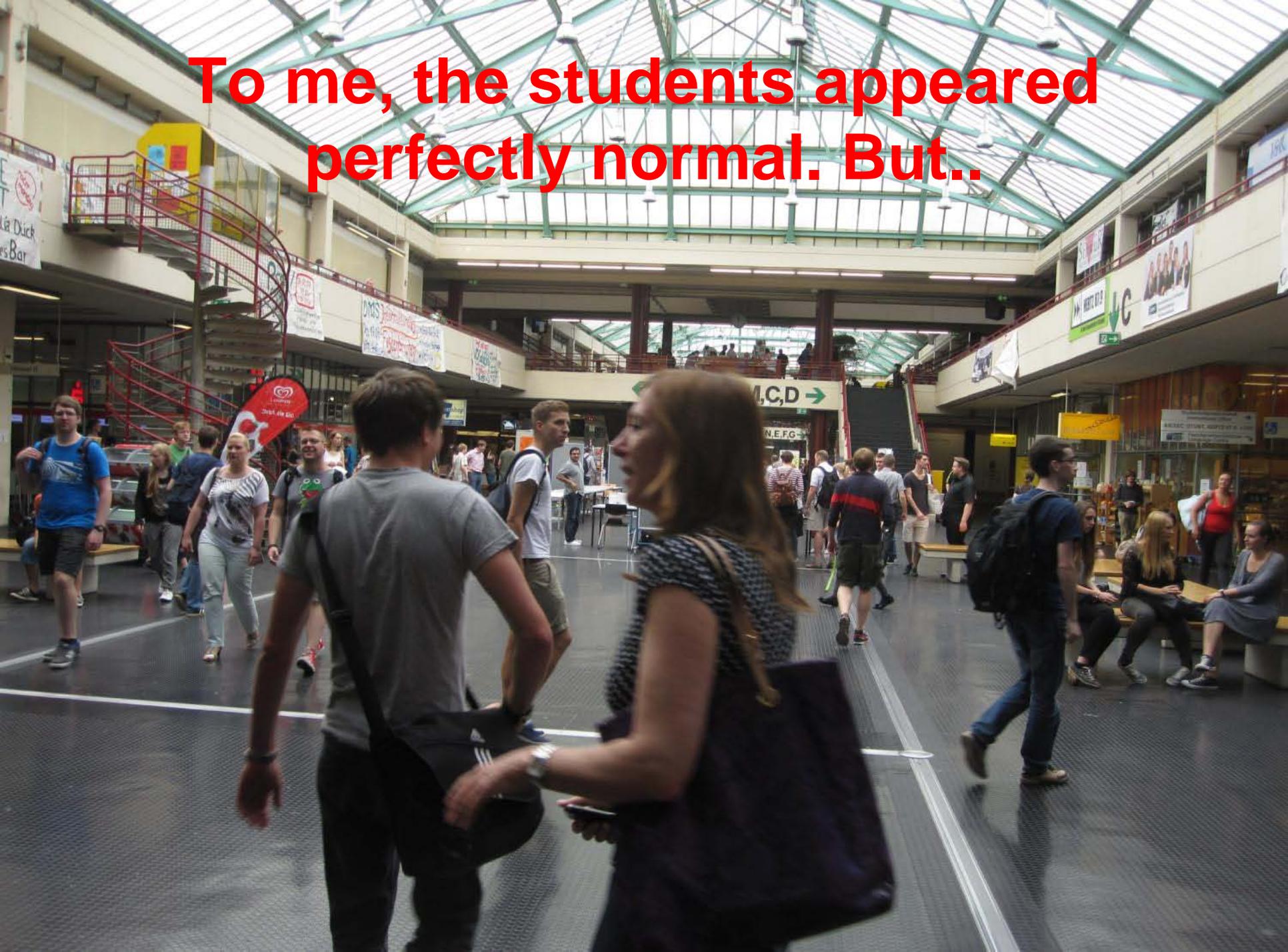
.. the line of critical activism continued. The large wall painting, bounding the concourse on the east end, to protest the other 9/11 – the CIA-backed murder in Chile – was still there. But did anyone pay attention?

Opposition – just how smart?



- I appreciate the spirit of political opposition. Some of it is playful, as suits young people. What do the **Migration of the Toads** and the **alternatives** mean? Real toads? Human toads –the German elites?
- Nice pun! Yet I am not in favor of sloppy language. **Vortrag** – a spelling error that we might forgive in primary school. Not here. But, then, substance and energy ought to come before form and canon.
- The nonchalance led my interlocutors (most of the older generation!) to advance the **Grand Unified Theory of Student Decline** ..

To me, the students appeared perfectly normal. But..



.. local observers held that ..

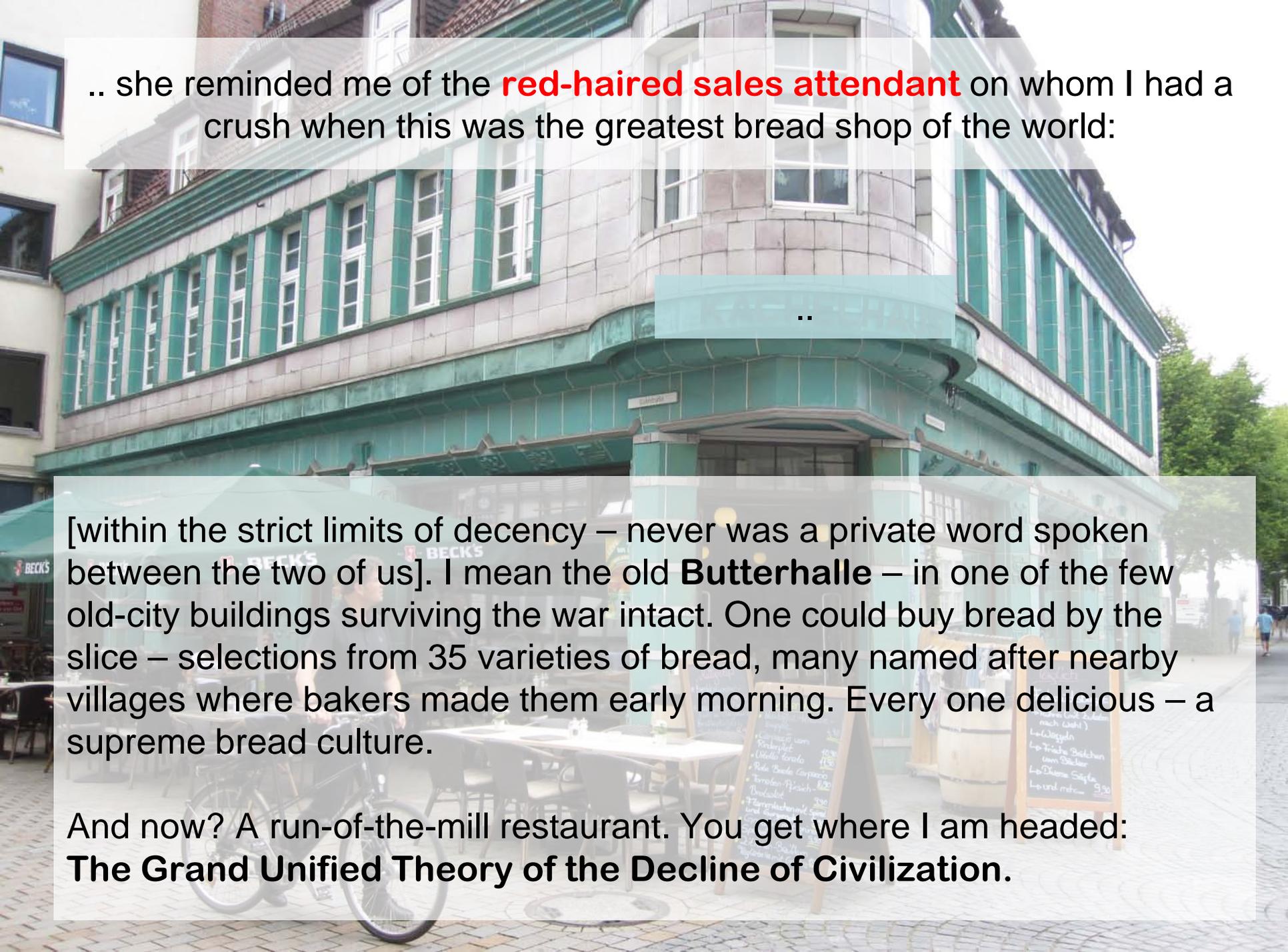
- European reforms of higher education have standardized teaching and learning to a senseless “point system”.
- In Bielefeld, mathematics and natural sciences have held up high standards because of access to research funds.
- The social sciences have been turned into a sinkhole for less qualified youths with a legal claim to university education.
- Docents no longer dare to use English language material; bachelors leave school illiterate and unemployable.
- → *The noise I heard in the concourse was of Professor Luhmann inconsolably turning in this grave.*



Another sample of one

After hearing out that somber theory of decline (which may well be correct), I fled in terror. Yet the only young person downtown who would exchange a few words with me tried to lure me into the expensive clothes store next door. She kindly allowed that I take her picture (in fact, insisted on a second) ..





.. she reminded me of the **red-haired sales attendant** on whom I had a crush when this was the greatest bread shop of the world:

[within the strict limits of decency – never was a private word spoken between the two of us]. I mean the old **Butterhalle** – in one of the few old-city buildings surviving the war intact. One could buy bread by the slice – selections from 35 varieties of bread, many named after nearby villages where bakers made them early morning. Every one delicious – a supreme bread culture.

And now? A run-of-the-mill restaurant. You get where I am headed:
The Grand Unified Theory of the Decline of Civilization.

In disgust, I fled again, this time to the fountain of true learning ..

(50)
$$\frac{a}{b} = \frac{b}{a+b}$$

so stellt diese Proportion den sogenannten goldenen Schnitt dar. Die Lösung der quadratischen Gleichung, die in (50) steht, führt zur Fünftelung des Einheitskreises bzw. zur Zehnteilung, wenn man

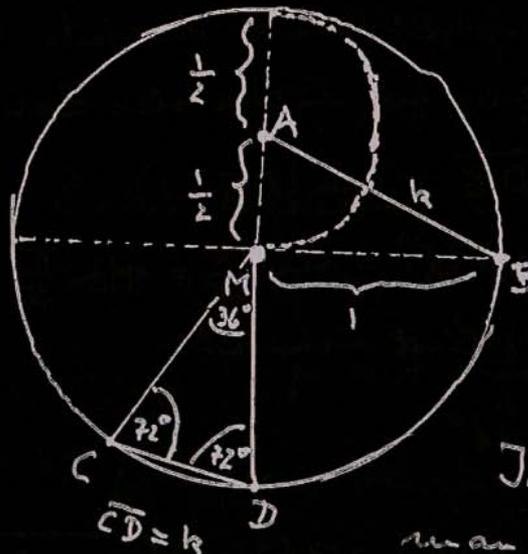
k Zehnmal auf der Peripherie des Einheitskreises abträgt:

$$k = \overline{AB} - \frac{1}{2}$$

$$\overline{AB} = \sqrt{1^2 + \left(\frac{1}{2}\right)^2} = \frac{1}{2}\sqrt{5}$$

$$k = \frac{1}{2}(\sqrt{5} - 1)$$

(51)



Im Dreieck MCD kann man k als Basis eines

Out in the countryside,



- a young historian and owner of a village bookstore led me to the meeting point with my revered teacher of statistics, **Professor Theodor Harder**.
- In the seventies, Harder was supposed to teach us statistics. He taught us how to think.
- I had not seen him since 1997. I did not know what to expect. He did not use email. The historian arranged all.

Theo, as he wants to be addressed, came on his racing bike. A black eye and a big boil on his forehead spoke of a recent fall.

Undeterred, 83 years' old, his ideas constantly raced ahead, for three straight hours. He was as sparkling as ever.

As though it were just yesterday when he used to play for us, by heart, long stretches of the Well-Tempered Clavier, or discuss Russian religious philosophers.



Not the mean, ..

- My reverence for Professor Harder is almost limitless. You have to bear with me. This is my favorite anecdote:
- *I served as a Red Cross delegate in Afghanistan for two years. During the battle for Jalalabad in spring 1989, a Soviet war plane attacked the ambulance in which we were rolling towards our advanced first-aid post. One bomb detonated some 150 meters to the left, another some 200 to the right. The bang was terrible, we brought the vehicle to a screeching halt and rushed down into the chaussee ditch. [..]*

.. but the variance

- *[..] It was useless. By this time, the danger had long passed. The shock lingered; we had scratches and were dirty all over.*
- *All of a sudden, I was seized by a burst of laughter. My colleagues found this badly misplaced and demanded to know what I thought so funny:*
- *“Just now, it came to my mind what my professor of statistics used to say:”*
- **What matters in life is not the mean, but the variance.**

The next morning, I needed some quiet. From the hotel I hiked towards a place where I hoped to find a small bridge. There, Frauke says, I showed her little sons a swarm of wild bees.

A photograph of a wooden bridge with railings crossing a small stream in a lush forest. The bridge is made of dark wood and has a simple railing design. The stream is narrow and flows through a dense forest of tall trees with green foliage. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking across the bridge towards the stream.

I had no recollection of the bees, though, yes, of the bridge. The rain caught me without an umbrella; I did the last 500 meters running. I am glad I did find it. After 43 years.

Is there a conclusion?

- A sample of one – no conclusion possible?
Certainly neither for nor against Grand Theories.
- Yet Bielefeld, on behalf of Germany, suggests this much:
 - Albeit a foreigner, I was accepted and have been rewarded with friendships that have lasted all my life.
 - Perhaps, it is now less a place of great ideas, and more of assiduous improvement on small ones.
 - Regardless, it is a well-ordered country, with benefits for many, and certainly for me.
- Best wishes on your 80th, Frauke -
in fact, for all of you!

