



“Akademischer Nachwuchs” – Reflections of a Veteran on a Strange Concept

Jürgen Hanneder*

Abstract: The German idea of “Akademischer Nachwuchs”, that is, young academics, is part of a structure built into our universities and based on a hierarchical teacher-student relationship. We know from Indological history that right from the beginning the often unpaid assistants contributed no less to the field than their well-paid superiors, and we also know from recent history that attempts to change some of the basic parameters of this system for the better came to naught. The lecture combines general thoughts on the topic with some personal observations, and a few historical examples from the early days of our subject.

Keywords: junior academics, teacher-student relationship, German Indology

When the organizers of the 12th *International Indology Graduate Research Symposium* in Vienna kindly invited me to give a keynote speech, I wanted to say something hopefully motivating to this immensely active group of scholars, but also express my critical view of how we (especially in Germany) treat young scholars institutionally. This combination of personal experiences and views, garnished with historical details, proved to be a problematic format, and especially in an academic conference, since for half of my talk I could neither go into details nor reveal

* Professor of Indology and Tibetology, Philipps University of Marburg.

any sources. Apparently it touched a nerve, but sadly, the digital format of the conference, at least for those like myself not physically present in Vienna, prevented more private discussions of the topic.¹ The inclusion of the following version of my talk in the proceedings will reveal many of these flaws, for which I crave the readers' indulgence.

For a young academic, an election into a permanent, which is usually only a professorial position in a university, is a great relief, but I guess for most people it feels like a transition – if the comparison is allowed here – from *hīnayāna* to *mahāyāna*. Instead of caring for oneself one is suddenly entrusted with the care for a whole academic subject, and especially for the younger academics on whom – if all works well – the future of this academic subject will soon rest. For those who have suffered the long insecurity of academic employment themselves, often including phases of pseudo-employment and of factual unemployment, usually carefully veiled in the *curriculum vitae*, this is a personal matter, and there are not many occasions to reflect on it. The following is a humble attempt to make up for this. I am also hopeful that this stirring up of an often traumatic phase in many academic biographies will be of some use and may even remind those academics in power who entertain a more Darwinistic view of the problem that in a small subject like Indology we cannot simply trust that those who are excellent enough and deserve it will make their way.

1. “Akademischer Nachwuchs”

Let me start with some basic facts and explain, especially to an international audience, that my own experience as a student is limited to the United Kingdom for a couple of years, and Germany for many more years. But I have since seen many institutes and encountered a few academic traditions and cultures and so I hope that the following reflections, although based mainly on the situation in Germany, may have wider implications in one or the other respect.

In Germany the term for junior academics is “Akademischer Nachwuchs”, which would literally translate as “academic offspring”. As often with faded metaphors, we are not usually aware of or reflect on their im-

1 Some participants continued the discussion online, for which see <https://homepage.univie.ac.at/vitus.angermeier/website/akademischer-nachwuchs>.

plications. The German term evokes the image of the head of an institute as a fatherly figure. Complementary to this terminology the doctoral supervisor is called *Doktorvater* – the “father” of the doctor (to be). This word and the concept has even survived the recent reflections on gender and language, so now even the term *Doktormutter* is used.

For understanding the context one has to know something about the organisational structure of German universities, which is based on what is often called an institute, although many other names are in use in different locations. The term denotes the organisational core structure of a small academic subject, as Indology, with a minimum of one professor and one “assistant”. Qualifications of these assistants may vary, they may be doctoral students, postgraduates or so-called “*Privatdozenten*”, an old term for the status of someone eligible for a professorship. There used to be versions of these posts that were permanent, occupied by the highly qualified that did not get a professorship, but since the last reforms these positions have a maximum duration, not dependent on the post, but only on the holder of the post, who cannot be employed longer than 6 years as a postdoc. This means that once one has passed this deadline, no German university will be able to employ you in a comparable position, that is, on the level of an assistant. In some universities this applies even to (German style) tenure track professorships, which means that having an assistant post in Germany precludes you from applying to one of the new tenure track professorships, an absurd example for the general rule that German regulations are so complex that no one can any more calculate the side effects of reforms and that sometimes the side effects are more severe than the initial problem.

In an institute you may find one or more professors and assistants, lecturers, students employed for a few semesters, as well as assistants working in research projects. The idea behind this structure is that the institute functions with the main professor as the head, who is responsible for and controls almost every detail. Legally this entails a strict hierarchy. No assistant can go to a conference, except in his or her free time, without consent of the head of the institute, and for getting funds for travelling to this conference one again needs the signature of the head of the institute. One can imagine that this allows for a wide range of relationships between head and employees, ranging from friendly support to strict control.

There can also be a hierarchy within institutes with more than one professor, with the result that in some conservative universities the main professor decides mostly everything, the others next to nothing. Actual practice depends of course on individual constellations, again ranging from the amicable institute climate to the unfortunately wide-spread ongoing conflict among the professors of one institute, but this is surely not limited to Germany.

The system seems to work on the assumption that someone eligible for a professorship, that is someone having a “Habilitation”, and claiming the status of a so-called Privatdozent, will get a permanent job soon and it is not crucial whether he or she receives an income up to then. This is perhaps one of the few instances in Germany, where no union and no court has ever intervened against – let me put it bluntly – forced unpaid labour. For the Privatdozent² is required for the continuance of his status to teach in the university, but for free. Already in the early nineteenth century Peter von Bohlen, whom some might know as the editor of the *Bhartrhariśataka*,³ described the private life of a Privatdozent as dreary.⁴ They were living like unsuccessful artists, always in need of some other income. One might assume in modern times social laws, a completely different system of contracts in the university, and other political and social developments would since have made a difference.

But in fact, almost two decades ago the German government made the situation much worse by discontinuing virtually all permanent posts below the professorial rank. It also raised the hurdles for employment by introducing a lower maximum age for being employed as a professor, and also rigorously enforced the rule that six years after Ph.D. one would be unemployable in Germany. In the same series of drastic reforms salaries of both professors and assistants were cut. The aim of this policy was publicly termed “the scrapping of a generation” (“Verschrottung

2 The term derives from Latin *privatim*, which used to mean “private” lectures by professors, that is lectures with no fee.

3 Petrus a Bohlen: *Bartrharis Sententiae*. Berolini 1833.

4 “Das häusliche Leben eines Privatdocenten ist überall kein rosiges zu nennen, noch ist es eben ein vielbewegtes.” See *Autobiographie des ordentlichen Professors der oriental. Sprachen und Literatur an der Universität zu Königsberg Dr. Peter von Bohlen, herausgegeben als Manuscript für seine Freunde von Johannes Voigt*. Königsberg 1841, p. 62.

einer Generation”⁵), with the underlying suggestion that those who had not made it into a permanent position were probably not good enough.⁶ It practically implied that nobody would care that a whole generation of scholars would stand no chance to get a job in Germany. This was a time, when virtually all German postdocs applied abroad. When a few years later even the press who had been applauding the reforms realized that this had been a nightmare for academics, they changed their position and wrote on the severe side-effects. Of course the government started a new initiative to reinvoke scholars that had fled, and of course declared it a success. Many had by then forgotten what had caused the exodus in the first place.

The whole story is today difficult to retrieve, since its facts are drowned in a sea, or perhaps better a swamp, of permanent reforms. German universities as a rule modernize all the time and believe that this defines progress. But in fact, as we all know from our study of Indian texts, time also unfolds in cycles. It is now after at least four reform cycles, for instance, that we in Marburg will have a “new” proper B.A. in Indology, in other words, we are slowly returning to the old system that was tested and that we should have never given up. But at the time resistance was no option, but could have cost you the job, so most people did not even try to protest.

But still I think there is too much readiness in universities to accept reform nonsense. Let me just give you one instance. In Germany modernization means internationalisation, and because of the post-war history of Western Germany, modern always means US American. The latest absurdity in my university is the institution of *tenure track commissions* – the English term is actually used in German. A *tenure track commission* makes sense, when you have tenure posts, but we have hardly any in our university, and none in our faculty, where we now have a commission. The commission in fact decides about a renewal of contracts with a maximum duration of two years, after which the person who is prolonged has reached his or her six years and is no more employable in a non-permanent university position. In other words, we are talking about the very opposite of tenure track. For those concerned this is

5 The term was used in 2002 in several print media in Germany.

6 The slogan was “Mittelmaß im Mittelbau”.

simply adding insult to injury. The assistants were rightly annoyed, but it seems no one else noticed the absurdity. We requested the president to change at least the name, but have no hope that this will happen. Using wrong English terms is it seems a core of our strategy of modernisation.

Some of this may not apply to other academic cultures, which are in fact quite different around the globe. In some countries universities have no institutes in the German sense, people come to the university to teach, but they have no real office, so that there is no locus for the German-type institute structure. Other phenomena may be more comparable.

And with this I want to return from politics to the institute structure and especially the relations between professors and assistants. Despite all the necessary criticism I do not want to sound too negative. In fact, I have more often than not enjoyed the atmosphere of daily work in quite a few Indological institutes. Where else will you find people to talk with about your outlandish research projects? The institute family can be pleasant, and a sustaining team experience. In many cases it entails a most valuable support given by the head of the institute to the younger generation, something that is often beneficial to one's motivation, self-esteem, and also to one's career.

But unfortunately there are also other cases. The same structures can enable misuse, just think of the fact that the German Doktorvater functions as supervisor, examiner, and often even employer to his doctoral student. As the image of the family can suggest, this system may also imply that the academic offspring is under total control of the *pater familias*, and that loyalty is what is demanded and what matters. Working in such an environment can be a terrible experience.

But this is not at all specific to Indology, but a result of historical development of academic degrees in Europe from the Middle Ages,⁷ when the important ingredient for a doctoral degree, which gave access to an aristocratic lifestyle, was the payment of a considerable fee. Sometimes a dissertation was required, sometimes not, sometimes it was written by

7 For the following, see Werner Allweis: "Von der Disputation zur Dissertation. Das Promotionswesen in Deutschland vom Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert." In: Paul Kaegoein, Franz Georg Kaltwasser, Wolfgang Kehr, Richard Landwehrmeyer, Günther Pflug (ed.): *Dissertationen in Wissenschaft und Bibliotheken* München, New York, London, Paris 1979. I am grateful to Walter Slaje for this reference.

the “Doktorvater”. The idea that the doctoral student has to demonstrate his abilities in the written dissertation – and the new German practice of finding plagiarism mainly in the dissertations of politicians and then removing them from office – is comparatively new. The continuity with the old systems is much stronger in other, seemingly modern academic fields.

Up to ca. 1800 a dissertation was entered into bibliographies not under the name of the doctoral candidate. Today we smile about those thin dissertations, but they were only the basis for a *disputatio*, and they were not viewed as a work the candidate was supposed to write on his own. The “Doktorvater” was to redact and correct “his” dissertations and was considered responsible for the results. The German system varied even in the 19th century, where some candidates never wrote a dissertation – one thinks of the Indologist Otto Böhtlingk, who paid the required fee to the University of Gießen and received his doctorate without having been to Gießen even once.

According to our modern standards this is not the only absurdity involved in this system. Quite contrary to the practice in many other countries the dissertations had to be printed, which again had to be paid by the candidate. Since the “Doktorvater” had to invest a lot of time in these dissertations, he received remuneration from the candidate for his contribution to the thesis, especially where the contribution of the Professors were substantial the process practically meant that the Professors would publish their own research in these dissertations. This is also why we find Professors with 400 Dissertations bearing their name, a practice that died out in the humanities, but the enormous number of publications of some heads of institutes in, for instance, medicine, are probably an offshoot of this long-standing practice.

This close structure may serve to explain another public expression, and that is an academic group mentality, a tendency to think in academic schools. It is well-known that in the Oxbridge system a lot of emphasis is placed on the college as the real home of and formative force for the student. There is no counterpart of this in Germany, but we tend to have a strong concept of what it means to be a student of Prof. X. It seems students were often not exposed to different influences and so one assumed that being a student of X more or less defined one’s academic field, method and mentality.

As the anthropologist would expect, there are academic rituals reinforcing this group identity. One that many scholars are very happy to undergo is organizing or taking part in felicitation volumes, a practice extremely wide-spread in Germany, and by the way, also in India, where similar reverence of academic teachers is found. The group identity is a strange animal, it rears its head in fights about succession, appointments, and it may express itself in surrogate wars. Let us assume our Prof. X is in academic, and perhaps personal conflict with Prof. Y. What we almost automatically expect, and what often can be observed unfortunately, is that this is also a conflict of schools and that other members of group X may fight members of group Y.

It would not be difficult to find more recent examples, but for maintaining a more objective historian's view I shall limit myself to older examples.

2. The case Suhtscheck

There is a common notion that academical newbies should not be too brisk in their criticism, especially of those professors whose support they might need later. An example would be the well-documented case of Friedrich Suhtscheck,⁸ an Austrian scholar of German Studies who wanted to prove in the 1930s that the Parzival legend was based on Persian sources. In the course of his research he met with considerable resistance – as is not uncommon in academic circles –, but also with encouragement. The whole matter was discussed in the press, which presumably boosted his confidence. In his writings he managed to insult many colleagues from varying fields of studies and also even ignored constructive criticism of specialists in fields he did not fully comprehend. Even the widow of the Indologist Karl Friedrich Geldner in Marburg had tried to moderate and wrote to him:

Permit me to give you some motherly advice. Refrain a little from too graphic expressions and accept scholars with other opinions, even if you can prove them wrong. I have a long experience in learned circles (I am a ward of Albrecht Weber)

⁸ The following is based on Walter Slaje: “Friedrich von Suhtscheck und das Pārsī-walnāmā.” In: ZDMG (1989) p. 93–103.

and know how easy it is for too impetuous gentlemen to block their own path.

Naturally these warnings did not have an effect. And thus it took half a century until at least some of Suhtschecks findings, some of which had found approval by specialists much earlier, found their place in academic history.

But the dilemma that one should be wise and hold one’s tongue applies not only to cases of younger academics with anger management issues. Even the most gentle postdoc or Privatdozent will at some point, that is after many years in the trade, fail to understand why he or she should still hold back.

Before introducing a few more cases, I want to mention that there is the notion that Indologists are easily irritated and like to quarrel about trifles, as a publisher once wrote about the conflict between Max Müller and Otto Böhtlingk.⁹ In fact the practice at least in German Indology goes back to literary polemic exchanges between the German romantics and their classical counterparts. In particular, the literary scandal around the so-called *Xenien*, a collection of polemic verses written by Goethe and Schiller against the Schlegel brothers,¹⁰ must have influenced August Wilhelm Schlegel who adopted a similar style of exchange later when he was one of the first Indologists. He even extended the genre of polemical verses¹¹ against other academics into Sanskrit verse.¹² Schlegel

9 Agnes Stache-Weiske: “Da die Herren Sanskritisten zornige Leute sind ...”: Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Otto Böhtlingk und Max Müller aus Briefen und anderen Quellen”. In: *200 Jahre Indienforschung: Geschichte(n), Netzwerke, Diskurse*. Wiesbaden 2012, p. 69–94.

10 See Roger Paulin: *The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel Cosmopolitan of Art and Poetry*. OpenBook Publishers 2016, p. 79 (“Goethe and Schiller on the Attack: The *Xenien*”).

11 On Schlegel and his polemical writings, see Günter Österle: “Romantische Satire und August Wilhelm Schlegels satirische Virtuosität”. In: *Aufbruch ins romantische Universum. August Wilhelm Schlegel*. Ed. Claudia Bamberg and Cornelia Ilbrig. Göttingen/Frankfurt 2017, p. 70–81.

12 For an example see the reproduction in Jürgen Hanneder: “August Wilhelm Schlegel und die Begründung der Indologie in Deutschland”. In: *Aufbruch ins romantische Universum. August Wilhelm Schlegel*. Herausgegeben von Claudia

sometimes talks of literary martial law,¹³ which apparently means that despite the highly polemic quality of one's writings, one must retain a certain fairness and refrain from personal insults.

But this idea of a martial law of literary and academic exchange is not so far-fetched, as the next example, this time from German studies, shows.¹⁴ Here one Privatdozent by the name of Eugen Wolff, in 1892 got into a fight with the Professor Eugen Burdach about what would later become the dichotomy between Literaturwissenschaft and Literaturgeschichte. It was a conflict between methods, but also one of a young scholar without a secure position, a Privatdozent, against one of the established big guns. This scandal has resulted in a very amusing resumé, which describes the conflict between the two scholars as a war with unequal weapons, in which the professor shoots with heavy calibre, whereas the Privatdozent, the postdoc, can only hit the air with a light sword:

In this peaceful war heavy shots were fired, especially in the form of president's speeches, against which even the most dashing strikes of battlesome post-docs proved impotent by nature.¹⁵

In other words: With heavy guns against light swords this was an unequal match. Burdach, the full professor, had publicly rejected the ideas of, as he said, greenhorns like Wolff, and called him trivial, dull, etc. A first repudiation by Wolff avoided all polemic, but was answered by Burdach with another barrage of insults. Wolff now stated that in the case of further insults, he would demand satisfaction. The whole conflict had apparently exploded quickly, but this result was unexpected, since academic duelling had already gone out of fashion by the time. In the end no

Bamberg und Cornelia Ilbrig. Freies Deutsches Hochstift – Frankfurter Goethe-Museum 2017, S. 201.

13 “Alles ist dem literarischen Kriegsrecht vollkommen gemäß.” Letter to Georg Andreas Reimer (29.11.1841). See https://august-wilhelm-schlegel.de/briefedigital/letters/view/2535?left=text&query_id=616b96b4decf6.

14 Dorit Müller: “„Lufthiebe streitbarer Privatdocenten.” Kontroversen um die theoretische Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft.” In: *Kontroversen in der Literaturtheorie / Literaturtheorie in der Kontroverse*. Bern: Peter Lang 2007, S. 149.

15 “Besonders in Form von Rektoratsreden fielen in diesem friedlichen Krieg schon Schüsse vom allerschwersten Kaliber, gegen die sich selbst die schneidigsten Lufthiebe streitbarer Privatdocenten naturgemäß als ohnmächtig erwiesen.”

duel was fought, and this was apparently the last attempt to fight a duel in German academia. But this is an interesting case, where personal and academic conflict were hard to disentangle.

Already in German Indology the first conflict, which was, as far as I can see, based mainly on personal insults, misunderstandings, or hurt pride, resulted in a division of the academic subject. If you wonder why in Germany Indology and Indogermanistik (Indo-German Studies) separated in the very first generation, it was the result of an appointment of Franz Bopp to the Berlin Sanskrit chair, a chair on which A. W. Schlegel, who had been only deputed from Berlin to Bonn, wanted to retain a claim. When Bopp was installed in Berlin, Schlegel's chances to return there were slim. From then on relations between Bonn and Berlin became uneasy and turned into a prolonged conflict. Students of Indology, who studied almost always in Bonn and Berlin, were wiser. They ignored the conflict, got along with both contenders, and ignored attempts to be drawn to one side. Only Christian Lassen, the successor of Schlegel, took Schlegel's side explicitly.

3. Schlegel and his students

It has to do with the German obsession with the “Goethezeit”, one of the formative times of German literature, that we know so much about Schlegel and his students. Schlegel was part of the romantic movement, especially later seen as the antithesis of the “Klassiker”. Letters from the time abound and thus we have the luxury of being able to reconstruct the lives and times of the early Indologists in an unexpectedly detailed manner.

The most extensive exchange of letters with students stems from the time that his main student Christian Lassen travelled to Paris and London for his own further studies, but also for collating manuscripts for his teacher's editorial projects, especially the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Their exchange of letters was published long ago,¹⁶ and remains an interesting source that shows how supportive Schlegel was of his students, but also how difficult he was, when things did not go as he had imagined them. We have 230 pages of letters, an extremely rich source for reconstructing the

16 *Briefwechsel A. W. v. Schlegel – Christian Lassen*. Ed. Willibald Kirfel. Bonn 1914.

teaching method, topics of supervision, but also international academic networks, the Indological situation in Paris and London and much more.

In 1824 Lassen writes from London that Baron Schilling, who had been sent to him by Schlegel, was taking up much of his time. But from the learned traveller Lassen learnt a lot about Buddhism, about Tibetan language and other topics. When abroad, Lassen was obviously flooded with further Indological information and during one of his travels he wrote together with Eugène Burnouf his famous essay on the Pali Language, which is now considered one of the seminal works of academic Buddhist Studies.

In his letters Schlegel patiently helps him with all sorts of questions about manuscripts, with many Indological details that non-Indological readers of these letters may not have understood. Lassen, on the contrary, helped Schlegel in academic as well as personal matters. When the social climate for Anglo-Indians in England deteriorated, the Anglo-Indian son of the eminent Indologist Colebrooke, who was in close contact with Schlegel, was sent to Schlegel for studying in Bonn and living in Schlegel's house. Here Lassen was asked to accompany him from London to Bonn, which he did.

But soon the letters center on one problematic topic: Lassen had a travel scholarship and payments by relatives to sustain him. When the latter stopped their payment he ran into financial troubles. Schlegel now increasingly scolded him for being not focussed on his main task, especially when he started sending him funds from his own pocket. Schlegel now adopts a double strategy of promising Lassen a career in Bonn, but also demanding more work. When he demands that Lassen return from Paris, and he does not comply, even Alexander von Humboldt, who was living in Paris and was a good friend of Schlegel, had to intervene and calm down Schlegel. In the end both scholars became rather close. Although we cannot reconstruct all details, Lassen during the end of his life must have had a stroke and could not speak enough for teaching. At this point students gravitated towards – as Haug writes – Marburg (Gildemeister), Berlin (Weber), or Tübingen (Roth). In that phase, in 1845, Lassen wrote to Ewald:¹⁷

17 Briefe an Ewald. Aus seinem Nachlaß herausgegeben von R. Fick und G. v. Selle, Göttingen 1932, p. 162.

I will soon be all alone in Bonn [...] Gildemeister will go to Marburg, since his works on the Holy Robe have earned him an appointment in Marburg. Schlegel was always until his death an enlivening force in my existence. Even when engrossed with other works, he often returned to Indian Studies. In my last talks with him he talked to me about reincarnation.

So Lassen was a case, in which supervisor and student were estranged, but again found a common ground that lasted.

But also other famous students had their problems with Schlegel, especially the well-documented cases of Friedrich Rosen and Adolf Friedrich Stenzler. The second is a name every student of Sanskrit knows, since his brief Sanskrit grammar is a standard book that has survived and remained in use in many reworkings, but still goes under his name.

In general, relations were quite friendly and close, as the following letter by Schlegel shows, where he reports:

This letter was brought by Stenzler, who just arrived from London. He was ill and wishes to recover a little here. He visited me the day before yesterday with Brockhaus, and I kept the young folks here almost the whole forenoon. Stenzler has, as I think, developed very favourably. The more that he is now completely “debopped”: he mentioned even ridiculous mistakes that I had not yet spotted.¹⁸

Probably Stenzler knew how to heighten the mood of this teacher, but it seems that he avoided being drawn into the conflict.

And I wanted to mention Friedrich Rosen, an almost forgotten early Indologist, on whose biography we now have Rosane Rocher’s impressive monograph,¹⁹ a pioneering work that has forced us to make some changes to the early history of Indology. Quite contrary to the endless

18 The German original: “Diesen Brief brachte mir Stenzler, eben von London angekommen; er war krank und will sich hier etwas erholen. Er besuchte mich vorgestern mit Brockhaus, und ich behielt die jungen Leute beinahe den ganzen Vormittag bei mir. Stenzler hat sich, wie mich dünkt, sehr vortheilhaft ausgebildet; überdieß ist er nun ganz entboppot: er erwähnte selbst lächerliche Fehlgriffe, die ich noch nicht bemerkt hatte.”

19 Rosane Rocher with Agnes Stache-Weiske: *For the sake of the Vedas: the Anglo-German life of Friedrich Rosen 1805–1837*. Wiesbaden 2020.

works that are being written on Orientalism, works that live by the same few quotations one has heard again and again, this stands on a completely new ground. Rosen, who was part of a circle of students who studied, or were in contact, with both Schlegel and Bopp, found employment at the university of London, a university that was, unlike Oxford, open to non-Anglicans.

Now both Rosen and Stenzler ran into similar problems with Schlegel. Both travelled to Paris and London, were extremely helpful, but did not do everything Schlegel demanded, or not fast enough. And Rosen understandably did not want to take sides in some of the academic conflicts Schlegel cultivated with Oxford and London. So both made their path after breaking with or at least reducing contact with the towering figure of Schlegel.

4. Lachmann

The final case of a complicated relationship between academic teacher and student is particularly absurd, since here academic truth has been the victim of the quarrel. It is from the field of textual criticism.

In textbooks for editing or textual criticism we find the idea that there exists an old or classical method to deal with the editing of texts. It is called the Lachmann method, since it was invented by the German Classical and modern philologist Karl Lachmann. Lachmann worked on Latin texts, on the Bible, but also on medieval and modern German texts. The method, as described in detail by later generations, since few people read Lachmann,²⁰ involves creating a genealogical tree of manuscripts which allows to attach more weight to certain constellations, that is, to agreement of certain branches of this tree and thereby identify the original version of a text.

The famous rival school is the school of Bédier, which after subjecting Lachmann's method to a rigorous criticism, advocates the use of what is called the "best manuscript". Often the Lachmann school was perceived as German, the Bédier school as French, although one wonders how and why that should matter.

20 The obvious exception being Giovanni Fiesoli: *La Genesi del Lachmannismo*. Sismel 2000.

Without going into details of the theory the actual string of events was this: Bédier had proposed a stemma codicum, a genealogical tree of the transmission of a text he was working on and came up with a stemma with three branches. What happened then must have been highly annoying: Bédier’s teacher published an article demonstrating that Bédier’s stemma was wrong and that the real stemma had only two branches. The text-critical implications of this are potentially far-reaching, at least if one thinks that this method is to be applied mechanically. If in a three-branch stemma two branches agree, then this is the reading to be chosen. If there are two branches, with one reading per branch, the editor can choose either reading. What Bédier now did was to psychoanalyse his teacher: he tried to prove, not without good arguments, that editors preferred two-branch stemmas, because it allowed them more leeway. This was a devastating criticism, since it destroyed the semblance of objectivity that had surrounded this method.

The criticism spurned a long controversy that forced adherents of the method to rethink. But the whole topic had also an unusual personal note. A teacher demonstrating his pupil’s error publicly, which can be seen as a breach of the teacher-student relation, lead to the revenge of the pupil in trying to destroy not only the whole method, but also adding insult by calling the method adopted by his teacher the method of Lachmann. In a nationalistic French context this was an insult easily understood, but as so often, the context was soon forgotten. And the term “method of Lachmann” continued to be used, even when philologists explained in detail that Lachmann had not actually invented the method and that the actual methods of Lachman and Bédier are not that different.

The idea of a method of Lachmann is ultimately based on Bédier’s anger about his teacher. The supposed larger theoretical antagonism, the conflict between a German and a French school, and the charge that Bédier’s teacher really belonged to the Germans, was apparently staged as a revenge by an estranged pupil. In a sense Bédier’s teacher had overstepped a boundary: it is odd for a teacher, who is supposed to support his pupil, to refute him in public. But for some reason the idea that Lachmann had still somehow invented the stemmatological method was impossible to stop. It was like in the Woody Allen joke, where someone asks the doctor what he should do about a relative who thinks he is a chicken.

The doctor suggests: Have you tried telling him that he is not a chicken. “Oh, we cannot do that”, is the answer, “we need the eggs.” Until today authors on the theory of textual criticism need the “eggs”: without a method of Lachmann much of the ensuing theoretical edifice built upon it, or rather its criticism, would collapse.

5. Conclusion

Following our intuitive belief in progress we are usually convinced that these are bygone times and that the old professorial powers are a thing of the past. But in recent years critical observers of German academia in the press claimed that the old type Ordinarius professors – the German term evokes the system before the reforms of the late 60s – have reincarnated today as the so-called speakers of what is called a *Sonderforschungsbereich* (SFB). This is the largest and most prestigious type of research group and since it is funded by the central government via the DFG, its additional funding is highly welcomed by the administrations. The SFBs also serve as indicators of the university’s excellence – another concept that has become a modern German obsession. As a consequence those who succeed in establishing an SFB in their university are like mountaineers who have made the ascent to Mount Everest. They become revered and dominating figures in their universities, and – thus the analysis in the newspapers – wield unprecedented powers, not just over their own projects, but indirectly also over the other institutes involved.

This is a new brand of large scale projects that produce many post-doc positions and have thus altered normal career trajectories, often by creating a group of international nomadic scholars moving from one employment to the other. The development in Germany, characterized by an underfunded university on one hand and affluent top projects on the other clearly shows that there is a lot of money in the system, obviously enough to finance a large group of project workers, but also a large and labour-intensive superstructure with their spin doctors, who ensure that these projects are perceived as excellent, cutting edge, and whatever the current conventions on terminology demand (resilient, scalable, etc). Reading the resulting publications instead of the high-flying announcements often reduces their scope to normal size. And let us be honest: Only the naïve will actually have believed that every new project has

the potential to explode and recreate the whole academic field, or whatever the promise was. Those with more project experience know that it is enough if the project results are in time, represent solid research, and most importantly that the project reaches its goals without cutbacks. Of course, this is not the language used publicly. But when it comes to the treatment of “Akademischer Nachwuchs” a little more honesty might be necessary: “normal assistants” are often producing excellent works and not all working in “upper class” projects are research magicians. Still funding is withheld from the first, but readily poured into the other. Using some of these funds to create a career perspective for those postdocs, whose academic merits are indisputable, would not only be fair, it would also safeguard the survival of a small subject like Indology.

