Agency and the Anstoß
Max Planck Directors as Fichtean Subjects

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ABSTRACT: One of the core assumptions in agency theory has been that agency is a primordial attribute of persons: an agent is ‘the origin of causal events’. However, rather than situating agency at the origin, this article argues that we should attend to where agency, within a given context, itself originates. In Germany’s Max Planck Society the departmental heads – so-called ‘directors’ – possess a significant degree of ‘agency’ in realizing their personal will. Yet they are not its authors. On the contrary their agency is a secondary product of the philosophies of German Idealism, which eulogize the subjectivity of a heroic intellectual. In this analysis, the agency of the directors is not a precondition of their humanity, but the offspring of a specific cultural inheritance which frames the organization’s intramural life. Organizational theorists should thus pay close attention to the geo-cultural location of their object before drawing conclusions about agency.

KEYWORDS: agency, Fichte, Germany, hierarchy, Max Planck Society, organization studies, personhood, power

Introduction

Where does our ability to transform the world come from? Philosophers since time immemorial have struggled with this question in debates about the human ‘will’; and in recent decades this has, particularly in anthropology and sociology, been theorized through the use of the term ‘agency’. However, since the turn of the century scholars in both disciplines have begun to query the validity of previously inviolable characteristics of agency, particularly when applied to non-Western contexts (Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Ahearn 2001; Loyal and Barnes 2001; Keane 2003; Mahmood 2005; Frank 2006; Hilsdon 2007). It appears that agency, the ability to transform the world, and even indeed, what counts as transformation, varies between ethnographic contexts. Agency is just one more category that must be severed from the moorings of the Western Enlightenment, and permitted to sail the earth in any direction the winds of culture take it.

This article explores one such expression of agency in one such context: namely, the agency of the directors of the Max Planck Society, in the context of Germany. I explore the transhistorical continuities between a philosophical inheritance of German Idealism, its reification of a heroic scholarly subjectivity by means of the Max Planck Society’s ‘Harnack Principle’, and the effect all of this has on how contemporary Max Planck directors understand themselves and their activities. The substantial agency of the directors in carving out new scientific fields is posited as the endpoint of a long historical tradition, which valorises a particular kind of self. This self is not a property of
their personalities, but a Durkheimian ‘social fact’ which has preceded them and will survive them (1938: 50–9). As agency is a rather recent and etic analytical term, the synonym which will substitute it for most of the essay is ‘freedom’, which my research participants and their philosophical antecedents talk about continuously. Thus the discussions about freedom which follow should be read as freedom qua agency.

Before elaborating on the connections between these phenomena in greater detail, I will present some key statements in the agency debate which shape my argument, and give a summary overview of the Max Planck Society as an organizational entity.

The Ethnocentrism of Agency

The concept of agency has been articulated in a number of different ways, which nevertheless collect around a similar core meaning. Rapport and Overing understand it as the following, ‘Agency is the capability, the power, to be the source and originator of acts; agents are the subjects of action’ (2007: 3). Meanwhile Alfred Gell, in his monograph on the subject as it relates to art, offers a similar proposition, ‘An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events’ (1998: 16). This notion, of agent as ‘source’ of action, is also implicit in the definition proffered by Anthony Giddens. For Giddens, agency is possessed by that individual who ‘could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently’ (1984: 9). Agentive behaviour here, is only exercised through this individual’s autonomous decision to act in one way and not another. At the heart of all of these definitions of agency is a conception of activity liberated from prior constraint: an agent is the ‘subject of action’, and agent is the ‘origin, of causal events’, an agent ‘could have acted differently’. Although this agent may then have layers of limitations piled upon it (most obviously in Giddens’ ‘structure’), its core being is constituted by a free and wilful subject who initiates the course of action they follow.

However, such definitions have recently come under attack as possessing their own ethnocentric bias. The most comprehensive and elegant treatment of the subject has come from Saba Mahmood (2005). Through her work with the female members of the ‘mosque movement’, a growing neo-conservative Islamic group in Egypt, she arrives at a critical appraisal of standard feminist progressive theory. Her criticism revolves around the latter’s implicit assumptions about agency, which consistently locates the latter, ‘within those operations that resist the dominating and subjectivating modes of power’ (ibid.: 14). In short, an agency which is only realized when an individual responds with autonomy to forms of constraint. The practices her informants undertake, such as naturally confident women attempting to render themselves shy to embody the Islamic virtue of female modesty, provoke a visceral ‘repugnance’ in her (ibid.: 37). Counter-intuitively, her informants experience these self-containing subjectivations as modes of empowerment. By working on themselves daily in this way, these women participate agentively in performing an ethical practice which has value for them. The transformation which they feel takes place not in the social world, but is manifested internally. Mahmood’s monograph thus seeks to expand the definition of agency to incorporate the non-liberal subjectivities of these women:

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. (ibid.: 14)

For Mahmood, the ‘meaning of agency’ in a given context must therefore be seen through
the prism of its own specific cultural inheritance. She goes on to make the provocative point that, ‘The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is the product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located’ (emphasis added) (ibid.: 32). The idea that agency could not ‘belong’ to someone, is a direct contradiction of the definitions of agency articulated earlier which locate the agent as the ‘source and originator of acts’, that is, someone to whom agency does very much belong.

It is critical, I think, that Western liberalism is the political ontology against which Mahmood’s informants define themselves, because it is becoming increasingly clear that the present theoretical assumptions about agency must be understood as emerging from a Western liberal tradition with particular choice-oriented determinations of what it means to effect (as well as what effect means). This determination is one which is not universal to every ethnographic context. By assuming that agency is only that which is ‘chosen’ (Loyal and Barnes 2001: 508), organizational theorists risk foreclosing a true comprehension of the dynamics of power which may enable forms of subjectivity. One such subjectivity is that of the Max Planck director, who we will turn to shortly. Before this, an overview of the organization as a whole will be necessary.

The Organization

The ‘Max-Planck-Gesellschaft’ [The Max Planck Society or MPG] is one of Germany’s four major scientific research organizations. By its own proud admission, it is the ‘most successful’ of the four in the language of impact, having been recently ranked by the scientific journal Nature as the third best research organization in the world, after Harvard and CNRS (MPG 2011). Partly due to rankings such as these, partly as it is often erroneously called ‘The Max Planck Institute’ (MPI) rather than ‘The Max Planck Society’, there is a common lay misconception that the organization is therefore situated on a single site. In fact it is fairly evenly dispersed over eighty separate institutes across the country, a similar number in each of the Länder [States]. There are also now several institutes outside Germany, and this global presence is something the Society appears keen to expand. In total, the MPG within Germany is host to around 22,000 employees, making an average of 250 in each Institute. As it receives a large number of ‘guest scientists’ every year, and the bulk of scientists are on short-term contracts, this figure is in constant flux.²

Sacred to the MPG’s self-image is its status as the most ‘basic’ of these four organizations: the motto emblazoned on its promotional literature being ‘Insight must precede application’, a quote from Max Planck himself. The eighty institutes are able to pursue largely ‘basic’ rather than ‘application-oriented’ questions due to its particular funding structure, the lion’s share of which is drawn from the German public purse. Over the organization as a whole, the proportion of public funding is 80 per cent, 40 per cent of which comes from the Federal Government, and 40 per cent from the State where the Institute is located (hence why they must be evenly dispersed). The remaining 20 per cent comes from ‘third-parties’, which may be federal research organizations like the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft or DFG [German Research Foundation], EU or extra-European project-based funding. Together, all of these funding sources make up its total running costs of around €1.9bn (MPG 2012b). There are a few grey areas in its relationship to industry: notably the MPI for Iron Research and the MPI for Coal Research, both in the state of North-Rhine-Westphalia, which are financed half from Federal sources, half by industry, their intellectual labours being therefore distributed between the two. In the main, however, the aim of the MPG is similar to other ‘basic research’ organizations like France’s
CNRS, in its commitment to problem-oriented rather than product-oriented research.

Each of these eighty institutes is governed by two and five directors. In total there are 286 directors working across the whole organization, 229 of which are in the natural sciences, which have been the focus of my research. An overwhelming majority of 217 out of this 229 are male, and tend to be within the age of 40 up to the compulsory retirement age of 65. Likewise, although the Max Planck Society aims to recruit the best scientists from around the world, almost 70 per cent of all natural scientific directors claim Germany as their ‘country of origin’. Each director will govern a scientific community of between 30 to 150 scientists (those in this study hovering between 50 and 80), in a research direction theoretically of their own choosing. The majority of these scientists are at post-doctoral level or below, and/or employed on temporary contracts, two sociological characteristics which intensify the centrality of this individual’s position.

Susan Wright notes that an enduring question for those studying organizations – ever since the Hawthorne Experiments of the 1920s and 1930s – has been how to problematize their ‘context’ (1994: 12–14). Where does one draw the boundaries of influence that shape intramural life? Among the Manchester ‘Human Relations’ school of the 1950s and 1960s these were variously the interrelations of whole industries, the British class system, or the social structures of the surrounding community. Among later anthropologists in the 1970s and onwards, this context was extended to include national and, increasingly, global systems: the latter still predominating through studies of transnational logics such as ‘networks’ (Riles 2000) and ‘audit’ (Strathern 2000). As this global context became ever more macro, there was also a simultaneous fascination with the micro, the notion that all organizational cultures were somehow sui generis. This model was particularly apt for the examination of manufactured corporate ‘strong cultures’ (cf. Kunda 1992; Garsten 1994). The approach I take here, to designate as ‘context’ a national philosophical inheritance, is therefore an unusual one within the field. There is no one reason why this might be the case, although it is possible that intellectuals play and have played an unusually significant role in the mediation of German cultural life (Ringer 1969; Dumont 1986: 140–52; Boyer 2005), making them more ‘contextual’ than other forces might be. With this in mind, we turn to explore the vision of one particular early twentieth-century intellectual: historian and theologian, Adolf von Harnack.

The ‘Harnack Principle’

Harnack was the founder and first president of the Max Planck Society’s predecessor, the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (KWG), and the person from whom the ‘Harnack Principle’ takes its name. The latter is described as the ‘structural principle’ of the MPG’s social order, and essentially means the institutionalizing of autonomous scientific communities governed by a single ‘charismatic’ leader (Weber 1979: 241–254). For Harnack, the contours of these communities were the institutes, but this has since been scaled down to the level of departments: of which each Institute has several.

On the MPG website one can find the following definition, ‘It represents a traditional policy of appointing the brightest minds as Scientific Members of the Max Planck Society, and building whole departments around these exceptional individuals when they become departmental directors’ (MPG 2012d). Once they do, these directors remain as such for the rest of their working lives, and are guaranteed a steady stream of public funding until called to retire. The founding of a new department is considered to be a ‘once in a lifetime opportunity’ for its first member, being invited to build a community of social-scientific praxis,
exchange and material culture from scratch. They are given a budget to buy the equipment and machines they will need, and begin ‘recruiting like hell’, for scientists of all stages and ages to join their team, often with some idea of the kinds of social relationships they wish to engineer. This community will grow in size, particularly in the early years, until it reaches a scale the director is comfortable with.

Directors and their subalterns make a substantial fetish of the ‘freedom’ the former possess in the governance of their community and their pursuit of ‘basic’ questions. In regards to governance, as they take great pleasure in telling me, the MPG is held to be an extremely ‘non-bureaucratic’ organization. They are responsible for hiring, which they often do without application forms, and are also the official heads of the institute’s administration. With reference to the latter, the fact that ‘politics is not dictating what the Society is working on’ is considered to be its ‘most highly valued commodity’. Meanwhile the generous endowment of base-level funding, is an explicit attempt to protect the MPG from simply catering to the demands of product application. As Article Two of its statutes state, ‘The Society’s institutes pursue scientific research freely and independently’ (1948: 5).

A conception of freedom has always been an integral part of the ‘Harnack Principle’. When Harnack founded the KWG, he was making a conscientious attempt to liberate scientific research from what he saw as the invidious bureaucratic interventions of the state, fully present in the universities (Ringer 1969). The ‘central figurehead’ around which the institutes were founded, as envisaged by Harnack, was both free from state intervention, as well as free to govern his community with quasi-autocratic control. The KWG was, however, always fully penetrated by private interests, with the guest list of its opening ceremony reading like a ‘“Who’s Who” of German industry’ (MPG 2012e). Likewise, although the Max Planck Society became formally liberated from industrial sponsorship after World War Two, the governing power of this ‘central figurehead’ was substantially diluted by progressive social reform in 1964 and 1972 (Gerwin 1996). Such freedom has therefore (as it always does) involved a substantial degree of contradiction in its actual realization.

Historians of the Kaiser-Wilhelm/Max Planck Society have deployed these political contradictions to critique the ‘Harnack Principle’ as nothing more than self-aggrandizing cultural myth (Vom Brocke and Leitko 1996). However, in this article I wish to take a different, namely anthropological, tack, which is to problematize this notion of freedom through an exploration of its specific philosophical foundation: as a freedom which posits self-limitation as its internal corollary. This foundation is the philosophical architecture of German Idealism, whose primary exponents were Humboldt, Fichte and Hegel among others (Harnack quotes Humboldt in particular, repeatedly in his speeches [Vierhaus 1996]).

As Fichte appears to articulate most closely this peculiar kind of freedom which the Max Planck director embodies, his writings will be my main point of reference.

Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity

Fichte and his fellow Idealists were particularly keen on the idea of freedom, indeed some scholars consider it to be ‘the central topic’ of German Idealism as a whole (Piché 2010: 378). Fichte’s impassioned commitment to the concept is clear from his philosophical speeches and writings. On his inauguration to the University of Berlin in 1811 he describes ‘conscious freedom’ as ‘the divine air’ which all of the University’s members may inhale (Ziolkowski 1990: 303). The idea that this nascent university would be a locus for the pursuit of ‘pure science’, uncorrupted by state or commercial involvement was, for Fichte and
its founder, Humboldt, its most fundamental characteristic (ibid.: 299). Meanwhile his major philosophical work, the ‘Wissenschaftslehre’ [Science of Knowledge] he extravagantly calls ‘the first system of freedom’ ever truly envisaged (Hoeltzel 2010: 93). It is, not surprisingly, a word he uses throughout the text.

Yet what does he really mean by it? Freedom has always been a particularly popular post-Enlightenment shifting signifier: from battle-cry for the French Revolution, to ideological vehicle for the American war-machine. It is always invoked as a convenient trope to convey something deemed by its invoker to be positive and somehow humanizing. For Fichte, the most positive and humanizing brand of freedom possible is intellectual freedom: the freedom of mind, or consciousness. He argues for the primacy of intellectual freedom through his most basic proposition that ‘The self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence’ (Fichte 1982: 99). No objective reality is able to emerge before the self becomes aware of itself as a self, before its mind is able to observe itself as being. Reality is then subsequently ‘posited’ by this self-aware self: ‘Everything that exists it posits; and what it does not posit, does not exist’ (ibid.: 225). It is particularly important for Fichte that no force should predetermine the ability of the self to posit the existence of itself nor other phenomena:

The self is to be absolutely independent, whereas everything is to be dependent upon it. Hence, what is required is the conformity of the object with the self; and it is the absolute self which demands this, precisely in the name of its absolute being. (ibid.: 230)

The process by which objects may come into being he calls ‘striving’. The self must strive in its engagement with the world to make it something real. This striving, the ceaseless activity of the self-positing, needless to say, cannot be directed or pushed in any direction. The goal of the striving must come from the self’s own unbounded interiority, ‘The striving of the self must be infinite, and can never have causality’. To put it simply, Fichte would be appalled by all bureaucratic phenomena which impinge upon the freedom of scholars to develop their thoughts irrespective of product (the ‘REF’ and other forms of ‘audit’ (Strathern 2000), the increasing prevalence of goal-directed funding, to name a few contemporary examples). All of these would be considered by him to elicit some kind of corrupting ‘causality’ on the striving of the self, a moral violation of the ‘system of freedom’ he carefully constructs.

However, Fichte’s freedom is not some egomanical free-for-all. Rather, it is very carefully circumscribed. The crucial point is that this circumscription takes place internally. There is, as Fichte says, ‘an original duality in the self’ (1982: 258): this ‘absolute self’ we have just encountered, as well as what he names a ‘not-self’, an external, limiting element contained within the self a priori, that is before its own self-positing. In this respect, Fichte’s philosophy of subjectivity is emblematic of what Louis Dumont calls the ‘schismatic introversion’ which has characterized German thought over the last few hundred years (1994: 49), what Goethe’s Faust names the ‘zwei Seelen … in meiner Brust’ [the two souls in my breast] (1872: 40). It is subtly dissimilar from the Cartesian cut between subject and object, instead it is a metaphysical cut within subjectivity itself, a dialectic not of, but ‘within consciousness’ (Ringer 1969: 93; my emphasis). The Fichtean self is sawed in two, and it is their interplay which guides activity.

The means by which the ‘absolute self’ is circumscribed by the sibling of the ‘not self’ is through the activation of an ‘Anstoß’ [habitually translated as ‘check’]. The Anstoß is the not-self’s limiting effect on the self. If the self is engaged in ‘striving’, then the not-self is engaged in ‘counter-striving’ (Fichte 1982: 238). If the self is ‘centripetal’ (spinning outwards in every direction) then the not-self is ‘centrifugal’ (spinning inwards again) (ibid.: 243).
If the self is constantly reaching out to infinity, then the not-self ensures that the ‘subjective must be extensible no further’ (ibid.: 189). In short, the Anstoß is the internal mechanism by which the self’s actions are governed. It allies the subject to an external reality, experienced as a ‘feeling’ which then conditions and shapes behaviour. The self thus is already penetrated by externality from its very inception.

Fichteian Subjects

How, then, do Max Planck directors resemble Fichte’s theory of subjectivity? Well, in the true spirit of ‘schismatic introversion’ this is perceptible in the realization of two kinds of self: firstly, the ‘absolute’ self, the self that considers itself free from any external ‘causality’ and thinks as such, and secondly, the self which senses an inner determination, an Anstoß, a ‘feeling’ which guides activity, making the limits of unbounded visions apparent through an existential tension in the inner life. Both of these kinds of self will be illustrated ethnographically in turn.

Firstly, the presence of an ‘absolute self’, a complete freedom of the intellect, is clear when directors and their subalterns describe the foundation and growth of their departments. As I sit down with one director to discuss his leadership, he begins telling me about his ‘vision’ almost immediately, and it is a theme which ends up dominating the rest of the discussion;

I really strongly believe that in order to do good science you have to have a vision of what you would like to work on. There are fashions in science. But it’s very important that one has a vision independently of all the fashions. It gives you a consistent way of working. It doesn’t have to be against all the fashions, but has to be something that you believe in strongly.

He then lays out in very clear and concrete terms what this ‘independent’ vision is. It has various elements to it, and he is conscious that some of these have the potential to make more of an impact than others. ‘After all’, he says, ‘we are the MPI so we have a very different perspective than, say, the Fraunhofer. Our mission is not necessarily applied research, helping industry. But our mission is to do the work ahead of this, to do the crazy things’. For him there is no goal-oriented ‘causality’ which guides his work.

When this director founded his department some years ago, he even sat around with his small cohort of senior scientists to brainstorm ‘ten commandments’ of the research field they would be investigating, each ‘commandment’ articulating this vision with greater clarity. As one senior scientist relates of these early stages, ‘In the beginning there was no department, just a lot of rooms. We would all sit round and discuss everything. The field at that stage was getting very fashionable, and (the director) had to decide who and what to exclude. It was almost as if we had to form a club’.

These stories of foundation and growth narrate a Fichteian tale of an ‘absolute self’ who imposes his or her consciousness on the world by ‘striving’. Indeed the language here is decidedly religious; the director becomes a messiah figure. The senior scientist’s description resembles the origin myth of a community’s foundation, a blank slate (‘there was no department, just a lot of rooms’) on which ‘ten commandments’, no less, were written, while the director paints himself as a charismatic persona with a ‘vision’ he ‘believe(s) in strongly’, and a ‘mission’ to boot. It shows how important the notion of a heroic leader, carving a scientific landscape ex nihilo (inside all of those ‘empty rooms’), is to the mythic life of the organization. Of course there are practical caveats, for instance in the era of multiple-headed institutes and the increasing importance of third-party funding, the field in which a potential director is working may be instrumental to his or her appointment (although the proponents of the Max Planck
ethos may be loathe to admit it). However, in significant practical and imagined ways, this sacred concept, intellectual freedom, argued for so vehemently by Fichte in the early nineteenth century, still lives on inside the Max Planck Society. The directors embody Fichte’s maxim, ‘The self is to be absolutely independent, whereas everything is to be dependent upon it’.

Where, then, is this inner determination, the Anstoß, a ‘check’ which contains this impulsive independence of an absolute self? This we will come to shortly, but first a procedural explanation will be necessary. Although their research trajectories have no ‘causality’ (as one executive board member of the Society puts, ‘Nobody is going to prescribe anything to them [the directors]’), there is an assiduous auditing process which takes place every two years, and another more serious one which takes place every six years. These are carried out over several days by the Fachbeirat [external advisory board], which produces a lengthy report subsequently submitted confidentially to the Society President. If the report holds the research being undertaken by an Institute, or even of a whole field of research, to be of insufficient quality, the President has the power to truncate its ‘base-level funding’ by up to 25 per cent. This potential loss is at the forefront of directorial consciousness, although it is apparently only ever very rarely carried out. As this same board member says, ‘It’s something everybody has in mind, let’s put it that way. So it’s one of those things that works although it’s never applied. [He chuckles] It has an incentive effect’.

The co-existence of a non-interventionist approach, (‘nobody is going to prescribe anything to them’) with a fine-combed post-facto review of all research activities they undertake, creates the cognitive space for the directors to ‘check’ themselves. The corollary of intellectual freedom is thus paradoxically an intense self-governance. One director explains the predicament of his position:

One of the main qualities of a researcher is to know when I should continue and when should I stop. When you find a scientist with burnout it’s probably because of this question. That’s a nagging question that worries you all the time. People think that being a professor is an easy job, but it’s extremely stressful psychologically. And there is a strong danger of burnout. What makes it so stressful is not the amount of work you have to do, but the uncertainty. If you are after a good question, there will be periods when you’re desperate. You ask yourself, am doing the right thing? Is it ever going to get better? You have to ask yourself, should I continue or should I stop? This is the most difficult question. In the end the most successful researcher is the one who ends up taking the right turn.

This ‘nagging question that worries you all the time’ is the Anstoß made manifest. In the process of his own ‘striving’, that is going ‘after a good question’, this director is constantly monitoring his own instinct in doing so. By incessantly asking himself whether he is on the right path, he reigns in his own ‘absolute being’, which seeks to spin outwards in every direction.

In Fichte’s philosophy, the ‘absolute self’ and the Anstoß effected by the ‘not-self’ are always tussling with each other, but are both necessary constituents of the subjective seesaw. What is important to note is that they are both embodied within the same acting subject. The dialectical tension here is therefore not between ‘agent’ and ‘structure’, as organizational theorists are wont to assume, but rather of two competing impulses within the individual.

Conclusion

Although Max Planck directors are enormously empowered in their relationship to research, and are given substantial ‘agency’ in effecting their personal visions (‘Nobody is going to prescribe anything to them’), this agency is just that, given. The ‘Harnack Principle’ is their cultural inheritance; the social is
not ‘flat’, as Latour would prefer to maintain, but already very unevenly distributed in their favour (2005: 15). Borrowing the idiolect of Mahmood, this agency ‘does not belong to the (directors) themselves’. It does not pre-exist nor does it resist the dynamics of the organization itself. Instead it is one which only becomes possible through the organization, and if it ‘belongs’ to anyone it is Fichte and his fellow German Idealists, whose still reverberating architectures of thought ennoble an idea of intellectual freedom and the moral autonomy of a heroic thinker and leader.

It is imperative therefore that the concept of agency is placed in cultural context, particularly with reference to the anthropology of organizations, which often posits a tension between agent and structure. I argue that agency has no exterior relationship to the conditions of power which enable it, and like Mahmood that it must be situated within ‘historically contingent discursive traditions’. In this vein, the directors of the Max Planck Society are only permitted to be mavericks and visionaries because this is the type of subjectivity that the organization makes room for. There may well be any number of other researchers who could easily perform similar kinds of personality, not least drawn from the ranks of senior scientists in the Society itself, but are prevented from so doing by the shape of their own occupational role.

This ‘discursive tradition’, which enables the agency of these directors, germinated from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, and was canonized in the twentieth. The former epoch was of foundational importance for German scholarly institutions, as it is in the rhetoric surrounding the University of Berlin, employed by philosophers like Johann Fichte, that a specific idea of scholarly subjectivity was carved out. It is this notion that was seized upon when Adolf von Harnack adumbrated his vision for the KWG. In this logic, a director realizes his agency through an internal dialectic, expanding his intellectual horizons in every direction, but also being forced to worry about, and take sole responsibility for, possible failure. Perhaps, in this light, we should begin to see all of the debates about agency for what they really are, culturally contingent and competing versions of what it means to be human.

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Notes

1. It is important to state from the outset that my argument applies solely to directors in the natural sciences, not the social sciences nor humanities. This does not mean it could not be extrapolated into these disciplines, but it is a knight’s move I do not have the evidence to make. My interlocutors were universally natural scientists and lead their departments in a way which may differ from the kind of leadership suitable for the human sciences.

2. On 1 January 2012, a total of 21,831 people were recorded as working inside the Society (MPG 2012a).
3. The fieldwork from which this ethnography is drawn was carried out between June 2010 and August 2012, in five institutes across Germany. All of my directorial interlocutors are natural scientists; and of these interviews, some of these took place repeatedly over several months, while others only once on a single day. All institutes and directors have been anonymized following ASA guidelines.

4. Approximately 151 out of 229 directors. This is approximate as ‘country of origin’ data is not available for all current directors (MPG 2012c).

5. As stated, this ‘base-level funding’ is expected to be supplemented by the winning of ‘project-based funding’, i.e. financial sponsorship by ‘third-parties’.

6. That their administrations are intended to serve them rather than govern them shields the institutes very effectively against the ‘new managerialism’ which Shore and Wright document elsewhere (2000: 58).

7. This statutory article is partly due to the intense ‘Nazification’ of the KWG during the 1930s and 1940s when they produced arms and chemicals on their behalf, a phenomenon well documented by historians (Beyler 2004; Heim et al. 2009).

8. Historians and historical anthropologists alike note that the epoch from 1770 to 1830, in which German Idealism flourished, is ‘very much the formative period for the 19th and 20th century’ (Dumont 1994: 17). Not only is it the foundational era for German national consciousness, it is also broadly the moment at which the structure of thought east of the Rhine diverges subtly from its Western counterpart, through its critique of the epistemological utilitarianism characteristic of British and French Enlightenment philosophy (Ringer 1969: 83–4).

9. Daniel Breazeale argues that the habitual translation of Anstoß as ‘check’ may obscure its other alternative meanings, namely ‘impetus’ (1995: 94). This would subtly alter the mechanics of the Anstoß, implying that it does not only limit activity in one direction, but positively encourages it in another.

References


