

## Memories of Bernd Giesen

Jeffrey Alexander, January 3, 2021

Bernd Giesen was fearless, a ferociously brilliant intellectual, a fiercely adventurous, lust-for-life, joy-loving man. He demanded beautiful *objets* - sleek cars, very old wines, African masks that filled his See Strasse living room. Bernd had the most capacious mind I have ever encountered, roaming freely among ancient and modern history, art, philosophy, social theory, micro-sociology and cultural sociology. His writing was almost freakishly creative, leaping with daring confidence toward the unknown; yet, it was also tightly argued. If his theorizing was unapologetically abstract, his empirical discussions were thick with the texture and stuff of social life, the illustrative, the everyday, the empirically concrete.

I had the great good fortune to have been close to Bernd, both to the mind and the man, for four decades. We met as barely 30-somethings at a small, generationally-defining German conference on Marx and Weber in 1979. At the Mexico ISA World Congress in 1982, Bernd walked up to Neil Smelser and me and proposed a series of German-American Theory Conferences. This idea launched three intensely compelling meetings that stretched over the next decade, demonstrating the common grounding of sociological theory, laying to rest sterile disputes from the 60s and 70s, and setting new agendas. The contributions to the first and the best of these meetings were published as *The Micro-Macro Link* (1987), which Bernd and I edited along with Smelser and Richard Munch. After agreeing to write the Introduction, Bernd announced he would be coming to Los Angeles for two weeks to do it in person. I was not entirely comfortable with this prospect. Wouldn't it be difficult to write general theory with another person, I wondered, especially somebody who was a demanding and sometimes impatient peer? It turned out to be thrilling. I sat in front of the computer, and Bernd sat at my side. Running through the wide range of macro and micro debates like the black and white keys on a piano keyboard, we composed a new piece of intellectual music.

The sometimes tawdry, sometimes starkly beautiful pop culture weirdness of Los Angeles fascinated Bernd, and he returned several times, the longest visit with his wife Chrissi, who worked in Berlin as a high level simultaneous "interpreter." She prepared haute cuisine meals, kept up on high culture and haute-couture, and explained that English, which she spoke perfectly, was just her 4th best language. I visited Bernd several times in Giessen and later at the EUI in Fiesole outside Florence. On one of those visits, in the gathering dusk of a late spring evening, Bernd and I confessed to one another that, in recent years, quietly and without public fanfare, each of us had turned away from the clarity of mainstream sociological theorizing and entered into the opaque, mysteriously exciting world of cultural theory and social meaning. We talked, almost in whispers, about this secretly shared cultural turn, and our ambition to make use of it to radically change sociology.

Our first chance to work on this together came in 1998. With the support of Neil Smelser, then Director of CASBS (Center for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences), I was able to invite Bernd, along with Ron Eyerman, Piotr Sztompka, and Bjorn Wittrock to work on a special project in Palo Alto. Meeting weekly over many months, we created our theory of cultural

trauma, which in the years since has spawned a global research program. Bernd often inspired me during these months at CASBS. I remember him grabbing a piece of chalk and leaping to the blackboard to synthesize our thinking at some critical juncture, then walking back to take his seat, his exquisite black Japanese suit covered in chalk dust. Even as Bernd and I, along with Ron Eyerman, worked to develop the analytical threads that became trauma theory, we bonded spiritually as we deployed the new theory to our respective sides of the Holocaust, he the trauma of German perpetrators, I the trauma of Jewish victims. These eventually became chapters in our co-authored *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (with Eyerman, Smelser, Sztompka, and Wittrock, 2004).

After that year in Palo Alto, Bernd moved south to Konstanz and I moved East to Yale, and the most productive period of our collaboration unfolded. It began with another conversation, this one long-distance. In the summer of 2001, during one of our every-few-months-catch-up conversations, I mentioned my new interest in theater and drama theory, and Bernd responded, “I’ve been moving there too.” Over the course of the next four years, our German and American professor-student “teams” met for intense, enlightening, and sometimes fractious discussions about performance, once at Yale, where Bernd, Ron Eyerman, and I taught a course on performance together, and twice in Konstanz. The sometimes conflicting but broadly complementary ideas and case studies that came out of these discussions were published in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual* (co-edited with Jason Mast, 2006). In the second half of that decade, Bernd and I moved on, with different but overlapping personnel, to the topic of materiality and iconicity. Once again, this cooperation triggered both a satisfying meeting of the minds and productive intellectual friction. The results were on full display – especially if you read between the lines – in our co-edited *Iconic Power* (with Dominik Bartmanski, 2012).

A truly gifted intellectual and fascinating personality, Bernd was also a talented academic entrepreneur and an electrifying and charismatic performer on the academic stage. Each of these qualities was fully evident in the annual *Meister* Class that Bernd and his team organized in the gorgeous early summers at Konstanz. Every year, two or three legendary social and cultural theorists, social scientists, and literary scholars were the hardworking guests of honor. It was a thrill to witness Bernd’s high wire act as he cajoled, inspired, and challenged, not only the “masters” he’d assembled, but the 20-plus students he’d invited to learn from and engage them. Most students were from Europe, but Bernd would be sure to reserve 2 or 3 slots for Yale CCS doctoral students, among whom the *Meister* constituted an annual pilgrimage to a sacred center of cultural thinking.

Bernd Giesen was a comet that blazed across the intellectual universe. He was also a dear friend and an inspiring colleague. His like will not soon come again, and never for me.