

## Aus aktuellem Anlass (Current debates)

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# On Academic debate: A comment on the discussions between Leonhardt, Roelevink and Berghahn

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I wish to thank the ZUG editors for inviting me to comment on the recent discussions in these pages between Holm Leonhardt, Eva-Maria Roelevink and Volker Berghahn. I am struck by the similarity between these debates and the judicial process under the common law system. Under the adversarial system of the Anglo-Saxon law, both sides to a dispute seek to marshal the best evidence in favour of their case, while testing the veracity of their opponent's evidence. It has long been held that in the crucible of the court-room, the «truth» will emerge. A similar, if less intense version of peer review and analysis is the foundation of academic progress; and there is evidence of it in their discussion.

The best debates, of course, focus strongly on the evidence, and not on the individuals arguing their case; although it is not unreasonable to also assess the credibility of the witness. As is also well known, two witnesses to the same event may often see, and recall, different things – and it the role of the court (or academic peers) to compare and contrast their version of events – hopefully to discover what «really» happened. In an adversarial system, however, it is also important that all the parties remain calm, focused on the central points, and respectful of their opponents and the court.

Unlike the legal system, where a final resolution (guilty or innocent) must emerge, it is also possible for academic research to progress, while individual researchers agree to disagree. In essence, their interpretation of what is important differs and both views can exist simultaneously. This is not the same as accepting errors or mistakes, but understanding that different perspectives can provide different insights.

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In 2013, Holm Arno Leonhardt published an 861 page opus, *Kartelltheorie und Internationale Beziehungen. Theoriegeschichtliche Studien*.<sup>1</sup> A wide-ranging text, spanning different centuries, nations, institutions and disciplines, he examined and applied the concept of cartels to a range of areas including private sector firms, the role of the state as well as international relations. His conception of cartels and cartel behaviour went well beyond the confines of economics or economic history or business history. He found many of the earlier discussions around cartels to be deficient. His discussion of cartels and cooperative behaviour included examining political behaviour and nations' imperial activities.

In 2015, his book was reviewed by Eva-Maria Roelevink, an expert in economic and business history.<sup>2</sup> In her review, she questioned, among other things, his criticisms of business history and his assertion to have created a «deconstructed» approach to examining cartels. These comments spurred Leonhardt to respond, in an article that also addressed the wider topic of factional disputes in historical cartel research.<sup>3</sup> In part, he appeared to argue his views, especially with regard to cartel theory, had been misrepresented by Roelevink. She responded to these criticisms in the same issue.<sup>4</sup> Here she argued that Leonhardt had overlooked or discounted several important theorists, and that to advance research into historical cartels, empirical, rather than theoretical research was of greatest urgency. Finally Volker Berghahn was invited by the ZUG editors to respond in more detail to Leonhardt's original book. He focussed especially on Leonhardt's discussion of events in World War Two, Jean Monnet's role with the ECSC and the influence of the United States on Europe after 1945.<sup>5</sup> In this discussion Berghahn, like Roelevink, comments from a position of expert knowledge; and like Roelevink he identified flaws in Leonhardt's analysis of particular events.

What are we to make of all this? Leonhardt has written a broad-sweeping volume that covers many eras, topics and disciplines. There are bound to be errors in such an approach. Both Roelevink and Berghahn are correct to identify these; this is precisely how academic debate advances understanding and accurately assesses the suitability of new perspectives on past events. Furthermore,

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1 Holm Arno Leonhardt, *Kartelltheorie und Internationale Beziehungen. Theoriegeschichtliche Studien*, Hildesheim et. al. 2013.

2 Eva-Maria Roelevink, Rezension: *Holm A. Leonhard Kartelltheorie und Internationale Beziehungen. Theoriegeschichtliche Studien*, in: ZUG 1 (2015) 110–112.

3 Holm A. Leonhard, *Zum Richtungsstreit in der Kartellgeschichtsforschung*, in: ZUG 1 (2016), 107–115.

4 Eva-Maria Roelevink, *Warum weniger eine neue Theorie als vielmehr eine neue empirische Kartellforschung notwendig ist*, in: ZUG 1 (2016) 116–120.

5 Volker Berghahn, *Einige weiterführende Gedanken zu Holm A. Leonhardts Kartelltheorie und Internationale Beziehungen*, in: ZUG 1 (2016) 121–126.

concepts evolve over time, and evolve along trajectories in different disciplines. As Leonhardt himself notes, even the basic concept of a cartel (a notoriously difficult concept to pin-down) may have one meaning in economics and a different meaning in drug enforcement debates.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, therefore that interpretations of what exactly is meant by a cartel varies, depending on the historical context in which it is examined. Indeed, understanding this is fundamental to understanding any historical document or its authors.

It is also crucial to scholarly debate that academics understand that concepts may be understood differently in different disciplines. For example, the term equilibrium does not mean exactly the same thing, and is not used in exactly the same way, in political science, economic history or economics. It is thus quite appropriate for experts to interpret basic concepts from their discipline's perspective and express their understanding of such terms from the framework of their own discipline. Such differences serve to highlight the need for care and clarity of communication in academic debate.

Ambitious and wide-ranging work, such as that presented by Leonhardt must pay particular attention to these variations, as the possibility for misunderstanding is high. Where such approaches make a particularly important contribution to academic debate is that when done well, they serve to gather together material that may have been overlooked, sidelined, or suppressed. Looking again at long-forgotten debates can remind us of earlier attitudes and understandings. Presenting and applying concepts across discipline boundaries can also stimulate researchers to think again about their use of those concepts in their own fields.

Ultimately the past is how we interpret it. Our task, as academics is to keep an open mind, and to examine, test and discover the past, so as to better understand the present and future. To achieve this takes civility, modesty, understanding of others and acknowledgment of one's own limitations, and the boundaries of one's discipline. No single perspective, and no single discipline will reveal all the answers in our collective quest to improve our understanding of human society.

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<sup>6</sup> Leonhardt, *Zum Richtungsstreit* (cf. n. 3), 107.