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## Conference Report

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# Leibniz honored in native city, but his economics remains unknown

by Rosa Tennenbaum

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The 350th anniversary of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's birth will arrive on July 1. This itself is cause enough for events, celebrations, and symposia to recall one of the founders of modern science. Leibniz's birthplace, the city of Leipzig, held one such symposium to kick off the year's commemorations on April 9-11 under the title, "Science and the Shaping of the World." This is where Leibniz passed the first 20 years of his life, years which in certain essential points stamped his character, although his rise to becoming one of the most famous men among the learned of Europe came about in other places and in other cities. In the mid-17th century, Leipzig already was a significant center for the book trade, and the home of Germany's greatest university, the University of Leipzig. Here the young Leibniz first attended the philosophy, and then the law faculty, before he was drawn to the courts of the eminent German princes, where he could hope to transplant his ideas.

The Saxon Academy of Sciences at Leipzig and the Leibniz Society of Hanover sponsored this international symposium, and a whole range of academic institutions participated. On the one hand, it was stirring to see that the spirit of Leibniz himself penetrates through the thick layers of dust which have settled down upon the academies and that it shines through the pessimistic spirit of our age to still inspire human beings today. On the other, it is highly doubtful that the "new Leibniz," longed for by several of the speakers, was to be found among those assembled.

In several presentations, the enormous breadth of the interests of the learned man, and the profound, continuing influence that his discoveries exert, even unto the present day, were brought into sharp relief. His interests and important contributions extended from medicine and physiology to optics and acoustics and went over to mechanics and mechanical physics, and would not be fully encompassed even should one also include his contributions to scientific method. He

was an historian and philologist, as well as an economist and political emissary; he was a learned man and a practical man, for whom no subject was too great or too small to awaken his curiosity. When he, for example, on one of his many journeys, came in the evening to a small German provincial town, the poor street lighting came to his attention. The next morning he immediately went over to the city hall and presented to the mayor a detailed plan for improving the miserable illumination by means of gas lanterns.

This ability, to engage himself on the spot with full abandonment to undertake remedying the smallest nuisances and hardships that then afflicted mankind, and to come up with totally concrete solutions, is immediately striking. Theory ought only to prepare a pathway for practice, it was not a thing in itself. The purpose of his academies or "societies" was not supposed to be only for doing research; rather, new technical discoveries had to be developed, which should be put on display there for the population and explained both by the inventors and the respective trade and professional groupings. Leibniz lamented the fact that we owe our knowledge to "merely a few tens of persons"; "the others have still not found their way onto the path." His academies ought to create remedies, and to convey the sciences to the people.

For Leibniz there existed a "pressing connection of knowledge and action," as illustrated in the remarks of Jürgen Mittelstrass from Constance. Philosophy, science, and technology are closely bound up with one other and imprinted by the Christian image of man. Society should "be guided by what is to its benefit," ought to elevate the overall conditions of life and of knowledge, in short: "To make the human species happy" was the goal which Leibniz pursued with his academies. By no means did this have to always proceed with deadly seriousness, as Detlef Doering of Leipzig showed in his speech about the "Young Leibniz and the Learned Societies in Leipzig and Jena." The early academies dealt with man as a whole; there would not merely be debate and investigation, but also singing, playing music, and taking strolls; poems would be composed and recited, and once in a while an oration would be staged "on behalf of Bacchus." Herbert Breger of

Hanover presented the young Leibniz as a downright boisterous, enthusiastic young man, overflowing with an incredible wealth of ideas.

Leibniz's design for academies took up a good deal of space in the symposium, probably also because he stands as a refreshingly pleasant antithesis to the current academic reality. Several speakers expressed a distinct discomfort whenever the discussion hit upon the current situation in the universities and the present condition of science and research. Wolfgang Frühwald from Bonn, in his capacity as president of the German Research Society, devoted himself entirely to this theme. He began his address on "*Theoria cum praxi*—The Forms of New Knowledge and the Problems of Advancement of Research in Germany," with some beautiful quotes out of Leibniz's "Academy Design." Theory and practice were one, the academy was both a research center and a manufacturing center, and served the general improvement of the intellectual and economic situation. The academies were also supposed to purify and unify language, to develop the language for the nation-state, a theme to which Leibniz personally devoted himself with great judiciousness. Frühwald reflected on the role that the national language played on behalf of the development of the nation-state.

European culture was generated out of the connection of language, writing, and movable-type printing; a civilized nation would always be defined within the national language. Knowledge would be begotten through language, propagated through language, and transmitted through writing. This has fundamentally changed. Today, scientific works are no longer language-oriented, but only result-oriented. Ninety-five percent of all scientific works, for the first time, are no longer in the respective national languages, but are just written in second- or third-class English and filed. The break in tradition, which is taking place with the present transition to the Information Society, were only comparable with the transition from the oral to the written tradition, Frühwald said.

The quantity of knowledge being produced daily can no longer be surveyed, let alone mastered. By means of the electronic media, this knowledge, which essentially has less of the character of knowledge than of information, is immediately disseminated throughout the entire world. The hyperinflation in knowledge and the speed of its diffusion are growing exponentially. In the next 15 years, as much research in the natural sciences will be carried out and published as in all of the 2,500 years since Heraclitus, Frühwald suggested. A powerful industry has become based upon the production of knowledge, in which the academies hardly participate at all any more. For these markets, universal knowledge is no longer in demand; rather, only highly specialized, very innovative knowledge can be sold.

Specialization, however, also means particularization, and profit from knowledge only too often goes hand in hand with loss of competence: Whenever we solve a new problem, a new procedure must be mastered, we put another program

into the computer. In this manner we are able to obtain results for which we have no prior idea of how they were created. The capacity to recognize and master essential coherencies is receding.

One further hallmark of this process is the lengthening of the chain of responsibility. Since the same process is occurring in the fields of economics and politics, responsibility can no longer be traced back to a specific person, and the concept of personal responsibility for a certain action gets utterly lost. "Responsibility," Frühwald joked, with a touch of hyperbole, "nowadays is only accepted by terrorists."

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Knowledge, Frühwald emphasized again and again, exists also, and most essentially, in the form of its transmission. If I read something in a book, it is absolutely not the same as when I am reading something on the Internet; the form of the delivery stamps our thinking and our power of comprehension differently. The relationship of speech, writing, and the printed book represents to humanity the humus within which it could germinate. A generation which almost grows up on the Internet will no longer have any relationship to our humanist traditions, the scientist feared. The break with tradition is therefore complete and our world will therefore appear entirely different.

Symposium participants were unified on one thing: By reactivating Leibniz's conception of the academy, the wounds which have been inflicted by the severing of liberal arts from the natural sciences, and the confusion of the concepts of knowledge and information in research and teaching, could be healed. Mittelstrass stressed that exactly Leibniz's ethical conceptions need to be discussed again today, if we wish to reform the nature of culture and education. Only twice in German history has a reform of the sciences and the educational system succeeded: with the Leibniz academy, and then once again with Humboldt's education reform and the founding of his Berlin University. Today we have to reconnect to this, for reform is no less urgent now than it was at that time, he deemed.

Leibniz's originality consisted exactly in the combination of what today is divided up into numerous disconnected disciplines, said Frau Hidé Ishiguro of Tokyo, who refreshingly brought together Leibniz's discovery of the infinitesimal calculus and his philosophy of language. His *Ars inveniendi*, his spirit of discovery, was at once a method of speaking, and of discovery. Hans Wussing of Leipzig gave an insight into the learned man's art of invention with the example of mining, to which Leibniz turned again and again. With the aid of wind power he succeeded in siphoning up the seepage of groundwater out from the mining pits, which he then additionally utilized to produce power for the drainage. Naturally, such developments also were accompanied by setbacks, and sometimes hit considerable resistance among some of his sillier contemporaries. For example, the Harz mine management protested against the water drainage equipment, because they had "a considerable loathing for the constant repairs."

Leibniz's ingenuity as an inventor was presented to the symposium by Professor Lehmann of Leipzig. Many years ago, Lehmann had begun to study Leibniz's calculating machine and became convinced that this design really would work. Within the conference he was able to demonstrate a fully functional replica of the "*calculator perpetuum*" to the delighted audience. It worked out every desired problem quickly and correctly, in each of the four basic operations of calculation. Leibniz only lacked a first-class technician who would have been able to carry out his ingenious invention, in Lehmann's estimation. In the original prototype, it was only that the prongs of the ratchet wheels which had to carry over the digits to the next decimal places had been spaced too narrowly, so that the transition to the next order of magnitude often failed to work properly. A good technician would have immediately noticed this in the process of building the machine, as Lehmann demonstrated. With this machine, he was directly able to show just how far into the future Leibniz's ideas continue to operate, because all mechanical calculators until well into our own century have been based upon his idea of the calculating bank.

Scarcely any attention was given at this symposium to Leibniz's economics, even though he had also erected the essential pillars of the field of national economy. In the public question and answer period, the illustrious panel admitted that they were not familiar with his writings on economics. Even the presentations on philosophy were somewhat disappointing, because they were cut off from the real world. The speakers remained imprisoned within the accumulated dust of their learning and treated the subject purely historically. Despite this, we can state that the integrity of scholarship has been maintained to the extent that Leibniz's opposition to Locke, Hobbes, and Descartes was prominently brought out. A wreath-laying at the Leibniz Monument and an expert tour through the small but attractive exhibition on the young Leibniz and the academies in Leipzig and Jena in his time, organized by Detlef Doerin, rounded out this symposium.

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## Italy

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# Northern League seeks 'right to secession'

by Claudio Celani

The sensational electoral success of the separatist Northern League in the April 21 Italian general election has opened a turbulent new phase in national political life. Umberto Bossi, the party's leader, has used the protest vote of almost 4 million people to escalate his attack against the nation-state, calling for the "right to secession" of northern Italy from the rest of the country. Bossi made his call at a May 4 meeting of the so-called Northern Parliament, the congress of all the Northern League's elected representatives, which has met regularly in the city of Mantua for the last year. He announced that the Northern Parliament is to be renamed the Parliament of Padania (the Po Valley), giving that name to the region from the Piedmontese Alps to the Adriatic Sea, along which flows Italy's longest river, the Po.

Bossi declared: "The time has come to sit around a table to divide the country. There is no possibility of getting out of the crisis if not through a choice that brings separation from a centralist, colonialist, and racist state. Today . . . we demand the right to secession." Such a right, Bossi said, will be exerted by a Committee for the Liberation of the Po Valley and by a shadow cabinet which he characterized as a "Sun cabinet," implying that it will be highly visible. Bossi compared his project to the split of former Czechoslovakia into two countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Bossi carefully added that he wants to achieve secession of northern Italy through "democratic means," through a referendum and "international recognition." However, guests at the Mantua meeting noticed the appearance of a militia-type organization, a few dozen members of which were dressed in green shirts—like Mussolini's Fascists. Mario Borghesio, a member of Parliament and leader of the "radical" faction of the League, explained to the daily *Corriere della Sera* May 6: "Perspectives [for the Green Shirts] are manifold and still to be explored. One could start with protecting forests, which today are threatened, and progressively give vent to the militants' commitment."

Bossi's statements were preceded by an interview with Roberto Maroni, the League's number two man and a former interior minister in the 1994 cabinet of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Maroni said: "We want the Europe of the re-