Heritage and Democracy

Introductory Thoughts

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For the *Arbeitskreis für Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege* (Association for Theory and Higher Education of Heritage Conservation),[1] conferring about heritage is what we do as a matter of course. In contrast, conferring about democracy in such a direct way initially seemed somewhat outside our comfort zone. Yet, for a long time, our conferences – always on a topic of particular current relevance – have also touched upon social questions and, by extension, on the democratic structures within which the processes of heritage and its conservation are embedded. Founded in 1977, in the Federal Republic of Germany, the Arbeitskreis held its first – and only – conference in a non-democratic state in 1986 in the People's Republic of Poland, in Gdansk. The city of Gdansk played a pioneering role in resisting the undemocratic communist regime in the then Polish People's Republic. Gdansk was the wellspring of the *Solidarność* movement, the independent trade union, which significantly contributed to the fall of the Iron Curtain and ultimately to the reunification of Germany. The topic at that conference was post-1945 reconstruction, focussing largely on Gdansk, but also featuring a comparison with Nuremberg and paving the way to examining questions of *'Denkmalpflege'* – the German word for, ostensibly, the care of listed buildings, but in its meaning so much broader and encapsulating all the complicated questions of cultural heritage which arise across different regimes.

The first conference held in a city of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the newly united Germany took place in Weimar in 1993. It was, in its own right a significant democratic event, particularly for the colleagues from the former GDR. The topic of democracy also played out in the conference session which explicitly dealt with 'inconvenient' heritages; for instance, the state architecture of dictatorships[2] and how to deal with them in democratic states.

Over the last twenty years, our conference topics have more variously touched upon themes in the wider realms of politics and democracy, namely on: public listed buildings and monuments (Dessau, 2005), social space (Leipzig, 2007), questions of borders and governmental changes in European regions (Strasbourg, 2008), post-1945 reconstruction (Utrecht, 2010, revisiting this topic nearly a quarter of a century after the Gdansk conference), contested heritage (Bolzano, 2012), values and evaluation (Cottbus, 2013), re-nationalisation and shared heritage (Tallinn, 2018; already under the cloud of the Russian invasion of Ukraine with the 2014 occupation of Crimea), on actors and stakeholders (Aachen, 2019), and on emotions with a focus on politicisation, mobilisation, and attachments (Bamberg, 2020).

Most recently, we discussed crises and disasters in heritage conservation (Zagreb, 2024), and not just with regard to the unsettling shocks of literal earthquakes.[3] This impressive list indicates that reflecting on questions of democracy in relation to heritage has a longstanding tradition within the *Arbeitskreis*.

The conference in Coventry has been the first with the term 'democracy' in its title.

What motivates us to discuss heritage with such an explicit reference to democracy at this moment in time? I know what has driven me to do this: It is the concern that successful, democratic stability cannot be taken for granted, even in established democracies. I come from a generation which still grew up in the so-called German Democratic Republic – a state *'democratic'* in name only. The peaceful transition to democracy and unity – not just in Germany, but across much of Eastern Europe – brought not only manifold opportunities, but also the hope that a move to democratic governments would be the inevitable trajectory of our time. The following years were accompanied largely by a sense of optimism which, notwithstanding regional conflicts in areas such as the former Yugoslavia, was pervasive across Europe and throughout the wider democratic world.

More than a third of a century later, we find ourselves at a juncture, where democratic institutions are once again being questioned; a process

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supported by volatile political trends, which undermine science, international collaboration, and mutual understanding across the world. This was already palpable when we first decided on this conference in September 2023. Subsequent global, European, and national events have accelerated and sharpened a sense of the precariousness of our democratic structures. There has been backsliding on democratic developments[4] over at least the last two decades: a "democratic recession"' which we must confront.[5] This means that a renewed appreciation of democratic values is needed, in tandem with a fightback through democratic processes in practice.

"Arguably, the importance of liberal democracy is two-fold: no other system of government guarantees the right to free expression of political preference; and no other system promotes progress through peaceful competition between different interests and ideas."[6]

Friedrich Schorlemmer, the prominent East German civil rights activist, who died in 2024, remarked: "Democracy is like a garden – if you don't tend to it, then it quickly goes wild!"[7] We are now looking at an increasingly "wild garden". Since we first started to conceptualise the topic in 2023, the debates about democracy have become yet more acute. This, in turn, intensifies the question: to what extent do we need to position or re-position ourselves professionally, in relation to heritage, the theory and practice of which we, the members of the AKTLD have dedicated large parts of our lives to.

Much like heritage protection, democracy is an ongoing activity of care rather than a one-off achievement – a journey rather than a destination. Cultural heritage, its designation, interpretation, and management are of course always affected by political circumstances. Whatever the approach taken towards heritage in democratic societies, it must be subject to public scrutiny, thereby necessitating dialogue and discourse beyond heritage professionals.

We work with the underlying assumption that cultural heritage in democratic societies and its publicly funded managing organisations are acting in the interest of the public good. This is increasingly being challenged not only by the voting public, but also by various representatives of the state.

During the later years of the UK's most recent Conservative government (ending in 2024[8]), a group of Members of Parliament objected to the National Trust exploring the colonial history of many of its properties. This led most extremely to death threats against the historian leading the inquiry and the director of the National Trust.[9] The question arises, what happens when democratically elected members of the legislature start to influence investigative and diverse narratives in the pursuit of popular support, thereby undermining egalitarian values of heritage and culture which heritage professionals have, arguably, been taking for granted? Where should the sovereignty of interpretation lie when populism is on the rise? Who defines, interprets, uses, or instrumentalises heritage and for what purposes? How do we prevent heritage practices from being harmful to democratic processes? … Whose heritage is it, anyway?[10]

Democratic processes are increasingly differentiated between top-down and bottom-up decision making, the field of cultural heritage is no exception. There are many perceptions as to how this differs in various national contexts. Through the conference and with this publication, we have brought together

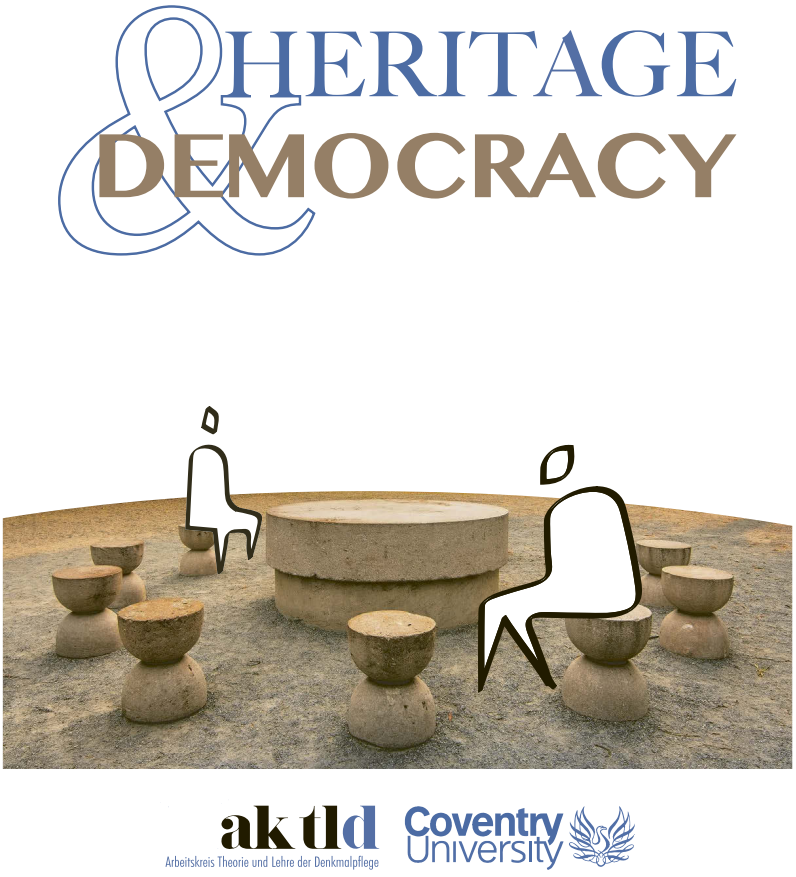

Fig. 1: Cover of the Conference Programme.

different national perspectives which explore the reality behind these perceptions.

The *Arbeitskreis* is steeped in discourse from a perspective of the canon of cultural heritage, its protection and conservation which has been developed over more than 200 years, originally in the context of the European Enlightenment and more recently that of globalisation. Yet in all the conferences listed above, we also always tentatively questioned this canon. The 2020 conference in Bamberg was of particular note in this context, querying as it did whether an allegedly scientific[11] approach to defining and managing heritage is still the way forward.[12]

In his contribution to that conference, Gerhard Vinken went even further by making the case for a *Re-Politisation* of the protection and management of cultural heritage.[13] Vinken warned us not to hide behind notions of science, objectivity, and neutrality when dealing with the *wicked problems* of cultural heritage.[14] International heritage discourses have been pointing this out through the key notion of Critical Heritage Studies. Vinken has been particularly concerned about the political self-restraint of the German heritage conservation sector,[15] something which, although historically understandable, needs to be overcome.

Questions have been raised recently about the extent to which the German military should consider ceasing its arguably non-political stance. For very understandable historical reasons this reluctance to be involved in overtly politicised activity, notably outside its own borders, has been a cornerstone of the nation's sense of itself. There may be a read-across here to our own area of interest. Significant historical and cultural developments in Germany and across the wider world may make the case for a more interventionist, less disinterested frame of mind, among those who hitherto considered themselves - even defined themselves – by their professional neutrality.

Within any democratic system there are sub-systems. The one we are professionally most familiar with is of course that of the institutions of architectural heritage protection. However, like individuals, each of these sub-systems cannot be an island: they must sustain the ability creatively to interact with other systems. In the UK, for example, the charitable and community sectors are generally upheld and even revered as traditional pillars of British society, not least in the heritage sector. Equally, *English Heritage and Historic England*, and their equivalents in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, have long focussed on heritage for the cohesion and wellbeing of communities.[16] *"Connecting Communities"* is one of the key headings[17] on the landing page of *Historic England's* website. Heritage authorities in Germany – arguably organised on a more top-down basis than is the case in the UK – are also increasingly discussing their options for engaging with the public.[18]

Two of the key engagement practices are *participatory* and *deliberative* democracy. Participation focuses on empowering citizens to act; deliberation focuses on discussion and debate between citizens and other stakeholders. Deliberation "shifts the emphasis from the outcome of the decision to the quality of the process."[19] "Ultimately, citizens should be swayed by the force of the better argument rather than by private concerns, biases, or views that are not publicly justifiable to their fellow deliberators."[20]

One of the biggest challenges of all democratic practice is that it takes time and effort, or as Oscar Wilde might have said: "The trouble… is that it takes up too many evenings."[21] One of the great opportunities – and, we must admit, luxuries – of our *Arbeitskreis* conferences is that we do take considerable time and effort to deliberate and that we don't shy away from controversial discussions.

As outlined above, for the *Arbeitskreis*, this topic is by no means new territory. What *is* new – and growing – is the fragility we now sense in our own countries, many of them established democracies; this apparent move away from democratic values under the guise of an indiscriminate agenda of free speech, extreme identity politics, conspiracy theories, and a sense of entitlement to one's own *"truth"* among large parts of the population, and increasingly in young audiences.

An effective (if not failsafe) antidote to all this confusion is education. Although this is of course a truism, it cannot be emphasised enough as one of the key agendas of 21st-century societies. Education is not only in the title of the *Arbeitskreis*, but also a daily practice of most members of the organisation, and one of its key roots and founding principles.

The precariousness of our democracies is to some extent mirrored in the vulnerability of our academic institutions, either through diminishing resources or imperilled freedom of operation, where societal priorities lie elsewhere. It forces universities to justify their activities beyond the creation and transfer of knowledge. Such activities which reach

beyond the academy is something most members of the *Arbeitskreis* have been engaged in for many years and even decades. Collaborating with civil society and fostering the understanding that heritage is a powerful force in our societies can be one of our most significant contributions.[22] Among all the disinformation and lies which pervade large parts of today's political discourses, it is more important than ever to educate ourselves and others – and specifically the next generation – about politics and how heritage work and knowledge of history can play a significant role in that.[23]

Coventry was a most pertinent place to hold a conference of this topic by a Germany-based organisation. The city, to a certain extent, provides a conceptual background to the questions of heritage and democracy.

Coventry still often refers to its destruction by the totalitarian German regime. The ubiquitous presence in the city of the symbol of the Phoenix, rising from the ashes, is testament to that as much as the ruins of St Michaels, the former Coventry Cathedral and now part of the complex which includes the post-war Cathedral.

Coventry is internationally recognised as a city of peace and reconciliation. The commitment to this goes back to the Second World War. The very day after the bombing, the Cathedral clergy started a process of reconciliation, with a commitment to not seek revenge but instead to strive for forgiveness; and, after the war, to work with those who had been enemies, in order "to build a kinder … world."[24] Later, Coventry embarked enthusiastically on the town twinning movement, with both Dresden and Kiel becoming partner cities in the post-war years. Ever since it was bombed in 1940, the city has promoted mutual understanding, human rights, peace, and security as pillars of democracy. This is reflected in multiple initiatives, notably within *Coventry University* the *Centre for Peace and Security*, which also works on questions of heritage and human rights;[25] and within the wider city, the *Coventry Association for International Friendship*[26] (CAIF), which was formally constituted in 1962 in the very venue of our conference, St Mary's Guildhall.

The post-war reconstruction of the centre of Coventry was significantly facilitated by the wartime destruction. Yet it actually followed a vision developed in the late 1930s by the team of the city architect, Donald Gibson. Under a Labour council this was, ostensibly, the result of a democratic decision. In our publication, the section containing the papers is bookended by submissions that explore in particular the relationship between Coventry and democracy.

The are the overall guiding questions we initially put forward to frame the discussion and to challenge our contributors were these:

- Notwithstanding the assumed consensus on the superiority of democracy as the least objectionable of all state models, is there an indication that heritage discourses and protection practices serve democratic societies (more so than autocratic ones)?
- How can discourses and practices of heritage uphold and develop democracy? And to what extent do they depend on it?
- What are the different heritage management practices of top-down/bottom-up decision making in national comparisons?
- What roles do heritage processes play in contemporary societies – both in support of state narratives and as oppositional and alternative practices?

The ways the contributors approached these questions were finally collected under the sub-topics of *Public Good, Civil Society, Politics*, and *Polity*, terms which of course overlap and intersect with each other yet nevertheless seem to us to provide a useful structure.

The formal presentation sections of the conference culminated in a panel discussion among colleagues in order to direct our conference topics to our own professional work, to our status as experts and towards the challenges we are facing in terms of authority and participatory decision making. We asked four professionals working in academia, practice, and administration about their experiences of working in and with institutions, which were set up and legitimised by democratic processes and law. Thomas Will introduced and chaired the discussion. He asked the participants to reflect on their understanding of four overarching themes: professional competence – the authority of expertise versus popular opinion; compromise – experts' role as professional arbiters in finding solutions; legitimisation – democratic mandate (top down) versus popular vote and grassroots politics (bottom up); and transparency – communication, participation and co-creating in decision making. The panel members were encouraged to talk about their own motivations and observations.

What is our non-disputable expertise and how should we communicate that? The answer to this is relatively easy regarding technical knowledge but becomes much more complex in questions of ethics and aesthetics, which are guided by values, emotions and sometimes habits. What became clear was that increasingly what is missing is not the expertise, but the acceptance of the knowledge behind the expertise. This recognition ultimately points to the ambivalence of heritage and its protection processes, which are being tested in each individual case.[27]

Through this more interactive format of a panel discussion, we followed on from the preceding presentation sessions and continued a discussion which is always prevalent in the *Arbeitskreis*, whether in formal sessions or in all the in-between conversations. Key take-aways were not just fascinating insights into personal perspectives, but also the function of heritage experts as facilitators of expert teams – particularly in decision making processes where they act as mediators without necessarily being the final judge.

As with all conferences, the topic, the presentations, and the published articles evolve over time. They also don't provide a complete picture but rather a current snapshot of thinking and research, which forms the basis for further discussion and hopefully acts as an inspiration for others to join and continue the debate.

Attempting to summarise all the contributions would not do them any justice and would amount to a simplification which is not conducive to the understanding of the complexity and nuance of the topic.

Instead, at this stage I would like to reflect on the title of our conference. It is a title that also carries with it the risk perhaps of being too broad, of straying too far from the professional business of the way we predominantly understand our heritage work. Yet, we deliberately focussed on a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach, bringing together researchers and activists from a broad range of professional backgrounds and from countries with varying degrees of democraticness. For me, it is this intersection between the disciplines and viewpoints, where we approach ideas tentatively yet with a kind of curiosity, which reveals for each of us our positionality, our own circumstances, and our values both as teachers as well as learners, in turn reflecting on and accepting the positionality of our counterparts. In our academic lives, these are normally colleagues or students, but we also have highly significant influence on the wider public. At some stage during this conference – and I recall some similar discussions at previous ones – we discussed how we can make the case for our own values without falling into the populist trap. Should we become lobbyists? We should certainly be wary of manipulating others, but we also do need to increase our efforts in one of our core activities – education. And we need to form further alliances: too often is the heritage sector still perceived as a sideshow in key societal developments. Bringing people along, communicating clearly – and, in the process of creating professionals, professing our values, and in this particular case our *democratic* values in relation to heritage, including to the wider public – will have to play a much more prominent role if the current political climate persists. If the call for re-politicising heritage was pertinent in 2020,[28] its potency has only multiplied since. This also means that representatives of the state in heritage matters need to reflect more critically on the power they are able to and perhaps ought to wield in wider society.

The integration of our understanding of heritage much more in conjunction with the notion of democracy needs to include heritage *in the* democratic process and heritage *as* a democratic process. Contemplating the title of the conference and this publication, it appears to me now that we must shift the emphasise of our activism – scholarly or otherwise – from Heritage *and* Democracy to Heritage *FOR* Democracy.

To me, democracy, despite all its imperfections and messiness, is a non-negotiable value. My professional values cannot be separated from it. It is my hope that this conference will provide a stronger impetus to think along these lines and develop creative approaches to the increasingly complex and volatile political landscape. As invoked by Lisa Marie Selitz in her contribution in this publication – in the words of Willy Brandt[29] from 1969, we ought to "… dare more democracy", "… mehr Demokratie wagen"!

Figures

1 Illustration by Adelina Skirth, inspired by "The Table of Silence" 1937 by Constantin Brâncuși, as photographed by Iulian Oancia.

Endnotes

1 Working Group/Association for Theory and Teaching of Architectural Conservation, *Über den AKTLD*, https://www.tu.berlin/denkmalpflege/aktld-e-v/ueber-den-aktld.

2 Klaus von Beyme, Staatsarchitektur der Diktaturen – ein Object der Denkmalpflege?, in: *Denkmale und Gedenkstätten: Dokumentation der Jahrestagung*, Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen, Weimar 41 (1995) 4/5 (Veröffentlichung des Arbeitskreises Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V., Band 7), pp. 179–184.

3 Further information on the publications of the Arbeitskreis can be found on the association's website, currently hosted by the Technische Universität Berlin: https://www.tu.berlin/denkmalpflege/aktld-e-v-1/publikationen

4 Our World In Data, *Democracy Index*. Data adapted from the Economist Intelligence Unit; Gapminder; Various sources; and Bastian Herre, Lucas Rodés-Guirao, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, *Democracy*, 2023, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu.

5 Larry Diamond, Facing up to the Democratic Recession, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 26 (2015), No. 1, pp. 141–155, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/facing-up-to-the-democratic-recession/.

6 Chatham House, *The Importance of Democracy*, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/importance-democracy.

7 Friedrich Schorlemmer, *Demokratie lebt vom selbstbestimmten Mitmachen der Bürger*, 2013 ["Die Demokratie ist wie ein Garten, der verwildert, sobald man ihn nicht mehr pflegt."], p. 1, http://www.friedrich-schorlemmer.de/docs/2013-02-01-Mitmachen%20der%20B%C3%BCrger.pdf.

8 The Conservative Party held power in coalition with the Liberal Democrats (2010–2015) and then alone (2015–2024), spanning 14 years overall.

9 Ben Quinn, How the National Trust fought back against the culture warriors, in: *The Guardian*, 27 October 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/oct/27/how-the-national-trust-fought-back-against-the-culture-warriors.

10 Sabine Coady Schäbitz, Whose heritage is it anyway? Denkmalschutz und Integration In Großbritannien, in: Birgit Franz and Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper (Hrsg.), *Sozialer Raum und Denkmalinventar: Vorgehensweisen zwischen Erhalt, Verlust, Wandel und Fortschreibung,* Dresden 2008 (Veröffentlichung des Arbeitskreises Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V., Band 17), pp. 84-86.

11 Alternatively, 'academic' or 'learned' in the wider understanding of the German word 'wissenschaftlich'.

12 „Können wir weiterhin mit einem angeblich wissenschaftlichen Denkmalbegriff, der sich auf eine Mastererzählung, einen Kanon, beruft, Wertzuweisungen betreiben?" Stephanie Herold and Gerhard Vinken, Denkmal_Emotion: Eine Einführung, in: Stephanie Herold und Gerhard Vinken (Hrsg.), *Denkmal_Emotion: Politisierung – Mobilisierung – Bindung*, Heidelberg 2021 (Veröffentlichungen des Arbeitskreises Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V., Band 30), p.10, https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/arthistoricum/catalog/book/920/chapter/13250.

13 Gerhard Vinken, Erbe und Emotionen. Zur überfälligen Re-Politisierung der Denkmalpflege, in: Stephanie Herold und Gerhard Vinken (Hrsg.), *Denkmal_Emotion: Politisierung – Mobilisierung – Bindung*, Heidelberg 2021 (Veröffentlichungen des Arbeitskreises Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V., Band 30), pp.14-23, file:///C:/Users/ac4938/Downloads/arthistoricum-920-978-3-98501-043-1-CH05-1.pdf.

14 Ibid. pp. 20-21.

15 Ibid.

16 See also: Sabine Coady Schäbitz, Kulturerbe und Sozialer Zusammenhalt. Ein anderer Wert in der Denkmalpflegediskussion Großbritanniens, in: Birgit Franz and Gerhard Vinken (Hrg.), *Denkmale – Werte – Bewertung: Denkmalpflege im Spannungsfeld von Fachinstitutionen und bürgerschaftlichem Engagement*, Holzminden 2014 V(eröffentlichung des Arbeitskreises Theorie und Lehre der Denkmalpflege e.V., Band 23), pp. 112-120.

17 Historic England, https://historicengland.org.uk/. In fact, it used to be the top headline in September/ October 2024, but has now moved to place 4, with the top heading being 'Protecting Our Heritage'.

18 Gerhard Vinken, op. cit.

19 Jennifer L. Eagan, *Deliberative Democracy (Political Theory),* Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/deliberative-democracy.

20 Ibid.

21 Oscar Wilde is said to have remarked: "The trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings." However, as with many quotes attributed to celebrities, this cannot be properly evidenced. See also: https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/06/03/evenings/.

22 See also: Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels and Jon D. Daehnke (Ed.), *Heritage and Democracy: Crisis, Critique, and Collaboration,* University of Florida Press, 2023.

23 Ibid.

24 Coventry Cathedral, *Our story of forgiveness: From destruction towards peace*, https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/our-story/the-story-of-coventry-cathedral.

25 Elly Harrowell and Aurélie Broeckerhoff from the Centre contributed to our conference with a paper titled: *'Developing a framework for integrating intangible cultural heritage protection and peacebuilding'*. Unfortunately, we weren't able to include this in the publication, but you can find out more about their work on the website of the *Centre for Peace and Security at Coventry University:* https://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2019/on-our-land/.

26 Further information about the *Coventry Association for International Friendship* is available at: https://caifonline.com/.

27 Thomas Will, notes to introductory remarks to the panel discussion.

28 Gerhard Vinken op. cit.

29 Willy Brandt, Regierungserklärung vor dem Deutschen Bundestag [Government statement to the German Bundestag], Bonn 28 October 1969, https://www.willy-brandt-biografie.de/quellen/bedeutende-reden/regierungserklaerung-vor-dem-bundestag-in-bonn-28-oktober-1969/. p.2