

1. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Imperial Presidency—Issues and Arguments

Convenors: Bernd Greiner (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung) and Susan Neiman (Einstein Forum, Potsdam)

Conference language: English

19 and 20 March 2010

Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: Ever since the diverse scandals of the Nixon administration in the early 1970s, the term »Imperial Presidency« has become a catchphrase and can sometimes be politically incendiary. In particular, critics of George W. Bush have made general use of the term. Has this concept lost some standing in the present academic discussion—apart from its use to describe a discourse?

First of all the term suits the description very well and aids in delimiting the problem area. It focuses our interest on the structural ambiguities in the American constitution; while there is a strongly normative claim to shared power and overlapping spheres of responsibility for all constitutional organs, the rules and procedures for guaranteeing these checks and balances have remained thoroughly vague to the present day. It is obvious that this constitutional diffuseness, particularly with respect to the widening of the executive's influence, can occasionally lead to an abuse of power. For historians and social scientists the challenge is to examine the conditions under which such power-political abuses succeed or fail, and by whom and through what means they are corrected.

But with all the undesirable developments associated with America's »Imperial Presidency,« the term should not be restricted to the United States. In Europe there has long been debate over a power-privileged executive and marginal, though not powerless, supervisory bodies such as parliaments. Because transparency, scrutiny and the control of power are among the sacrosanct elements in democracies, one can also assert that preoccupation with the »Imperial Presidency« focuses attention on a field of research that will and must greatly occupy us in the future for a variety of reasons—chief among these being the institutional, procedural and normative vulnerability of democracies in times of crisis, emergency, or war.

BCZ: What is the role played by the debate on the »Imperial Presidency« in research on contemporary history?

The interest after 9/11 has markedly increased. As the discussion during the Berliner Colloquium showed, there are mounting doubts as to whether one should in fact speak of the »imperial presidency« or whether this notion can be too easily misconstrued. This is not to say that the office of the American president has not meanwhile been vested with responsibilities and privileges of power in peacetime that were previously only to be found during time of war. It is also true that all U.S. presidents after 1945 were very successful in challenging Congress' most important spheres of competence—military deployments, making war and peace—which in contrast to other policy areas are clearly delineated by the U.S. constitution. This compels us to speak of a »National Security Presidency« taking into account the fact that in contrast to foreign and security policy, one can hardly speak of an imperial plenitude of power in domestic politics. More comprehensive, and at the same time more precise, would still seem to be the term »National Security State,« which obviates any inappropriate personalization and includes the giant security apparatuses that emerged during the Cold War and the »War on Terror«—bureaucracies with a pronounced awareness of their power and ability to assert it.

BCZ: Did the colloquium give inspiration for further research?

In droves. Actually this thematic field can only be adequately addressed in interplay with other disciplines. With respect to the U.S. Congress, for example, political scientists are in demand. In this case one can hardly speak of a disempowerment. It is striking how light-mindedly parliamentarians typically disempower themselves, how carelessly they surrender their supervisory control and in holding people to account—and with very few exceptions. Also, it is astonishing how little reflection is given to the mystification of power in the United States, in particular by the academic elites. After all, it is quite apparent that without the support of legal or military and security experts of the »National Security State« that such would never function so smoothly. And yet the last major study on »defense intellectuals« was done thirty years ago. We are also lacking in knowledge as to the functional mechanism and the defining political powers of gigantic bureaucracies that have a vested interest in maintaining a mental state of war both in their own ranks and particularly in the political and public spheres.

BCZ: Can one speak of a specifically American way of dealing with uncertainty and threats?

Much would point to it. But why this society, for almost the last hundred years, repeatedly and even regularly finds itself in political states of excitation and sometimes even hysteria—to this question the scholarly answers are very few. Only one thing is evident—the kind and extent of real threats are not a sufficient explanation for the reactions and the resonance they find among the public. There is clearly more in play. So before one undertakes a comparative analysis of the political mobilization of emotions and fears of various states, one would do well to study the effective peculiarities of America. Ultimately the colloquium inspired a research project on »fearmongers« in the United States and the obsession with »national security.«