Dissertating ad Nauseum

In the words of Woody Allen: Sex and death are two things that come once in a lifetime. But at least after death you're not nauseous." We can add a third thing that occurs only once for most of us—writing a dissertation. But it too may make you nauseous!

I wrote only dissertation, which was completed in 1971 in a strange place called the United States. It would be strange to German students perhaps because the rules for dissertation writing then and there were so vague, unwritten, almost nonexistent. I was left pretty much on my own, which is to say, with almost no guidance. Maybe that is why I didn't feel any nausea when it was over.

When exactly was it over? Not when the committee accepted it and I got my degree. I continued working on it for seven years altogether before it was published, and then I worked on it again for a second, enlarged edition, published in 1994—making it nearly two decades that I lived with it off and on. It had an unusual history for a dissertation, not only in length of time, editions, but also in the fact that it sold pretty well—going into six translations, with worldwide sales of 50-75,000 copies (I can only estimate), and most remarkable to me it is still in print.

At the same time that dissertation developed and prospered, it did not meet with much academic success. Most people probably think my second book, *Dust Bow*l, was my dissertation. Certainly itt was the one that got more attention, won a

bigger prize, and generated more attention among historians. But then what is a successful dissertation? I don't know. Is it one that helps you get a job? By that standard mine was a failure.

It failed academically perhaps because it did not fit any standard categories. It was not pure history of science, nor the usual intellectual and cultural history. It was broad in chronology, too broad one of my committee members said. Had I gotten more and better advice, I would have probably written quite a different book.

The only rule I encountered was to show up now and then with a chapter you had finished in hand to give to your advisor. Maybe he would read it, but he would read it very slowly in his own time, and to me it seemed not very carefully. While waiting and waiting for comments, and there were never many of them, the expectation was that one should work on another chapter. After you got a big enough pile of chapters, and after your advisor and committee had slogged through them all, and if they were not too bad, then they gave you the degree.

That I suppose is not the German way. Advisors here probably take their responsibility more seriously. Here too I suppose there must be an old and strict set of rules and formats to follow (unless you are working with Professor Mauch!). I read on Wikipedia the following summary of what an Old World dissertation must look like:

> *There must be a) an introduction, which introduces the research topic, the methodology, as well as its scope and significance; b) a literature review, reviewing relevant literature and showing how this has informed the research issue; c) a methodology chapter, explaining how the research has been designed and why the research methods/population/data collection and analysis being used have been chosen; d) a findings chapter, outlining the findings of the research itself; e) an analysis and discussion chapter, analysing the findings and discussing them in the context of the literature review (this chapter is often divided into two—analysis and discussion); f) a conclusion.*

What a mouthful! Like a mouthful of dry oats. It doesn't make dissertating seem much fun at all, but very nauseating. Yes, there is some logic in including all these different elements, but the format seems far too dull and mechanical to me.

But with so little experience in dissertation writing and all of it ignorant of rules and conventions, how can I help you? I feel completely unqualified. Well, I have advised more than twenty dissertations over my career. Almost all of them have ended up being published in book form by reputable presses. Some have won prizes, many have become widely read by scholars and the public. My advisees must have been doing something right. Of course I didn't have much to do with that success. They succeeded mainly on their own. But I can say that there weren't any failures!

Here are a few things I believe are useful tips to doing a dissertation:

1. From the beginning ***a dissertation should be conceived as a real book,*** not written only for an advisor and committee. One should think of a broader audience beyond this place and moment and even think about reaching people who don't teach at a university as part of your potential audience.

   If you think about reaching that broader audience, then you will soon see that nobody really wants to read chapters written according to the rules I cited a moment ago—nobody. Who really enjoys sitting down to peruse a literature review, a methodology chapter, a chapter on "findings," etc? It sounds deadly and dull. The first thing a publisher would do is to throw out that cookie-cutter table of contents and ask you to start over. So avoid that outcome, and just write it like a real book from the beginning.

   Books (including dissertations that become books, and they should) have varied forms and approaches. Each book should be a little different, have its own history, its own course of development, its own tone and personality. That outcome takes time to evolve. It should emerge slowly as you do research, think, and create. You cannot decide exactly on it before you even begin. It takes a long time to invent the form that is best for you and your subject

2. ***Start with a question that intrigues <u>you</u>.*** I said "A QUESTION," not five or ten of them! You should be able to state that one central question in a single sentence with a question mark at the end. Of course you may have a few subordinate questions, but not all questions are or should be equal in the good dissertation. Deciding on this hierarchy is more important than you might think.

   That overall question should intrigue <u>you</u> first and foremost because if it doesn't get you excited, then you won't get any satisfaction from it regardless of its critical reception. And you should. In the event that no one else likes it or buys it as a book, you at least should be able to say that you enjoyed the writing and learned a lot. But it is also likely that if you are excited and passionate about your research, so others will be.

   That research question should be one that no one else has answered satisfactorily or perhaps even asked. Maybe no one has even thought of the question, or thought it mattered. But while it should be a fairly new question or have a new answer, it should be a *question that matters*—ie., an important question, one that is worth a lot of time investigating.

   In the US a dissertation can take at least three years to write, and then another five or six years to revise for publication. That's 8 or 9 years. If you have not come up with an important question whose answer you don't know but feel compelled to answer, you won't make it. You will quickly get bored with your subject, want to abandon it, and may never see it all the way through.

The best questions for dissertation writing are usually those that lead one on to another related and broader questions, that is, they are part of a cluster of issues that you have struck you in your graduate classes as exciting and you want to think about a lot more.

In most cases your advisor is not the best person to identify that single, core dissertation question. He or she must approve it, but don't expect them to come up with it. It has to come from you and your life and your interests. Now and then, to be sure, advisors do help their students find a topic and focus on a question. They should do so only if they feel like they know you, your life and interests pretty well. That's the only way I would ever give a poor suffering student a research question.

I won't intervene until the student has developed at least some good questions that he or she wants to discuss and then we can ask how to make one of those questions into the main research question.

3. Be sure that ***sufficient historical materials exist and are accessible to you, materials that will <u>allow you to answer that question</u>***. Is that so obvious? Some questions cannot be answered, no matter how important they are. We don't have the material to do so. We can only speculate.

A common problem is a mismatch between the question and the research materials. The materials available to you have to allow you to answer that question. So ask yourself: *What will your materials allow you to ask?*

That a dissertation is about research *is crucial* to understand and remember. You don't deserve a Ph.D. for writing a novel or some creative work of nonfiction. You get to call yourself "Doctor" only after you have mastered research techniques and done deep research and convinced your advisor and others that you know what good research is and how to do it.

Experiment all you like with the manner of presenting that research, but never lose sight of the reason why you want a Ph.D.: i.e., because you want to learn research methods and use them to write a research-oriented book.

Leave your personal sentiments aside and tell your personal story someplace else.

Some historians like to say that we should focus more on learning how to tell a good story. I don't agree with that, at least as the main purpose. Yes, knowing how to narrate your research effectively is important, but a dissertation is not primarily a "story." Thomas Mann wrote stories, Toni Morrison writes stories. A Hollywood film director turns out many, many stories. You are not like them: You are not a storyteller but a scholar doing research and finding answers that can be supported, doing work that requires evidentiary support.

4. ***Think like a scientist***. I don't mean a scientist who is trying to get lots of numbers and measure things, who builds models or experiments in a lab. That is not the only way to be scientific. Historians can and should be scientific in their own way.

   We don't think usually think in terms of numbers or measurements or believe that they can explain everything; there are unnumbered facts and unquantifiable truths to be uncovered. They can be found in dusty old archives, usually in the form of written documents, or they can be photos, films, etc, but whatever they are we must analyze them systematically and objectively, which is to say, scientifically.

   What makes the dissertation writer a kind of scientist is that he or she is trying to explain something. "Why did that happen? What were the consequences? Or what changed in that place or time, and how can we explain the change?" If you throw up your hands and say, I cannot explain this or that or I feel it is presumptuous to explain anything, then get out of the dissertation program. You *must* explain something convincingly or you should be writing a novel instead.

   The professional mantra among historians is that we explain "change over time," by which we mean usually change in the human condition, not change in the ecosphere or cosmos. We explain change in economic conditions, social relationships, ecological relationships, attitudes and expressions. If we cannot explain some important change, then we are more like a journalist, good or bad, simply reporting on events.

So inscribe on the wall next to your work space this question: What am I trying to explain? And then ask, do I have the information I need? And then add, and only then, do I need or have a theory?

5. ***I believe that theory is vital***. But how, why, and what does that mean? Theory is not simply some word, sentence, or cluster of words or ideas you borrow from, say, Michel Foucault or Ulrich Beck, and throw in to make your prose look more stylish or impressive. Theory is a frequently misunderstood and misapplied concept. Theory in a more scientific sense means an explanation that comes out of research, an explanation that is clearly set forth and can be tested by others. Darwin came up with "a theory," the most important perhaps in the modern world, the theory of evolution of species through natural selection. It has stood the test of time. It works, it explains.

   But too often theory, especially among historians, literary scholars, and others in social science or humanities programs, is not like that. Theory has been stretched to include simply citing somebody's "opinion," "idea," or even adopting some ideology. Or sometimes it means throwing in a string of quotations. We write about "my theory" or "theories," and often they are simply an assortment of untested and *untestable* ideas, often expressed in pretentious or obscure language. Theory then becomes some oracular saying uttered from a high pedestal: "As Marx says…". Sometime it is nothing more than a bunch of labels or names attached to something which may or may not

even exist, or at least has never been proved to exist: like Freud's subconscious, Marx's dialectical materialism, and so forth.

In many cases those words explain nothing.

We can also call theory a set of ideas that help us develop a HYPOTHESIS. Eventually you should come up with a hypothesis that your research suggests and supports. This requires careful, rigorous work. You muar be very clear minded about it, not muddled or lazy.

What is your hypothesis? Have you considered alternative hypotheses, and why have you rejected them?

In any case your hypothesis should be free, or as free as possible, from what you think the world *ought to be like*. You are supposed to be explaining, not advocating for some slant on the world or some social reform. Your hypothesis should not be an expression of your judgment, your personal views, likes and dislikes, prejudices or political leanings. You are not writing a newspaper editorial or a blog.

6. ***Write like a poet.*** Labor long and hard over each word and each sentence you write. Write your chapters with as much energy and as much clarity as you can. But above all be precise and very deliberate in your choice of words.

A dissertation can be a thing of beauty and grace, elegant in language and evocative in tone. But above all at its heart it must be precise in expression, and if it is not, if it is muddled in language, it is muddled in analysis. The poet's writing does not have to be gorgeous. Leave all the gorgeous writing to those

who have nothing but gorgeousness to offer. You have research and analysis to offer, and never forget that. Your goal is to make sure your advisor and everyone else who reads the dissertation, or who eventually will read the book, understands your explanation completely. They must "get it." And they must get the evidence and reasoning that you have worked so hard to assemble and provide as support.

Always write with a thesaurus at hand. Use it a lot! First use it to give more variety to your prose, but even more important to make that prose as precise as possible. Search for exactly the right word. Review each sentence over and over to make sure that it says what you to say as precisely as possible, with no excess wordiness or sloppy language.

Ultimately this means doing a hell of a lot of revising. Every sentence should be scrutinized for repetitiveness, flow, clarity, and precision. Every chapter should be revised many, many times. REVISE. I cannot emphasize that word enough. Revise, revise, revise! Open that dictionary and thesaurus.

Personally, I cannot do that kind of strenuous, attentive writing and revising for more than three or four hours at a time. I try to do it in the morning when my brain is most clear and rested, working e each day from about 7 or 8 am to late morning. This has become almost a daily habit. I get up and go as straight as possible to my work place and get into it. And once the first draft is done, I start on the revisions, which can go on for months and months.

In conclusion, a good dissertation, it seems to me, combines a sense of freedom and play, wit and color, with a sense of rigor and objectivity. Dissertations that try to explain and explain well need not be pedantic or dry or coldly logical. It is possible to do research in history as a kind of scientist without become a tedious collector of facts.

So have I made you nauseous yet?