



Photo: MPI for Social Law and Social Policy

Seat of Learning

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a sofa is a sofa is a sofa is a sofa. However, this example in the library of the Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy in Munich has connotations that extend beyond the Wikipedia definition of “a piece of upholstered furniture suitable for sitting or reclining.” The designer *objet* dating from the late 1960s came to prominence thanks to the persistent myth that Jürgen Habermas had sat on it, steeped in thought. Starting in 1971, he joined Carl Friedrich Weizsäcker as Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Living Conditions in the Scientific and Technical World in Starnberg. Nine years later, upon Weizsäcker’s retirement, the institute was renamed the Max Planck Institute for Social Sciences and relocated to Munich. The sofa and Habermas moved with it.

Soon after, however, the sofa acquired a new owner with the arrival of Franz Emanuel Weinert. Habermas took his leave, and Weinert remained, becoming the Founding Director of the new Max Planck Institute for Psychological Research. This also no longer exists: in 2006, it was merged with the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig.

Only the sofa still remains. Perhaps because it is “tainted with odium,” as Emeritus Wolfgang Prinz put it, without so much as a hint of disrespect. “Institutes come and go, but the sofa survives,” says sociologist Gertrud Nunner-Winkler with a smile. For well over 30 years, her career and that of the sofa have progressed in parallel, as both made the transition from Starnberg to Munich. Whose seat of learning is it now? Library users like to sit on the sofa as they leaf through books and journals. It’s a very comfortable place indeed to seek out information.