

Inventories of Bankrupt Households in Bern: Arranging and
Rearranging the 'Hausrat' (1760-1914)

With regard to the changing modes of Doing house and family, the leading question of this Subproject is how the material culture of the domestic micro-space was arranged and rearranged in the course of the long 18th century. With the so-called 'Geltstagsrödel' of Bern we have access to a homogeneous series of several hundred bankruptcy inventories which run without interruption from the 17th century until 1831. The researcher has easy access to this mass of sources through an archival catalogue which lists all cases of bankruptcy inventories in Bern in alphabetical order with the names of the families and their professions. Unlike probate inventories, 'Geltstagsrödel' of bankrupt households include all-encompassing inventories of the possessions of all strata, ranging from day labourers and artisans to well-known patricians. All objects are listed in great detail and with a precise indication of their value, often room by room, which allows us to reconstruct the material and the spatial arrangements of the domestic sphere. Moreover, according to the Bernese statutes, the belongings of wives, the 'Weibergut', had to be listed separately. In some cases, even the condition of the objects due to their everyday use is mentioned. Furthermore, lists with the names of the creditors are included. Hence, regarding the aspect of financial support it will be possible to reconstruct the social environment of the household and analyse changing roles of neighbours, kin, friends and others. Of central concern for this subproject are the changing social diffusion of goods and the respective transformation of domesticity. Based on the quantitative and qualitative study of the 'Geltstagsrödel', the subproject deals with questions of functional differentiation and spatial reallocation. Did domestic settings transform into several spheres and 'stages' (E. Goffman), such as professional sphere (workshop, office), a new sphere of quasi-public sociability and display (parlour, upper lounge) and another also new sphere of privacy and domesticity (closet, well-furnished bedchambers, nursery), each of them endowed with specific everyday objects? Secondly, the question of spatial differentiation applies to the formation of separate gender spheres, spheres for the different generations and not least for domestic servants. Thirdly, the question of social differentiation in the domestic sphere applies to consumption. So far, we may assume that the formation of different styles and tastes oscillated between the scarcity of the urban poor and luxuries of the middling sort.