

## CULTURE IN AMERICAN HISTORY: TRANSATLANTIC PERSPECTIVES YOUNG SCHOLARS FORUM 2003

Seminar at the GHI, May 29–June 1, 2003. Convener: Christine von Oertzen (GHI). Moderators: Kathleen Conzen (University of Chicago), Jane Dailey (Johns Hopkins University), Christof Mauch (GHI), Mary McGuire (Southern Illinois University), Michael Salman (University of California, Los Angeles), and Christoph Strupp (GHI).

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The 2003 Young Scholars Forum offered German graduate students working on topics in American history the opportunity to develop their research in collaboration with peers and distinguished professors from this side of the Atlantic. Our work began with an invitation to German applicants to define the role of culture in their approaches to American history, encouraging submissions in the following, admittedly rather general topic areas: migrations and regions; politics and foreign relations; race, ethnicity, and identity; sexuality and gender relations; as well as religion, education, memory, experience, and historical imagery.

After selecting our German candidates, we issued a second call for papers to American graduate students. After considering many strong applications, we settled on ten excellent representatives from Germany and five from the United States. Among these fifteen young scholars, we identified seven general areas of research: the British Empire and America; Film; Intellectual History and Transfer of Ideas; Transatlantic Cultures and Discourses; Slavery; Immigration; and the U.S. Army in Germany and Vietnam. Four distinguished American mentors, each an expert in at least one of the fields mentioned, accepted our invitation to participate in the Forum and to share their broad knowledge of the topics.

In order to promote a lively exchange of views among our participants, papers were distributed in advance. Rather than asking each individual to present his or her work, we followed the model of our existing graduate seminars and decided that each participant should briefly introduce a colleague's paper.

The Forum began with a discussion of Stefanie Schneider's and Almut Steinbach's papers on British-American relations and imperialism during the nineteenth century. Drawing upon contemporary caricatures, Schneider demonstrated that the symbolic representation of friendship existed long before—and not long after, as has often been argued—its manifestation at the formal political level. Steinbach, for her part, called

into question the argument that the advance of English as the world's lingua franca may be attributed primarily to the rise of the British Empire. Americans, not Britons, led the charge, as American missionaries to British colonies such as Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaya (Malaysia) went so far as to put reading and writing before religious instruction.

Julian Hanich presented an analysis of the Murnau Film, *Sunrise*. Much praised by critics, the 1927 release enjoyed only limited popular success, a fact Hanich attributes less to the sense that it was "too German" and more to the complex metaphorical fantasy employed by the German-born director who had just immigrated to the United States.

The work of Anja Becker, Michael Frey, and Martin Woessner demonstrated the vitality of transatlantic perspectives on intellectual history. Becker offered us an exact portrayal of the ways Leipzig University served as a conduit for the transfer of knowledge from German professors to American students and therefore back to the United States; Frey and Woessner focused their attention on the period after 1945. Using the example of Marcuse's "One Dimensional Man," Frey showed us how the American and German student movements engaged in a lively exchange of theories back and forth across the Atlantic. Furthermore, Woessner's compelling analysis of Martin Heidegger's reception in the United States proved that the transfer of ideas and knowledge—in this instance, through the initiative of the American philosopher, Glenn Grey—hinges upon the individuals and their personal connections.

Hannah Spahn brought us into the realm of linguistic theory with her analysis of Thomas Jefferson's writings. Spahn illustrated that Jefferson's views on slavery were not, as many assume, a paradox, but rather lack the sort of moral ambiguity that modern writers have posited. Jim Down's paper sparked a memorable discussion of whether one can, based on the extant archival evidence, speak of homosexual slaves; this discussion of what is and what is not actually "researchable" informed subsequent sessions as well. Transatlantic exchange is one thing, but how can one define a transatlantic culture? Manfred Roppelt, focusing on ball games in the eighteenth century, and Joseph Murray, tracing the *fin de siècle* question of whether the deaf should be allowed to marry one another, both addressed this complex question in novel ways. Here the differences within the transatlantic culture mattered, too, for Murray showed that the deaf community in both England and the United States insisted on marrying their deaf loved ones against the wishes of social hygienists.

Three presenters offered their perspectives on questions of immigration. Jens-Rainer Berg's contribution approached immigration as a study of body history and, in this respect, extended the analytical lines set out in Murray's consideration of social hygiene. Entire villages of Catholics

pulling up the stakes in the Eifel and heading to the Holy Land of East-Central Wisconsin was the story Beth Schlemper shared with us, offering a compelling presentation of the nuance geographers bring to the study of history and culture. Susanne Wiedemann traced the complex bundle of ethnic identity, cultural memory, and nationhood through the lives of German-Jewish immigrants—individuals who had eventually made their way to San Francisco via Shanghai.

Alexander Vasansky and Ann-Kathrin Colomb are working on the historical experiences of U.S. military dependents—in Germany and Vietnam, respectively—and their research proves how vital the study of the military is to understanding American society and culture during the twentieth century. Vasansky's interest, based on his study of the archival records, is the problem of deviance and drug use among male GIs, while Colomb's oral history sources shed light on the experiences of Army nurses in Vietnam and then on their lives upon returning to civilian life.

All of the participants presented their work and their comments in compelling and interesting ways. As a group, the participants were engaged and engaging, each able to situate her or his work within the broader strains of historiography that characterize the study of the transatlantic region. The "thickening" of our conversations during our few days together was most satisfying. The concept of culture was not essential in every aspect; instead, intellectual and social history were also important, demonstrating once again that innovative forms of writing history are bound to combine different theoretical and methodological approaches. The discussion resulted in stating the need to define and historicize concepts of transnationalism, regionalism, and transfer.

Bringing young specialists in American history from Germany together with their natural counterparts in this country turned out to be a great success. Both groups expressed the desire to come together as a scholarly community during the coming months and years, an undertaking the German Historical Institute welcomes and looks forward to supporting.

*Christine von Oertzen*

## **Participants and Their Topics**

ANJA BECKER (University of Leipzig), *'Leipzig University was, until very recently, of no such great importance.'* *Academic Networks of American Students at Leipzig University, 1870–1900*

JENS-RAINER BERG (University of Hamburg), *Different Bodies: 'New Immigrants' in the American Perception*

ANN-KATHRIN COLOMB (University of Tübingen), *For Jesus Christ and John Wayne: American Nurses in the Vietnam War*

JIM DOWNS (Columbia University), *Were There Gay Slaves? Homosexuality and the Historian's Craft*

MICHAEL FREY (University of Bochum), *A Disneyland Version of the Weimar Republic: The American Student Movement and Herbert Marcuse*

JULIAN HANICH (Free University of Berlin), *Journey to the End of the Night. Murnau's Sunrise and the Conflicting Systems of the American 1920s*

JOSEPH J. MURRAY (University of Iowa), *True Love and Sympathy. The American Deaf-Deaf Marriages Debate in Transatlantic Perspective, 1833–1920*

MANFRED ROPPELT (Catholic University of Eichstätt), *Ball Games in Colonial North America as Part of an Atlantic Culture*

BETH SCHLEMPER (Illinois State University), *From the Eifel to the Holyland: The Construction of Identity and Community Life*

STEFANIE SCHNEIDER (University of Erfurt), *Gendered Nations. Love Relationships as a Symbol of Anglo-American Paranationalism*

HANNAH SPAHN (Free University of Berlin), *Jefferson's Attitude toward Slavery and Race as a Problem in Cultural History*

ALMUT STEINBACH (University of Konstanz), *American Missions in the British Empire. Their Contribution to the Spread of the English Language—A Study of Ceylon and British Malaya*

ALEXANDER VAZANSKY (University of Heidelberg), *The Army in Decay: Drug Abuse and Racial Tensions in the United States Army, Europe, 1968–1975*

SUSANNE WIEDEMANN (Brown University), *Berlin—Shanghai—San Francisco: Ethnic Indentity, Cultural Memory, and Nation in the (Re) Making of the Shanghailanders Community*

MARTIN WOESSNER (CUNY Graduate Center), *J. Glenn Gray, Martin Heidegger, and German-American Intellectual Exchange after the Second World War*