

CONFERENCES, SYMPOSIA, SEMINARS

AMERICA IN GERMANY—GERMANY IN AMERICA

Panel at the German Historikertag in Halle a.d. Saale, September 12, 2002. Convener: Christof Mauch. Participants: Heike Bungert (University of Cologne), Kathleen Conzen (University of Chicago), Andreas Daum (Harvard University), Philipp Gassert (University of Heidelberg), Wilfried Mausbach (Free University, Berlin), Axel Schildt (Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte and University of Hamburg).

The 44th biennial Historikertag, the largest meeting of professional historians in Germany, was dedicated to the topic "Traditionen—Visionen." The German Historical Institute organized and sponsored a panel that focused on the German presence in America and the American presence in Germany. In his introduction, Christof Mauch pointed out that the papers in this section reflected a change of influence from the nineteenth to the twentieth century in the German-American relationship. The first three papers focused on nineteenth-century German immigrants and travellers to the United States; the other two were dedicated to America's influence in Germany in the twentieth century. America played only a secondary role in political, economic, cultural, and scientific discourses of the nineteenth century, and German cultural critics often regarded the United States as a country without memory or history or, for that matter, as the "land of the future" (Hegel). The situation changed in the course of the twentieth century, when the American influence in Germany and Western Europe became strong in almost every field: American troops and movies, computer software and fashion, and more recently, the introduction of the Bachelor of Arts degree are highly visible and much-discussed symptoms of America's presence in and the Americanization of today's Germany. In contrast, the German influence in today's American culture is hardly visible, even though, according to the 2000 census, German-Americans are the strongest ethnic group in the U.S.

In a methodologically reflexive and highly stimulating paper, Andreas Daum (who unfortunately could not attend the meeting himself, but whose paper was read by Kathleen Conzen), argued that the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt enjoyed a great public reputation in nineteenth-century America. According to Daum, Humboldt was "invented" as a "hero" primarily *after* his death. He became a public figure

between 1859 and 1880 because worshipping him served multiple purposes on different (popular) levels of American culture. Daum discussed images of Humboldt as well as discursive strategies and symbolic acts pertaining to the American veneration of this German hero, whose popularity seems to have hinged on multiple (Daum identified ten) different "symbolic meanings" that could be found in American Humboldt celebrations. Depending on the ideals that specific social or ethnic groups projected onto their hero, Humboldt could be represented as a cosmopolitan figure or a nationalist German, a freethinker or a believer in God, a scientist or a politician, a second Columbus or a new Benjamin Franklin. Furthermore, Daum argued that Humboldt's success as a public figure coincided with the last peak of parade culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, which also saw the unveiling of Humboldt monuments in three major American cities: Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Chicago. According to Daum, the invention of "Humboldt-as hero" happened "because diverse groups within the United States realized that, in a period of social, ethnic, and cultural unrest, Humboldt's biography, his outstanding scientific accomplishments, and his political opinions allowed them to project their different cultural self-definitions onto one individual."

Like Andreas Daum, Heike Bungert discussed social values and cultural phenomena as essential elements within America's immigrant society. Bungert argued that German ethnic festivals played an immensely important role for nineteenth-century German-Americans. Because of the absence of common religious, social, and (until 1871) national roots, festivities offered "the only opportunity" to German-Americans for the "construction of a collective identity or ethnicity." Bungert explained that *Sängerfeste* and *Turnfeste*, as well as the anniversary celebrations of German personalities, were designed to gain recognition by fellow Americans and to invoke the German past and images of *Heimat*; to build German-American identities and to allow a temporary retreat from everyday routine. According to Bungert, the creation of the German Reich strengthened the identification of German-Americans with their homeland. At the same time, regional origins and differences were emphasized in a new type of *Volksfest* culture that began to arise in the late nineteenth century. Contrary to other scholars, Bungert argued that German-American festive culture did not disappear after World War I, but that sites of German-American memory were now located in America, rather than Germany.

In the third paper of this panel, Kathleen Conzen focused on a much overlooked section of America's immigrant population: German-speaking Catholics. By the end of the nineteenth century, this group had formed well over 2000 parishes scattered across the northern United

States. German Catholicism had endured as a distinctive subculture in American society because so many aspects of American life were confessionalised in nineteenth-century America and, more specifically, because Catholics had been successful since the 1820s in establishing a wide array of institutions, ranging from schools to mutual benefit societies, from orphanages to German-language Catholic newspapers. According to Conzen, the underlying organizational energy was as much an aggressive diasporic reflection of Catholic Germany as it was a defensive reaction to American nativism, German immigrant anticlericalism, or American Catholicism. The influence of nineteenth-century confessionalism, for which German Catholic immigrants may provide an instructive example, was not only stronger than is generally assumed, but according to Kathleen Conzen, it can also help us understand the American concern with religion which is "too often dismissed by American historians as either irrational nativism or irrelevant distraction from more central issues of race."

In a fourth paper (an expanded version of which is published in this issue of the Bulletin), Philipp Gassert focused on the field of American Studies in Germany, as well as on its main protagonists and institutions. Gassert emphasized the fact that the founding of the German Society of American Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Amerikastudien, DGfA) in 1953 was supported by the High Commissioner of the United States and clearly showed an "American face." The Americans saw the revitalization of American Studies after World War II as part of their more general efforts in the field of reeducation and democratization. At the same time, however, a number of continuities lived on after 1945. The first board of the DGfA combined members who had emigrated from Nazi Germany, and others who had remained active as academics during the Third Reich. The ambiguous character of this new beginning was accompanied by the attempt to establish American Studies as a "cooperative project" of different disciplines rather than a subject of its own, which it had been during the Weimar period and the Third Reich.

In the last paper, Wilfried Mausbach discussed and analyzed German discourses about the war in Vietnam. Mausbach argued that terms such as the Occident (or *Abendland*), the West, the Atlantic Community, and the Free World provided emotionally charged patterns of political, ideological, and spacial identification for postwar Germans in an increasingly globalized and bipolar world. Vietnam had a fixed place in this virtual space. The issues connected with Vietnam were seen as a free-world problem rather than a regional matter. McGeorge Bundy declared at one point that "the defense of Berlin, right now, is in Vietnam." Thus, the Berlin-Saigon analogy provided a central symbol within this discourse of an imagined global geography. Interestingly, at the same time, Vietnam

also served as a very different symbol for leading members of the radical socialist student movement who identified the American genocide in Vietnam with the Holocaust and Vietnam with Auschwitz. In this respect, German discourses about Vietnam remind us that the 1960s saw “not only,” as Wilfried Mausbach put it, “an American war in Vietnam but also a German war for Vietnam.”

In his comments, Axel Schildt emphasized that all of the presenters had focused more on cultural issues than on diplomatic history. All of them had analyzed images of Germany or America, and they had thereby revealed the prejudices, visions, and desires of the creators of those images. Schildt made numerous constructive comments about each paper, but in his criticism he repeatedly returned to the larger question of what social factors and conditions might have contributed to the erosion or the disappearance of specific images, values, and preferences. The papers, as well as Axel Schildt’s comment, triggered an extensive discussion with a large and very interested audience.

Christof Mauch