

GHI RESEARCH

COMPETING MODERNITIES: GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES, 1890 TO THE PRESENT

Christof Mauch (GHI) and Kiran Klaus Patel (Humboldt University, Berlin)

The GHI and the Humboldt University Berlin recently began a joint project, "Competing Modernities: Germany and the United States, 1890 to the Present." The goal of this new project is to systematically compare the paths of the United States and Germany from a number of vantage points over an extended period of time. Made possible by a grant from the Robert Bosch Foundation (Stuttgart), it is conceived for a broader public in addition to an academic audience. One of the project's major objectives is the publication of a collection of scholarly but highly readable essays in English and German. Because it is the first comprehensive comparison of two national histories on this scale, it is hoped that the publication will serve as a model and a stimulus for future research. The project also strives to contribute to the public discussion about future social and political developments in Germany and in the United States.

Scholars from both sides of the Atlantic will work together in teams, called "tandems." To better serve this dialogue, two workshops will be held, as will multiple public events. In contrast to most university-based projects, "Competing Modernities" is concerned with a large-scale synthesis rather than with basic research. The interest shown by think-tanks, publishers, research centers, and research institutions when the project was still in its planning phase suggests that it will find great resonance in America as well as in Europe. The overarching intention of the project is to identify the historically conditioned cultural differences between Germany and the United States and to inspire public debate in both countries. This subject has great social and political relevance in light of today's much discussed question of whether "the West" has a future as a community based on shared values and actions.

We are not aiming for an encyclopedic contrast in the form of a handbook. Instead, we seek to open up avenues for the comparative study of significant themes based on existing research. To this end, we will investigate the emergence of commonalities *and* differences, continuities *and* breaks in each country's national history. Our ambition is to

compare two national histories. Within this framework, we will also investigate reciprocal perceptions and cross-cultural transfers. The histories of two countries will not be examined in terms of individual phenomena or events, but over a long period with reference to broad questions. We hope that our project will mark a new phase in comparative historical studies.

The time period to be examined spans the years in which modernity emerged. From the 1890s onwards, various changes made their mark on society. Urbanization, industrialization, the formation of a mass political market, imperial ambitions, and the beginnings of modern art are only a few examples of these developments. While these forces also characterized other Western societies of the period, the “young nations” Germany and the United States stand out from the rest. As “latecomers,” each sought a higher international standing, an aspiration which would lead Germany into the catastrophe of National Socialism, and the United States, by contrast, into a position of global leadership after two world wars and the Cold War. By examining the period from the 1890s to the present, we will deliberately breach traditional historical caesuras, especially regarding German history (1918, 1933, 1945), mindful of how more recent research increasingly questions these boundary lines. Our study will also attempt to provide a new basis for judging to what extent these dates actually do signal historical “breaks.”

Tandems of scholars will produce essays on the following subjects: empire and nation; religion; constitutional law; discipline and order; the welfare state; migration; gender roles and the family; markets and consumer culture; labor and industry; environment; science and education; and media. They will thus address central aspects of emerging modernity with reference to crucial current issues.

It is our hope that the methodology and international scope of “Competing Modernities” will have an impact on universities and schools on both sides of the Atlantic. Both the shared features and unique aspects of individual national histories can be brought into sharper focus and critically evaluated through a comparative perspective. On an institutional level, “Competing Modernities” seeks to promote transatlantic cooperation among a new generation of scholars in Germany and the United States. The current, politically lively debates around the idea of a “transatlantic community of values” might also gain historical perspectives from this project.