

COMPETING MODERNITIES: THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND GERMANY SINCE 1890

Conference at the American Academy Berlin. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI) and Kiran Klaus Patel (Humboldt University, Berlin). Made possible by a grant from the Robert Bosch Foundation, Stuttgart, and the Humboldt University.

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What sorts of commonalities, differences, and connections can be uncovered through a comparative study of Germany and the United States in the twentieth century? The project "Competing Modernities," a cooperative effort between the Humboldt University and the GHI, is dedicated to these comprehensive questions. As we reported in the previous issue of the *GHI Bulletin*, in the project, pairs of experts work together as a "tandem" on fundamental questions such as the role of the state, law, religion, or migration. The tandems will write essays that are accessible to a broad audience. Thus, the texts can offer insight into both societies' paths to modernity.

To lay the groundwork for these essays, a first workshop took place on September 18, 2004 at the American Academy in Berlin-Wannsee. Twenty participants from Britain, Germany, and the United States presented and discussed their first working hypotheses. The workshop served to introduce the project participants to one another, to provide an opportunity to discuss the project on a conceptual level, and to address potential omissions or areas of overlap. This resulted in lively and productive debates about the working theories of the various subprojects.

The empirical results of each tandem will be the subject of a second workshop that will be held at the GHI in Washington in September 2005.

In the following, we will detail four of the most important conceptual foundations of the project.

In the first place, there was a broad consensus among the participants that in order to comprehend the route of these two societies into modernity, it would make sense to conceive of a “long” twentieth century. In contrast to the conventional periodization, which takes the First World War as a starting point, our studies will commence with the 1880s or 1890s. It is not only the history of industrialization that reveals crucial modernizing developments in those decades, but also the histories of fields such as conservation or art. For that reason, “Competing Modernities” will employ the periodization that is increasingly used for global history. At the same time, we will investigate lines of continuity that extend further into the past. It is self-evident, for example, that one cannot understand the history of religion or the state without a longer temporal perspective.

Originally, we planned to conclude our investigations with the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was the beginning of a new era of globalization that had a significant impact on Germany and America. However, the workshop concluded that it would make more sense to extend the study up to the present in order to allow the parallels, connections, and contrasts between the two societies to emerge with full clarity.

In the second place, we discussed in great detail our conceptual concern that, on many points, American history in this period is characterized by a relatively high degree of homogeneity, whereas German history is replete with ruptures and new beginnings. To compare the United States with Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic, the National Socialist regime, the “old” Federal Republic and the GDR, and reunified Germany is an enormous challenge. Interestingly, the consensus of our discussion was that the greatest problem was not posed by the question of how to integrate the study of the Nazi period into our analysis, even though it was clearly a “breakdown of civilization” that goes beyond the boundaries of any comparison with American democracy. Conceptually, it will be even more difficult for the various subprojects to adequately consider the GDR. For the Cold War era, a comparison of America and Germany is difficult because American history must be related to the history of both German states. Nonetheless, there was broad consensus that the history of the GDR cannot be excluded without risking a deceptive teleological narrative in which a divided Germany would appear as merely an interlude.

Thirdly, the workshop clarified how important it is to consider transnational interactions together with a comparison of the two societies. The history of science, of consumption, or of the media cannot be discussed without taking stock of the complex, multisided transfers and mutual

influences. The phrase “Americanization of German society,” understood here as the specific adaptation of elements of American society, can only be a shorthand for this nuanced process. There are especially interesting questions about the GDR in this regard—for example, when one considers media history and the impact on eastern Germany of American programming broadcast by West German television. This is but one instance of the multifaceted interconnections that transcend the boundaries of the Cold War system.

Finally, the workshop was productive in identifying and correcting possible areas of overlap or omission between the various subprojects. Additionally, we discussed the question of how to present themes not covered by any of the subprojects. Twelve main themes were presented at the workshop: Empire and Nation (Thomas Bender and Michael Geyer); Religion (Simone Lässig and Rainer Prätorius); Law (Manfred Berg and Dieter Gosewinkel); Discipline and Order (Dirk Schumann and Judith Sealander); the Welfare State (Daniel Letwin and Gabriele Metzler); Migration (Tobias Brinkmann and Annemarie Sammartino); Gender, Work, and the Family (Eileen Boris and Christine von Oertzen); Markets and Consumer Culture (Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Paul Nolte); Labor and Industry (Colleen A. Dunlavy and Thomas Welskopp); Environment (Christof Mauch and Kiran Klaus Patel); Science and Education (Kathryn Olesko and Christoph Strupp); and Media (Philipp Gassert and Christina von Hodenberg).

At the next workshop in September 2005, we will discuss the results of the individual tandems. Abstracts of these are available on the GHI website, which will also feature regular updates on the status of the project.

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