

HAPPENING WITH A ROYAL TOUCH: JOHN F. KENNEDY AND THE GERMANS

Second Edmund Spevack Memorial Lecture at Adams House, Harvard University, October 22, 2004. Speaker: Andreas Daum (University at Buffalo, SUNY). Co-sponsored by the GHI, Adams House, and the Edmund Spevack Memorial Trust.

Andreas Daum's lecture presented a cultural interpretation of German-American relations in the twentieth century. Daum focused on the social dynamics that marked President Kennedy's visit to Germany in June 1963, and situated them at the intersection of diverse and much older traditions of publicly staging politics. Following the example of the French historian Marc Bloch and his seminal work on the "royal touch," Daum argued that medieval and early modern practices of turning encounters between rulers and their people into visible events marked by immediate physical contact survived into the modern era, no less than hopes for miracles, which were revitalized in the age of mass politics and served as vehicles to express a longing for change.

Physical presence and visibility played a major role in the United States' strategy after 1948/49 to secure the cohesion of the transatlantic alliance and to reaffirm West Germany's political alignment with the United States. In 1963, the tendency to dramatize the necessity of transatlantic bonds culminated in the staging of Kennedy's visit to Germany. The U.S. administration and its counterparts in Bonn and Berlin had planned the event minutely. The popular reaction, however, transcended both the expectations of the planners and the constraints that the security forces had imposed upon the population. The public enthusiasm for Kennedy revived older traditions of unrest and street theater and turned the event into a mass happening. This occurred at a time when the concept of "happenings" as an interactive form of artistic production was gaining prominence in the western world. In their public veneration of Kennedy, the Germans articulated hopes for political redemption that were reminiscent of forms of popular Catholicism. This "happening with a royal touch" remained ambivalent for observers. Some saw parallels to the mass enthusiasm for Hitler that the world had watched not even a generation before 1963. Yet the cheers for Kennedy articulated approval for a democratic order. They expressed a desire for social and political change in the Federal Republic, which was beginning to leave the Adenauer era behind, and domesticated Kennedy's charisma as an embodiment of this hope.

The lecture thus suggested a new departure in the study of international relations and alliance politics and the testing of diverse research

strategies. In particular, historical anthropology and sociology, political science and cultural history might contribute to gaining a deeper understanding of how international relations maintain or lose the balance between consensus and conflicts, and how alliance systems can create a certain degree of cohesion among people situated in very different societies. Questions such as these, Daum suggested, might be especially relevant today, as the Atlantic community is undergoing a dramatic process of redefining the bonds that may hold it together, the values and political objectives that its members can share, and the interests that often enough diverge.

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