

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

Workshop at the GHI, September 23–24, 2005. Conveners: Christof Mauch (GHI), Kiran Klaus Patel (Humboldt University, Berlin). Made possible by a grant from the Robert Bosch Foundation, Stuttgart.

Participants: Thomas Bender (New York University), Manfred Berg (University of Heidelberg), Eileen Boris (University of California, Santa Barbara), Tobias Brinkmann (University of Southampton), Ed Dimendberg (University of California, Irvine), Colleen A. Dunlavy (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Christiane Eifert (University of Bielefeld), Philipp Gassert (University of Heidelberg), Heinz-Gehard Haupt (European University Institute, Florence), Christina von Hodenberg (University of California, Berkeley), Konrad Jarausch (University of North Carolina and Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschungen, Potsdam), Simone Lässig (GHI), Daniel L. Letwin (Penn State University), Paul Nolte (Free University Berlin), Kathryn Olesko (Georgetown University), Annemarie Sammartino (Oberlin College), Dirk Schumann (GHI), Christoph Strupp (GHI), Thomas Welskopp (University of Bielefeld).

The purposes of this two-day workshop, the second held in connection with the “Competing Modernities” project, were to consider the draft essays prepared by each “tandem” of authors and to discuss areas of overlap, gaps, and overarching questions. In turn, this discussion served as an occasion to consider the core issues of the project, which aims to explain the differences, commonalities, and connections in the histories of the United States and Germany during the twentieth century. (See the previous reports on this project in *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 35 (2004): 97–98 and *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 36 (2005): 119–121.)

In the course of the discussion of the individual topical essays, abstracts of which are posted on the Competing Modernities website (www.ghi-dc.org/competingmodernities), two important general points became clear. First, nearly all of the author tandems found it a major challenge to integrate the history of the last thirty years into their accounts. One important reason for this problem is the scarcity of archivally based studies of the very recent past. It is thus difficult to take accurate measure of developments of the past thirty years, and that, in turn, makes it difficult to substantiate the interpretation of the early 1970s as a major turning point in world history. Consequently, with an eye toward addressing this lacuna, the Competing Modernities project participants

agreed at the workshop that the final versions of their essays should give particularly close attention to changes that have occurred in recent decades.

The second point that emerged in the course of the two-day discussion is that the individual author tandems are coming to very different conclusions. While Germany and the United States appear to have clearly taken separate paths in some areas—in religious life, in the forms of state, and in engagement with the environment, for example—they seem less dissimilar than one might expect in other areas, such as their experiences with popular entertainment and capitalism. Similarly, it is also clear that within the “long twentieth century” periods of growing difference, on the one hand, and, on the other, of increasing similarity must be distinguished. In sum, the workshop made clear that the thesis of a “grand divide” between the two countries and the counter-thesis of a persistent parallelism or even confluence within the framework of the development of Western societies both need to be qualified. The main objective of this project is to explain demonstrable differences and determine their importance in the comparative history of the two countries.

Christof Mauch and Kiran Klaus Patel