Migrants as “Translators”: Mediating External Influences on Post World War II Western Europe, 1945 - 1973
October 24 - 26, 2013
Workshop at the Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg
Conveners: Jan Logemann (German Historical Institute, Washington DC), Miriam Rürup (Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg)
Organizer: Björn Siegel (Institute for the History of the German Jews)

This workshop will focus on the role of migrants as mediating agents and cultural translators in social transformations and exchanges in postwar Western Europe. European immigrants and émigrés to the United States, for example, played a vital role in building networks between European and American institutions after the war. These émigrés frequently acted as experts, analysts, and envoys for American government organizations in the context of postwar reconstruction and Cold War public diplomacy. As visiting scholars, artists or professionals they helped initiate transformations in various fields of postwar European societies. As entrepreneurs, they built or rebuilt economic ties that spanned the Atlantic. As network specialists, they forged bridges between civil society organizations. As returning Jewish and Non-Jewish migrants, they frequently established transatlantic personal and professional relationships that fostered transnational exchanges. American-born expatriates in Europe, finally, formed yet another vector in such transatlantic networks. How did they help shape what contemporaries discussed as social or cultural “modernization”?

Western European societies underwent tremendous social and cultural transformations in the decades following World War II. Economic prosperity at home coupled with the decline of colonial empires abroad changed European nation states in manifold ways. European societies, their economies, cities, and civic institutions “modernized” in the eyes of many contemporaries. Yet these processes were hardly self-contained, but instead occurred in dialogue with other parts of the globe. The “Americanization” of post-World War II European societies remains a perennial topic of historical research; in a diverse set of areas from politics and intellectual life, academia and urban development, to business and consumption, American influences have been identified as a significant force for change in Western European societies. Transatlantic influences, however, were only one part of a larger set of exchanges which also connected Western Europe with – among other places - the Middle East, (post-) Colonial Asia and Africa, and countries across the “Iron Curtain.” Transnational studies have increasing analyzed the role of transnational institutions, governments, business, and civil society institutions in these transfer processes. This conference will ask in what ways various groups of migrants helped transform postwar Western European societies and pave the way for the transnational social movements of the late 1960s (the global dimension of which has been a focus of recent scholarship) as well as broader patterns of a “second globalization” setting in during the 1970s.

The emphasis on migrants allows us to put such transatlantic exchange networks into a broader context. Migration pathways became increasingly global during the middle of the
twentieth century. Migrants who acted as translators and agents of social change in Western Europe came not only from the United States, but also from the other parts of the Americas, the Middle East, (post-)colonial Asia and Africa as well as the Eastern bloc. Whether as expatriate businessmen, professionals with transnational careers, political exiles, or returning colonial administrators, they left a mark on their host societies during the 1950s to ‘70s. The conference aims to utilize individual and group experiences as a lens through which to examine broader patterns of social change in Western Europe during the decades after World War II.

Their unique migration experience provided migrants with the tools to act as “translators” or “cultural brokers” between societies, both in a linguistic and in a broader cultural sense. The conference will draw on the growing interest in returning émigrés in emigration and exile studies. For West Germany, scholars have already begun to explore the role of returning exiles – both Jewish and non-Jewish – in particular in the transformation and, in part, democratization of parties, unions, the social sciences, businesses, and other institutions. We want to add a broader European perspective on this research. The workshop will similarly draw on and advance recent scholarship on transnational exchanges and networks. The concept of cultural translation, finally, has gained in currency among cultural studies scholars in what Doris Bachmann-Medick has termed the “translational turn.” In postcolonial studies, similar processes of intercultural translation and hybridity have long been part of the research agenda. Methodologically, this conference will explore the utility of the “translational turn” for the history of migration and transnational transfers. Thus, the workshop will start off with a keynote lecture on the impact of the “translational turn” on cultural studies in general, paired with a comment discussing its relevance for migration studies in particular.

We invite scholars working on migrants and global exchanges in a variety of fields including, but not limited to:

- Jewish Migrants and Returning Exiles
- Cold War Travelers and their Impact on Postwar Political Cultures
- Migrant as Experts, “Modernizing” European Business, Science, and Technology
- Migrants as “Outsiders” in European Intellectual Life and Popular Culture
- Globalizing and/ or Provincializing Europe: Migrants Role in Emerging Transnational Networks

Please send applications with title, short abstract, and CV to Björn Siegel (bjoern.siegel@public.uni-hamburg.de) by January 6, 2013. Expenses for travel and accommodation will be covered, though you may defray organizing costs by soliciting funds from your home institution.