

ATLANTIC CROSSINGS? TRANSCULTURAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL PROTEST IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES, 1958–1977

Conference at the GHI, October 17–18, 2003. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Volkswagen Foundation. Conveners: Belinda Davis (Rutgers University), Astrid M. Eckert (GHI), Wilfried Mausbach (University of Heidelberg). Participants: Mererid Puw Davies (University of London), Michael Frey (University of Bochum), Martin Klimke (University of Heidelberg), Carla MacDougall (Rutgers University), Johannes Paulmann (International University, Bremen), Dieter Rucht (Social Science Research Center, Berlin), Kristina Schulz (Université de Genève), Bonnie Smith (Rutgers University), Jeremy Varon (Drew University).

This conference brought together junior and senior scholars to discuss the significance of cultural transfer and transnational networks in political and social protest movements in the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States. Its goal was to open up new paths of inquiry into the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s by utilizing recently advanced concepts of transnational history and intercultural exchange. The conference aimed to provide a forum in which the applicability of these concepts could be tested, and offered an opportunity for a stimulating exchange of ideas among various scholars from different disciplines.

The opening panel, "Framing Internationalism: Interculturality, Transnationality, Social Movement Theory," introduced the main theoretical questions of the conference and framed the debate for the subsequent panels, which then focused on specific case studies. The first paper, by Bonnie Smith, provided a broad overview of the history of European cultural borrowings from other parts of the world, suggesting a more porous concept of culture and a history of modern Europe that is not linear, but rather a circuitous process of exchange. Referring, among other things, to non-European sources of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Smith's analysis called for a reconsideration of the paradigm that uses national boundaries as the focus of historical inquiry, and persuasively demonstrated the incompleteness of a historiography based solely on autonomous national cultures. Dieter Rucht's presentation then focused on the structure of social movements, which enables them to transmit and receive items from abroad and to produce a sense of collective identity across national borders. He reminded participants of earlier historical instances of transatlantic transfer, such as the anti-slavery, socialist, and women's movements. Rucht identified four characteristics of so-

cial movements: (1) They strive for a fundamental change in society; (2) They constitute “mobilized networks of networks”; (3) They share a collective identity, a sense of belonging, supported by a common cause; (4) They use various forms of protest, often as a means to achieve visibility and attention. Elaborating on the second of these characteristics, Rucht explained that networks may incorporate organizations but have no overall membership requirement, and are not arranged in hierarchical order. The strength of ties among them varies, and there are no clear boundaries to a particular movement, but rather “clusters of cores.” This observation led Rucht to compare social movements to gravity centers of interaction. Geographically distinct, they are linked and overlap with each other at these centers of exchange and communication. Through these “fishnet-like” connections, they would also be able to organize themselves with the help of further interpersonal or interorganizational channels. Johannes Paulmann, after sketching the development of historiographical interest in questions of transnationality and interculturality, defined intercultural transfer as a transfer among cultures, not of culture itself. He also stressed that the borders of culture are being constantly redefined. Distinguishing between levels of perception and influence in intercultural transfer, Paulmann elaborated on the costs of these transactions, various paths of transfer, their directions, and the existence of blind spots in these processes of exchange. In his view, these processes not only demonstrate a crossing of borders, but the creation of intermediary spaces, of which he enumerated four, namely the periphery of territories, particular spaces within territories (e.g. McDonald’s in Beijing), institutionalized international organizations and professional networks, and the media. Paulmann cautioned, however, that the historical nature of these spaces constantly changes. Drawing on such intermediary spaces as reservoirs of ideas and practices, historical actors themselves would then selectively adopt and reframe knowledge for their own purposes or cultural backgrounds.

The second panel, “Appropriating Ideas, Appropriating History,” commenced the series of case studies dealing with transnational relations and social protest. Jeremy Varon’s paper compared the theoretical trajectories of the German Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Weathermen in the United States, and identified their ideological similarities and differences. By examining the two groups’ profoundly divergent attitudes toward violence, his analysis underscored the importance of paying close attention to national and historical specificity in analyses of transcultural exchange. In the end, domestic terrorism in Germany evolved as a public drama in which Germans played out ambivalent notions of democracy, whereas in the United States it remained a fringe phenomenon. Wilfried Mausbach opened his paper by demonstrating how West German protesters turned the Vietnam War into a contemporary representation of

Auschwitz. He argued that antiwar activists in the Federal Republic read the experiences of Americans and Vietnamese through the filter of their own collective memories, thus appropriating others' experiences as a means to arrive at a new understanding of themselves. Mausbach then asked whether this kind of "appropriating history" was a unique phenomenon, and went on to illustrate how a similar process occurred virtually at the same time in the opposite direction, when Americans began to incorporate the Holocaust into their own history. Mausbach concluded that as a consequence of the process of globalization, the exposure to other cultures' experiences and memories has dramatically increased since the end of World War II. Through modern telecommunications and the spread of popular culture, the preconditions for "importing" others' memories have been greatly expanded. The protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, among others, utilized these novel possibilities for intercultural exchange.

In the third panel, "The Student Protest of the 1960s from a Transatlantic Perspective," Martin Klimke offered another example of transnational exchange in the transatlantic context with his examination of personal interactions between various activists of the West German and American student movements throughout the 1960s. Focusing on the two most influential student organizations in the United States and Germany, the *Students for a Democratic Society* and the *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, he examined the long-term impact of the various levels of direct and indirect personal contact between the two, and referred to examples of cultural appropriation, reframing, and resultant misperceptions. By including governmental reactions to (transnational) protest in his analysis, Klimke stressed the need to incorporate the 1960s protest movements into the more comprehensive international historical framework of the Cold War, based on a multicultural as well as multidimensional transnational history. Michael Frey's presentation emphasized the crucial significance of the peace movement for the development of the protest movement of the 1960s. Illuminating the transnational networks of the peace movements after World War II, he argued that the bloc confrontation of the Cold War provided fertile ground for the spread of these personal and organizational networks. Regarding these movements as a necessary precondition for the emergence of a New Left in the United States, Great Britain, and West Germany, Frey accordingly defined this emergence as an awakening of a new protest generation in 1958–59 with non-organizational forms loosely bound together by the common advocacy for a "third way."

Carla MacDougall's presentation on the panel "Transnational Links and the Politics of Feminist Activism" brought to the foreground translation, appropriation, and reception in the transcultural movement of

ideas to reveal the multiple dimensions that must be considered in analyses of transnationality and intercultural transfer. Thus she demonstrated the one-sided nature of the flow of exchanges from the United States to Germany in her examination of the first lesbian feminist group in Germany. However, these transfers and the ways in which their reception transformed ideas and made them very specific to the West German political-cultural context might well have contributed to the nationally specific contours of lesbian feminism in the Federal Republic. At the same time, her paper revealed that processes of transfer can sometimes be quite unidirectional or even shrink to a barely discernible trickle. Similarly, Kristina Schulz in her examination of the women's movements in Germany, France, and the United States demonstrated that although the slogan "sisterhood is global" pointed to a transnational orientation of second-wave feminism, there is hardly any evidence of intercultural transfer of movement ideas at the local or even national level. Taking Dieter Rucht and Doug McAdam's model of cross-national diffusion as a starting point for her analysis, she interrogated the notion of transnationality to demonstrate its limitations as a way to explain shared cognitive orientations of Western feminisms. By way of example, Schulz pointed to the reception—and lack thereof—of Simone de Beauvoir in the German context, despite Alice Schwarzer's efforts to give her ideas the kind of prominence they had had in the French context, from which Schwarzer had come in the early 1970s. Schulz also stressed the pitfalls of misperception. Thus the French essentialist position of the 1980s, though only one current of French feminism, was taken for the entire thing in the United States. Schulz therefore urged scholars to pay close attention to the conditions for the reception of ideas from abroad.

During the final panel, "Public Sphere/Political Imagination," both Belinda Davis and Mererid Pw Davies examined the symbolic practices of social movements in the 1960s. Davis's paper asserted that scholars must look not only at major theoretical figures and movement leaders in assessing intercultural transfer and impact, but must also look at a broad range of activists, including "middle-" and "low-level" protesters, examining their lived experience of cultural influences, from high theory to objects of popular consumption. She argued that "interculturality" must not only include reference to nations as cultural units, but should be understood far more broadly, as West Germans from all over the country (as well as East Germans and others) came together at universities and in big cities, bringing a range of cultures to bear. Davis looked at the ways in which the range of activists acted on these influences, transforming them toward particular—and sometimes particularly salutary—ends. Mererid Pw Davies then expanded the "symbolic and cultural battlefields of social practices and lifestyles" by giving an overview of the

numerous sources available but still largely untouched by historians of the 1960s protest movements, such as the massive amount of underground literature, posters, chants, etc. Focusing her presentation on the graffiti artist "Eiffe" from Hamburg, among others, she successfully demonstrated the significance of his provocative slogans as texts of provocation that were able to open up spaces of public discussion. Arguing for fresh approaches with the help of these unexplored sources, Davies persuasively showed the porous nature of the boundary between political speech and theatrical act, and advocated including these two mutually intertwined spheres in future historical research.

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion that initially focused on the tension between the theoretical and methodological approaches presented here and their applicability to the historical treatment of transatlantic protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. A major point in this regard was the assessment of the actual "transnationality" of these phenomena and their grounding in national or local historical traditions. Some participants argued that the networks discussed during the conference were not necessarily only transnational in the sense of downplaying the significance of the nation state, but would often better be defined as "transborder" movements, as they crossed boundaries of all kinds, including regional, urban/rural, and race, class, and gender.

In a similar vein, the question of national variables and the global dimension of protest brought up the distinctiveness of both decades. It was pointed out, for example, that whereas in earlier periods young people migrated unidirectionally, in the 1950s, they began to go back and forth across boundaries. Comparisons were also made to the transnational efforts of today's protest movements, non-governmental organizations, and other social activist groups. This accompanied a discussion of the historical development of the transnational spaces described earlier, including their key actors, their reference systems, and the expertise needed to sustain them. The role of governments and the nation state led back to the emergence of the New Left in the historical setting of the Cold War and the specific relationship between the United States and West Germany. Panelists agreed that in order to fully understand the mechanics and the transnational orientation of protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s within their own countries, more emphasis should in the future be placed on governmental or, more broadly, "establishment" reactions to and interaction with these movements on a national and international level. Such interactions might well have affected or even exacerbated several dichotomies that seem, as one participant observed, to have always marked social movements, e.g. dichotomies between strategy and identity, doctrine and pragmatism, personal and public roles, and lead-

ership/hierarchy and democracy. It seems that the strongest social movements can combine these dichotomies and withstand the tension.

Overall, the conference provided a glimpse into the huge amount of work that still lies ahead before scholars can really come to grips with the multi-colored yet kindred social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But in a most cordial and stimulating atmosphere, it also outlined some of the more promising and exciting avenues to travel toward this end.

Martin Klimke, Carla MacDougall, and Wilfried Mausbach