LIVES BEYOND BORDERS: TOWARD A SOCIAL HISTORY OF COSMOPOLITANS AND GLOBALIZATION, 1880–1960

Conference at the University of Heidelberg, Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe,” February 12–13, 2010. Sponsored by the GHI and the University of Heidelberg, Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe.” Conveners: Madeleine Herren (Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe,” University of Heidelberg) and Ines Prodöhl (GHI). Participants: Gopalan Balachandran (Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva), Nicolas Berg (Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig), Tibor Frank (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest), Michael Geyer (University of Chicago), Frank Grüner (University of Heidelberg), Jing Yuen Tsu (Yale University), Cornelia Knab (University of Heidelberg), Erez Manela (Harvard University), Rudolph Ng (University of Heidelberg), Miriam Rürup (University of Göttingen), Amy Sayward (Middle Tennessee State University), Christiane Sibille (Universities of Heidelberg and Basel), Rudolf Stichweh (University of Lucerne), Tomoko Akami (Australian National University, Canberra), Raphael Utz (University of Jena), Rudolf Wagner (University of Heidelberg), and Yoshiya Makita (Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo).

Recently, transnational and global historians have focused on several aspects of the history of international networks and organizations, but they have failed to address the role of the individuals who work in and define these networks. The conference “Lives Beyond Borders” was held to develop a methodological approach to this question in the field of biographical research. In her opening lecture, Madeleine Herren illustrated the need for new methods of biographical research with regard to international individuals, using the example of the recent opening of the personnel files in Geneva’s League of Nations Archives. These files do not support the common image of diplomats, but rather reveal the underlying bureaucratic methods of administrative organizations. Herren presented methodological questions and a preliminary theoretical conceptualization aimed at defining transboundary biographies. She suggested approaching these biographies on three levels: first, transcultural entanglement, representing aspects of boundary-crossing communication and community; second, territoriality, which incorporates the bureaucratic and political organization of the newly invented type of international civil servant; and, third, performativity as an ongoing process of creating and transforming boundary-crossing identities. Based on this analytical approach, Herren proposed a typology of boundary-crossing lives. Although limited to the League
of Nations’ source material, she divided transboundary lives into four sub-categories: elite cosmopolitans, experts creating global topics, cumulative internationalists, and global illusionists.

The first panel, “Border-Crossing Elites,” concentrated on journalists, scientists, and aristocrats. Using the example of Michael Polanyi’s biography, Tibor Frank pointed out that, as a consequence of Hungarian anti-Semitism, which excluded Jews from higher education, young Hungarian Jews were usually sent abroad to study. The effect was a weakening of Hungarian national science, a theory supported by the list of Hungarian Nobel Prize winners, most of whom received the prize well after they had left Hungary. The biography of Polanyi, a chemist, seems to have been paradigmatic of Jewish Hungarian scientists, who often did not find a home in a specific language, or a certain country, but through their internationally desired expertise in science.

Journalists such as William T. Stead constituted a second category of internationalist. Although Stead was neither a displaced intellectual like Polanyi, nor a member of the cosmopolitan elite, he was still an actor on the internationalist scene. Motivated by his belief in the “superiority of the English race,” and, as a consequence, an “English civilizing duty,” he remained strongly connected to his country. He was, as Cornelia Knab argued in her contribution, “an international imperialist.” As a journalist, Stead created a public sphere of influence around international events such as the Hague Conferences (1899; 1907). Knab pointed out that, because of the publicity surrounding him and his controversial character, biographical research on Stead as a “global player” must critically differentiate between his personal statements and the perception of and commentaries about him by his contemporaries.

The women on whom Raphael Utz focused in his lecture about ruling families as a social group enjoyed a similar degree of public notoriety. Utz presented the biographies of three very different royals, not all of whom were successful in realizing their aspirations. The comprehensive collections of letters from these royals, especially in the case of Grand Duchesse Maria Pavlovna, reveal an extensive and influential political network. In her commitment to the women’s rights movement, Princess Alice of Battenberg also demonstrated a strong affinity for transcending social boundaries. Utz pointed out that such aristocrats—as a social group of ruling dynasties in a global context—have been an understudied subject
until recently. He suggested that the study of royal biographies could provide a window onto transnational family networks, and could be extended to the study of the community of ruling families that crossed social and ideological boundaries.

The second panel, on “Fugitives and Patterns of Mobility,” shifted the focus from the social heights of global elites to the field of bureaucratic questions about citizenship and the self-definition of internationalists as so-called Weltbürger, or cosmopolitans. Frank Grüner reflected on the different connotations of cosmopolitanism. The idealized cosmopolitan has been linked to the international, liberal-minded, and widely travelled individual, whereas more negative connotations were employed by the Nazis and Soviets as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns.

During the conference, various attributes of real cosmopolitans were also presented. These ranged from travelling the world with a comforting sense of nationality and a persistent connection to a home country, to being banished from one’s home country and thus becoming a “world citizen” by necessity. The latter fate was often strongly connected to the idea of “statelessness.” Examining the history of statelessness in the twentieth century, there are manifold aspects and agents that need to be considered. Miriam Rürup defined fundamental terms such as passport, citizenship, and statelessness, before providing an overview of landmark incidents in the history of statelessness, ranging from the aftermath of World War I to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. In her lecture, she addressed the question of how organizations, diplomats, national institutions, and stateless refugees dealt with statelessness. Rürup pointed out that it is not only important to examine the biographies and activities of internationalists, but also to look at the circumstances and legal relationships that they were embedded in or excluded from. Referring to Bertolt Brecht’s “Flüchtlingsgespräche” (Refugee Conversations), Rürup stressed the importance of a passport to any border-crossing individual.

In contrast to humans, bacteria and viruses do not respect national borders, and while epidemics easily overcome geographic boundaries, the fight against epidemics has often been obstructed by them. The struggle to control epidemics has yielded a strong, cooperative international effort. The third panel, “Experts Creating Global Topics,” allowed a closer examination of the careers of medical and scientific experts in international settings. Yoshiya Makita
presented surgeon Anita Newcomb McGee’s battle for the recognition of nursing as a profession, rather than as a natural role for women. During the Spanish-American War, McGee was successful in establishing a permanent corps of trained female nurses within the U.S. Army. The idea of a qualified female nursing service was further strengthened when many American soldiers based in Cuba contracted yellow fever during an epidemic, leading to an urgent need for nursing staff in military camps and hospitals.

Another example of disease promoting an international career was presented by Erez Manela, who offered insight into the biography of Nicole Grasset, a microbiologist-epidemiologist and the senior smallpox advisor of the World Health Organization. The aim of Manela’s research is to learn more about the motivations of international activists, who often left high-status careers, families, and personal lives behind to pursue careers in international health organizations. Through the example of Grasset’s life, it becomes clear that technological change and scientific progress must be weighed alongside the personal motivations of internationalists in order to understand the history of transnational campaigns for disease control and eradication.

Tomoko Akami examined two global health experts, each driven by very different motivations. On the one hand, Akami presented the example of Polish Jew Ludwig Rajchman, whose commitment to the subject of global health as the medical director of the League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO) from 1921 to 1939 was driven by a sense of humanity and social justice. On the other hand, Neville M. Goodman, British representative to several international organizations, acted explicitly to promote national interests, such as protecting his fellow countrymen from outside health threats. Tomoko’s talk underscored that the professional agendas of health experts could be strongly influenced by the political structures of their times. But while experts’ motivations differed, they were united in their goals.

The fourth panel, “The Invisibles: No Place in History,” sought to offer further answers to the question of what a cosmopolitan is. Some general observations about cosmopolitans were offered by Rudolf Wagner. According to him, most cosmopolitan lives are characterized by certain attributes, such as a high standing in society and government protection, made visible through Western clothing and manners, accompanied by a certain ignorance vis-à-vis
foreign cultures. Instead of concentrating on Western cosmopolitans, Wagner chose to present the biography of Zhang Pengchun, who, while fully integrated into American society, remained strongly connected to his home country of China. He is a prime example of a cosmopolitan who was still rooted in traditions and ideologies of his origins, but used a Western “disguise” to operate more successfully in a foreign culture. Li Shizeng (1881–1973) represented a somewhat similar type of cosmopolitan. His biography was presented by Rudolph Ng, Christiane Sibille, and Ines Prodöhl. Shizeng was one of those international individuals who attempted to use international organizations as platforms for his own agenda. Like Zhang Pengchun, Li Shizeng has been overlooked by historians thus far, and his international operations only become visible by tracing his paths around the globe. Li’s activities are too numerous to be listed here, but the unconventional nature of his biography is typical for an internationalist, and highlights the need for equally unconventional approaches to research methodology.

In contrast to the previous focus on elites, Gopalan Balachandran spotlighted international subaltern groups such as seafarers and displaced persons in global spaces. To illustrate this phenomenon, he described international harbors and the worlds that surround them as places where a global community of subalterns—seamen, prostitutes, dock workers, etc.—had been generated. Balachandran also pointed out that subaltern global spaces are rarely visible without sources by middle-class observers.

The recurring theme of cosmopolitanism can be found in the Jewish Diaspora as well, whether one is looking at Michael Polanyi, Ludwig Rajman, or other Jews drifting, fleeing, and moving through the sometimes dangerously anti-Semitic European countries, often unwillingly becoming part of a cosmopolitan community. Nicolas Berg questioned the old definition of the Luftmensch as a general Jewish way of life. All kinds of negative attributes deriving from an international lifestyle—particularly the attitude of seeing the globe as one’s homeland—were often associated with Jews. And while most cosmopolitans were always connected to their home country and, as Michael Wagner indicated, could continue to be identified as British, Chinese, and so on, Jews were seen as dangerously rootless. Nicolas Berg presented insight into the literary reverberation of Weltbürgertum (cosmopolitanism), in which the Luftmensch is characterized as someone who is not rooted to his
homeland. This last panel concluded that the necessity of either broadening the definition of cosmopolitanism or finding a way to categorize and name the very individual and diverse biographies, all of which share the characteristic element of a border-crossing life, remains controversial.

During the conference’s discussion about the socio-historical methodology of cosmopolitanism, it became clear that biographical research must take the ethnicity, gender, and class of individuals or groups into account. Eventually, discomfort about terms such as internationalism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism arose, because they implied a Western-centric definition of the professional class of boundary-crossing individuals. The three variants of methodological approaches to transboundary lives—transcultural entanglement, territoriality, and performativity—as presented by Madeleine Herren in her opening lecture, can be applied to most of the biographies presented at this conference. These lenses could become important avenues for the thorough examination of the history of international organizations and networks by enabling new investigations into the biographies of the women and men behind them.

Milena Guthörl (University of Heidelberg)