DEMOCRATIC CULTURES PAST AND PRESENT: PERSPECTIVES FROM WASHINGTON DC

Seminar at the GHI and American University, May 4-13, 2012, organized by the Bavarian American Academy. Conveners: Heike Paul (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI), Barrett Watten (Wayne State University), Meike Zwingenberger (Bavarian American Academy). Keynote Lectures at the GHI by Heike Paul, Maria Höhn (Vassar College) and Werner Sollors (Harvard University). Participants: Alisa Allkins (Wayne State University), Sarah Lisa Beringer (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Sarah Nike Bernhard (University of Passau), Edmund Brown (Wayne State University), Sebastian Dregger (University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt), Cedric Akpeje Essi (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Annabella Fick (University of Würzburg), Katharina Gerund (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Alexandra Herzog (University of Regensburg), Sabrina Hüttnner (University of Würzburg), Dorian B. Kantor (Free University Berlin), Mahshid Mayar (University of Bielefeld), Marcus Merritt (Wayne State University), Michael Oswald (University of Passau), Jonathan Plumb (Wayne State University), Monika Sauter (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), Stefanie Schäfer (University of Jena), Michael Schmidt (Wayne State University).

For two inspiring days during the week-long summer academy we were delighted to be able to enjoy the hospitality of the GHI. Our group of doctoral candidates affiliated with German and U.S. universities felt a warm welcome when Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, deputy director at GHI, opened the first session on Monday morning. With the overall topic “Democratic Cultures Past and Present: Perspectives from Washington DC,” the GHI was just the place to be. Individual doctoral projects and three keynote lectures by Heike Paul, Werner Sollors and Maria Höhn were presented.

In her introductory keynote lecture Heike Paul dealt with myth as a foundational moment in democratic cultures in her talk on “Memory Wars, Founders Chic and the Consumption of American Democracy.” Paul indicated the continuities and changes in the canonical readings of specific texts by the Founding Fathers and elaborated on the “founders chic” by using Lauren Berlant’s concept of the “intimate public sphere” (2004). Paul alluded to the fact that many authors of recent biographies of the founders, like David McCullough in his John Adams biography or Newt Gingrich in his historical novels, revisited...
the founders and presented them as founding gardeners, founding architects and cooks. Being in the kitchen with the Founding Fathers clearly indicates the consumption of the myth in a “sentimentalist country” again a term derived from Lauren Berlant (2009). Paul asked: “Who would argue about old recipes?” and stressed that the “founders chic” was part of the marketing of a nostalgic past.

The first round of work-in-progress presentations by the doctoral candidates focused on contemporary politics: Sarah Nike Bernhard in her talk on “The Functionalization of Cultural Narration and Memory in Political Staging (Barack Obama’s Presidential Campaign in 2008)” used the tropes of the American Adam and the family man to demonstrate the constructedness of male blackness in Obama’s first campaign. Michael Oswald analyzed interest group politics in his project “The Tea Party: A Social Movement or rather a Means of Post Democracy”, referring to Colin Crouch’s “Post-Democracy” (2004). In the afternoon the second round of work-in-progress presentations covered a wider time span from Edmund Brown’s “The Unification of a Nation: How F.D.R. and Hitler Used Technology during Their Reign” to Stefanie Schäfer’s “Yankee Democracy? Canon Formation and the Struggle for Cultural Independence”, and Sabrina Hüttner’s “Politics of Dissent: The Theater of Naomi Wallace, Christopher Shinn and Tony Kushner.” All three projects were very well developed and indicated how and by whom a multiplicity of voices might be reduced by canon formation with the help of technical devices (the radio, but also, in a broader sense, the literary market) to transmit representative, but also biased interpretations of the state of democracy to the audience.

The evening keynote lecture by Werner Sollors, “Hard on the Eyes: A Photographer and His Subject,” unravelled an intimate relationship. Sollors began by showing the audience a photograph supposedly of a German child after the liberation of death camp Bergen-Belsen, shot by British photojournalist George Rodger, who later became a founder member of Magnum photos, published in LIFE magazine exactly 67 years before the lecture on May 7, 1945. The boy really was Sieg Maandag, a Dutch Jewish child survivor of Bergen-Belsen. Sollors argued that the false caption “Young German boy walking down dirt road lined with corpses of hundreds of prisoners who died of starvation near Bergen-Belsen extermination camp” further strengthened the powerful rhetoric of the visual. Only after finding the real story behind the photograph, the life-long traumatization of the subject and the photographer became the focus of Sollors’ captivating lecture.
On Tuesday morning the period after World War II, democratization processes in Germany, occupation and re-education were once more at the center of Maria Höhn’s talk titled “‘We Will Never Go back to the Old Ways Again.’ African American GIs, Germany and the Struggle for Civil Rights.” The time African American GIs spent in Germany — most of them from the segregated Deep South of the U.S. — had been a life-transforming experience according to Höhn. The military in the occupied spaces was what the U.S. were not at the time: integrated. Contact zones in Germany provided experiences many of the Black soldiers had not made in the U.S. These first-hand experiences of integration became a very powerful narrative in the African American community back home.

In the third round of work-in-progress presentations Cedric Essi took up the questions of race and social change in his talk “Washington’s Interracial Genealogies: From Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama.” Essi included the newest readings of Sally Hemmings in his analysis of the multiracial individual and family, mixed-race movements and the concept of a post-racial era in the dominant popular discourse. Jonathan Plumb provided another transatlantic perspective in his dissertation project on “How the Artists Peter Weiss and Anselm Kiefer criticize Nazi Ideology.” With Freud’s “Melancholia and Mourning” (1915) Plumb examined how the ego can work through loss and traumatization and indicated the relevance of Anselm Kiefers’ works for aesthetic pedagogy and political education.

The final three work-in-progress presentations started out with a descriptive perspective on contemporary political cultures and attempted to determine the outcomes with a more theoretical approach on the institutional level. Sebastian Dregger’s talk focused on “The U.S. Supreme Court between Originalism and Living Constitution (Rehnquist and Roberts Courts 1986–2012)”; Dorian Kantor presented a project titled “Politics as Law: Juridified Executive Unilateralism and Conservative Legal Movement”; and Sarah Lisa Beringer analysed “The Flow of Trade between Nations.”

During the following days the group was introduced to the work of the National Endowment of the Humanities and the research facilities of the Library of Congress by the staff of the John W. Kluge Center. Further keynotes by Max Friedman (American University), Barrett Watten (Wayne State University), and Donald Pease (Dartmouth College) plus the additional work-in-progress presentations made this summer academy a unique and rewarding scholarly experience.
The inspiring lectures, enthusiastic discussions, and social networking strengthened academic collaboration between German and U.S. researchers and the institutional ties of the GHI, American University, Wayne State University, the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg and the Bavarian American Academy.

Meike Zwingenberger (Bavarian American Academy)  
and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (GHI)