IN SEARCH OF BETTER LIVES:
THE CIRCULATION OF IDEAS FOR SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT
IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Workshop at the GHI, March 8-9, 2013. Conveners: Christina Lubinski (GHI), Christina May (University of Göttingen), Warren Rosenblum (Webster University in St. Louis). Participants: Sonja Blum (University of Vienna), Adrienne Chambon (University of Toronto), Wiebke Glässer (Humboldt University, Berlin), Marjorie Johnstone (University of Toronto), Gül Karagöz-Kızılca (University of Ankara), Stefan Königter (University of Hildesheim), Beate Loeffler (Dresden), Mark Malisa (University of Saint Rose in Albany), Julia Moses (University of Sheffield), Frauke Scheffler (University of Cologne), Malte Thießen (University of Oldenburg), Carmen Van Praet (University of Ghent), Margaret Vining (National Museum of American History, Washington DC).

The social improvement of everyday lives is a much debated topic. Many current social problems have an international character and occur in a variety of countries, although the economic, political, and cultural conditions differ considerably. International organizations and institutions, in particular, work in the field of social improvement on a global level. However, the current social challenges are not the first that aroused ideas of social improvement beyond national borders among policy makers, reformers, and experts. This workshop focused on the circulation and implementation of these ideas in a historical perspective. One of the main goals was to study how social reforms were transferred across borders and who were the actors involved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The papers and presentations illustrated how ideas of social improvement occurred in different regions and countries. The various interdisciplinary approaches and the transnational perspective served as an excellent basis for a lively conference. Instead of describing each panel, the following report discusses the workshop’s major themes.

One of the main topics that arose was the importance of cultural ties that can lead to the transfer of ideas. Countries that belong to a common cultural community, such as the member states of the European Union for example, tend to borrow ideas from each other. Sonja Blum presented examples of ideational exchanges between countries that have certain cultural similarities. She analyzed to what extent family reforms in Germany and Austria in the period 2000-2010...
were influenced by different forms of mutual policy transfers. Blum pointed out that these forms of transfer depend on cultural, political, and economic settings; often one group of countries serves as a role model for others. Carmen Van Praet showed an example of such a role model, focusing on the nineteenth century’s ideas on housing. Van Praet presented the case of the *cité ouvrière* in Mulhouse, France, which served as an international model for solving worker housing problems. By analyzing international congresses on housing, Van Praet highlighted that ideas were exchanged interactively rather than unilaterally.

Van Praet’s considerations also addressed scientific exchange among experts. In this context, Christina May’s talk on social ideas and their circulation among international experts and institutions around 1900 brought up a new aspect of transfer: knowledge. May described knowledge as well as its professionalization and export as important factors in the resolution of social problems. In her study, May analyzed four dimensions of knowledge transfer in the field of social policies: the production, the carriers, the implementation, and the translation of “welfare knowledge,” that is, the export of ideas into different national contexts. On the basis of her case studies, May distinguished between two ways of exchange: First, *policy tourism* — politicians traveling to other countries — and, second, *exchanges of academic paradigms*. May, Van Praet, and Julia Moses, who gave a talk on workers’ insurance in Imperial Germany, showed that even in the nineteenth century policy makers and experts observed other countries closely to learn from them in the field of social improvement.

Moses offered another important dimension regarding the circulation of ideas: competition. Social politics and the implementation of social ideas, she argued, were often seen as a *yardstick of modernity*. The sense of superiority as a *Kulturstaat* and the desire of governments to be advanced in social politics became apparent in several European states before World War I. The factor of competition also played an important role in Malte Thießen’s presentation on vaccination and public health in twentieth century Germany. Thießen defined the history of vaccination as a history of exchange and emphasized two types of transfer: cooperation and competition. As Thießen showed in his analysis of the Cold War era, vaccination as a form of social improvement was used as propaganda weapon between East and West Germany. At the same time, international organizations managed
to implement cooperation in the field of social improvement between the countries of both blocs.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such forms of competition and exchange often arose between Western industrialized countries. But what happened when social ideas of *Kulturstaaten* or imperial powers were transferred to countries characterized by considerably different economic, political, and cultural conditions? This was another important theme at the workshop. As Frauke Scheffler showed in her paper, the transfer and implementation of social ideas into other national contexts was often used as an instrument of control. Examining infant health programs in the US-occupied Philippines from 1900 to 1930, Scheffler highlighted the circulation of medical knowledge between France, the United States, and the Philippines and the role of colonial elites as contributors of transnational knowledge. By introducing their social ideas in the colony, these elites tried to control the Philippine people by trying to make them behave in new ways.

Another important aspect of the workshop focused on the identity of the actors involved in the circulation of social ideas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It became apparent that the search for better lives was often launched by individual actors or groups beyond policy makers or academics. As Mark Malisa stressed in his talk on Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, the international transfer of social ideas was often provoked by single persons who travelled to different countries and exchanged ideas and concepts. Karagöz-Kızılca analyzed a group of individuals who tried to implement social reforms in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. Besides the relationship between law and social improvement, Karagöz-Kızılca focused on a group of intellectuals, the Young Ottomans, who tried — inspired by transnational ideas — to modernize the *old system*. Margaret Vining studied women as a group that carried and transferred social ideas. By presenting feminism as a toolbox for new social ideas, Vining emphasized the important role of women in the search for better lives. Furthermore, women seemed to be in the center of the practical execution of social work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Adrienne Chambon, Marjorie Johnstone, and Stefan Königter showed in their presentations. Beate Loeffler’s study of mission and social work in Japan reflected that the personalities and biographies of carriers of social ideas played an important role. The analyses of Malisa,
Karagöz-Kızılda, and Loeffler thus demonstrated that the circulation of ideas was not only connected to scientification, academization, and authority, but also to charisma.

Furthermore, Loeffler’s analysis of William Merrell Vories, a Christian missionary in Japan, showed that common values, like affiliation with the same religion, encouraged transfer processes. The factor of religion in the exchange of social ideas again referred back to the concept of cultural community. The presentation by Adrienne Cham-bon, Marjorie Johnstone, and Stefan Königter on organizations of social reform in Toronto at the beginning of the twentieth century pointed out that organizations can be local and transnational at the same time. In their case study, Christianity functioned as a cultural community that was informed by the transnational transfer of ideas.

The workshop’s final discussion focused on general questions about the conditions for the circulation of social ideas. The participants agreed that there were different reasons behind the exchange of ideas. In many cases, crises or shifting political conditions were the catalysts for the exchange process — forcing people to travel to other countries in order to learn from others. Such moments of perceived crisis in which old modes of living came to appear dysfunctional or outdated seem to be an important precondition for the search for reform ideas. In contrast to theories of globalization or world societies, the workshop showed that the nation state played an important role in the circulation and implementation of ideas throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nationalism fostered competition in the field of social policy and made some countries behave as if they were superior and had found advanced ways in their search for better lives. At the end, the discussion returned to general questions about the meaning of a better life. The participants agreed that there have been many different interpretations of social improvement, depending on the social, economic, and cultural context. But as the workshop showed, although there is no common idea of a better life, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries social ideas circulated internationally between policy makers, experts, intellectuals, different groups, and individuals. Since there is still very little agreement on what “better lives” are, and since the search continues, exchanges about this topic will persist in the future.

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