MIGRANTS AS “TRANSLATORS”:
MEDIATING EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON POST-WORLD WAR II WESTERN EUROPE, 1945-1973

Workshop at the Institute for the History of the German Jews (IGdJ) in Hamburg, Germany, co-sponsored by the GHI Washington, October 24-26, 2013. Conveners: Jan Logemann (GHI Washington) and Miriam Rürup (IGdJ). Participants: Doris Bachmann-Medick (University of Giessen), Tamara Bjažić Klarin (Croatian Museum of Architecture), Elisabeth Gallas (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin), Nancy L. Green (EHESS Paris), Laura Hobson Faure (Sorbonne Nouvelle University), Andreas Joch (GHI Washington/University of Giessen), Jan Lambertz (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), Simone Lässig (Georg-Eckert-Institut/TU Braunschweig), Jan Logemann (GHI Washington), Isabella Löhr (University of Basel), Barbara Louis (University of Minnesota), Corinna Ludwig (GHI Washington/University of Göttingen), Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney (University of Arizona), Hanno Plass (TU Berlin), Christiane Reinecke (Centre d’Histoire Sociale du XXe siècle), Miriam Rürup (IGdJ), Joachim Schlör (University of Southampton), Dirk Schubert (HafenCity University), Lauren Shaw (GHI Washington/University College London), Björn Siegel (IGdJ), Andreas Stuhlmann (University of Hamburg), Corinna Unger (Jacobs University Bremen), Anne Zetsche (Northumbria University).

In the decades that followed the end of World War II, Western Europe experienced a period of rapid social and cultural transformation. This workshop set out to explore the ways in which returning European émigrés and other migrants contributed to and acted as mediators in this era of change. As entrepreneurs and scholars, government envoys and leaders of civil society organizations, migrants played an active part in facilitating the vibrant postwar exchange that connected disparate parts of the globe and shaped the rebuilding of Europe’s cities, the strengthening of its economies, and the “modernizing” of its societies. How did their migration experiences enable them to take on the role of “translators” either in a linguistic or a broader cultural sense? To what extent can the examination of individual and group experiences with exile, migration, and return provide a fruitful lens through which to study postwar social change?

A keynote lecture and comment provided a methodological and thematic framework for the workshop. Coming from the field of cultural studies, Doris Bachmann-Medick challenged participants to view
migration as a form of cross-cultural interruption, a series of ruptures and frictions during which individual migrants may in turns have the agency to act as “cultural brokers” or find themselves translated and defined by others. In discussing what she has termed the “translational turn,” Bachmann-Medick provided several theoretical models that migration scholars may find useful for analyzing the shifting and varied social contexts between which migrations and translations occur. These included self-translation, the management of multiple belongings, and the use of a shared point of reference or third idiom — such as international human rights norms — by migrants to make their political or cultural claims heard. In history and migration research, as in cultural studies, she emphasized the importance of a less metaphorical and more empirically-grounded understanding of translation. Nancy L. Green followed up on Bachmann-Medick’s lecture, commenting from a migration studies perspective that the conceptualization of migration as a series of ruptures may prove a good way to complicate overly simplified and cheerful narratives of transnationalism. Green noted the importance of considering complicating factors, such as class and gender, when looking at the power structures within a society that make possible or frustrate attempted translations. Certain professions, she observed, are characterized by an inherent translational quality, while the socio-economic status of other migrants may make it near-impossible to participate actively in translation. Green also asked participants to reflect on which elements of the “translational turn” could provide useful new tools for researchers in migration studies and whether some of its concepts might not already be present in the field under other names.

The first day of the workshop focused on political translations by migrants in the Atlantic world in the aftermath of the war. The initial panel centered on individual Jewish émigrés who acted as “cultural brokers” in public discussions about the Holocaust. Elisabeth Gallass presented a look at Hannah Arendt’s “return through writing” to participate as a Jewish voice in German postwar public debates about the country’s Nazi past, as well as in efforts backed by Allied forces to recover Jewish cultural objects looted during the war. Through a close analysis of her writings, Andreas Stuhlmann distinguished several translational modes in Arendt’s transatlantic engagement; these included the weaving together of reflections on the European Enlightenment, political science, and individual historical experience to contribute to a shared cultural narrative, and, on a more literal level, the use of her position as an editor for a New York publishing
house to recommended the translation and publication of the works of certain German and European authors, including Walter Benjamin. To conclude the panel, Jan Lambertz examined the detention of the Jewish community activist Norbert Wollheim on Ellis Island upon entry into the United States, highlighting the challenges that Cold War tensions created for cultural interlocutors as they moved between distinct and shifting political worlds. All three papers suggested that the reception of cultural processes of translation depends not only on the translations offered, but also on the acceptance — or not — of the migrant’s authority by the wider society as a result of the individual’s real or perceived political and cultural affiliations.

The panel that followed featured émigrés that were involved in the postwar reestablishment of cultural ties between the United States and Europe. Through an examination of German-American businessman Eric M. Warburg’s role in the founding of the Atlantik-Brücke and the American Council on Germany, Anne Zetsche suggested that diverse professional and personal contacts, coupled with experience in multiple cultures, put émigrés like Warburg in a unique position to forge elite networks and strengthen the emerging “Atlantic Community.” Björn Siegel then traced the transatlantic career of shipping magnate Arnold Bernstein and his efforts to restore American-European shipping routes for both cargo and tourism. By enabling middle-class Americans to visit the continent, Bernstein contributed to shifting perceptions of Europe from a wartime battlefield to a resurrected center of culture. Both presentations highlighted the importance of social networks for successful cross-cultural transfers, but also raised questions about how to clearly define translation as a social practice.

The third panel offered a look beyond the Atlantic and examined political exchanges and translational processes between Europe and the Global South during the 1960s and ’70s. Hanno Plass shared his research on the anti-apartheid activism of members of South Africa’s Jewish minority. Taking the example of the journalist Ruth First, Plass demonstrated how experiences with anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe shaped the social and political views of Jewish activists like First, and enabled her to internationalize the anti-apartheid cause while in exile in Great Britain. Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney then presented on the reception of Chilean political exiles in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the distinct ways in which the Chilean peaceful revolution and subsequent military coup were understood by GDR.
party elites, members of solidarity groups, and average East Germans. This was coupled with a look at the position of “translator” the exiles later assumed when conveying their experiences with socialism in practice after their return to Chile. Even within the highly transnational language of protest and activism, these papers acknowledge, there remained a need for translation and adjusting of messages to localized debates and cultures. By couching their struggle in the burgeoning international language of human rights, these migrant activists were able to amplify their message.

The second day of the workshop shifted the focus to migrants active in various professional fields. Translations in business and marketing stood at the center of the fourth panel. Jan Logemann assessed the transatlantic career of motivational researcher Ernest Dichter as part of a larger group of European émigré “consumer engineers” that were able to use their expert knowledge of European markets and psychologically-informed research methods to influence the development of mass consumption on both sides of the Atlantic. Turning to the field of advertising, Corinna Ludwig then analyzed the cultural codes and market features unique to American and German automobile consumption that complicated the transfer and translation of the Volkswagen Beetle advertising campaign in the late 1950s and early ‘60s. In business, as with transnational protest movements, localized adaptation and awareness of the culture of a translation’s intended audience were stressed as important elements of a successful translation. Both case studies furthermore sought to complicate traditional notions of the postwar “Americanization” of European consumption as a one way process, noting the multidirectional dialogue and creative synthesis between European-trained market researchers, American advertising experts, and companies from both sides of the Atlantic.

The fifth panel opened a discussion on the way experiences with migration, exile, and displacement were portrayed in and experienced by those involved in creating contemporary popular culture. Miriam Rürup explored representations of remigration and return in the early postwar films Der Ruf (The Lost Illusion) and Long is the Road, analyzing the challenges of negotiating incredibly divisive and emotionally charged issues on screen, including wartime suffering and guilt, and the hopes and disappointments of returnees. Joachim Schlör followed this with an examination of the way exile from and return to Europe shaped the career of the German songwriter Robert Gilbert.
The English language — the source of much of Gilbert’s frustration as he tried to write songs for an American audience — became an asset in his later career after returning to Europe as he translated multiple American musicals, including *My Fair Lady* and *Oklahoma!*, into German. Both papers inquired about the potential limitations and misinterpretations of cross-cultural translation by highlighting not only the successes, but also the challenges migrants faced and the instances of failed translations.

The role of remigrés in the postwar professionalization of European social work was the topic of the next panel. Laura Hobson Faure presented on the creation of the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work by the American Joint Distribution Committee and on the involvement of migrant experts — including several German exiles — in efforts to popularize “American” social work methods to France. Barbara Louis then shared the case study of Gisela Konopka, a Jewish refugee from Germany, who became a translator of social work methods and practices — most notably social group work — through her position as an educator and consultant specialist sought out by the Allied High Commission to help rebuild German welfare services after the war. By considering migrant experts as translators rather than simple carriers of ideas, Louis suggested, historians acknowledge the individuals’ agency and active participation in the adjustment and moderation of transfers between cultures. Such an understanding can lead to a more nuanced understanding of processes of cultural and professional exchange. These papers also demonstrated different strategies experts chose in representing themselves and the methods they tried to advance as either “American,” “European,” or something in between.

The final panel examined the careers of several prominent émigré architects and urban planners who engaged in postwar debates on the future of urban space. Looking at the diverse professional activities of Walter Curt Behrendt, Victor Gruen, and Hugo Leipizger-Pearce, Andreas Joch suggested that while planners of the period shared a professional language that to some extent bridged national divides, a secondary translation of planning ideas was often necessary to make them accessible to non-experts, including politicians and the average citizen. In this sense, contemporary planners made use of both the strategy of appealing to a cross-cultural “third language” and of localizing their message in an effort to make it resonate with the receiving society. Tamara Bjazić Klarin analyzed Croatian-born...
Ernest Weissmann’s rise from an independent architect to the director of the United Nations Housing and Town and Country Planning Section, noting his continued dedication to the practice and spread of socially responsible architecture. Weissmann and the other planners discussed in this panel had well-defined social goals that included the protection of metropolitan city centers, the creation of high-quality housing for vulnerable individuals, and the fostering of democratic behavior. While these goals were maintained, more or less, as the planners crossed national borders, the methods used to pursue and explain these aims often required translation to fit the cultural and historical context.

The concluding discussion underlined the potential usefulness of translational models of cultural analysis for histories of exchange and encounter. The research presented at this workshop provided an initial empirical test of these models. A renewed focus on the process rather than the outcome of translations leads to a more subtle understanding of cultural and professional dynamics and of the position of migrants within a society. “Translation,” it was suggested, is a more nuanced term than “transfer”; it brings in the complexity of language and the speaker’s anticipation of the reception of a message by a particular audience. However, a more well-defined typology of the different modes of translations would be useful, particularly when considering different types of migrants. To what extent can the same processes be seen among high- and low-skilled, forced and professional migrants? While migrants in certain professions, including marketing and pop culture, reflected explicitly on their roles as “cultural brokers,” for others, translation was simply an inherent part of everyday life. The translational turn, most participants agreed, may not revolutionize their research projects, but can open valuable new spaces to explore the nuance and friction of migrant experiences, and to better understand the agency of individual historical actors.

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