IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TRANSNATIONAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE, FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO TODAY

Workshop at the German Historical Institute, June 16–17, 2016. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (University of Göttingen), Jessica Csoma (GHI), Bryan Hart (GHI), Kelly McCullough (GHI), Atiba Pertilla (GHI), Benjamin Schwantes (Johns Hopkins University), Uwe Spiekermann (University of Göttingen). Participants: Alicia Dewey (Biola University), Jürgen Finger (GHI Paris), Javier Grossutti (Swinburne University of Technology), Will Hausman (College of William & Mary), Giles Hoyt (Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis), Rebecca Kobrin (Columbia University), Alan Kraut (American University), Jochen Krebber (University of Trier), Indianna Minto-Coy (Mona School of Business & Management), Cristoforos Pavlakis (Hellenic Centre for International Studies), Carol Petty (George Mason University), Dan Wadwhani (University of the Pacific), Marianne Wokeck (Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis), Xaojian Zhao (UC Santa Barbara).

On June 16 and June 17, 2016, the German Historical Institute hosted the workshop “Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Transnational Comparative Perspective, Eighteenth Century to Today” to mark the conclusion of the research project “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present.”

In the first panel, on “Methods and Approaches,” Jürgen Finger’s paper “Entrepreneur Biographies: Microhistories of an Immigration Society” posed the argument that studies of immigrant entrepreneurs’ lives are most useful when they provide a window into the history of how migrants have encountered and reshaped social, cultural, and economic arrangements as they cross national borders. Finger argued that the most fruitful use of the entrepreneurial biography is to use the individual life to provide texture to an account of the history of a community (broadly defined to include not only geographic settlements but also local diasporas, business networks, etc.), rather than myopically focusing on a single case study with only occasional glances at the world outside the subject’s immediate frame of reference. The biography, Finger suggests, should attempt to encompass as many different scales of human activity as possible, and illustrate how global or local forces may shape an entrepreneur’s life in different ways at important moments. In the next presentation, “Why
Biographies? Actors, Agencies, and the Analysis of Immigrant Entrepreneurship,” Uwe Spiekermann noted that the genre has long been disdained by academic historians, particularly in social and economic history, for lacking scholarly rigor and, at worst, for being prone to stringing together unexamined anecdotes and exuding sentimentality. Spiekermann argued that, in fact, biography can expand knowledge within these fields by bringing to their agglomeration of quantitative data a perspective that recognizes the importance of contingency and the agency of multiple actors — not only of the entrepreneur at the center of the account but also of workers, consumers, family members, regulators, and other individuals whose actions both constrain the entrepreneur’s choices and make new opportunities possible.

The second panel, “Individuals, Networks, Ethnic Groups,” probed histories of entrepreneurship across national borders. Javier Grossutti’s paper surveyed immigrant entrepreneurship over the longue durée by focusing on mosaic and terrazzo-floor artisans from the Friuli region of Italy, who as early as the sixteenth century were renowned in Venice and whose services were demanded by aristocratic patrons from as far away as France. Grossutti then traced the emigration of Friulian tile artisans to the United States, where they continued to practice their craft and successfully transitioned to using mechanical equipment rather than handicraft alone. Even today many of the largest American tile companies are owned and operated by descendants of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants. Grossutti’s case study illustrated the persistent importance of skills transfer in providing opportunities for entrepreneurship within a lucrative economic niche. Rebecca Kobrin’s paper, “A Credit to Their Nation,” examined migration as a business in and of itself at the turn of the twentieth century by tracing entrepreneurs who facilitated the immigration of Eastern Europeans to the United States. These entrepreneurs served as brokers by buying passenger tickets in bulk, assuring shipping lines a predictable profit, and then providing credit for poor families to buy tickets on installments. Kobrin noted that these entrepreneurs had great visibility and high prestige within their communities, which some in New York and other large cities parlayed into providing banking services and engaging in real estate speculation. Immigrant banks faced minimal government scrutiny at first but were gradually regulated out of existence by lawmakers who were concerned that immigrants who did not patronize mainstream financial institutions might be prone to panic during financial crises and thus destabilize
the local economy. Alicia Dewey reviewed the history of “Diversity and Entrepreneurship in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands, 1880–1940” by examining the activities of Tejano, Mexican, and European immigrant entrepreneurs in the emerging urban network of the lower Rio Grande valley. Providing farm tools, hardware, groceries and other consumer goods to residents of the region’s growing small towns and cities created opportunities for entrepreneurs at varying scales of business activity, and they often attracted customers on both sides of the border. Prevailing systems of racial and ethnic categorization placed Mexicans and Mexican-Americans at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with southern Europeans occupying a middle zone, and “white Anglo-Saxon Protestants” enjoying the most privileged positions. Credit records indicate Mexican-owned businesses faced constraints on their expansion because they had more difficulty obtaining financing than businesses owned by entrepreneurs of other ethnicities.

The third panel returned to the experiences of German-American immigrants. Hartmut Berghoff reviewed “Lessons of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project.” The project found that German-American entrepreneurs were active in the broadest possible range of economic activities, from innovation in tobacco and meat processing in early American history to the present-day creation of new high-tech platforms for the online economy. Entrepreneurs' interactions with the state also ran the gamut from close cooperation in military production to illicit bootlegging and fencing stolen goods. The project, Berghoff noted, was conceptualized in part because of the lack of attention in American business history to ethnic entrepreneurship in general and German-American entrepreneurship in particular. This was in part a consequence of the fraught question of ethnic identity for millions of German-Americans in the wake of the world wars that played out in entrepreneurs' individual decisions over whether to Anglicize their names, to use German in public, or to actively pursue reconciliation between Germany and the United States in the wake of the two world wars. Jochen Krebber’s presentation, “Swabian Entrepreneurs in Nineteenth Century America,” detailed the experiences of migrants from a cluster of German communities, who typically ended up as local craftsmen or managers of small neighborhood enterprises in the United States as opposed to the nationally and regionally important entrepreneurs profiled at the Immigrant Entrepreneurship website. Krebber’s detailed tracking of individual migrants found that in many cases chain migration was less important than has been generally assumed in the academic literature, and that skilled migrants were
highly likely to move away from friends and acquaintances to new communities where they might fill a needed niche and find greater opportunities. Carol Petty’s paper, “German-Americans in the Context of Entrepreneurship and Global Capitalism,” traced immigrant entrepreneurs in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Her review found that foreign-born residents and their children have habitually represented a disproportionate percentage of entrepreneurs. In particular, Petty delineated shifts in the proportion of German-American entrepreneurs in different economic sectors, marked by decreasing participation in farming, resource extraction, and wholesale or retail trade while business and professional services account for an increasing proportion of entrepreneurs. Petty concluded that German-American entrepreneurs have particularly benefitted from the American transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy, thanks in part to significantly greater educational attainment than among the general U.S. population. The three papers highlighted the importance of skills transfer in facilitating entrepreneurship among German migrants in the United States, particularly in the nineteenth century, when the strict residential, familial, and occupational laws in many parts of Germany restricted opportunities for artisans and craftsmen in their home communities.

The final panel, “Heritage and Skills,” looked at the experiences of specific ethnic groups in three different regions and economic sectors. Cristoforos Pavlakis’ paper “Greek Migrant Entrepreneurs in the Southern United States” explained that extreme rural poverty led many Greek men to emigrate in hopes of earning sufficient money to return home and be considered eligible to marry. While the majority of Greek migrants traveled to Northeastern and Midwestern cities and became factory operatives, a sizable portion emigrated to the burgeoning cities of the “New South” and started restaurants, shoe-shine establishments, and other enterprises providing food and other services to an urban clientele. Greeks were often treated as a liminal ethnic group which did not experience the same racial animosity as African-Americans but did not receive the full privileges of white identity either. Many operated businesses and lived in neighborhoods that functioned as buffer zones of racial segregation. Eventually, Pavlakis explained, Greek-Americans established a national identity association, AHEPA, which urged “pure and undefiled Americanism.” Over the interwar years, Greek-Americans became assimilated into the larger Southern white community and changed several of their cultural practices, adopting an English-language liturgy in many
Orthodox churches and becoming accepting of intermarriage with other ethnic groups. Ironically, by the 1970s, many communities were sufficiently confident in their American identities that they began to embrace their Greek heritage with street festivals and other celebrations, illustrating the tendency of many ethnic communities to go through periods of both uplifting and downplaying their diasporic history. Xiaojian Zhao’s study of Chinese and Korean immigrant entrepreneurship focused on the development of international and global supply chains, especially in the fashion industry, from the 1960s onward. Zhao noted that among both groups, relationships between immigrant communities tended to be grounded in family ties or links to a common local origin rather than business relationships. This has changed, she argued, as larger portions of Asian immigrants have shifted their entrepreneurship from community-level businesses such as ethnic restaurants and neighborhood stores to large-scale retail enterprises such as clothing and toy stores. Increasingly, Asian-American entrepreneurs have turned to manufacturers in their home countries to supply their inventory, taking advantage of communication technologies and financial services to efficiently manage logistics. In the case of fashion, these networks extend not only from the United States to China or Korea, but to other communities, such as Buenos Aires, where Korean and Chinese immigrants have developed new garment districts to supply “fast fashion” garments that can be produced cheaply and deployed quickly to store counters throughout the world. Indianna Minto-Coy examined the history of Caribbean immigrant entrepreneurship in the United States, presenting a case study of a fast-food company founded in the 1980s by a Jamaican immigrant and his family in New York City which has since spread throughout the Northeast. Minto-Coy noted that the business had prospered in part by marketing itself as a Caribbean rather than a specifically Jamaican establishment, appealing to a broader regional identity encompassing multiple nations. The paper noted that the company’s founder strategically focused on offering franchises to nurses, reasoning that they had both sufficient savings and local community prestige that would allow them to attract and keep potential customers. Determining how best to leverage identity and prestige was crucial to providing the company a stable platform for expanding beyond its original ethnic roots.

The workshop discussions were informed by the keynote lecture by Alan Kraut titled “Investing in America: The Historical Perennial of Immigration and Assimilation,” which examined the development
of a formal American immigration infrastructure in the early twentieth century and the interplay between scientific knowledge and the circulation of racial and cultural stereotypes that helped shape immigrants’ initial encounters with American government authority. Throughout American history, Kraut noted, immigrants’ desires to pursue opportunities to build businesses, families, and communities have often been met with skepticism and nativism, overcome time and again by persistence and creativity. The workshop papers demonstrated that the international framework of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship project points towards the usefulness of using a global lens to trace the development of economic activity and social cohesion in American culture from the eighteenth century through the present, not only among German-Americans but among immigrant groups from all corners of the globe.

Atiba Pertilla (GHI)