FOREVER YOUNG? REJUVENATION IN TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE, 1900-2000

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), May 11-13, 2017. Supported by a Conference Grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG). Conveners: Kristine Alexander (University of Lethbridge), Mischa Honeck (GHI), Isabel Richter (University of Bremen). Participants: Andrew Achenbaum (University of Houston), Anne Leonora Blaakilde (University of Copenhagen), Catherine Carstairs (University of Guleph), Birgit Dahlke (Humboldt University, Berlin), Silke van Dyk (University of Jena), Josef Ehmer (University of Vienna), Kenneth Kidd (University of Florida), Till Kössler (University of Bochum), Susan Miller (Rutgers University), Jane Nicholas (St. Jerome’s University), Leslie Paris (University of British Columbia), David Pomfret (University of Hong Kong), Franziska Roy (ZMO Berlin), Paul Schweitzer-Martin (GHI), Michelle Smith (Deakin University), Heiko Stoff (University of Hannover), Nicholas Syrett (University of Northern Colorado), Melanie Woitas (University of Erfurt).

The purpose of this conference was to advance scholarship on various historical strands of rejuvenation that are often examined separately. The conference pursued three broad aims: First, it sought to tease out unrecognized connections within a growing body of literature that explores how conceptions of youth and old age are socially constructed and shaped by cultural perceptions. Second, it aimed to insert age as a category of social, cultural, and historical analysis into fields of research (e.g. economics, politics, international relations) where questions of youth, aging, and rejuvenation are rarely studied systematically. Third, contrary to most scholars who focus on social constructions of age in advanced industrial societies, this conference wanted to critically engage the tacit assumption that the “war on aging” was primarily a Western phenomenon. A combined transnational and transcolonial approach thus appeared particularly suited to appreciate rejuvenation as a historically contested and multifaceted phenomenon.

The first panel featured three papers that laid the theoretical groundwork. Leslie Paris offered a panoramic overview of major “body projects” in industrial societies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when new technologies of physical improvement and an expanding consumer market propelled new opportunities and pressures for youthfulness. Fusing key institutions and ideologies,
Paris connected individual projects of self-improvement to national projects of civic renewal, in which the body politic has been imagined as both susceptible to harm and open to repair. Nicholas Syrett’s paper on the relationship of rejuvenation and the rise of chronological age addressed the increasing significance of birthdays in U.S. popular and legal culture since the mid-nineteenth century. As a result of greater age segmentation, the celebration of milestone birthdays became more popular, yet negative cultural connotations about ageing also led more people to refuse to identify with specific ages they associated with physical decline. Adding perspectives from sociology, Silke van Dyk focused on the fact that while youth and old age have received ample attention in the interdisciplinary field of age studies, the categories of midlife and adulthood are important pieces in the scholarly puzzle that often lack critical reflection.

The first panel was followed by David Pomfret’s keynote lecture, “Springs Eternal: Youth, Age, and Global Histories of Rejuvenation.” Spanning entire continents and centuries, Pomfret addressed a dazzling variety of rejuvenationist projects ranging from the supposed degenerative impact of tropical climate on white bodies and Serge Voronoff’s medical experiments with monkey testicles to Benito Mussolini “as the youngest of all” since fascism was closely tied to the myth of youth. The last example brought up the interesting question of what happens when rejuvenation movements grow old. In sum, Pomfret demonstrated how broad the field of rejuvenation is and just how many aspects can be analyzed.

The second day began with a panel that traced the role of discourses of rejuvenation in the arts, letters, and sciences. Birgit Dahlke examined the ways in which “juvenescence” was both an object of celebration and a symptom of crisis in German literature and culture around 1900. In Dahlke’s assessment, Wilhelmine artists and writers — most of them male and middle-class — idealized youth to not only distract from fears of emasculation and imperial decline but also to imagine a realm of infinite possibilities for social and national renewal. Moving from the rejuvenation of a nation to the rejuvenation of an academic discipline, Kenneth Kidd’s paper focused on the International Philosophy for Children’s movement (P4C) in the latter part of the twentieth century. By appreciating children as critical thinkers in their own right, the protagonists of this movement, according to Kidd, sought to revitalize philosophy as a socially relevant intellectual endeavor, especially in opposition to modern disciplines such as anthropology.
or psychology. In her comment, Kristine Alexander probed the extent to which P4C could be understood in postcolonial terms. Additionally, Alexander stressed similarities between Dahlke’s analysis of the cult of youth in Wilhelmine Germany and in other modern empires.

The next panel examined efforts to renew bodies through dental hygiene and physical exercise, with a particular emphasis on these projects’ class-based and gendered dimensions. Catherine Carstairs took up the subject of oral health improvements in twentieth-century Canada to provide a more positive, though not uncritical, perspective on rejuvenation. While the expansion of quality dental care allowed an aging population to enjoy their food more and live with less pain, keeping one’s teeth for a lifetime also made possible the gleaming smiles that were part of the pressures placed on the elderly, especially elderly women, to look young in a youth-centric society. A post-industrial body project of a different sort stood at the center of Melanie Woitas’s paper. Revisiting the heyday of aerobics in the United States and West Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, Woitas analyzed the quest for the “aerobic body,” with its emphasis on female musculature and youthfulness, as an intensified striving for self-realization in times of economic uncertainty and the re-emergence of conservative gender roles. Heiko Stoff then placed these two examples of physical rejuvenation alongside several other modern body projects. For Stoff, most of these projects were a response to the perceived crisis of the productive body and emerged inseparably from demands made upon citizens in various imperialist, nationalist, and capitalist regimes that they be healthy, efficient, and youthful, irrespective of their actual age. Rejuvenation, thus, should not be conflated with the prolongation of life.

The commodification of young and rejuvenated bodies was the object of investigation of the fourth panel. Investigating letters of advice for young working women published in early twentieth-century Canadian periodicals, Jane Nicholas showed how young women played an active role in shaping idealized modern femininities through the confident embrace of a variety of fashion and skin care products. At a time when more women became concerned about their economic independence and sexual autonomy, the time they spent on enhancing their physical appearance no longer just served to attract the positive attention of men. Instead, as Nicholas underlined, women who managed to retain youthful looks were celebrated as exemplars of a nation defined as possessing vitality, energy, and enthusiasm. Michelle
Smith shed additional light on the nexus of femininity, rejuvenation, and beauty products with a presentation on Victorian and Edwardian print culture and the problem of cosmetics. Highlighting the ways in which girlish beauty was naturalized as healthy and attractive in the period’s advertisements and beauty manuals, Smith recalled that the excessive use of visible cosmetics still invited negative assessments of a woman’s character, and that older women’s attempts to recapture beauty were cast as ever more futile. In her comment, Isabel Richter drew attention to how these types of age (and gender) engineering can illuminate the shifting and historically contingent boundaries of youth and old age beyond traditional markers such as education, marriage, and retirement.

The fifth panel approached the modern history of rejuvenation from the perspective of aging societies. Josef Ehmer gave a broad and statistically informed overview of developments in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century regarding changing patterns and images of work over the course of a person’s life. Ehmer defined youth as a time of passage that included several markers of maturation such as finishing school, leaving home, and joining the labor force, yet he also stressed the fluidity of the concepts of youth and old age in advanced industrial societies where an increased appreciation of leisure activities and the growing attendance of institutions of higher learning rearranged transitions into and out of adulthood. Andrew Achenbaum reflected on the role of ageism in developments leading up to the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Some liberal commentators, according to Achenbaum, were inclined to describe the fact that pro-Trump sentiments were disproportionately high among baby boomers as a senile form of protest against a youth-centric society. Achenbaum, however, rejected this reading because it bore the seeds of pathologizing an entire generation. Anne Leonora Blaakilde then added a Danish perspective in her comment that focused on the politics of aging in Denmark. In particular, Blaakilde problematized how the Danish social system provided incentives for retirees to migrate to southern Europe in ways that unsettled social and economic relations in both regions.

The final thematic panel of this conference engaged questions concerning the rejuvenation of collective bodies in the arena of state politics. Mischa Honeck wove together different postwar moments in the first half of the twentieth century to investigate how rejuvenationist narratives of a fresh start helped societies across the
divides of geography and ideology to recuperate from the ravages of modern warfare. Honeck argued that youth rallies, such as the world jamborees of the international Boy Scout movement or the communist-sponsored World Festivals for Youth and Students, offered rites of passage in reverse for old elites who sought to absolve themselves of responsibility for imperial and great-power conflicts that had resulted in unspeakable suffering. Combining anti- and postcolonial perspectives, Franziska Roy addressed the relationship of nation-building and the (de)mobilization of Indian youth during the country’s independence struggle and the Cold War. Emphasizing the malleable contours of who and what counted as young, Roy used the case of anticolonial Indian nationalism to show how state-builders of various leanings drew upon a seemingly ageless ideal of youth to develop a metaphysical politics of progress. Underscoring the significance of the early twentieth century for developing a political grammar of youth, Till Kössler agreed that more research was needed to grasp how nationalist and internationalist movements were (de)legitized in age-specific terms. At the same time, Kössler cautioned scholars against ignoring the spiritual and religious connotations of rejuvenation in an age of secular politics.

The concluding roundtable made clear that while the human desire to conquer aging and, ultimately, death may have been a transhistorical pursuit, rejuvenation needs to be understood as a distinctly modern phenomenon. As such, it comprised a series of historically specific projects of regeneration and repair designed to reenergize both individual (male, female) and collective (nations, professions, empires) bodies that resonated across social, political, and geographical boundaries. Rejuvenationists, whether they marched under the banner of science, public health, physical education, state-building, war, or world peace, tended to cast their ventures in glaringly utopian colors. However, their ventures produced formulas for stopping or reverting the aging process that were neither universally accessible nor applicable. As a result, some schemes magnified existing inequalities of class, race, and gender, while others projected functionalist visions of society that were blatantly misogynist and ageist. Rather than laying bare a panoply of innocuous lifestyle choices, research on the histories of rejuvenation can help us better understand the relationship of age and age engineering to evolving patterns of power, privilege, and (dis)ability.

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