DIVERSITY IN GERMAN HISTORY: INTRODUCTION

Till van Rahden
UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

Anthony J. Steinhoff
UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL

Richard F. Wetzel
GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

Diversity has been central to political and social life in German-speaking Europe, but also one of its ongoing challenges. For much of the modern era, diversity has been viewed as a problem that had to be solved via the marginalization, suppression or even elimination of differences in order to realize visions of unity that lay at the heart of the nation-state, and — even more so — of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft and the East German “Peasants’ and Workers’ State.” As observers such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel have noted, the passage from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft created new options for individual autonomy, above all in the context of the modern metropolis. Nonetheless, as Alexis de Tocqueville stressed in Democracy in America, democratic polities could be at least as hostile to difference as traditional rural or urban communities.

The debates and conflicts that have ensued from diversity’s fate at modernity’s hands in the German lands since the Reformation have received ample attention from scholars working from many perspectives. What would happen, though, if we viewed difference and diversity as constitutive of modernity itself? In this light, diversity might perhaps be more fruitfully understood as the inevitable effect of individual freedom rather than as a specter of alterity that haunts (liberal) modernity. How might this shift change our thinking not only about modernity, but also about how we as scholars have endeavored to make sense of difference and the narratives, practices and politics it has engendered since the religious crisis of the late Middle Ages? Indeed, how might attention to the conceptual history of “diversity,” as a category that is continually negotiated and navigated, enable us to move beyond the binary oppositions — insider/outside, majority/minority, particular/universal, secular/religious — that have long dominated scholarly and public discourse on the subject?

It is with these paragraphs that we began a call for papers for a conference on diversity in German-speaking Europe from the Reformation
era to the present that was co-organized by the three editors of this “Forum” and co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington, the Université de Montréal, and the Université du Québec à Montréal and took place in Montreal in April 2016. As these lines intimate, our goal was to bring together scholars working from a variety of perspectives to explore diversity as concept and category and as experienced in time and space. We wished to provoke discussions about how Germans perceived diversity and how they reacted to different types of difference, while also encouraging reflection on how the negotiation of diversity, both formally and informally, has shaped economic, political, religious and social life in the German lands since the Reformation. The choice of a broad time frame was deliberate. In part, we saw this conference as an opportunity to rethink narratives about the relationship between modernity and diversity that presuppose major breaks between the early modern and modern eras. At the same time, we wanted to acknowledge and build upon the innovative contributions that historians of the early modern period have made to our understanding of diversity. In these ways, too, we hoped to cultivate a scholarly conversation about diversity that moves beyond the concept’s current political connotations in North America and Western Europe and concentrates instead on examining diversity both in the multiplicity of its manifestations and in the shifting valences attached to them across time and space. How did Germans construct and navigate gender differences, for example, in the sixteenth, eighteenth or twentieth centuries? How has law been employed to manage religious difference in the German lands since the Reformation? And with what consequences for notions of civil community?

The essays in this special issue of the *Bulletin* are the fruits of the rich discussions that took place in Montreal. Taken together, they reflect the conference’s topical and chronological breadth, but also its intellectual depth. Although each of these pieces returns to material presented in the respective authors’ papers for the conference, in every case the material has been reworked significantly (sometimes with a notable change in focus) to arrive at the versions published here.

The first essay, Jesse Spohnholz’s study of dissimulation in the city of Wesel after the Protestant Reformation, addresses one of the fundamental problems that the Reformation’s success posed for the German lands, both short and long term, namely, how to contend with the newfound religious pluralism and interconfessional coexistence. As Spohnholz reminds us, these were existential questions that affected

---

1 A report on this conference was published in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 59 (Fall 2016): 121-128 and is available online at https://www.ghi-dc.org/publications/ghi-bulletin. We especially wish to thank the International Research Training Group “Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces” for its support of this conference.
Germans in a variety of ways, both public and private. Whereas scholars have long underscored the legal attempts to regulate this religious confusion, above all by excluding confessional “others” from state and society to recreate at least the image of mono-confessional harmony, Spohnholz prompts us to pay attention to the informal practices that complemented but, critically, also undermined these formal strategies for the management of religious diversity. Indeed, in the interest of maintaining a certain degree of religious pluralism and public peace, Wesel’s residents and officials were willing to engage in duplicitous behavior that normally would have been deemed both morally and legally unacceptable. In this fashion, Spohnholz moves the discussion of religious difference past considerations of “tolerance,” which he brands as a form of institutionalized intolerance, to one that seeks to understand the modalities and ramifications of religious pluralism.

Helmut Walser Smith’s essay shifts the issue’s temporal frame forward into the eighteenth century. But it also proposes a novel, even radical prism through which to think about diversity in Germany: travel and travel literature. In one respect, he intimates, traveling is fundamentally about encountering, acknowledging and navigating difference. One travels to other lands, some nearby, some further away, in search of the foreign, the exotic, the other: customs, architecture, cuisine, landscapes. The travel accounts that Smith studies here, however, propose something different. Not only do they chart and report on Germany’s physical contours, they also reflect on the people inhabiting these lands: Protestants and Catholics, city folk and country folk, north and south Germans, Rhinelanders and Prussians, Saxons and Austrians. True, Smith concedes, the travel descriptions of such travelers as Johann Georg Keyssler, Friedrich Nicolai and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder traded in stereotypes and prejudices. Nonetheless, this lack of objectivity affords us insights into how individuals in the eighteenth century conceived of “Germany” as a translocal community defined much more by the interplay of difference — confessional, economic, geographic, social — than by any overarching notion of unity.

In her piece on the kindergarten movement in mid-nineteenth — century Hamburg, Nisrine Rahal calls attention to a critical instrument that societies and states have used to navigate difference, namely educational policy. Normally, we tend to think about education and schooling as tactics for regulating, that is, downplaying
diversity. In this view, schools are sites above all for societal reproduction that aim to promote conformity, hegemonic notions of social order and, hence, patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Rahal confirms that this dynamic was also at work in Hamburg, above all in church and political leaders’ responses to the emerging kindergarten movement. More importantly, however, she stresses that part of the kindergarten’s radical image lay precisely in its intent to recast Hamburg’s and, by extension Germany’s, religious and political landscape. Already from an operational perspective, the schools championed a more inclusive, socially diverse vision. Not only did they enlist supporters across confessional lines, but they idealized women’s contributions as educators, thereby deviating from the patriarchal, patrician line that dominated pre-1848 Hamburg. Moreover, through their curricular agendas and enrollment strategies, the kindergartens strove to promote social inclusion of another sort: opening up access to schooling, free from confessional dictates, to both boys and girls and to children from lower middle-class and lower-class families.

Schools also figure prominently in Glenn Penny’s contribution to this issue, but the context in which he invokes them, namely immigrant German communities in Latin America, injects new elements into this discourse on diversity. At first reading, one might be tempted to gloss this as a case study of ethnic survival abroad, in that the German schools Penny examines initially aimed to provide Germans in such countries as Argentina, Chile and Guatemala access to high quality, “German” education. The support given to these schools from Berlin, especially in terms of curricular models, textbooks and even teachers, also suggests that these institutions promoted a unitary image of Germanness abroad. Yet, Penny argues that, when one looks at actual practices, the history of German schools in diaspora settings speaks much more to the negotiation of difference rather than the striving for a certain ethnic conformity. Not only was there no agreed upon definition of Germanness for the schools to propagate, but increasingly their survival depended on the good graces of the host societies, encouraging them to make their own demands on the schools. But the logic of Penny’s argument goes well beyond the idea that the emigrant experience complicated Germans’ sense of identity, imbuing it with a hybridity rapidly being lost on the European continent. Indeed, he proposes that emigration itself was a vital strategy that Germans exploited in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to plot a course through an ever more diverse, and for that reason challenging social, political and economic environment.
In the final article, Christopher Ewing returns to the notions of travel and Germans abroad, which receive here a provocative twist that raises further questions about how we conceptualize and study diversity. In part, this is a study of the emergence of a public gay milieu in West Germany following the decriminalization of homosexuality there in 1969, defined above all by the rise of gay print media. At this level, we can read this as an essay on the growing inclusiveness in West Germany in the wake of the 1960s and continued economic prosperity. Prosperity, in particular, translated into travel opportunities, which the new gay magazines and travel guides thoroughly exploited. As gay men frolicked overseas, Ewing notes, they gained new perspectives on the world even if, as Smith similarly observed vis-à-vis eighteenth-century travelers, gay men’s accounts of their trips and encounters routinely reproduced racist images and stereotypes. And yet, even as some of these stereotypes persisted, Ewing reveals, through their travels and increased knowledge of gays living in other parts of the world, West German gays also increasingly developed a political conscience and fought to oppose repressive sexual politics across the globe. In short, Ewing offers here a case study in how a legally marginalized social group strove to leverage its new-found social and legal capital to promote greater sexual diversity both at home and abroad.

As each of these essays reveal, the effort to understand and analyze how Germans have sought to navigate difference since the Reformation is inherently complex. It entails taking account of the concepts, metaphors, and languages Germans have employed to talk about diversity and how they have tailored them to match particular situations. In addition, it involves exploring the realm of practices: how has diversity been experienced, manifested, represented and negotiated? How have Germans identified and acknowledged difference? How have they responded and acted on that knowledge? And, of necessity, the quest demands a consideration of political life, a central space where the narratives and practices of diversity intersect. That is, how have Germans used politics to negotiate — define, channel, accept, tolerate, condemn, or embrace — difference? To what degree should we understand the anxieties that have arisen around diversity — its presence and its toleration — as reflecting the problems and insecurities arising from particular constructions of power rather than the presence of difference itself? Of course, the essays in this forum, much like the papers presented at our conference, can offer only initial reflections on this critical subject. But we hope that they
Till van Rahden holds the Canada Research Chair in German and European Studies at the Université de Montréal. He is interested in the tension between the elusive promise of democratic equality and the recurrent presence of moral conflicts. His publications include Jews and other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860-1925 (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008) and the co-edited volumes Juden, Bürger, Deutsche: Zur Geschichte von Vielfalt und Differenz 1800-1933 (Mohr, 2001), Demokratie im Schatten der Gewalt: Geschichten des Privaten im deutschen Nachkrieg (Wallstein, 2010), and Autorität: Krise, Konstruktion und Konjunktur (Fink, 2016).

Anthony J. Steinhoff is Associate Professor of Modern European History at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is the author of The Gods of the City: Protestantism and Religious Culture in Strasbourg, 1870-1914 (Brill, 2008) and numerous journal articles and contributions to edited volumes on nineteenth-century European religious history, and co-editor of The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations (Berghahn Books, 2016).

Richard F. Wetzell is a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington DC. His research is situated at the intersection of legal history, political history, and the history of science. His publications include Inventing the Criminal: A History of German Criminology, 1880-1945 (UNC Press, 2000), Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany (edited, Berghahn, 2014), and the co-edited volumes Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880-1980 (Palgrave, 2012) and Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany (Cambridge UP, 2017).