

The European – an invention at the interface of technology and consumption

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The research department of the Deutsches Museum in Munich links two larger projects, which in the last one and a half years have explored the conceptual framework and conditionality of the construction of the European. The workshop was the result of the collaborative effort of the Research Group 3 (The Homo Europaeus between Research and Market) of the project *Imagined Europeans*. The Scientific Construction of Homo Europaeus, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, together with *European Ways of Life in the ‚American Century‘: Mediating Consumption and Technology in the Twentieth Century*, a research project of the EUROCORES program *Inventing Europe: Technology and the Making of Europe, 1850 to the Present*, funded by the European Science Foundation (ESF).¹ *Imagined Europeans* enquires on an interdisciplinary basis into the whole range of conceptions of the European, with its main focus centering on the influence of scientific research, while the international subproject of *Inventing Europe* concentrates from the viewpoint of *History of Technology on European consumption patterns in the light of developments in the US*.

The workshop therefore promised an interesting interplay of different scientific views – Empirical Social Sciences, Anthropology, History and Philosophy of Technology – connected with the challenge to find a common language for the issues at stake. In his introduction, HELMUTH TRISCHLER (Munich) outlined the workshop’s subject: the various strategies and techniques of constructing a European consumer of technology within the tense field of production and consumption. He suggested an analysis of the coming into being, functioning and transformation of the narratives of the homo

Europaeus as one initial key for a historiography of „the European“. The ESF representative RÜDIGER KLEIN (Strasbourg) reaffirmed the relevance and general need for research in this field in light of European integration.

The contributors in the first session explored the car as the engine of Europe or rather as driving force of the definition of the European as customer between producers’ intentions and individual reception of the technological product. THOMAS KAISERFELD (Stockholm) derived the iconic power of American cars as symbols of 1950s and 1960s rebelliousness not only from their size and ostentatiousness but also from the lifestyle they seemed to embody. They represented luxury, waste of fuel and an extraverted culture of mobility, while European cars stood for prudence and frugality. Considerably lower wages in Europe combined with high fuel prices did not allow the average European to adopt this symbolic product of the American way of life. However, the American consumer did not necessarily conform to this picture, as STEVE BERNARDIN (Paris) showed in his enquiry of the mid-century American „war on accidents“ and the attempts to discipline car consumers. Firstly, the cautiousness of drivers was addressed in safety campaigns initiated by the industrial leadership. After World War II, the national government took over the costly campaigns. Post-war presidents announced a „war action program“ driven by massive media employment to sensitize citizens towards the dangers of traffic. Bernardin showed how the governmental message attempted to replace the formula of freedom of mobility with freedom through safety. Consumers, however, remained skeptical and often felt restricted.

CHRISTOPH NEUMAIER (Munich) and KILIAN J.L. STEINER (Munich) provided insight into the context of car production and the dynamics of sale and were therefore able to reveal several aspects of the image generation of the product. Neumaier explained the consumer’s decisions in the process of car purchase with the theory of rationality fictions. Only details singled out from the complex technology of a product are extensively medially transmitted to the consumer. The decision to buy is therefore made much more quickly and, simultaneously, evokes a secure feeling about the purchase. As Neumaier pointed out, this strategy worked well in the case of the diesel car in Europe. It consumed less fuel and emitted fewer toxic pollutants. The rational sales argument merged

¹ Further information under <<http://www.imagined-europeans.org>> and <<http://www.esf.org/activities/eurocores/programmes/inventing-europe.html>>, cf. the workshop report under <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=1717>>.

with the disapproval of aesthetic reservations, coupled with pleasant sensual experiences. The image of the diesel engine had been that of a slow, noisy machine, but the diesel car proved to be quick, quiet and not at all inferior to the gasoline car. On the long run, consumers' sympathy helped it survive all upcoming critical discussions.

Steiner, in his talk, pointed to an issue that emerged as one of the core topics of the workshop: the tension between the individuality of the consumer and the standardization of the product. Steiner presented the *homo Europaeus* as a product of science and industry by turning the attention to the interface between the technological product and its human consumer. The European car industry in the mid-90s used a template of the European driver based on scientifically gathered anthropometric data. Steiner explicated how the framework for the product was not set by the body of the individual user, who was rather forced to adapt to the general abstracted model. Even though Germany developed a template that could do justice to a variety of user groups like women, kids, or elderly, the national car industry was forced to subordinate itself to the economically powerful transnational standard.

It was a great idea on the part of the workshop's organizers to invite ANDREAS SEIDL (Kaiserslautern), a representative of the commercial branch of body-scanning and 3D-templates. Seidl described the shift from two-dimensional to virtual templates, simultaneously decreasing the costs of the pre-production process and allowing adjustment to individual body shapes. Seidl's talk made clear, however, that in spite of the seemingly higher individuality the consumer still remains subject to thematization and industrial standard. Product developers abstain from surveys of actual consumers since a consideration of their particular opinions and interests would slow down the production process and increase its costs. As Seidl also revealed, industry doesn't trust users' unpredictable preferences but prefers to influence their purchase decisions with well-directed marketing campaigns and controlled stimulation of demand.

In a second session, the workshop considered the characteristics of European media for entertainment and information communication. KASPAR MAASE (Tübingen) analyzed the increasingly uniform language of European media. He described how the insatiable human need for aesthetic experience resulted in growing media consumption combining programmed broadcast with CDs, pay-

TV and internet, technologies allowing individual „mood-management“, foiling the control and centralization of national media. With the dissolution of national programs, Pop, once used to stigmatize American mass culture, has taken over the European claim for high culture, and even managed to become the „soundtrack of politics“. The contributor emphasized, however, that this popularized, superficial language bears potential especially for migration societies and migrants' participation in the common cultural property. JÜRGEN BOYNY (Nuremberg) considered the topic from the viewpoint of market research. The increasing consumption of television and rising numbers of high tech sets sold confirmed Maase's observation of the human pursuit of entertainment. Interesting, though, was Boyny's remark on the inverse proportion of the bad public image of TV consumption and its economic success. He attributed this fact to a consumer behavior depending on social context more than on nationality.

This aspect became evident during the subsequent talks and discussions. While many products are available all over the world, socially and nationally distinct consumer groups tend to perceive and use them quite differently. The user often evades producers' intentions and definitions. It became apparent that the researcher therefore should enquire the varying techniques and conceptions of the different actors of the consumption field and their interaction. Institutional framework can be as important as consumers' gender or age, industrial research, marketing, or scientific approaches. Thus, characteristics of an actual and all-embracing European identity – the often mentioned *homo Europaeus* himself – should not be the aim of research in light of the manifold developments.

This was also pointed out by MARKUS SPEIDEL (Munich), who explored, whether the introduction of Btx/Videotex/Minitel systems for interactive data transmission during the 70s/80s had really been the road to a common European information society. While national campaigns promoted the new systems and promised enormous increase rates of the new technology, it became a commercial failure. Speidel showed how technological requirements had been adapted throughout Europe, but national borders were not opened for information contents. Quite contrarily developed the spread of the GSM mobile telephoning standard in Europe since the 1980s, as HEIKE WE-

BER (Darmstadt) made clear. After the cooperation treaties in the European mail and telecommunication sector, GSM was launched under excellent conditions. Its economic potential was, however, largely underestimated. The small consumer target group – mainly businessmen – had to face high costs for the bulky hardware and telephoning. Nevertheless, over the years, mobile phoning became very popular on a national scale. Different national telephone cultures all over Europe started to merge only after the recent introduction of a coherent price system for telephoning abroad.

Unfortunately, the workshop's third session on European housing was cut short by the cancellation of two papers. Therefore it was up to LISBETH BERVOETS (Amsterdam) to use the example of postwar Netherlands to show how users – in this case, women committees – got engaged in the regulation of national mass housing projects. While modernizing architecture combined with outward standardization established a counterpoint to the traditional variegated housing on the national scale, the layout and technological equipping of the apartments followed the local individual needs of special interest groups as formulated by the women committees.

A fourth main point of the workshop focused on European foodways. KARIN ZACHMANN (Munich) explored why and how this part of cultural heritage disappeared during the American Century. After World War II, the variety of European food constantly increased whereas at the same time a transnational uniformity of the range of goods was established. Zachmann pointed out the important regulative role of the US: During the 1940s, government and science enforced a thorough analysis of food habits, resulting in the Food for Peace Program and agricultural matters of the European Recovery Program from the 1950s on. According to Zachmann, introducing American foodways was also a means to create a market and stimulate the demand for American products on a worldwide scale.

BARBARA ORLAND (Zurich/Vienna) looked at the flipside of this development by analyzing the coming into being of allegedly long-established European food traditions. She exposed the argument of geographical characteristics, cultural heritage and special ingredients and recipes as lacking an empirical basis. Orland denoted local cuisine, especially from the early 20th century on, as social construction. Regional identity became a com-

mercial protection shield against innovative market changes. Food was simultaneously a means for authentication of national identity and a useful marketing strategy aiming at the world market. In fact, foodstuff claiming regional exclusivity was a remnant of regional marginalization processes that had annihilated the variety of product forms. ELITSA STOILOVA (Eindhoven) confirmed this assumption with a case study on Bulgarian yogurt. Individual and simple yogurt production for the family need was, around the turn of the 20th century, replaced by mass production and standardization of the product. Laws, new hygienic standards, and dietetic requirements of ingredients defined the obligatory characteristics of the Bulgarian yogurt. Stoilova could show how the legislative and scientific framework represented the modernizing tendencies in Bulgarian science and culture, while the product itself was promoted as traditional and typical regional product, although for its coming into being the genuine traditional production processes had to be suppressed.

EMANUELA SCARPELLINI (Milan) explored the distribution patterns of European food and illustrated the shift from small shops to supermarkets in Italy during the 1950s. She successfully challenged the assumption of a thorough Americanization as driving force of this process. Under the special social and political framework of European countries, the American model had to be modified. In Italy, restricted urban space initiated smaller market buildings, and lower wages resulted in less products sold. The broad range of goods and the shopping conditions made supermarkets nevertheless a success with people from all different social groups. The survival of small shops (especially due to the campaigns of leftist parties) finally caused a marketing strategy integrating local Italian food and fresh foodstuffs into the range of supermarket products. Scarpellini concluded therefore that European supermarkets might well have been inspired by their American counterparts, but developed into hybrids of consumption habits. The workshop highlighted at several instances that Americanization should not be taken for granted as a forerunner of European developments and driving force of standardization. As emphasized during the discussion, the term moreover embraces the phenomenon of globalization just as the political system and the economy of capitalism.

The final session on European product design again devoted attention to the problematic compre-

hensibility of consumer behavior. GIJS MOM and SJOERD VAN DER WAL (Eindhoven) sketched in a dense talk theoretical approaches for the explanation of the independence of a product's design and its function. Design seems to sit between the chairs of technical properties and relational functions, the two natures of technological artifacts. The contributors described design intentions as a signature for cultural differences. To get closer to the phenomenon they proposed the use of recent theories from Sociology and Philosophy of Technology, Anthropology of material culture, Behavioral Psychology and Design Theory. As a concrete example for enquiry, Mom and van der Wal chose the introduction of the automatic gearbox in the US and in Europe. While the device was soon seen as a necessary component for comfortable car use in the US, European consumers hesitated to embrace an innovation that was felt to be a restriction of the individual way of driving. If consumers influence design by their preferences and habits, as Mom and van der Wal concluded, technology takes up traces of cultural peculiarity.

ELKE GAUGELE (Vienna) reminded the audience of the tensions caused by the consumer's commitment in processes of product development. As an apt addition to the talk of the representative of the 3D-templates industry during the workshop's first session, Gaugele presented an anthropological analysis of the technology of body scanning. She illustrated the interplay of individuality and standard specification with the case of apparel. While the choice of clothes represents individuality, standardized sizes dissolve individual and national differences. Consumers moreover seem to have a split relationship to their virtual counterpart, as Gaugele pointed out. On the one hand excited about the technology that goes with their decision for purchase of clothes, users on the other hand hesitate to look their avatar in the virtual eye. As Gaugele explained, results of individual body scans are mostly applied to virtual prototypes, or appear visualized as data columns or abstract outlines.

ANNA SUDROW (Munich/Berlin) concluded the workshop with a talk on fashion as interface of producer and consumer in the case of shoe design and mass production in Europe till the mid-20th century. She showed how in the early decades, producers had seen fashion as threat, endangering carefully planned production processes and a constant appearance in form, color, and material. Shoe

buyers, however, showed a remarkable obstinacy. They required fast model changes according to latest trends, and forced producers to make concessions in variety. The shoe industry reacted with regulations attempts. „Fashion committees“ were founded to control and reduce variety of design. While in the UK producers soon gave in to the argument of the consumer and reacted with market research and surveys, in Germany professional shoe design only became established in the 1950s.

The workshop revealed the invention of „the European“ as a strategy to gain control of the tensions between supply and demand, technological requirement and consumer preference, factual and statistical results and the scientific comprehension of the unpredictable dynamics of consumption. The contributors managed to transcend a mere questioning of customary explanations for a European identity by exploring the function and dynamics of the constructed narratives. It became clear that each constructed narrative of the European, with its special actors and interests involved, can be read as a single case study with fruitful results.

The variety of methodological approaches of the presented papers might not yet allow the formulation of general conclusions. It will be up to future meetings of the research groups to explore possible approaches to combinations of the case studies to form a coherent historiography. However, the potential of the interdisciplinary dialogue has become apparent. Especially promising and essential for upcoming debate seems a discussion of the epistemological status of the material context in historical research, since the special role of the technological artifact as intermediary between the constructing narrator and the constructed European was vividly illustrated by all contributors.

Conference Overview:

Helmuth Trischler (Munich) Welcome and Introduction

The Engine of Europe

Thomas Kaiserfeld (Stockholm): Born to run or chained to the car? American vs. European visions and practices of automobile society

Stève Bernardin (Paris/Lyon): The war on accidents – disciplining consumers in the US, 1937-1956

Christopher Neumaier (Munich): The rise of the diesel car in Europe, 1973-2005

Kilian J.L. Steiner (Munich): The scientific construction of European drivers. A case study about

templates in automobile industry

Andreas Seidl (Kaiserslautern): Ergonomic design of vehicle interiors with computerized man-models

Eurovision. Unterhaltungselektronik in Europa

Kaspar Maase (Tübingen): Trends der Unterhaltungskultur in Westeuropa

Jürgen Boyny (Nuremberg): Unterschiede im Fernsehverhalten: Asien Europa

Markus Speidel (Munich): Btx/Videotex/Minitel – Europas Weg in die Informationsgesellschaft?

Heike Weber (Darmstadt): Mit dem Handy durch Europa. Zur Entwicklung und Aneignung von GSM, 1982-2000

„Plattenbau“ and Summer-resort. Symbols of European Lifestyle

Lisbeth Bervoets (Amsterdam): ‚From normalized dwellings to normalized dwellers?‘ The technological and interpretative flexibility of housing in Europe

European Foodways

Karin Zachmann (Munich): European foodways in the American century

Barbara Orland (Zurich/Vienna): Zur Erfindung regionaler Traditionen in der europäischen Ernährungs- und Landwirtschaft

Emanuela Scarpellini (Milan): Food distribution systems: Small shops and supermarkets

Elitsa Stoilova (Eindhoven): Bulgarian dairy industry meets the (West)-European, 1910-1940

Design Europa

Gijs Mom / Sjoerd van der Wal (Eindhoven): Designing cars, designing images. Expectations as a guide for activities in the history of technology and design

Elke Gaugele (Vienna): Fashion Scans: Technologien der Mode und das Design von Subjekten

Anne Sudrow (Munich/Berlin): Die Mode als „Eigensinn“ der Nutzer und die Entstehung des Produktdesign von Konsumgütern in Europa und den USA, 1925-1950

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