American Historiography: Approaches, Issues, Controversies

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Bericht von: Manfred Berg, Zentrum für USA-Studien Stiftung Leucorea, Universität Halle-Wittenberg

The 2005 annual meeting of the historians in the German Association for American Studies was hosted by the Center for U.S. Studies at the Leucorea Foundation, Wittenberg. Major financial and logistical support was provided by the U.S. Embassy in Berlin and the Leucorea Foundation in Wittenberg. The conference was dedicated to taking stock of major historiographical trends and developments that have shaped scholarship on U.S. history over the past few decades.

The first panel on „American History and International History“ was opened by Anja Schüler’s (Humboldt University Berlin) paper on „The American Welfare State in International Perspective.“ Challenging the master narrative of the United States being the latecomer among industrial welfare states, Schüler discussed classical theories on the development of welfare states as well as current comparative approaches that emphasize the unique political structures of the United States which produced not so much a „late“ but rather a „different“ welfare state, and one that was very much gendered. In addition, the paper took a look at studies that place the American welfare state in an international perspective. Both comparative research and the study of international networks of social reformers have revealed new interconnections and have thus started to retell the story of American social policy.

In his case study „Trouble in Sarkhan: The Ugly American Revisited,“ Andreas Etges (Free University of Berlin) focused on ideas and ideology in the history of American foreign relations. Taking a closer look at William Lederer’s and Eugene Burdick’s 1958 novel „The Ugly American,“ Etges described its immense public success and the way it shaped debates on foreign aid as well as on the recruitment and training of the diplomatic corps. While highly critical of Americans overseas, the book’s message is based on the belief in the superiority of the American way of life. By promoting simplistic modernization theories, the „Ugly American“ guided foreign policymakers in the 1960s.

Eckhardt Fuchs’s (University of Mannheim) paper „From ‘Western Civ’ to ‘Cultural Wars’: Teaching and Writing World History at U.S. American Universities in the Twentieth Century“ presented an overview of the development of World History at American secondary schools and universities in the twentieth century, especially since the late 1960s. Tracing the debates and struggles over reforming the curricula of both high schools and colleges, Fuchs challenged the prevailing notion that teaching World History in higher education represents an unbroken success story.

The keynote lecture was delivered by David Thelen (University of Indiana, Bloomington). In his talk „Re-living the Past and Rethinking History,“ he challenged both objectivist and relativist models of history and, based on concepts developed by Dilthey and Collingwood, advocated the reenactment of the past as a means to delve more deeply into how people experienced their worlds.

In the workshop on „Political History“ two younger scholars presented their ongoing dissertation projects. Alexander Emmerich (University of Heidelberg) introduced the audience to „The American Dream Made in Germany. The Life of John Jacob Astor,“ His biography of the famed German-American self-made man draws upon elements and theories of migration history and places them in the wider context of the studies on the Early Republic. The second panelist, Jan Surmann (University of Hamburg), dealt with Holocaust claims and consciousness after the end of the Cold War. Surmann argued that the United States, in a „Crusade for Justice,“ not only insisted on the material settlement of these claims but also urged the Western world at large to come to terms with history.

The panel on „History and Memory“ featured two speakers. In her paper „Building Bridges Over the Widening Gulf Between Academic and Public History Professionals. Historical Memory and 1930s America“ Kriste Lindenmeyer (Universi-
ty of Maryland, Baltimore) probed into changing concepts of childhood and adolescence and the historical memory that these concepts evoke. Using two Pennsylvania textile workers’ strikes of 1903 and 1933 in which the strikers were children and adolescents as a case study, she reflected on these important shifts. Analyzing the current memory boom regarding the Second World War in the United States, Kristina Scholz (Free University of Berlin) took a critical approach to the avalanche of popular books and docudrama about the „Greatest Generation.” In the commercialized „marketplace of narratives,” she cautioned, historians should resist the trend toward the personalization and decontextualization of history.

The next two panels dealt with issues of slavery and racism in U.S. history. In his talk „Slavery and Racism: The Origins Debate Revisited,” Manfred Berg (Center for U.S. Studies, Wittenberg) reviewed the historiographical controversy about the early history of slavery in British North America. Were Africans in North America treated as slaves from the very beginning? What role did racial stereotypes play in the process of enslavement? Assessing the empirical record, Berg argued that most Africans were treated as slaves virtually from the moment of their arrival in the British colonies and subjected to racial discrimination which hardened over the course of the 17th century. The longevity of the debate, he concluded, has more to do with the search for usable pasts than with disagreements over the evidence.

Astrid Eckert’s paper „Testing Freedom on the Frontier. Edward Coles and the Issue of Slavery in the Old Northwest“ introduced the audience to the case of a slaveholder who freed his slaves and brought them to the free state of Illinois because he considered slavery as morally wrong. The paper explored the historiographical strains that are relevant to contextualize the story of Edward Coles and his former slaves and identified a need to intensify the study of the African American experience in the Old Northwest.

John David Smith (University of North Carolina, Charlotte) analyzed the relationship between „Fiction, Historical Criticism, and Race in Thomas Dixon’s ‘The Flaming Sword’.” Dixon, a southern writer and racial ideologue, employed his novel „The Flaming Sword“ to attack his black critics, including mathematician and sociologist Kelly Miller, historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, and novelist and poet James Weldon John-son. The novel’s graphic, pathological ugliness, Smith argued, offers an extraordinary window into how Dixon’s racial ideology remained essentially constant from 1902 to 1939.

In her paper „White Resistance to Black Civil Rights” Jane Dailey (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) discussed recent scholarship which has broadened the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement to include actors not usually appearing in civil rights studies, including, for example, white southern women on both sides of the segregation question. For too long, she pointed out, ideas such as popular sovereignty interpretations of the Constitution and white supremacist religion were not considered worthy of scholarly attention.

The panel on „The Town and the City” included contributions from two scholars working in early colonial history and the Progressive Era, respectively. Johannes Dillinger’s (University of Trier) paper „’A Remarkable Example for All Generations’: The New England Town in American Historiography” discussed the significance historiography has attributed to the New England town of the colonial period. The German-trained historians of the late 19th century characterized the towns’ political system as a carry-over from ancient Germanic liberty whereas a new generation of American scholars - well before Frederick Jackson Turner - regarded the towns as genuinely American creations of the Frontier. In the 1950s New England towns were characterized as „middle-class democracies”. In the late 1960s the historiography presented the towns as peaceful and egalitarian „peasant utopias”. The 1980s and 1990s depicted the towns as part and parcel of a volatile and innovative market economy. Every new generation of historians discovered a mirror image of the societal ideal of their own time in the colonial towns.

In her paper „’A Lady can’t even walk without soiling her clothes’: Gender and Urban Space in New Orleans, 1900“, Nadine Klopf er (University of Tübingen) explored the connection between perceptions of gender differences and the production of urban space in New Orleans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her analysis of New Orleanians’ views of city streets and parks demonstrated how widely accepted notions of femininity and masculinity were explicitly drawn upon as an objective frame of reference that contributed to the creation of what was perceived as a more orderly, progressive urban space.

The final session addressed issues of „Culture
and Religion.” In her talk „The Forgotten Victorians or Why Historians Hate American 19th Century Culture“, Jessica Gienow-Hecht (University of Frankfurt/M.) criticized U.S. historians for their reluctance to recast their nation’s history in a multinational context where the United States appears as just one among many actors. In the predominant exceptionalist narrative only mass culture counts as genuinely American, while aspirations to adopt European „high culture“ have no room in the anti-elitist history of the United States. In contrast, Gienow-Hecht argued that the history of American culture - including high culture-must be resituated in the context of diplomatic history, trans-Atlantic exchange, and international relations.

The final paper „Recent Developments in American Catholic Historiography“ by Michael Hochgeschwender (University of Munich) gave an introduction to the theoretical and methodological debates on the history of American Catholicism both from a Catholic and a non-Catholic viewpoint. He first pointed out traditional differences between Catholic and non-Catholic historiography and explained them on the basis of Catholic ecclesiology. He then stressed some striking dogmatic developments that allowed Catholic historians during the last three decades to establish some fresh and fruitful revisionist work on Catholic history.

In summary, the conference to a remarkable degree reflected both the diversity of themes and approaches that American historiography has taken over the past decades and the great interest in American history that can be found among German historians whose work has become increasingly integrated into the mainstream of American scholarship.