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Modernities: Competition versus Convergence

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President Barack Obama's summer 2009 visits to Omaha Beach and the Buchenwald concentration camp evoked events that have profoundly shaped the relationship between the United States and Germany. Nazi crimes against humanity, World War II, and postwar occupation dominate our collective memory to this day. They also mark the moment in the history of both societies when American military and cultural hegemony achieved its absolute zenith, as exemplified by GIs, jeans, rock n' roll, and the Cold War. Given the enormous differences and power imbalances of 1944–5 and the early postwar years, does it make much sense to compare Germany and America?

From this perspective, it is easy to forget that Germany and the United States had very similar starting points when they entered modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. To understand the paths subsequently taken by the two countries, their differences and similarities, the rivalries and alliances that shaped German and American history in the twentieth century, we would do well to revisit the late nineteenth century.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The surprising closeness of the two societies is reflected in the matter-of-fact way Germans and Americans compared, looked at, listened to, and took stock of each other at the turn of the last century. "North America appears as a typical Low German settlement in the West, while Prussia seems to be the same thing in the East," remarked the German American writer, August Julius Langbehn, in 1890. In both Germany and America, he continued, we see "a mad dash towards all kinds of cultural accomplishments," and even the German capital city seems "North American" because "a significant portion of the population is made up of immigrants." Similarly, the German American psychologist, Hugo Münsterberg, magnified the irony in each country's perception of the other and had a good laugh in the process when he wrote at the beginning of the new century:

> In the eyes of Americans the German is a poorly dressed, scruffy, uncouth Philistine, a clumsy, narrow-minded pedant, who takes pleasure only in his pipe, beer, and skat [a card game], who marches in parades and is paralyzed by bureaucracy, marries only for money and treats women like servants or toys, who bows to authority and brutalizes those beneath him, who fears the policeman, quarrels with his neighbor, and hates

anything progressive. Germans, on the other hand, consider the Yankee to be an ill-bred fellow who is corrupt in public life and cheats in business, who chases after every dollar and any sensation, a barbarian in scientific and artistic matters, a bigoted hypocrite, who chews tobacco and takes great pleasure in a public lynching.

Despite their cultural differences, Germans and Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century both believed in a common and shared future – in science, in business, and also in politics. In 1905, the German chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, praised his American colleague, President Theodore Roosevelt, for having recognized "how useful Germany and America will be for each other in the future." That it could ever come to a "transatlantic war with America" seemed to the German chancellor absolutely "absurd."

Indeed, the German Empire and the United States were entering into the new century under similar circumstances and with important features and viewpoints in common. Both were prominent political and economic powers. A spirit of adventure and optimism reigned on both sides of the Atlantic. Both Germany and America were profiting from an enormous economic upswing and were rapidly evolving into wealthy industrial nations. In both countries, the second wave of industrialization was driving economic and social change. It was not the textile industry, as in the case of the industrial pioneer, England, but rather heavy industry and an array of newer industrial activities that catapulted Germany and America into global leadership positions around 1900. The German Empire dominated the new industries, in particular the chemical and electrical sectors, whereas the United States became the world's greatest steel producer at the turn of the century, after tripling its production in just fifteen years, between 1877 and 1892.

German engineers invented the internal combustion engine, the bicycle, and the automobile. Their American counterparts prided themselves on the invention of the sewing machine, the electric light bulb, and the typewriter. Nowhere else in the world were so many patents and inventions registered as in Germany and the United States, and in no other country was the economy growing as fast as it was in these two nation-state latecomers. Great Britain was still the undisputed global leader in the production of industrial goods in the 1860s, but by 1900 the German Empire was producing one-quarter of all European industrial goods. By 1913, the United States and Germany occupied the top two positions in this global industrial competition, noticeably ahead of Britain.

Even in the realm of international trade, which the British Empire, with its global reach, had clearly dominated throughout the nineteenth century, Germany and the United States were rapidly closing the gap in the years before World War I. In the economic sphere, modernity was increasingly equated with industrial growth and the development of global markets, and the United States and Germany were the pacesetters in both.

This economic upsurge was also reflected in the brisk growth rates of their respective populations. The population of the United States more than doubled in only thirty years (1860–90), from thirty-one million to sixty-three million. By 1890, the population of the German Empire had already reached fifty million, which was significantly larger than any of the other nation-states in Western Europe. France had roughly thirty-eight million inhabitants, England and Italy had

about thirty million each, and Spain had only eighteen million. Another important demographic development was that the flow of immigrants from Europe to the United States – between 1820 and 1890, 7.1 million Germans had emigrated to the United States – had leveled off noticeably by 1900. This stream of European immigrants across the Atlantic would soon shrink to only several tens of thousands per year, and this more balanced population growth in the United States and Germany tended to add to the similarities between the two countries.

Linked closely to these demographic developments was the pace of urbanization in both countries. Their cities grew at rates unequaled elsewhere. Between 1880 and 1900, America's large cities gained fifteen million residents; Chicago's population alone tripled to more than 1.5 million. At the time of the German Empire's founding in 1871, there were only three cities with populations of more than 200,000: Berlin, Hamburg, and Breslau (Wrocław). By 1913, there were twenty-three cities of that size. Industrial cities in Germany, like Gelsenkirchen, saw a tenfold increase in population between 1871 and 1910.

The two capital cities, Berlin and Washington, which had in the past appeared to be quite different from one another, were becoming more similar. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Berlin was already a pulsating metropolis, whereas Washington, the seat of America's federal government, had for generations retained the character of an underdeveloped small town. Visiting the American capital in 1842, Charles Dickens remarked ironically that Washington was a "city of grand intentions" with "broad avenues that had no beginning and did not seem to lead anywhere." But by 1910, Washington had transformed itself into a proud city of marble, a kind of "Rome on the Potomac" with enormous neoclassical buildings, modern museums and government buildings, luxurious residences, and an expansive mall that lent a cosmopolitan air to the center of the city.

The dynamic growth of the economies and populations of these two nations was also reflected in the expansion of their naval fleets, which by 1900 were seriously challenging the hitherto undisputed global dominance of the British Royal Navy. After the United States triumphed over Spain in the Spanish-American War of 1898, Great Britain tacitly relinquished to the United States its commanding position in the Caribbean. The German naval and merchant marine fleets were expanding steadily and soon ranked right behind the British in terms of worldwide sea power. In overall military strength, it seemed to be only a matter of time before Germany and America would overtake the United Kingdom as the dominant world powers, and in this competition Germany had a decided edge over the United States. In 1890, the United States maintained a standing army of 126,000 troops; in contrast, the army of the German Empire numbered 490,000.

Even in the area of culture, these two societies on either side of the Atlantic displayed some significant similarities. In contrast to France and England, the Ottoman Empire, and the Hapsburg monarchy, neither the United States nor the German Empire had much national or imperial history on which to look back. Both countries had reestablished themselves through armed conflicts in the latter third of the nineteenth century – the Americans through their Civil War and the Germans through their wars of unification. Yet both "young" nations fit their times perfectly. Faith in progress and a hope that all would be possible motivated the upsurge in both societies. These attitudes were, however, coupled in both

countries with aggressive gestures of power, ostentatious displays of nouveau-riche magnificence, and missionary zeal.

At the same time, many in both countries, particularly among the social elite, questioned whether the meteoric rise of their respective societies could be sustained. As of 1890, the United States was deemed to have lost its frontier – that diffuse boundary between "civilization" and "wilderness" that had served as the driving force for much of the country's expansion and development. The leaders of Germany felt even more hemmed in by its geographic location in the middle of Europe.

The mixture of economic, demographic, and political power, on the one hand, and anxiety induced by rapid change, on the other, fueled imperialistic ambitions and nationalistic delusions of grandeur in Germany and the United States alike. Each saw itself as engaged in a struggle to win a "place in the sun." Not only in their accomplishments but also in their imagined and experienced deficits, the United States and the German Empire were strikingly similar.

There were, of course, also unmistakable differences and dissimilarities between the two countries. Perhaps the most conspicuous disparity was the difference in size. The territory of the United States encompassed more than nine million square kilometers at the opening of the twentieth century. Germany, measuring roughly a half-million square kilometers in area, seemed tiny in comparison. With overseas possession taken into account, however, Germany was only one-third, rather than one-twentieth, the size of the United States and its territories. Likewise, the ethnic diversity of the United States should not obscure the fact that the German Empire included sizeable Polish, Jewish, and other minorities and, even more important, encompassed roughly fifteen million colonial subjects in Africa, Asia, and the South Seas.

Perhaps because of the similarities between the United States and the German Empire, many observers and commentators at the opening of the twentieth century thought the two countries were engaged in a kind of friendly competition. The Americans were ahead in some areas, the Germans in others. Pittsburgh, for instance, boasted the largest steel factory in the world. With the discovery of oil in five states, the U.S. energy reserves appeared to be unlimited. America's skyscrapers signaled the beginning of a new architectural era, and its national parks – the "green discovery" of the nineteenth century – were the envy of the world. In other respects, the Germans seemed to be setting the pace for this race into modernity. The German university, for example, served as a model for the modern American research university, furnishing American academics with the blueprint for the scientific laboratory, seminar, lecture, dissertation, and even the footnote. In the realm of high culture, the United States was on the whole not able to keep up with the "land of poets and thinkers" (*Land der Dichter und Denker*). And Germany was clearly ahead of the United States in the size of its armed forces and of its military budget.

In a discussion with Fritz Stern, the prominent American historian of Germany, the famous French philosopher and sociologist Raymond Aron once commented that the twentieth century could have been Germany's century. That did not come to pass, however one may care to interpret events. Jumping ahead to the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is obvious how much has changed: in

some areas in which the Germans led around 1900, the United States has surged ahead, and vice versa. Today, the United States has at its disposal the most modern armaments and is the undisputed military superpower, whereas Germany ranks relatively low in military might. In the realm of scientific research, the Americans are also clearly in the lead. In terms of the environment, in contrast, the United States, despite its national parks, is clearly way behind in the race to be "green." Problems and political controversies notwithstanding, Germans continue to be proud of their state-regulated social welfare and health care systems, which have served repeatedly as points of reference in American debates on social policy over the past century. All in all, the yardstick for measuring the success of any homegrown accomplishment often seems to lie on the other side of the Atlantic.

COMPETING MODERNITIES

The phrase *competing modernities* ties together the essays in this collection. It should be understood metaphorically, not literally. The image of a "race" is meant to convey the notion that, very often, modern societies find themselves in a competition with each other – a competition that, going beyond traditional rivalries for wealth and power, encompasses the struggle to define the norms and standards of what it means to be modern. With the rise of modern scientific expertise in the twentieth century, statistics, graphs, and narrative descriptions have been brought to bear on nearly every aspect of these modern societies, resulting in some assuming the status of pacesetters in the race to be modern and others appearing to be rather backward, the caboose of the train chugging into modernity. In this race, Germany and the United States at times have moved closer to one another. For example, today both belong to the group of postindustrial, Western democracies. At other times, however, this competition has produced extremely aggressive confrontations, such as the two world wars and the conflicting systems of the Cold War, during which Germany was split between the two rival ideological camps.

The intensive phase of the competition between these two nations began in the 1890s. Of course, the United States was already a more important role model for Germany than vice versa, and that tendency was to grow over time. All the same, it was during these years that events in both countries shaped a number of crucial developments that would significantly determine their respective paths into modernity. These developments were in the areas of heavy industrialization, urbanization, the advent of a mass-market consumer economy, imperialism, modern art, and communications as well as the first waves of economic globalization.

The meaning of the word "modern" has never been as subject to debate as it is today. In 1970, for instance, most scholars in a variety of disciplines would have equated "modern" with "progressive." The term "modern" was applied to phenomena such as economic growth, Western science, democratization, industrialization, secularization, and increasing individualism as well as to new trends in music, art, and literature. Postmodern and postcolonial criticism has increasingly challenged this perspective. The modern era had both bright and dark sides. Without modern technology, Auschwitz would not have been possible. Industrialization

and Western consumption have produced not only progress but also serious problems, ranging from the alienation of workers and a decline in the quality of life to the degradation and destruction of the environment. Furthermore, the criteria for defining modernity have been derived almost exclusively from the European and American experiences and thus cannot claim any global validity. For this reason, we hear today about the "paradox of modernity," about "reflexive modernity," and about "multiple modernities." These concepts indicate that there is no longer any consensus as to how modernity should be defined.

Building on these discussions, we view modernity as characterized by two features. First, modernity can be seen as a specific period – as an era in which societies cast off their attachments to the past, to concepts and values that had shaped their development. What counted as "new" and as "modern" had to be fundamentally new, not just a return to the "good old days." Belief in progress and the future went hand in hand with dynamism and the acceleration of social change and, maybe even more importantly, with a "surplus of possibilities" (Niklas Luhmann). Furthermore, the modern age ushered in the era of both the masses and the individual. Through demographic shifts, economic growth, new modes of participation, and more rapid flows of various forms of exchange during the twentieth century, many more people than in earlier times took part in social, cultural, and political life. Leisure and consumption in the twentieth century were no longer the privilege of a small minority. Politics took on new, hitherto unknown forms in the public arena and evolved into the "political mass market" (Hans Rosenberg). Societies mobilized mass armies that became brutal killing machines, waging wars of mass destruction that annihilated not just tens of thousands but millions at a time. And women suddenly took on a multitude of roles that had been denied to them for centuries. To be sure, these processes had been underway since the late eighteenth century. They intensified markedly around 1890, however, and that is when modernity began in the sense of a defined epoch.

Second, we see modernity as a discourse, as a concept about which contemporary observers argued heatedly and, through their debates and actions, gave meaning and form. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept has evolved to serve increasingly as a point of self-reflection and self-assurance for societies. Contemporary observers have negotiated linguistically and philosophically to arrive at what we understand as modernity today: civilization and culture, freedom and equality, expansion and conservation. Modernity became a goal to be pursued, to be rejected, to be confronted and struggled over. Modern societies were thus motivated to detach themselves from tradition and convention, to view themselves not just as distinct from their own past but also from other countries. It follows that the concept of modernity was not only interpreted differently within different societies but has also been subject to change over time.

NEW PATHS OF EXCEPTIONALISM?

The war that the United States waged against Iraq in 2003 revealed abruptly that the gap that had opened up between Germany and America since the end of the Cold War was much wider than most observers had thought possible. The

Germans and the Americans were worlds apart in their estimates of the threat to world stability posed by Saddam Hussein and his regime. Robert Kagan's claim that Americans were "from Mars" and Europeans "from Venus" acknowledged these differences in a very pointed and polemical fashion. He was suggesting that Americans viewed the world order as a struggle of all against all. In contrast, Germans, along with some of their European neighbors, appeared to be self-obsessed and to have forgotten the meaning of power, because they seemed to be dreaming of achieving universal peace through reasonable means, à la Immanuel Kant. Self-assertion or downfall, a sense of reality or a utopian striving for peace, power or powerlessness: these were the two extremes to which conservative (or neoconservative) commentators like Kagan attempted to reduce the American and German positions.

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency has been accompanied in Germany – as in many other European countries – by a new wave of enthusiasm for America (although we could ask whether this is not merely obscuring long-term shifts of the kind that Kagan identifies). Conversely, American interest in Germany has dwindled noticeably. Other societies have replaced Germany as a major strategic partner, economic rival, and inspiration in the field of scientific and technological innovation.

The marked differences between Germany and the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century have found expression not only in attitudes to the Iraq War and in the intensity of their interest in each other but also in other social spheres, such as religion, demographics, and ethnicity. In Germany, church attendance has dropped dramatically. In many traditionally Protestant regions, fewer than 10 percent of Germans are churchgoers even on major religious holidays, whereas more than 40 percent of all Americans regularly attend religious services. Consequently, the United States has become the most religious of the Western industrialized countries. At the same time, the U.S. population has experienced a remarkable demographic upswing. Whereas the birthrate in the Old World has declined steadily since the 1980s, the fertility rate in the United States has risen during the same period and today has reached an average of more than 2.1. Alone among the industrialized nations, the United States is not facing a rapid aging of its population.

Linked closely to this demographic upsurge is the striking growth of ethnic minorities in the United States. As the numbers of immigrants from Central and South America and Asia have grown, Caucasians have come to represent a shrinking portion of the American population. According to current demographic projections, Caucasians will make up less than half the population by the middle of the twenty-first century. The ethnic composition of Europe and the United States is thus drifting increasingly apart. At present, more Americans claim German ancestry – 14.3 percent of the population – than any other national or ethnic background. That figure has been decreasing, however, as have the figures for all other European immigrant groups.

The Federal Republic of Germany is also experiencing significant changes. In fact, because the effects of the European unification process have been so strong during the past two decades, it seems almost obsolete today to even speak of *a* German position or approach. In terms of political, social, and cultural

developments, the societies of Europe have for some time been moving closer and closer together. In contrast to the United States, which since the end of the Cold War and even more so since September 11, 2001, has been pressing its claim to national sovereignty and unrestrained modes of action, the Europeans seem to be willing to transfer important political and societal functions to a level beyond their national borders.

At the same time, however, transatlantic relations continue to flourish. The economic ties between Germany and the United States have never been so close or extensive as they are today. The possibilities for exchange between the two societies are as diverse and strong in the area of popular culture as they are in the realm of science and technology. Owning a Mercedes, a Porsche, or a BMW is still a potent status symbol in the United States, and even the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration had little effect on the enduring popularity of jeans, Coca-Cola, and American music in Germany. The possibility that Germany and the United States might find themselves at war in the foreseeable future is inconceivable.

This collection of essays explores the volatility and the ambivalence in the relationship between the United States and Germany during the twentieth century. What insights can we gain from history? Is American society today closer to or more distant from Germany than it was twenty, fifty, or one hundred years ago?

Hundreds of monographs in the fields of history and political science and thousands of scholarly articles have grappled with the relations between Germany and the United States and their international ramifications. The most comprehensive survey of relations between the two countries – social and cultural as well as political and economic – is *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War* edited by Detlef Junker and his colleagues at the German Historical Institute in Washington. More than 150 scholars contributed to this monumental examination of a crucial half-century in transatlantic history.

However, until now, no attempt has been made to compare the history of these two societies over a long period of time, despite the fact that historical scholarship has ascribed to the development of both nations' special historical circumstances – a *Sonderweg* (separate path) for Germany and the concept of "exceptionalism" for the United States. Compared to the rest of Western Europe, according to the *Sonderweg* narrative, Germany developed anachronistically, with trust in authority and antidemocratic tendencies gaining the upper hand. America's path through history, proponents of American exceptionalism argue, has been characterized by a special mission in the world, a lack of authoritarian movements, the dominance of ethnic groups, and the abundance of opportunities symbolized by the idea of the "American dream." Only by means of a thorough, broad-based comparison like the one undertaken in this volume can such assumptions be either confirmed or refuted.

COMPARISON AND TRANSFER

When a particular piece of historical scholarship is found to be too narrow or too provincial in its orientation, the standard corrective is to introduce more comparisons. Why is it then that the call for more comparative research is so rarely followed? The main reason may be that effective comparisons require a great deal

of methodological and historical expertise. Whoever sets out to compare two individuals or two movements with one another must be highly informed not only about the two subjects in question. The construction of a valid comparison also requires considerable imagination and critical thought. If the differences involved in the comparison are too great, then the historian must decide whether the comparison will yield any significant findings at all. If, however, individual phenomena are pulled from their original context and viewed in parallel with another seemingly comparable phenomenon, one runs the risk of overlooking or relegating to the sidelines the genuinely characteristic features to be derived from the comparison. In practice, thus, every comparison is a difficult balancing act.

Dozens of scholars and commentators have approached German and American history from a comparative perspective in recent decades. They have produced a multitude of excellent books on specialized topics ranging from the history of employees in both countries, the role of women in the armaments industry, to the history of railroads. All of these monographs and essays have a narrow chronological focus, and none has attempted to present and analyze the social developments in both countries in their broadest context. And none, moreover, has sought to address general readers interested in German and American history as well as professional scholars. In this respect, the present collection represents a completely new approach to comparative history.

Because, as noted earlier, modern societies are always observing each other and engaging in all manner of exchanges with one another, it would be shortsighted to limit this study to a strict comparison. If we search exclusively for similarities and differences, we tend to overlook important connections between societies. We may be tempted to explain certain similarities as the result of seemingly local factors, whereas they are caused de facto by exchange relationships or foreign influences. For this reason, we have also included in our investigation reciprocal perceptions, transfers, and modes of exchange.

More precisely, we make this attempt because Germany and America were part of each other from the very beginnings of the European settlement of the New World. The mass immigration of Germans to North America – the first German immigrants arrived in the British colonies nearly a century before the American Revolution – has left its mark in many areas of American society, from preferred foodstuffs and names of streets to certain agricultural practices. Similarly, American influence in shaping the Old World – from fast food to the formation of democracy and capitalism – is beyond dispute. Alongside the Americanization of German society – the topic of a burgeoning literature – the contributors to this volume also consider forms of exchange and influence that have crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction. Through incorporating such developments into its analysis, the present collection attempts to contribute to a transnational approach to American and German history. At the same time, we would like to emphasize the potential of transnational history, which is much discussed but rarely implemented in practice. Its combination of comparative and transnational approaches thus makes this volume conceptually innovative.

In light of the aforementioned challenges and difficulties, it is not surprising that this collection is the only attempt so far to investigate systematically the development of two countries over a long period of time. This adds an experimental

aspect to the present collection of essays. It was inspired by the conviction that a transnationally enriched comparison of Germany and the United States over an extended period of time would illuminate historical circumstances, collective attitudes, and societal characteristics more than would a focus on just *one* national history. Ideally, a comparative history of this sort will explain why a particular development takes very different courses in the two countries. To understand, for example, how a religious movement like Scientology could be so broadly accepted in the United States but arouse so much concern and suspicion in Germany, it will be more fruitful to examine the past than the present. One would see, for instance, how the National Socialist past has sharpened Germans' sensitivity to perceived totalitarian tendencies in Scientology and how Americans' high regard for religious freedom has shaped their reaction to Scientology.

TRANSATLANTIC TANDEMS

This book draws on the work of researchers from both Europe and North America and is the product of a type of teamwork that is extremely rare in the world of historical scholarship. To carry out the broad comparison described herein, scholarly "tandems" were formed, each consisting of one expert on the United States and one on Germany, to address broad topics such as the role of law, gender relations, and consumer society. We are pleased that so many prominent – and very busy – scholars agreed to participation in this project. Without their wide-ranging expertise and willingness to stretch the limits of their knowledge and abilities, this project would never have succeeded.

Two planning workshops took place in Berlin and Washington, during which the scope and collaborative nature of the project were determined. At the time, no one could foresee that during the course of the project a number of the participants would change their academic bases, in some cases several times. The editors themselves were by no means spared this fate of the mobile scholar: they started off in Washington and Berlin, one moved later to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and they now live and work in Munich and Florence, respectively. Other tandem pairs experienced moves on the order of Berkeley to London, and from Heidelberg to Philadelphia and then Washington, and from there to Augsburg. Despite all this movement and dislocation, collaboration within and between the tandems and across the Atlantic functioned extremely well. At the same time, the project would have been impossible before the age of electronic communication.

Unlike most scholarly projects, this book is more concerned with synthesis than basic research. The tandems were not commissioned to write encyclopedic articles, however. Rather, they were encouraged to produce sweeping, thought-provoking, and very readable essays that rested on solid research and reflection. Each tandem was asked to blaze a trail for comparison through the material at hand. It was the development of commonalities and differences, continuities and ruptures, reciprocal perceptions and transfers in the history of Germany and the United States that drew our attention. In this process, the histories of two countries and several German states – including the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which is considered at least partially in each essay – are examined for the first time not just selectively or in relation to a single issue but rather over a long period of