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0521782058 - Bridging the Atlantic: The Question of American Exceptionalism in Perspective

Edited by Elisabeth Glaser and Hermann Wellenreuther

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Introduction

ELISABETH GLASER AND HERMANN WELLENREUTHER

This book presents the revised results of a conference convened to discuss the work of the late Erich Angermann (1927–92). The symposium took place at the German Historical Institute (GHI) in Washington, D.C., from June 8 to 10, 1995. We remember Angermann, the senior historian of America in Germany, as the principal figure behind the foundation of the GHI in 1987. He also served as the first chairman of its academic advisory council. During his tenure as professor for American and European history at the University of Cologne, Angermann more than anyone else worked for a revitalization of what he called “Atlantic history.” That conceptual approach, derived from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of humanistic historiography, viewed American history as part of an integrated history of North America and Europe. Thus, the concept of *Atlantic history* comprises the common links between European and American history since the beginning of the European settlement of North America as well as comparative social, cultural, and economic developments on both continents.¹

Angermann’s integrated vision of a common Atlantic history of Europe and America remains important for American as well as European historians. During the last decade the historical communities on both sides of the Atlantic have vigorously debated the notion of complementary and comparable historical developments – or of Atlantic history.² The meeting

1 For similar approaches in American historiography with a different emphasis, see Henry S. Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977). Angermann described his thoughts on the potentialities and limits of comparative European–American history in *Challenges of Ambiguity: Doing Comparative History*, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., Annual Lecture series, no. 4 (New York, 1991). See also Erich Angermann and Marie-Luise Frings, eds., *Oceans Apart: Comparing Germany and the United States* (Stuttgart, 1981).

2 See, e.g., Norbert Finzsch and Robert Jütte, eds., *Institutions of Confinement: Hospitals, Asylums, and*

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in Washington in 1995 presented an opportunity to reassess pertinent methodological and historiographical questions.

At the conference and in this book, the discussion about American exceptionalism serves as a useful counterpoint to national historiography. Historians of America in both Europe and the United States have opted not to subscribe to an understanding of history that fosters narrow interpretations or promotes the writing of exceptional national histories.³ The debate over American exceptionalism, as continued in this book, shows how America adopted and transformed European institutions, religions, mores, and political philosophies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Hans R. Guggisberg and others have pointed out, a discussion of American exceptionalism implies a comparative context. The chapter on immigration history in this book illustrates that point.⁴ Meanwhile, the related issue of whether or not there was a German *Sonderweg* or peculiar path of historical development still provokes sharp criticism and vociferous disagreement, despite overwhelming evidence for the affirmative. Here, however, Kenneth L. Kusmer and Hans L. Trefousse provide qualified support, albeit with caveats.⁵

The discussion of whether historical research can distinguish clearly between comparable or unique national developments, or whether these categories are merely historiographical tools, has increased our knowledge about European–American relations over the last 300 years. Since the early

Prisons in Western Europe and North America, 1500–1950 (New York, 1997); Miles Kahler and Werner Link, *Europe and America: A Return to History* (New York, 1996); Roger Schlesinger, *In the Wake of Columbus: The Impact of the New World on Europe, 1492–1650* (Wheeling, Ill., 1996); James R. Sofka, “Metternich, Jefferson, and the Enlightenment,” Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1995; Karen O. Kupperman, ed., *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995); Hermann Wellenreuther and Claudia Schnurmann, eds., *Die amerikanische Verfassung und deutsch-amerikanisches Verfassungsdenken* (New York, 1990); David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser, eds., *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: Germany and America Since 1776* (New York, 1997).

3 Klaus Schwabe, “Die Vereinigten Staaten und die französische Revolution,” in Norbert Finzsch and Hermann Wellenreuther, eds., *Liberalitas: Festschrift für Erich Angermann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Transatlantische Historische Studien, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1992), 189–206. See also Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford, 1991); Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993); Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York, 1996); David K. Adams and Cornelis van der Minnen, eds., *Reflections on American Exceptionalism* (Staffordshire, U.K., 1994); Amy T. Bushnell, ed., *Establishing Exceptionalism: Historiography and the Colonial Americas* (Brookfield, Vt., 1995); David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence, Kans., 1992); and the chapters by Hans R. Guggisberg and Gerald Stourzh in this book.

4 See Kathleen Neils Conzen’s chapter in this book.

5 See Reinhard Kühnl, *Deutschland seit der französischen Revolution: Untersuchungen zum deutschen Sonderweg* (Heilbronn, 1996); Helga Grebing, *Der Deutsche Sonderweg in Europa 1806–1945: Eine Kritik* (Stuttgart, 1986); Karl-Dietrich Bracher, *Deutscher Sonderweg: Mythos oder Realität?* (Munich, 1982).

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1980s we have witnessed the stunning growth of complementary comparative historical research and important longitudinal studies.⁶ This book pursues that debate and brings together historical essays on comparative themes of modern European and American history. One of the important underlying methodological questions is how the tools of comparative analysis, or, where appropriate, the emphasis on singular national developments can help in drawing the fine line between comparable and distinct national developments.

Angermann insisted on broad historical approaches to studying the history of the Atlantic world – “*multum*, but not *multa*” – inspired by his desire to revive the tradition of humanistic historiography.⁷ As a researcher, teacher, and educator he concentrated first on the history of German liberalism in the nineteenth century and then, since the early 1960s, increasingly on American history. He eventually became the leading historian of the United States in the Federal Republic of Germany. His characteristic approach to teaching and writing American history centered on his integrated vision of the history of England and the United States. Thus, Angermann’s colleagues in Germany and abroad and his students in Cologne profited from his cosmopolitan yet sound interpretations of British and North American history. He emphasized the fundamental role that British and European settlement of North America played in the development of modern European *and* American or Atlantic history.⁸ But he did not stop at that. In practical terms, he worked hard to establish the GHI and his own institute in Cologne as centers for a

6 See, e.g., George M. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); George M. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York, 1995); David Englander, *Britain and America: Studies in Comparative History, 1760–1970* (New Haven, Conn., 1997); Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagler, eds., *People in Transit: German Migrations in Comparative Perspective, 1820–1930* (New York, 1995); Stephen Englehart and John A. Moore Jr., *Three Beginnings: Revolution, Rights, and the Liberal States: Comparative Perspectives on the English, American, and French Revolutions* (New York, 1994); Stephen I. Katz, *The Holocaust and Comparative History* (New York, 1993); Mathias Reiman, ed., *The Reception of Continental Ideas in the Common Law World, 1820–1920* (Berlin, 1992); and the synthetic treatment by Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York, 1997).

7 See Erich Angermann, “Sapientia et Eloquentia: Überlegungen zur Geschichtsdarstellung Franz Schnabels,” in *Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, ed., *Franz Schnabel: Zu Leben und Werk (1887–1966)* (Munich, 1988). In the United States, Peter Gay’s work offers an outstanding example of humanistic historiography that seeks to explore broad human themes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European history. See, e.g., Peter Gay, *Education of the Senses: The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud* (New York, 1984), 3–44.

8 For a discussion of Angermann’s work, see Hermann Wellenreuther’s chapter in this book, as well as Helge Riedel, “Das wissenschaftliche Werk Erich Angermanns,” in Finzsch and Wellenreuther, eds., *Liberalitas*, 521–33.

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broad scholarly exchange involving different concepts of Atlantic history. The present book highlights some of the results of this work. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation among American and European historians on the structure and nature of European–American relations, the contours of American history, and the important debate on the meaning and possibilities of comparative methodology. The authors here continue what Angermann felt strongly about – an Atlantic dialog.

Part One concentrates on constitutional and political history. Gerald Stourzh (Chapter 1) argues that the American legal framework derived from an exceptional English legal culture of individual rights. From English roots, eighteenth-century Americans evolved a conspicuously different legal culture that was based on the concept of a written constitution and on that of the people as the constituent power. Ari Hoogenboom (Chapter 2) begins where Stourzh leaves off. He deftly sketches what republicanism meant in the late eighteenth century and then describes its various effects on the political, economic, cultural, and religious cultures of the United States. He forcefully insists that the American republican tradition was and still is exceptional. He adds, however, that the term has lost much of its earlier glamour; at the same time he cautions against critical overreaction. True, American foreign policy has lost much of its revolutionary and republican fervor; likewise, he concedes, America's social structure still leaves much to be desired, especially when one considers the starkly unequal distribution of property within American society. Yet, at the same time he points to the vibrant forces within American society that work to improve these social ills, that continue to combat racism and work for a greater integration of ethnic minorities into the American mainstream, and that insist on human rights as a factor in foreign policy – these are values that should be respected everywhere.

Part Two focuses on comparative themes of religion, social philosophy, and nationalism. In his essay on religion in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hartmut Lehmann (Chapter 3) raises questions about the interrelatedness of secularization and Christianity on both sides of the Atlantic. His argument is based on the observation that American society experienced a re-Christianization while de-Christianization progressed within European societies. Because urbanization and industrialization, the latter hitherto considered the prime cause for secularization, shaped societies on both sides of the Atlantic, Lehmann proposes a series of precisely focused comparative studies in order to better understand these processes.

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Lehmann also suggests that the concept of exceptionalism could be taken as a starting point for a closer and more searching analysis of European and American social, cultural, political, and religious developments. This concept also intrinsically shapes Carl N. Degler's essay (Chapter 4). In analyzing American and European perceptions of Darwin's concepts Degler demonstrates that each debate is situated in a specific national context, although it simultaneously forms part of an Atlantic dialog. Books were translated, and ideas were exchanged and contested in both Europe and America. In the end, the dividing line did not run between Europe and America but between the Anglo-American and the European continental intellectual worlds.

Hans L. Trefousse (Chapter 5) focuses on yet another important aspect of the Atlantic world of concepts and mentalities: the different ideas and meanings of nationalism. He discusses the nationalism of Abraham Lincoln as an example of idealistic and ethnic nationalism. Trefousse portrays Carl Schurz as an example of ethnic nationalism formed and shaped by his experiences as a Forty-Eighter and a member of the radical republican wing of German liberalism that gradually merged with American idealistic nationalism. Otto von Bismarck, finally, exemplifies the Prussian nationalist. Nationalism not only shaped and structured Bismarck's policies but also may have later prompted the Iron Chancellor to use German unification in 1870–1 as a means for the aggrandizement of Prussia rather than for the formation of a unitary German state.

In Part Three, Kathleen Neils Conzen (Chapter 6), Kenneth L. Kusmer (Chapter 7), and Daniel J. Leab (Chapter 8) address the question of how people in the transatlantic world perceived themselves. Conzen presents a thoughtful analysis of the experience of German Americans in nineteenth-century America. Kusmer addresses the xenophobic responses to immigration in a comparative study of Germany and the United States. In a detailed treatment of American responses to blacks as well as to Chinese, Jewish, and Mexican immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Kusmer recounts stereotypes and acts of discrimination against these minorities. He also looks at German attitudes toward Poles, Jews, and blacks between 1871 and 1933. His comparisons show important differences between the responses in both societies to mass immigration and modernization, particularly in the reactions of the urban middle class and academics. Leab's discussion of German and American national perceptions in movies before and during World War I also addresses stereotypes and how an increasingly important medium popularized them. Leab shows how a largely negative image of Germans in

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American movies preceded World War I and became more propagandistic and pronounced in the years after 1914.⁹ German movie depictions of the United States appear mostly positive and admiring, and included popular German-made “Westerns” during the Wilhelmine period. Together, the chapters by Conzen, Kusmer, and Leab demonstrate that national identity is an overdetermined concept in which personal predilections, “imagined” traditions, and religious, social, and political environments all play a role.

Transatlantic politics and economics from 1914 to 1945 are analyzed by Gerhard L. Weinberg (Chapter 9) and Elisabeth Glaser (Chapter 10) in Part Four. Weinberg compares Franklin D. Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler. He pointedly shows how both men had radically different personalities and reacted very differently at times of potential military confrontation. Roosevelt preferred deterrence until the Japanese attack in 1941, whereas Hitler always chose the aggressive option and in fact had propagated a war against America as early as 1928. Glaser deals with America’s options for helping the Allies against Germany in 1914–16. She shows how J. P. Morgan & Co. recognized the need to aid the Allies financially, contrary to Washington’s official policy, thereby paving the way for more American economic and financial help that turned the war effort in favor of the Allies. Taken together, these chapters underscore the evolving role of the United States as a world power after the turn of the century and how at an early date clear-sighted observers inside and outside the United States perceived that new role, which Washington only gradually accepted.

The historiographical essays in Part Five illuminate the options and limitations of transatlantic history and American exceptionalism as categories for historical interpretation. Peter Krüger (Chapter 11) surveys German historiography since 1945. He emphasizes the slowness with which German historians developed new concepts. Likewise, he demonstrates how transatlantic history in Germany profited from the teachings of Angermann’s mentor, Franz Schnabel, one of the few holders of a history chair in postwar Germany who had not been associated with the Nazi Party. In 1936 Schnabel had been forced to leave his job as a professor in Karlsruhe. After 1947, as a professor of modern history in Munich, Schnabel broadened the historical curriculum by including lec-

9 Cf. Daniel J. Leab’s chapter in this book to Beverly Crawford and James Martel’s analysis of post–World War II American movies, “Representations of Germans and What Germans Represent: American Film Images and Public Perceptions in the Postwar Era,” in Barclay and Glaser-Schmidt, eds., *Transatlantic Images*, 285–308.

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tures about revolutionary wars, including the American War of Independence, and decolonization.¹⁰ German interest in American history, as Krüger points out, was also promoted by the work of Dietrich Gerhard, an émigré historian and the first holder of the American history chair in Cologne. Political scientists, particularly Karl Dietrich Bracher, whose work in turn was influenced by Hannah Arendt, likewise had an impact.¹¹ In conclusion, Krüger counsels against the inflationary use of concepts such as the German *Sonderweg* or American exceptionalism and pleads instead for using national history and comparative studies of modern nation-states as promising themes of transatlantic history.

The late Hans R. Guggisberg (Chapter 12) reviewed recent American literature on American exceptionalism as a theme in American history. Guggisberg contrasted new interpretations that stress the complementary nature of American exceptionalism in the comparative history of the modern nation-states with the accounts of George Bancroft and Henry Turner, whose romantic images of America's uniqueness still reverberate, even in works of New Left historians. Finally, Hermann Wellenreuther (Chapter 13) depicts the historical world of Erich Angermann. He describes how Angermann's work as a researcher, historian, and teacher depended on his vision of the rootedness of American history in its ties to Europe. As Wellenreuther makes clear, Angermann's views were much influenced by Schnabel but also grew out of Angermann's own active involvement in the teaching of American history as the only holder of a chair in that field in the old Federal Republic. In sum, the reader finds a balanced and careful discussion of German views on American history, American exceptionalism, and transatlantic history as historiographical categories for comparative historical approaches toward American and European history.

With this book the editors hope to encourage further research by German and American historians in the fields explored here. The individual chapters have been inspired by the desire to practice and discuss transatlantic history not as a strict methodological canon but as the focus of multiarchival and comparative research, as Angermann suggested. We therefore dedicate this book to his memory.

The editors sadly report that Hans Guggisberg died a few months after taking part in the conference on which this book is based. Guggisberg

10 See Angermann, "Sapientia et Eloquentia," and Eberhard Weis, "Leben und Persönlichkeit Franz Schnabels," in Historische Kommission, ed. *Franz Schnabel*, 25–40.

11 See also Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, eds., *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigrés and American Political Thought After World War II* (New York, 1997).

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(1930–96) taught American history at the University of Basel and actively supported the European Association for American Studies. He also served as a founding member of the Swiss Association for American Studies. A polyglot historian interested in the early modern history of Europe and the United States, Guggisberg, not unlike Angermann, was a devoted teacher and scholar, although he modestly described himself as simply a “student of history.” In 1974 he published a two-volume history of the United States that became a standard textbook. We will remember him fondly.

We thank the GHI and the Volkswagen Foundation for the funding of the original 1995 conference. We also extend our thanks to Erich Angermann’s wife, Ursula Angermann, for her kind advice. Hartmut Lehmann, the first director of the GHI, suggested and encouraged plans for the conference. His successor, Detlef Junker, has generously supported the project. Frank Smith at Cambridge University Press recognized the relevance of this subject to the ongoing work of the GHI. Annette M. Marciel copy-edited the manuscript, and Daniel S. Mattern, the senior editor at the GHI, gave patient and expert advice that made publication of this book possible.

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PART ONE

Transatlantic Faiths and Beliefs

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*Liberal Democracy as a Culture of Rights**England, the United States, and Continental Europe*

GERALD STOURZH

I

“The Commons of *England* for hereditary fundamental Liberties and Properties are blest above and beyond the Subject of any *Monarch* in the World.” Thus wrote Edward Chamberlayne in 1669 in his highly successful work *Angliae Notitia*, which was to run through no less than thirty-eight editions until 1755 and was translated into German and other continental languages.¹

Chamberlayne did not mean the members of the House of Commons; he had in mind free Englishmen who did not belong to clergy or nobility, and he proceeded to enumerate, in what may be considered an early, though unofficial catalog of the rights of Englishmen, these liberties and properties in eight points. I shall mention only a few of them. The first point: “No Freeman of England ought to be imprisoned or otherwise restrained, without cause shewn for which by Law he ought to be so imprisoned.” In point two, the Writ of Habeas Corpus was mentioned; in point four, it was stated: “No soldiers can be quartered in the House of any Freeman in time of Peace, without his will.” In point five, the Englishmen’s property rights were extolled: “Every Freeman hath such a full and absolute property in Goods, that no Taxes, Loans, or Benevolences ordinarily and legally can be imposed on them, without their own consent

I would like to thank James Hutson and Vera Nünning for their thoughtful comments on the occasion of the presentation of this chapter in June, 1995, as well as Ralph Lerner and Jack Pole for their critical reading of the manuscript. This essay has also been published in Thomas Fröschl, Margarete Grandner, and Birgitta Bader-Zaar, eds., *Nordamerikastudien: Forschungen zu den Vereinigten Staaten und Kanada an österreichischen Universitäten*, Wiener Beiträge zur Geschichte der Neuzeit, no. 24 (Vienna, 1999).

1 Edward Chamberlayne, *Angliae Notitia*, 3d ed. (London, 1669), 446–8, reprinted in Gerald Stourzh, “Vom aristotelischen zum liberalen Verfassungsbegriff,” in Gerald Stourzh, *Wége zur Grundrechtsdemokratie* (Vienna, 1989), 34–5.