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“Transnations” Among “Transnations”?
The Debate on Transnational History in the United States and Germany

by

Prof. Dr. Kiran Klaus Patel

Department of History and Civilisation/
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
European University Institute

Convento

Via delle Fontanelle, 19

I - 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole

Italy

Tel. ++39.055.4685 - 743/751

Fax ++39.055.4685 - 770

kiran.patel@eui.eu

Abstract

Comparing the rise of transnational history in the United States and Germany is difficult, mainly because of the many connections between these historiographies. Still, the article argues that the paths into a transnational historiography were quite different on both sides of the Atlantic. Apart from similarities and connections, the text therefore highlights the intellectual as well as institutional differences of the debates in the U.S.A. and Germany.

Writing American history in Germany has always also been about America in Germany and vice versa, thus making these fields transnational endeavors right from the beginning. The same holds true for the debate on transnational history in both countries. It is impossible to separate a purely “German” from an equally immaculate “American” discussion. Who would count as what? Is, for example, Michael Geyer who was educated in Germany and has taught at North American universities for over thirty years, to be counted on this or on that side? And are German scholars of American history part of a transnational community of Americanists, or do they belong to German historiography with its specific traditions, takes and theories?

In his classical article on comparative history, Marc Bloch reminded us that before every comparative study we have to look into the connections between the researched societies, lest we overlook the transnational “grandes causes” in favor of pseudolocal explanations (Bloch 19). For quite the same reason, it is a special challenge to compare phenomena in societies that are closely intertwined with each other: here, similarities can result from transfer processes, whereas comparative history stresses the distinctiveness and non-identity of the entities it analyzes for similarities and contrasts.

In this light, one could argue that it does not make any sense to discuss the debates on transnational history in the United States and in Germany as distinct matters, but rather to focus on the brokers and networks, exchanges and flows, and other forms of interaction in which transnational studies and approaches themselves become transnational commodities. And it is true that today debates on both sides of the Atlantic are closely knit. One of the most recent examples of transnational history as shared history in the Atlantic world (and beyond) is the *fest-schrift* for the German historian Jürgen Kocka. The biggest single group of contributors to this volume dedicated to transnational history lives and teaches in the United States, and quite a few were educated or work in one or more third countries (Budde, Conrad, Janz). Therefore, transnational historiography might seem to be the perfect example of what transnational history is all about: transgressing national boundaries and examining the way ideas, people, institutions and goods move and circulate between different societies.

Keeping all this in mind, there are also differences and divergences in spite of all the obvious similarities. The contexts of historiography in the United States and Germany are quite different and they have shaped the trajectory of transnational history as they would influence any other historical perspective. And even if there are many affinities and resemblances, they need to be explained. As will be shown, certain similarities in the two debates are fed by quite different longer-term developments, conceptual approaches and institutional settings. I would therefore agree with Matthias Middell, who recently argued that a genuinely transnational debate on transnational history first has to reflect the specific traditions of the different intellectual approaches, academic schools, and national historiographies that feed into the discussion (Middell, *Geschichte*). Therefore, I will highlight the differences while attempting to include similarities and connections too. Obviously, this article will have to use a broad brush and will lay out a rather general argument about the state of history in both societies. A certain focus will lie on American history in the United States and on German history as researched and taught in Germany itself. However, this is not based on a preconceived opinion – otherwise, it would be a circular argument – but is rather a reflection of the way history is understood in both societies.

The Quest for Uniqueness

The current excitement about transnational history in both countries can only be understood against the backdrop of longer historiographical traditions. Ever since the late Enlightenment, national history has become the central focal point of historical research in the Western world. The rise of modern historiography as a profession, as a cultural technique and as a source of identity has been inextricably linked to the rise of the nation-state (Patel, *Nationalfixiertheit*). German history is a perfect example. It was during the nineteenth century that the hegemony of the nation as a subject and object—and in Germany also as a project—of history was slowly established. Particularly for the *kleindeutsch*-Prussian school around Heinrich von Sybel, Heinrich von Treitschke and others, the Prussian-led *Kaiserreich* was *an* end in history, if not *the* end itself.

Despite of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, the nation-state remained the essential and unquestioned focal point of historical studies. This was even true after 1945, when extreme nationalism came to an end but did not take nation-centeredness with it (on the ebbing away of nationalistic history, see Kennedy). In the immediate postwar years there was a tendency to widen the canvas of history. For example, Hermann Heimpel noted in 1959 that there could be no doubt that “the time of an exclusively national historiography has passed. History has to dare the leap into a planetary future, even in its understanding of the past” (Heimpel 22).¹ However, a different trend dominated: putting national history front and center. The Cold War and the division of Germany go a good way to explaining this. They spurred a race for new historical explanations of the German past, when Eastern and Western claims about the true causes of Nazism vied with one another. Nazism had brought about the end of a German nation-state, and radical nationalism had been one of the key forces behind the rise of Hitler’s movement. So it seemed logical to zoom in on the nation’s longer history in order to understand why Germany as a modern industrialized power “strayed” from a presumably normal path to modernity. The focus on national history was reinforced not only by the hypertrophy and destruction of the nation-state, but also by the insecurity regarding the present status of the nation (on East Germany Sabrow; on West Germany Conrad, *Suche*; on both Jarausch/Sabrow).

This tendency is the broader background for the German *Sonderweg* hypothesis (literally “special path”)—the master narrative of West German historiography from the 1960s to the late 1980s. According to the *Sonderweg* hypothesis, German history, at least over the last two centuries, had followed a completely different path than other modern Western societies, a path that culminated in the twelve years of Nazi dictatorship. Although this interpretation relied on an implicit comparison of German history with the history of Western societies, for a long time it did not trigger many empirical cross-national comparative studies. Rather, the *Sonderweg* hypothesis combined the moral question of the inquiry into the causes of Nazism with the search for longer continuities that led up to the *Zivilisationsbruch* (breach of civilization) (Welskopp; Berger). All in all, the *Sonderweg* hypothesis thus appears as only one of the most recent reformulations of the fixation on the nation-state; as an addition to a post-nationalistic and highly critical view on German history.

¹“... die Zeit einer ausschließlich nationalstaatlichen Geschichtsbetrachtung vorbei ist. Die Geschichtswissenschaft muß den Sprung in die planetarische Zukunft wagen, auch in der Erfassung der Vergangenheit”

We find a somewhat similar nation-centeredness in the United States, though for quite different reasons. Some scholars have argued that national history has loomed even larger in America than in other countries. For example, Ian Tyrrell once wrote that nowhere has “a nation-centered historical tradition been more resilient than in the United States” (Tyrrell, *Exceptionalism* 1031; also see Pfaff; more cautious: Tyrrell, *Nations* 1015–1018). And while it is true that reference to national history has been strong in the United States, and intensified especially during the twentieth century, I would argue that it was still more important in Germany. Under the influence of a Hegelian notion of history, Americans remained deeply insecure about their national history for the most of the nineteenth century. As a young nation in almost every sense, Americans both cultivated a minority complex and compensated it by inscribing their history into that of an Atlantic or rather a greater European space. American history remained framed in a wider European context – predominantly Anglo-Saxon, white, and Protestant (Gräser 371–373).

One rather eccentric example of this is the “Teutonic germ theory” that dominated American historical thought in the 1880s, according to which English and American democratic and liberal institutions were rooted in traditions of Teutonic tribes that had been imported first to Britain and from there to New England (Novick 87–88). Apropos Germany – the hypostatization of the state in American history was itself influenced by nineteenth-century German historiography (Novick 87; Lingelbach).

The 1890s, and especially the impact of Frederick Jackson Turner, then brought an important shift in interpretation. Turner of course is best known for his “frontier thesis,” according to which the spirit and success of the United States was directly tied to the country’s westward expansion. And although he also reflected on a transnational dimension of history that has only been rediscovered recently (Bender, *Rethinking* 2–5; Tyrrell, *Making*), he was soon to be remembered for the words: “Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors” (Turner 61). In the decades that followed, the scope of American historiography narrowed, even if Turner’s influence should not be overestimated. Non-national entities continued to attract more attention in America than in Germany. Local and regional history were not reduced to a mere function of national history, while at the same time, global interconnections also continued to interest many scholars. The research on the American West, as well as William H. McNeill’s approach of “world history,” epitomize these two tendencies (see, e.g., Hijiya; McNeill).

All this notwithstanding, the years after World War II were the heyday of a nation-centered historiography, where the idea of American Exceptionalism was central. America was seen not as of, but in the world, its trajectory being completely different from that of all other societies. Even if the roots of Exceptionalism date back before the time of the American Revolution, the concept reached its climax in the 1940s and 1950s under the auspices of the consensus school in American historiography. Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin and others argued that in the New World a people had escaped Europe’s haunted past and found its own exceptional future, freer and more stable than Europe’s. External influences and comparisons played no important role for these scholars (e.g., Hartz; see also Patel, *Nation*, 41–44; Rodgers 21–40). In this new mode, America was not just seen as special or different, but rather as unique and singular; it diverged from the universal tendencies of history.

Thus, historiography set both nations apart. In America because the past seemed stable or even – in Daniel Boorstin’s the eyes – seamless, and thus the positive exception from the

problematic rule of history (Boorstin 8-35); in the German case because of the many discontinuities and, most importantly, because of the *Zivilisationsbruch*. The consensus and *Sonderweg* interpretations peaked at different times, the *Sonderweg* gaining influence when it was already difficult to find a staunch supporter of Exceptionalism in American history (McGerr). Also, these concepts were only two of the most striking manifestations of the larger tendency to concentrate on national histories and to treat nations (or nation-states) as entities containing and explaining history (for more recent examples see Shafer; Kammen, *Problem*; Wehler, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*). This is especially true for modern history, whereas scholars of older periods in both societies have been much less focused on national histories.

However, it also has to be noted that historians in Germany and the United States were not alone on their paths to Exceptionalism. Most other national historiographies joined them. The French had their "exception française", the Swiss their *Sonderfall*, and of course no other nation's history compared to Britain's or Japan's (e.g. Conrad/Conrad; Nützenadel/Schieder; Kunz). And yet in almost all these cases it would be more revealing and rewarding to analyze the structural similarities of the narratives than to adhere to the interpretations these models offer.

Transnational History in the United States and Germany: Six Differences

It is against the backdrop of this long fixation on the nation as object and subject of history that the recent interest in transnational history has to be seen. Transnational history understands nations and other social formations not as unchangeable, stable entities but emphasizes the interwovenness and the mutual influences that societies exert on each other. It is interested in how ideas, people, institutions, and goods moved and circulated between different societies. Transnational history stands not for one specific conceptual approach, theory or field of research, nor can it be identified solely with cultural or social history. Rather, it is a particular perspective with the potential to develop a different (national) history (Geyer, *History*; Paulmann, *Grenzüberschreitungen*; Patel, *Nationalfixiertheit*). As such, it did not come out of nothing, of course. There had always been a small but steady stream of studies that we would now call transnational. But since the power of the national approach was so strong, these attempts had all remained on the fringes of academia. This only changed recently. However, I would argue that the genealogy of the debates on transnational history is quite different in America and in Germany. Despite obvious similarities and connections, there are quite a few distinctions.

In the United States, the 1960s saw the rise of a social history that questioned the harmonious narrative of consensus history and replaced it by a more conflict-ridden interpretation, focusing on the deep class and racial divisions in American society. However, America by and large remained unique and isolated from the rest of the world for these critical historians. For example, the United States was the exception to the rule insofar as European-style socialism remained unsuccessful; immigration, too, remained an American-centered story (Rodgers 30-34). It was only in the late 1960s that U.S. history and historiography in the United States in general started to change dramatically in this respect. Historians then started to include subject areas, perspectives, and theories that were once disregarded or dismissed as trivial or even offensive. The history of non-whites, women, labor, popular culture and sexuality began to be addressed; gender studies, urban studies and environmental history appeared as new disciplines; and keywords such as the linguistic turn, postcolonial studies and the rise of cultural history came to denote these changes (e.g., Novick 415-629; Kelley; Degler; Ross 663-668; Bender, *Strategies* 131-

134; for assessments of the “state of the art” in the various subfields, see e.g., Kammen, *Past*; Foner; Molho/Wood; Stokes).

Efforts to transcend national boundaries were only one of these many attempts to re-write history. The “new ethnicity” of the late 1960s emphasized the histories of subnational ethnic groups vis-à-vis national history and also got interested in their homelands. What had been *im*-migration history thus became migration history. Scholars from around the world – who had hitherto used the label *e*-migration for the very same phenomenon – were very active in this move, in many cases even more so than their colleagues at American universities (pars pro toto: Gabaccia, 1117–1120; on the older roots of this transnational orientation: Gräser 377–378). Simultaneously, the study of slavery shook off the chains of national history, expanding into what would become an “Atlantic history” of many routes and colors (see e.g., Gilroy’s classic study *The Black Atlantic*; see also Meinig; Curtin; Davis), while colonial history repositioned colonial British America at the western rim of a vast Atlantic economy (e.g. Kupperman). Comparative history gained momentum in the 1980s, at around the same time as in Germany. Rather than taking American Exceptionalism for granted, many of these studies understood the American experience as just one of many manifestations of a given phenomenon (e.g. Veysey; Grew, and the Guarneri anthology). While this whole body of research tried to widen the canvas of issues hitherto analyzed primarily in a national context, the move from diplomatic to international history further reinforced the decentering of the nation (though transnational and international history merge in some studies, I would argue that there is a difference: Patel, *Nation* 44–53).

By the early 1990s, a debate on transnational history was well underway in the United States, fed by historians of U.S. history as well as those working on other related areas. Journals like the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History* (*JAH*) published an increasing number of articles on the subject; the *JAH* even ran two special issues on transnational history (*JAH* 79 (1992): 419–542; *JAH* 86 (1999): 965–1307). The Organization of American Historians and the International Center for Advanced Studies of New York University held a whole series of conferences dedicated to the internationalization of American history (1997–2000) at the Villa La Pietra in Florence, Italy. The final report of this endeavor was a strong plea to extend the transnational approach to U.S. history and was widely received in the profession (Bender, *Pietra*; Bender, *Rethinking*). The La Pietra project was also crucial for the international debate on transnational history because many scholars from non-American and especially from European universities were invited to participate. Its influence for the discussions in various subfields of history as well as for linking the hitherto national debates can hardly be underestimated. In the meantime, transnational history seems quite established in American academia with specific job offerings, discussion platforms, and a presidential address to the American Studies Association dedicated to the issue (cf. e.g. the H-German discussion on http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/Trans/forum_trans_index.htm; Fishkin).

In 2001, a leading German historians wrote that the term transnational had not yet really been introduced into historiography (Osterhammel, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* 471–474). What would have been incorrect with regard to the situation in the United States was true for Germany. Generally, the debate in Germany got off the ground some ten years later than in the United States – quite revealingly at the end of the La Pietra project, though no direct lines can be drawn between the two events. Of course, the German discussion had been slowly gaining momentum for some time, but it was only when some of the leading social historians put transnational history on the agenda that the debate reached the historiographical mainstream. Most

important in this context was Jürgen Kocka's initiation of a debate on transnational perspectives in 2001 in the flagship journal of German social historians, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Kocka, *Einladung*). In the same year, Jürgen Osterhammel published a highly influential collection of essays on transnational and global history in the *Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft* series, yet another flagship of German social history (Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft*; Osterhammel himself was not primarily a social historian by training or practice). Ever since then, the debate on transnational history has been highly visible in Germany, and it was further institutionalized by the creation of the internet platform *geschichte.transnational*. All in all, its late beginning and faster transition into the historiographical mainstream in comparison to the United States marks a first important difference between the positions of transnational history on both sides of the Atlantic.

Secondly, the roots of the debate in Germany are rather different from the ones outlined for America. Obviously, the role of ethnic studies was much smaller in Germany than in the United States, reflecting the general marginality of this field in a country that until recently has claimed to be no "land of immigration." Certain other fields of social and cultural history were more important. Social historians from the Bielefeld school—to which the aforementioned Kocka belongs—tried to beef up the *Sonderweg* hypothesis through comparative work, especially since the 1980s. In the process, paradoxically, they provided some of the most fruitful rebuttals of their earlier assumptions (Kaelble; Kocka, *Komparatistik*). The growing ambivalence of social historians' stance toward the nation also had a methodological dimension. Most of their studies compared national histories with each other, thus, at the same time reinforcing and subverting the power of the national framework of history. Finally, social historians realized that, despite their many international cooperations, their own work so far had mainly been on German national history (Raphael, *Editorials*; Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft*). A feeling that this focus was insufficient in an age of globalization and the fact that their classical concepts had reached an overt crisis were two other factors contributing to their interest in transnational history. All in all, the highly influential branch of social history thus embraced a field not specific to its approach. It would be completely wrong to overemphasize the role of the Bielefeld school of social historians in the debate on transnational history, especially since one of its principals, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, is the most outspoken critic of some of the most important empirical transnational studies by German historians (Wehler, *Geschichte*). However, mainly due to their enormous academic power, social historians were crucial in opening the debate to the historiographical mainstream.

An even more important center of gravitation of what would soon be labeled as transnational history was a research group on cultural exchanges between Germany and France that formed around Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the 1980s (Espagne/Werner). Obviously, other scholars working on mutual perceptions and transfers between societies, e.g., in the context of British, American, or African history, also fed the nascent debate (e.g. Muhs/Paulmann/Steinmetz or Junker). But this Franco-German research became crucial because of Espagne and Werner's claim to be applying a specific concept—the "transferts culturels." And they dared to attack the Bielefeld school and its hegemonic claim that comparative approaches were superior to other forms of contextualizing national history head on. After a fierce fight both groups met on a middle ground by the late 1990s. The new consensus—that neither comparative nor transfer history presented a master solution and that both concepts could and should be combined—was very much like what Marc Bloch had proposed some seventy years

earlier. Now, it became a major source of the emerging interest in transnational history (Paulmann, *Vergleich*).

Another source of the emerging debate on transnational history is found in the attempts to rejuvenate and redefine world history. In this context, the vibrant Zentrum für höhere Studien at Leipzig University and especially the journal *Comparativ* have to be mentioned. Both were instituted in the early 1990s (in an attempt to revive Karl Lamprecht's tradition of a cultural and global take on history), and Leipzig became an important center of transnational history before the debate reached the mainstream (Middell, *Weltgeschichtsschreibung*). The fact that the online platform *geschichte.transnational* (established in 2004) is a cooperation between the French *transferts* connection and the Zentrum für höhere Studien highlights the importance of these two groups for transnational history in Germany.

And at least one more center of gravitation of the debate has to be mentioned: the work of scholars of German history abroad, mainly in the United States. It is amazing how easily Charles Maier combined comparison and transfer analysis in a Blochian way long before his German colleagues thought this could be worth discussing. Michael Geyer's classical assessment of the fiction of autonomy of European nation-states, published in the turbulent last months of 1989, today reads much fresher than quite a few of the publications on transnational history released in the recent years; and the first major attack against the *Sonderweg* hypothesis was of course written by two British scholars who would both end up teaching in the United States (e.g., Maier, *Europe*; Geyer, *Fiction*; Geyer/Bright; Maier, *Consigning*; Blackburn/Eley). Other examples could be quoted, and a prosopographical study could probably show how crucial the influence of these academic "uncles" and "aunts" in the New World was for a younger generation of Germans that would eventually feed the debate on transnational history back home. For many reasons, not least because of the language issue, scholars based in Germany have had no comparable impact on American academia.

This leads us back to the main differences between the American and the German debates. A third difference has to do with the problem of fragmentation. Since the 1960s, historiography in the United States has lost its powerful center. With the demise of the WASP-centered culture, it became impossible to maintain a single, unified conception of American history. The explosion of historical topics and takes since the 1960s not only brought about the "age of reinterpretation" that C. Vann Woodward had demanded at the beginning of the decade (Woodward). It also led to a high degree of specialization of academic historical inquiry. And, maybe more important than specialization itself, the axes of knowledge were recalibrated. Whereas previously, historical epochs and regions had organized debates and narratives, themes and interest groups now became more important. For example, histories of prohibition had been written before 1960, but in the decades that followed, students of this field first issued a newsletter, which later developed into a journal with the title *Social History of Alcohol Review* (today called the *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*), and formed the *Alcohol and Temperance Historians Group* that then gained affiliation with the American Historical Association, held its own conferences, etc. Thus, new small worlds of research were created, and it seemed ever more difficult to relate and connect them to each other.

Together with immense and growing output, this fragmentation is a reason why U.S. history today hardly offers any syntheses beyond the level of textbooks. Presently, there is no master narrative of American history that would compare in length and quality to the works of, say, Thomas Nipperdey, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, or Heinrich August Winkler (Nipperdey; Wehler,

Gesellschaftsgeschichte; Winkler). While some scholars praise this situation as perfectly appropriate for a pluralistic, multicultural or postmodern society, others have bemoaned the loss of coherence (e.g. Gräser 366–367; Bender, *Strategies*; Ross 668–677; Tyrrell, *Jeremiad*). German academia had seen somewhat similar debates during the 1980s, but they never became as powerful as in the United States and were submerged by the search for a new national identity after reunification. As a consequence, historians of German history with a transnational take had a clearer counterpart from which to demarcate themselves than did their colleagues in America. This explains why the thrust of the transnational historiographical debate today sometimes seems more vigorous in Germany than in the United States – although it is too early for a proper assessment and I actually doubt that transnational history will ultimately remain stronger in Germany than in America. On the other hand, this is also the reason why the issue of a synthesis of national history in a transnational perspective looms much larger in America than in Germany (for recent attempts, e.g. see: Bender, *Nations*; Tyrrell, *Nation*; see also the contribution of German scholars of U.S. history, especially Finzsch/Lehmkuhl/Wellenreuther). The combination of fragmentation with issue-oriented integration might also explain why transnational studies are much more an interdisciplinary endeavor in the United States than in Germany (for transnational American studies as an interdisciplinary enterprise e.g., see: Hornung).

Fourthly, American and German debates on transnational history have different tendencies regarding their geographical and topical scope. In the German debate the focus lies on Germany, often in a European perspective. Transnational history is not so much about transgressing traditional boundaries per se, but rather about doing it within a specific spatial horizon. The work of both the Bielefeld school and the “*transferts culturels*” approach exemplifies this tendency. Some scholars went so far as to call for a Europeanization of German history under a transnational umbrella (Frevort), although there is little clarity about what Europeanization could mean as a heuristic or analytical tool, and where the boundaries of this Europe should be. It is telling that especially scholars from the other side of the Atlantic – or those who cross the ocean so often that they can be counted on either side – therefore see a danger that Europe could turn into a new container of historical narratives just as impermeable as the enclosure of traditional national history. The respatialization of historical narrative would thus end in yet another dusty conceptual box. Konrad Jarausch has very convincingly called this the “*Treitschian trap*” that European history ought to avoid (Jarausch). With regard to topics, issues of political and social history are quite strong, whereas popular culture and even more economic history (and maybe also social history) are so far underrepresented (Geyer, *History*; Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*; Patel, *Perspektiven*).

In America, political history had been much less exposed to transnational perspectives than cultural and social history, at least as far as U.S. history is concerned. However, the agenda is set in both countries, so the imbalances regarding subjects are not so interesting. Another aspect is more important: transnational history in America tends to be about the world. Of course, it is true that the traditionally strong trans-Atlantic dimension looms larger than, say, trans-Pacific perspectives. However, it would be difficult to find a scholar arguing that transnational history should be first and foremost about the Americas – or any other region for that matter. For German history, inner-European connections and transfers are indeed highly relevant, so that the certain European focus of transnational history is more than just navel-gazing or the latest form of provincialism. However, it is revealing that scholars in America tend to broaden the canvas of research much further. Due to the sheer size of American history departments, there are also many more historians of fields outside U.S. history who are going transnational

now. The global dimension of transnational history in America is also reflected in the fact that the boundaries to global history have often become blurred, especially since the 1980s (of course there are many overlaps; as an attempt to differentiate the two fields: Patel, *Nation* 44–53).

The prominence of non-American history at American universities is the most striking point in this context. Furthermore, there might also be a difference in research perspectives. As Michael Geyer has argued recently, the vantage point of most scholars of U.S. as well as of German history engaged in the transnational debate is from the inside out, i.e., to explore the transnational horizon of a nation. But because so many more historians in the United States than in Germany do not focus solely on the past of the society they themselves live in, the two other transnational research agendas Geyer identifies play a larger role in America than in Europe. One is to explain the rise of the nation form as a global phenomenon in place after place or, in Geyer's words, the "outside in" perspective; the other is to focus on the subjects of transnationalism. By exploring forces and movements "that cut across nations and establish circuits that lift entire spheres of life out of their local/national context into another transnational world," the degree to which nations are able to contain history is at issue in these studies. In this case, the research agenda is being transnationalized to a much larger degree than by only investigating "transnational nations" (Geyer, *History*).

As a fifth difference, postcolonial studies have had a bigger impact on American academia than on German. This is, of course, itself a result of transnational phenomena. As the position of European history at American universities has weakened in relative terms, non-Western fields of study have gained in importance. Many of the new positions have been filled with scholars with a non-Western background. Dipesh Chakrabarty – born in India, educated in Australia, and presently teaching in Chicago – is a perfect example of this move. His widely received plea to "provincialize Europe," to introduce subaltern studies and to bring postcolonial theory into history are examples for the salience of postcolonial studies at American universities and for its influence on transnational history there (Chakrabarty). Nothing similar has happened in Germany, and with a few exceptions, the debates on transnational history – and especially the empirical works with a transnational perspective – have been much less influenced by this theory. Also, those interested in postcolonial studies have mainly written on how the wider world has impinged on German history and, more specifically, on the role of the colonial and the global in the European metropolises (as the latest examples: Conrad/Osterhammel; Conrad, *Globalisierung*; as an example including other approaches informed by postcolonial theory: Zimmerer/Zeller). These studies primarily center on German actors. Other parts of postcolonial theory, e.g., the more interactive idea of giving voice to the non-European other, have been much less influential, especially in comparison to the situation in American academia. At the same time, there are whole fields of history in Germany, e.g., the research on the Nazis' war of annihilation, in which such interactive approaches have become more prominent in recent years. However, these debates have so far by and large been uninformed by postcolonial theory (Patel, *Search*).

The sixth and last difference – and of course I am overstating this a little – is that Americans did transnational history and Germans talked about it. The debate on transnational history in the United States was always fed by a substantial body of book-length empirical studies applying a whole variety of approaches and methods (for overviews, see Gräser; Patel *Perspektiven*). In Germany, recent years have seen a lot of programmatic statements but much less empirical research. For a long time, the quest for a master theory of transnational history was an

important dimension of the debate, whereas only recently was it possible to establish a consensus that transnational history is a specific perspective on the past but not a particular theory. While scholars in Germany fought over the relationship between transfer and comparative history with theoretical and philosophical arguments, their American colleagues had no such scruples. They simply got going. These two cultures of transnational research are uncannily close to the stereotypes about the academic traditions of the two nations: the Germans slightly belated but then engaging in a scrupulously thorough, almost Faustian search for a theoretical core (that does not exist); Americans not getting worked up, simply rolling up their sleeves and getting things done.

Where Transnational History Dwells: Departments vs. Lehrstühle

The academic historiographical developments alone do not explain the success story of transnational history, of course. It is obvious that the new interest in this research is fed by globalization as a phenomenon that eventually even historians could not continue to ignore. Also, it is evident that these changes have a larger impact on a nation with a global reach and global interests, especially after 9/11, than on a regional power still struggling to reinvent its identity after a whole cornucopia of caesurae. More interesting, and maybe more controversial, is a brief glance at the institutional settings of history in the United States and Germany. It did not take Foucault to remind us that the order of knowledge is deeply enshrined in institutional arrangements, and simultaneously influences intellectual outcomes. A short outline of the actual places where transnational history arose, is written and is taught, seems therefore indispensable.

In the United States, history departments themselves very much reflect that America is a “global nation.” Today, about one-third of all historians at American universities work on U.S. history. Another (shrinking) third concentrates on European history, while the last third focuses on other parts of the world. General survey classes on subjects transcending national history – most notably the “Western civ” classes first introduced at Columbia University in 1919 – have a long record. The tradition of area studies at most American universities facilitates cooperation with philologies and anthropology, and world or global history also rose at American universities. America has some of the best libraries in the world. Scholars and students alike also reflect the transformation of American society into a truly global nation no longer defined by WASP culture (Gräser 364–373; Bender/Katz/Palmer).

Against this backdrop, one might expect that historians in the United States should have taken up the agenda of transnational history much earlier. However, since the late nineteenth century, history departments in the United States have parceled out the past mainly into national units. The dominant principle for the organization of knowledge was thus a territorialized vision of nations, and the trend to specialization in response to the explosion of academic research reduced the probability of historians reaching beyond the strictly confined provinces of their own work. Also, already in the first half of the twentieth century students had to choose quite early which region to concentrate on. So the potential for a transnational history in America has surely not yet been played out (Gräser; Grew 87–90; Higham 1291–1292). It will be interesting to see if the position of being the only remaining superpower and, according to some, the first truly global empire will foster academic parochialism and navel-gazing or a historiography of Hoso Maki, Ura Maki, and what probably is Nigiri Sushi – to play a little bit with Geyer’s terms of inside-out, outside-in, and cutting across as agendas of transnational history;

and by skipping all the other subtle varieties that Japanese cuisine (and probably also the world) still have in store.

It is obvious that the professional field of history is much smaller in Germany than in the United States, though it may come as a surprise for some scholars of German history that there are more professorships in their own field in America than in Germany (Weinberg; due to the differences between the two academic systems it is of course difficult to compare numbers). What is more important is that in Germany history departments have a completely different structure than in the United States. Often, they even today echo a Hegelian notion of history according to which European societies have a past and the rest can be dealt with by anthropologists or at least by institutional and curricular structures outside regular history. Thus, even the few existing historians of Chinese or Latin American history are often not part of history departments but rather of area studies. The structure of *Lehrstühle* by and large gives the individual professors more freedom in what they teach and research than their colleagues at American universities have. For a long time, cooperation among scholars was less central, and when it was fostered, especially through extra grants, the interdisciplinary dimension was more important than the internationalization of research (especially beyond the confines of the Western world). Also, the research focus of individual scholars has changed. In the days of Ranke, Sybel or Treitschke, it was still quite common to write about medieval as well as modern history and publish on a whole host of (primarily national) histories. Due to specialization, the breadth of research and teaching decreased during the twentieth century. Sure enough, a German (history) professor can talk about anything as long as he or she gets ninety minutes. But it is revealing that in (West) Germany, most historians of modern history focused on the German past even if their *Lehrstühle* had rather general titles such as “modern” or “contemporary” history. The fact that German academia is state-sponsored and that there is no equivalent to private institutions such as the Ivy League universities has also emphasized the tendency to concentrate on the history of one’s own nation-state. Seen in this light, it is less astonishing that transnational history got on the agenda later in Germany than in the United States, and that the focus has remained much more Eurocentric (Gräser 378–380; Raphael).

In Germany the success story of transnational history can also be related to a generational factor. Within the relatively small German system, an extremely influential academic generation is just now retiring. Having moved into their professorships during the 1970s, they were able to shape the trajectory for three long decades (Nolte). The generational change taking place at the moment is breathing some new life into a highly protectionist closed-shop system. Maybe future historians will write about transnational history as one of the specific modes in which German historiography organized the generational reformation at the turn of the twenty-first century. And for all the hype around transnational history, the counterfactual question remains of what would have happened to *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) had it not been confronted with the extremely tight job market of the 1980s. Maybe future historians will evaluate the success of transnational history in Germany by how successful it is in reorganizing the institutional structure of historiography in Germany to create a setup that is better equipped to meet the challenges of globalization. This would also include opening up job offers to people educated in other academic systems and thus reversing the accelerating trend of an academic brain drain from Germany that—not least of all—also feeds the transnational debate in the United States.

Transnations in an Age of Globalization

Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem
(attributed to William of Ockham)

One of the first to use the term “transnational” was Randolph Bourne in his 1916 article “Trans-National America.” Bourne, a progressive writer and public intellectual, argued that the United States should accommodate immigrant cultures and thus become a “trans-nationality of all the nations.” In that sense, he saw America as “a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors” (Bourne 121–122; on the conceptual history of “transnational,” Saunier). The focus of this article was less on the threads that connected the transnational debates in the United States and Germany, but rather on their different paths into a transnational historiography. It would have been easier to write about the edited volumes and special issues, the centers and conferences, the fellowships and relationships that make transnational history a shared history of people in America, Germany and many other places. For example, the mutual interpenetration of supposedly national discussion arenas could be illustrated by the fact that the 2005 and 2006 gatherings of the German Studies Association in the United States highlighted transnational history and that the same was the case for the 2003 meeting of the historians in the German Association for American Studies. However, placing the focus more on dissimilarities and divergences might be more helpful for future attempts at a further transnationalization of transnational history.

As shown above, transatlantic studies can only be one of many fields for transnational history. But especially since the issues of mutual perceptions, transfers and comparisons between the Old and the New World have always been an important part of the research agenda of U.S. history and, generally, of American studies in Germany, their contribution to the ongoing effort could be substantial. At the same time, they can build upon a substantial body of research conducted in the years since Bourne’s coining of the term “transnational.”

Much has been said about the conceptual and theoretical side of transnational history, but the skeptics will only be convinced by an impressive body of works successfully implementing the agenda of transnational history. It has to demonstrate by example what historians have been missing by a nation-centered approach. Therefore, it is high time to focus on empirical studies in order to gain a better understanding of the past—including the past role of the nation-state.

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