

Being in transit – Shipboard Travel and its role in Nineteenth-Century Globalization. Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“, University of Heidelberg, 04.04.2013-06.04.2013.

Reviewed by Johanna de Schmidt

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2013)

The symposium „Being in transit – Shipboard Travel and its role in Nineteenth-Century Globalization“ held from 4th to 6th April 2013 at the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum (IWH) in Heidelberg brought together an international group of scholars working on the role of ships in a global context. While former research mainly focused on the very ends of global interactions (such as the history of ports or littorals) it was the purpose of this conference to illuminate the phase of being-in-transit.

As donor of the Klaus-Georg and Sigrid Hengstberger Prize KLAUS-GEORG HENGSTBERGER (Heidelberg) greeted the participants with a welcoming speech. The first panel “The problem of being in transit” served to approach the subject from interdisciplinary angles. Host ROLAND WENZLHUEMER (Heidelberg/Basel) opened the panel with a presentation on the Mutiny on the Bounty. He showed how various causes interacted and reinforced each other in the cramped space of the Bounty. The ship’s mission to collect and transport bread fruits in the South Sea had a direct impact on the living conditions on board: Caring for the plants limited the water supply as well as the place which normally served to enact hierarchical structures. The speaker considered the ship as a prism in which global processes refracted and were played out in the isolation of the high seas.

While Roland Wenzlhuemer had a historical approach, NICOLA HILTI (Zurich) added a sociological perspective by talking about local living today. She showed that dwelling can be understood as a dynamic and active practice where even the time in transit could be understood as an integrated part of living. Another aspect of living in transit was presented by HARALD WERBER (Salzburg) who reported about his experience as a teacher on board a sailing ship. The first panel was closed by the discussant GIJS MOM (Eindhoven) who emphasized the importance of multiple mobilities and brought up the co-evolution of culture and mobility.

The keynote speech by GOPALAN BALACHANDRAN (Geneva) put Indian seafarers on European steam ships in the centre, who were depicted as trophies of the Empire but at the same time were able to challenge this role by subverting their objectification. The speaker saw it as characteristic for this group of workers in transit that they consistently confounded contemporary and historians’ expectations. By jumping ships and changing their identities, they tried to shape their conditions of being in transit.

The second panel which dealt with the historiography of the Sea was opened by DAVID LAMBERT (Warwick) who reconsidered and reflected on the impact of his paper published together with Luciana Martins and Miles Ogborn. David Lambert/Luciana Martins/Miles Ogborn, *Currents*,

visions and voyages. Historical Geographies of the Sea, in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 32/3 (2006), pp. 479 – 493. He stressed the potential of putting the ship into the centre of historical perspectives. MARTIN DUSINBERRE (Newcastle/Heidelberg) used the example of a Newcastle built ship transporting Japanese workers to Hawai'i, to highlight the Japanese perspective on 19th century globalization. Japan's attempts to catch up were highly dependent on importing foreign machinery. On the ship, Japanese migrants came to develop a sense a Japanese nationality. Also, these migrant communities were influential for the shaping of Japan's imperial mission. Finally, the paper argued that the Japanese elites understood its modernisation project as a 'passage out of Asia'. Using Hayden White's theory of emplotment DAGMAR BELLMANN (Darmstadt) concentrated on the representations of steamship travel in travel literature and newspaper articles. She argued that most accounts of the steamship used a 'romantic' narrative structure in order to make steamship travelling appear as safe and orderly.

The third panel was opened by LISA HELLMANN (Stockholm) who extended the phase of being-in-transit to the intercultural encounters taking place on board of Swedish East India vessels in Chinese harbours. Being in transit also covered an experience of cultural difference. TAMSON PIETSCH (London) used a more anthropological approach by focusing on the bodily experience onboard ships and the limits of its representation. Pacific steamship companies were the topic of FRANCES STEEL's (Wollongong) paper. She was interested in how the companies tried to accommodate national and cultural expectations of steamship traveling. The panel was closed by VALESKA HUBER (London) who paid attention to the Suez Canal as a place shaping perceptions during a voyage. By using this example, she highlighted the importance of stoppage and slowdown of globalization. Discussant ISABELLA LÖHR (Basel) saw a common aspect of this panel in the fact that ship passages were not seamless transi-

tions but formative phases, which disrupted routines and cultural self-conceptions.

Panel four continued looking at passages as formative phases, the paper of ANYAA ANIM-ADDO (London) brought up how boundaries between passengers and crew were contested due to the proximity on board. Thereby, she was able to show that managerial expectations of gentlemanly travel had to be accommodated in transit. MICHAEL PESEK (Berlin) interpreted steamer passages of German colonizers as a formative phase for the building of a German colonial identity, distinct from a national identity being formed in Germany at the same time. JOHANNA DE SCHMIDT (Heidelberg) and MICHAEL OFFERMANN (Heidelberg) presented ship newspapers produced by passengers before the introduction of wireless telegraphy. Using examples, they demonstrated how this particular type of source offers insights into social processes on board of the ship.

The last panel of the conference started with a paper by JANE WEBSTER (Newcastle) who concentrated on the material aspect and practices of intercultural exchange onboard slave ships by using the three categories of food, language and music. Although slave ships were designed to separate the crew from the human cargo, these material processes were actually able to transcend the physical borders on board. WILL HASTY (Edinburgh) also considered the material aspects of ships. He interpreted the space of pirate ships as expression of social and practical needs of sea robbers. By removing the upper deck structures, pirates changed the material and social spaces on board. Thus, the ship itself was interpreted as being itself in transit while being on sea. However, the making of the social space on board was a constant and on-going process, even after the physical space had been altered. Like Hasty, MICHAEL KEMPE (Hannover) qualified Markus Rediker's thesis of pirates as social bandits. Peter Linebaugh/Marcus Rediker, *The many-headed Hy-*

dra. Sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic, Boston 2000. While he acknowledged that social hierarchies on board pirate ships were indeed more equal, Kempe questioned any political or ideological motives. He also drew attention the fact that pirates constantly were in transit between land and sea. They would use islands and ports, and more often they would fight in coastal waters than on the open seas.

Central to the closing discussion was the ship – shore relation. The term moving horizon was proposed to go beyond this dichotomy and to express multiple relations between land, sea and ships. The study of the phase of being-in-transit opened the field for further research on the role of ship travel in processes of globalization.

The symposium underlined the potentials of considering ships as social arenas in their own rights to the centre of historical vision. It considered important aspects of shipboard travel, such as material, transcultural and social aspects. Even if non-western modes of shipping were only marginally represented, the conference brought together various impulses for intensifying the integration of ships into histories of globalization processes.

Conference Overview:

Opening

Klaus-Georg Hengstberger (Donor Hengstberger Prize)

Peter Comba (IWH)

Panel I: The Problem of Being in Transit

Roland Wenzlhuemer (Heidelberg University/University of Basel): 'With Huzza's for Otaheite!' Mutiny on the Bounty.

Nicola Hilti (ETH Zurich): Between Movement and Mooring – Multi-Local Living Today.

Harald Werber (Salzburg): Learning in Transit: Experiences on a 'Floating School'.

Discussant: Gijs Mom (Eindhoven University of Technology)

Public Keynote

Gopalan Balachandran (Graduate Institute, Geneva): Tricksters in Transit: Ideological Imaginaries and Social Geographies of Subaltern Modernity.

Panel II: Towards a Historiography of the Sea

David Lambert (University of Warwick): A New Historical Geography of the Sea?

Martin Dusinberre (Newcastle University/Heidelberg University): Mr Kodama and a Japanese 'Middle Passage' in the Late Nineteenth Century.

Dagmar Bellmann (Technische Universität Darmstadt): Steamship Travelling as Imaginary Space.

Discussant: Gesa Mackenthun (Rostock University)

Panel III: Ship Passages as Formative Phases I

Lisa Hellmann (Stockholm University): All aboard? – Swedish East India Company Ships as Contact Zones.

Frances Steel (University of Wollongong): Transpacific Passages and the Business of Transit

Tamson Pietsch (Brunel University): Bodies at sea/Bodies in transit: Traveling in the Age of Steam

Valeska Huber (German Historical Institute London): The Suez Canal as a Transit Zone.

Discussant: Isabella Löhr (University of Basel)

Panel IV: Ship Passages as Formative Phases II

Anyaa Anim-Addo (National Maritime Museum London/University of Sheffield): Caribbean Connection: Travelling Identities in the Age of Steam.

Michael Pesek (Humboldt University Berlin): Passage to Africa. Steamship Travels of Germans to East Africa in the Early Twentieth Century.

Johanna de Schmidt/Michael Offermann (both Heidelberg University): What's in a Ship Newspaper?

Discussant: Nanny Kim (Heidelberg University)

Panel V: The Ship as a Historical Arena

Jane Webster (University of Newcastle): Culture in Transit: the Slave Ship as a Third Space of Interaction.

William Hasty (University of Edinburgh): Crafting Space Afloat: Process and Politics Aboard Pirate Ships in the Early Eighteenth Century.

Michael Kempe (G.W. Leibniz Research Centre, Hannover): Being in Transit with Bandits. Pirate Ships as a Swimming Republic of Democrats?

Discussant: Bernard Gießibl (Leibniz-Institute of European History, Mainz)

Closing Discussion

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Johanna de Schmidt. Review of *Being in transit – Shipboard Travel and its role in Nineteenth-Century Globalization*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39272>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.