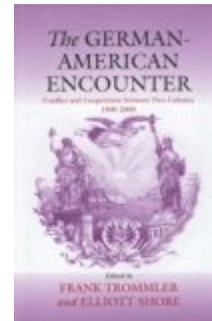


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Trommler, Elliott Shore, eds. *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures, 1800-2000*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001. xix + 340 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-290-2; \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-240-7.

Reviewed by Christiane Harzig (Department of History, University of Bremen)
Published on H-GAGCS (August, 2002)



New Ventures in German-American Studies

New Ventures in German-American Studies

The volume under review is remarkably rich and complex. It originated from a conference on “The Future of German-American History,” hosted by the German Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, in April 1999. With this event the Society celebrated the conclusion of a five-year project to restore its library and catalog the contents. Thus the volume draws attention to the treasure of over 70,000 volumes in German and 10,000 volumes of German-Americana accumulated in the library <http://www.germansociety.org/library_catalog.htm>. Both the new accessibility of this library collection and the volume reviewed here open new vistas in area studies research and German-American Studies. The volume, with its twenty-two contributions organized in three parts entitled “The German American Part of American History,” “The American Part of German History” and “The New Transatlantic Predicament,” is actually three books in one.

In introducing the first part, Elliott Shore sets the tone by questioning basic assumptions: what is America or German-America, and what is meant by Americanization? Neither of the two cultures can be identified without taking the other culture’s vantage point into account, nor are the two cultures so clearly distinguishable given the impact of German immigrants on the United States. Kathleen Conzen takes up the issue by challenging us to rethink the concept of “contribution,” after she outlines and assesses the decidedly non-contributionist re-

cent German (and American) historiography on German-America. About fifteen years ago, Conzen outlined the defining contradiction of German-Americans in that they ferociously cling to a group identity while at the same time assimilating almost without a trace into the American mainstream. Here she again addresses the relationship between national (American) identity and group (ethnic) identity by seeing ethnic groups “neither as passive victims nor innocent bystanders but more or less empowered contributors to a constantly self-constructing nation” (p. 10). Viewed from this point, it is safe to ask how German immigrants made a difference in America without falling into the filiopietistic trap. Germans did not have a “diasporic imagination,” Conzen argues, but rather a “colonizing vision.” This vision enticed them to populate the “empty space” known as America and to imbue it with some “culture,” helping the new territory along its national trajectory. Conzen discerns three areas of German “contribution” to the American nation-building process. The first is the reproduction of “self-contained fragments of the homeland” in the heartland, i.e. rural communities with German ethnicity as the mortar holding them together and causing them to resist assimilation longer than any other group. The second is the concept (and reality) of neighborhood/community in urban settings, with distinctive institutions and organizations in relation to settlement patterns, thus inventing the institutionalized ethnic community. The third area of German contribution is a “one-hundred years culture war” (p. 17); that is, resistance to the process of unifying the nation into a common set of religious beliefs and

cultural values (starting in the Jacksonian era) and insistence upon making their “Germanness” part of the American project. So, it may be argued, Germans paved the way for a multicultural understanding of the American nation.

The following papers in this section, by such known chroniclers of German-America as James Bergquist, Patricia Herminghouse, Hartmut Keil, Gregg Roeber, and Brent Peterson, may be used to introduce students to well-established findings in German-American history on the Forty-Eighters, German women and feminism, the working class, German religion, and reading habits of conservative “church-Germans.” Mainly they reiterate standard insights. Some add further issues to the canon, albeit by drawing on earlier research, such as Daniel Fallon’s essay on the impact of German intellectualism on American education. Werner Sollors rounds out this section by boldly challenging some well-established American Studies themes from the vantage point of German-American cultural production: A recently translated German-American literary fragment may lead to a reassessment of “exceptionalist” claims of the supposed non-existence of the “novel of manners” in American literature. Are theories in whiteness studies, it may be asked, justified when looking at Otilie Assing’s literary expressions? Should the Black-Jewish relationship be re-evaluated when reading DuBois’ account of Hitler’s Germany? Even theories on the representation of lesbian love do not seem universal in light of the German-American novel *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans* by Ludwig von Reizenstein. Sollors gives us a taste of what may be expected at the conclusion of his ambitious research project on American literature in languages other than English.

The second part reverses the angle of vision by looking at the “American part in German history,” but only from World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Martin Geyer, Thomas Berghahn and Rudy Koshar analyze respective images as expressed in opinion polls, as negotiated in the industrial culture and as used for specific purposes in travel guides. The authors Lily Feldman, Moshe Zuckermann and Manfred Henningsen focus on “the Holocaust” as an interpretative concept in German-American-Israeli relations. Geyer introduces us to the uneasy mindset of Germans in the 1950s, who appreciated the Americans as the least of various occupying evils, but also resented their presence and the “modernity” they stood for. They rather wanted to be left alone. By the 1960s, however, Americans were accepted as competent and powerful guarantors of peace and protectors

against communism. Germans began to be accustomed to “their Americans.” In East Germany, Geyer argues, “anti-Americanism” continued to persist, not only due to state sanctions, but also due to a quest for authenticity in the search for a modern, genuinely German culture. Koshar, in analyzing early travel literature written for Americans who sought to venture into this once familiar but now strangely unknown territory, shows how common American tropes were used when introducing post-World War II Germany. Regional diversity in Germany was equated with multiculturalism and an emphasis on German “cleanliness,” as opposed to French “mud-dyness,” attempted to make Germany palatable again to Americans.

After Feldman briefly outlines “the Jewish Role in German-American Relations,” as it takes shape in its institutional and political form, Zuckermann looks at how the Holocaust functioned in the construction of statehood and in the culture industry. While the state of Israel was constructed as the victim, West Germany fulfilled the role of the perpetrator. West Germany, after being allowed to “pay of its debts” could then take up its position as a cold-war outpost. When demonstrating the function of the Holocaust in the U.S. culture industry, Zuckermann has to move beyond the bipolarity employed by the editors and other authors of the volume. The “transatlantic dimension” of the holocaust discourse is best demonstrated as it appears in popular culture. Henningsen takes this one step further, suggesting an intriguing analogy between the memory culture as it pertains to the U.S. phenomenon of “slavery” and the holocaust. He thus questions the uniqueness theory of Holocaust Studies or, as he calls it, holocaust fundamentalism (p. 208), pointing to the possible benefits a comparison of “memory” and “compensation” would have for American political culture. While this reviewer is not yet ready to regard the holocaust as “just” one atrocity among many in history, an internationalization of holocaust discourse, as suggested by Henningsen, does seem to provide many interesting insights.

The last part, “The New Transatlantic Predicament,” carries the reciprocal reflections into the present and the future by outlining the challenges and new directions for Euro-American discourses. The underlying theme of the last seven papers is “Americanization” in its various guises. It appears in issues of “politics, communications, scholarship” as introduced by Trommler. Most authors would rather discard the term and the concept. Berndt Ostendorf pleads for introducing “generation” as an analytical tool when talking about the American influence

on post-World War II Germany. Elliott Shore questions the validity of equating “Hollywood” with American cultural imperialism. While Konrad Jarausch pessimistically assumes that the understanding Germans and Americans have of each others’ policies has eroded during the last decade (as people have less and less knowledge of and understanding of cultural differences), Theo Sommer does not see this cultural erosion to the same extent. He assumes that “Europeans and Americans should not allow themselves to be overwhelmed by their differences” (p. 245), and he pleads for a new transatlantic approach that recognizes differences but continues to thrive on the trust built during fifty years of successful cooperation. He argues from a firmly rooted, self-assured, self-confident European stance.

The volume concludes with a look at scholarship about “the other” in both countries along with the outline of a joint teaching project and its theoretical implications by John Rowe and Günther Lenz. Lenz in particular pleads for an internationalization of American Studies, and he unmasks the concept of “Americanization” as a ploy to divert observers from analyzing the complexity of cultural and social developments in various European countries.

The book covers many issues; each of its three parts could well stand alone. Considered as a whole, the book

is larger than the sum of its parts. It moves the history of German America beyond the dominant paradigm of German immigration to include the analysis of reciprocal influences. It gives German American studies a contemporary edge and a political relevance, underpinning the continuing importance of area studies, albeit in an enlarged framework. Some issues remain unaddressed. Religion, one of the major reasons for cultural misunderstanding as outlined by Jarausch, is not examined as a part of contemporary development. Though some authors make an effort to include “the East German Experience” in their analysis, it is obvious that scholarship is only at the beginning of this necessary reconceptualization. A representative of “East German” scholarship, even a token one, would have helped. Some authors too easily equate the U.S. experience with all of “America,” giving very little room for Canadian differences, for example, when it comes to analyzing multiculturalism. And the book does not address another more practical issue: though more (political) cultural knowledge about the “other” is called for and regarded as necessary for future cooperation, German university positions in “North-American History and Politics” continue to be eliminated. This may not have been on the conference’s agenda, but it is nonetheless necessary to consider if we want to continue to strive for the better understanding of cultural specifics in a globalizing world advocated by this volume.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

[/~gagcs/](#)

Citation: Christiane Harzig. Review of Trommler, Frank; Shore, Elliott, eds., *The German-American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation between Two Cultures, 1800-2000*. H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6584>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.