

# German Migrants and Migrating Knowledge in Latin American History

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington, November 3-5, 2022. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung. Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Mario Peters (GHI Washington), H. Glenn Penny (UCLA) and Stefan Rinke (Free University of Berlin). Participants: David Blackbourn (Vanderbilt University), Sophie Brockmann (De Montfort University, Leicester), Benjamin Bryce (University of British Columbia, Vancouver), Cristian Cercel (Institut für donauschwäbische Geschichte und Landeskunde, Tübingen), Nelson Chacón (Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt), Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş (GHI Washington), Jochen Kemner (University of Kassel), Barbara Kirsi Silva (Universidad Alberto Hurtado), Karina Kriegesmann (Free University of Berlin), Jeffrey Lesser (Emory University Atlanta), Lorena López Jáuregui (Free University of Berlin), Ricarda Musser (Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Berlin), Irina Podgorny (Universidad Nacional de la Plata), Carlos Rodrigo Sanhueza Cerda (Universidad de Chile), Claudio Soltmann (University of Mainz), Itzel Toledo García (Free University of Berlin), Nino Vallen (GHI Washington, Pacific Office), Felipe Vilo Muñoz (University of Texas at Austin).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Latin America was a major destination for German-speaking migrants, who left a lasting mark on society, economy, politics and science in its various countries. By building networks and institutions, cultivating ties to their homeland and host societies alike, and communicating across borders, they shaped a variety of multidirectional knowledge flows. The conference brought together scholars from Latin America, North

America, and Europe who shared the goal of raising awareness for the intertwined histories of German migrants in the Americas by focusing on their contributions to knowledge production. Rather than viewing them as an isolated ethnic group in individual Latin American nation-states or merely tracing simple knowledge transfers, the common focus of attention was on interactions between different individuals and groups. Scholars, settler communities, and even media entrepreneurs played important roles in the circulation of knowledge within and between different spheres.

In his keynote, Jeffrey Lesser gave a glimpse into the lives of five individuals by highlighting various aspects of Brazilian migration history and debates related to public health. The starting point of his lecture was the Bom Retiro (Good Retreat) neighborhood in São Paulo, which has been highly impacted by immigration movements. In his case studies, he addressed the discourse about people bringing diseases into Brazil, the locally organized “cleansing” of supposedly dirty foreigners in São Paulo’s “central disinfection center,” patient-doctor relations, the role of intermediaries, and mental illness and the rejection and violence directed against it. Lesser emphasized that knowledge had a different meaning for each of the protagonists in the five stories he recounted. Rather than reducing them to their role as migrants, he discussed the extent to which migrant knowledge was present in the cases presented.

Irina Podgorny took up this idea in her commentary. She emphasized that the protagonists in the episodes could not be reduced to their nationality. Instead, she emphasized their movements within transcultural contexts, the diversity of contacts and identities, and the knowledge that was shaped on the move. Both Lesser and Podgorny addressed the key concepts of the conference: What is German exactly? What does migration mean for immigrants and emigrants as well as their descendants? To what kind of knowledge can

we refer? These were some of the questions to be discussed in detail by the participants of the conference on the following two days.

The first panel dealt with indigenous knowledge and related research, networks and representations. Chaired by Nino Vallen, it focused on the work of scholars who were active transnationally. Sophie Brockmann vividly illuminated the contribution of researchers such as the archaeologist and anthropologist Erwin Paul Dieseldorff in Guatemala, who played a significant role in the development of Maya archaeology and the production of archaeological knowledge in the first decades of the twentieth century. The scholars whose networks Lorena López Jáuregui analyzed acted similarly. Her presentation focused on the highly mobile German participants of the International Congress of Americanists. She explained how some members contributed to the creation of national museums and their collections and translated knowledge about indigenous groups. Encounters with local indigenous communities constituted the focus of Felipe Vilo Muñoz's presentation. He described how the Prussian naturalist Rudolph Philippi contributed to the production and circulation of knowledge during his research trip to the Atacama Desert in 1853-1854, which was financed by the Chilean state. The gathering of local knowledge about the desert and the recognition of local skills and practices were fundamental to producing publications, maps, and museum collections in the following years. H. Glenn Penny linked the three papers in his commentary. Referring to the different scholars, he explained which national and transnational arenas they moved between and how they acted as knowledge holders and translators. In the following discussion, the participants identified the question of national heritage, profit and advantage, the role of the state and the citizenship of scholars as subjects that deserve deeper scholarly attention. Future research needs to address indigenous and local knowledge as well as different epistemologies.

The second panel, chaired by Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş, focused on entangled scientific knowledge. Benjamin Bryce gave an outline of one aspect of Argentine immigration policy between 1880 and 1930. He explained how, as a result of legal discussions and exchanges with other states, Argentina developed border controls to keep people off Argentine soil who were deemed “unfit for work.” Barbara Kirsi Silva did not focus on large migrant groups, but on the work of one individual, whom she introduced as a mediator for migrant knowledge. The German-born astronomer Jürgen Stock from the University of Chicago came to Chile during the Cold War to evaluate different potential locations for the United States southern observatory. Instead of calling Stock a “scientific pioneer,” Silva emphasized the contribution of local people who later became experts themselves in the field of astronomy. Expert knowledge was also the focus of Nelson Chacón’s talk on the “scientific migrant” Fritz Müller. He highlighted how Müller produced knowledge about evolution in a transcultural space. Like Müller, Charles Darwin and others used the natural world of Brazil as a laboratory and interacted with local knowledge producers. In his commentary, Carlos Rodrigo Sanhueza Cerda raised the question of whether an identical understanding of knowledge could be assumed in the cases presented or whether we should rather focus on the asymmetries that marked the production of knowledge. All three papers focused on individuals who, for example, created legal and public health regulations, produced astronomical knowledge, or studied the peculiarities of the Brazilian environment. However, it was precisely the connections to local communities, interactions between different individuals, and the close contact with the environment that the three presenters identified as crucial for the production of scientific knowledge. In the subsequent discussion, it became apparent how central Latin America is and that we need to move beyond diffusionist narratives which assume that the production of knowledge only happened in North America and Europe. The focus on

Latin America can help to reorient our perspectives and to relate different bodies of knowledge to each other.

In the third panel, the history of knowledge and the history of migration were linked to aspects of colonization, settlement, and entrepreneurship. Chair Mario Peters introduced the focus on the creation of knowledge in and about foreign environments. Jochen Kemner then focused on the Caribbean, where Germans were active as tropical agribusiness entrepreneurs. Business activities must be seen in the context of the postcolonial gaze on labor exploitation and philanthropy. Jochen Kemner emphasized that knowledge produced by experts, local actors, and migrants were equally important for business. "Knowing how to settle" was central to Cristian Cercel's presentation. He compared two examples of organized migration in the 1940s and 1950s. More specifically, he focused on the settlements of Jewish refugees in the Dominican Republic and those of Danube Swabian expellees in Brazil. His presentation went beyond humanitarian aspects and highlighted the relevance of previous experiences and the transfer of knowledge for land settlements and re-settlements. Claudio Soltmann also focused on foreign environments but in his case in language and culture. In the 1920s, the Capuchin missionaries Felix Joseph von Augsburg and Hieronymus von Amberg made a noteworthy contribution to the development of Mapuche Studies through their publications. According to Soltmann, their writings and epistolary material are essential for understanding various aspects of network-building and German scholarship in Chile. Commenting on the three papers, Stefan Rinke highlighted the relevance of the different places where these actors went, met each other, and exchanged ideas, as well as the idea of supposedly empty landscapes in Latin America, in which and about which new knowledge was produced.

The fourth panel, chaired by Simone Lässig, focused on the production of knowledge in the public sphere. Karina

Kriegesmann connected the circulation of true and false news during the First World War with the image that Brazilians were able to form, especially about people from Germany. She drew attention to contested knowledge and newspapers as producers of vernacularized migrant knowledge. Itzel Toledo García equally emphasized the importance of news production in the 1920s. In her study on Carl Duems, a German-born media entrepreneur in Mexico City, she outlined the establishment of his news agency that contributed to the dissemination of more or less neutral news in Latin America. Ricarda Musser combined her research on Charley Lachmund, who was born in the United States, worked in Brazil and studied in Leipzig from 1896 to 1902, with questions from cultural history. Referring to “musical migrations,” her paper discussed one representative of a highly mobile professional group who had decisive influence on the development of music in Brazil. In his commentary, David Blackburn pointed out that especially at the turn of the twentieth century, information spread much faster than people and goods and contributed significantly to the production of knowledge about events and developments in distant regions. The discussion of the papers focused on the role of the First World War and how nationality was negotiated in the media and in music. Given their common focus, the three papers also inspired the participants to discuss the intersections and boundaries between knowledge, information, news, *Allgemeinwissen*, artistic contributions, and oral communication, and questions of identity formation.

A visit to the Argentinian Embassy in Washington DC and an exchange on current migration and science policy were part of the conference’s program. The participants in the final round table discussed pressing topics in the history of German migration to the Americas, the relevance of the interconnections and entanglements of German migrant communities for historical narratives, and interpretations of the place of migrants in the dynamics of knowledge pro-

duction. The discussants agreed that we need to call into question assumptions of the specificity of being German. The history of Germans and German-speaking people in the world, which in fact spans more than just two centuries, must be considered in a sophisticated way. Focusing on narratives about migrants and the idea of a “German Atlantic” can help us analyze a variety of entanglements without neglecting disentanglements, a possible loss of knowledge, and asymmetries in knowledge production. In order to address the complexity of migrations and knowledge, the focus must be placed on mediators and translators. The focus on Latin America in particular proves how fruitful it is to examine not only different temporal and spatial scales but also the diversity of the actors involved, especially non-Western actors, as well as indigenous knowledge in different places.

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