

## **Rootedness and Acculturation**

### **Experiences from German Immigrant Communities in the USA (1883-1918)**

International conference, Bordeaux, October 14th-16th, 2020  
<https://us-germans-bdx.sciencesconf.org/>

In 1883, the bicentennial of the founding of Germantown and the settlement of the first German immigrants in North America were celebrated. The related events were the starting point for increased self-reflection and for a process of awareness raising within the German-speaking community. Through lectures, panel discussions and publications, members of the community discussed controversially how the decline of German culture in the USA should be avoided and which tools could be used to promote the status of their community, but also to emphasize more clearly its contribution to the building of the American nation. Therefore, the specificity of the German-American community and the return to its cultural roots became a relevant matter of interest and investigation.

Under changing conditions, this debate went on until the end of the First World War. The North American public opinion increasingly questioned the positions of German-Americans concerning the imperialistic foreign policy of Wilhelm II. and criticized the attempts to exploit German-speaking communities abroad in the interest of the German state. Consequently, a debate arose about patriotism and the alleged loyalty of the German-Americans to the founding values of the USA. The German-speaking community was confronted with mistrust and discriminatory measures because it was repeatedly denied full identification with the American nation.

In this context of uncertainty and self-reflection, the conference aims at questioning the model of integration: Was there a shift between 1883 and 1918, in which an open concept of integration with regard to cultural, social and political characteristics was replaced by an assimilation model in which the German-speaking community fully expected to adapt fully to the framework of the dominant culture? What function did the discussion about the cultural origins of the German-American identity play? How did German-Americans position themselves towards concepts like Americanism, nation, identity and ethnicity or race, which played a major role in debates on the English-speaking side.

In order to answer these questions, three topics will be considered for the conference:

#### 1. The rise of German-American historiography

Between 1883 and 1918, numerous efforts were made to establish an autonomous German-American historiography. The purpose was to highlight the migration and settlement process as a successful contribution to the emergence of the American nation. 'Elements' or 'properties' allegedly associated with the German culture were presented as an enrichment for the further development of the United States. How were the questions of the roots and the link with the German-speaking territories addressed? Was this historiography rather an adherence to a cultural heritage or was it a resolute move towards a new framework? Did the rise of German-American historiography lead to the development of a specific view on how the United States became a nation? Were there significant attempts to distinguish the fate of the

German-American community from that of other ethnic groups which also settled in North America? Which larger role did these attempts play?

## 2. The status and situation of the German language(s) in the US

From a linguistic point of view, special attention will be devoted to the situation of the German language as well as German dialects with respect to the mostly, but not exclusively English-speaking environment of the US. Contacts with other languages of US may also be taken into consideration in the discussion. The first dimension is the maintenance and advancement of the German language in an institutional context sometimes associated with important tensions concerning language policy: What were the strategies used to promote the use of German among immigrant communities? How did those groups react to such initiatives as the Bennet Law in Wisconsin (1889), which was intended to undermine the position of German at State level?

The second major question is the nature and evolution of what is to be called “the German language in the US”, especially considering its regional and dialectal varieties. Can the sociolinguistic situation at the time be defined as a case of diglossia between “German” and “English”? Or should we assume cases of triglossia between a German dialect, a more or less standardized German high variety and English?

What was the role played by the many High and Low German vernaculars spoken in the US in the crystallisation of regional German-American linguistic communities? Conversely, what was the influence of the European standard on the language spoken in the US? The timespan between 1883 and 1918 includes the final establishment of a homogeneous European high variety, associated with the names of Konrad Duden and Theodor Siebs, among others. Did this evolution play a role in the praxis of varieties in America?

These debates also raise important methodological issues. The timespan considered in the conference is marked by an important production of newspapers and literature. Are these documents, e.g. local newspapers, reliable witnesses of regional koineisation and/or standardization? Given the role of the dichotomy between conceptional scripturality and orality in language variation, (how) should we take it into consideration in the analysis of these sources?

## 3. The social and political dimensions of German-American self-comprehension

At least from 1883 onwards, the question of the cohesion of the German-American community was a central matter of concern. The growing social heterogeneity of the population with German background created a space for institutions, forces and protagonists that aimed at fostering the feeling of cohesion within the community as well as between the community and the German-speaking European territories. How did the network of unions and societies evolve after the highly dynamic period of the mid-19th century? Who were the protagonists of initiatives for the self-affirmation of German identity in the US? Were they primarily native-born Germans, or rather people that were born in the US? Women played a growing role in the network of societies and schools at the time: What were the modalities and consequences of the social commitment of the women? How did the issue of confessional diversity in the US and among German-Americans interact with the social cohesion of their communities? Finally, the decades considered here were also marked by the new organization of major political forces in German-speaking Europe: National-liberalism, Conservatism,

Imperialism, but also the rise of Social Democracy and the first organization of radical Antisemitism as an autonomous political movement. How did German-Americans position themselves with respect to those political forces in the German Empire and in Austria-Hungary?

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Papers addressing any of the three domains listed above are welcome. The proposals should take the form of an anonymous abstract (max. 500 words excluding references) and a separate short biographical notice (max. 150 words). The two languages of the conference will be German and English.

Abstracts should be sent by **October, 15th, 2020** to both convenors (see e-mail addresses below). Notifications of acceptance will be sent by January 15th, 2021.

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