

A CRITIQUE OF TRANS-ATLANTIC REASON

Abstracts

Jacob Eder (Berlin): *Staatsräson* avant la lettre? Reflections on the Politics of Holocaust Memory in Germany and the United States

The history of Germany's "coping with the Nazi past" is often told as a tale of remarkable success – a story of self-reflection, moral ambition, and of a state committed to acknowledging responsibility for unspeakable crimes. In the United States especially, Germany has often been cast as the "world champion of memory," and the injunction to "learn from the Germans" has become a familiar trope. The reality, however, is more complicated. This talk examines (West) German politicians' and diplomats' reactions to the sharp rise, beginning in the late 1970s, of American engagement with Holocaust history. Conservative figures around Chancellor Helmut Kohl viewed this trend as a threat to the Federal Republic's reputation and to German-American relations. Although their efforts to shape American Holocaust memory ultimately failed, the intense engagement with American Holocaust memory left traces in West Germany and accelerated a process in which the federal government assumed both institutional and intellectual responsibility for Holocaust memory. Kohl – whose earlier policies suggested a desire to draw a *Schlussstrich* – emerged in the 1990s as a staunch champion of Holocaust remembrance, calling it "the core of our self-concept as a nation". A kind of *Staatsräson* avant la lettre?

Florian Meinel (Göttingen): Constitutionalising Westbindung: The Political Function of the Basic Law

I will explore how the Federal Republic's geopolitical orientation of Westbindung has been inscribed into its constitution, both in terms of a bold constitutional principle that has shaped judicial interpretation and with regard to the broader constitutional discourses that slowly has embraced "Western constitutionalism" as a framework of reference. While early West German policy linked *Westbindung* to sovereignty and security within the Western alliance ("Staatsräson"), the Basic Law and the jurisprudence of the Bundesverfassungsgericht gave this alignment a concrete constitutional form. Decisions on the EVG-Vertrag, the Grundlagenvertrag, and the stationing of U.S. forces reveal how the Court gradually normalised Western integration under Articles 24 and 59 GG, treating alliance participation as an expression of democratic legitimacy rather than its limitation (opposed to its rulings on European integration), with its inner, cultural counterpart: the rise of "Verfassungspatriotismus" can be seen as a civic translation of Westbindung, most notably in the case of Habermas of course who outrightly reframed loyalty to the West as loyalty to the constitution itself. I will finish by asking in how far the post-reunification jurisprudence on geopolitics (NATO missions out of area etc.) has changed this framework towards a "Hamletization" of the Berlin Republic.

Birgit Jooss (München): Die CIA, das MoMA und die documenta. Zur Kanonbildung der Nachkriegsmoderne in der BRD

Die ersten documenta Ausstellungen können als Demonstrationen westlicher Ideologie gesehen werden. Ihre offizielle Zielsetzung war es, sich öffentlich von der Kunstpolitik der NS-Zeit zu distanzieren und – an die Kunst der Vorkriegsavantgarden anknüpfend – eine

moderne, vorzugsweise der abstrakten Ästhetik verpflichtete Produktion zu zeigen, um wieder Anschluss an die aktuelle Kunstszene zu finden. Figürliche, gegenständliche Kunst wurde abgelehnt. So konnte man sich gleichzeitig gegen zwei Richtungen abgrenzen: die Kunst des NS-Regimes und die des Sozialistischen Realismus des Ostblocks. Wenn auch stets betont wurde, dass es bei der documenta keine Einflussnahme durch die Politik gab, so wissen wir heute, dass sich die amerikanische Regierung aktiv eingemischt und die documenta als Instrument genutzt hatte, um sich gegen den drohenden Kommunismus abzuschirmen. Über das „International Program“ des MoMA unterstützten die Amerikaner die Weltkunstaussstellung mit Leihgaben. Bei der zweiten documenta 1959 war das MoMA sogar für den amerikanischen Beitrag verantwortlich, der den Abstrakten Expressionismus in einer überwältigenden Schau propagierte. Doch das MoMA agierte nicht im Alleingang, die personellen Verstrickungen mit der CIA sind offensichtlich. Gemäß ihrer Ideologie vermittelte der Abstrakte Expressionismus am besten die Idee einer freiheitlichen Demokratie und so muss man die frühen documenta Ausstellungen als Teil des Re-education Programms der USA betrachten. Da die documenta bald richtungsweisend für den Aufbau von Museumssammlungen in Westdeutschland wurde, trugen also die Amerikaner auch zur Kanonbildung der Kunstsammlungen in der jungen BRD bei.

Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins (Middletown, CT): Fear of Abandonment: Henry Kissinger's Europe Policy of the 1970s and its Neoconservative Critics.

This paper attempts to historicize today's strain in Euro-Americans relations, in light of the current US administration, by looking at the decade of the 1970s for similar precedents. In doing so it examines Henry Kissinger's critical views of Ostpolitik, his controversial "Year of Europe," (1973) as well as his handling of the Cyprus crisis. In doing so it will show how Kissinger's longtime ally, the French liberal Raymond Aron, critically responded to the Secretary of State's handling of these matters. The paper will suggest that Aron's criticisms partook in a wider North Atlantic neoconservative critique of Kissinger's foreign policy.

Diedrich Diederichsen (Berlin): Outlaw, Dandy oder Situ – Rebellen Identitäten für BRD-Jugendliche aus dem Angebot der Alliierten

After the war young Germans were looking for cultural identifications which would allow them a distance from previous generations, but also a site from where they could judge, understand, act, at least symbolically. Mostly this story is told as a tale of Americanization, for better or worse (democracy, consumerism). But not only provided America options for identities that positioned themselves for or against the real USA and its politics (Kennedy, Dylan Malcolm X), there were also alternatives by identifying with choices from the other Western allies: French rive gauche culture or British dandysme; Jean Genet or David Bowie could beat Bob Dylan on a good day. What were the effects of this offer of choices, how serious were the consequences, how has this mechanism of identification and counter-identifications shaped the political culture till 1989 and beyond.

Mona Leinung (Essen): 'Democracy Is Inhospitable to Philosophy.' European Intellectual Encounters with America

Whether on research trips or in exile, European intellectuals often experienced America as a laboratory of modernity – a source of both exhilaration and disquiet. Tocqueville's early reflections on American democracy were written, as he himself claimed, with the express purpose of showing "what men must do to escape both tyranny and debasement as they grow

democratic.” A century later, Simone de Beauvoir, travelling through the United States in 1947, lamented the inevitably anti-intellectual consequences of the democratic promise. Adorno, during his own American sojourn, distilled his uncompromising hostility to the culture industry into theoretical form, while Ernst Bloch, who had first hailed America as a generous land of utopian possibility, would later have to temper his hopes.

Drawing on key texts by Adorno, Arendt, de Beauvoir, and Bloch, this talk examines the troubled dynamics of translation between European theory and American democracy. It argues that European critiques of America often miss their target, for they take aim at a polity that never wished to become European in the first place. Yet in some cases, most notably in the work of Hannah Arendt, the experience of intellectual estrangement gives rise to a genuinely transatlantic perspective, in which America’s republican self-understanding is refracted through the prism of European historical thought. Whether Arendt’s sombre intuition “that Western civilization has its last chance of survival in an Atlantic community” still holds true, remains, perhaps more than ever, one of the fateful questions, philosophical and otherwise, of our own time.

Matthew Specter (Berkeley): Realism's Origins and Actuality: Contributions of an Intellectual Tradition to the 'Transatlantic A Priori' and Its Crisis

Realism in international relations is a contested term, both in definition and genealogy. Specter argues that late 19th century North Atlantic exchanges between Germany and the United States in particular is a critical moment in the development of what we mean by realism in the contemporary transatlantic foreign policy discussion today. Further, the realist thinkers of the first half of the 20th century contributed significantly to the tradition of Atlanticism –the transatlantic a priori’—that is our conference’s focus. In the second half of my talk I will examine the flip side, namely the extent to which contemporary versions of realism today, in both left and right-wing varieties, have been mobilized in critique of the old Atlanticism. Finally, Specter will argue that one can be a critic of American primacy and Atlanticist shibboleths without endorsing the fashionable realisms of left and right. There are alternatives to realism.

Kristina Lepold (Berlin): White Guilt? Observations on the Transatlantic Backlash against Critical Race Theory

For several years now, anti-racist approaches in the U.S., particularly Critical Race Theory, have been the target of fierce attacks. The idea of white guilt plays an important role in this, with critics accusing Critical Race Theory of declaring every white person guilty. As such, Critical Race Theory is said to threaten social cohesion and ultimately to undermine democratic coexistence. In Germany, the idea of white guilt, alongside concerns about the anti-democratic potential of Critical Race Theory, has also found its way into the public discussion. Usually, no concrete evidence for these claims is cited, which is unsurprising given that it is hard to find claims of white guilt in traditional texts of Critical Race Theory. In my presentation, I would therefore like to address the idea of a critique of transatlantic reason in reverse — that is, transatlantic *unreason*. I want to examine how the idea of white guilt has taken on a life of its own both in the U.S. and, as an import, in the German debate, and discuss the political implications of this.

Michael Kimmage (Washington, DC): The Three Stages of the Postwar West: A Nonlinear History

This presentation will explore the evolution of the postwar West - understood as the transatlantic relationship. It will propose a three-stage process that was "supposed" to happen, a development from a spare creative phase, the 1950s, to a euphoric revolutionary phase, the 1980s, to a phase of rational self-perpetuation. Instead, the first two phases can be said to have occurred, the foundational 1950s and the joyous 1980s, but the third phase, through which we are currently living, does not manifest rational self-perpetuation at all. It is instead a festival of insincerity, a performance of the transatlantic relationship based largely on untrue statements in Washington and across Europe, though this bizarre chapter in the transatlantic relationship is less dysfunctional than it seems, as Russia struggles to capitalize on the seeming dysfunction of the West circa 2025.

Grey Anderson (Caen): Atlantic Eddies: NATO at 75

NATO's seventy-fifth anniversary coincided with a European war that has clarified both the scope and the logic of the alliance. Far from a simple mutual-defence pact, NATO has always combined multiple core functions: deterrence, values-legitimation, management of allies and, since the 1990s, out-of-area force projection. The military dimension is real but has long served wider political ends—binding West Germany, structuring European integration under US supervision and insulating strategic decision-making from democratic volatility. The language of democracy and the rule of law has provided legitimacy for expansion and intervention while naturalising a hierarchy in which decisive military authority remains American. Enlargement after 1990 extended this model eastwards as a programme of political-military management, not merely security provision. NATO's role in the Ukraine war exemplifies both sides of its design: as an instrument of strategic power it has supplied the institutional machinery for training, arming, and intelligence-sharing; as a framework for management it disciplines allied budgets, coordinates sanctions and shapes information environments.

Jana Puglierin (Berlin): The Populist Atlantic: How MAGA Shapes—and Is Shaped by—European Right-Wing Politics

This presentation explores the emergence of a new ideological axis across the Atlantic—what might be called the *Populist Atlantic*. It examines how the U.S. MAGA movement is increasingly influencing, and being influenced by, European far-right parties.

While traditional transatlantic relations were grounded in shared liberal-democratic values, this new alliance challenges those foundations. The 2025 Munich Security Conference marked a turning point: U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance framed liberal European democracies not as allies, but as threats to Western civilization. His culture war rhetoric resonated strongly with the European far-right, who in turn see Trump's America as an ideological ally.

The presentation pays particular attention to the case of Germany's AfD. Historically skeptical of the U.S.—once calling it a "raumfremde Macht" (Carl Schmitt) —the party has undergone a remarkable shift since Trump's return to power. Figures like Alice Weidel now openly praise Trump, and the AfD has become one of Washington's most visible far-right interlocutors. Endorsements from Elon Musk and symbolic gestures like prominent AfD attendance at Trump's inauguration reflect this transformation.

This emerging informal alliance, based on shared hostility to liberal elites, "wokeness", climate policy, migration, is already reshaping the tone and substance of transatlantic politics. The presentation concludes by arguing that the *Populist Atlantic* is not a temporary aberration, but

a structural shift. It challenges both the institutional framework of Euro-American relations and the cohesion of Europe itself.

Fara Dabhoiwala (Princeton): European and American Visions of Free Speech

Why do Europeans and Americans differ in their approach to free speech? Have they always? I will outline a 3-part history that answers these questions and can help us make sense of the current transatlantic fight over free expression, media platforms, and government regulation.

Moritz Rudolph (Berlin): **Starke Männer in Amerika.** Könige, Häuptlinge, CEOs und die okzidentale Despotie

Die USA befinden sich auf dem Weg in die Monarchie. Das sollte uns nicht überraschen. Trump setzt mit seinen Angriffen auf Gerichte, Parlament, Verwaltung, Militär, Presse und Universitäten um, was er versprochen hat: Diktatur zur Wiederherstellung der Ordnung. Dabei kann er sich – neben zeitgenössischen Befürwortern starker Männer wie Curtis Yarvin und Michael Anton – auf eine erstaunliche Vorgeschichte in Taten und Ideen berufen: Amerika verfügt über eine solide monarchistische Tradition. Sie reicht von den Gründervätern über mächtige Präsidenten wie Washington, Lincoln und Roosevelt bis zu rechtslibertären Intellektuellen wie Hans-Hermann Hoppe. An der Figur Trumps wie an den Ideen Hoppes und Yarvins sehen wir jedoch, dass es sich um ein besonderes Königtum handelt: Einen CEO-König, der das Land wie ein Unternehmen führt und dabei auf Bürokratie verzichtet. Der amerikanische König ist ein König ohne Staat.

In meinem Beitrag frage ich nach den Wurzeln dieses für europäische Geschmäcke seltsamen Königtums. Es ist, so meine These, das Ergebnis einer euroindianischen Synthese, die im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert entstand. Sie begründete den Libertarismus, Amerikas Beitrag zur politischen Ideenlandschaft. Auf die Ablehnung des Staates konnten sich Siedler und Native Americans einigen: Als gelehrige Schüler John Lockes pochten die Siedler auf ihr Privateigentum. Doch erst der Mut der Indianer ließ sie gegen den englischen Staat rebellieren. Der Euroindianismus demokratisierte die Idee des Eigentums: Jeder sollte Herr sein, letztlich König (während die Französische Revolution lediglich die Aristokratisierung des Demos versprach). Eigentum, Verteidigung und Glauben waren Privatsache. Doch für ein Königreich brauchte man Knechte – anfangs Sklaven, später Marktüberzählige. Wenn aber alle Könige sein wollen, führt das zu Ansprüchen, die nicht erfüllt werden können, weshalb es in Amerika immer wieder Spannungen und Bürgerkriege gibt. Am Ende kommt der starke Mann, der King of Kings, der den Parteien die Waffen aus der Hand nimmt und die Friedenspfeife herumreichet. Wie ein Häuptling – der schon unter Native Americans nach Leistung ausgewählt wurde und die Entstehung eines Staates verhindern sollte – thront er über den Parteien und sorgt dafür, dass die Untertanen in Ruhe ihren Geschäften nachgehen können. Als Transzendentaldealmaker unterscheidet er sich vom europäisch-asiatischen Königtum, das mehr auf Zeremonie und Dynastie setzte. Amerikas Könige sind pragmatisch. So pragmatisch, dass etwa zwei Drittel der Native Americans für Trump stimmten.

Dieses seltsame Ideengebräu, den Euroindianismus, nehme ich zum Ausgangspunkt für einige geschichtsphilosophische Überlegungen. Nach Franz Borkenau verläuft so nämlich die Geschichte des Abendlandes, wir können sagen: des Westens: Dieser ist das Ergebnis einer römisch-germanisch-keltischen Synthese, von Starrem und Dynamischem, Zivilisation und Indigenem. Das ist sein Erfolgsgeheimnis. Wer also Partei ergreift für das Indigene, ist ein wachechter Westler. Die USA mit ihrer anthropophagischen Verbindung Rom-Europas mit dem Native Americanism haben diese urwestliche Synthese noch einmal verfeinert. Kein

Wunder, dass sie zur Weltmacht Nummer 1 aufsteigen konnten. Allerdings geht es, wo an Synthesen gearbeitet wird, auch drunter und drüber. Bis der König kommt und den Streit beendet.

Franziska Davies (Potsdam): Opponent, rival, partner, protective power? America in Eastern and Central Europe

In the twentieth century, the United States of America played different roles for the peoples and states of Eastern and East-Central Europe. Even before the emergence of the Soviet Union as an imperial power in the region, America was crucial in reshaping the political map of East-Central Europe after the First World War, serving initially as an enabler and, to some extent, as a guarantor of new sovereign states such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic countries.

After these states became part of the Soviet Union or the so-called Eastern Bloc following the Second World War, the United States nonetheless remained an important point of reference for dissident movements and exile communities, with Washington often serving as a focal point for lobbying efforts by anti-Soviet movements from East-Central and Eastern Europe.

For the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the United States played an ambiguous role — both as its main rival and, to some extent, as a model. After the collapse of socialism, Russia's loss of imperial status comparable to that of the United States became integral to the narrative of humiliation that continues to be fostered by the Putin regime to this day.

In East-Central Europe, the United States came to be seen as the only truly reliable guarantor of the newly regained independence. Thus, the denunciation of the Western alliance by the Trump administration and its open sympathy for Vladimir Putin marked a seismic shift in the role of the United States, particularly for the East-Central European states that share borders with the Russian Federation.