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Marcus Hahn and Frederic Ponten by Tamara Heger

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An interview with Marcus Hahn and Frederic Ponten by Tamara Heger

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Regensburg German studies scholars Marcus Hahn and Frederic Ponten discuss with American studies researcher Tamara Heger *Deutschland-Analysen*, a *longue-durée* analytical lens that views Germany and German-ness from both the inside and outside. In this interview they consider Germany as an area, with global, trans-imperial and transregional perspectives contributing to the reconfiguration of national and language-centred conceptions of culture. They address how they negotiate the legacies of Nazi-era appropriations of concepts such as *Lebensraum* and *Heimat*, which have made applying spatialized approaches to 'Germany' difficult.



“What is Germany?” This and similar questions have been at the center of cultural texts analyzing Germany and German-ness from Tacitus through Richard Wagner to Nesrin Şamdereli. For Prof. Dr. Marcus Hahn and Dr. Frederic Ponten (both University of Regensburg), such texts are part of a distinct yet diverse genre which they call *Deutschland-Analysen*. In October 2020, they edited a thematic issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* on this very topic. In this interview with American Studies PhD researcher and *Frictions* editorial board member Tamara Heger, conducted in June 2021, they outline what they mean when talking about a trans-imperial genre, what Germanistik (German Studies) in the Federal Republic of Germany can still learn from international academia, and what their personal favorite contributions from this vast field are.

Tamara Heger: *Thank you for taking the time for this interview for Frictions. I am really looking forward to learning more about your joint publication Deutschland-Analysen, an edition of the Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften, that came out with the publishing house transcript in 2020.*

Let us start at the very beginning. Your collection has a very curious cover – resembling a Rorschach test. Could you say a bit about your thoughts behind that choice?

Marcus Hahn: The cover does indeed resemble a Rorschach test. The graphic designer made it out of two upside-down maps of Germany, mirrored against each other, and then sprinkled some additional ink dots over them. We liked this very much because, on the one hand, it points to the ambiguity about what the borders of the epistemic object ‘Germany’ could actually be: the geographical borders of the Federal Republic of Germany or also those of Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland? And within which historical boundaries: 1990, 1949, 1937, 1914, 1806, 1512 or 919? Or would one have to start from the respective areas of distribution of the German language? On the other hand, we want to draw attention to the deceptively projective character of *Deutschland-Analysen* (our own included), which we have tried to look at in their entire spectrum between outsider perspectives and self-analysis.

TH: *You understand Deutschland-Analysen as a genre – including interpretations and negotiations of Germany and German-ness both from the inside and the outside. How does this inform your epistemological interest in their analysis?*

Frederic Ponten: We found Germany and German-ness to be complex objects of knowledge which have provoked a wealth of responses that constitute a highly pertinent body of texts for anybody interested in ‘German Studies’. Understanding the construction of ‘German identity’ – the topic of my article – is however only one of the many insights these *Deutschland-Analysen* provide. When choosing the contributions for this volume, we were rather interested in the surprising variety and contradictory nature of the long tradition of a multilingual genre – spanning from the writings of Tacitus to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors such as Herder, de Staël and Heine to American cultural anthropologists during World War II. ‘Germany’ as an area, after all, has at no time in the past or present been congruent with a single political entity let alone a ‘nation-state’, and we found especially non-German texts and outsider perspectives particularly helpful for their understanding of Germany. We therefore propose that the resulting hybridity of the genre should be considered less a bug than a feature.

We got to think of *Deutschland-Analysen* as a ‘boundary object’ that draws together and allows to express the fundamental incongruities of the German experience. As such, it serves as a heuristic tool to explore the concepts and practices developed by different individuals and groups to relate to Germany and its federal political, social, cultural and literary institutions. ‘Weak’ German regional institutions, for example German language newspapers published in New York City such as *Aufbau*, in which Thomas Mann published the first pre-print of his *Doktor Faustus* in 1944, or German language schools in Prague such as the *Deutsche Knabenschule am Fleischmarkt* attended by Franz Kafka since 1889, often lacked the means to impose a centrally organized standardization of infrastructures and publics. Indeed, our *Deutschland-Analysen* rarely show success stories, but rather an engagement with German problems. The genre is therefore dominated by inter-cultural encounters with various and often mystifying German shapes, joys and illusions, but also with German aggression and genocidal violence.

TH: *Coming back to maps: What impact do geographical and temporal dimensions and dynamics have on*

Deutschland-Analysen?

FP: During our research, we observed a phenomenon that maybe does not come as a big surprise to some: historically, writing about Germany increased significantly especially in times of crises and wars that led to changes in political borders. *Deutschland-Analysen* played and still play a crucial role in enabling people to reflect on their relationship to Germany, to negotiate the historical complexity of central or peripheral places of origin, of inner-European and extra-European colonialism, migration routes and exile situations, of languages and literatures involved, of their outsider status or multiple identities. All these problems need a historical but also a heightened geographical awareness. Using spatial concepts in relation to the study of German cultural history has been a taboo for a long time, that is, after National Socialist German scholars throughout the humanities and social sciences attempted to establish a strict relationship between 'blood and soil', leading to the infamous idea of a German Lebensraum. This has now led to the paradoxical effect that large parts of the humanities missed the renewed urgency of the global entanglements and disentanglements after the end of the Cold War. We had to go through a quick learning process for which Global History, Cultural Anthropology and Area Studies, which had never given up on space, provided crucial conceptual guidance. Our discovery of *Deutschland-Analysen* as a genre indeed only became possible when we started to look at texts about Germany from a global as well as from a trans-regional perspective.

'Germany' as an area, after all, has at no time in the past or present been congruent with a single political entity let alone a 'nation-state' [...] German national culture in fact developed between multi-ethnic and multi-lingual empires and not within a single German national state.

Frederic Ponten

TH: *Many works considered Deutschland-Analysen might appear to come from the far-right spectrum, especially in the twentieth century, and in connection to this, "Heimat" has become a very contested concept. Can your collection counter this impression?*

MH: *Deutschland-Analysen* come from all sides of the political spectrum, not only from the right. Heinrich Heine's "Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen" (1844) is a left-wing republican view of Germany during the Restoration, Helmuth Plessner's famous 1935 exile text on "Die verspätete Nation" takes a liberal-bourgeois perspective. We even found four texts, all with the same title, "Was ist deutsch?", by authors as diverse as Richard Wagner (1878), Theodor W. Adorno (1965), Peter Trawny (2016) and Dieter Borchmeyer (2017). The decisive reason for us to research *Deutschland-Analysen* is the boom in political-sociological, but also literary and filmic analyses of Germany in the last decade. We can refer here, for example, to Zafer Şenocak's essay "Deutschsein" (2011), to Navid Kermani's speech "Vergesst Deutschland!" (2012), to Mohamed Amjahid's "Unter Weißen" (2017) or to the anthology edited by Fatma Aymedir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah on the occasion of

the first anniversary of the German 'Ministry of Homeland', "Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum" (2019). In the field of literature, one could mention Feridun Zaimoğlu's "Kanak Sprak" (1995) or Yadé Kara's novel "Selam Berlin" (2003); in the field of film, the integration comedy by Yasemin and Nesrin Şamdereli "Almanya - Willkommen in Deutschland" (2011) comes to mind. The concept of 'Heimat' is indeed 'disputed' in all these contributions, but one could perhaps also de-dramatize the process somewhat in terms of cultural studies and say: the meaning of 'Heimat' is currently being socially renegotiated.

TH: *You perceive Deutschland-Analysen as a trans-imperial genre rather than a transnational one. Could you explain what you mean by that, why you think it is important and how Area Studies have informed this perception?*

FP: German Studies as an academic discipline has dealt with nationalism - mostly affirmatively - since its foundation in the nineteenth century and has produced at times an overly myopic view of German literature and culture. Conceptualizing Germany as a globally entangled area rather than only as an autonomous nation has had a liberating effect, at least for our volume on *Deutschland-Analysen*. In this spirit, we particularly welcomed trans-regional contributions and highlighted perspectives of inner-German migrants, immigrants and émigrés. This helped us to frame *Deutschland-Analysen* as a 'trans-imperial genre'. In order to understand the meaning of a 'trans-imperial' approach, it is helpful to think of the meaning of Germany during one of its supposed heydays of nationalism. Looking at a map of Europe in 1914, a scholar of modern German literature who is used to considering literature from parts of the (Second) German Empire, parts of the Habsburg Empire and parts of the Swiss Confederation, may swiftly move from these three states to recognize a German 'cultural space'. One century later, this space itself appears almost unreal, as it extends between Berlin and Königsberg, Munich and Zurich, Vienna and Czernowitz, Prague and Trieste. But should one trust a political map full of empires? How could such a map help identify the significant contribution of Jewish-German writers, or the Jewish-German tension-field between assimilation, antisemitism and Zionism, located within and beyond various empires and nation states? How should one include the significant numbers of German speakers in St. Petersburg and Warsaw or beyond Europe in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, in Santa Fe, Argentina, or in Adelaide, Australia? And what about the colonial population in Windhoek, Dar es Salam, Tsingtao and on the Bismarck Archipelago? As several global historians have discussed in the last decade, the German countries of the *Sturm und Drang* era to High Modernism, from the late eighteenth century to the First World War that after all produced what we consider the 'Classics' of German literature, come from a world dominated by empires. As we show in *Deutschland-Analysen*, German national culture in fact developed between multi-ethnic and multi-lingual empires and not within a single German national state, which in turn led us to think of the Germany analyzed in our *Deutschland-Analysen* as a 'trans-imperial nation'.

TH: *Your collection contains contributions from various fields of Cultural History and Ethnology along with German Studies. In how far does this reflect different understandings of Deutschland-Analysen as a term and concept in international research? Is this also a comment on or a message to the German academic landscape?*

MH: To speak of a 'message' would be a little too strong for me. But we are certainly making a plea with our

Themenheft to develop German Studies further in the direction of cultural anthropology, i.e. to open up the traditional interpretive study of German-language literature to the research perspectives of neighboring subjects such as Ethnology, History, Media Studies or the History of Science, to name just a few disciplines that, alongside the neighboring philologies, immediately spring to mind and from which the study of literature in particular benefits enormously. I think that this can be implemented very well in the Regensburg research environment and that it can help us to connect to the international discussion, especially in the exchange with so-called 'Auslandsgermanistik' [German studies abroad - ed.], because it 'disturbs' the self-centered view within the Federal Republic in a positive sense, i.e. it de-automates it and thus creates new possibilities for knowledge.

TH: *Picking up on the transnational and transdisciplinary concept of your collection, could you give our readers a tiny glimpse into what they can expect from the contributions?*

FP: We were lucky to attract contributions from various junior and senior researchers that were willing to engage with the genre of *Deutschland-Analysen*. Most contributions come from literary and cultural historians, as well as cultural anthropologists. The studies range from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. The Seven Years War, World War I; World War II and reunification after the Cold War set the stage for trans-national or 'trans-imperial' encounters resulting in several intriguing *Deutschland-Analysen*, touching on perspectives from Austria, German East Africa, the Ottoman Empire, the United States, former Yugoslavia and post-unification Eastern Germany. The volume also contains contemporary analyses, such as fieldwork conducted in *Heimattuseen*, as well as an article reflecting on the German experience of a recent Syrian immigrant, both translated from English.

Our discovery of *Deutschland-Analysen* as a genre indeed only became possible when we started to look at texts about Germany from a global as well as from a trans-regional perspective.

Frederic Ponten

TH: *Thank you for all of these insights, which will certainly make the readers want to delve deeper into your collection themselves. Let us end on a more personal note: Having worked on them so long, do you have a favorite text from the wide field of Deutschland-Analysen?*

MH: I have a few favorites, but as I can only mention one text here: In 2002, the ethnologist Flavien Ndonko, who comes from the former German colony of Cameroon, attempted to unravel the German obsession with dogs, which is difficult to understand from an African perspective, in the anthology "Inspecting Germany". His analysis of Germany, "Deutsche Hunde. Ein Beitrag zum Verstehen deutscher Menschen" ends up blaming the disintegration of German families for the fact that Germans turn four-legged friends into wives, husbands or children.

FP: The analyses of Germany that I've been most interested in were collaboratively written by German and

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European émigrés together with Americans for the American government and philanthropic institutions during World War II. If I must pick one favorite it would be a memorandum by Gregory Bateson called “An Analysis of ‘Hitlerjunge Quex’” composed for the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in 1943. All the reasons why this is a fascinating text can be found [here](#).

TH: *Thank you to both of you for this wonderful interview!*

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Marcus Hahn is Professor in Modern German literary studies at the University of Regensburg. He was a research fellow at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna and at the Institute for German Language and Literature at Ghent University. His research interests include German-language literature of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, the history of science and culture, media theory, and anthropology. Frederic Ponten is a postdoctoral researcher in Modern German literary studies at the University of Regensburg. He studied comparative literature and media studies in Siegen and Barcelona, as well as European Ethnology and German Studies in Berlin and Baltimore. He received his PhD from Princeton University with a thesis on US-American Deutschland-Analysen produced during the Second World War. His research interests include this history of literature, media and science in Central Europe. Tamara Heger is a Doctoral Researcher in American Studies at the University of Regensburg and Administrative Manager of the Regensburg European American Forum (REAF).