

The Ambiguous Semantics of “Reeducation” in Transnational and Transhistorical Perspective

International Conference of the Research Project “Reeducation Revisited: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives on the Post-World War II Period in the US, Japan, and Germany”

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organized by Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

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The international conference *The Ambiguous Semantics of “Reeducation” in Transnational and Transhistorical Perspective* was the third and last conference of the project “Reeducation Revisited.” Whereas the project took as its point of departure an examination of US-American reeducation policies in Germany and Japan after World War II from a comparative and transnational perspective, this last symposium sought to explicitly broaden the focus beyond this specific geographical constellation and beyond the period of the immediate postwar to problematize and discuss the concept of “reeducation” in a wider scope. This included a rigorous investigation of power differentials and a nuanced analysis of intercultural encounters in occupied territories as well as in colonial and postcolonial settings. “Reeducation,” viewed in this light, describes various, at times incommensurable, ideas, norms, and practices, including strategies of democratization, emancipation, and empowerment but also, more often than not, different forms of violence (both physical and epistemic) and the use of force in occupation settings and colonizing enterprises in order to control an indigenous population. Hence, the ambiguous and changing semantics of “reeducation” were discussed as part of societal realms – as part of political communication, as mass media phenomena, as institutional creeds, and as programmatic rhetoric appropriated by different actors and groups in civil society and military and para-military institutions. Studying “reeducation” and the ideological baggage this term entails can shed light on multidirectional influences and ramifications as well as point to the overt or more subtle paradoxes that the prescribed or voluntarily enacted (un)learning processes may entail. The focus on processes indicates that “reeducation” in its different shapes and guises is itself often both a vehicle and a product of (mostly forcefully enacted) transitions.

In her opening remarks, JANA ARESIN (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg) mapped out how the initial interest of the project in three countries – Japan, Germany, and the United States – during a very specific and rather short period of time, i.e., the post-WWII military occupation, grew to a wider interest in reeducation as a concept, an ideology, and a political practice. In many insightful discussions and exchanges with other researchers, including historians, social, cultural, and

political scientists, the question arose whether the idea of “reeducation” that is so closely tied to the collective memory of postwar Germany in particular, has not existed in similar forms – although sometimes under different names – at other times and in other world regions. While “reeducation” ideologies usually start from the assumption that it is possible to change or even manage and engineer cultural practices, worldviews, mindsets, mentalities, and everyday practices of large groups of people – combined with a moral conviction of the duty to do so, for the supposed benefit of the people who are being reeducated and society or even the world at large –, the commensurability of “reeducation” with democracy remains an open question. Against the backdrop of these larger considerations, the conference was interested in the origin and uses of ideologies of reeducation, its variations and continuities and its interaction with the mechanics of power relations – colonial or neocolonial, relationships of occupation, or relationships of states to ethnic or other minorities.

In her keynote address “Re-education: The Imperial Pre-History and Afterlives of a Punitive/Pedagogical Conceit,” SUSAN CARRUTHERS (University of Warwick) traced the origins of the complicated and ambivalent idea of re-education that is primarily associated with the post-WWII occupations of Germany and Japan. She uncovered the hidden connections of re-education and democratization projects – often presented as constructive and progressive – to the British oppression of colonial counterinsurgencies as well as the afterlife of the concept in the United States’ Cold War era obsession with POW camps and brainwashing. She further investigated the more recent US military occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the language of democratization that accompanied them, and which frequently utilized comparisons to the ‘good occupation’ after WWII for their legitimization.

The first panel, starting on the second day of the conference, addressed various geographical locations, diverse historical periods, and different agencies on which occupational reeducation policies had an impact. It introduced the participants to the potentiality of studying reeducation beyond a focus on post-WWII Germany and Japan and resulted in vibrant discussions following each presentation.

HOLGER DROESSLER (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) made the first contribution, introducing the conference participants to the colonial history of the great powers of Europe and America who competed over the islands of Samoa in 1900-1937. In his presentation, he focused on one of the protagonists from his recently published book *Coconut Colonialism: Workers and the Globalization of Samoa*, a female nurse from Samoa called Grace Pepe, who received training from the US Navy both in Samoa and the US, portraying how she became an essential negotiator between Samoan traditional healing and Euro-American medicine. Paying attention to ambivalent agencies of the occupied, he discussed how local workers in the colonial service, such as soldiers, interpreters, and nurses, used their acquired skills not only for individual development but also as means to engage in political activism.

The second presenter, FEDERICA GUAZZINI (Università per Stranieri), elucidated the important yet often overlooked history of occupational disarray in Eritrea from the 19th century onwards, with a focus on 1941, when the British Military Administration began to replace the Italian army following their defeat in WWII in the occupation of the region. She discussed how a primary concern of the British forces, prior to a revision of the local educational system, was the dismantling of the fascist outlook that permeated colonial Eritrea, and which had greatly been influenced by the Italian forces. She showed how forms of communication between the British and the Italian in the transition period of the handover of the occupation intricately impacted the agency of the Eritreans who yearned for autonomy and the ability to control their own future.

JUAN JOSÉ VÉLEZ-PEÑA introduced the participants to music in Puerto Rico as another historical and sociopolitical case of reeducational policies. Starting with the portrayal of Puerto Rico as an immature student in a classroom with Uncle Sam as a teacher in the famous satire "School begins," Vélez-Peña discussed a series of reeducational measures aimed at achieving the implementation and strengthening of US-hegemony in the region since the end of the 19th century. He then presented as an example the discursive re-articulation of Afro-Puerto Rican music, which originally came from the lower social strata, elucidating how a folkloric and whitened image of this musical culture was promoted through books, films, and prints in order to design an essentialist and homogenized national identity of Puerto Rico in favor of colonial or neocolonial projects of the US. He pointed out that such projects had ambiguous effects, ranging from creating job opportunities in the musical industry for the locals to reaffirming and strengthening racial, social, and economic difference in various groups.

The first panel was concluded by CHRISTINE DE MATOS (University of Notre Dame Australia) with her talk about the role of Australian women in Allied-occupied Japan from 1945-1952. Focusing on the power relationship between Australian women (military wives, nurses, teachers, volunteers) and the Japanese maids who assisted them with household chores, de Matos contended that the former actively engaged in the extension of occupation powers within the domestic sphere, rather than participating in the democratization or liberation of the Japanese female, thus contributing to a maintenance of both order and the status of the occupiers. Her introduction of the 'handbook' *The American Way of Housekeeping*, which had been used to teach the Japanese domestic workers western ways of housekeeping, attracted the participants' attention during the discussion, as the use of instruction manuals appeared recurrently in other reeducational systems.

The second panel of the conference, "The Global Entanglements of Post-World War II 'Reeducation,'" on the afternoon of the second day of the conference, continued to explore the connections between imperialism and reeducation, but also zoomed in on the postwar era in Germany and Japan. The speakers on this panel further examined how cultural mediators (German authors and

publishers as well as Japanese exchange students) engaged with US-reeducation measures, especially by explaining US-American culture and its specificities to their audiences.

JI HEE JUNG (Seoul National University) opened the panel with an analysis of three popular cultural products – NHK’s radio serial *Bell Hill* (1948-1950), the Hollywood film *Boys Town* (1938), and the Korean film *Homeless Angel* (1941) – and their respective representations of the reeducation of juvenile delinquents, thus situating US reeducation programs in postwar Japan in a broader historical and global context. Her talk not only made a case for understanding the US occupation as a practice of neo-imperialism but also outlined a particular notion of reeducation as a trope for postcolonial imperialism in the transpacific and beyond.

Turning to postwar Germany, SANDRA SCHELL (University of Heidelberg) offered a close reading of German American journalist Margret Boveri’s *Amerikafibel* (1946), focusing specifically on the text’s attempts at cultural mediation. Schell argued that the text was carefully composed to facilitate the transcultural encounters in the German American contact zone under the auspices of reeducation. Boveri’s ambivalent text has come to be understood by some as provocatively countering reeducation efforts while – at the time of its publication – it was largely hailed as a practical and appropriate introduction to US-American culture. Schell zoomed in on Boveri’s national-conservative conceptualization of ‘The American’ and her rhetoric that promoted Western-European supremacy, casting the liberators’ reeducation efforts as ‘dark pedagogy.’

The panel continued to engage with questions of cultural mediation in postwar Germany with a presentation by BIRTE CHRIST (University of Gießen) on Rowohlt’s RORORO newspaper format and its ‘internalized’ reeducation. Based on material from the Rowohlt Verlagsarchiv, Christ analyzed the seven American novels (including works by Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and Marjorie Kinnan-Rawlings) that Rowohlt published between 1946 and 1949 with an eye to the selection process and the texts’ respective framing (e.g., through their afterwords). Her case studies revealed the significance of German reading culture and of US-American literature in the context of reeducation and illustrated what Christ termed the ‘internalized reeducation’ of German cultural mediators.

Finally, ALISA FREEDMAN (University of Oregon) returned to the transpacific in her talk and exemplarily analyzed the *Handbook for Japanese Students Going to America* (1956) and its role in guiding exchange students in how to “survive American imperialism and reeducation in the 1950s.” Authored by sixteen male and female GARIOA (Government Aid and Relief in Occupied Areas) fellowship recipients who studied abroad in the United States, the *Handbook* provided pragmatic information but also reflected on national identities and the significance of education. Drawing on a range of orientation materials as well as interviews, Freedman not only showed that official Army books and films in the service of reeducation were insufficient to prepare the students for their time abroad; she also revealed how the students pursued their own agendas within the official program and

how especially Japanese women used a US-American imperial project to advance their personal and professional lives.

On the final day of the conference, the third panel, “‘Reeducation’ in Contemporary Postcolonial and Post-Conflict Settings,” featured two papers that examined reeducation practices and narratives in contemporary contexts from a postcolonial perspective. SARAH SPORYS (Albert-Ludwigs University of Freiburg) presented an analysis of the discursive mobilization of ‘reeducation’ in the Bush administration’s public legitimization of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Sporys showed how idealized collective memories of the ‘successful’ democratization of Germany and Japan after World War II were used to justify the invasion. She highlighted the connection of these memories and narratives to a construction and affirmation of US national identity as liberators but also pointed out the lack of actual ‘reeducational’ or democratizing policies in the following military occupation of Iraq.

BJÖRN ALPERMANN (University of Würzburg) discussed the Chinese reeducation policies in Xinjiang targeting the Uyghur ethnic minority. Alpermann located these oppressive policies in a longer history of nationalist integration of Chinese colonies. He outlined how the People’s Republic of China after its formation had to define national unity within a multiethnic state and aimed to resolve the inherent tensions through a developmental logic based in Marxist thought, creating a hierarchy of ethnicities based on their supposed socio-economic development. He further argued that, in China’s current policies, the Uyghurs are framed simultaneously as an ethnic ‘other’ and potential security threat to the nation as well as subjects to be included and assimilated into the nation, resulting in extensive and often coercive policies disguised as cultural and educational programs.

WERNER SOLLORS gave the final keynote of the conference, titled “‘Everybody gets *fragebogened* sooner or later’: The Denazification Questionnaire as Cultural Text.” Sollors addressed the Allied denazification questionnaire which, in its best-known version, was disseminated in millions of copies to post-war Germans and which asked 131 questions, not only about membership of the NSDAP, SS, SA, and fifty other affiliated associations but also about individuals’ pre-Nazi voting record, implicated relatives, and such data as weight, height, and foreign-language expertise. He demonstrated how the questionnaire on the one hand became a site of German cultural memory through its massive circulation (filled in, for instance, by Erich Kästner and Ina Seidel in 1945), but also a bureaucratic nightmare for those who had to evaluate the piles of these forms in the Allied armies and the German ‘Spruchkammern,’ on the other. He showed how the ‘Fragebogen’ provoked writers on both sides of the Atlantic – such as Wolfgang Borchert, Margret Boveri, Stig Dagerman, David Davidson, Alan Marcus, John Dos Passos, Zelda Popkin, Ernst von Salomon, and Just Scheu who composed a song about it – to represent it in fiction and non-fiction, often critically commenting on it as a merciless catechism of 131 questions or as an ideological equivalent of tax returns. Sollors revealed that despite the fact that the questionnaire was often perceived as an embodiment of American

culture, it had actually emerged with the help of Franz Neumann and Herbert Marcuse, German Marxist intellectuals in exile, who had hoped that denazification would bring about revolutionary change in Germany. The talk was followed by a brief concluding discussion, which affirmed the relevance of the topic and its comparative angle.

Conference Program

Wednesday, February 16, 2022, 5 p.m.

Workshop Opening by the Organizers

Welcoming Address by **Meike Zwingenberger (Bavarian Center for Transatlantic Relations/Amerikahaus)**

Keynote, 5.30 p.m. – 7 p.m.

Chair: Heike Paul (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Susan L. Carruthers (University of Warwick): Re-education: The Imperial Pre-History and Afterlives of a Punitive/Pedagogical Conceit

Thursday, February 17, 2022

Panel 1: Colonization and Reeducation

9:30 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Chair: Akino Oshiro (FAU)

Holger Droessler (Worcester Polytechnic Institute): The Americanizing Mission and the Politics of Incorporation in Eastern Sāmoa, 1900-1937

Federica Guazzini (Università per Stranieri): British Reeducation Policies in Occupied Eritrea: The Antinomies between the Quest for Democracy and Imperial Design

Coffee Break

Juan José Vélez-Peña: 'Re-educational' Policies and Coloniality in Puerto Rico: Folklorization and Whitening of Afroboricua Music

Christine de Matos (University of Notre Dame Australia): The Occupied Home as a Space of Re-education: Power, Democracy and Housekeeping Manuals

Lunch Break

Panel 2: The Global Entanglements of Post-World War II "Reeducation"

2:30 p.m. – 6 p.m.

Chair: Katharina Gerund (FAU)

Ji Hee Jung (Seoul National University): Reeducation as an Inclusive Trope for Post-colonial Imperialism: Three Redemption Stories of Juvenile Vagrants in Transwar Transpacific

Sandra Schell (University of Heidelberg): Reeducation from a Literary Studies Perspective: Mediation Attempts in Margret Boveri's *Amerikafibel für erwachsene Deutsche* (1946)

Coffee Break

Birte Christ (University of Gießen): Rowohlts 'Internalized' Reeducation: American Novels and their German Framings in the RORORO Newspaper Format, 1946-1949

Alisa Freedman (University of Oregon): Occupied Exchange: A Student's Guide to Surviving American Imperialism and Reeducation in the 1950s

Friday, February 18, 2022

Panel 3: "Reeducation" in Contemporary Postcolonial and Post-Conflict Settings
9.30 a.m. – 12.15 p.m.

Chair: Jana Aresin (FAU)

Greta Biro (FAU): The State-Islamic Re-education of Transgender People in Malaysia (cancelled)

Sarah Sporys (Albert-Ludwigs University Freiburg): Reeducation, Liberation, Democratization, Nation-Building? The United States and Its Post-War Strategy in Iraq

Coffee Break

Björn Alpermann (University of Würzburg): Transforming the Ethnic "Other": China's Re-education Drive in Xinjiang

Keynote

12.30 p.m. – 1.30 p.m.

Chair: Fabian Schäfer (FAU)

Werner Sollors (Harvard University): 'Everybody gets *fragebogened* sooner or later': The Denazification Questionnaire as Cultural Text

Concluding Discussion