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# Introduction: The Nature of Intercultural Transfer

## 1.1 Transnational history versus national history

The history of the modern era has often been portrayed as centered on the nation and the state. Since the inception of history as an academic discipline at the beginning of the nineteenth century, history has been taught and written as national history. Most of the Western societies quickly claimed a national history that in spite of the modern nature of nation states presumed an ancient history, often stretching back several thousand years, that gave modern nation states a glorious but imagined past. And while scholars such as Benedict Anderson reminded us that nations are “imagined communities,” historical scholarship all too often continues to follow in the footsteps of our nationalist nineteenth-century predecessors. The academic job market still offers positions for American, British or German historians, lectures are still given about the history of a particular country, and textbooks are still written for teaching the history of single nations.

Newer approaches, such as global, world, transatlantic, and transnational history, have begun to challenge a historical account that is centered on the nation state. Daniel T. Rodgers in his path-breaking *Atlantic Crossings* reminded his fellow historians that no society developed in isolation and that even the most isolated of nation states is still affected by movements and influences that originated far beyond its borders. The nation state is no black box and its borders are certainly not impenetrable. Even if one accepts the nation state as a framework for the writing of history, one has to acknowledge, as Ian Tyrell reminds his readers in his book *Transnational Nation*, that nations are made transnational. Nation states did not emerge in a vacuum but were the result of mutual exchanges and contacts across geographic lines that only later, with the introduction of passports, limiting definitions of citizenship, and the fortification of countries’ geographic borders, turned into fortified political borders.

Historians all too often accepted the nation as the natural body of history, ignoring the interconnectedness of human life and the

complexity of building modern societies. Moreover, national history is inherently flawed through tendencies to highlight the specific and particular nature of a given national culture. What makes one nation different from another? What is the defining moment, characteristic or stereotype of a particular national identity? Such questions consumed historical research and forced history often into a straightjacket of national exceptionalism. The notion of German exceptionalism proves how questionable such interpretations can be. The absence of a successful liberal and national revolution in the nineteenth century was seen, at least until 1914, as a sign for German superiority. The very same argument was used after World War II to explain the catastrophe of the Holocaust and World War II by suggesting that the failure of the liberal and national revolution of 1848 was responsible for the authoritarian tendencies that led to Nazism and the Holocaust and thus explained the inferiority of twentieth-century German society. Such national exceptionalisms often hold little explanatory but immense political power.

If one breaks, however, with the tradition of national history, one still needs an organizing principle for the writing and teaching of history. The topical approach with a global setting seems to promise an alternative to traditional ways of doing history. Few historical changes from industrialization and urbanization to social reform movements had been national in character. Daniel T. Rodgers and Thomas Bender remind us that phenomena such as social reform could not be meaningfully explained if one were to limit oneself to the history of one particular nation. Social reformers interested in improving the housing conditions of working-class families or school reform studied the reform experiments in cities and towns across the world. They were helped by the fact that industrialization and urbanization did not affect people around the world at the same pace. This difference in pace provided reformers in places that were still going through urbanization with the unique chance to travel to places that had already experienced the problems of big-city life. The reform movement was from its outset transnational and global in character since the problems that sparked the reform movement, such as overcrowded housing and slums, were a result of global forces. Therefore, it would make sense to follow the journey of a particular idea around the world. If one were to embark on such a global journey, one would have to think about one idea in multiple places at the same time or in a time sequence and conceptualize the transformations of the traveling idea. Such an approach does

not necessarily ignore political boundaries since it investigates the changes to the idea that occurred in transfer.

By following the path of an idea that was transferred from one culture to another, the historian recreates the transfer. Such historical inquiry is very similar to archaeological excavation, since most concepts have become so embedded into national cultures that they appear to us as part of our own heritage. However, most elements of modern culture are the result of contacts and exchanges. What we consider our own today is the result of intercultural exchange and integration of ideas that helped shape modern society.

It is the goal of this book to provide an alternative teaching tool for classes in world history and courses of different levels that include a transnational focus. By embracing the interconnected nature of human history across continents and oceans, and by employing the concept of intercultural transfer, this book seeks to uncover the roots and global distribution of major transformations and their integration into local, regional, and national contexts. The aim of this book is not to suggest that these phenomena were identical across the globe but that they were connected through extensive exchanges of ideas and distinguished by their way of integration into various distinct cultures and societies.

## 1.2 The history of an interconnected world

The increased contacts between diverse cultures and people after the end of the Cold War makes people forget that globalization is in fact an old but often forgotten phenomenon. Even in the nineteenth century—an age that historians specializing in the political histories of discrete nations often mistakenly describe in terms of national isolation and lack of international cooperation—intercultural transfers played an important part in shaping societies around the world. The social, cultural, and even economic fabrics of most societies are the products of contacts with and transfers from any number of alien cultures.

The study of intercultural transfers as a subset of world history scholarship does not consider the adoption of public policy by one government following the example of another. Rather, it investigates the processes of exchange and cultural borrowing that occurred below the level of the nation state. In the pre-television, pre-Internet, pre-mobile phone age, this type of transfer depended largely on the agency of humans, who are known as “agents of

transfer,” and relocation, namely travel and migration. This was particularly true prior to the modern era, but with the advent of such mass communication media as books, newspapers, journals, radio, and film, these new forms of communication provided alternative avenues for “intellectuals products” to move far beyond the borders of their areas of origin.

The concept of intercultural transfer differs from older concepts such as Europeanization, Americanization, and cultural diffusion. While Europeanization and Americanization refer to movements of military, political, cultural, and linguistic expansion in which indigenous cultures were replaced by European and later American cultures, the concept of cultural diffusion refers to a process in which a leading culture exports elements of its culture (such as in the process of Americanization). It is expected that other cultures influenced by this process become more similar to the originating culture. However, these concepts do not grasp the complexity of exchanges between different societies and cultures since they do not account for the modifications and transformations that occur in the process of cultural exchanges. The assumption that Americanization would lead to a world that would become a copy of the United States is simply misleading. Rob Kroes, in his contribution to Thomas Bender’s *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, acknowledged that American icons and products have become symbols of a visual culture that unites people around the globe. Everyone knows Coca-Cola and jeans. But that does not suggest that everyone assigns the same meaning to these symbols since in the process of transferring these icons across the world, (American) authors lost control over the meaning and interpretation of their creations. People care little about authenticity, and meanings can be invented and reinvented again and again. There is no doubt that American culture has become a leading culture for the world, and there is also no doubt that many cultures have accepted American language and cultural icons, but people and cultures accepted and adapted these American imports to serve their own goals. Jeans and Coca-Cola were always more than just commercial products. They were turned into cultural and political symbols that carried messages beyond their commercial value. Therefore, our focus in this book is on the modifications and transformations that occurred in the transfer process. The primary source texts included in this book reflect the original idea and the transformations and mutations of this idea in the process of transfer. These changes, which are caused by the agents of transfer, and the culture into which these

concepts are integrated tell us about the needs of the receiving society and their understanding of the concept and idea transferred.

The notion of intercultural transfer differs from concepts such as Europeanization, Americanization, and cultural diffusion in that it assumes that exchange processes always occur in both directions if one considers a time frame of more than a century. In the process of intercultural transfer, ideas travel back and forth between one or more societies and sometimes undergo so many changes that an idea might no longer be recognized as originating in a specific society by the members of that society. This might lead to the introduction of an idea from a neighboring country since it was considered new and superior when in fact that idea originated in that same country. The neighbor's lawn always appears greener.

The concept of intercultural transfer rests also on the belief that societies are far more open to exchanges beyond and below the nation state than is commonly accepted among historians. The study of intercultural transfer differs from traditional approaches such as the study of international relations and diplomatic history. While the latter focus on the actions of governments and politicians, intercultural transfer deals with the exchange of concepts between individual citizens and groups of people such as associations and societies. Travel was very significant throughout the nineteenth century for intercultural transfer to occur. Since travel was, because of the costs involved, an elite phenomenon up until around 1900, intercultural transfer was, throughout the nineteenth century, the privilege of what the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen called the leisure class. This class of well-to-do people, who were not required to work for their well-being, was characterized by its ostentatious consumption of luxury goods. Members of the leisure class who acted as agents of intercultural transfer found through their engagement in intercultural transfer meaning in their life and a professional career since they could claim experience and knowledge in a particular field. They often had, however, no training in the field in which they became actively involved in intercultural transfer. They were private citizens, not agents of governments or political bodies. They rarely belonged to transnational organizations.

Agents of intercultural transfer were essential for intercultural transfer throughout the course of the nineteenth century. Even after print media made the exchange of ideas across continents and oceans easier, travel and direct encounter often remained essential for the transfer and successful integration of an idea into a specific society.

Agents of intercultural transfer possessed a “selective eye” for ideas and concepts they felt appealing. They belonged in most cases to the receiving culture. The success of intercultural transfer depended on the fact that ideas for transfer were selected by members of the receiving society. If members of the giving society were to try to transfer an idea to a receiving society, the chances of its success would have been very limited. The occurrence of intercultural transfer is always connected to the perceived need for the introduction of a particular idea or concept into a specific society. In the process of transfer, the agent of transfer modified the idea to make it fit the new context, and thereby became the author/creator of the idea transferred.

Language and language skills were essential to the process of intercultural transfer. Agents of intercultural transfer were sometimes well versed, but rarely fluent, in the language of the culture they studied and observed. Sometimes the individuals involved in intercultural transfer did not understand a word of the culture with which they were fascinated. As the case of Edmond Holmes, who studied Montessori’s teaching philosophy without knowing a single word of Italian, will show, a lack of language skills did not stop individuals from exploring these concepts. There can be no doubt that much was lost in translation.

The notion of intercultural transfer further recognizes the conundrum of these exchange processes: One is tempted to assume that intercultural transfer would result in the receiving culture becoming just like the giving culture (the idea underlying the concept of Americanization). Yet, since ideas traveling between cultures always undergo transformation, intercultural transfer contributes at least partially to the differentiation of both cultures. In the process of intercultural transfer, both cultures—the giving and the receiving culture—become more similar and at the same time also more distinct.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the nature of intercultural transfer began to change in five directions. First, the agents of intercultural transfer came increasingly from an academic background. Intellectuals and scholars pushed aside laypersons and gave intercultural transfer an academic status. Second, the spread of print media—from the publication of books to newspaper and magazines—influenced the practice of intercultural transfer. Print media made alien ideas widely available and sparked the curiosity of individuals who were looking for ideas to change a particular element of their culture. However, reading about an idea often led to traveling so that one could see with his own eyes how it actually worked. Travel thus became secondary, but remained



an important element of intercultural transfer. Third, with the spread of ideas around the globe and the recreation of ideas in different settings, the transferred ideas themselves became objects of observation and transfer. American Edward A. Filene found, for instance, his inspiration for the creation of cooperatives not in Europe where it originated but in India. Fourth, with the decreasing cost for travel and the greater availability of print media, agents of intercultural transfer of the twentieth century did not necessarily belong to the leisure class. Travel became affordable for individuals with middle- and later even working-class backgrounds. Fifth, the borders between private and state action, as the chapter on eugenics shows, became fuzzy. People involved in intercultural transfer acted on their own initiative, but in many cases were civil servants, and the ideas transferred by these individuals caused state action in form of laws and enforcement of these laws.

Intercultural transfer could in short be defined as the movement of material objects, people, and ideas between two separate cultures and societies. The object of transfer crosses geographic and political borders and undergoes processes of selection, transport, and integration. The transported goods experience significant modification and transformation. Intercultural transfer contributes to the diversification of the societies involved. The notion of intercultural transfer is based on the assumption of a relative openness of societies and undermines national stories of exceptionalism and uniqueness.

Intercultural transfers contributed to the creation of modern societies and shaped the modern age. The transfer of cooperatives around the world contributed to the diversification of ownership and thus to the (economic) democratization of capitalism. The housing reform was a response to the dreadful living conditions in urban centers. The creation of healthy and affordable housing for working-class families assured social and political stability. The transfer of eugenics points to the dark side of intercultural transfer and modern society that all too easily embraced biology as a means to solve social problems. School reform permitted children to develop creativity, individuality, and intellect as preconditions for participation in a society that grew exponentially in complexity. And while the twentieth century was certainly an era of war and genocide, it still ended with the non-violent overthrow of dictatorships in Eastern Europe.

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