CFP: Writing Democracy: Literature and Democratic History, New Haven (23.10.2022)

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Workshop to be held at Yale University, March 31–April 1, 2023, organized by Dr. Tilman Venzl, Prof. Dr. Jennifer Allen, and Prof. Dr. Kirk Wetters.

Writing Democracy: Literature and Democratic History

In recent months, the idea of a new Historikerstreit (historians’ dispute) has become a major topic of discussion in German academia. The debate was sparked by Hedwig Richter’s book Demokratie. Eine deutsche Affäre (Democracy. A German Affair), published in 2020. This book prominently includes the German Empire in the history of democracy. In light of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the empire in 2021, this claim provoked both engaged support and fierce opposition. Does the depiction of the German Empire as an authoritarian state need to be revised, and what effect would a more positive and democratic understanding have on the German culture of memory? This renewal of the Historikerstreit is only one among many signs of a more general return of questions about the past and future of democracy and its institutions. Since the end of the Cold War, western representative democracies have been understood as “quasi-natural” entities (Jan-Werner Müller) and as the inevitable political bodies of the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama). Recent developments, however, have tempered this sense of certainty. In the US, UK, and Europe, democracy is under threat, now even under military attack. In the international press, democratic theory, and political science, the “challenge to democracy” and the “crisis of democracy” have once again become established themes. As a result, the postwar and post-1989 interpretations of democratization as a comprehensive and self-evident progressive development face a degree of skepticism unseen since the 1930s and 1940s. Consequently, Daniel Ziblatt has called for a “historical turn in democratization studies.”

Our workshop will take this historically-oriented approach to democracy as its starting point. Recent research on democracy has begun to identify the historical entanglement of progressive and regressive movements as well as of intentional and accidental developments. This approach broadens our perspective on the complexity of democratic historical development. Importantly, it also benefits from an interdisciplinary framework. Literary studies in particular can pursue new research trajectories by focusing on the relationship between literature, art, culture, and the history of democracy.

This workshop explores the interrelation of literature and democracy by posing two sets of questions: 1) How can recent developments in the theories and histories of democracy open up new perspectives for literary studies? Does this context shed new light on authors, texts, or epochs? 2) What can literature teach us about democratic history? To what extent does
literature not only observe democracy but also influence democratization? The bi-directional relationship of democracy and literature has varied over time and invites us to ask questions about its manifestations: What is the interplay of literature with democratic theories and discourses? What role does literature play in life in a democracy? To what extent is literature embedded in the democratic public sphere and the media landscape? In what way does literature become a means of expression—even a discursive weapon—for oppressed or disenfranchised groups? Have specific genres, representational forms, or topoi emerged in the service of democratization? The attempt to address such issues generates additional conceptual and methodological questions: What conceptions of democracy promise the greatest insight into the relationship of democracy and literature? Conversely, what definitions of literature prove most useful in grasping the relationship of democracy and literature? What role can we as scholars and academics play to strengthen the resilience of democracy in the present and the future? As we face the threats of populism, anti-democratic sentiment, even wars against democratic states and societies, studying the history and the literature of democracy offers a path forward.

Our workshop takes Germany as its primary case study. But scholarship on Germany also raises intrinsically comparative inquiries. Our workshop welcomes contributions from scholars in other geographies whose work offers such European and global comparisons.

We invite both established and younger colleagues from Germany, the United States, and beyond to participate in the workshop. Each participant will deliver a paper of roughly 30 minutes in length. Presentations and discussions will be held in English, though participants may also offer commentary in German, if they prefer. Travel expenses will be covered, as well as meals and accommodation during the period of the conference. We plan this conference to be an in-person event. Please send a brief CV and a paper proposal of roughly 400 words by October 23, 2022, to Tilman Venzl (tilman.venzl@germanistik.uni-muenchen.de).