

[Gaul on Bungert, 'Festkultur und Gedächtnis: Die Konstruktion einer deutschamerikanischen Ethnizität 1848-1914'](#)

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Heike Bungert. *Festkultur und Gedächtnis: Die Konstruktion einer deutschamerikanischen Ethnizität 1848-1914*. Paderborn: Schöningh Paderborn, 2016. 652 pp. \$62.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-78185-7.

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Commissioned by Alison C. Efford

Between 1848 and 1914, festivals were crucial to the construction of a German American identity and ethnicity, Heike Bungert argues. With the revised edition of her *Habilitationsschrift* from 2004, Bungert has finally released the definite standard reference on the festive culture of German American singing societies, veterans and workers associations, Turnvereine (gymnastics societies), and shooting societies.

In her introduction, Bungert convincingly outlines the idea that the ethnic identity of German Americans depended on cultural memory. Cultural memory, in turn, is built on communication, language, images, and ritual repetition. Consequently, festivals, being concrete manifestations of these four elements, form the archetype of cultural memory. With this argument, Bungert mostly follows established findings of migration and ethnicity studies without redefining them.[1] This observation is not meant to be a point of criticism. On the contrary, the book's theoretical framework and the historical evidence in the following chapters form a complementary relationship.

In her chronologically arranged account, Bungert reveals phenomena that could be detected at almost every German American festival: invocations of symbols, rituals, concrete events and myths, a response from the Anglo-American public, and political and cultural exchanges with Germany. German American *Sängerfeste*, for example, initiated public singing and singing contests that also became embedded in Anglo-American festival culture. Curiously enough, these events have not yet aroused broader attention by other studies on cultural transfers between the United States and Germany.[2] This neglect makes one even more grateful for Bungert's contribution.

For the basis of her research, Bungert evaluated the archives of numerous German American organizations and analyzed more than seventy German American and Anglo-American newspapers, mostly from Milwaukee and New York City. Almost every chapter is accompanied by valuable data on the German population over the years or information on the professional composition of the festivals' committees and participants. In some passages, however, descriptions of the festivals' peculiarities (costs, number of attendees, decoration of floats) are a bit too fine-grained. Most readers would probably prefer more analysis and less description.

In view of the amount of archival material Bungert consulted, her focus on Milwaukee and New York, two cities with prominent German populations, is perfectly understandable. On the other hand, this

emphasis might distort the reader's understanding of German American life. Besides a few excursions to San Francisco and San Antonio, Bungert leaves out other US cities that also witnessed a brisk German American festivity culture. It would have been rewarding to read more about the way German immigrants in southern cities like New Orleans or Charleston had to arrange their festivals given the distinctive dynamics of race and slavery and the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction, not least because current scholarship increasingly emphasizes the importance of friction and the limits of transnational phenomena.[3] As many historians observe, interactions across borders were not always successful or harmonious.[4]

Despite this limitation, *Festkultur und Gedächtnis* covers an impressive number of festivals that German Americans initiated or joined in the midwestern and northeastern United States for over sixty years. Festivities like Friedrich Schiller's birthday, *Karneval*, *Sängerfeste*, *Turnfeste*, or *Deutsche Tage* (German days) shaped the immigrants' ethnic identity. Over the decades, this identity shifted from one being largely reliant on references to Germany toward a distinct German American one.

Bungert depicts German-speaking singers, *Schützen* (marksmen), and Turners as members of collectives that were careful not to appear as isolated groups. As the reader learns from the selected speeches, press coverage, and the participation of Anglo-American officials and visitors, the immigrants interacted with the receiving society and vice versa. Since they also participated in Anglo-American festivities, like celebrations of the 4th of July or George Washington's birthday, Anglo-Americans increasingly appreciated German American culture.

Far from being secluded events in smoky taverns or enclosed beer gardens, German American festivals were public events that registered political change and cultural developments on both sides of the Atlantic. In chapter 3, Bungert plausibly describes how the Revolutions of 1848, the participation of Germans in the American Civil War, and the foundation of the German Empire in 1871 represented watersheds in the way German Americans celebrated and perceived themselves. Other significant phenomena that shaped German American ethnicity and festival culture were, according to Bungert, the Anglo-American nativist and temperance movements, the rise and decline of German immigration in the 1880s and 1890s, and the transatlantic expansion of nationalism at the turn of the century.

To provide a multi-perspectival analysis, Bungert conducted research in Europe as well as in North America. German immigrants were eager to receive recognition for their efforts and contributions in the United States. Yet they maintained traditions and interacted with their ancestral homeland for a remarkably long time. In chapter 5, Bungert substantiates this thesis with further material from German archives. Allusions to the German homeland ran through the festivals like a common thread. From the 1860s onward, these ties were strengthened by participation of German Americans in festivities in Germany and through the active *Kulturpolitik* of the German Empire's foreign office and diplomats.

Bungert concludes that festivals formed important imagined spaces between Germany and the United States. Immigrants from Germany created *Deutschamerika* as a transnational social space and became cultural mediators between their receiving and home countries. Furthermore, the flexibility of German American festivals and their organizers meant that many German immigrants did not

completely assimilate. This makes the case of nineteenth-century German Americans an exception from general models of assimilation.

Taken as a whole, Bungert's comprehensive, though in places somewhat too fine-grained, study represents the most elaborate book on the topic that has been published so far. In a well-written and well-documented account of over 530 pages, *Festkultur und Gedächtnis* should interest all scholars of the cultural and transnational impacts of immigration.

Notes

[1]. See Rubén Rumbaut's definition, according to which "immigration engenders ethnicity" and is a "transformative force" that produces "social, cultural, economic and political changes in both sending and receiving societies." Rubén Rumbaut, "On the Past and Future of American Immigration and Ethnic History: A Sociologist's Reflections on a Silver Jubilee," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 4 (2006): 161-162.

[2]. Current examples for the neglect of German American festivities include the volumes by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer and Cora Lee Kluge. They mainly deal with literary and linguistic instances of cultural transfers between the United States and Germany. See Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, *Transatlantic Crossings and Transformations: German-American Cultural Transfer from the 18th to the End of the 19th Century* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2015); and Cora Lee Kluge, *Paths Crossing: Essays in German-American Studies* (Oxford: Lang, 2011).

[3]. For recent works on German immigrants who settled in the southern United States, see Jens Bodamer, "Von Hannover in die Südstaaten: Deutsche Auswanderer in Wilmington, North Carolina, 1840-1914," *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* 81 (2009): 319-344, esp. 337-341; Andrea Mehrländer, "With More Freedom and Independence than the Yankees: The Germans of Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans during the American Civil War," in *Civil War Citizens: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in America's Bloodiest Conflict*, ed. Susanna J. Ural (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 57-97; and Jeffrey Strickland, "How the Germans Became White Southerners: German Immigrants and African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, 1860-1880," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no. 1 (2008): 52-69, esp. 56-60.

[4]. Sebastian Conrad, *Globalgeschichte: Eine Einführung* (Munich: Beck, 2013), 100-101; Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung: Dimensionen, Prozesse, Epochen* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 23-24; and Margit Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 43-49.

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