

The International Research Training Group “Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces”: Research Agenda and Research Objectives

The IRTG “Diversity” analyzes ‘diversity’ in an interdisciplinary research program in which German and Canadian senior and younger scholars from the fields of history, political science, sociology, geography, literature, linguistics, and media/communication studies will expand and further institutionalize well-established collaboration between research centers in the fields of Canadian/Quebec Studies and German, French and European Studies. The Centers for Canadian Studies in Trier and Saarbrücken have collaborated closely since their foundation. They count among the leading Canadian Studies Centers in German-speaking countries and have actively shaped the development of the field in close cooperation with Canadian partner universities, especially with the Université de Montréal and the University of Manitoba. The topic of multiculturalism, transculturalism and diversity emerged early on as a research focus for both institutions. With the establishment of the research program “Diversity and Civility” at the Center for German and European Studies at the Université de Montréal, UdeM became a natural partner in the common endeavor to bring together research on diversity focusing on Europe and on Canada/Québec. Since 2007 leading scholars from the three universities have been working on a common research program aiming at (1) historicizing the debate about multiculturalism and diversity, (2) capturing the historical entanglements between Europe and North America as multi-cultured societies as well as (3) comparatively exploring the specific paths taken by Canada/Québec¹ and Germany/France/Europe. In order to prepare a common research proposal, several meetings took place in Montréal and Trier. Acknowledging the intensified cooperation between the three universities and as an instrument facilitating student and faculty exchange, an umbrella agreement between the University of Trier, Saarland University and the Université de Montréal was signed in May 2011.

The IRTG offers a unique research program promising a reorientation of research in the field of ‘diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ through an interdisciplinary approach that combines subjects and institutions in a novel way. In contrast to the

1 The usage of Canada/Québec follows the established distinction in Canadian and Quebec Studies between Québec and the Rest of Canada (ROC). “Canada/Québec” serves as a marker pointing to the still problematic recognition of distinct societies within Canada.

majority of studies in the field of diversity and cultural pluralism, the IRTG's research program does not focus on migration and cultural transfer processes as such, but takes cultural pluralism and a multi-cultured social reality characterizing North America and Europe as the starting point of its scholarly endeavor. Hence, going beyond the current focus of transnational studies on "links and flows [...] people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in between polities and societies" (Iriye/Saunier 2009) or on movements and connections transcending politically bounded territories (Schiller et al. 1992; Conrad/Osterhammel 2004; Patel 2004, 2009; Brunnbauer 2009; Kocka/Haupt 2009; Vertovec 2009), the IRTG offers an innovative framework of analysis to explore geographic and symbolic spaces of diversity that are characterized by the outcome of these transnational flows and links. Like transnational studies we recognize the need to overcome methodological nationalism and to take into account the existence of transnational spaces (Beck 2005, 2008; Giddens 1984). However, by arguing that there is a plurality of competing spatial frameworks at any given time and by recognizing the constructed nature of space as well as the simultaneity and fluidity of various spatial frameworks, we intend to be as inclusive as possible, and will also explore the mediation of difference in forms of politically defined territories on the local, the national, and the regional level.

Our research program offers an original approach to the study of multi-ethnic environments by going beyond the dominant focus on race, ethnicity, and identity. Instead we adopt a constructivist position and propose a pioneering analytical framework that avoids a normative or essentializing perspective by analyzing diversity as a continuous process of mediation and translation. The research program is based on the constructivist assumption that discourses and representations of diversity and cultural pluralism are a central driving force for changing patterns of interpretations and thus for the inherently processual character of politics, practices, and narratives of diversity. The constructivist approach together with the research program's process-orientation and its perspective of 'longue durée' helps to capture the contested and open-ended meaning of diversity and will contribute to historicizing key concepts of the current debate in the field of transnational and area studies on the bases of often neglected francophone (Québec-France) research perspectives and empirical realities of diversity, multiculturalism and processes of transculturation.

In order to avoid one of the problems of transnational studies, namely "the over-reliance on a 'grand narrative' of domination and resistance" (Bayly et al. 2006: 7), our actor-based approach in conjunction with the focus on specific geographic and symbolic spaces offers an innovative research heuristic for the analysis of co-existing and rival claims about the cultural meaning, construction, and appropriation of space by the multiplicity of actors living in these spaces and shaping them by their modes of

interaction. The IRTG thereby explicitly includes the exploration of empowerment mechanisms and subjectivation processes of social actors who are usually depicted and analyzed as subjugated objects in a social setting characterized by a dominant ethnic, cultural, and class majority. Moreover, the focus of the IRTG’s research program on the potentially conflict-ridden dynamic processes shaping localities of diversity and/or transcultural spaces opens up innovative research perspectives on the power dimension of interaction processes in multi-cultured settings.

The IRTG’s focus on mediation and translation processes introduces new methodological perspectives for cross-cultural research and area studies. Starting from the established understanding of translation as a transnational cultural practice, the IRTG enriches the translation concept with insights from media studies, exploring different media as agents in the translation and mediation processes with which diversity is formally and esthetically transposed into multi-layered public spheres, thereby producing and reproducing, altering, deconstructing or radicalizing the semantic repertoire and (historical) knowledge of a given community. In this sense we also introduce a new approach to the history of memory and the analysis of memory politics by applying the translation approach to phenomena of inter-temporality and to mediation and translation between different layers of historical experience.

The IRTG Diversity’s research program offers an analytic framework in the field of comparative area studies for which international cooperation is a scholarly and academic necessity. The cooperation and scholarly exchange between Canadian experts in German and European Studies and German experts in Canadian/Quebec and French Studies have established an unprecedented international research community for exploring shared experiences of diversity in Europe and North America as well as distinct developments in both world regions. Cooperation with a leading Canadian research university on the topic of diversity is self-evident. Not only was Canada, in 1971, the first country to introduce an official policy of multiculturalism, but during the last 10 years theoretical concepts and ideas that were developed against the background of the Canadian experience have come to serve as a reference point in the debate on diversity in the European context, too. Nevertheless, Canada/Québec and Germany/France/Europe have followed different paths, which need to be explored cooperatively and in comparative perspective. Whereas in Canada we see the emergence of critical multiculturalism, criticizing state-managed multiculturalism as “reifying and exoticizing as well as domesticating cultural difference” (Lammert/Sarkowsky 2010), in the European context, e. g. in Germany and France (as in Québec), the issue of cultural diversity has come to focus on questions of religion, mandatory language instruction, or debates about *Leitkultur* vs ‘cultural fragmentation.’ We are convinced that the gaze of outside observers will allow us to uncover hidden histories that discursively frame the different paths that Canada/Québec and Germany/France/Europe have taken. Cooperation between Canadian

experts in German and European Studies and German experts in Canadian/Quebec and French Studies will thus result in mutually enlightening effects.

The international structure of our research program has opened and continues to generate a new dimension of the often quoted principle of “forschen *mit* statt forschen *über*” by introducing an innovative comparative methodology based on a distinct epistemological principle that we call “herméneutique croisée”. Almost every member of the group of experts who carry the research program of the proposed IRTG has personal experiences with everyday life in both Canada *and* Germany. The group of Principle Investigators consists of scholars from Germany and Canada who are either experts for Canadian and Quebec Studies or experts for German and French/European Studies. Drawing on different disciplinary perspectives, both groups’ academic interest in diversity also builds on their daily experiences in their immediate life-worlds in the multilingual metropolis of Montréal and the “Saar-Lor-Lux” borderland, a European region that is historically and politically distinct in dealing with questions of language minorities, problems of de- and re-territorialization, cross-border family networks, etc. (Dörrenbächer 2006; Dörrenbächer/Brücher 2000). Doctoral students are thus able to profit from the international context of the IRTG in a double sense: first, they are offered the opportunity to work together with internationally renowned experts in their field who bring in comparative research perspectives, offering an in-built double reflexivity to guide the empirical research process. Second, they are able to use the every-day life experience and the native as well as the scholarly knowledge of the Principal Investigators as a sounding board for probing the working assumptions and hypotheses underpinning their individual dissertation projects (see supervision strategy).

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