

MEHRING, FRANK, *The Democratic Gap: Transcultural Confrontations of German Immigrants and the Promise of American Democracy* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 403 pp. European Views of the United States 5.

Frank Mehring's award-winning study is a much-welcomed addition to several areas of American Studies: It provides an original contribution to the cultural history of American democracy (and its discontents), to the vast scholarship on German-American immigrants, and to the growing research on cultural exchanges between African America and Germany. Mehring coins the term "the democratic gap" to capture the "discrepancy between democratic ideals and reality" (2) which has long been observed, articulated, and discussed by political commentators, scholars, and artists on both sides of the Atlantic. *The Democratic Gap* examines how six (more or less) paradigmatic German immigrants have tried to reconcile their notion of American democracy with their actual experiences in the United States—from the *Vormärz* era to the mid-twentieth century.

Rather than focusing on issues of cultural preservation, Mehring draws attention to the ways in which these immigrants fashioned themselves as model American citizens. He analyzes their negotiations of the (unfulfilled) promises and (unrealized) fantasies of American democracy and situates them within "force fields of [transcultural] confrontation," namely "abolitionism, female emancipation, debates over cultural pluralism, patriotism in times of war, [...] the evolution of a Holocaust consciousness" and the "American experience of Afro-Germans" (8). Taken together these six case studies recast the history of German immigrants, especially intellectuals, as a "history of confrontations rather than a continuous success story of integration and cultural contributions" (23).

The analyses are attuned to the political, performative, and aesthetic dimensions of German intellectual emigres' claim to Americanness and reveal what Mehring calls their "patriotic dissent." Each analysis moves from an exploration of the immigrant's German background and image of America to an examination of the "moments of friction and various response patterns," and, finally, to a juxtaposition of the German-American intellectual's political stance with that of an African American artist and/or activist (10). These

confrontations result in complex negotiations of national identities, dissent, and democracy. Mehring discovers and develops interesting and sometimes even surprising connections between the respective two intellectuals. These connections, however, are established on different levels: for instance, some thinkers/activists actually collaborated, some influenced each other, more or less directly, and some never met in person but are contextualized within the same force field. The rationale behind the specific confrontations selected for each field is not always equally convincing, but they successfully show German-American investments, cultural and political, in an idealized American democracy and in activism against its most obvious failures (i.e. enslavement, racism, and discrimination).

In the context of abolitionism, Mehring singles out Charles Follen (1796-1840) as the prototype of an intellectual immigrant from the German *Vormärz* era who became a controversial American reformer and abolitionist spokesperson. Follen fashioned himself as a model American and performed a patriotism less shaped by "the resistance of a German patriot hero against tyranny," but more by "the insistence of the Founding Fathers on independence, freedom, and equality" (84). David Walker, whose famous *Appeal* influenced his work, serves here as a "foil to bring Follen's patriotism into focus" (86). This patriotism then emerges as largely devoid of religious rhetoric, invested in citizenship, and based on the foundational documents of the US. Similarly, Ottilie Assing (1819-1884) "placed Americanness at the center of [her] democratic dissent" (148). She is positioned in the force field of women's emancipation and represents the reform agenda of a new generation of German immigrants. Assing's self-fashioning as a "cosmopolitan" (103), her influence on Frederick Douglass, and her commitment to the women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic are compared with Sojourner Truth and her call for "female emancipation, albeit from a racial perspective and a history of slavery" (104). In contrast to Assing, Truth's rhetoric relied on "humor, satire, and sarcasm" as well as on dialect to evoke a "sense of unpremeditated urgency, authenticity, and Americanness" (138). Yet, Mehring claims, they not only crossed the color line but also shared a common political goal.

From nineteenth-century social movements and reform agendas, *The Democratic*

*Gap* takes its readers to the transatlantic art scenes of the early twentieth century. Winold Reiss (1886-1953) addressed the democratic gap through his art rather than through political activism. Guided by his interests in travel accounts and folk culture, the painter became famous for his portraits of African Americans and Native Americans that arguably transcend stereotypes. His artistic work bespeaks the discrepancy between his experiences in the United States (esp. racial inequality) and his expectations of American democracy. They create a vision of Reiss' democratic ideal as well as a notion of "cultural pluralism" (180). Especially his collaboration with Alain Locke, which made him an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance, "reveals the international dimension of their strategy to use art and culture for unlearning xenophobic forms of racism" (195). The composer Kurt Weill (1900-1950) similarly used musical theater to transgress racial boundaries—most prominently in his collaboration with Langston Hughes and through incorporating elements from African American musical traditions into his oeuvre. His work is situated within the force field of *Amerikanisierung/Americanization* which "challenged traditional notions of national identity" (198). Weill had modelled himself into an American even before he immigrated and thus claimed a kind of "cultural citizenship not restricted to territorial belonging" (224). His work reflects a staunch patriotism that allows for a critical stance towards American ideals without compromising its decidedly democratic impulse.

With Hans J. Massaquoi (1926-2013) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) Mehring's study, finally, turns to immigrants who left Germany during or after World War II. Massaquoi later chronicled his experiences of "growing up black in Nazi Germany" in his 1999 autobiography *Destined to Witness* and reflected on his coming to the United States in *Hänschen klein, ging allein ... Mein Weg in die Neue Welt* (2004). His life and work draw attention to democratic gaps on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly with regard to racism and white supremacist thought. Massaquoi turned to journalism not only to "write against racial discrimination" and to "gain recognition

[and] self-respect" but also to meet some of his childhood heroes, e.g. Joe Louis (279). The postwar years especially showed the hypocrisy of a United States set on bringing democracy to post-fascist Europe while tolerating and promoting segregation, racism, and discrimination 'at home.' Juxtaposed with Malcolm X, whom he interviewed for *EBONY* in 1964, it becomes clear that Massaquoi does not ascribe to a radical agenda of black liberation; rather "his patriotic dissent followed similar patterns like that of white German intellectual immigrants preceding him" (299). The postwar years also generated a new force field in the form of "Holocaust consciousness," which is explored through Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Arendt's writings are examined with a keen eye to their inherent linkage of literature and politics. She is cast "as a poet who expressed herself not so much via poetry but the art of essay writing and public dissent" (316) and, like the other protagonists of this book, she "positioned herself as a model American par excellence" (331). The analysis covers Arendt's ambivalent perspective on the Civil Rights movement and compares her work to that of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison. This comparison, Mehring holds, indicates "that the literary work, the use of language, and the process of fashioning oneself into an American dissenter are linked by transatlantic traumas" (352) and evidences the powerful workings of literature against and across democratic gaps.

Overall, the vast scholarly resources, wide-ranging primary material, and broad knowledge of cultural contexts and transatlantic history Mehring condenses into each chapter (and the extensive footnotes) could have easily been turned into a multi-volume work. *The Democratic Gap*, in this sense, actually presents several books in one—it covers the biographies and some major works of its six protagonists in depth, encompasses six force fields of transcultural confrontations, and rewrites the history of German-American immigration to the United States. This may also be regarded its main flaw but it is most definitely its major strength.

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