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- 1 Frank Mehring, *The Democratic Gap: Transcultural Confrontations of German Immigrants and the Promise of American Democracy*.
- 2 Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2014. 419pp. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6170-9.
- 3 Hans Krabbendam
- 4 Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg

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This award-winning book by Frank Mehring, professor at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, addresses central questions in the field of American Studies: How does one explain the discrepancy between the promise of American democracy and the discouraging historical record of inequality? And how can immigrants maintain their optimism after their first confrontation with the imperfections of America – the racial prejudice, exploitation, violation of human rights, distortion of reality by the media, and imperial self-righteousness?

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The author seeks an answer among the critical interventions and strategies of German immigrant intellectuals responding to the issue of race after encountering African American writers between 1830 and 1960. Mehring's work covers six themes of abolitionism, woman's emancipation, cultural pluralism, patriotic performance culture, the movement for civil rights, and Holocaust consciousness. The strategic selection of these critical themes secures a fresh look on immigrant contribution superior to the regular and often triumphalist immigration narratives that suggest a coherent body of accomplishments in America, achieved harmoniously.

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The great variety of cultural expressions and a complex web of relationships that Mehring incorporates in his argument make this book an ambitious and exciting project. It centers on the moment of naturalization and identification with America and describes how the educated German immigrants entered what they anticipated would be an environment much more liberal and democratic than their situation in Germany, only to be disappointed in most cases. This is an intellectual history with immigrant protagonists quickly identifying with America and rejecting German-American parochialism. To them the American promise was more important than the German legacy. The most innovative part of the book explores how their attitude in favor of America prepared them for the most exciting part of their experience: the transcultural confrontation between German Americans and African Americans. The Germans aspired to become model citizens, but their patriotism was tested when they came face to face with racial animosity in American society. Their determined patriotism was a testimony to their faith in American ideals even when their assessments of their experiences were loaded with dissenting views on America.

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In an interesting swing away from an earlier historiographical emphasis on ethnic German cultural preservation, Mehring zooms in on German immigrants' eagerness to reform America. The immigrants behaved more American than many native born as their presumption that America would live up to its democratic ideals energized them. This reformist approach to their new country had the pleasant consequence of social acceptance.

Their first target for reform was slavery. Charles Follen outdid his new countrymen by claiming African Americans should have equal rights and he used American arguments to support his radical view. In defending women's rights, the German immigrants continued a long revolutionary tradition from Germany. Otilie Assing (1819-1884) for example, arrived as one of many female reformers. She was a cosmopolitan figure and ready to fight multiple battles for women. In certain campaigns, being a woman made her tasks harder, but on occasion her femininity gave her an advantage. An obvious example is that she was never at risk to be drafted into the army, even after her naturalization in 1860 - the decade of Civil War. Her position as the mistress of Frederick Douglass led to involvement in a comprehensive reform agenda.

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In the early twentieth century the German painter and designer Winold Reiss (1886-1953) co-produced strong images of the "New Negro" movement working in cooperation with the African American intellectual, Alain Locke. Reiss was better able to create a vibrant portraiture style in America than he had been at home. The prejudice and contempt he had experienced as a German immigrant just prior to World War I opened his eyes and allowed him to transcend the stereotypes commonly associated with Native Americans and African Americans and they became his subjects in the canon of American painting. On the other side of the ocean, the acceptance of African American artists in Europe during and after World War II, helped them to come to the forefront of the US cultural arena. Reiss and Locke transcended America's polarized racial division by emphasizing the necessity to include all races and nations in representations of human rights. Through the medium of African American art, their cooperative artistic output successfully broadcast a democratic message internationally.

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A similar artistic collaboration grew out of Kurt Weill's democratic expressions for the theater. As a composer Weill opened the musical stage to transnational exchanges of technology and art. By elevating the blues/jazz idiom Weill was not so much a political as an artistic reformer. In this interchange, Weill became renowned and revered, while African Americans also benefited from the inclusion of their musical treasury in his successful shows.

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The story comes full circle when considering the offspring of African American soldiers and Germans, born during and after World War II. They challenged the very idea of German identity as a white identity. Their situation bound together the German and American cultures in a most powerful way. One of the most famous of these Afro-Germans was Hans Massaquoi, an immigrant to the US, who became an editor of *Ebony* magazine. In his work at the magazine he effectively used the explicit nature of Nazi racism to explain and confront the hidden racism of US society.

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Using Hannah Arendt's example, the final chapter describes how consciousness of the Holocaust shaped the identity of Jewish refugees in the United States. Arendt's conceptualization and interpretation of the Holocaust developed alongside her pursuit of American citizenship. Her sensitivity to political oppression and her growing understanding of the moral task of writers and poets to dissent when freedom was violated, forged a link with African American authors who were already writing to probe the hidden structures of racial oppression in America.

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The book is persuasively written and reminds us that democratic aspirations in America have always been an ideal in need of practical implementation. Immigrants were especially receptive to the strength of the imagination; hence the author has been able to utilize artistic examples to connect the six case studies. There is an intriguing paradox in the author's argument; while the book definitively transcends the classic contributory history that seeks to boost ethnic pride, it replaces the old form by a new and dynamic form of transatlantic exchange and in the end still touts the contribution of the immigrants. What is put forward as a series of biographical analyses outlining the alliances between Germans and African Americans soon develops into nothing less than a transatlantic cultural history of modernism. The footnotes are another book in themselves, full of historiographical foundations, linguistic explorations, biographical information, and exposés on the history of travel writing, art, film, and drama. The combination of so many elements in the notes results in a

captivating multi-media history of the German intellectual experience in America.

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For the present journal it is relevant to ask whether this story tells only of the typical German experience, or if it is also valid for other European immigrant groups in America. I became convinced that the positive fascination with African Americans evidenced in the interactions described, is a German preoccupation and resulted from an emotional disappointment that was stronger and deeper than what existed among other European immigrants. Germans left their homeland after intense debates about German nationalism had been raging in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century and their aborted reform efforts spurred them to seek a new outlet for change in America. Since most Germans found themselves in Northern cities, the sympathy for the oppressed African Americans in those cities was plausible. The Germans Mehring write about happen to be a class of well-educated, articulate intellectuals who had the ability to rise quickly to intellectual prominence. For them it was an emotional moment. Surely other immigrants from other classes and circumstances evinced more pragmatism when faced with the same situation. It is unlikely that the laboring class, those who found jobs in factories and mills, had the same experience of exaltation at acquiring citizenship or were as reflective about their own civic identity. It is unlikely as well, that they readily accepted African Americans as equals since the entire force of society weighed against this. Many German immigrants became American patriots without embracing the egalitarian gospel. A comparative study of similar European groups would yield fascinating results.

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The Democratic Gap is an invitation to explore a broad range of interactions, relationships, ideals and debates, occurring primarily in circles of German intellectuals, but which other immigrant communities may have felt attachment to as well. It is a reassuring book for those in Europe working in American Studies, because it offers inspiring examples of "Americophiles" who nevertheless examined the US critically. Many readers will find this assessment encouraging since patriotic dissent is rarely seen by non-Americans as a quality to be found in the US.

This history gives the reader a new way to think about the issue.

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