

25 Years of PGF: Past, Present, and Future

Comments by Sabine Sielke and Karsten Fitz

Welcome Address

Sabine Sielke

The 2014 conference of the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS) at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz was also an occasion to celebrate the PGF at 25. Initiated in 1988 by four (then) young scholars working on, or just having completed, their PhD theses at the John F. Kennedy Institute—Hannah Möckel, Ulfried Reichardt, Hans-Joachim Rieke, and Sabine Sielke—, the PGF evolved as a forum for both the debate of current theory and collaborations between young scholars at different German universities in a time before the internet. As such, the PGF not only inspired colleagues from other European associations of American studies to organize themselves in similar ways. The PGF also changed the age structure of the constituency of our association considerably and transformed the ways in which scholars and teachers of American studies in Germany interact and cooperate. As a consequence, academic hierarchies within our field became somewhat porous: In the late 1980s publishing one's work (or even a book review) in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* required a PhD degree. Meanwhile young scholars drive and dominate the agenda of our annual conferences and publish in various media formats, including their own journal *COPAS: Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, founded in 1999.

In part thanks to the support by our teacher Heinz Ickstadt, among others, the first workshop of the PGF took place during the 1989 annual GAAS conference in Laufen on "Modernism and Modernization: Departure into the American Century (1900-1920)." In the fall of 1989 the PGF convened at the Freie Universität Berlin. In 1994, the PGF guest-edited a volume of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, entitled *Theory in Practice: Recent Approaches to American Studies in Germany*. This was the very moment when the founders and first generation 'activists' of

the Postgraduate Forum felt somewhat anxious about the future of their initiative. Would it prove sustainable once we pulled out of the enterprise and handed matters over to succeeding PhD students? It soon became evident that these fears were unfounded. In fact, looking back after twenty-five years, the achievements and professionalism of our younger colleagues stand out and we bow with much respect. This volume of *COPAS* is ample proof that the Postgraduate Forum is a vibrant network of young scholars engaged in research at the forefront of our field. Long live the PGF!

With best wishes for the future,

Prof. Dr. Sabine Sielke

Director, North American Studies Program and German-Canadian Centre, University of Bonn, and
founding member of the Postgraduate Forum

Roundtable Comment

Karsten Fitz

When, in 1999, together with my colleagues Juliane Bierschenk and Zeno Ackermann, I hosted the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS) at the University of Regensburg, it was all but obvious to us that the PGF would have the bright future it now seems to have had—looking back from the vantage point of twenty-five years of its existence. As the senior among the three local organizers, I had attended my first PGF at the University of Tübingen, hosted by Oliver Scheiding (then Assistant Professor of American Studies), in the mid-1990s, when the annual rhythm of PGF conferences we have come to take for granted today had been temporarily interrupted. Except for a tiny group of three or four young scholars, no one among the almost thirty attendees of the Regensburg-PGF had been to Tübingen. And all we had in terms of a history was but a faint semi-knowledge of some nebulous founding myth of the PGF, a myth American Studies scholars are much in need of at all times, that traced the beginning of the Forum back in time to the late 1980s and back in place to the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität Berlin. Thanks to the cultural memory of the German Association for American Studies, this history has been recuperated and we can now trace the genealogy back to the beginnings.

And what an impressive history it has been! This became abundantly clear to me when participating as the ‘representative’ PGF veteran in the panel discussion “The PGF at 25: Challenges and Opportunities for Young Scholars of American Studies in Germany” at last year’s PGF Conference at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Facing an audience of more than sixty young American Studies scholars who now, fifteen years after I had co-hosted the PGF in Regensburg, *were* the Postgraduate Forum, made me realize (in a very condensed and intensive moment) the ground that has been covered in only a decade and a half: (1) The amazing degree of professionalization which the PGF has achieved—as can be seen in the quality of conference programs, the high number of young scholars attending, and the respectable amount of funds being raised for the event; (2) the enormous amount of visibility within our association, as demonstrated by the impressively high

number of postgraduates among the workshop organizers at the annual GAAS conferences, the institutionalization of the PGF workshop as well as the PGF lunch at the annual meetings, the PGF report of activities at the annual GAAS members' meeting, and the presence of several GAAS presidents (including their opening addresses) at various PGF conferences; (3) the substantial level of representation in that, for several years now, there has been a so-called PGF ticket on the GAAS board, carrying the most important postgraduate issues into the heart of our association; (4) and last but not least, something combining all of these aspects: the online journal *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies (COPAS)*.

When *COPAS* was launched in 2000 as a result of the PGF conference in Regensburg in order to provide a publishing platform for young American Studies scholars in Germany, it was, similarly to the PGF itself, by no means a fast-selling item by and of itself. Rather, it needed the continuous effort of succeeding generations of postgraduate scholars and their innovative ideas to get where it is today. All these things could only be achieved through a collective effort in which one generation of young American Studies scholars could pick up and expand on what the previous generation had established. And 25 years of such cross-generational processes is certainly the time to celebrate these multifaceted achievements.

However, before getting lost in nostalgia and complacency, it is also time for a reality check. No doubt, as it stands today, many things are not great in academia! And these problems and shortcomings impact on the careers of postgraduates in German American Studies as well: the closing or gradual fading out of American Studies programs in places where new or different priorities are being established "from above," the weakening of American Studies programs due to the aggregation with other "Anglo"-disciplines (e.g., under the label Anglophone Studies) or with neighboring disciplines (e.g., under the denomination "American Studies/Cultural and Media Studies," as is the case with my own professorship in Passau), understaffed and underfinanced (but often overburdened) American Studies programs, short-term contracts issued for postgraduates for twelve months or less, etc. These issues need to be looked after, improved, and, if necessary, fought

against through the GAAS as *the* national academic non-profit organization in the field of American Studies in Germany.

As the panel discussion in Mainz has shown, despite the many achievements, there certainly remains much work to do beyond securing the future of our discipline, as addressed above. Zooming back to the PGF conference in Regensburg in 1999, it is comforting to know that a good third of the attendees from back then today are professors in the field of American Studies. Another third are in other teaching positions on the university and school levels or have become engaged in academic management. But there are also those who have left academia altogether, working as the director of a cultural institution, Vice President of Sustainability Management for one of the world's largest investor-owned electric utility service providers, Product Manager for a multinational software corporation that produces enterprise software, or as freelance ad writer, to name but a few options. Reaching out to this non-academic professional world and building networks outside the academic sphere should be on our to-do-list for the future, if we want our postgraduates in American Studies to succeed professionally.

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