Fine-Tuning Utopia: American Social Sciences, European Émigrés, and U.S. Policy towards Germany, 1942–1945

This essay examines the discussions, suggestions, and policy guidelines of the Council for Intercultural Relations after World War II. Founded and led by Margaret Mead, this council – active since 1942 following the United States’ entry into the war – deliberated recommendations regarding proposed postwar political developments. In addition to American social scientists, German-speaking refugees influenced the discourse on the future of Germany after Hitler. In corollary fashion, this essay addresses what effects flight and banishment had on advancements in scientific knowledge as well as the political convictions of those refugees.

Following the rise of European totalitarian movements in the twentieth century, several scholarly covenants originating in the US sought in varying intensity and breadth to explain these developments.1 Central to the following inquiry are the discussions and contributions of the Council for Intercultural Relations (CIR). The CIR was closely affiliated with New York’s Columbia University and from 1942 through 1945 regularly submitted suggestions developed by scholars for a cultural policy toward Germany. In particular, my research addresses the following issues: (1) the role social science-based knowledge played in political actions and perspectives; (2) the influence basic political convictions had on the course of theory processing; (3) whether the experience of flight, expulsion, and migration generated a genuine scholarly profile; (4) the practical consequences achieved through a policy legitimized by scholars, and (5) the mental and institutional processes that became reality or were brought to fruition.

I. Anthropology and Politics

In 1946, State Department Assistant Secretary William Benton, then in charge of the cultural policy of the American Military Government in Germany, wrote to anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Your part in the war-time information program in foreign countries created the foundations for a peace-time program”.2 The US entry into the Second World War assumed a significant place in Margaret Mead’s biography. Apart from her full-time job as a curator of the American Museum of Natural History, she decided to offer her collected anthropological knowledge and experience to the good services of American warfare. In times of war, confessed Mead, social scientists have several options. They could remain in an ivory tower, do something patriotic, or use their accumulated knowledge and scientific methodology to the best of their ability to win the war:

We must analyze the social organization of Prussia and Japan, especially, and attempt scientifically to strike out those elements which produce the convinced fascist [...] and with equal vigor we must set about developing within the culture of our enemies those tendencies which will enable them to use well the freedom which they have never had. If we fail in either job, if we let those fascist tendencies flourish at home we have disarmed abroad, we, of course, win nothing [...]. And if we fail to make every effort to cure all the curables in the other culture, then it is clear that what we glossed over as hospitalization was really after all only a prison designed to punish, not to cure.3

An important building block in Mead’s way of thinking was based on anthropological similarities and regularities in societies which originate in connection with political racism. Mead took the view that each socialization theory is necessarily racist in itself when it is constituted on the basis of cultural characteristics and simultaneously maintains an early and constant determination of the future life cycle. Furthermore, Mead represented the point of view that human development only coincides with democratic ethics if postulated as a life-long learning process by encouraging changes in human behavior. She also refrained from theoretical approaches that claimed the exclusive relevance and irreversibility of cultural experiences in early childhood. Within the contemporary controversy between the protagonists supporting either

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2 William Benton, State Department, to Margaret Mead, February 26, 1946: Library of Congress, Washington D.C., Special Manuscript Division, Papers of Margaret Mead: C 15. Subsequent quotations from the Papers of Margaret Mead will be referenced with the abbreviation MM followed by a colon and a Letter (designating series) and an Arabic numeral (designating box number).