

25. Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte

Trans-Bloc Knowledge Circulation in the Cold War

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Interview

Berliner Colloquien zur Zeitgeschichte: The 25th Berliner Colloquium zur Zeitgeschichte examined the relationships of exchange in the sciences that transcended the blocs during the Cold War. What was the fundamental idea for this approach?

Elke Seefried and Malte Rolf: Science and politics were thoroughly interlaced during the Cold War. Especially US and British research of the past two decades has argued that, under the umbrella of the rivalry of systems, something like »Cold War science« arose. By this reading, the Cold War deeply influenced science in East and West, through major state-financed research programs, shifting interests and links within the military-industrial-academic complex and new forms of knowledge, e.g. in game theory and the practice of »war gaming«. More recent studies have, on the other hand, increasingly cautioned that the metaphor of the »iron curtain« is actually misleading. They advocate instead more attention to reciprocal relations and exchange processes between East and West. One author (György Péteri) has even suggested the term »nylon curtain« as a more accurate replacement.

Our colloquium on trans-bloc exchange of knowledge in the Cold War was intended to survey this new field of research. We began with the understanding that this history of knowledge should not be restricted to scientific knowledge. We also wished to include applied and everyday kinds of knowledge, given the politicization of knowledge and the scientification of policy in the Cold War. Our goal was to discuss with experts in very diverse fields about why exchange processes were initiated across the blocs' frontiers, what channels and conditions for communication existed, what hubs and »gatekeepers« steered the interactions and what scientific, societal and political effects these exchange processes had. We also hoped to debate systematic and methodological approaches. And, we did not least seek to expand perspectives on the global circulation of knowledge as a way of dismantling the constricted view of relations between the »first« and »second« world.

Did the event meet your expectations? What new insights did you gain in the discussions?

In general the discussions revealed very clearly how important the topic of »exchange« is for very different fields of research. The metaphor of the »nylon curtain« certainly came in for criticism, as it masks the countless demarcations and barriers to communication between the blocs. Yet there was agreement that the accumulation of knowledge in both East and West could not be understood without taking reciprocal relationships into account. We also believe we made progress toward our goal of identifying systematic approaches. Of course, much depends on what topical fields are actually productive. It was broadly agreed that examining key actors and institutions in direct exchange, as meetings of experts, in international organizations or scientific conferences, promises new insights. However, we also unanimously stressed that the patterns of indirect comparison, which of course were very widespread amid the rivalry of the Cold War, certainly need to be presented in more detail. We also heard demands for inquiries regarding not only the exchange, but also the implementation of knowledge, and whether this was a matter more of scientific and technological consequences or spin-off effects in the respective societies. That becomes especially clear in »global case studies«, in which the interaction of trans-bloc and/or global relationships and local dynamics of knowledge acquisition and implementation is examined on site.

Looking at these patterns of exchange relationships, can they really be called reciprocal effects? Wasn't it more a case of the Eastern Bloc always trying to catch up with and copy the West?

No, in no way was this a one-way street from West to East. Certainly, there existed knowledge imbalances to a greater or lesser extent between the blocs, depending on the field. And, to be sure, there were areas in which the »West« – first and foremost the US – had a pioneering role, such as in nuclear technology. However, the broad spectrum of fields discussed in the colloquium in which exchange did take place certainly strengthens the thesis of a far-reaching and reciprocal circulation of knowledge. The International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, founded in 1972 as an East-West institution dedicated to methodological studies of systems analysis and cybernetics and their applications in energy research and information technology is just one example. Another is soil research, as well as historical preservation. In the early 1970s, representatives of the Eastern Bloc in these and other fields were treated as partners – or rivals – on an equal footing. In this context it was helpful not only to discuss East-West relationships but also the

exchange with the Global South. Participants in the discussion who had investigated frameworks of interaction that stretched beyond the allegedly bipolar world of the Cold War strongly advocated regarding the genesis of knowledge as a process of global reciprocal effects.

There has been much discussion in the media these days whether the Cold War is really over – or if we are currently witnessing its re-emergence in a different guise. Did this question play a part in the colloquium?

It certainly was not at the core of the debates, but it was mentioned repeatedly. The predominant assessment was that we are *not* witnessing a reprise of the Cold War, that the conflict situations are simply too different to be even coarsely equated. However, we discussed the question as an invitation to differentiate the long timespan from 1945 to 1991. There it became clear that trans-bloc contacts in the later 1960s took on an intensity that had been unthinkable before then. The early 1970s, in turn, proved to be a phase of a new and, especially, global dynamic of knowledge exchange. These reciprocal relationships resonated into the respective societies and influenced the West German project of »change through rapprochement.« The caesura of 1979, which is sometimes referred to in the literature as a »second ice age,« played a far less important role by comparison. Incidentally, opinions differed widely over whether the Cold War should be grasped as a »container« for periodization or, as in the view of Cold War science, as a specific configuration of knowledge production. In any case, the knowledge yielded through trans-bloc exchange should be given more significance, it was agreed. The same applies to its utilization.