

## IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A CHALLENGE FOR HISTORIOGRAPHY

**Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann**

From 2010 to 2016, the German Historical Institute's research project "Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present," explored the entrepreneurial role and the economic performance as well as the social and cultural experience of German-American businesspeople in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Combining nearly 200 thoroughly researched biographies, it offers a new integrative perspective not only to trace the lives, careers, and business ventures of significant immigrants but also to answer core questions of American, business, and migration history in a new way. Using a freely accessible website, the project presents the results of thorough research not only into the academic world but also into the general public. It is part of the German Historical Institute's ongoing commitment to digital and public history.

The project's *raison d'être* stemmed from the transatlantic and transnational mission of the institute. "Immigrant Entrepreneurship" questions notions of American exceptionalism, situates U.S. history in a transnational framework and studies the formation and changes of an immigrant nation and its business community over a period of nearly three hundred years. A detailed description of the project's rationale is presented in Hartmut Berghoff's article in this volume. The project also aimed to put Germany and the German states in a global perspective: The transnational biographies of migrants allow us to reconceptualize the meaning and relevance of the heterogeneous Western nation-states. Focusing on German-American businesspeople meant focusing on an immigrant nation — the U.S. — and an emigrant state, which itself had turned into an immigrant state by the end of the nineteenth century — Germany. In the twentieth century, in Germany immigration and emigration took place side by side.

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project is not an outgrowth of the historiographic trend or sometimes fashion toward transnational history. It was rather primarily driven by the aim to broaden the empirical foundation of immigration and business history in the U.S. The objects of most historiography of German immigration to the U.S. have been mass and group immigration, while the formation of

<sup>1</sup> For details see <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org>.

elites — perhaps with the exception of culture and politics — was regularly neglected. “Facts” on elites, however, are important to examine the promises of modern capitalist societies — the idea of upward mobility and equality of chances.

This is not the place to repeat all of our ambitious research questions.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this volume will present a few results from the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project’s research. The eleven rather different biographies included not only span more than three hundred years of German-American immigrant experience, but they also portray the changes of the British colonies and the U.S. from colonial times to the present. The four introductory articles discuss the challenges of the genre of (entrepreneurial) biographies, of transnational history, and give an overview of the project’s empirical findings.

### **Workflow and Structure of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project**

As of September 1, 2016, 185 biographies of approximately 8,000 words each had been posted on the project’s website <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org>. Additional manuscripts are still in the editorial and publishing process. More than 2,000 images and ca. 1,000 documents provide additional evidence and allow a detailed understanding of the immigrants’ experience. The research project covers not only the well-documented period of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, but more than three hundred years of the German-American experience: the project’s website currently presents approximately thirty biographies each for the period before 1840 and after World War II to give vivid insight into the fundamental long-term changes in immigration, entrepreneurship, and the economic, social, political, and cultural framework of the pre- and postindustrial periods.

The main practical task of the project was to transform aspiring research goals into a continuous workflow. The project was headed by two general editors, Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann. Utilizing funds from the German Historical Institute Washington, DC, and substantial support by the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology, they established a core group of researchers, editors, and web specialists at the German Historical Institute, and invited an international economic advisory board to formulate

2 See Hartmut Berghoff and Uwe Spiekermann, “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: The German-American Business Biography, 1720 to the Present: A Research Project,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (2010): 69-82.

the key principles of this large and ambitious research endeavor.<sup>3</sup> This resulted not only in key definitions — first of all, a pragmatic answer to the complex question of “Germanness” — but also in detailed plans for the structure of the project: The corpus of biographies was divided into five chronological “volumes.” Five outstanding American scholars were recruited as volume editors — Marianne Wokeck (Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis), William J. Hausman (College of William & Mary), Giles Hoyt (Indiana University, Purdue University Indianapolis), Jeffrey Fear (University of Glasgow), and Dan Wadhvani (University of the Pacific). The task of these experts in either business and/or German-American history was twofold: finding well-qualified authors for the individual volumes, and reviewing the incoming manuscripts to guarantee the scholarly quality we expected.

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project is an attempt to integrate most of these inspirations and combine advanced business history with the challenges of the many new directions in the historical profession. Critical to a one-dimensional microeconomic functionalism, it reintegrated into business history the entrepreneurs’ values and beliefs, the motivations of leadership, the influence of family, private networks, and employees, and reputation and trust — in accordance with recent suggestions by business historians Philip Scranton and Patrick Fridenson. Entrepreneurs were analyzed as individuals in their different networks shaping and reshaping American society, on the one hand, and in their reactions to their changing social and cultural environment, on the other.<sup>4</sup>

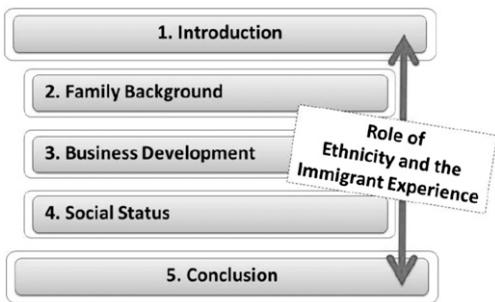
All contributors to the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project were asked to deliver a biography of around 8,000 words, each of which should deal with similar categories of the given entrepreneur’s life and work (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> The goal was to present individual biographies in a structured and comparable way: the eleven biographical articles in this volume give proof of this.

The authors faced an ambitious research program: First, they were to focus on the family background of the entrepreneurs. This included their geographical background — mostly in the German states or Germany within the borders of 1871 — occupation, religion, education, and social milieu of both the parents and their candidates. The circumstances of migration were also to figure prominently. This included not only the subjects’ motives for leaving their fatherland but also their resources and aspirations in the U.S. and later on as entrepreneurs. Second, the individual biographies were

3 For details comp. Uwe Spiekermann and Hartmut Berghoff, “Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present. Zielsetzungen, Organisation und Herausforderungen eines Forschungsprojektes des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Washington,” *Jahrbuch der historischen Forschung: Berichtsjahr 2012* (2013): 53-61.

4 Philip Scranton and Patrick Fridenson, *Reimagining Business History* (Baltimore, 2013), 201.

5 For more details, see <http://immigrantentrepreneurship.org/resources-for-contributors.php>.



**Figure 1: Suggested outline of a biographical article for the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project.**

always to be accompanied by the history of the subjects' businesses: Immigrant firms were de facto often different from those of born Americans, and the subjects' lives were always linked to the development of their businesses. These business history sections were to include the specific resources and obstacles, the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the immigrants, and their particular business strategies. They

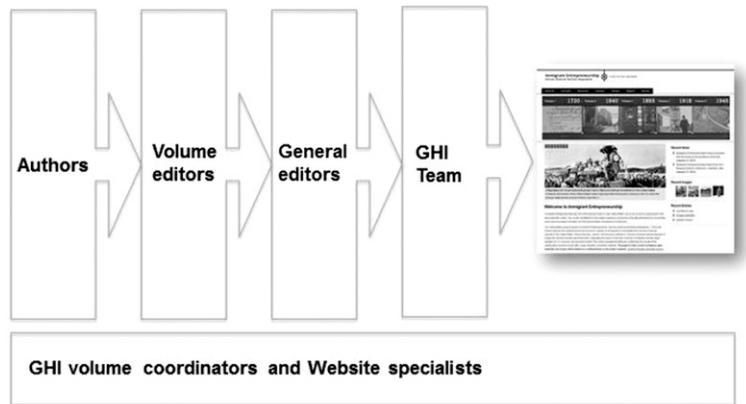
were also to cover questions of success and failure, the role of local, regional, federal, and international politics, access to capital and business networks, and the use of technology. We asked the authors to reflect on the entrepreneurs' significance, and particularly on their contributions to developing new markets and the rise of their particular industries. A third element of every biography was to deal with the subjects' social status, with private networks, with family and public life. Entrepreneurs are representatives of a specific social class and their culture(s). These sections were to include the role of spouse(s) and children, the status of siblings, philanthropic and non-economic activities, religious affiliation, and leisure activities. The candidates' political and social engagement and their ethnic and transnational networks were other important features to be considered. The most challenging and innovative task, however, was to think and write all of this from the perspective of ethnicity and the immigrant experience. Our assumption was that the business careers and the private lives of the entrepreneurs were fundamentally shaped by their experience of being "strangers"<sup>6</sup> to the new world.

This fairly rigid research outline was intended to enable comparisons across all the biographies. It was to be used flexibly to analyze an individual life and career and help to portray entrepreneurs as variations within the general history. The structure could have reinforced the standard Whig history of success and social advancement. But such a stereotypical narrative was perpetually questioned by intervening factors that were unearthed through empirical results. The project's guidelines were changed several times in response to results of the peer-review process.

The authors also encountered a rigid refereeing process (Figure 2). Every article was reviewed by at least two senior scholars, normally the volume editor and one of the two general editors. After a first

6 Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, 1950), 402-408.

round of revisions, the draft version was again reviewed by the GHI team. Content, language, and format were checked in detail. At the same time, the GHI team managed copyrights and the editing of images and documents. This structured workflow



led to a rather high rate of revised and also rejected articles, but this was necessary in the interest of a high scholarly quality. It was particularly important to live up to the standards of the diverse fields from German to American history, from business to migration history, from economic to cultural and social history, and to deal with the specific challenges of biographies, which Uwe Spiekermann highlights in his methodological contribution to this volume.

**Figure 2: Workflow of the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project.**

### Challenges of a Research Project

The detailed guidelines resulted from intense internal debates on the methodology and the main research questions. Still, the careful approach and the pronounced peer review could not keep the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project from being challenged by at least six problems:

First, it was very difficult — even for senior scholars — to overcome the retrospective and hagiographic traditions of rags-to-riches careers. The manuscripts emphasized that the American dream had created its own narratives; constant reflection and intervention was necessary to offer more nuanced biographies. Many authors tended to write somewhat heroic success stories of hard-working individuals, neglecting structural and situational preconditions. In addition, the American past was often purged of rather common prejudices against immigrants: widespread anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-socialism had important implications for business careers, both as obstacles and as push factors for niche economies.

Second, the intellectual traditions of unique opportunities and resources in the U.S. setting the respective immigrant entrepreneurs

on a one-way street to success were difficult to overcome. Within these traditions, success is understood as an American accomplishment, not as a result of the newcomers' skills and resources, the knowledge and capital they had brought with them from abroad. It was a big challenge to debunk such clichés that involved the neglect of a detailed analysis of the German origins of the migrants. At the same time, there was a risk of overlooking the immigrants' difficulties in orientation and acculturation: German immigrants, indeed, had immense difficulties with the patronage of the U.S. political machines, restrictive religious and moral codes, and nativist rejection and even violence.

Third, although the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project is based on the work of approximately 150 authors, it proved very difficult to recruit highly skilled authors willing to accept the project's main research questions. Moreover, approximately one quarter of all commissioned and submitted essays were not accepted.

A fourth challenge resulted from the design of the website: Although the website offers a broad variety of individual lives, the outlines still focused on the reconstruction of a "standard life." The heterogeneity of careers and business models (networks, family businesses, multiple-generation careers, siblings, etc.) was sometimes overshadowed by the standardized biography of one entrepreneur in his or her setting. And short careers that resulted in quickly earned fortunes were largely excluded as we focused on long-term developments.

Fifth, the project's interest in "thick description" of the individual lives and careers often interfered with the general goal of empirically valid generalization. This is the core problem of every biography. Most articles did a fabulous job of clarifying the local circumstances of entrepreneurial significance and success and also of ascribing them as examples of more general economic, social, and cultural patterns. But comparison between different branches, places, times, and ethnic configurations was beyond the scope of any biographical essay — and contextual essays could not add these complex links. Hartmut Berghoff carves out some more general perspectives on the German-American immigrant entrepreneur's experience in his contribution to this volume, but he is fully aware that more work has to be done to arrive at valid generalizations.

Finally, the project's pioneering role generated problems of its own: Due to a lack of comparable projects of other immigrant groups,

cross-ethnic comparisons remained difficult. Although we organized several panels and workshops with leading experts to deal with this dimension, the analysis of the specifics and characteristics of German-American businesspeople is still a core challenge. This is because in the nineteenth century, narratives of national immigrant groups created their own historical reality. The floating definitions and meanings of “nations” make it possible to deconstruct the homogeneity of the “German-Americans” — but they do not make it possible to find answers on *the* German-American business elite in contrast to, for instance, Anglo-Saxon, Irish- or Scandinavian-Americans. Transnational history has dealt with this problem on a theoretical level — but we definitely need empirical work and theories and methodologies that are more nuanced and flexible to deal with the different shades of identities and to compare the broken national identities of German-American immigrants with other immigrant groups in the U.S. and elsewhere. Now that much of the conceptual and empirical work has been completed and most of the biographies have been published, it is time to start such systematic research.

### **The Purpose of this *Bulletin Supplement***

The goal of this *Bulletin Supplement* is twofold: First, it presents four contributions to the workshop “Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Transnational Comparative Perspective, 18<sup>th</sup> Century — Today,” which took place at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, on June 16-17, 2016. These essays offer additional impulses on how to use the rich materials of the project: Jürgen Finger and Uwe Spiekermann discuss the relevance of (entrepreneurial) biographies for business, migration, and general history. While Finger integrates the project’s work into the broader framework of modern cultural history, addressing the interaction between macro- and micro-levels of analysis, Spiekermann positions the biography as an important methodology for new and more advanced forms of historiography — beyond the dead ends of structural and modern cultural history. Hartmut Berghoff uses the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project’s biographies to present some lessons from the project’s work and to offer first cautious generalizations on the German-American immigrant entrepreneurship experience. Finally, Rebecca Kobrin’s article broadens and questions our understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship. Her analysis of the transnational business careers of father and son Sender and Meyer Jarmulowsky, travel agents and bankers in Poland, Hamburg, and New York, questions “national”

narratives of immigration and emphasizes the dynamics of business life as a result of individual and political constellations, of rational calculation and dreams of prosperity, of business opportunities and market consolidations. All four articles help readers interpret the eleven biographies that follow in quite different ways: as examples of a broader German-American immigrant experience, as expressions of multiple identities in the transatlantic world, as micro-histories of the fundamental transformation of the (Western) world to a modern industrial one, and as narratives that question stereotypical readings of our past.

The second goal of this supplement is to give a reasonably representative sample of individual biographies from the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project. This condensed overview is intended to encourage readers to have a closer look at the many more articles, as well as the much more numerous photographs and images, on the project's website. Together they convey an impressive idea of human passion and ambition, of family networks and individual decision-making, of acculturation and a broad panorama of regional, national, and cultural identities.

The biographies illustrate the typical German-American niche economies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hans Leaman's contribution on printer and publisher Johann Sauer (1695-1758) leads us into a world of Pietistic religiosity and a German-language subculture dedicated to the praise of the Lord — and profits that were modest and agreeable to God. Religious faith was crucial to the career of gun stocker Johann Andreas Albrecht (1718-1802). Scott Gordon gives instructive insights into a life dominated by the decisions of the Moravian community — and not by the self-made-man ideology of later times. Another example of such German language cultures is the career of political refugee and writer Mathilde Franziska Anneke (1817-1884), analyzed by Stephani Richards-Wilson.

While these early immigrants formed a niche society, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century German-Americans became an integral part of the American nation, although their identities often remained hybrid. Beer magnate Adolphus Busch (1839-1913) kept close ties to Germany and traveled back and forth across the Atlantic extensively. His biographer Timothy J. Holian presents him also as an incarnation of American self-promotion, atypical of the more restrained German-American entrepreneurs. Banker Jacob H. Schiff (1847-1920) represented solidity and integrity in the financial world; he even

rejected big business deals if they did not accord with his moral and religious compass. Biographer Bernice Heilbrunn emphasizes Schiff's eminent philanthropic activities and his conservative family ideals. While Schiff was a core player in the German-Jewish immigrant community of New York, West Coast large-scale project leader Henry J. Kaiser (1882-1967), portrayed by Tim Schanetzky, developed no close relationship to his parents' fatherland and became a leading representative of American business in the interwar period.

The biographies also make clear that entrepreneurship underwent dramatic changes over the centuries. Albrecht was not more than a local carpenter for most of his career, working for local contractors and individual customers. Sauer sold only to the German-American community, while Busch served the whole American nation. Anneke was an important example of social entrepreneurship, while Kaiser, at the peak of his career, was a typical government contractor. Financial investor Peter Thiel (b. 1967) set a very different tone in business, as Meghan O'Dea emphasizes. Based on credit and an idea of future, he has left a global footprint in the world of technology and venture capitalism.

German-American immigrants were often described as shrewd and industrious; and Schiff's narrative provides a good example of this. Investor and financier Henry Villard (1835-1900), however, was a typical robber baron of the Gilded Age, who made and lost several fortunes, as Christopher Kobrak recounts.

Such heterogeneity can also be seen in the world of female entrepreneurship. While in the late nineteenth century figures like Anneke were rare exceptions and seven-eighths of married German women did not work outside the home, this pattern changed in the mid-twentieth century. Ute Mehnert introduces Lillian Vernon (1927-2015) as a housewife who wanted to add money to the family income — and became a leading player in the mail-order business.

While most German-American entrepreneurs built up their businesses in the U.S. and focused on the domestic market, others connected Germany, Europe, and America. Henry Villard attracted German direct and portfolio investments to the U.S., while Florence Ziegfeld Jr. (1867-1932) formed a new style of "American" entertainment. As Heather Hester demonstrates, he searched for new talents in Europe, encouraged them to come to the U.S., and merged different cultural traditions into a new global product named "Broadway" and "American beauty."

The Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project focused on “significant” first- and second-generation immigrant entrepreneurs. This should not be confused with permanent “success” or wealth, as Henry Villard’s career demonstrates. Uwe Spiekermann added the biography of an unknown sibling of the Spreckels family, leading figures in the sugar business, to portray a typical executive and small businessman. Walter P. Spreckels’ (1888-1976) career was interrupted by World War I and Prohibition, both important watersheds for German Americans in general.

While he was only an ordinary man, other immigrant entrepreneurs became American icons who fundamentally changed U.S. business and everyday life. Sauer is still known as a pioneer of the ethnic press in the U.S., Busch deeply influenced U.S. drinking culture, Ziegfeld shaped the image of women and the urban lifestyle, while Thiel, with his investments in PayPal and Facebook, transformed methods of payment and everyday communication. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project’s website offers many more examples of these and other topics that were key to the German-American experience and U.S. culture and business.

### **Acknowledgments**

Public resources made the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project possible: We are very grateful to the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the Max Weber Foundation for funding the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC, which provided most of the resources. An endeavor of this size, however, would have not been possible without additional and very substantial financial support by the Transatlantic Program of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany through funds of the European Recovery Program of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology. Apart from financial resources, we benefited tremendously from academic cooperation from the Hagley Museum and Library, the German American Chambers of Commerce, and the Friends of the German Historical Institute.

The biographies would not have been possible without the work of engaged and passionate authors who worked closely with a highly motivated project team, at the GHI project manager Jessica Csoma, research associates Bryan Hart, Christine Le Jeune, Kelly McCullough, Ashley Narayan, Megan O’Dea, Atiba Pertilla, Benjamin Schwantes, Simone Willnath, and Claudia Winkler. The external editors played a key

role. We owe a large intellectual debt to the Immigrant Entrepreneurship Project team: Volume editors Marianne S. Wokeck, William J. Hausman, Giles R. Hoyt, Jeffrey Fear, and R. Daniel Wadhvani.

This volume was proposed by the new GHI director Simone Lässig, who also pledged to maintain the project's website at the GHI in the future. We are very thankful for her support.

Finally, we owe much credit to *GHI Bulletin Supplement* editor Patricia C. Sutcliffe, whose dedicated work added the final linguistic and stylistic polish to the manuscript. It was a wonderful and fruitful experience to work with all of the people involved in the project.

