

## Call for Papers

### Annual Conference of the Historians in the German Association of American Studies

#### REFORM MOVEMENTS IN US-HISTORY

February 14-16, 2020, Gustav-Stresemann Institute, Bad Bevensen

<https://gsi-bevensen.de>

Organizers: Charlotte A. Lerg (University of Munich/University of Bochum) and  
Jana Weiß (University of Münster)

While the founding of the United States was marked by a revolution, reform has been the preferred mode of striving for change ever since. In a country insistent on a strong belief in the notion of progress, “reform” seemed natural and ever necessary. This mindset generated movements for the most varied of causes. In hindsight, some may seem overly idealistic, others misguided – all of them, however, were usually accompanied by intense conflict and public debate.

Whether sweeping the country or flickering in niches, the manifold reform movements were shaped by and thus, further contributed to a language, culture, and ideology of constant improvement. Reform was propagated, proclaimed, and demanded in regard to social issues as well as to moral questions (often the two of them closely entwined). Moreover, activism for ostensibly beneficial transformation and/or pushing against the status quo was not only limited to social structures, constitutional questions, public policies, or the economy. U.S. intellectual and cultural practices also feature a distinct tradition of self-betterment and character-reform.

Historiographically, some decades are known for being particularly focused on change and improvement. Two prime examples are the Progressive Era between the 1890s and World War I, famously dubbed the “Age of Reform” by Richard Hofstadter, as well as the major social changes of the 1960s (some might be inclined to call them a revolution rather than a reform period). Yet, while these were remarkable developments accelerated by industrialization, demographic change, and economic upheaval, reform movements can be identified throughout U.S. history. They were often inspired by religious belief or moral convictions and fanned by manifest injustice, or economic duress. The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw Puritan John Winthrop set out to create “a city upon a hill” in the newly settled colonies and the Constitutional Convention seeking “a more perfect union”. Transcendentalism, abolitionism, temperance, and Anti-Trust activism flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the major movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ranged from women’s rights to Martin Luther King’s Dream, from counterculture utopias to economic plans of varied success. Whether marriage and reproductive rights, child rearing or penitentiary systems, saving the environment, or personal dietary regimes, the language of (sometimes radical) reform seems omnipresent.

The conference invites contributions on key reform movements throughout U.S. history. Topics may include but are by no means limited to discussing reformers, their motivations, organization, and proposed solutions to the social, political, or economic ills they perceived most pressing. Who benefitted and who suffered from these changes and programs? Papers may also trace intellectual and cultural traditions as well as the emergence of reactionary and counter-movements that sought to put things back to the way they were (or supposedly once were). This also raises the question of resistance to reform or more theoretical approaches: Which factors enabled and shaped the proliferation of reform movements? Are there any discernable patterns in reform rhetoric and practices? Does revolution begin where reform ends or is reform a way to prevent revolution?

We look forward to a lively and interesting conference and explicitly encourage participants from different disciplines and/or a transnational perspective.

Please send a short CV and a proposal of up to 500-words to the conference organizers Charlotte Lerg and Jana Weiß ([DGFAhist2020@amerikanistik.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:DGFAhist2020@amerikanistik.uni-muenchen.de)) by June 30, 2019.