

## 11.4 Images of the peasant in Germany, the United States, and Austria Room 202

*Convener: Gesine Gerhard*

*Chair: Jonathan Harwood*

### 11.41 Gesine Gerhard:

The image of the peasant in West Germany: ‘spongers off the state’ or ‘threatened species’?

In the 1950s, structural change dramatically transformed the livelihoods of West German peasants. During the Nazi era, peasants had found a reprieve from the economic and social transformation that had begun with industrialisation at the end of the nineteenth century. After the war, however, the ‘farewell’ from the countryside could no longer be prevented. This time, the changes occurred at an accelerated pace. Large numbers of peasant left farming. To minimise the hardships for peasants who had to give up their way of live, the German Peasant League (Deutscher Bauernverband, DBV) used old images of the peasantry reminiscent of nineteenth century agrarian romanticism. The DBV painted a picture of a special group that needed to be protected from industrialisation and urbanisation. The rhetoric employed was used strategically to unify peasants, to justify their far-reaching demands for special protection and to increase their political power. The self-image of the peasants, however, stood in stark contrast with social and economic realities. This paper will examine the image employed by peasants and their interest group, its contradictions as well as its effectiveness in the political discourse of West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Gesine Gerhard** is an associate professor of history at the University of the Pacific in California. She completed her dissertation ‘Peasants into Farmers. Agriculture and Democracy in Modern Germany’ at the University of Iowa in 2000. She earned a M.A. degree from Technical University Berlin, Germany. Her research focuses on German agrarian history. She is currently working on a political biography of Nazi Minister of Food and Agriculture Herbert Backe. Her most recent article ‘Food and Genocide. Nazi Agrarian Food Policy in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union’ was published in *Contemporary European History* (2009).

### 11.42 Frank Uekötter –The American Way: US Farming as a transatlantic myth

When German agriculture was changing after World War Two, American agriculture created excitement like no other farming system in the world. For some, it was the future of agriculture: highly mechanised, with huge fields and large barns, making for the ‘economies of scale’ that would allow farmers to survive the cost-prize squeeze. For others, the American farmer was the end of peasantry, a heartless agrarian entrepreneur that Germans could only copy at the expense of their soul. The paper will discuss these divergent views and then complement the findings with a discussion of the image of farming in America itself, arguing that the German view was only one of several images that coexisted in US society. With that, the paper shall also demonstrate the merits of a broad perspective on farming images that became a mainstay of societal discourses over decades, in line with the general idea of this panel to look at images that remain a fixture over long periods of time. As this paper shows, images of agriculture are significant nationally as well as transnationally: without the US farmer, German agriculture would look different nowadays.

**Frank Uekoetter** is a Dilthey fellow with the research institute of the Deutsches Museum and Deputy Director of the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, Germany. His research interests include agricultural history, history of science and technology and environmental history. His most recent book, ‘Die Wahrheit ist auf dem Feld. Eine Wissensgeschichte der deutschen Landwirtschaft’, was published in 2010. He is currently organizing a conference on the environmental history of the plantation.

### 11.43 Ulrich Schwarz – The image of the peasant in Austria: guidance in times of change or repository of antiquated moral virtues?

On the basis of Austrian farmers' journals and farmers' almanacs of the 1950s to the 1970s, a fundamental transformation and reinterpretation of the image of the peasant can be reconstructed. These periodicals, published by the Austrian Peasant League (Österreichischer Bauernbund), contain stories and reports that construct representations of peasant's position within Austrian society during the economic transformation of agriculture in that period. Especially advertisements in these journals illustrate changes within the images surrounding the farmer. This paper will focus on questions of production and effects of these representations as well as the political-economic interests, ideas and ideals that have been woven into them. How does the production of images change in the context of the transition from the aim of national food security after the war into the dilemma of overproduction? How is the discursive formation of the 'Austrian peasant' linked to the construction of Austrian identity? The paper discusses relations between these propagated pictures and concepts, which addressed farmers directly, and their social and economic situation and tries to explore how they might have influenced the concepts farmers had about themselves and their way.

**Ulrich Schwarz** studied history at the University of Graz and the University of Vienna (master 2008), currently researcher at the Institute of Rural History in St Pölten and PhD student at the University of Vienna, fields of research: farming styles, discourse analysis and writing as a practice in twentieth-century rural Austria.

For his publications: see <http://www.univie.ac.at/ruralhistory/schwarz.htm>.