

## **A HANDS-ON APPROACH: THE DO-IT-YOURSELF CULTURE AND ECONOMY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Workshop at the GHI Washington, April 25-26, 2014. Convener: Reinhild Kreis (GHI). Participants: Hanno Balz (Johns Hopkins), Christopher Chenier (University of Delaware), Gary Cross (Penn State), Andre Dechert (University of Münster), David Farber (Temple University), Rachel Gross (University of Wisconsin), John Hoenig (Penn State), Mischa Honeck (GHI), David Lazar (GHI), Benjamin Lisle (Colby College), Lisa Z. Sigel (DePaul University), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Zinaida Vasilyeva (University of Neuchâtel), Jonathan Voges (University of Hannover), Sonja Windmüller (University of Hamburg).

In a mass consumer society, do-it-yourself (DIY) is a very peculiar way of obtaining goods. Why do people choose to make things themselves when they can simply buy most goods or services? As consumer choices and leisure practices, DIY expresses preferences in the use of time, money, and material resources. Engaging in DIY activities therefore usually presupposes a decision on what and how to consume. The workshop took DIY as an approach to link the spheres of work, leisure, and consumption in the twentieth century, all three of which are important for defining individual as well as group identities, as indicated by labels that have been used to characterize modern societies such as “consumer society,” “work society,” or “leisure society.” In order to explore the often neglected phenomenon of DIY in the twentieth century, the workshop brought together scholars from different disciplines such as history, anthropology, and the social sciences.

In her introductory remarks, Reinhild Kreis highlighted three characteristics of DIY in (mass) consumer societies. First, the consumption of ready-made items and DIY practices were not mutually exclusive but correlated with one another in many cases. Second, DIY in the twentieth century was different from making things oneself in pre-industrial times. It was based on industrialization, and is part of an industrialized world. Third, she stressed DIY as an alternative with a built-in comparative perspective and suggested asking what the alternatives to DIY were in a certain context and what DIY was an alternative to. She was followed by Gary Cross who put “Doing it Yourself in an Age of Shopping” in the broader context of twentieth-century America. He pointed out how DIY helped shape identities

across gender, ethnic, and generational lines in an age of rapidly shifting identities, at least in part caused by changing work patterns, and housing developments. Throughout the “age of shopping,” Cross claimed, a strong desire to produce something independently prevailed, putting DIY somewhere between opposition and participation in the consumer society as well as the refusal and reinforcement of traditional values.

The second session considered DIY at the intersection of production and consumption from different angles. Rachel Gross elaborated on the remarkable but brief success of sewing kits for outdoor equipment such as tents or hiking gear in the 1960s and 1970s that seemed to provide a way to escape consumerist structures as many outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen desired. By the late 1970s, however, gear companies provided equipment that was not only cheaper but also superior to what even advanced sewers could produce, not to mention the enormous amount of time one needed to sew one’s own gear. Consumers stopped buying kits, which had promised to lend a sense of individuality, ecological sensibility, and adventure to outdoor gear, and turned to factory-made high-tech products such as *Gore-Tex*. Do-it-yourself stores and home gardening, as discussed by Jonathan Voges and John Hoenig, in contrast, proved to be successful undertakings. Voges presented the rise of home improvement stores in West Germany as heavily inspired by the American model and as a highly profitable and therefore competitive market. By the mid-1970s, home improvement had established itself as an industry and as a market to which not only retailers, but also producers, had to adapt. John Hoenig focused on the tomato to outline how and why disparate groups of American society engaged in home gardening in the second half of the twentieth century, making it both a profitable business and a way to escape dependence on the market for economic as well as for health or lifestyle reasons.

The third session focused on knowledge and skills as preconditions for engaging in DIY activities. Christopher Chenier presented twentieth-century amateur photographers as a highly differentiated group. While most amateur photographers appreciated the opportunity to disregard the technical side of photography, a smaller and rather elitist group aspired to develop technical and creative skills on an almost professional level. Drawing on magazines, self-help literature, and other sources, Chenier explained how the needs of these prosumer photographers led to the emergence of a diverse

market for highly advanced amateurs. Zinaida Vasilyeva contrasted the hitherto Western-centered perspective with a presentation on DIY as an everyday phenomenon in the Soviet Union. Challenging notions of DIY as a mere economic necessity in Soviet society, she related these practices to a culture that ranked production more highly than consumption and valued the exploitation of the full potential of material resources as well as workers.

The fourth session explored the relationships between DIY, privacy, and publicity. Based on artefacts from the Kinsey Institute of Sex, Gender and Reproduction, Lisa Z. Sigel explored handmade and homemade pornography in the United States. Arguing that mass-produced pornographic items did not necessarily reflect consumer wishes, she emphasized how people articulated their individual sexuality, not least in places like prisons. Here, handmade pornography can be seen as a form of resistance to state attempts to control and organize sexuality. Sonja Windmüller's presentation focused on another "hidden treasure": waste. From an anthropological perspective, she analyzed waste as a resource of DIY as well as techniques of repairing and recycling, relating such practices to ideas of revaluation and reintegration. Furthermore, Windmüller claimed, by repairing an item people made it part of one's own history and served as a carrier and generator of memories.

The fifth and last panel dealt with questions of identity as expressed through DIY. David Farber analyzed DIY-practices of the American counterculture as part of an ethos of self-creation and self-invention. Using the examples of home building and customized trucks, he stressed the desire for a self-sufficient, egalitarian, community-based life that valued technical mastery and shared knowledge. The approaches practiced in counterculture settings had a lasting impact on American society but were, as Farber pointed out, also vulnerable to being commercialized. A striving for independence and self-expression beyond consumerism also drove the DIY homebuilding movement that started in Maine in the 1970s. Benjamin D. Lisle explored how economic instability, growing ecological awareness, and critique of the consumer society all led to the establishment of the Shelter Institute, where people could learn how to build their own homes. Despite this anti-modern and anti-consumerist stance, the homebuilders of Maine maintained a lifestyle based on the traditional family home and, unlike the counterculture, did not seek communal solutions. Andre Dechert, finally, analyzed the role of the media in

mediating role models as related to DIY. Taking the U.S. sitcom “Home Improvement” as an example, he asked whether working with tools still served as a signifier of masculinity in the 1990s, when the show was aired, as it had during the 1950s. He concluded that in the 1990s working with tools was seen as an indicator for male insecurity. Nevertheless, the DIY principle continued to play an important role in American society since “Home Improvement” served both as a DIY guide for work around the house and for keeping up a happy family life. Here, as in the presentations throughout the workshop, DIY was depicted as a field that is highly sensitive to questions of gender, race, class, and generation.

The final discussion focused on general questions about the characteristics of DIY and its meaning in consumer societies. It was generally agreed that, both on a social and an individual level, DIY as a practice, a movement, and a market, offers deep insights into the social, cultural, and economic transformations of the twentieth century.

Reinhild Kreis (GHI)