

**Review Essay**

**Dana Bönisch, Jil Runia and Hana Zehnschetzler (eds.), *Heimat revisited*. De Gruyter, 2020.**

**Svenja Kück, *Heimat und Migration. Ein transdisziplinärer Ansatz anhand biographischer Interviews mit geflüchteten Menschen in Deutschland*. Transcript Verlag, 2021.**

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We live in a time of “umbrella terms:” latent, slippery, and vague notions encompassing a broad spectrum of concepts and idea(l)s that stand in precarious relations to each other, tied by a bond that is constantly in motion, being exposed to constant repudiations and redefinitions. Hardly any notion embodies this postmodern penchant for highlighting the instability pertinent to the present-day

humanities better than that of *Heimat*. This term may be taken as paradigmatic for the global post-modern world as a whole, since it reflects not only an epistemological sensibility, but also political, cultural, social and economic trends. Our world is constantly moving, and migration, whether voluntary or involuntary—is omnipresent as countries continue becoming more multiethnic and inhabitants represent a growing patchwork of nationalities, cultures, languages, and narratives. Migration and escape go hand in hand and lead to the wish of finding a home somewhere else, to create a *Heimat* – or rather the notion of *Heimat*.

The highly dense and unstable semantic polyvalency of the notion of *Heimat* is reflected in the two books reviewed here, and both make a convincing case for a transdisciplinary approach to studying it. This is true especially for *Heimat revisited*, a collection of conference papers. The twelve papers are organized in three chapters, each containing four papers: “Politics and practice of Heimat”, “Literary deconstruction” and “Global Heimats”. The book ends with a reprint of an essay from Bruno Latour, first published in the German weekly *Die Zeit*.<sup>1</sup> The wide range of the participating scholars (encompassing the fields of ethnology, literature, philology, cultural studies, sociology, anthropology) along with their broad fields of interests make *Heimat revisited* a scholarly panoply of approaches, positions and highlights. The authors employ a large variety of source types ranging from literary texts, films, popular songs, to commercial campaigns (Egger), local festivals (Kühn) and realia such as clothing and everyday objects (Hänel), covering a period from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The emphasis in the first two parts is mainly on the cultural and socio-political context of German-speaking countries. The first article, “Mi Heimat es su Heimat: Beobachtungen zu einem Schlüsselthema der flüchtigen Moderne,” analyzes the multiple facets of the (extended) notion of *Heimat* in the Bavarian context, in the wake of the fragmentation of *Heimat* due to the process of globalization (27-28). Cornelia Kühn’s article then juxtaposes the construction of the notion of *Heimat* in East and West Berlin of the 1950s by analyzing how the concept of *Heimat* is employed in constructing political identities by employing popular culture (“Festkultur”). The last two articles of the first part shift the

discourse more explicitly to the contemporary political dimension: Dagmar Hanel draws a (albeit somewhat normative) contrast between the academic discourse on *Heimat* as shaped by fluidity and plurality (“cultural imagination“, social process determined by plurality; 70) with non-academic discourse – represented by the various local associations (“Heimat-und Geschichtsvereine”) – which perceive *Heimat* as spatially fixed, cultural areal of identification, whereas Beate Binder’s article “Politiken der Heimat, Praktiken der Beheimatung“ relates the notion of *Heimat* to the contemporary political discourse even more explicitly, emphasizing the negative impact of what she sees as a dangerous and emotionally contaminated populist *Heimat* discourse (represented, for example, by the German right-wing political party *Alternative für Deutschland*). Working predominantly along the dichotomy inclusion-exclusion (Öffnung-Schließung), Binder proposes the globalist notion of “homing” (“Praktiken der Beheimatung“, 97ff) that centers around individual construction of belonging (“Herstellung von Zugehörigkeit,” 98). Binder’s article may be read as a (globalist) political plea against the contemporary populist discourse.

The second part of *Heimat revisited* focuses on the literary representations of the notion of *Heimat*; the cultural context of the German-speaking world remains predominant here. Analyzing a variety of literary texts dealing with the Nazi period (Hannah Arendt, Ruth Klüger, Jean Améry and Martin Walser), Friederike Eigler emphasizes the instability and the multiple facets of the notion of *Heimat*, while also pointing to the tension between the need for stability and the intricate process of “homing,” expressed through the dynamic process of “production of locality”. Using literary texts from the “Heimatkunstbewegung” and expedition reports, Rolf Parr moves to the lesser-known though immensely important context of German colonialism, analyzing the colonial *Heimat* construct as socio-psychological compensation in the context of the perceived losses inflicted on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Employing a broad variety of literary references, with Heinrich Böll prominently featured, Werner Nell offers a differentiated socio-historical view on *Heimat*, investigating the role of literature and writers in the narratives and imagery of *Heimat*. Working alongside the two dichotomies “stability – instability”

and “integration – exclusion,” Nell highlights the tension between *Heimat* as an imaginary locus and its claim to self-evidence and (unquestionable) reality. The processualism and the mobile concepts that constitute the post-modern notion of “homing” exemplified in Randa Jarrar’s novel *A Map of Home* are central in Jill Runia’s article that closes the second part of the volume; in accordance with this notion, the author advocates “more general models of a transnational and hybrid homeland” (185).

Finally, the third part expands what is regarded as the specifically German notion of *Heimat* beyond the German-speaking world, thus making a case for its universality. It opens with an article by Christoph Antweiler, which can be regarded as a valuable theoretical prolegomenon on the notion of *Heimat*. Antweiler employs a variety of arguments (evolutionary, biological, psychological, cultural) to counter what he perceives as an overemphasis of the arbitrariness of a *Heimat*-concept characterized by emotional construction/production and instability (191) as well as the stigma that follows this notion in contemporary academic discourse. Instead, he advocates for a more balanced, critically aware, and more differentiated understanding of *Heimat*.

Importantly, the emphasis on the contemporary context does not mean that *Heimat revisited* neglects the relevance of pre-modern conceptions of *Heimat*. Contemporary concepts (re)thinking *Heimat* that are predominantly determined by mobility, instability and migration, are thus juxtaposed and analyzed vis-a-vis pre-modern concepts, determined by (the need for) stability, which is expressed through canonized spatial and cultural references. Indeed, some of the contributing authors point out that pre-modern concepts of *Heimat* can be understood as the canvas on which contested and rearranged dichotomies now unfold, such as: local/regional – global/transregional, stable – unstable, conservative/political – personal.

Yet the positions encompassing these predominantly socio-political contexts are divergent. Mainstream academic discourse seems to be skeptical of the notion of *Heimat* and its semantic potential, associating it mostly with the political Right – from the warning voices that emphasize the danger inherent in

notions such as *Heimat* or identity (Binder, Hänel) or that point to their controversial potential (Silke). Other authors, particularly Eigler, are more balanced, pointing to the abuse of the notion by all actors across the political spectrum. Antweiler interestingly opts for the rehabilitation of the notion of *Heimat* regardless of its controversial political potential and stigma, shifting his attention from the “constructed” and individualized nature of *Heimat* typical of (post)modern discourse to its empirical presence manifesting itself as a psycho-spatial relation.

It is not, however, this position alone, in which Antweiler seems to be ‘the lone wolf’ in this volume. Antweiler also points to the excessiveness of some typical (post)modern topoi related to *Heimat*, showing them to be either historically (the conjecture *Heimat*-nationalism) or empirically questionable (the overemphasis of the role and the presence of mobility and migration in the Modernist context). He argues that these are “myths,” given that although *Heimat* is individual, emotional and related to a specific person, it is ultimately not a “construct” but rather objective, being prompted “a priori” by spatiality and by the existential necessity of spatial reference. Thus, Antweiler’s article can be read both as a valuable divergence of the present academic discourse on *Heimat*, as well as a synthesis of the seemingly irreconcilable facets of pre-modern and (post-)modern notions of *Heimat*.

Finally, Latour’s brilliant essay closes the volume and points to the dangers and the failure of both political globalism and nationalism to address and solve the socio-economic problems of humanity, be they ‘local’ or ‘global.’ Its a warning call to the Humanities in the age of neoliberalism not to turn into neoliberal humanities, by hasty and uncritical acclamations of neoliberal-globalist tenets (usually beginning with multi-, trans- and global-) and/or one-sided criticism of nationalist and populist discourses, but to maintain their critical vigilance and to identify the problems beyond the partisan temptation of the ideological schisms such as globalism – nationalism, (neo)liberalism – populism. Latour poses the key problem in this regard: “In order for one to be a ‘citizen of the world,’ there has to be a functional world in the first place, which will secure the wellbeing of those which are ought to belong to it”.

This statement falls in line with the primary tenet of *Heimat und Migration*, in which Svenja Kück argues that it is the responsibility of society to work against racism and stigmatization, to provide refugees and migrants in general with the structural requirements to create their *Heimat*, by giving them human rights as well as the possibilities and opportunities for new actions. Kück centers the personal journey of nine individual refugees as they find or rather construct their *Heimat*. *Heimat*, Kück formulates, "is not just a feeling, it is created by decisions, actions, reflections, and visions; it is subject to continuous movement while it is also dependent on continuities" (250).<sup>2</sup> One important aspect is the understanding of *Heimat* as actor-centric. In this, *Heimat* is something actively constructed, it is dynamic and changing but can also be seen in known patterns, routines, and networks – it is a process of negotiation and adjustment.

In her analysis, Kück does not resolve the question of what *Heimat* is but rather in which fields of tension the concept of *Heimat* is continuously negotiated. She uses biographical interviews with nine refugees in Germany to analyze the(ir) meaning of the *Heimat*. The escape from the refugees' country of origin is often seen as synonymous with the loss of the *Heimat*. However, in *Heimat und Migration*, *Heimat* is no longer seen as directly connected to the country of origin or other cultural signs, instead it is actively constructed.

Kück utilizes transdisciplinary research methods to gain a personal connection to each individual refugee. Further, she uses biographical research and the concept of the migration regime as a lens for her analysis. Across seven chapters, Kück provides the reader with an overview of the historical and sociopolitical understanding of the notion of *Heimat*, introduces her methodology, the narrative interviews, a discussion of the results, and a conclusion. She always returns to a discussion of the complexity of the notion of *Heimat*. Kück concludes the second chapter by outlining a notion of *Heimat* which provides a red thread throughout the book: *Heimat* includes and merges "spatial, legal, political, and emotional dimensions that are weighted differently, relative to perspective and historical context (47).<sup>3</sup>

However, similar to the dangerous potential of *Heimat* discussed in the *Heimat revisited*, Kück also picks up on this notion by identifying the “Other” as one important factor of the notion of *Heimat*. *Heimat* includes and excludes as it creates different images of the ones belonging to the same *Heimat* and the ones that do not – the strangers. By positioning refugees in specific neighborhoods and not giving them the option to choose their geographical and social context, this power is taken away from them as they are unable to create their own *Heimat*. Instead, a geographical one is forced upon them. This topic is further expanded in the third chapter. Kück discusses how the instrumentalization of *Heimat* in politics and societal discourses as well as the differentiation between the stranger and the familiar is essential and is also used to legitimize processes of inclusion and exclusion. While her arguments are not in themselves novel, they are nonetheless important. Furthermore, Kück connects them to specific lived experiences of the nine individuals that she interviewed.

Regarding the construction(s) of the meaning of *Heimat*, Kück states that it is accessible in all dimensions of the creation of living space – not only the actual geographical and territorial situation but also the social context, and the realities of life (54). Emphasizing a self-constructed nature of *Heimat*, one of the practices emphasized by Kück is the “Strategische Beheimatung” (61) – referred to as “homing” in *Heimat revisited* –, which names the strategical reproduction of familiar practices. This could mean starting hobbies or finding social groups that create an emotional bond with the new living situation and therefore the creation of a *Heimat*. The search for the *Heimat* is characterized as an ongoing search and development, in this process, the necessary elements of the *Heimat* can change for the individual.

One of the perspectives Kück utilizes for the analysis of the interviews is the migration regime. It assumes that the actions of migrants and the creation of a migration phenomenon are created under the condition that “different [...] strategies of controlling, directing, categorizing, and regulating are developed, and a variety of different actors participate in the production and partial realization of these” (76).<sup>4</sup> The interviews with the refugees are understood in the text as a subjectively perceived migration regime in which the interviewees position

themselves. The interviews and the narrated biographies, respectively, are seen as an individual and social product and are structured in three phases: the initial prompt, followed by the main narrative of the refugee, a phase of inquiry, and finally, the discussion of topics that have not yet been addressed but are thought to be important by Kück.

Kück provides a narrative summary of the biographical narration told by each of the nine refugees. Additionally, she also names the main topics addressed by each of them. Kück then engages with different semantic fields and their connection to the context of migration and escape: *Heimat* as a social-locational entity directly related to life, everyday practices and routines to create a *Heimat* during crisis, strategies to create a *Heimat* and the creation of *Heimat* as a strategy, longing, utopias as resistant concepts of meaning, and childhood *Heimat* as a template and counterpart.

Finally, Kück presents her results in the form of three different types of *Heimat* semantics, which specify how *Heimat* is created for refugees after the migration. The first type is *Heimat* as a transportable phenomenon. This type understands *Heimat* as less dependent on the location and more dependent on abilities and activities that are located in the past and present and may be used in the future. *Heimat* is here defined in terms of self-determination, independence, and an orientation towards the future that may be experienced and perceived. The second type recognizes *Heimat* as a niche. The individuals of this type do not feel any, or hardly any, options for action in relation to the future and their current lifestyle. Some of the emotions that can be prevalent are the feeling of one's lifestyle being determined by others. However, there is also a sense of an orientation towards utopias and the desire for purpose through small activities. *Heimat* can therefore be seen as a seed for new hope. In this sense, *Heimat* offers individuals resources to counteract overbearing problems and despair. The final type is the perception of *Heimat* as a mosaic. Individuals choose fragments of their memories, for example from their childhood, and use them productively for the creation of a *Heimat* in which old and current lifestyles and living contexts are combined and contrasted. *Heimat* is thus "a result of processes of reflexion,



personal decisions and consequential following rational initiated detachment processes from a familiar and positively memorised but also timewise limited living situation.” (239) Different types of the perception of *Heimat* are established because of similar living situations, their status in the asylum process, and specific dynamics like experiences with racism and hate.

While Kück states that the results of her analysis are not to be generalized because she puts an emphasis on the individuals and their story, one of the questions that remain after reading Kück’s book is how applicable the construction of *Heimat* and the different types she identifies are to refugees in other countries and migrants in general. Moreover, the selection of the participants for the interviews was limited to refugees with good language proficiency in either English or German to avoid the necessity of a translator. While Kück justifies this decision by pointing out the potential negative influence on the interview itself with another person present and the use of a ‘mediator’ that would hinder the private and safe environment, it also leads to the question of how applicable the ideas are for refugees that have newly arrived and lack the linguistic proficiency that would allow them to talk to German nationals and facilitate their integration and consequently also the feeling of *Heimat* in Germany.

Both *Heimat und Migration* and *Heimat revisited* present the work of a broad range of specialists in various fields of the humanities whose interest evolve around the topics of migration and (national) identity. Kück’s book also offers a concise and informative introduction to the historical evolution of the notion of *Heimat* and its key problems with the emphasis on the present context, which makes *Heimat und Migration* by Kück an appealing read for students who want to expand their initial interest in this topic, while at the same time gaining a deeper insight into the important and current context of migration in Germany prompted by the “long summer of migration“ of 2015.

There are many different approaches to the discussion of *Heimat*, as Kück’s analysis of the personal and biographical interviews, on the one hand, and the numerous different methods displayed in *Heimat revisited*, on the other hand, illustrate. The concept remains effective because it draws on emotional

connections associated to feelings of (in)stability, (dis)integration, and safety/danger. It is a premodern construct which continually reemerges as a global reflex, as a protest against and perhaps an acceptance of globalism. Both *Heimat und Migration* and *Heimat revisited* may lead one to ultimately ask, “Is it dangerous to speak of *Heimat*, or is it dangerous not to?” What both books clearly point out is that it is more dangerous not to have a *Heimat*. Are we then looking toward a future in which we are helplessly trapped between the reactionary rebirth of (pseudo)patriotism and the globalist “transcendental homelessness” (Lukács, cit. in *Heimat revisited*, 157) or the localized nostalgia and the postmodern “patriotism of the orientationlessness” (Stanišić, cit. in *Heimat revisited*, 12)?

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<sup>1</sup> Die Zeit 12/2019 14 March 2009.

<sup>2</sup> “ist nicht allein Gefühl, es erwächst aus Entscheidungen, Handlungen, Reflexionen und Visionen, befindet sich in einem ständigen Fluss und baut ebenso auf Kontinuitäten”

<sup>3</sup> “räumliche, rechtliche, politische sowie emotionale Dimensionen, die in der historischen Betrachtung je nach Perspektive eine unterschiedliche Gewichtung erfahren.”

<sup>4</sup> “verschiedene[...] Kontroll-, Steuerungs-, Kategorisierungs- und Regulierungsunternehmungen hervorgebracht [werden], an deren Herausbildung und partieller Durchsetzung verschiedenste Akteure beteiligt sind.”