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Social Housing Reform in the transatlantic world before World War I

Previous scholarship has pointed to the transatlantic transfers that occurred in the realms of social welfare policies and state involvement in the solution of the “social question”. Both, Daniel T. Rodgers and Axel Schäfer, reminded historians that social policy was created nowhere in the North Atlantic world in national isolation. American and European reformers developed a transatlantic network that furthered exchange and learning processes. And although Rodgers already reminded the reader of his book *Atlantic Crossings* that this exchange was characterized by an “asymmetry of the exchange” (page 70) (meaning that the United States received many more ideas and concepts in the field of social policy during the nineteenth century than it exported during the twentieth century), he still neglected to take the extensive exchange of ideas within the field of private social welfare into account. An investigation of the European roots of American private social housing projects in Boston and New York will show the extent of this transfer and its impact on social reform debates in the United States.

From the 1840s to the turn of the nineteenth century, American housing reformers such as Henry I. Bowditch, Alfred T. White, and Elgin R. L. Gould traveled repeatedly to Europe in search of models for the solution of the pressing housing problems back home. In this process, British and German organizational and architectural models for social housing companies were imported by social reformers and philanthropists who did not have a government mandate but acted on their own or in company with like-minded individuals. London and some German cities, Leipzig in particular, became the favorite destinations of these reformers who observed social housing models in various economic, social, and cultural settings to find the best fit for solving the housing crisis at home. Common to all American reformers was the admiration for ventures that combined philanthropy with market capitalism (Philanthropy and Five Percent) and Octavia Hill’s house management system.

Looking at this extensive transatlantic transfer of housing models, two trends become clear. First, the transfer of social housing models happened in two waves: the first wave occurred during the 1870s and was dominated by Bowditch and White. In the course of this initial transfer, models of social housing were transferred from London to Boston and New York. These models were in many cases literal translations (in their organization and architecture) of the London original. The second wave occurred during the 1890s, when this transfer became professionalized and reflected in major publications such as Gould’s *The Housing of the Working Classes* (1895) and Marcus T. Reynolds, *The Housing of the Poor in American Cities* (1893). During the second wave, American reformers traveling to Europe did no longer limit their attention to London but included other European cities, which in many cases had become the home to social housing models created after models first established in London. The focus of American reformers, thus, shifted from studying the original to studying the transfer of London models within Europe and the modifications that occurred in the transfer process. Secondly, in both time periods, Boston and New York were forerunners in private housing reform. Both cities were the first to introduce European models of housing

reform and thus became “laboratories” in which the applicability of European housing models within an American setting was tested. From here modified and “translated” housing models were sent all over the North American continent. In this process, social reformers and philanthropists in many American and Canadian cities adopted Americanized social housing models that were European in origin.