

CITAS Brownbag Session
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SG.214 (CITAS), Sammelgebäude, Uni Regensburg

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Agents of Globalization:

Shipping Companies, Labor Recruiters, and Landlords in the Making of Global Migration, 1870-1930



A peculiar business partnership took shape during the 1890s. On one side were Germany's multinational shipping companies, the Hamburg-America Line and North German Lloyd, conveyors of millions of transatlantic migrants. On the other was the planter elite of Brazil, still stinging from the abolition of slavery in 1888 and hungry for a new source of labor. Each side needed something from the other. As the number

of emigrants from Germany dwindled, shippers feared a devastating loss of revenue and sought ways to stimulate further migration. Bereft of slave labor, planters were determined to hold down wages by importing a free labor force, and they looked to shipping companies to supply it. A deal was struck. For a measly 100,000 Marks, the Hamburg and Bremen shippers were to purchase more than 500,000 hectares of land in southern Brazil, formerly the property of the banished François d'Orléans, Prince de Joinville. The vast site became home to the Hanseatic Colonization Society, a lavishly financed enterprise with the task of settling 50,000 Germans in southern Brazil within ten years.

Despite its auspicious birth, the Hanseatic Colonization Society managed to settle only a few thousand Germans before winding up operations in 1904, a far cry from the projected 50,000. Although Brazilian elites had been unwavering in their support, officials in the German government were appalled. The Chancellor and his leading ministers moved quickly to ban subsidies on settlers' relocation costs paid out by the Brazilian state, and to issue the shippers a shoddy permit that capped the number of emigrants at 500 per year. It was no secret that the government had spoiled the colonization project on purpose, and done so on the orders of Germany's agrarian elite, who feared that shippers and New World planters would steal away their workers. In other words, German landlords had checked the ambitions of planters an ocean away to siphon off their labor force. This was not an isolated incident. Around 1900, it was private businesses in search of labor rather than politicians or ethno-centric electorates that tended to determine migration policies.

My dissertation shows how businesses including shipping companies, labor recruitment agents, and landed elites—"agents of globalization"—decisively shaped global mobility in an era of nominally "free" and unregulated migration. From South Carolina and Argentina to Saskatchewan and Australia,

businesses tried desperately to court immigrants, resorting to subsidies and marketing campaigns, or, failing these, deceit and coercion. Recruiters were invariably aided by shipping companies, which agglomerated during the 1870s into a handful of globe-straddling, modern corporations like the British Cunard or the German Hamburg-America Line. Never simply neutral conduits of global interconnectivity, steamship lines indiscriminately fomented migration to countless destinations, which delivered profits far exceeding those on freight. Across Europe, meanwhile, the deluge of shipping agents and foreign recruiters provoked a backlash from commercial farmers, who had been buffeted by world markets and now faced a depleting labor force and rising wages. The net result was an international migration regime quite unlike our own. Ours is an age of chronic structural unemployment in the richest countries, in which liberalized immigration policies are consequently a hard sell. In 1900 by contrast the economies of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand wrestled with an inexhaustible appetite for labor power. Simply put, even unskilled labor was a desperately sought commodity in a world awash in land and capital. From the First World War arose a wave of democratization across the globe, which led directly to immigration restrictions as the masses exerted unprecedented control over policy.