

A view on the study of Canada from German-speaking countries: Toward a reinvigorated network of Canadian Studies

BY CHRISTOPH VATTER

Christoph Vatter is a professor of intercultural communication, cultural theory, and communication research at Friedrich Schiller University Jena and president of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries.

The 2024 International Canadian Studies Summit invited scholars to meet at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University in Toronto in order to stimulate discussions and reflections for the academic field of Canadian Studies and to bring together perspectives from within Canada and abroad. A summit is not only an occasion to look at past achievements, it serves also as a think tank to discuss the current state of the field and to develop new visions for the further evolution of Canadian Studies. In the following, I would like to explore this from the perspective of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-Speaking Countries (GKS), a regional association for Canadian Studies in Europe with over 400 members. Starting with a review of the development of Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries in an international context, I would like to identify current challenges for the field and discuss future potentials and perspectives for the international network of Canadian Studies.

LOOKING BACK

Established in 1980, the GKS has been a member of the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS) from the very beginning. International networking has always been a central concern for us, initially in order to establish a common Canadian Studies network in the German-speaking countries of (West) Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. However, looking to the East already played an important role in the 1980s. Whereas the main focus of the association was initially on the integration of academics from the GDR, after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, its scope expanded to Eastern and Central Europe. As a result, Grainau, the location where our annual conference was held from 1982 to 2024, became a hub for European Canadian Studies. Close ties still exist today, especially with the Central European Association for Canadian Studies (CEACS) and the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies (NACS)—and of course with numerous Canadian researchers and institutions.

According to the membership figures, interest in Canada was at its greatest in the 1990s: the GKS grew from 68 members in 1980 to 714 members in 1997.¹ This rise of Canadian Studies may have been linked initially not only to the fascination with a “different America,” but also to discipline-specific developments such as the growing interest in Francophonie in Romance studies. The international network of Canadian Studies made it possible to deal with highly relevant, urgent issues such as migration, multiculturalism, diversity, and the exploitation of natural resources, many of which are still crucial “future themes” today, in an interdisciplinary framework using Canada as an example.

Important incentives also came from cooperation with Canadian institutions. As part of cultural diplomacy, Canadian missions abroad provided significant support for the development of international Canadian Studies. Numerous researchers participated in Canadian government scholarship programs, gaining authentic insights on-site, expanding their expertise as Canadianists, and passing this on to their students. By the early 2000s, over 300 scholarships for research stays in Canada had been awarded to GKS members, who thereby built extensive networks with Canadian scientists. This successful interplay of academic interest and sustainable international networking is also reflected in a lively publication and research atmosphere—from the *Journal of Canadian Studies* (*Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*, since 1981) and the GKS book series (since 1991) to an annual conference for early career researchers held since 2004.

Since the mid-2000s, however, there has been a certain decline in Canadian Studies, which can be explained by both external and internal factors. The external factors include, above all, changes in the funding landscape in Canada, especially the discontinuation of the Understanding Canada program by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. This made it more difficult for many scholars to maintain the close and regular contact with the culture being studied that is so essential in area studies. Above all, however, emerging Canadianists lacked opportunities to build up Canadian expertise and field experience through research stays. Internal, structural, and institutional factors also weakened Canadian Studies in German-speaking countries and in Europe. With the so-called Bologna Process, which replaced the previous national diplomas with BA and MA programs by 2010, it was hardly possible to anchor Canadian Studies in the university curricula in a sustainable and visible way.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

It is not an easy time for area studies in the current university landscape in German-speaking countries and beyond. In the current academic structure, it is difficult for young academics to establish themselves in the academic system with a focus on Canadian Studies in the long term. Whether in the social sciences or in literary, cultural and linguistic studies, it is rare to make a career with a focus on Canada alone. Particularly in disciplines such as geography, history, or political science, we observe that many young scholars are increasingly focusing on Canada in the form of case studies and then turning their attention to other areas. For committed Canadianists, this results in a need to justify the study of Canada, a need that does not exist in Canada itself. However, if we take area studies and its knowledge value seriously, it is imperative that we maintain its interdisciplinary breadth.

The promotion of early career researchers is particularly important in this context. In recent years, GKS members have regularly organized study trips and summer schools that have enabled students to gain first-hand experience in Canada and with Canadian Studies. Just like semesters abroad in Canada, this can be the initial spark for a commitment to Canadian Studies. One of the few positive side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was a strong internationalization, especially at the GKS Young Researchers' Forum, so that an active peer network facilitates entry into Canadian Studies.

The past few years have impressively demonstrated how large research networks such as the German–Canadian transatlantic doctoral school IRTG Diversity: Mediating Difference in Transcultural Spaces (co-funded by SSHRC and DFG 2013–2023) have not only given a significant boost and creative impetus to the researchers and universities directly involved, but also to GKS and Canadian Studies as a whole. It is to be hoped that the existing international funding opportunities, especially in the European–Canadian context, will lead to further initiatives of this kind.

PROPOSING A PATH FORWARD

From this perspective, three factors in particular appear decisive for the productive further development of Canadian Studies:

1. We should first and foremost excel with outstanding research. The great attention that Canada is receiving in connection with Donald Trump's re-election also underlines the international relevance of Canadian Studies, whose traditional key topics such as dealing with diversity, the environment, and sustainability are still considered to be topics of the future.
2. This can only be achieved through international networking as in the ICCS and with the support of political actors, particularly through programs for international mobility and scientific networking.
3. It is at the core of Canadian Studies to also think about the forms and perspectives of area studies. Together with Canadian colleagues, GKS members asked, for example, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the GKS, about the model character of Canadian Studies for "transcultural societal studies" (Hoerder, 2004) and the potential of "beyond area studies" (Lüsebrink & McFalls, 2006).

The International Canadian Studies Summit and the reflection on our field, through the SSHRC project *(Re)Searching for Canadian Studies*, based at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, are important steps toward making Canadian Studies fit for the coming years. Together with the ICCS initiatives for international networking and the promotion of young researchers, the results will contribute to further advancing the international dialogue on Canada and Canadian Studies. As the GKS, we are pleased to contribute to this. ■

NOTE

1. In 2024, GKS had 434 members. The peak of Canadian Studies in the late 1990s is not only limited to Germany, but can also be observed in other countries, including the United Kingdom (Coates, 2024).

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