Workshop at the German Historical Institute Washington, DC

"Inheritance Practices in the 20th Century"

<u>Tentative dates:</u> 9/14/2017 – 9/16/2017

<u>Conveners:</u> Jürgen Dinkel (University of Gießen), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Vanessa Ogle (University of Pennsylvannia)

Topic

American baby boomers stand to inherit about $11.6 trillion in the coming years. The distribution of this wealth will be highly unequal, however. Households in the wealthiest decile will receive by far the biggest inheritances, an estimated $1.5 million per heir on average. By contrast, heirs in the poorest decile will receive an average of $27,000. Enormous and unequal intergenerational wealth transfers are expected in other regions of the world as well.

Despite the substantial contribution of inheritance practices to social inequality in societies and individual families, we know very little about the distribution of inherited money and assets in the period since the late nineteenth century. Thomas Piketty's bestselling *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* has spurred heightened interest in the question of inherited wealth and its relation to rising inequality over the course of the past century.

Although historians have published extensively on inheritance law and practices in earlier periods in a variety of world regions and among different social groups, the twentieth century remains largely unexplored. This workshop thus seeks to bring together the history of inheritance and contemporary history. We want to examine and compare how property and property rights were distributed upon death in different world regions, urban settings, and social groups from the late nineteenth century to the present. We want to analyze how wealth transfers influenced family and kinship in terms of individual life plans, intra-family relations (including sibling and gender dynamics), intergenerational relations, questions of race, social inequality, notions of risk and entrepreneurship, and mobility (including transnational migration). While the legal frameworks for inheritance are important and will be considered in connection with the questions the workshop address, we are primarily interested in inheritance *practices*. Specifically, we seek to analyze what strategies (wills, trusts, inheritance agreements, etc.) testators used to distribute which parts of their property to which heirs and what factors determined their choice of heirs and the apportionment of property and assets among them. We are also interested in increasingly common strategies used to minimize different taxes on inheritances, such as the use of tax havens and low-tax jurisdictions for setting up trusts and the like. Additional questions include: What significance did kinship possess vis-à-vis personal relationships with persons who were not kin to the testator? What conditions were placed on inheritances and what role did inheritance play in the lives of the heirs?

By examining inheritance practices, the workshop aims to provide new insights into the structure and meaning of personal networks (like family and kinship relations) in the twentieth century. The workshop's focus on inherited property is also intended to shed new light on continuities and discontinuities in social inequality in families and in societies. Finally, the workshop will explore the interdependence between public, social, and economic welfare structures, on the one hand, and private family and kinship networks, on the other hand, in the modern age.

We seek papers that deal with one or more of the following groups of questions:

1. Social differentiation: Which kinds of relationships influenced inheritance practices (age, gender, social milieu, religion, generation, status, race, cultural, political, and legal context)? What impact did inheritance practices have on the structure of social milieus and family networks? In certain colonial and post-colonial contexts as well as in some countries, including the United States, anti-miscegenation laws at times prohibited passing on inheritances to spouses and offspring from interracial marriages. How did inheritance practices contribute to the growth and reproduction of social and racial inequality?
2. Property: How did the amount and composition of wealth to be passed down affect inheritance practices? What if there was no property? What about the inheritance of debts? How did the relative significance of different types of property change over the course of the twentieth century? What impact did the rise of finance and financialization have on inheritance?
3. Social actors: What forms did estate planning take over the course of the twentieth century? How did the outlooks of testators and heirs toward the future affect inheritance practices? How did expectations of an inheritance (or of not receiving an inheritance) affect the life planning of heirs? What organizations and professionals – so-called wealth managers – (lawyers, accountants, bankers, notaries, religious institutions) influenced the transfer of wealth in the twentieth century?
4. Periodization: The history of bequeathing and inheriting has barely been periodized. What continuities and/or discontinuities can we see in inheritance practices during the twentieth century? How might we periodize and explain possible changes?

Format

Papers will be pre-circulated four weeks in advance, and at the workshop participants will deliver short introductory remarks to start the discussion. These remarks will be no longer than ten minutes. A publication might follow. The language of the papers and the workshop will be English.

The GHI will provide a lump sum to participants for travel, and we are currently seeking further financial support. To apply, please send a 500 word abstract and a one-page cv to fabricius@ghi-dc.org by Feb 28, 2017. If you have further questions please contact Jürgen Dinkel: dinkel@ghi.dc.org