



## Harry Liebersohn, Ph.D.

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Born in 1951 in Washington, D.C., USA

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### PROJECT

## Exchanges of Gifts and Knowledge Between Europeans and non-Europeans since the Eighteenth Century

This is a study of gift-giving as a critical point in the exchanges of ethnographic knowledge between Europeans and non-Europeans. The study will look at actual gift exchanges between Europeans and indigenous peoples since the late

eighteenth century; how the objects and the intent of giving were understood at the time; the ethnographies resulting from them; and theoretical interpretation of these exchanges culminating in the ethnological literature of the early twentieth century.

### Recommended Reading

Liebersohn, Harry. *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

-. *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988.

-. *The Travelers' World: Europe and the Pacific*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.

## Intellectual history as global history: European travelers and their gifts, 1750-1925

Most intellectual historians in the United States try to show how art and ideas have developed in response to internal challenges, notably the political and industrial revolutions in European society since the late eighteenth century. My recent work has focused instead on how European thinkers developed their social theories in response to encounters with indigenous peoples. I have argued that Europeans were not detached scientific observers, but used these encounters to test or confirm the political preconceptions they brought from home; and that the encounters, far from bringing different cultures into immediate contact, were highly mediated events in a global network of knowledge.

Gift-giving, the subject of my current research, has been a widely practiced form of communication and exchange in the history of cultural contact. Marcel Mauss's essay *The Gift* (1925) famously defined gift exchanges as a system of mutual obligations and stimulated an outpouring of comments on gift-giving from scholars across a broad range of the humanities and social sciences. Mauss's essay started out from indigenous Pacific societies and then took the important step of bringing gift-giving back home, describing its role in the "archaic" European societies of antiquity and the middle ages. My research pushes the temporal boundaries of gift-giving forward by reconstructing its significance for European social thinkers from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

My talk will illustrate the significance of gift-giving with one example and with a brief sketch of my research agenda. George Forster's account of his voyage around the world with Captain Cook (1772-1775) shows three functions of gift-giving for a modern thinker: as a medium of interaction with extra-European peoples, as a topic for critical reflection, and as an intra-European practice. I am researching these functions of gift-giving in five ethnological models of modern European social thought, which I will present in roughly chronological order: missionary, liberal, utopian, aristocratic, and social democratic. Taken together, they reveal a richer historical discussion than has hitherto been observed and enlarge our contemporary conception of gift-giving.

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PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Liebersohn, Harry (2013)

Doktrinärer Liberalismus : Lionel Trilling imaginiert T.S. Eliot

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=766156702>

Liebersohn, Harry (Cambridge [u.a.],2011)

The return of the gift : European history of a global idea

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=633910805>

Liebersohn, Harry (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.],2006)

The travelers' world : Europe to the Pacific

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=498925803>

Liebersohn, Harry (Cambridge [u.a.],2001)

Aristocratic encounters : European travelers and North American Indians

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=33545187X>

Liebersohn, Harry (Philadelphia, Pa.,2001)

"My life in Germany before and after January 30, 1933" : a guide to a manuscript collection at Houghton Library, Harvard University

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=330803948>

Transactions of the American Philosophical Society ; 91,3

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=330803948>

Liebersohn, Harry (1994)

Discovering indigenous nobility : Tocqueville, Chamisso, and romantic travel writing

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=77008642X>

Liebersohn, Harry (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.],1988)

Fate and utopia in German sociology, 1870 - 1923

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=274881500>

Studies in contemporary German social thought

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=274881500>