

Investing in the Past – European Identities in a Globalized World

Memories of the past, which make and remake history, constitute human groups. It is not that the past determines the present, but vice versa that groups define their past within their present. What is remembered and what is forgotten, which memories are given greater or lesser weight, how history is written, re-written, changed, and adopted from other groups that are in- or excluded. At any point in time, all this is determined anew when a community imagines itself on the basis of “its” history of its “foundation myth”.

Among others, “the Europeans” imagine themselves as a community (B. Anderson, 1983). Who “has always been” part of Europe, and shared “European culture” from “the very beginnings” – who is thus accepted in (or who is segregated from) a “euromantic” memory of the common past. Who contributed as a member or as an outsider, who learnt from it as “heir” or only borrowed it as an outsider?

Foundation myths, moreover, migrate and can be kept or accepted by migrating groups. Thus these imagined pasts go beyond the geographical borders of Europe and research in this field is of wider, global relevance. Which groups in the globalized world see themselves as European due to their “heritage”, which groups define themselves as hybrids from European and non-European cultural elements, which groups emphasize their “European roots”, which emphasize (frequently in demarcation from “Eurocentric” points of view) their non-European “ancestors”? Is it even possible to trace typical “migrant identities” for which mobility is constitutive? What is the relationship between modern experiences of emigration and our study of medieval migrations?

Language has become one of the most important defining elements in modern notions of nation and therefore “ethnicity”. In a global perspective race may be more important, but also religious culture in a very wide sense, art and architecture, literary traditions. Which images are moving “everybody” why and when? What are the “lieux de mémoire”, which are the preserved or newly erected, collected or newly composed monuments, in which investment in the past becomes manifest? What are the ways popular culture appropriates the foundation myths and the demarcations from other groups: in holidays and “events”, in museums and history-tourism, in “living history” and medieval markets, in movie and TV (educational broadcasting as well as historical romance), in theatre and historical novels, in children’s and schoolbooks?

Research, including comparative research, on the foundation myths of the European nations is well established. This CARMEN initiative seeks to build on this work to investigate the origin myths of imagined European cultures all over the world.

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