

Crossing Frontiers – Belief in Magic and Witch-Hunting as Culture Transfer

International convention at the Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris / German Historical Institute Paris on May 20th/21st, 2010, organized by Prof. Dr. Gudrun Gersmann (DHI), Dr. Jürgen Michael Schmidt (University of Tübingen) and Dr. Katrin Moeller (University of Halle)

Call for papers until September 15th, 2009.

The cumulative concept of witchcraft, the image of a sect in pact with the devil and evil, conspiring to harmful magic and celebrating their apostatical wicked deeds with wild bacchanals at the witches sabbath, did not just coin the stereotype of the essence of witchcraft and the conceptual repertoire of witchcraft research.

Since its rediscovery during the 70ties and 80ties of the 20th century, the atmosphere of anxiety, violence and crisis of early modern times, when witch-hunt could sometimes indeed turn into witch-craze, has virtually increased to a paradigm of the epoch. It seems as if by now the Middle Ages handed on the attribute of darkness to early modern times, the late 16th and 17th century mutates to one of the “most horrible epochs of history” (Lyndal Roper). Therefore, belief in witchcraft is meanwhile characterized, not just in some branches of witchcraft research, as a product of a psychopathological conspicuous society coined by depressions and panics, belief in magic is viewed as a context that was constitutive for all life situations, sometimes applied without alternatives.

In recent years, with the impetus of a “re-enchantment” of the world, transdisciplinary approaches emerged that – turning away from Max Weber’s paradigm of rationality – emphasize the importance of religious-magical systems of reference up until incipient modernity. In context of the “linguistic turn” and approaches of communication theory, ritual acts, symbolic communication, and semantics in the fields of religion and magic are conceived by now as – in the broadest sense – integral components of a virtually religious sphere providing the repertoire of a primary and dominant set of values of daily routine and conduct in early modern times. Therefore, belief in witchcraft, rituals of folk magic, popular piety, comprehension of cultural and legal norms and symbols melt into a syncretic world view which cannot be described anymore with the modern terms of a Christian religiosity or a clear separation between rational and supernatural semantic levels, but convey insight into - culturally and discourse-theoretically - highly alien worlds.

Thereby, recent research on early modern times establish hypotheses that create a diffuse picture of magical-religious conducts and interpretations and that describe them as everyday social practices, without providing a sophisticated conceptual and methodological repertoire for academic specification and analysis of such ideological constructs that also allows for empirical research.

Further, from the perspective of witchcraft and folklore research, who for decades are wrestling for the question of scope and reality of belief in witchcraft, such approaches seem to be not quite unproblematic, because the social meaning of witch-hunting – categorically criminalizing every form of magic, discarding it as heresy and suppressing it vehemently – is virtually turned upside down. To put it crudely, the perception of witches within early modern times research shifts away from the “terrorists of early modern times” towards the cheerleaders of a broad “grassroots movement”. The invasion of the magical into early modern times research almost inevitably challenges witchcraft research to a productive debate, it having to contribute substantial arguments for the new paradigm development that can outline facets but also limits of the model better.

In the face of this intellectual challenge the question arises if the relatively rigid concept of witchcraft within witchcraft research is still an appropriate tool to conceive the diverse interpretation patterns of witch and magic malefactions that ruled trials and daily routine in early modern times. On principal, the object of witchcraft research must therefore be renegotiated. The basis of this could be a self-assurance about which regionally overlapping concepts of the magical and belief in witchcraft existed and what shaping power they possessed, or if such apparently uniform semantics hide chronological, regional, confessional, societal and individual varying perceptions. Categorically, alternating concepts and interpretation offers are likewise to be pointed out.

This topic is not completely new and was already discussed partly in various directions within folklore and witchcraft research during the nineties. It mainly connects with the attribution of magical ideas to folk and / or elite culture. Although today it is not about commemorating romanticizing or folksy myths, linear acculturation processes or static outlines of society anymore, still the focus of research about magical mentalities centers on the carriers and agents as well as the reach of magic, belief in witchcraft and acceptance of witch-hunts and their contextualization. In recent years, numerous arguments have been compiled on the part of witchcraft research that shatter the research paradigm of undifferentiated persecution from “below” and make better visible the limits of the popular belief in magic.

The convention wants to encourage, on the one hand, to inquire into the semantics and potential of the belief in witchcraft and magic and, on the other, to venture on crossing methodological frontiers, in many respects experimentally and interdisciplinary. We want to put forward for discussion two closely interwoven emphases:

1. Spatial borders und frontier crossings: Which individual, local, regional, “national” or overlapping forms of belief in witchcraft and magic and their systems of reference can be determined? We want to dedicate special interest to the crossing of frontiers in the sense of reception currents, culture transfers, regional and supraregional networks or migration processes that help make visible static and dynamic elements of belief in magic. This new space research invites and encourages searching for relational tie points, revealing competing or diverging relations. Simultaneously, the question arises concerning which spatial factors affected, changed or isolated belief in witchcraft and magic. Here, it might be thought about urban-rural contrasts, ethnic plurality or linguistic and political demarcations, for example. Of importance – especially with regard to a rather poor research condition – is a closer examination of confessional

conceptions of belief in magic and witchcraft that, to date, largely have been visualized from the perspective of academic discourse and only to a lesser extent based on manifestations of magical practices, religious tolerance or specific forms of belief in witchcraft. In general, it is about the implementation of one or rather several local, regional or society overlapping discourses of magic and witchcraft and their alternatives, whereby the questions of societal placing regarding inventions, interpretations, evaluations and lines of interpretation lead over to the second emphasis.

2. Domestic borders and frontier crossings: With this key issue, we want to encourage (referring to the conference on early modern period 2009 in Aachen) to deal once more with the conception of lay and academic cultures. Is the dichotomous model of this kind still sustainable or can there be found differentiations regarding various societal classes and agents as well as diverse systems of belief? The challenge especially rises in drafting a model which integrates the tension-filled structure between faith and skepticism in its various correlations, potentials of modification and nuances without hastily diminishing the search to conclusions of either the “alien magical” or “enlightened” society. In this context, one important discussion will have to be led about the correlation concerning the construction of popular belief in witchcraft. The answer to the question in how far e.g. demoniac concepts really coined a popular or elite belief – to be shown in its differentiations – in witchcraft provides a crucial key for agent-centered model formation.

Proposals for conference contributions – with indication of presentation title, an abstract (circa one page) and résumé of professional career – can be sent to the address stated below (preferably via email) until September 15th, 2009.

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