Cultural spheres

FORMATIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS AND INTERACTIONS IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Between the classifications ‘global’ and ‘local’ are a wide variety of ‘cultural spheres’ of different sizes, defined through geographical, political, economic, legal, religious, cultural, linguistic and artistic characteristics. A sphere might not respect traditional geographical or political borders, but might exist across continents — with its internal structure being the subject of scientific discourse, as well as whether it is defined from within or without.

Globalization has led to a re-evaluation of the term cultural sphere, created by anthropologists and ethnographers in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Its attractiveness — complexities notwithstanding — lies in the opportunity to employ research practices of various scientific disciplines, many of which go beyond those used to describe nation states and their interrelations. In the process, the myths of nation building are put under scrutiny.

A MODEL EXAMPLE: THE MEDITERRANEAN

Cultural spheres cannot be described using a single criterion: they dodge clear definitions. The terms ‘Christian Occident’ or ‘Islam’ miss the mark, as their constituent elements are coherent yet heterogeneous. Since Braudel’s seminal 1949 study, the Mediterranean (Med) — reaching into three continents — has been the classic example of a cultural sphere1-4. Despite not being homogeneous in terms of religions or ethnicities, intensive contact and exchange among the coastal regions since the Bronze Age shaped the geographical and cultural perception of its inhabitants, while falling short of constituting a common identity. The Med is dominated by a network of harbour cities and, since Late Antiquity, a common imperial past. The infrastructure, architecture and artistic languages of the Roman Empire have been taken up and transformed by its Christian and Islamic successors.

The premodern Med was characterized as much by migration, trade, interreligious dialogue and exchange of knowledge as it was by wars, epidemics and natural catastrophes. The periods of the ‘convivencia’ of the monotheistic religions are a major research focus, whether in the short-lived court of the Normans of Palermo in Sicily, Italy, or the century-long different forms on the Iberian Peninsula. Art-history research analyses the migration of forms and artefacts in the Med, and questions the processes of hybridization in the visual arts in relation to the inherent heterogeneity of the cultural sphere5.

BETWEEN THE MED AND CHINA

The Med cannot be seen in isolation from Asia. The geographical space between the Roman and Chinese empires constantly brought forth new powers, which created infrastructures for trade and supported mercantile exchange. Mongol power and its expansion since the thirteenth century is an example, inviting investigation of issues such as the degree of penetration of cultures through a dominating one, the survival of regional cultures, the creation of transregional centres, the coexistence and interrelations of nomadic and settled life, and the nature of transcultural trade and knowledge transfer. How do empires decay, what spheres are created, and how do they preserve the continuity of infrastructure within and without5?

EUROPE AS A CULTURAL SPHERE

The cultural sphere of Europe is younger than the Med and is defined by the geographical shape of a continent. Despite its small size, it has a surprising variety of languages and other differentiations. Modelled on antique ‘predecessors’ — the Greek Polis and Roman Empire — and created through frictions with the Med, Europe has recast itself at least twice: during the periods of Humanism and Enlightenment. Through colonial expansion, it has exported cultural concepts across the globe.

Italy was central in the creation of Europe. Radiating out from the remains of antique Italian buildings, art and manuscripts, a network of connections was laid across the continent over centuries, which established — despite demarcations invented by the drive towards nation states — a common European cultural heritage. This is most visible in the field of the arts, where, for example, the representational language of Roman early modern architecture created a Europe-wide accepted model6.

Similar developments led to Europe-wide similarities in legal systems, education and ideas of statehood7-9. Although complex, an interdisciplinary approach is rewarding in light of current challenges of globalization and resulting conflicts.

Over the past 65 years, the ‘European idea’ helped to master and defuse the national element within the political

The long-term ‘Mediterranean Art Histories’ project at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max Planck Institute) tries to overcome the traditional separation of Western, Byzantine and Islamic art history. It studies the artistic and cultural interactions in the Mediterranean world from late antiquity to the early modern period. The project does not see the Mediterranean as a self-sufficient world, but rather concentrates on the networks and dynamics of exchange among the Mediterranean, Central Asia and the Far East.
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CURRENT CHALLENGES IN LEGAL STUDIES

Research is currently directed towards questions about the parameters of historical discourse, such as the division of the Americas into three spheres, the convolution of geographical South America into one unit and the importance of the Pacific in the development of the Atlantic sphere. European canon law is used to investigate the transfer, transformation and reproduction of normative orders in Hispanic America. How did legal traditions established in Europe influence the transfer? What was the relationship between law and religion? Another focus is the emergence of national legal systems in post-Ottoman Southeastern Europe — not previously studied for historical, political and linguistic reasons. As older legal layers, such as common and moral laws, are mostly intact, scientists expect to find phenomena of multi-normative customs, layering and mutual penetration. During the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, emerging nation states looked to Western Europe as a model. Aiming for modernization, national unity and autonomy, these belated national dawns were accompanied by discrepancies, dissonances and different developmental speeds.

In Southeastern Europe and South America, research into the historical dimensions of the cultural sphere help to understand ongoing tensions between nation states, which often erupt in conflicts, such as the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Defining and appealing to cultural commonalities that transcend national borders might aid a nation-building process that does not have to resort to violent differentiation from a neighbour.