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Cultures of the Past and the Past in our Cultures

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There was recently a news item in circulation about a former secondary school teacher who gave up his job and without much ado within a brief space of time became a much sought after expert for innovative ideas. The creativity inherent in this job description is not his own, however. An avid reader of science fiction, he peruses his comprehensive science fiction library at home in search for answers to questions such as how we can improve public transport, how we can automate housework or how we ought to conceive of urban spaces in the future, and he offers his services to those who might be in need of inspiration. Thus, large companies ask him to compose reviews on what science fiction writers have had to say on these and other topics, and CEOs squat amidst and flick through the collected science fiction works in the hope of finding inspiration for new products.

This is a rare (and likely rather costly) method for the purpose of knowing which direction to take for future exploits. Most of us look to the past instead: in order to learn about what has been done in similar situations, to find help in assessing the present in light of tradition, as a justification for certain kinds of action, as a source for personal identity, as a myth to unify a divided people. This list is not exhaustive. The past has several “social functions”, as the late Eric Hobsbawm (1972) once put it, and it can be put to various uses. It is with all of us at all times “by virtue of living with people older than [our]selves” (Hobsbawm 1972: 3). Preceding the actions of isolated individuals, the past is manifest in institutions, cultural symbols and everyday practices. It can have a claim on our loyalty, it can restrict our action space, and it can prop us up, individually as well as collectively.

Thanks to the diligent work of chroniclers and scholars, the historical record provides a factual account of past events. How they transpired and who was involved in them may even be “set in stone”, as it were. The meaning of the past, however, is not fixed. Within the same culture, different narratives about the same historical era or event may exist in different strata of the population and at different periods of time. For since we always look to the past from our present perspective, the meaning of the past is affected by where we stand in social space and time. At the same time it is not only tied to (solid) artefacts (buildings, cars, clothes, ornaments etc.) but also to institutions such as schooling, the family, the military or the church. Vested interests seek to preserve these institutions in specific ways, and this may involve protecting a specific version of this institution’s

history. But institutions change amidst these struggles for meaning, as well. In other words, the meaning of the past is not only a social and cultural matter but also a political issue. As we can currently see in the Crimean crisis and as we have seen plenty of times in similar disputes, the political meanings of the past can be hotly contested as national boundaries are drawn and re-drawn with reference to different periods of time and different events in a region's history. Dealing with the past can quickly become sticky and complicated. One could say that the past is indeed "a foreign country" (Lowenthal 2005) to us which we need to discover and try to understand and whose tales and myths we appropriate and re-appropriate time and again.

The essays in this issue each in their own way focus on the complexities inherent in engaging the past as part of a quest for meaning: in terms of the discourses employed for this purpose (Hafsteinsson, Grétarsdóttir, Árnason), in providing crucial background information to interpretations of novel cultural practices (Ellerbrock) and in the context of changes in symbolic communication (Bednarek-Gilland, Eberlein).

Sigurjón Hafsteinsson, Tinna Grétarsdóttir, Arnar Árnason examine how various extant myths of new and old Icelandic national identity have been seized upon and valorised in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007 (Hafsteinsson, Grétarsdóttir, Árnason in this issue). Focusing in particular on how the causes of the crisis have been explained in public discourse, Hafsteinsson et al. "suggest that the events around *hrunið*, the collapse, and the linguistic forms of 'New Iceland' and 'Old Iceland' have, at least for now, taken on a similar significance [as crucial events leading to the establishment of Iceland as a sovereign nation-state, A.B.-G.] in the historical imagination in Iceland" (Hafsteinsson et al.: 24). Here, we can see the groping for meaning in the past in order to ascertain a specific national identity discourse amidst a crisis situation. Highlighting the especial role of language in meaning making, the authors insightfully discuss the policy implications which the various re-tellings of the crisis events and its causes involve. For example, if the financial crisis is conceived and spoken of as a natural disaster on par with volcanic eruptions and floods which is a strong strand in Icelandic debates on this issue, then, as a result "Iceland [is] an innocent victim in the financial crisis. We emphasise again how this works rhetorically because of the enduring power of the story of Icelanders as having long had to cope with and learn to survive in a harsh natural environment. The effect here is that the financial crisis is another example of natural disasters with which Icelanders have long had to deal" (Hafsteinsson et al.: 25). This version of events, then, preserves the notion that Icelanders possess mastery over nature and simultaneously absolves political leaders from the responsibility for reform. Not only do Hafsteinsson et al. provide a detailed and yet concise introduction to current debates in Icelandic politics and culture; I would expect that, furthermore, their essay inspires a renewed interest in how the financial crisis has been explained and dealt with in the other national economies affected by it.

Whilst Hafsteinsson et al. shed light on the discursive wrestling with the past in the context of pressing politico-cultural developments, Dagmar Ellerbrock focuses on the cultural practices of knife and later gun fighting during the 19th and up to the early 20th century and their significance in the gender order (Ellerbrock in this issue). Ellerbrock argues that knife and gun crime are integral elements in “doing masculinity” but that, due to technological change (the invention of the small handheld gun) the way masculinity was asserted in fights changed. During the 19th century, violent encounters between adolescent males involved an expert handling of the knife. Drawing on court records and cultural history, Ellerbrock explains that “the victory could be won by violating the enemy through the destruction of his clothes. Possession of the requisite courage to face battle was proven in a pure, noble fight and did not require serious bodily harm, though a little bit of blood was always welcome to prove the sincerity of the game” (Ellerbrock: 64). When the handheld gun became available, the artefacts used for doing masculinity rather than the cultural customs themselves changed (Ellerbrock: 66). What changed with this also is the toll in terms of fatal injuries: “The adolescents still aimed to prove their masculinity to one another via these fights [and] this still did not extend to hurting or even killing each other. This practice was already hard to learn with knives, but it was nearly impossible with modern firearms” (Ellerbrock: 66). Engaging historical material in order to shed light on the reasons behind the sudden rise of gun violence at the beginning of the 20th century, Ellerbrock highlights the impact of technological innovation on enduring cultural practices. Concluding that “in times of technological change and an emerging consumer culture the acquisition of masculine habitus naturally integrated new elements” (Ellerbrock: 67), Ellerbrock superbly draws attention to the interplay between continuity and discontinuity of cultural patterns.

This is also the main focus in the essay myself and Hermann-Peter Eberlein contribute to this issue (Bednarek-Gilland, Eberlein). We turn a historical-hermeneutical inquisitive glance at the recent changes in pastors’ attire in the German Protestant Church (EKD). Our starting point is the observation that the black academic gown which had formerly been the exclusive prescribed official attire of Protestant pastors is now competing with the white alb and the stole. This is an interesting development as both alb and stole which are widely worn within the Catholic Churches and by Anglicans had for specific theological reasons to do with the evolved meaning of these pieces of clothing not been used in Protestant churches since the Reformation. Appearance-wise, Protestant pastors as they are adopting old types of clothing in new ways are losing part of their sartorial identity. The concept of reclericalisation goes a long way towards explaining most of these changes. We define reclericalisation as “the reintroduction of traditional religious vestments and the concomitant renewed emphasis on distinctions in form and status between a kind of clerical estate and lay people on the one hand and, on the other hand, between higher-ranking religious officials and lower-ranking ones” (Bednarek-Gilland, Eberlein: 49). Notwithstanding the fact that today items

of clothing are combined in entirely novel ways, innovation therefore playing an important role in reclericalisation, the reclericalising shift is mainly justified by reference to venerable traditions from pre-Reformation times. This status-increasing development in official clothing is mirrored in Protestant pastors' informal wear, i.e. in the way they dress "off duty".

The essays in this volume advance the question of how we engage (with) the past from different disciplinary vantage points. Hafsteinsson et al. combine a discourse-analytical perspective with a cultural studies focus and evince the resourcefulness of anthropological analysis of contemporary culture. Ellerbrock who is a historian working on violence and gender utilises a different kind of source material, namely magistrate court records and criminal statistics, to make her argument. Her analysis thus bears similarity with the historical-sociological work of Durkheim and Elias. Bednarek-Gilland and Eberlein draw on formal church regulations and official church records and complement these with Bourdieusian cultural analysis. Ultimately, then, the discussion on the topic of cultures of the past as it is presented here is an interdisciplinary one in the best sense of the term, i.e. as widening a debate to multiple voices in the hope of enriching the extant discourses on the topic at hand. It is for this reason, too, that these essays are well suited to the aims of "Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica".

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Bibliography

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