

# MEMOREG

## History and Memory — the Regional Dimension

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For about two decades now, *lieux de mémoire* / *Erinnerungsorte* / *luoghi della memoria* etc. have been a very influential paradigm in the historical sciences and notably their diffusion to a wider audience. The quite voluminous collective works on the places (or *topoi*) of national history and memory have been astoundingly successful in terms of both book market distribution and academic resonance. It is fair to say that they have put a lasting mark on scientific progress, in that it has become quite impossible to work on either 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century historical consciousness or the history of historiography of any period, including pre-modern ones, without recourse to the concept of the shaping and re-modelling of historical knowledge by nationalising and ‘nation-building’ processes. It would be otiose here to rehearse the different forms this awareness has taken (expositions, publications etc.) Suffice it to say that ‘Myths of Nations’ or similar concepts need no explanation or justification today.

In all this, interest has been primarily, indeed almost exclusively, on the national level. This is quite understandable, since the main point at issue has been the importance of historical ‘myths’ (or master narratives, *grands récits*) in the making of modern national states. It was predominantly through national agency, from school systems to festivities, monuments etc. that such ‘myths’ took shape; likewise, non-official agency such as embodied by national associations, book markets, the mass media etc. have been, and continue to be, organised mainly along national lines – indeed, they have more often than not been instrumental in bringing the national states into political existence (Germany and Poland being two obvious examples, but there are others).

It now would seem that this paradigm, due to its very success, has outrun its course. The huge ERC project ‘Interpretations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe’ (2003–2008) appears as a milestone in this respect. We propose no continuation into the same direction, which would be unoriginal, nor a ‘roll-back’ on the success the study of national history/memory has had, which would be presumptuous as well as preposterous, but its

modification and clarification by way of focusing on the regional level, which has so far been neglected.

- (i) Regions have occasionally been discussed in previous research and dissemination. The impression is, however, that this occurred by and large subsidiary to the national level, i.e. the focus was on regions when these became meaningful to the national 'whole'. Examples, the Schleswig question to German and Danish national histories; Silesia to Germany and Poland, South Tyrolia to Austria/Germany and Italy respectively. Regions 'unproblematical' in the national narratives, such as Westphalia (safe within Germany) or Burgundy (within France) etc., have had no part in the master narratives.

This network accepts the assumption that this is more than a 'lacuna' which ought to be filled for the sake of comprehensiveness or fairness. Rather, by looking at the overlooked dynamics of history and memory in European regions, some seemingly clear-cut and unproblematical certainties of the national discourse will be called into question, while other highly problematical cases (bipolar frontier regions) may appear more complex and at the same time less 'cleft' than is normally assumed.

- (ii) While it is a *sine qua non* in present-day research to point out that national histories must not be written 'teleologically' (that is, the outcome of any such narrative was neither obvious nor inevitable from the outset), it is not always easy to follow this position through. For one thing, many present-day historians will, in spite of deconstructionism, find it hard to discard such narratives as – to name just one example from my own field, Medieval History – that there was some kind of continuity between High Medieval Roman Emperors and 'German' Kings, and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century German nation-state. For another, the weight of facticity of the modern nation-states in the shape they actually have taken makes it very hard to divest oneself of the historians' retrospective omniscience in dealing with the many competing narratives (or myths) of the formative period. To keep myself to the example, it has become a part of the narrative of the course of German nation-building to highlight such precursors of later nationalism (for better or worse) as Ernst Moritz Arndt, whose visions by and large correspond to later actual development. Much less-known are alternative visions, such as Low German nationalism, which suggested a national state stretching (to quote a phrase current around 1850) 'from Dunkirk to Königsberg' but excluding present-day Central and South Germany. So long as nation-building in Central Europe was still going on, this concept was in no way less (ore more) obviously 'right' than the inclusion of present-day Northern Germany but not the Netherlands into a Greater Germany which, due to contingent factors, is what has happened. In other word, regional myths/ narratives about history, language, culture, religion etc. have a lot to teach us about the 'dead

ends' of history, and their importance to the understanding of the few among many options that have turned out to materialise. This is no exercise in counterfactual history but a sharpening of the awareness of contingency.

This research can possibly have some considerable *impact* on present and future EU policy. The role of the regions, the question of their place in the top-down vs. subsidiarity models, is a topic of constant debate. Serious research has been carried out about a future spatial organisation of a regionalised EU whose regions might cut across present-day national boundaries (Heineken Foundation, Amsterdam). While such concepts at present seem to have little chance of implementation, the future role of the national states and of the regional level within the EU is an open question. It might be quite maningful to supply policy makers with the findings of a project that addresses

- (i) the question of the cultural resources/options within regions which a future reorganisation could draw on
- (ii) the question of how problems within existing regions can be better understood and more effectively dealt with.