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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

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Heidelberg, 15 January 2008

International Conference: “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual”

(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)

Key impulses from historical studies: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and breaks new ground in the research.

The Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Dynamics of Ritual” (SFB 619) at Heidelberg University is holding an international conference “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual” from 29 September till 2 October 2008. Experts from around the world have been invited to Heidelberg to discuss their current findings and present them to a wider audience. Renowned historians such as Professors Gerd Althoff and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (Münster), and Folker Reichert (Stuttgart) have already agreed to participate. With this conference, SFB 619 aims to expand and consolidate its interdisciplinary approach.

Set up in 2002, SFB 619 is the largest research centre worldwide dedicated solely to the subject of rituals and their dynamics. At present, nineteen projects are being conducted by over 90 researchers from the fields of Anthropology of South Asia, Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern History, Assyriology, Classical and Modern Indology, Comparative Religion, Egyptology, the History of East Asian Art, the History of South Asia, Islamic Studies, Medical Psychology, Musicology, and Theology. The centre performs pure research with the aim of developing theories with cross-cultural validity, and presenting explanatory models for the socio-cultural significance of ritual action, as for instance in the legitimisation of power or creation of identity, in crisis therapy, or the maintenance of order.

Around 250 experts will present the results of their research at the conference and put them up for discussion, including such famous names in the field of ritual studies as Ronald Grimes (Ontario/Nijmegen), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), Alexis Sanderson (Oxford), Frits Staal (Berkeley), and James Laidlaw (Cambridge). The interdisciplinary teamwork will first be focused on twenty-one panels, lasting in some cases several days. Not only will the latest research approaches be presented, such as “ritual economics”, “ritual design” and “scientific rituals”, and new topic areas discussed, such as intercultural ritual transfer, “ritual agency”, and the connection between rituals and the new media – vital impulses will also be provided by the many historians present.

Bernd Schneidmüller, Professor for Mediaeval and Recent History at the University of Heidelberg, will chair the panel on “Rituals of Power and Consensus” and explore the question of how far rituals and ritualised behaviour shape social order in politics and society. Rituals of power and consensus not only reflect patterns of social order, but generate them too - as is especially evident at the transition points between political

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planning and the hegemonic imagination. This section will present the efficacy and evolution of political rituals in pre-modern communities. Cultural comparisons will allow an analysis of the codes of formal behaviour for presenting power and negotiating consensus, and an evaluation of the historical force constituted by ritual dynamics.

Gerald Schwedler, research fellow at the Historisches Seminar, University of Zurich, and co-author of the book *Die Welt der Rituale* (2005, WBG), will chair the panel "Usurping Rituals", which will examine cases in point from ancient Babylon to the 20th century to determine how, and whether, rituals are employed as instruments of conquest to legitimise power and rule, and the dynamics that this entails. Changes in power are inconceivable without ritual manifestations of the same, whether in traditional form or newly created. They serve to emblazon political structures, or indeed as means to create political and social networks or to foster their acceptance. Copy, change, or discard - regardless how a new regime deals with handed-down rituals, the dynamic relationship between ritual and power demands investigation.

New for historians and many of the participating disciplines will be the insight that quite familiar procedures or actions, or even performative artworks can be viewed as rituals. Important new impulses will be sought here from those who straddle the sciences and ritual practice. The daily breaks and evening activities will serve as informal platforms for discussions. In order to underscore the social relevance of ritual research, SFB 619 also wishes to communicate the topics of its research over and beyond the academic framework, particularly through its accompanying programme.

The official period for registration begins on 15 February 2008. All those who are interested can find the relevant information at www.rituals-2008.com and sign up for the conference newsletter.

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