The 'ETHNIC TURN' in the EARLY MIDDLE AGES and its CONSEQUENCES

The origins of many European peoples go back to some time between the 4th and the 10th century: the French, Germans, English and Irish, Swedish and Danes, Croats and Serbs, Poles and Czechs, Hungarians and Bulgarians and many more. However, the Early Middle Ages did not only see the rise of numerous peoples that later developed into modern nations, which have dominated the political landscape up until the present. The same period also marks the beginning of the western way of thinking about peoples. Ethnic identities became the basis of political power and individual self-perception. In this respect, Europe occupies a unique position, comprising a great diversity of stable countries defined by Ethnic identities. Of course, this does not mean ethnic uniformity, which has never existed, not even after a century of nationalism and, in some parts, forced unification. Yet, most countries have adopted the name of their inhabitants (or the other way round as in the case of Italy and Spain) and base their legitimacy on the people. This was different in most other cultural areas in world history (as in Roman Antiquity, the Islamic World or India). The roots of this development lie in the Early Middle Ages but, to date, hardly any research has been undertaken on the subject in its broader context. This is what I mean by the term "ethnic turn". It is at the heart of the Wittgenstein Prize Project, in the course of which a group of young historians are conducting extensive source studies to get further insight into the role of ethnic identities between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

So far, the discussion led by social and cultural scientists on identities has hardly taken account of the Early Middle Ages. Even those debating whether nations are modern have shown little interest in this period. Presumably, this is one of the weak points of many debates held about the evolution of society: modernity is opposed to an archaic or premodern world in a rather global way that is illustrated eclectically with results achieved by ethnology and with ideas about the Middle Ages, some of which have been obsolete for quite some time.

As I would like to demonstrate, the Early Middle Ages offer methodical possibilities as a field of research that might be of interest to other disciplines as well. One of the reasons for the significance of this period is that the Early Middle Ages in Europe provide highly valuable memory resources for national identification. Moreover, it was in the Early Middle Ages that the specifically Christian and Western way of thinking and negotiating about ethnic identities and, most importantly, putting them to use on a political level was conceived. Last but not least, exemplary studies about this period enable us to follow long-term ethnic processes several over the centuries. Almost as in a social science laboratory, we can observe the formation, crises and loss of identity under various circumstances: autochthony and migration, war and peace, foreign rule and autonomy, state or decentralized forms of organisation, prevalence or lack of writing, scarcely populated steppes or multi-ethnic metropolises, ethnic ideologies and universalistic tendencies or even the flight from identities (as in early monasticism). Although sources do not abound, we can reconstruct the discourse on identity in some of its forms.

The populations of medieval kingdoms were made up of a considerable diversity of ethnic groups, which was hardly ever considered an urgent problem. In the Frankish kingdom, for instance, the Franks at first belonged to a tiny minority. The Early Middle Ages were a period of gradual adaptation on both sides. The ruling class of Frankish warriors began to speak the language of the majority, who in turn slowly assumed the name of the ruling group. Similarly, the Bulgarian steppe warriors were assimilated into the Slavic majority of the population. Contemporary authors hardly took account of these changes and used names for ethnic groups in an entirely ambivalent way. Political actions of a king or a small group of leaders carried out on behalf of the people were not generally distinguished from the people as an entity and the territory it occupied. However, the assimilation of different population groups in the Middle Ages did not create homogenous peoples but new social and regional groups. Multiple identities were also easily possible. We can see the complexity of these processes of identity formation from the various names given to the German people in different languages: Deutsche, Allemands, Tedeschi, Nemci (the mute), Saksa. Ruling on an ethnical basis was highly successful, mainly because the system remained flexible enough to make possible gradual integration or at least the precarious cohabitation of different population groups. Only when nationalism was on the rise in the 19th century were the ethnic roots of nations used as ideological resources in the pursuit of ethnic purity. In the Middle Ages, this hardly ever happened in spite of the examples set by the Old Testament.

Most medieval authors seemed to accept as a fact that, despite the construction of ethnic unity, in reality diversity prevailed. This knowledge was excluded from modern historiography only temporarily. Of course, we should now avoid to take the other extreme and presuppose that ethnic bonds were completely random and irrelevant or that cohabitation in heterogeneous societies was free of any conflicts. However, the fact that things did not happen on their own accord but a constant effort to achieve balance was necessary on a cognitive and political level is exactly why we can learn a lot from medieval European history. Depending on the amount of sources available, it can help us understand the conflict-ridden relationship between the actual diversity of the population and the efforts made to symbolically integrate communities. In order to achieve that, people have always been active remembering, making use of memory resources, interpreting, negotiating, reshaping and handing on. In our attempt to understand the past, we have been benefiting from the efforts devoted by many generations before us to establish a history both distinct and uniting. We must be critical of today's views and simplifications as well as of the sources from the past. Nevertheless, we can go on to try and understand the reasons and motives for these developments – for the past and for the present.

FWF — WITTGENSTEIN PROJEKT P — INSTITUT FÜR MITTELALTERFORSCHUNG — ÖAW