

Origin Myths: Challenges of Interpretation

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Since the 1980s, early medieval historiography has undergone a wave of deconstruction, being credited with little credibility as historical sources. Even more, origin myths have been dismissed not only for their factual information, but also as indirect witnesses of indigenous constructions of identity. The article reopens the debate acknowledging the inspiring challenge of constructivism, but also questioning the new ontology that has spread in its simplifying reception. Using a number of methodological and philosophical approaches, it raises the question to what extent the past is only accessible as a construct, and who are the constructors. Referring to Waldenfels' phenomenology, it argues that »the other« is not simply a construct of the sovereign self, but that the challenge of the alien is prior to its construction. That may also explain that many origin myths hardly offer positive models of identification, but are full of conflicts, failures and ambivalent figures. Foreignness and diversity are not only constructions of the self, but they are also deep experiences of a foregoing reality. Epistemologically, past diversity that we study is indeed always constructed, and all written sources are already the result of such constructions. Methodologically, therefore, the constructivist perspective needs to be maintained. As the article argues, we just have to avoid ontologising it. The ontological basis is human diversity. The epistemological goal is to understand how people deal with that challenge, and how identities and differences keep changing as a result.

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Whether origin narratives had an origin is difficult to say. Their creation seems to have happened everywhere, and they are indeed quite well preserved from relatively early on in human history. Taken together they provide us with a rich variety of how different societies and cultures reflected on the questions of what made them belong together. It seems as impossible to reconstruct the origin of origin myths or stories as one a coherent history, just as it seems

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impossible not to explore them as constitutive elements of human societies. In many cases such narratives concern not only the origin of a specific group, people, kingdom empire, or religion, but also the origins of mankind itself. In doing so, they tend to define humanity by what it is not – by its distinction from the non-human, the inhuman, the divine, the worlds of animals, plant life, or machines and so forth.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus creates mankind from mud and water, setting them apart from animals in giving them an upright posture to be able to look to heaven. In the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, the first human, Enkidu, is created from clay but lives among and like beasts before his real humanization through a six-day period of intimacy with the temple prostitute Shammat.¹ In Chinese anthropogonic myths, the creation of mankind also addresses the origins of social stratification. In the Chinese story of Nuwa's creation of human beings, for instance, she too created humans by forming figures with her own hands from yellow clay. Since shaping them by hand was too time-consuming, she dipped a vine into the mud and splashed droplets onto the ground. Each droplet turned into a person, and while the figures carefully shaped by hand became the nobility, the people formed from the mud splashes turned into the lower strata of society.² In a popular Tibetan origin myth, a monkey pairs up with a lustful rock-demoness, and their offspring eventually develops into humans – the Tibetans.³ Many anthropogonic narratives are similarly further developed into reflections about the specific humanity of particular communities allowing to distinguish one from the other.⁴ In doing so, universal origins are always shaped or at least inflected by specific historical circumstances and power relations, and by their corresponding boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.⁵ This, however, is not only true for the various narratives themselves but also for their further study and reflections about these origin stories up to modern historiography.

The historiography of our own research field, the late antique and medieval West, from the heydays of modern nationalism in the 19th century onwards provides particularly illustrative examples for how origin myths continue to stay connected to processes of identification as well as reflections about them. From the beginning of history as a professional discipline in Europe, the study of origin myths was closely connected to efforts to reconstruct the continuity of early medieval communities such as the Goths, Franks, or Longobards, whose kingdoms were established as more or less ethnically defined realms on the territories of the former

1 *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tables 1-2., trans. George, 1-21.

2 Goldin, *The myth that China has no creation myth*, 11 and references to other translations, n. 45. I would like to thank Xin Wen, Princeton, and Trenton Wilson, Princeton, for advice.

3 Langelaar, *Chasing the colours of the rainbow*.

4 Leeming, *Dictionary of Creation Myths*.

5 The inbuilt contradiction or aporia of reflections on humanity between its constitution as universal and distinctive at the same time and its relation to the production of anthropological differences is one of the main themes in the work of Étienne Balibar; for a recent introduction to his work see Stoler, Gourgouris and Lezra (eds.), *Thinking with Balibar* for a recent discussion by Balibar himself, *On universals. Constructing and deconstructing community*; *idem*, *Rasse, Geschlecht, Gattung*; and *idem*, *The genealogical scheme*.

Western Roman Empire, with the modern European nations.⁶ Early medieval origin myths that have come down to us from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages were interpreted as representing the ethnic mentality of early medieval peoples that came to replace the constitutionalism of the Roman empire. Hence, the interpretation of medieval origin stories in Europe became closely linked to the often-controversial debates about the role of ethnicity and identity in the formation of the post-Roman kingdoms. Did origin myths matter for ethnic identities, and did ethnicity matter for the people concerned? In the context of such questions, the role of ethnic origin narratives in early medieval Europe has again received considerable interest since the turn of the millennium.⁷

The more recent and increasingly post-modern critique of the modern »myths of nations«⁸ has gone so far as to disconnect these stories from any historical reality, pushing them into the sphere of solely speculative reflection, ahistorical reproduction of literary or ethnographic tropes, or fiction. Our position is different. While we agree with the necessity of the critique and deconstruction of older and newer nationalist or racist appropriations of early medieval origin myths, we would rather suggest to ask how origin stories arise and why. Pursuing such questions must, to a certain extent, leave the field of classical historiographical methods. Despite all the tools adopted from linguistics, sociology, and literary studies, the historiographical methods remain at the level of source description, no matter how sophisticated this may be. These sources are evidence of individual and collective mental operations that produce ultimate meaning-giving concepts of the world. »Collective identities« is one of these concepts, and a very important, ubiquitous and persistent one, although the term is a modern one.

The question of the formation of origin stories is therefore a question of the origin of precisely such meaning-giving mental and social operations. Hence, the question of the origins of origin stories will lead us not only to questions of historical text or source critique. They were and are also connected to fundamental epistemological, philosophical and anthropological issues such as the question what distinguishes the human from the non-human, which could also provide a matrix that allowed to distinguish between humans, and to assess where they belonged. Without considering this ensemble of questions, our historical critique would not be able to match the historical complexities of the production, reproduction and dissemination of origin myths. To do so seems to us even more important in a time of resurfacing nationalism, race making, and the (re-)naturalization of cultural, religious and gender boundaries, whose success builds on the seeming familiarity of older and long-held assumptions. The long history of such assumptions in European medieval historiography may well make

6 Historiography: Wood, *The Modern Origins*; for the history, Pohl, *Völkerwanderung*; Halsall, *Barbarian migrations*, Wood, *Transformation*; and the discussion in: Pohl and Wieser, Introduction: The Emergence of New Polities.

7 For instance, Christensen, *Cassiodorus, Jordanes and the History of the Goths* (2002); Pohl (ed.), *Suche nach den Ursprüngen* (2004); Plassmann, *Origo gentis* (2006); Geary, *Women at the Beginning* (2006); Coumert, *Origines des peuples* (2007); Bernsen, Becher and Brüggem (eds.), *Gründungsmythen Europas* (2013); Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past* (2015); Pohl and Mahoney (eds.), *Narratives of Ethnic and Tribal Origins* (2018); Brady and Wadden (eds.), *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe* (2022); Brady, *The Origin Legends* (2022).

8 Geary, *Myths of Nations*.

such trends more virulent and influential. It may therefore be useful for readers of this collection of essays on Eurasian origin myths who are not acquainted with the debates on origin myths in European history to give a brief outline of the historiography as the background for the more general methodological aspects of the study of origin myths that we would like to outline in this introduction.

Historiography: Ontologies and Their Deconstructions

For a long time, debates focused on binary alternatives; and the different axes of analysis were rarely distinguished: »Authentic« and indigenous myth vs. erudite fabrication and outside perception; emic vs. etic production of a story; oral vs. written transmission, codified vs. flexible texts; and relevance of these texts for self-identification of a group vs. their dubious, purely literary character disconnected of the political reality of the community. The problem with these axes is twofold: For a long time, debates focused on binary alternatives; and the different axes of analysis were rarely distinguished.

The traditional position of *Germanische Altertumskunde* (Studies in Germanic Antiquity) aimed for the reconstruction of authentic Germanic myths, which represented orally transmitted, essentially unchanging traditions that came directly from the soul of the Germanic people and expressed their innermost feeling of belonging.⁹ The elements of this authentic mythology had to be washed out of the texts like golden nuggets. They could be verified and contextualised in the much wider mythology of the Icelandic sagas which were transmitted more than half a millennium later, in the 12th and 13th centuries.¹⁰ There are indeed obvious parallels. For instance, the Longobards were supposed to have received their names from Wodan and Frea, who can be identified with the Nordic gods Odin and Freya or Frigga.¹¹ Furthermore, this story about the Longobards can be connected to old Norse texts that attribute a long beard to Odin, who occasionally receives the epithets *Síðskeggr* or *Langbarðr*. On the other hand, the connection could also be reversed; the Nordic authors of the period may have had a good Latin education, could have read Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* (used, among others, in the Danish history by Saxo Grammaticus in c. 1200), and may have included *Langbarðr* in the long list of epithets of Odin, as Robert Nedoma suggested.¹² The grandiose edifice of *Germanische Altertumskunde* was, in any case, built on patchy evidence.

These debates had both an ideological and a paradigmatic context. Since the 19th century German nationalism had laid much weight on the Germanic origins of the nation, and on the heroic past of the migration period. The wide-ranging migrations of Goths and Longobards could serve as a model for expansive politics and for the presumptions of racial superiority of the Germanic/Nordic race, culminating in the Nazi period. This nationalistic discourse relied on an essentialist and naturalist paradigm: Which ethnic group or nation one belonged to was

9 Klaus von See, *Deutsche Germanenideologie*.

10 Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*.

11 *Origo gentis Langobardorum* 1, ed. Bethmann and Waitz, 2; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 7-9; *ibid.* 52; see the article by Walter Pohl and Pavlína Rychterová, in this volume.

12 Nedoma, *Der altisländische Odinsname*.

determined by biology and/or by a shared »Volksseele« (soul of the people).¹³ After 1945, this ideology and its points of reference in history were gradually dismantled, not least by historians writing in German.¹⁴ The first wave of critique mainly addressed the racist ideologies as the foundation of previous Germanic studies. That was mainly the achievement of Reinhard Wenskus in the 1960s, who showed that the late antique and early medieval evidence does not warrant any racial or biological definition of Germanic tribes (he avoided the term *Volk* that was central in Nazi propaganda). In his view, a small, influential core group of a distinct society (*Traditionskern*, kernel of tradition) which preserved ancient norms and narratives could act as a catalyst for the formation of an ethnic group.¹⁵ This model maintained some weaknesses of older research, for instance, assuming strong textual continuity of key oral traditions, ascribing agency to a narrow male elite, and regarding this process as a characteristically Germanic form of »gentile«, ethnic consciousness. At the time, however, it opened new avenues for research. Building on this model, Herwig Wolfram showed the dynamic character of »ethnogenesis«, and its Roman, not only Germanic context.¹⁶

How far the demolition of »the Germanic« should go, however, remained controversial. Many scholars pushed toward the other end of the spectrum: The texts in question were regarded as literary fiction written by Romans only, without any basis in actual oral lore, completely malleable to the intentions of the authors and without any visible impact on ethnic identities. To some, speaking of »tradition« or »ethnicity« in the context of post-Roman kingdoms already perpetuated nationalist and racist ideologies.¹⁷ Several authors have therefore denied that these texts contain any traces of indigenous legends, or that they mattered at all for identity formation.¹⁸ Patrick Amory, for instance, claimed that the well-attested use of the ethnonym »Goths« in Ostrogothic Italy was not an ethnic identification, but just an »ethnographic ideology« which did not create community, it created political opportunity. No-one in Ostrogothic Italy attaches a belief in common descent to the words Goths and Romans.¹⁹ As usual with such clamorous deconstructions of ethnic identities, this argument only works if you define a »real« people by its common blood. Yet this case shows well that the outdated essentialist definition of ethnicity makes no sense: If Goths consistently act and represent themselves as Goths and are regarded as such by Romans and others, they are an ethnic group regardless of their genetic ancestry, i.e. »blood«.²⁰ It is far-fetched to argue that an origin narrative of an ethnic group was irrelevant to that group's identity, and

13 Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*.

14 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*; Beck (ed.), *Germanenprobleme*; Pohl, *Germanen*.

15 Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*.

16 Wolfram, *Goten*.

17 Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*. Even Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past*, who shows (against Goffart) that »barbarian« historiography in Latin has a lot in common with vernacular epic, shies away from allowing for its relevance for identity.

18 Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*; Gillett (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity*.

19 Amory, *People and Identity*, 316-317.

20 Pohl, *Gotische Identitäten*; Pohl, *Strategies of Identification*.

it contradicts much of recent research on cultural memory.²¹ To an extent, however, it was still the critique and fear of Nazi ideology that triggered an attempt to remove all possible historical arguments which could be misused for it once and forever.

The essentialist paradigm was not only criticised by ancient and early medieval historians. On a theoretical level and in the Social Sciences, constructivism offered an alternative that has eventually become mainstream in Humanities research.²² It argued that ethnic and other large social groups had to be imagined at first to become real.²³ This approach was radicalized by postmodern deconstructionism, claiming that ultimately there was no reality outside the text.²⁴ That created a powerful impulse to deconstruct former concepts and terminologies, and undermine established master narratives. It helped to realise that scholars had taken many things for granted that were in fact modern projections not based on the sources. Yet it gradually turned into a new routine that placed more trust in its theoretical models than in the source texts. By blurring the distinction between historical reality and social memory, it had become difficult to historicize either of them, because the first had become inaccessible, and the second was locked in its presentist and intertextual dimensions.²⁵

In Medieval History, this deconstructive spin was strangely coupled with traditional positivist scepticism in denying that narrative sources could tell us much about past realities. The refusal to acknowledge any indigenous element or form of ethnic identification in origin narratives derived much of its impact from this deconstructivist spin: Not only origin myths, but early medieval historiography as a whole had largely been written to deceive. And textual traces of ethnic identities were regarded as particularly deceptive.²⁶ In fact, as the sociologist Andreas Wimmer noted, »Constructivism as an epistemological stance (...) is sometimes confounded with an ontological statement about the nature of empirical reality: that ethnicity is inherently ephemeral and unstable.«²⁷ The ontological claim that all groups and identities are necessarily fluid is usually connected to the assumption that what is fluid can never be »real«. In this way, Benedict Anderson's constructivist approach – that communities had to be imagined to become real – was mistaken for an ontological statement that ethnic and other communities were only imaginary.²⁸ This was in a sense a paradox intellectual development because postmodernism had entered the scene as a critique of Western ontology (or ontologies), of the conceptual foundations of modernity. However, it was Jacques Derrida himself who had boldly stated that there was no reality outside the text.²⁹ He may not have understood this as an ontological affirmation, but as a play of »différences«, continuous shifts of differences. Yet in its reception by historians, this assertion clearly acquired an ontological

21 Assmann, *Cultural Memory*.

22 Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*.

23 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

24 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

25 For a recent critique, see Schaub, *Le passé ne s'invente pas*.

26 Cf. Pohl, Debating ethnicity.

27 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 3.

28 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Pohl, Ethnicity, race and genetic ancestry.

29 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

value: communities, identities, ethnicity only existed in texts. In contemporary Western society, in which intellectuals enjoy considerable freedom of expression but have limited access to power and resources, such an approach offered the seductive illusion that by producing texts we intellectuals did not only construct reality, but were in fact the ones who had a share in the »real world« of texts, and could shape discourses that could change the course of history. The power of words would, for instance, deprive atavistic ethnic, national and racial divisions of their incidence. Unfortunately, we can already observe that this was a noble illusion.

Epistemologies and Their Constructions

However that may be: As an ontological paradigm, insisting that social reality does not »really« exist may make sense in Buddhist philosophy, but not as a guideline to historical method, and in fact few scholars have explicitly tried to establish it as such. The arguments were rarely ontological but epistemological; written sources were classed as »opaque barriers« between us and the past, about which they could not provide verifiable evidence. For such claims, it was often sufficient to find some bias or mistake in a text to dismiss it as unreliable. In a next step, that supposed lack of evidence could then be used for ontological statements about the past, for instance, that ethnicity did not exist or did not matter in the past society in consideration. Those were conclusions about which progressive deconstructionists and traditional positivists could agree.

What came closest to a general methodological approach was Hayden White's critique of historical writing, past or present, which he regarded as mere »fiction of fact«.³⁰ That was a useful point of departure for a literary analysis of historical texts and the ways in which they could achieve credibility, and it offered some additional refinement to historical source critique. As a paradigm for historical research, however, it rather replaced than refined the systematic critique of the sources. It did not go beyond the rather crude positivist distinction between intrinsically unreliable narrative texts and reliable documentary sources. Such an approach fell far behind Foucault's discourse analysis, which incorporated both within inclusive discourse formations, still one of the lasting achievements of poststructuralism.³¹

The frequent misunderstandings of constructivism and its unreflected ontological uses do not warrant abandoning it as a paradigmatic approach in the study of past societies.³² Yet it should be restored to an ontology which assumes that the result of construction was social reality. In this form, deconstructionism as a critical method also remains valid as a tool for dismantling essentialising concepts and master narratives. However, the ontological basis requires further discussion. A fundamental question is whether and under which conditions social reality exists prior to and without construction, and how exactly we conceive of the process of construction. Who constructs? Critical uses of constructivism often assume that »the elites«, whether of power or knowledge, construct and impose the reality under which

30 White, *Content of the Form*.

31 Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*.

32 For a more radical refutation of constructivism see Hoeres, *Perspektiven für eine postkonstruktivistische Geschichtswissenschaft*, who advocates the return to what he calls a »postconstructivist« methodology. On this discussion, see also Haas and Wischermann (eds.), *Wirklichkeit der Geschichte*.

the subaltern masses (i.e. individuals sharing an inability to differentiate and reflect on their daily experience) live, whether or not this construction was actually pervasive enough to determine their lives completely. This may be an important tool in the critique of power relations. On the other hand, as Foucault assumed, power relations and the production of discourse involve all levels of society. Male or white dominance is not simply an elite phenomenon. To what extent do people construct themselves, and only exist through this construction? What is imposed by dominant forces, by contingency or by environmental conditions? It seems that in historical research we need an ontology that allows for realities that are not just constructions, although we also need an epistemology that acknowledges that the story-worlds of all our written sources inevitably have been constructed.

That is not a new debate. In Latin Europe during the Middle Ages, for example, among the circles of the ecclesiastical elite, the perception of the world as a construct of human consciousness in relation to divine truth and plan was a key intellectual issue.³³ Philosophical and theological systems of the major religions of the pre-modern era all focused on the question of the relationship between human consciousness and the »real« world. Modern historiography should acknowledge this and incorporate the ability of contemporaries to theorize the relationship between perception and reality into its own reflections on social constructions. This is particularly true for the social constructions of identities, because these drew on the entire philosophical and theological repertoire available to contemporaries in the individual cultures. Historiography would therefore do well to incorporate its own epistemological presuppositions, i.e., philosophical-theoretical concepts, into its analytical approaches on a (self-)reflective level.

A further problem is that the ontology that is constitutive of our research, and shapes our epistemologies, is Western, and has developed not only in the context of enlightenment, but also of colonialism and racial thinking. Postcolonial Theory³⁴, Decolonialism³⁵ and Critical Premodern Race Studies³⁶ have provided an impulse for giving different epistemologies (for instance, indigenous ones) a voice. In archaeology, inspired by recent debates in anthropology, the »ontological turn« advocates opening up the interpretation of the archaeological record to indigenous ontologies, and exploring different »theories and experiences of what exists«.³⁷ This is an approach that may also be useful for research on origin myths. Modern Western ontology relies on the assumption that human beings cannot be descended from wolves or monkeys (as the Turkic resp. Tibetan origin myths claim), and that a god of war

33 From Augustine of Hippo's reception of Platonic philosophy to later Christian theology, through Boethius to Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, medieval theology grappled with the question of the relationship between human consciousness, God, and the world. The extensive secondary literature on the individual questions of this theological and philosophical discourse cannot be discussed in detail here.

34 Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*; Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*; Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*; Hahn (ed.), *Cultural History of Race*.

35 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Vallega, *Latin American Philosophy*.

36 Heng, *Invention of Race*.

37 Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, *Introduction: Thinking through things*; Paleček and Risjord, *Relativism and the ontological turn*; Harris, and Cipolla, *Archaeological Theory*, 182.

such as Wodan cannot give victory in battle.³⁸ We should acknowledge that people in the past followed different ontologies, and that can tell us something about their mindset and motivations. Trust in Wodan may indeed be a valuable asset when risking one's life in battle. That also implies being aware of the historical context and limitations of our own scientific ontology; but it does not mean abandoning or de-legitimising it, because it offers the rare opportunity to critically monitor our own mindset and methodology.

Constructions of Identity: Process, Agency and Relation

What does that mean for origin myths and their role in the construction of identities? The first step should be to abandon the a-priori assumption that modes of identification such as ethnicity, race or religion do not exist but are »just« constructed, and return to the constructivist model by which social construction leads (or can lead) to social realities. Rogers Brubaker's critique of »groupism«, the tendency of taking social groups for granted and reifying them as fixed entities with collective agency in the social field, should be taken seriously, but not read as an axiom that groups do not »really« exist. Brubaker's definition is much more precise: »groupism« is »the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis.«³⁹ In research, we can depart from the assumption that social groups are moving targets, they do not stay the same over an extended period of time: »Franks« could mean rather different things in the course of their history, and during their transition to »the French«.⁴⁰ Tracing the dynamic of their construction is a key task of identity research. To whom did it matter to be a Frank, when, and how much? It often conferred access to resources and privilege. If a Frank was killed, his relatives received twice the compensation as for a dead Roman, so it made a difference.⁴¹

This leads to a further issue with constructivism as used in historical studies. On the one hand, constructivism is especially suited for studying history because there can be little doubt that all our written sources represent constructions of the realities they describe; they are only »real« as texts and in their material existence as manuscripts or inscriptions. However, does that mean that (for instance) identities have to be constructed before they come into existence? Benedict Anderson's argument was that social groups that stretch beyond the everyday reality of a face-to-face group needed to be imagined to become real, and empirical observations about the formation of nations (his topic) surely support this view.⁴² However, the constructions historians work with are invariably posterior, retrospective. Whether or not what our sources report actually happened, was successively rehashed or an outright invention, it is always a thing in the past. In the case of origin narratives, it happened long ago. That does not only raise the question whether narratives go back to the time of writing,

38 See the contributions by Pohl and Rychterová and by Wabnitz, in this volume, and Langelaar, *Chasing the colours of the rainbow*.

39 Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, 164.

40 Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing*.

41 Esders, Roman law.

42 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

or to a more distant past (which has been discussed at length in recent historiography). It also poses the problem whether the identities they project were posterior to the construction of the narrative. Do identifications of groups as such and of individuals with groups originate simultaneously? What is the constitutive act that starts the process of identifications and thereby initiates the hermeneutic spiral? Is this constitutive act intentional, in the sense of a meaning given by an active subject, or not, and if yes, to what degree? If we reopen the question whether the construction is always there before the social reality, how can we avoid to slip back to the concept of a reality that is essential, unchangeable, ever-present? There is, of course, no empirical answer to these questions, and different cases may differ in this respect. But we can reflect about the relationship between the process in which narratives of belonging were constructed, and the emergence of group identities.

First, this requires a processual understanding of identities, and here we can build on the profound scholarship of the study and conceptualization of identities in the last decades.⁴³ As has been shown, individuals and groups do not »have« an identity.⁴⁴ Its construction is part of a more complex process shaped by a reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups which is reproduced through verbal or symbolical statements of identification, and complemented by ascriptions of alterity.⁴⁵ With one of the pioneers in the intensified study of identities over the last decades, Stuart Hall, we may reconceptualize an older notion of identities as a processes of identification. As Hall put it:

Identity, far from the simple thing we think it is, understood properly is always a structure that is split, it always has ambivalence within it. The story of identity is always a cover story. A cover story for making you think you have stayed in the same place while with another bit of your mind you know you have moved on. ... We have now to reconceptualize identity as a process of identification, and that is a different matter. It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference.⁴⁶

In his article Stuart Hall focusses above all on the ambivalent and always split structure of identities. However, it is clear that the main driver of the split and ambivalent structure of identities is their history. Hence it is the historians who are prompted to explore the historical dimension of this process.

Second, this prompts the question who had agency in this process. Mainstream opinion in studies of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages currently focuses on the agency of literate outside observers in the construction of ethnic and religious identities of largely non-literate groups. However, in fact that risks ontologizing the Roman imperial perspective, and denying agency to indigenous groups. Identity construction is better understood as a circuit

43 For a recent overview and bibliography, see Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, and for some of the approaches in our own work, Pohl, *Debating ethnicity*.

44 Pohl, *Strategies of identification*.

45 See Gingrich, *Conceptualizing identities*.

46 Hall, *Ethnicity: Identity and difference*; see also the posthumously published: Hall, *Fateful Triangle*.

of communication and interaction that shapes and reshapes processes of identification. It is shaped by a reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups which is reproduced through verbal or symbolical statements of identification, and complemented by ascriptions of alterity. This includes self-identification of an individual or a group who want to demonstrate or claim their allegiance, by using a recognized set of symbolic representations in language, dress, hairstyle, religious affiliation etc. These claims can then be accepted, refused or negotiated by the ethnic, religious or other community or its representatives.⁴⁷ This community collectively identifies itself in joint agency, shared rituals, symbols or through its representatives. This may involve a common name, actual or notional common origin, a shared memory of the past, common territory, language, outward appearance and dress, customs, myths, norms, beliefs, codes of honour, religious creeds and practices. While these markers of identity are always culturally and contextually specific, they are only successful in processes of identification if they are not regarded as deliberate but as belonging to a social »deep structure«. And finally, these self-representations have to be recognized in some way by outsiders, whether in everyday practice, by using the name (or an equivalent), in formal or diplomatic exchanges, or in ethnographic discourses. Such outside identification may also be the starting point for identity construction, but it would be unrealistic to deny the incidence of self-identification altogether.

Third, we should therefore regard processes of identification as relational, always involving a plurality of actors. Here, ideas from the »relational sociology« of Harrison C. White can be helpful. He primarily focused on social networks, but also featured actors and their identities, and the attribution of actions in transpersonal transactions. »Having an identity in the common sense of that term requires continually reproducing a joint construction across distinct settings. This is better described as having a bundle of identities.«⁴⁸ Thus, identities are always defined in relation to other identities. The issue is to establish some control over these exchanges, and thereby generate meanings, which can also be condensed into narratives. The processes in which interpersonal relations evolve into networks can be seen at the same time as constructions, but also as realities; »networks are phenomenological realities as well as measurement constructs.«⁴⁹

Constructivism and Phenomenology

This brings us from ontology and anthropology to phenomenology, and here we find it helpful to take stock of Bernhard Waldenfels' reformulation of Edmund Husserl's classical phenomenological approach. In Husserl it is consciousness that constitutes the meaningful world, i.e., it gives meaning to the physical world, while the physical environment merely provides the disordered material. Husserl understood the construction of meaning as an intentional act, i.e. that the subject is the source of meaning which moves from the subject towards the

47 Pohl, *Debating ethnicity*.

48 White, *Identity and Control*, esp. 5.

49 White, *Identity and Control*, 36; see also Preiser-Kapeller, *Nodes, ties and theories*, 7-8.

world.⁵⁰ The »Other« is in his approach constituted as an *alter ego*—another »I«, in analogy to the »me«. In this view, the meaning arises from the subject's intention and desire to give meaning to the encounter with the other »me«. According to Husserl this constitutes a *sinngebenden Akt* (an act of conferring meaning).⁵¹ In relation to the moment of origin of individual and collective identity constructions, one can see how fruitful Husserl's approach is for understanding this concrete epistemological achievement: Indeed, identity construction is the exceptional achievement of consciousness in appropriating the foreign in an analogy to the self.

What we have to deal with here, however, is the static nature of this appropriation, its lack of flexibility, its finality. By concentrating on what is our own, the alien, in its otherness, slips out of reach, which means that our understanding of the construction of identity as a transformative process stops halfway. Here, the input of Husserl's successor, Bernhard Waldenfels, can be of crucial importance: his phenomenology of responsiveness can be understood both as a continuation and as a radical transformation of classical phenomenology. It proposes the following further developments of the central ideas concerning the constitutive, meaning-giving act of consciousness: Husserl puts the transcendental ego at the centre: The world »appears« to me because my consciousness constitutes it (constructs it as meaningful). Everything that exists is an object for a subject. The subject is the source of meaning. Waldenfels reverses this. It is not the subject (the »I«/consciousness) that first gives meaning to the world, but rather it is challenged by the other/alien (before »I« recognizes or acts, »I« responds to a claim that comes from outside, from the other/alien). The subject is no longer the »master of meaning,« but it responds.⁵² The most important change, however, concerns the role of the other/the alien:⁵³ According to Waldenfels, Husserl's integration of the alien/

50 Intentionality, as defined by Husserl as a property of consciousness, was seen by Searle as a natural, biological property of the brain. Thus, their approaches are very similar, yet fundamentally different. Husserl's definition is taken as the starting point here. See on the very complicated problem of intentionality Barz, *Problem der Intentionalität*.

51 See Steinbach, *Gelebte Geschichte*. While Husserl writes about how meaning arises in consciousness, Steinbach shows that this meaning is only stabilised through narrative. Without the phenomenological order of time, however, there would be no material from which a narrative identity could be constructed.

52 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 59: »Before any intentional orientation, the subject experiences itself as being addressed. The relationship to the world is therefore not due to the constitutive achievement of an ego, but rather to an always subsequent response: only in responding to what affects us [experience of the other in the sense of alien, PR] does what affects us come to light as such. ... This response is therefore to be thought of entirely in terms of being affected, in the subsequentness of an action that begins not with oneself but with others. ... There always is a gap between the demand and the response which is delayed and/or insufficient (it never may answer fully the demand). The delay can never be made up; in order to make it up, I would have to make up my own pre-existence, even though this is inextricably intertwined with alien influences.« [German quotes have been translated with the help of DeepL].

53 The term of »das Fremde« (the alien) as coined by Waldenfels is discussed by Springstübe, *Responsivität*, 47-56: »Waldenfels distinguishes between alienness/foreignness/strangeness and otherness. The »other« refers to a variant within an order, such as a species of animal in contrast to other species. The »alien/foreign« is a special case of the »other«; it arises through a process of inclusion and exclusion, as in the case of one's native language, whose normality renders all other languages foreign. Something appears as »foreign/strange/alien« when it lies beyond the familiar and thus eludes our grasp.« Waldenfels argues that the »alien« is truly radical. It is not just another version of me; it is something that disrupts my »sphere of ownness«. It is a »sting« or a »claim« that cannot be fully integrated into my existing system of meaning.

other into the self on the basis of analogy is an appropriation in which the alienness of the alien (otherness of the other) is not sufficiently taken into account. The other/alien cannot be completely translated into the logic of the self; in other words, consciousness (the subject, the self) can never fully comprehend the other/alien. Moreover: meaning is not constituted as a »free« act of consciousness, but as a response that is inherently delayed in relation to the demand/challenge.⁵⁴

Waldenfels' further development of Husserl's phenomenology is crucial to the question of identity constructions because, on the one hand, it allows us to appreciate the other/alien in its uniqueness and, on the other hand, it helps us to understand the dynamics of the constant transformation of identity constructions. These identity constructions can, as response to the challenge posed by the other/alien, never fully appropriate the other/alien. The temporal distance between the challenge posed by the other/alien and the response of consciousness is the mental space in which the constant negotiation of identity takes place as a meaning-giving constitutive act of consciousness: The time lag means that the response never reacts to the actual other/alien, but to the other/alien that was already in the past at the moment of the response, i.e., at the moment of the meaning-giving act constitutive of consciousness. This implies that the challenge and response must start anew and continue in a hermeneutic spiral. In other words: Identification is not initiated by the subject, but is defined as the subject's reaction to its experience of the other-alien. This is all the more important because only when we understand the constitutive moment of identification as a reaction in response to an external stimulus are we able to comprehend its temporality and study its historicity.

For this we can turn to Waldenfels' proposal of the interrelationship between challenge (claim) and response which can be understood as analogous to Hans Georg Gadamer's definition of the hermeneutic spiral as a constant movement between pre-understanding and the »textual whole« (*das Textganze*).⁵⁵ Gadamer's revision of understanding after encountering the »text« (analogous to Waldenfels' »other/alien«) corresponds to that of Waldenfels – whether or not a common meaning can be worked out, as Gadamer assumed, is a question that is difficult to answer. The relationship of the subject to the other-alien, caused by the gap between the demand/challenge (*Anspruch*) and the response, which is always »too late« and therefore »not enough«, can never be completely rationalised or controlled. The claim of the other/alien is initially incomprehensible. It strikes the self/-consciousness before it can be classified. The experience is understood from its responsive entanglement and taken seriously in the sense that it never begins with a conscious decision of the subject. »The ego thus never begins with the self, but always begins elsewhere and experiences itself as permeated by alteritarian demands.«⁵⁶ Gadamer's »shared meaning« remains a promise that can never be fulfilled, his hermeneutic spiral, like Waldenfels' proposal of challenge and response, can help us understand the procedural nature of identity construction in its historical-temporal dimension.

54 On the relationship between Waldenfels' phenomenology of responsiveness and Husserl's concept of intentionality, see Flatscher, *Antwort als Verantwortung*, 109.

55 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*.

56 Flatscher, *Antwort als Verantwortung*, 197.

One aspect of the process of constructing meaning must be given special attention with regard to the emergence of identifications: the other/alien has an effect on the subject/on consciousness before the subject is capable of perceiving and reflect it as such. The subject/consciousness, therefore, cannot be fully aware of their responses to the challenge resulting from encountering the other/alien. This assumption takes us beyond the field of Husserl's phenomenology, which deliberately excluded the question of the origin of consciousness because it was dispensable for the focus on the origin of meaning and the logic of the constitution of meaning, and because it conflicted with the strictly abstract definition of the central concepts of his approach. However, if we want to make use of phenomenological conclusions for research into the emergence of social identities, we must ask ourselves this question. Another question, also set aside by Husserl and his successors for the same reasons, is that of the relationship between individual and collective consciousness. The abstract category of consciousness, as defined by phenomenology, is to be regarded as individual. The collective occurs only in intersubjectivity, according to which the constitution of the meaningful world is a joint achievement of many individual subjects who accept the objectivity of the world in the expectation that other individual subjects also see it that way.

Research into the formation of identities operates with the concept of the collective (which can certainly be defined in Husserl's sense) and likewise with the concept of the unconscious, a concept from Leibniz's theory of perception (Leibniz, Schelling, Nietzsche), and popularized in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, because it examines the question of the constitution of meaning in concrete historical dimensions, the tangible expression of which are origin stories.⁵⁷ How, then, can we define these origin stories, taking into account the phenomenological approach described above? If we consider the constitution of the meaningfulness of the world as (also) a collective and partly unconscious mental operation, origin stories would be a shared vehicle of the collective, partly unconscious experiences of the construction of meaning. This may be the underlying reason why they are handed down as myths that are beyond rational access and scrutiny. Their widespread acceptance in pre-modern societies would then not be due to a lack of ability on the part of these societies and their individuals to reflect on their own situation and to »observe« society, but to the fact that they express elements of the social production of meaning that are otherwise unobservable – which, of course, brings us directly to Lévi Strauss and his definition of myth as an expression of the deep structure of the human mind.⁵⁸ However, this does not detract from the matter at hand. In the encounter between the phenomenological and anthropological approaches, we must ultimately seek the logic of origin stories, of myths.

This is not to say that phenomenology must give way to anthropology here. An approach that moves in the same direction as Lévi Strauss, but with a different conceptual toolkit, can be found in Hans Blumenberg's works on the phenomenology of history, and in particular on metaphorology.⁵⁹ He offered new perspectives on our understanding of how humans perceive

57 Hendrix, *Unconscious Thought*.

58 Lévi Strauss, *Mythologiques 1*: »...les mythes se pensent dans les hommes, et sans qu'ils le sachent.«

59 Blumenberg, *Paradigmen der Metaphorologie*; *idem*, *Arbeit am Mythos*.

reality and use language. We can relate what Waldenfels defines as the radical challenge of other/alien to the concept of absoluteness of reality with which Blumenberg operates in order to emphasize the indispensable role of metaphor and myth in human interaction with the world. Blumenberg defines human beings as vulnerable creatures. If humans were to face the world directly and defenselessly – with all its indifference, unpredictability, and existential threats – they would be overwhelmed by the »absoluteness of reality«. Myths and metaphors enable humans to establish a protective distance. They cloak the unknown in familiar images to make the world livable and manageable. They represent the substructure of thought. Every precise philosophical or scientific term has a metaphorical history, but this does not mean that every metaphor, on its hypothetical journey from myth to logos, would necessarily give rise to a term or concept. The metaphor provides human beings with the intuitive overall framework within which they operate in the first place. When an era changes, its fundamental imagery usually changes first and with it, the entire perception of what is considered »real«.

Applying Blumenberg's approach the process of emergence and the character of the response, which necessarily turns out to be metaphorical, becomes clearer: The subject is struck by something it did not choose, and which transcends its existing categories. The absoluteness of reality (or Waldenfels' alien) »breaks in« before the self can organize it. It also becomes understandable why the symbolically, metaphorically and mythically expressed parts of identification narratives, i.e. origin stories, are particularly stable – so much so that they can give the impression of an »essential« core of identity: they represent absolute metaphors which actually never transform into terms/concepts – as epistemological categories they prove to be resistant to terminological challenge. In addition, metaphors have not only an epistemological, but also an ideological effect, because they present certain collective experiences and/or social conditions as natural and without alternative.

This is not to say that individuals or communities are incapable of consciously shaping their identities. However, even in such cases, most visibly in the case of a revolutionary group that breaks with the existing social order, as was the case with modern revolutions but also with medieval heterodox movements such as the Waldensians or the Hussites, some key identifications are shifted outside human agency and entrusted to transcendent authority, such as supernatural beings, transhistorical concepts or »history« itself – because they can only be handled symbolically.

Concluding Observations

The argument sketched here shows why classical communication theory and the phenomenology developed by Husserl cannot fully grasp processes of identification – they depart from the notion of the (at least modern) rational individual and their sovereign consciousness that is capable of constructing their environment. Post-modernism has sought to deconstruct the individual, the author and other notions of sovereignty; but paradoxically, its brilliant intellectuals succumbed to the temptation of acting as sovereign master thinkers who could stake strong claims and flag novel concepts that would change our perceptions of reality.⁶⁰ At least

60 Kristeva, *Les Samouraïs*.

in the reception of post-modernism, that sovereign gestus stuck. Understanding constructivism through the agency of a sovereign individual self, even though it is rarely formally defined that way, is a classical-modernist and/or liberal illusion. It tends to elide the dark sides of the self, the shortcomings of consciousness, and the misconceptions and misunderstandings in its interaction with the other/the alien.

To understand the limitations, it is perhaps worth returning for a moment to where the concept of identity was developed, which is in the social psychology of childhood and adolescence, of the formation of a personality.⁶¹ In this process, the child is inevitably the passive recipient, not the sovereign individual that can conceptualise the encounter with others. It is a long and winding road in which the ego is constituted, and the process may fail and is never fully achieved. Its success or failure depends on the resources – education, competences, intellectual capacity, social position – that are available (or not available) to an individual. As a consequence, there is always an element of insecurity and misunderstanding in any except routine interactions. The encounter with an alien may always be overwhelming, frightening, aggressive or overly cautious. One always has to be on guard.

Here, our post-enlightenment perspective is confronted with »indigenous« epistemologies, which creates serious difficulties in placing them alongside our own, hegemonial epistemology. This observation is not intended as a call to abandon Western rationality, on the contrary. But it seeks to move away from the binary logic often connected with it. As the contribution by Pohl and Rychterová in this volume argues in more detail, the Roman and the indigenous, »barbarian« view of origin myths essentially shared much of its ontological and epistemological basis. Similarly, our modern epistemology, at least in its wider social impact, is entangled with symbolical constructs, small and large. Again, that is not a reason to abandon modern rationality overall and succumb to a new wave of irrationalism and mythologization; but rather, to acknowledge that the way we think is rarely free from mythologies.

The approach sketched in this article has far-reaching methodological consequences. As shown above, Waldenfels' phenomenology focuses on the other as a condition for the construction of the ego, not vice versa: the »Other« also exists before othering. This seems to run counter to much recent theorizing. Since the 1980s, the Humanities have largely learnt to privilege the processual option: We have preferred »becoming« to »being«, »othering« to »the other«, »identification« to »identity«, »race-making« to »race«, and quite generally the ing-form to the noun. Where that did not work, as with »ethnicity«, which lacks its processual substitute »ethnification«, scholars have become very uncomfortable with using it.

Recently, »difference« has also been deconstructed under the label »doing difference«. This is the approach chosen, among others, by the sociologists Stefan Hirschauer and Tobias Boll, and now at the centre of a Mainz SFB (*Sonderforschungsbereich*). Their fundamental concept is »*Humandifferenzierung*«, as set out in an article (in German), entitled »Un/doing difference«. After a very lucid analysis of the methodological problems of research on differences between humans, they posit »that a difference can only be considered relevant in

61 Eriksen, *Childhood and Society*.

a sociological sense if it makes a difference in a practical sense⁶² – that is, if it is actually employed in assigning social positions and resources to a person, or to decide whether he/she belongs to this or that social group. In this sense, agency and a concept of difference are necessarily prior to the difference as such. This approach has the merit of focusing on interaction rather than on concepts. A professor is only a professor if »she is doing being a professor«. ⁶³ The result is, in German, »*ein stets flüchtiger Schwebezustand*« – our translation programme rendered that as »an always fleeting state of floating«. Should we really assume that human beings are only different if they act or are being treated differently? And that their being different is always in flux?

That certainly helps to avoid reification and »naturalisation« of human differences, and we should indeed keep doing all we can to avoid a return to the essentialist paradigm. But the unavoidable ontological basis for this »floating« epistemology is the sovereign ego and the self-conscious agency of a society which can »do difference« before being exposed to it. Difference only exists in constructing, negotiating, becoming. That implies ontologising the fluidity of all identities and differences, as observed by Andreas Wimmer. ⁶⁴ Is this empirically tenable, not only for the present, but also for the distant past? Or are we trying to project a postmodern myth into the past? Individuals that never »were«, but always only »became«? Are »fluidity«, »flexibility«, »malleability« only our concerns, or also those of the people who lived in the Early Middle Ages?

We argue that human diversity is one of the most precious heritages of humanity, and it exists without anybody »doing being diverse«. ⁶⁵ As proposed above, we are diverse first and only learn to cope with that later, and these are experiences that may be traumatic or inspiring, challenging or uncomfortable. Epistemologically, past diversity that we study is indeed always constructed, and all historical written sources are already the result of such constructions. Methodologically, therefore, the constructivist perspective needs to be maintained. However, we have to avoid ontologising it. The two perspectives, being and becoming, being different and doing difference, are complementary; there is no need to decide which one of them is »right«. The ontological basis is human diversity. The epistemological goal is to understand how people deal with that challenge, and how identities and differences keep changing as a result.

Historiography, and especially mythic accounts are full of failed interaction, unresolved conflicts and ignoble deaths. When narratives give reasons for leaving one's former homeland, they are mostly negative: The future Longobards had to leave their country during a famine, when lots were drawn who had to depart. The Goths had to split because a bridge collapsed while they were crossing it. The Turks attacked the Rouran after the humiliation that their leader was denied a Rouran princess as a bride. The Czechs had to leave their homeland and their people because their founding father committed a murder. And the people who set out to settle Ireland had to return to their homeland at the first attempt, and the second group of

62 Hirschauer, *Un/doing Differences*. Die Kontingenz, 181.

63 Hirschauer and Boll, *Un/doing Differences*. Zur Theorie und Empirie, 11.

64 Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making*, 3 (see above 91 and n. 27).

65 A point also made by Graeber and Wengrow, *Dawn of Everything*.

immigrants were annihilated by a plague.⁶⁶ It may be surprising that so many ancestors are far from representing models to be proud of, heroes, wise men, successful rulers or virtuous and moral figures. Why was the banished helpless Roman parricide Brutus styled as ancestor of the Irish, the crippled boy Ashina saved by the she-wolf revered as the founder of the Türk Ashina dynasty, a monkey who mated with a lustful rock-demoness regarded as the first Tibetan?⁶⁷ Why was Troy after its destruction so much more popular as a place of origin than victorious Athens or Rome? Whatever »really« happened in these cases, the world was full of dangers, and identities were precarious. The world that the Icelandic sagas design is full of adverse creatures and forces of nature, and the gods are not benevolent like Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary.

The supernatural beings and weird heroes are symbols, metaphorical constructions, but the threatening and disquieting forces that they represent are not. These passages in origin narratives address levels of experience that are beyond construction. As texts they are constructed but often, from the point of view of today's reader, they seem artificial and devoid of narrative logic. Perhaps that is because the roots of individual identities go back to a response of individuals overwhelmed by their encounters with the alien world around which continued to require an explanation. The response to the challenge of foreignness is always delayed, and the individual is never able to fully comprehend the world in all its ever-changing complexity. The medieval origin narratives helped to come to terms with this strangeness; not least, with the group's own alien beginnings, mediated through narratives of supernatural agency and stories of migrations from far-away lands. Approaching the origins of the group through myth and metaphor was a productive epistemological choice, which allowed aligning the self with others in the construction of communities.

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66 For these examples, see the article by Pohl and Rychterová, in this volume.

67 Langelaar, Chasing the colours of the rainbow, see also his concluding chapter to this volume. For ancient Turkic origin myths, see the contributions by Sandra Wabnitz and Joo-Yup Lee, in this volume, and Golden, Ethnogenic tales of the Türks.

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Abbreviations

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

RGA Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde

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