

Research Area »Mobility and Belonging«

Mobility makes otherness particularly visible. The movement of people and concepts calls into question existing political, social, religious, and regional differences and affiliations and transforms them. Mobile actors and the societies they encounter must continually (re)define and (re)negotiate differences and belonging. At the same time, changing affiliations and forms of belonging also affect the mobility of actors. This research area examines the interplay between mobility and belonging in modern Europe and its global relations from the 15th to the 20th centuries. How did mobility affect the political, social, cultural and religious »belonging« of actors who crossed borders in modern Europe? What effect did the construction of belonging have on mobility potential? To what degree did the interplay of mobility and belonging change perceptions and concepts of difference?

To answer these questions, the research area's projects study the interplay between mobility practices and the construction of belonging from three complementary and overlapping perspectives – actors, texts and spaces. First, from an actor-centred perspective, several projects investigate the multi-layered, self-perceived, and ascribed ways of belonging in the individual lifepaths and the autobiographical practices of migrants and other mobile actors. Particular attention is paid to strategies of biographical navigation, through which the actors sought to position themselves spatially and socially in different phases of their lives. A second approach focuses on texts that were not only a medium in which actors reflected on their mobility, but that were mobile themselves, transporting ideas and concepts. In this way, texts created belonging independently of the mobility of the actors and consequently increased or decreased the mobility potential of other actors and texts. Third, the research area examines border regions and spaces of concentrated and overlapping mobility where actors of different backgrounds come into contact. Through their contacts, liminal spaces and transit zones emerged, in which differences dissolved, and affiliations had to be renegotiated.

Looking at the individual projects together makes it possible to question the narrative of a constant increase in mobility potential. Rather than a continuous increase, the projects reveal discontinuities, upheavals and periodic waves in mobility potential and these shifts affected forms of belonging. Similarly, it is not possible to identify clear categories of differentiation in individual historical periods or cultures. Instead, depending on the circumstances, various categories of difference existed simultaneously, sometimes reinforcing, competing, or neutralising one another. A multi-perspective analysis across historical periods is particularly useful for revealing cycles, continuities and discontinuities. For example, the ways that "national" and religious aspects of belonging were weighted shifted depending on the context, but at no point was either completely irrelevant as a category of difference. Against this backdrop, mobility can be understood as a test case for societies' tolerance of ambiguity, which varied in strength across time and space. Processes of ambiguation and disambiguation had a dialectical relationship.

Processes of social and spatial interconnection and disentanglement can be observed across time periods. Many of the research area's projects reveal that individual actors maintained close connections between local rootedness and global networks. With this in mind, the research area focuses on the relationships between transit zones (micro-perspective) and transregional spaces (long distances). These relationships are most evident in the projects that deal with actors in imperial and trans-imperial structures. However, a distinction must be drawn between forms of belonging perceived by individuals and collectives themselves and those that others attribute to them. Affiliations that actors adopted for themselves and those that others attributed to them

often resulted in multiple, overlapping forms of belonging, which the actors actualised in their practices and were represented in objects such as texts and images.

Each project also shows how communicative practices influenced the aggregate conditions of belonging. Language played a central role as a medium of communication and differentiation. Mobile actors emerged as carriers of ideas and authors of autoreflexive texts, though they also had affiliations ascribed to them by third parties. The spectrum of aggregate conditions of belonging stretched from situational self-attributions and attributions by others to classification by the authorities and formal membership in organisations.