

Workshop series "Recontextualising Bismarck"

Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg - Ministry of Culture and Media, Department for Museums

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„Bismarck. Bismarck? Who is actually being honoured here? Different perspectives on the political figure Otto von Bismarck“

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From a historiographical-critical point of view, the name 'Otto von Bismarck' entails two different levels of understanding : the historical figure of the Prussian-German politician with all his achievements and failures with a life span from 1815 to 1898; and the mythically transfigured figure of the founder of the German Empire, who was already revered during his lifetime and inscribed in public space in a large number of monuments and street names with a veritable regime of honour in the years leading up to the First World War. The politics of the former, including colonial politics, can be discussed in the context of their time horizon and on the basis of research. A similar approach can be chosen when it comes to analysing the 'Bismarck myth', which reveals how his contemporaries and their descendants perceived him.

In Hamburg's case, the image is three-dimensional and is located in the middle of the city as the tallest Bismarck monument ever. For its builders, the more than 30-metre-high statue was the Hanseatic expression of the "Watch on the Rhine" as well as the "Watch on the Sea". Furthermore, he was and is still understood as the revered founder of the German nation, from which merchants and shipowners profited greatly by the economic upswing instigated by the unification. As a modernist-martial Roland figure - guaranteeing market and trade rights and thus commercial freedom - he looks down the Elbe towards the North Sea. With the revelation of the monument in 1906, Germany epitomized in a figurative-material way the imperialistic competition with the British fleet, as well as the other European and overseas trading partners - the continental blockade of the Napoleonic era, which threatened Hamburg's prosperity, was only 100 years ago.

It is indisputable that nation and nationalism resonated in dimensions that have been overcome today, and that global trade and shipping also meant colonialism. These components of Bismarck's politics, which are difficult to recognise when looking at the monument, as well as the thoughts of his later admirers, should be made clear in a historical-critical, commemorative commentary and contextualisation. Bismarck is not wearing a pith helmet or balancing a globe, he is standing as a grim Roland in a park on the Elbe and the image's message is hardly comprehensible to the average public - commentary is therefore urgently needed. By deciding for the restoration of the listed monument (primarily a source for historians and art historians), the German Bundestag and the Hamburg Bürgerschaft have provided the impetus for this civil enclosure - be it with permanent, local commentary on the content and in the neighbouring Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte or with artistic-creative appropriations. In this way, unlike a mere architectural renovation, the ambivalences of today's remembrance of Bismarck and the Bismarck myth versus the former veneration as part of Hamburg's urban history would become visible - for Hamburg residents and visitors from very different social groups and countries.

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