

The study of European history and culture

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An important point of departure to approach the study of European history and culture lies precisely in defining the scale and scope of what we mean by Europe in the first place. A common trend identified in existing courses is the understanding of European studies mainly as equivalent to studying the European Union, or studying Western Europe. It is necessary to avoid this simplification of Europe = West = EU, as there are vast areas of European culture and history that are left aside.

The study of European history and culture faces a significant challenge when contrasting normative ideas and conceptions against reality. A clear example of this clash is the analysis of religions in Europe. If this analysis is performed based solely on the prevailing idea, we would find a clear-cut distinction between religions, having the Muslim world only limited to the Turkish area. However, when analyzing reality we see that beliefs have spread along and across Europe, in a mixture that does not longer respond to clearly defined borders.

Another aspect that can be highlighted when studying the historical and cultural aspects of Europe is related with understanding the origins of the EU and the contradictory discourses coexisting about its constitution. On the one hand, there´s a line of discourse emphasizing the “what should be” or normative vision of European integration. The creation of a new supranational organization that would eliminate armed conflict, after the catastrophic experience of two World Wars. On the other hand, we find a discourse that places mistrust as an engine of European integration. This element stand out in the presentation by Prof Bernecker, exploring the thesis that the main interest of the victorious

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powers of the 2nd war, particularly that of France, was to have control over Germany (FRG).

One additional point to emphasize is the importance of incorporating an intercultural approach, element mentioned by Prof. Mackenbach and supported by various participants. It is important to acknowledge and understand the current complexity of the XXI century, where population flows and coexistence among different cultures are a non-stopping trend. From academia, we must therefore include interculturalism as a key component of study programs, even more when it comes to the study of Europe.

Now, in terms of methodology, courses on European history and culture could combine a content-based orientation, together with training on the tools and methodologies to approach the study of European cultures and literature.

It is also extremely relevant that courses are designed having the end-user (i.e. the student) in mind. Thus, courses on European history and culture should have a practical-professional orientation, offering to students contents that are valuable, relevant and useful for their professional life.

The relation of European history and culture with Latin America

One interrogate raised by participants in this debate was: How can I make of European studies something relevant in my country with limited resources?

As an initial road for including European history and cultural studies into academic programs in Latin America, presenters proposed various alternatives that, departing from a single discipline, try to find a specific domain where the European context can become relevant and can be related with Latin America. Examples of these from the point of view of historians are: i) a comparative study of Latin American and European history in the XIX, or ii) an analysis of the cultural effects of the Great War in Latin America.

Besides the thematic orientation, the availability of sources becomes an important factor that influences the decision of how to teach European history and culture in Latin America. This means that professors need not only to consider the relevance of the topic they want to share with their students, but also the feasibility of finding reliable, accurate, and readily available materials to use in class.