

The Myths That Made America

Teacher Seminar, 18 November 2011

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Heike Paul, FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg

How could Christopher Columbus, an Italian explorer sailing for the Spanish Crown, become a national American hero? What is so persuasive about the story of Pocahontas and the cultural contact in North America in 1607 that even recently it has become the theme of three major Hollywood films (Walt Disney's Pocahontas, Terence Malick's The New World and James Cameron's Avatar)? How was the biblical Exodus-narrative used by the first groups of religious immigrants to render America "the Promised Land" and why does this appropriation still echo in contemporary discussions of American exceptionalism? Why is Benjamin Franklin depicted on 100 dollar bills? Christopher Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims & Puritans and the Founding Fathers (among them John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington) are the heroic figures of an American beginning that have been profoundly mythologized and whose stories and legacies appear in popular culture, literature, memorial culture, school books and, simply, every-day life. To this day, these myths determine discussions of US-American identities. We will study each of them and trace their making, remaking and unmaking through the centuries by consulting various kinds of material and media. A profound knowledge of these myths, their historical genesis and the ideological controversies they have caused enables students to understand the meaning of America as an imagined community.



9.00 Part 1: American Myths: Christopher Columbus & Pocahontas

1. What is a Myth?
2. 1492: Christopher Columbus and the Myth of 'Discovery'
3. 1607: Pocahontas and the Myth of Transatlantic Love
4. Conclusion of Part 1: European vs. Indigenous; Male vs. Female Narratives of Origin

10.30 Coffee Break

11.00 Part 2: American Myths: Pilgrims and Puritans & the Founding Fathers

5. America as "Imagined Community"
6. 1620/1630: The Pilgrims & Puritans and the Myth of the Promised Land
7. 1776: American Independence and the Myth of the Founding Fathers
8. Conclusion of Part 2: America as Religious and Political Utopia / Some Paradoxes

13.00 End



The paintings of Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers are in the rotunda of the capitol in Washington D.C.:

<http://www.aoc.gov/cc/art/index.cfm>