

[„The Circle of Life” - Birth, Dying, and the Liminality of Life since the Nineteenth Century](#)

Announcement published by Michael Zok on Wednesday, February 16, 2022

Type:

Workshop

Date:

September 1, 2022 to September 2, 2022

Location:

Poland

Subject Fields:

Women's & Gender History / Studies, Religious Studies and Theology, Modern European History / Studies, History of Science, Medicine, and Technology, Contemporary History

Birth and dying are the only life events that everyone experiences – without anyone being able to tell about them. As existential transitions in human life they have a profound significance for every society. Surprisingly, in historical research they are usually considered in isolation. Anthropologists and ethnologists, on the other hand, have been interpreting them as entangled practices for a long time, as envisioned in the concept of liminality and rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. In observing that cultures have different approaches to these phenomena, they observed that their functions depended on the specifics of a given society and its cultural beliefs and performances.

However, rites of passage and liminal stages do not only have a cultural dimension. Rather, they are connected with historical change. This can be seen in modern societies where processes such as secularisation, modernisation, scientification, and rationalisation had a major impact on (religious) systems of beliefs as well as everyday life. Therefore, these processes also influenced the meaning of liminality and rites of passage that are subjects to public discourses, political decisions, and legal requirements. To give but two examples: So-called ‘pro-life’ groups try to alter the definition of the beginning of life, in order to prepone the moment the state is obligated to protect this life. The Heartbeat Law in Texas or the decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal from October 2020, but also historical discourses like the pre-referendum debates in the Republic of Ireland in the early 1980s show how impactful these discussions about the liminal stage of conception could be in modern societies. In a similar vein, debates on euthanasia have triggered a broad international controversy on when life ends – and on how people can die “with dignity” in the light of medical opportunities to prolong the life of terminal patients further and further. While the ethical and legal legitimacy of mercy killings is still disputed in most countries, passive forms of euthanasia are generally accepted, even in Catholic societies.

Because they are subjects to individual and intimate aspects of human life as well as because of their relevance for societies, the thinking and arguing about liminality and rites of passage

Citation: Michael Zok. „The Circle of Life” - Birth, Dying, and the Liminality of Life since the Nineteenth Century. H-Announce. 05-27-2022.

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tend to be discussed in a controversial manner. The stages of conception, birth(-giving), and dying show exemplarily the general ambivalence liminality and rites of passage can create in political discussions as well as their complex legal implications.

We invite interested scholars to join our conference where we would like to analyse and investigate concepts of liminality and rites of passage in a historical perspective, with a particular focus on social changes in modern industrialised societies.

Thus, we are interested, among others, in the following questions:

- how do modern, especially pluralist, societies deal with the above mentioned liminal stages at the beginning and end of human life;
- which factors and processes have influence on changes in understanding and interpreting these stages;
- how do modern societies and their diverse subgroups react to social change, shifts in values, and scientific innovation with regard to the liminal stages of conception, birth(-giving), and dying;
- which notions, ideas, and (legal) traditions influence the legislative regulation of these stages?

The workshop will be held at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw on 1 and 2 September 2022 with financial support of the German Research Foundation. In case of travel restrictions due to the pandemic, the workshop will be held in a hybrid or online format. The workshop language will be English. Travel expenses of invited speakers will be reimbursed, accommodation will be provided by the German Historical Institute Warsaw.

Proposals for 20-minutes presentations should include a short abstract (approx. 300 words), a title, a short bio (half a page), institutional affiliation, email address, and should be sent to the workshop organisers Michael Zok (zok@dhi.waw.pl) and Florian Greiner (florian.greiner@ebert-gedenkstaette.de) by 15 April 2022.

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