



P R E S S E M I T T E I L U N G

6. Mai 2010

Lecture David W. Sabean: Thoughts on Incest: Shifting Discourses since the Renaissance

David Warren Sabean, specialist in anthropology and kinship, draws attention to an array of shifting, post-Renaissance social interpretations of incest. Over the centuries there were times when cousin marriages became increasingly common and times when incest was viewed primarily through the lens of biology. Different epochs have often focused on quite different issues concerning incest, and they have frequently developed peculiar "obsessions" about particular pairs. During the seventeenth century, thousands of pages were written about incestuous relations between in-laws and step relatives, with a particular emphasis on the deceased wife's sister, a relationship that scarcely counts as incest in the modern period. The particular threat of different violations needs to be understood in terms of the constant reconfiguration of kinship relationships. For example, the rise of cousin marriages from the middle of the eighteenth century throughout Europe provided the context in which the social imaginary played with incestuous bonding among siblings. But the representation of kinship relationships itself has not been a constant. In the seventeenth century, unlike in the Middle Ages, kin were thought of as connected through blood - and, curiously enough, allied kin could be seen as consanguines. In twentieth-century post-war Europe, the relationships among family members were more often represented as power relationships than anything else. Most recently, in popular culture the buzzword is "genetic sexual attraction." Finally, the discourse itself continually changes. If in the seventeenth century, incest was discussed practically only as an issue of law – law as commandment – by the mid eighteenth century, it found a new language in "moral sentimentality." Not until the second half of the nineteenth century was incest seen through the lens of biology and the consequences for progeny. Post-war discussions were primarily couched in terms of psychotherapy, only to be supplanted in the past decade and a half by evolutionary biology.

David Warren Sabean

Thoughts on Incest: Shifting Discourses since the Renaissance

Lecture at the IFK, Wien

17 May 2010, 6.15 p.m. (free entrance)

David Warren Sabean is Henry J. Bruman Professor of German History at the University of California at Los Angeles. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin, where he studied under George Mosse, Sabean has taught at the University of East Anglia, University of Pittsburgh, and Cornell University. He is Guest of Director at the IFK.

Selected publications: Co-editor with Simon Teuscher and Jon Mathieu, *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)*, New York, Oxford 2007; *Kinship in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870*, Cambridge 1998; *Property, Production, and Family in Neckarhausen, 1700–1870*, Cambridge 1990; *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 1984.