

Aktuelles und Kommentare

Laudatio auf Natalie Zemon Davis, gehalten an der Universität Basel, Wildtsches Haus, 29. April 2002¹

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Einleitung zur Lobrede

Im Sommersemester 2001 beschloss die Philosophisch-Historische Fakultät der Universität Basel die Verleihung der Ehrendoktorwürde an Professor Natalie Zemon Davis. Diese sollte, wie üblich, am „Dies Academicus“ vom 30. November 2001 erfolgen. Leider verhinderten unüberwindliche terminliche Hindernisse die Teilnahme von Natalie Zemon Davis. Die Übergabe-Feier wurde am 29. April 2002 im Wildtschen Haus am Petersplatz (gegenüber dem Kolloquiengebäude der Universität) nachgeholt. Der Rektor, Professor Dr. Ulrich Gäbler, eröffnete die Feier. Der Dekan, Professor Dr. Achatz von Müller, überreichte der neuen Ehrendoktorin feierlich ihre Ehrenurkunde unter Verlesung der lateinischen und deutschen Fassung folgender Laudatio:

Die Philosophisch-Historische Fakultät der Universität Basel verleiht die Würde eines
Ehrendoktors phil. an

Frau Prof. Dr. Natalie Zemon Davis,

die durch ihre Forschungen im Bereich von Humanismus und Reformation, der Frauengeschichte und Gender Studies sowie der Jüdischen Geschichte zu einer der international führenden Vertreterinnen ihres Faches geworden ist,

der aufgrund ihrer wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten der Rang einer Vordenkerin der interdisziplinären Kulturwissenschaften zukommt,

¹ Mit herzlichem Dank an Claudia Opitz für ihre Angaben.

die durch ihre offene und begeisterungsfähige Art die Beratung und Förderung jüngerer Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler auf beispielhafte Weise zu ihrem Anliegen gemacht hat.

Vor der Ehrung durch den Dekan hielt der derzeitige geschäftsführende Vorsteher des Historischen Seminars die nachstehend abgedruckte Lobrede.

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Verehrte Frau Professor Zemon Davis, Dear Natalie,
Frau Vizepräsidentin des Universitätsrates,
Herr Rektor,
Herr Dekan,
meine Damen und Herren,

Einem generationenalten Ritus gemäss fallen die Laudationes am „Dies Academicus“ unserer Universität jeweils relativ knapp aus. Der heutige Anlass gibt mir die willkommene Gelegenheit, die Laudatio auf unsere hochverdiente Ehrendoktorin etwas ausführlicher zu gestalten. Damit wir uns alle verstehen, soll dies in englischer Sprache geschehen.

Natalie Zemon Davis was born in 1928 in Detroit. In 1959 she received her Ph.D., at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Her doctoral dissertation “Protestantism and the Printing Workers of Lyon” circumscribed not only a new field of historical investigation – the social and cultural history of the Reformation – but also put the city of Lyon on the intellectual map of all those historians interested in more than the relatively restricted fare of confessionally oriented Reformation history. It is no mere coincidence that from the 1950's onwards scholars of Jewish origin played an important role in opening the horizon of Reformation history. More than others at the time, they were able to transcend a narrow view of that important period in European history. From today's vantage point it is no exaggeration to claim that Natalie Zemon Davis has not been only the most productive and innovative but also, especially in the eyes of a younger generation of historians, the most exciting of this group of scholars.

After receiving her Ph.D., she held teaching positions at Columbia University and the University of Toronto, where she returned to an adjunct professorship in history, anthropology and medieval studies following her retirement. After leaving Toronto in 1971 and before returning there in the later 1990's, she held a professorship at the University of California at Berkeley and, from 1977 an endowed professorship at Princeton University. At Princeton, during the 1990's, she was likewise director of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies.

The history of women and, especially, gender history are a second field, in which Natalie Zemon Davis has played a pioneering role. During the last couple of decades she has found a growing and by now world-wide recognition in this field. I would like to dwell on this for a moment, before I return to her seminal contributions to the history of the Reformation and of the sixteenth-century more generally. More than a quarter of a century ago (in 1976) Natalie Zemon Davis began to promote the transition from the history of

women to gender history and helped to open up this field, as well as early modern history more generally, to new, creative impulses owing to her reading of the work of eminent cultural anthropologists and ethnologists, such as Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas. At the same time, she remained no stranger to new, postmodern approaches and was thus able to build bridges between the different camps that for a while, during the 1980's and early 1990's, threatened to divide some history departments at North American universities. Her work on the early modern history of gender and not least on the theory and method of gender history have had a creative and lasting influence on an international scale. In many ways, this culminated in her major work published in 1995, "Women on the Margins", a fascinating attempt to bring together the life histories of Sybilla Merian, Marie de l'Incarnation and Glikl bas Judah Leib, familiar to most of us as Glueckl von Hameln, that is, of three women who lived on the margins of seventeenth-century European society. Simultaneously, this gave a noticeable boost to historical research on personal documents such as autobiographies, diaries and family chronicles. Likewise, it represented a ground-breaking attempt to fuse gender history with the social and cultural history of Europe on a more general level.

"Women on the margins" is a wonderfully successful work in fusing the many different strands of research and scholarly discussion to which Natalie Davis had devoted her work during the preceding decades. One of these strands, so far unmentioned, is Jewish history, which, starting in the early 1980's, she added to her many other fields of activity. Together with some Princeton colleagues she published the seventeenth-century autobiography of the Venetian Rabbi Leone Modena, an intriguing document on the search for personal identity based on thoroughgoing crosscultural experiences. Her incisive chapter on Glikl bas Judah Leib in "Women on the Margins" represents a persuasive extension of these concerns. Both Leone Modena and Glikl have since repeatedly surfaced in her work, most recently only a few days ago in a suggestive lecture delivered at the Klingenthal Museum just a good stone's throw away from where we are assembled today. As with the history of gender, a singular merit of Natalie Zemon Davis' work on Jewish history lies in her exemplary integration of this particular concern with the history of a social and religious minority into the mainstream of research on early modern European history. To return to the history of the Reformation, humanism and sixteenth-century Europe more generally, her early and inspiring introduction and integration of anthropological approaches into research on this period has encouraged many of us to include hitherto neglected sources and texts in our historical endeavours, such as the acts of consistories and court records, marital contracts, testaments and last wills, but also popular narratives and even pamphlets on well-known criminal cases. This last concern led to her justly celebrated book, "The return of Martin Guerre", as well as, during the 1980's, to her work, "Fiction in the Archives", a suggestive study of pardon tales based on research of sixteenth-century French court records. Both these works, not least by their contagious enthusiasm, drove home the excitement, as well as the necessity, of a co-operation between literary and historical scholarship. At the same, I must also mention the superb study, "The gift in sixteenth-century France". It can be read as an eloquent acknowledgment of the significance of cultural anthropology to our study of the past, an approach to which Natalie Zemon Davis has herself contributed a great deal.

It goes without saying that several of these scholarly endeavours made a lasting contribution to the perception of history as an academic field by a broader non-academic public. It is as if the academic ivory tower had never existed for Natalie Davis or as if she had decided early on in her professional career to ban it out of sight. The book on Martin Guerre is a particular case-in-point. As you may remember, it came about in the context of the making of a film on Martin Guerre, directed by Daniel Vigne, in whose production Natalie Zemon Davis served as an adviser. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that her latest book, entitled "Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision", published very recently (2000) is a thoroughgoing study of five films concerned with historical aspects of slavery.

Dear Natalie,

I am aware that I would have to go on for quite a bit longer to do full justice to the uniqueness of your work, to its high scholarly standard, to its great richness, to the profound learning to which it witnesses and which you have always carried in such a light and exemplary manner. Alas, I have to be brief.

However, I would not want to end without having mentioned the inspiration you have been over so many years to younger scholars in the humanities. For one thing and beyond doubt, you have been an important role model for younger women trying to establish themselves in a male-dominated field, but, what is more, there has been no moment I would know of in which you have rested on your laurels. On the contrary, you have always made it a point to remain accessible to younger people in your field and in the humanities more generally. I have myself been the beneficiary of your help and advice, as have countless other younger scholars, female and male. It is not just by your work but also through personal contact, which to you seems all along to have been a way of personal enrichment rather than a burden, that you have become an important source of inspiration to the younger academic generation in the United States, in many European quarters, and, in particular, here in Basel.

I have already mentioned the wonderful lecture you delivered last week in the context of a conference organised by Susanna Burghartz and her team. But your connections with Basel historians certainly do not date just from last week. Your regular contacts with the history department of the University of Basel go back to the early 1990's. During the winter semester of 1994/95 you worked here as a guest professor and taught the course, "Doing gender history. Women and Society in Early Modern Europe". And in September 2000 you participated in a section concerned with transcultural aspects of the research on autobiographical records, which Claudia Ulbrich of the Free University of Berlin and I co-chaired at the German Historikertag in Aachen. Your contacts with our history department have been intensive and have acquired their own history, which links your personal biography with that of several scholars and colleagues associated with our Historisches Seminar. Today's bestowal on you of an honorary degree of the University of Basel testifies to the singular richness and importance of your work, as well as to the significance your work and person have had for many of us for some time.

Dear Natalie,

In our thoughts you have long acquired the status of a virtual member of our local academic community. We are thrilled and happy about the opportunity of including you in this community in a more formal way this afternoon. A few days ago, you mentioned in conversation that the inner spark – der innere Funke – was a necessary prerequisite to significant academic work. We do hope that your own particular spark will remain an inspiration to us for some time to come.