CfP The concept of ‘national indifference’ and its potential to nations and nationalism research. Deadline 31 January 2016

Discussion published by Maarten Van Ginderachter on Wednesday, November 25, 2015

Workshop: The concept of ‘national indifference’ and its potential to nations and nationalism research

5-6 September 2016

Convenors: Maarten Van Ginderachter (Antwerp University) and Michal Kopecek (Charles University Prague)

Venue: Charles University Prague

CfP. Deadline: 31 January 2016

This workshop welcomes conceptual contributions and case studies on the issue of national indifference from across the field of the humanities and the social sciences. The aim is to publish an edited volume with an international academic publisher or a themed issue of an international academic journal.

Successful applicants will have their accommodation costs completely covered and their travel expenses reimbursed. In exchange participants will give the right of first publication to the organisers of the workshop.

Papers will be refereed at the workshop by Pieter Judson (EUI – Firenze), James M. Brophy (University of Delaware), Jeremy King (Mount Holyoke College) and Tara Zahra (University of Chicago).

Please send a 500 word abstract of your paper to Maarten.VanGinderachter@uantwerpen.be and kopecek@usd.cas.cz. Deadline is 31 January 2016.

Call for Papers

This workshop tackles one of the crucial issues in research on nations and nationalism, namely the question of how ‘ordinary people’ have come to identify with the nation. The particular challenge this research has faced in the past decades is how to reconcile the culturally oriented, constructivist approaches to social-historical perspectives. A possible way forward is offered by the concept of ‘national indifference’.

This concept has been pioneered by historians working on late nineteenth and early twentieth century Central Europe (mainly the Austrian part of the Habsburg empire). Their main thrust is that the nationalist struggle in the Habsburg state was not driven by mass fervour for the nation, but rather its opposite: indifference, ambivalence and opportunism of ‘ordinary people’ when dealing
with issues of nationhood and with claims made by nationalists. The populace was not – as previously assumed – under the general spell of sub-state nationalism.

These scholars have followed Rogers Brubaker’s call not to view national identities as the logical outcome of an already existing ethnic identity, nor to conceptualize the ‘nation’ as a real group, but rather “as practical category, institutionalized form, and contingent event”. By focussing on the indeterminate identification of ‘ordinary Austrians’, their bilingualism and their indifference towards nationalist appeals, these scholars have clearly demonstrated the constructedness of ethnicity. In this sense they take the constructivist paradigm one step further and are a critique of Anthony D. Smith’s ethno-symbolist position: nationalists do not only create the nation, but also the ethnic and linguistic substrate on which they ground their nation. The concept of ‘national indifference’ also implies a critique of Miroslav Hroch’s developmental scheme of small national movements, and more specifically of the timing of the advent of mass nationalism in Hroch’s phase C. According to the proponents of ‘national indifference’ there was no mass breakthrough of nationalism in the Habsburg empire before the First World War. It was the general breakdown of society because of the war that created the conditions for the ‘massification’ of small national movements.

The concept of ‘national indifference’ takes issue with (at least three) traditions within the historiography on nations and nationalism. First, it offers a critique of the teleological slant in much literature, which has tended to reproduce the narrative of nation-building as a relentless modernisation process turning peasants into ‘nationals’. The point of addressing national indifference is to direct scholarly attention away from the explicit purveyors of nationalism and to explore the limits of nationalization, rather than its success. By doing so, these historians question how national identity has become such a strong focal point of identification throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Secondly, the concept of ‘national indifference’ aims to provide an ‘empirical and social turn’ to the constructivist paradigm. Scholars investigating national indifference claim not to focus on the construction of national discourses by politicians at the national level or in published, easily accessible sources, but also in the murky complex reality of everyday life at the local level on the basis of archival materials in small, often neglected places.

Thirdly, ‘national indifference’ goes to the heart of one of the crucial methodological issues within nations and nationalism research. According to Zahra and Judson, nationalists’ attempts to influence ordinary people’s behaviour with their public discourse, were counter-productive. ‘Commoners’ reacted with national indifference and refused to accept the hard boundaries nationalists drew between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In other words, a widespread nationalist discourse need not necessarily reflect its successful interiorisation by ordinary people. Michael Billig’s theory of banal nationalism is in a sense the opposite of ‘national indifference’. Billig assumes that widespread nationalist discourses have an nationally integrative effect on the audience. In other words, we are confronted with two opposite theories that have both important methodological implications, namely ‘what do widespread nationalist discourses tell us about the attitude of broader reaches of society?’

This workshop wants to evaluate the innovative potential of ‘national indifference’, without losing sight of the critique levelled at it. What are its strengths and weaknesses? How valid is the thesis about the absence of a massive breakthrough of nationalism before WWI for the Habsburg Empire

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and beyond? Can the concept be adapted outside Central Europe, for instance in the so-called ‘historic nation-states of Western Europe’ (thus overcoming the East-West dichotomy in much nations and nationalism research)? What about other European regions? Scandinavia, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe? Is its temporal application range limited to the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries? In other words is national indifference a historical category that could be sustained only for a certain period? Does its viability expire with the advent of mass democratization? Or is it usable for earlier/later historical periods too? Could national indifference, for instance, survive in the ‘established’ nation-states of the second half of the twentieth century? Is it revived by the globalisation wave of the twenty-first century? Does ‘national indifference’ evolve throughout time? How should we historicize it? Can the concept be productively used in other fields than history, for instance in sociology or political science? How does the concept of ‘national indifference’ relate to other concepts such as cosmopolitanism or supra-nationalism? How does it square with regional, primarily non-national identities such as the Walloon, Moravian, Bavarian, Tyrolean or Goral regionalisms? How does ‘national indifference’ relate to religious and political identities that challenged nationalist mobilization (e.g. Roman-Catholicism in Bohemia or radical socialism and Marxism)? Can it help us to better evaluate the potential of other nationalist concepts that mobilized broad strata of the population? Volksgemeinschaft, for instance, was a particularly effective mechanism of participation and exclusion in the first half of the 20th century. What can ‘national indifference’ tell us about the character and nature of the ‘nation-states’ originating from the ruins of the multi-national empires after 1918 and their development throughout the 20th century?

This project is coordinated by the POHIS-Centre for political history of Antwerp University and funded by the ‘International Scientific Research’ program of the Research Foundation of Flanders.

More info: