

Reconsidering the Political in Contemporary History. Social Practices and Material Cultures in Cold War Western Europe

Veranstalter: Jan Hansen, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; Jochen Hung, Universiteit Utrecht; Andrew Tompkins, University of Sheffield / Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; Phillip Wagner, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Datum, Ort: 04.03.2016–05.03.2016, Berlin

Bericht von: Alrun Berger, Institut für soziale Bewegungen, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

How did social practices and material cultures form the contours of 'the political' in Cold War Western Europe? This was the key question raised at the international workshop 'Reconsidering the Political in Contemporary History. Social Practices and Material Cultures in Cold War Western Europe', which took place at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Organized by the Humboldt-Universität, the Universiteit Utrecht, and the University of Sheffield and funded by the 'KOSMOS program' of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the workshop's aim was to offer an alternative perspective on the political history of post-1945 Western Europe by calling for an extension of the epistemological horizons of our discipline. Expanding on the works of thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, who argue that various acts of communication constantly reconfigured the boundaries of what is considered political, and borrowing from scholars of new social history such as Patrick Joyce, the organisers conceived communication not only as a verbal or visual but also as a physical interaction that involves human actors as much as non-human agents (e.g. objects, instruments and animals).

BENJAMIN ZIEMANN (Sheffield) introduced his substantial keynote lecture with an insight into a memo written by Willy Brandt in February 1980, where Brandt tried to interpret the prospects of the then newly founded party 'Die Grünen' (The Greens). Even though Brandt was a party politician who had accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the workings of parliamentary politics

over the years, he failed to understand the real challenge that the new party provided. Against this backdrop, Ziemann teased out some conceptual underpinnings and implications of the 'changing contours of the political' from the 1960s to the 1980s alongside the conference's key terms. First, he pointed out that the usage of the term 'political' indicates a growing distrust about the ways in which democratic states operate as well as perhaps a skepticism towards the state to actively steer and manage political developments. According to Ziemann, the optimistic belief of the state's overall capacity to successfully anticipate, balance and ultimately control negative developments in the environment, education or other policy fields through proactive intervention stood against a proliferation of the notion of a 'political' that exists and operates beyond the state's purview in the 1970s discourse on governance. These two contradictory elements were the backdrop for the insistence that 'the political' had to be reinvented or championed. With this in mind, he stressed that a first step in the empirical investigation that the conference tried to conduct should take stock of the semantics of 'the political' in alternative approaches to politics in Western Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. In order to understand the changes in the political that this period brought about even better, Ziemann added the term 'front porch politics' which he had borrowed from the US historian Michael S. Foley.¹ He suggested conceiving it as a metaphor for a type of activism that translates what in German parlance since the 1970s has been called *Betroffenheit* (being immediately affected by external circumstances) into a language of citizenship and protest. In this context, he drew attention to the striking parallels to and the relevance of Susanne Schregel's book „Atomkrieg vor der Wohnungstür“ ('nuclear war at the doorstep of your flat' or 'at the front of one's flat').² As the peace activists in Schregel's book renegotiated the boundaries of the polit-

¹Michael S. Foley, *Front Porch Politics. The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s*, New York 2013.

²Susanne Schregel, *Der Atomkrieg vor der Wohnungstür. Eine Politikgeschichte der neuen Friedensbewegung in der Bundesrepublik 1970-1985*, Frankfurt 2011.

ical space by politicising different spheres of human activity (e.g. the private living space, the workplace, the religious sphere or nature), Ziemann suggested to seek explanations for the context of the political changes since the late 1960s within a widely conceived political system, rather than just referring to an all-encompassing 'Cold War' framework. Hence, he specifically emphasised, amongst other important findings, the significance of these anti-nuclear protests in the West for a general broadening of the political space and expansion of the parameters of political discourse in Western Europe (especially by referring to the loose alliances of the peace campaigners with Communist activists, who brought in their undoubted skills as mass organisers and administrators of mass movements and gatherings).

The first panel dealt with new approaches to diplomatic history. JAN KREUELS (Fribourg) reconsidered an investigation of the Cold War summits. Even though most of these summits hardly ever generated tangible results in the form of formal agreements and therefore have been largely neglected as a relevant subject of historical research until now, Kreuels advocated for an investigation of their form. He claimed that the Cold War summits should be read as places and instances where the policy of *détente* as well as the coequality between the two superpowers were performed and become visible to the public. Thus, he called for an examination of the summits' prior arrangements, meeting places, gestures and poses as tools for a symbolic communication. CRISTIAN CAPOTESCU (Michigan) analysed West German humanitarian aid to communist Romania during the 1970s and 1980s. By using 'giving' as a concept, he tried to capture a continuum of differing yet related forms of material and immaterial exchanges framed through an ethics of solidarity. Although giving remains elusive to the traditional taxonomies employed in the history of the Cold War, he concluded that giving as a social practice, which was propelled through the growing mobility, rising consumer culture, and changing economic landscape of the 1970s and 1980s, provides a sense of the ways in which ordinary people negotiated

(geo)politics on the ground. STÉPHANIE GONÇALVES' (Rennes) paper explored ballet – a performative art, which does not require any translation – as a social and political practice in the Cold War. By focusing on three parts of the Bolshoi ballet tours to London and Paris such as production (question of repertoire), consumption (places of performances) and reception (by the Western public), it concluded that ballet can be seen as a cultural diplomatic tool during the Cold War.

The second section was dedicated to 'Institutional and Parliamentary Practice'. CARLA HOETINK and HARM KAAL (Nijmegen) presented a joint paper on the material culture of Dutch Parliament between 1945 and the end of the twentieth century. They argued that material culture would be crucial for the understanding of parliamentary culture, since it helps to discover the beliefs – the values, ideals, attitudes, and assumptions – of parliaments at a given time. Because they ascertained an absence of objects in Dutch Parliament, they concluded that parliamentary culture differs from the extra-parliamentary political sphere where objects have played a prominent role notably in political communication, as exemplified by electoral culture, demonstrations and manifestations. In his presentation, JOCHEN F. MAYER (Edinburgh) campaigned for taking literally Otto Uhlig's metaphor of the 'framework' (*Gerüst*) to critically engage with more recent work on the 'history of paperwork' that has begun examining modern bureaucracy with a focus on its main administrative and material foundations. Using the example of the mid-twentieth century labour administration in Germany, and the labour card files in particular, he stressed that administrative continuity and persistence along with the physical survival of the *Gerüst* (preserved file cards and related paperwork and legislation) allowed for continuous administrative writing of the individual employment history and the gathering of basic statistical data, office equipment, or, indeed, manifold resistance on behalf of the defeated population.

The third panel had a focus on consumer cultures. REINHILD KREIS (Wien / Mannheim) analysed home improvement in the GDR by scrutinising the general accep-

tance of the GDR citizens being skilled and enthusiastically devoted tinkerers and do-it-yourselfers, as a necessity and result of the insufficient supply of consumer goods. She stressed that home improvement in the GDR was not solely a private matter but something of a hybrid. Like anyone else, GDR citizens, indeed, enjoyed being handy or resorted to DIY practices for economic reasons, and many of them were of course very proud of their skills and the results of their work. However its political dimension, she concluded, was always present during the Cold War as well, as the state has reneged on the promise of a certain standard of living and therefore declared DIY-activities a characteristic of socialism and of the 'socialist personality', both encouraging and demanding such activities. In his presentation, BENJAMIN MÖCKEL (Köln) dealt with the question of what a material culture approach could contribute to the history of human rights. He argued that recent human rights historiography could serve as a very good example for the shifting notions of 'the political', as human rights became a new buzzword for a 'moralisation' of international politics and the idea of an emerging 'global civil society' since the 1970s. New actors in the 'political sphere' such as the United Nations, several NGOs, and above all individual members of society-conducted human right politics indicated a shift of the Human Rights' concept from the sphere of politics and law to the sphere of civil society. On the basis of human rights-inspired boycotts such as the boycott against „Outspan“-oranges, and so-called 'moral merchandise', he pointed out that material objects – both artefacts and consumer products – played a decisive role in triggering support and raising awareness for human rights issues outside of 'politics' in a narrow sense of the word. NATALIE SCHOLZ (Amsterdam) examined the political role of everyday material objects in postwar West Germany. She explained that modern design in general and architecture and interior design in particular became, indeed, a crucial element of the way the young Federal Republic reinterpreted and symbolised itself as a democratic, modern and western-oriented nation. However by hinting at the fact that the very same objects were

adopted by dramatically incongruous political regimes (e.g. Bauhaus-inspired styles), she proposed an approach of conceiving everyday material culture as being of considerable importance for the construction of Germany as a 'make-believe space' both between 1933 and 1945 and during the 1950s, with government institutions playing an active role in this process.

The final panel examined new forms of political activism. Against the backdrop of the waning efficacy of site occupation in the late 1970s, STEPHEN MILDNER (Groningen) portrayed that some antinuclear activists organised grassroots campaigns for local councils and state parliaments in West Germany and France. Moreover, he stressed that such ecological candidates of the late 1970s received the highest share of the vote where they focused on immediate, local issues (e.g. particular reactor projects) around which diverse grassroots coalitions had formed earlier in the decade. In order to hold their coalitions together, they painstakingly avoided participation in national politics. Hence, he concluded that such antinuclear activists' local electoral campaigns, in the longer term, opened up space for a rethinking of politics itself that linked elections and parliamentary democracy with local matters. JOHN NIEUWENHUYNS (Brussels) presented a paper on Belgian pro-Palestinian solidarity groups, which he conceived as 'socialisation arenas' for intellectuals and activists at the crossroads between different spheres of society. Providing an insight into how antizionism as a *Weltanschauung* combined oppositions to Western imperialism, structural racism as well as deviant forms of socialism, he argued that pro-Palestinian solidarity merged into a new repertoire of Human Rights and Global Justice in pre-1973-74 Belgium. Whilst the second half of the 1970s gave way to new strategies like ecologists' electoral ambitions at the provincial level, he stressed that 'Third Worldism' was only used to advance their agenda locally. Thus, Nieuwenhuys concluded that Palestine had hardly ever been more than a banner at a time when antizionism seemed a popular reference. TOBIAS VETTERLE (Trier/Luxembourg) examined the changing nature of political legiti-

macy in post-war Luxembourg by analysing the countless discussions about the legitimacy of certain political practices and institutions, which the Luxembourgian environmental movements' rise to political power from 1970 to 1990 gave cause for. According to Vetterle, the movement confronted the public with notions of political legitimacy during its whole process of development by scrutinising the fundamental idea that democratic legitimacy could be sufficiently produced by the act of voting. He stressed that this process transformed the traditional notion of political legitimacy in Luxembourgian public discourse as the act of voting lost its role as democracy's primary source of legitimacy and was instead supplemented by principles like transparency, accountability and deliberation. In his contribution, PANAGIOTIS ZESTANAKIS (Crete) scrutinised the connection between media change and 'de-politicisation' in late 1980s Greece. Despite the assumption of some Greek scholars who view the expansion of lifestyle media as evidence of growing 'de-politicisation', he argued that at the same time Greek lifestyle media influenced young audiences, they offered alternative terrains where political juxtapositions were articulated, designating new vocabularies of 'the political'. Moreover, he stressed that such media politicised consumption in novel ways, alarming established political subjects who felt anxious about unfamiliar discourses to which they were not ready to respond. Instead they preferred to categorise them as 'dangerous' promoters of 'de-politicisation'. Thus, he concluded that it may be wiser to think of mass culture and politics not as contradictory but as interacting, supplementary concepts.

By linking political and cultural history, the conference showcased a large variety of options and approaches to examine how social practices and material cultures form the contours of 'the political' in Cold War Western Europe. The lively discussions about each participant's paper demonstrated the great potential that a broader understanding of what formed political negotiations could contribute to established notions (of the parameters) of political discourse in Western Europe. By bringing different but interrelated topics

together, the workshop illustrated the shifting notions of 'the political' in the second half of the twentieth century. A shared key definition of the concept presented at the conference would certainly open up a whole new perspective on the history of post-1945 Western Europe.

Conference overview:

Welcome and Introduction: Jan Hansen (Berlin) / Andrew Tompkins (Sheffield / Berlin) / Phillip Wagner (Berlin)

Keynote lecture

Benjamin Ziemann (Sheffield), Beyond the Front Porch? Changing Contours of the Political in Western Europe from the 1960s to the 1980s

Panel I: New Approaches to Diplomatic History

Chair: Jan Hansen (Berlin)

Comment: Gabriele Metzler (Berlin)

Jan Kreuels (Fribourg), Reconsidering Cold War Summits

Cristian Capotescu (Michigan), „Pakethilfen nach drüben“: West German Humanitarian Aid to Communist Romania, 1970s–1980s

Stéphanie Gonçalves (Rennes), „Ballet as a weapon“: Ballet Tours and Propaganda in the Cultural Cold War, 1947–1968

Panel II: Institutional and Parliamentary Practices

Chair: Phillip Wagner (Berlin)

Comment: Stefan Couperus (Groningen)

Carla Hoetink and Harm Kaal (Nijmegen), More than Words. The Material Culture of Parliament: Objects as Elements of Political Communication, 1945–2000

Jochen F. Mayer (Edinburgh), 'The Backbone of our Work': File Cards, Allied Archival Protection, and the Persistence of Power in German Labour Offices, c.1935–1955

Panel III: Consumer Cultures

Chair: Jochen Hung (Utrecht)

Comment: Jan Logemann (Göttingen)

Reinhild Kreis (Wien/Mannheim), „Join in“ and „Do it Yourself“: Home Improvement in the GDR

Benjamin Möckel (Köln), Materializing

Global Justice: Consumer Products, Boycotts, and the 1970s Human Rights Revolution
Natalie Scholz (Amsterdam), Everyday objects and the imagination of the political in postwar West Germany

Panel IV: New Forms of Political Activism

Chair: Andrew Tompkins (Berlin)

Comment: Claudia Gatzka (Freiburg)

Stephen Milder (Groningen), Political Questions, Grassroots Answers: Creating Green Politics in Western Europe, 1975–1983

John Nieuwenhuys (Bruxelles), Land and Imperialism: Belgian Pro-Palestinian Activists in search of social Alternatives

Tobias Vetterle (Trier/Luxembourg), Transforming the culture of political participation in Cold War Western Europe: The case of the Luxembourg environmental movement

Panagiotis Zestanakis (Crete), Media change and the question of (de)politicization in late 1980s Greece.

Concluding discussion

Jan Hansen (Berlin) / Jochen Hung (Utrecht)

/ Andrew Tompkins (Sheffield / Berlin) /

Phillip Wagner (Berlin)

Tagungsbericht *Reconsidering the Political in Contemporary History. Social Practices and Material Cultures in Cold War Western Europe.*

04.03.2016–05.03.2016, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult

04.10.2016.