

### **Nation, Nationalism, and Transnationalism Revisited**

**Veranstalter:** Volker Depkat (Regensburg); Susanne Lachenicht (Bayreuth)

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**Bericht von:** Liv Birte Buchmann, Universität Regensburg; Stefan Weiß, Universität Bayreuth

The international and multi-disciplinary conference binding together the early modern and modern periods of history focused on the current academic discourse on nation, nationalism, and transnationalism as well as on historical examples and trajectory lines. In their introductory remarks, VOLKER DEPKAT (Regensburg) and SUSANNE LACHENICHT (Bayreuth) defined the idea behind the conference as an attempt to connect different paradigms and concepts or categories of constructed collective identity and to historicise them across time and space. The discussions were to reconceptualise the ambiguous relationship between nationalism and transnationalism. Is there always a transnational element to nationalism and are they both mutually reinforcing each other? Other prominent elements, such as empires and the dichotomy of universalism and particularism, were to be taken into consideration, too. The conference therefore aimed at reflecting „nation“ as one among several offers of collective identity; the participants discussed how nation, race, identity and other categories of collective identity are used and how it might be possible to critically assess presentist perspectives of these terms and concepts.

In the first session, „Approaching Collective Identities,“ WERNER SOLLORS (Harvard) delineated the genesis and patterns of use of the term ethnic identity in American literature and culture. He argued that ethnic identity is meant to make a person special or different; however, it is highly situational and needs to be carefully negotiated. He illustrated his argument by quoting two literary examples: W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous question „How does it feel to be a problem?“ and Edward Haskill’s 1941 novel „Lance.“ Sollors described how the terms ethnicity, empire, na-

tion, transnationalism, and invention deeply intertwine. He pointed at the impossibility to discuss all these terms without using the word „identity“ – which has only been used since the 1950s and can thus be considered as a relatively new term. Sollors concluded by raising awareness of the ambiguous nature of the terms national or ethnic identity. In the subsequent discussion, it was questioned whether historians ever get a hold of „identity“ as such, or whether they could only analyse identity narratives. It was suggested that the analytical focus of historians should be laid on situations which produce identity narratives; however it should always be considered that identity is not a useful analytical category in each and every case.

The second session of the conference focused on architectural representations of transnationalism. ANNA MINTA (Linz) demonstrated how theories of identity were translated into architecture in posttraditional societies. She argued that architecture and art can be regarded as manifestations of the influence of identity politics. After 1945, she stated, modern architects were challenged by the question of how to re-establish „human elements“ in the city. Minta showed that especially university campuses, museums, and other official buildings were used to emphasize transnational elements and ideals. Thus, the architecture of these buildings often played with different regional, republican, or sacred references, such as an archetypal Parthenon temple placed in the centre of a forum. All these modern buildings and places created, according to Minta, a sense of belonging, which was often specifically transnational in its meaning.

LIV-BIRTE BUCHMANN (Regensburg) argued in her presentation that transnational networks played a significant role in the installations of three statues of Abraham Lincoln in Edinburgh, Manchester, and London. Buchmann showed that all three of these monuments were products of private endeavours and were not part of any official political agenda. She further elaborated on the unveiling ceremony of the statue in London, which was dedicated in 1920 and which was the first monument on Parliament Square to honour a non-British statesman. She ar-

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gued that the site was thus transformed into a transnational space of freedom and democracy and demonstrated how the orators at the ceremony focused on an imagined Anglo-American collective identity as a certain form of cultural diplomacy. The unveiling ceremony and the speeches held at the occasion showed that Abraham Lincoln was constructed as a symbol for a transnational collective identity spanning the Atlantic.

The third session of the conference focused on the relationship between diasporas and nationalism. SUSANNE LACHENICHT discussed whether early modern diasporas can be described as transnational nations. Lachenicht demonstrated that diaspora is both an analytical and an emic term, providing the examples of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews and Huguenots from the early modern period. Susanne Lachenicht argued that in early modern times the term „nation“ carried several layers of meaning, connected to territorial and legal spheres as well as to „purity“, and was used interchangeably with other terms such as blood, race, and people. Lachenicht concluded by stating that it was indeed possible to become a nation through exile, through a transnational and transcultural process, i.e. when a specific legal status was given to people from other regions. However, in exile often existed an ethos to reterritorialize and to end the transnational element of nations. Lachenicht suggested that this connection of diaspora and nation-building should be integrated into imperial history and the history of globalization.

LIESBETH CORENS (Oxford) centered her talk on the early modern community of English Catholics in the Low Countries and Northern France. She argued that diaspora communities had to be actively fostered and that theology was a building block of these communities. English Catholics actively maintained their bonds mainly through three different elements: first, confraternities played an important role; hence they maintained cohesion across large distances and the mutual assistance within them was considered as a path to salvation. Secondly, important relics were brought to the new regions and by worshipping them collective commemoration was perpetuated. The third

element consisted in the continuing importance of saints' days, which helped to uphold the memory of the ancestors. Corens concluded that despite their vast scattering English Catholics were thus able to strengthen their communal bonds.

The fourth session brought the complex relationship between nation and empire into focus. STEFAN WEISS (Bayreuth) argued that the terms Empire and Nation were used interchangeably, complementarily and in an antagonistic way in nineteenth-century Britain. He illustrated that during the so-called Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 many commentators of the events used the terms indiscriminately and merged „English Nation“ and „British Empire“ into one and the same concept. British imperial discourse deeply intertwined with English national discourses. At the same time, the events triggered critical comments in Ireland, where the „nation“ was felt as something desirable, however hindered by the existence of empire. Furthermore, Weiss emphasized the enormous power that the concept of Nation still possesses in arranging, organizing and thinking about historical subjects.

FRITHJOF BENJAMIN SCHENK (Basel) presented concepts of collective identity between Nation and Empire in nineteenth century Russia. He argued that Russian nationality was a relatively recent phenomenon compared to Russian imperial identity. Imperial identity was formed by territorial, dynastic, and institutional elements and was also linked to religious orthodoxy. Only the last two Russian tsars tried to turn their subjects into „Russian nationals“. Schenk elaborated on whether the two rival concepts – empire and nation – are truly as irreconcilable as they are often claimed to be. He thus called for a perspective of subsumption instead of contradiction. According to Schenk, Empire and Nation in nineteenth-century Russia were often entangled and overlapping: imperialists did not fight nationalism but were rather trying to use it for their purposes, although the last Russian tsars were not able to start a successful nation-building process. In his conclusion, Schenk argued for a research approach which focuses on how the subjects perceived these concepts of identity and how they reacted to them.

PIETER JUDSON (Florence) opened the fifth session on „Nationalism and Transnationalism.“ His talk focused the key areas where national and transnational elements were colluding, namely the Borderlands of the Habsburg Empire. Judson defined these as regions within the empire where people met who spoke different languages and had different religious beliefs. According to Judson, Borderlands were crucial for nationalists; this was also the place where nation and empire mutually created one another. At the same time, many people refused nationalist propaganda and displayed attitudes of national indifference. Judson emphasized his highly critical attitude towards the traditional dichotomy of Empire versus Nation. In many ways, nations behaved like empires and, within the Habsburg Empire, few things changed during the transition from empire to nation. Accordingly, analysing the Habsburg Borderlands is challenging traditional paradigms of imperial and national histories.

In the second part of the session, JASPER TRAUTSCH (Regensburg) illustrated the history of the terms ethnic nation and civic nation. According to Trautsch, a civic nation is a state which is based on a common belief system with common values rather than one common ethnic identity. Trautsch argued that, despite heavy critique since the 1990s, civic nationalism is nonetheless still useful, both as an empirical category and a normative ideal. With his edited volume on civic nations he is aiming at a global perspective of the phenomenon and at reviving the concept of a civic nation.

In the last session, Cultural Nationalism in a Transnational Perspective, VOLKER DEPKAT presented his thoughts about the history and character of American Exceptionalism as an identity narrative. He demonstrated that American Exceptionalism has many key elements, for instance a language of universalism, its utopian character, and a sense of mission inseparably tied to the possibility of failure. He emphasized the multiple layers of this phenomenon and the analytical problems resulting from its complexity. In his concluding remarks Depkat highlighted the importance of the American Revolution for the evolution of American Exceptionalism by claiming

that a universal ideology was transcending the American nation right from the start. At the same time, the exact relationship between nationalism and universalism remained undefined so that narratives of American exceptionalism basically are a form of nationalism that comes with universalist pretensions. Therefore, American Exceptionalism is deeply embedded within but not identical to the history of the American Nation.

In the last presentation of the conference, MARCUS GRÄSER (Linz) talked about the concept of American cultural nationalism in the 1930s and argued for the usefulness of this approach for historical study. He deplored that the cultural sphere is underrepresented in general histories of that time. Gräser defined culture for his purpose in a very narrow sense, i.e. institutions collecting and exhibiting art as well as the production and reception of art. He argued that while cultural nationalism had always been present in European states, the USA can be described as an international late comer in this regard. After providing several examples of stately intervention in the cultural sphere, Gräser concluded that cultural nationalism must be regarded as an episode in American history and an expression of the 1930s spirit; however, it did not become a powerful narrative.

The final discussion aimed at tying together the different strands presented at the conference and at providing an outlook on future academic study in the field. It was agreed that analytic terms and concepts always carry several layers of meaning, for instance the presentist perspective, the historical emic perspective, and the etic analytical perspective. Terms should never be predefined but always be built up from the actors' perspective and in accordance with the sources. Essential elements of nationalism are its ties to moments of crisis. Generally, terms and concepts seem to be highly situational and relational and need to be considered in their limitedness – spatially as well as temporally. Furthermore, who is excluded from national or transnational narratives and who is creating the sense of a „We?“ As to the concept of national identity, some participants pointed to the element of choice, which is antagonistic to the peoples' belief in identity as a given. Others stated that

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much of the national vocabulary is embedded in historicist paradigms and their quest for uniqueness. Finally, the discussants unequivocally agreed that transnational foundations of nationality and the special dimensions of identity should be in the focus of further research in the study and re-evaluation of nations, nationalism, and transnationalism.

**Conference Overview:**

*Introduction*

Volker DEPKAT (Regensburg), Susanne LACHENICHT (Bayreuth)  
Nation, Nationalism, and Transnationalism Revisited

*Session 1: Approaching Collective Identities*

Werner SOLLORS (Harvard)  
The Problem of National and Ethnic Identity

*Session 2: Architecture, Artefacts, and (Trans)Nationalism*

Anna MINTA (Linz)  
Parliamentary Buildings, Universities, and Museums. Architecture and Identity Politics in Posttraditional Societies  
Liv Birte BUCHMANN (Regensburg)  
Three Lincolns for Great Britain: Lincoln Statues as Sites of Transnational Nation-Building

*Session 3: Diasporas and Nationalism*

Susanne LACHENICHT (Bayreuth)  
Early Modern Diasporas as Transnational Nations?  
Liesbeth CORENS (Oxford)  
Charity and Community without Borders

*Session 4: Nation and Empire*

Stefan WEISS (Bayreuth)  
Nineteenth-Century Britain between Empire and Nation(s)  
Frithjof Benjamin SCHENK (Basel)  
What does it mean to be Russian? Concepts of Collective Identity between Nation and Empire in the 19th Century

*Session 5: Nationalism and Transnationalism*

Pieter JUDSON (EUI Florenz)  
Habsburg Borderlands: Where Nation and Transnational Empire Collude, 1880 – 1930  
Jasper TRAUTSCH (Regensburg)

Civic Nationalism in Global Perspective

*Session 6: Cultural Nationalism in Transnational Perspective*

Volker DEPKAT (Regensburg)  
The Revolutionary Foundations of American Exceptionalism: Between Universalism and Nationalism  
Marcus GRÄSER (Linz)  
Cultural Nationalism in the 1930s: The US in Comparative Perspective

*Final Discussion*

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