‘Splendid Isolation’? Insularity in British History

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„Our story centres in an island, not widely sundered from the Continent.“ – This well-known opening line to Winston Churchill’s History of the English-Speaking Peoples indicates how prominently references to insular geography rank whenever British history and identity are up for debate. „Those who dwell there“, Churchill continues, „are not insensitive to any shift of power, any change of faith, or even fashion, on the mainland, but they give to every practice, every doctrine that comes to it from abroad, its own peculiar turn and imprint“[1]. Churchill’s islanders are well connected and informed, yet distinct.

To trace in British history such ideas of islandness was the aim of this conference. The event was supported by the German Historical Institute in London, the German Association for British Studies, and the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. It was preceded by a public panel which evaluated the referendum of 23 June 2016 considering long- and short-term socio-political developments on both sides of the Channel[2].

The conference was opened by CHRISTIANE EISENBERG (Berlin) and WENCKE METELING (Marburg) who introduced the Centre for British Studies and its research aims. Subsequently, ANDREA WIEGESHOFF (Marburg) and HANNES ZIEGLER (London) outlined the conceptual framework of the project. Wiegeshoff recounted how on the British Isles the „geographical fact of inhabiting an island“ had been connected „with historical, political or economic developments“ at least since the eighteenth century. She explained how the connection of ideology and geography, integral to the notion of insularity, has traditionally informed discourses of British national and imperial identity, a well-known recent example being David Cameron’s ‘Bloomberg Speech’ of January 2013[3]. Like many British politicians before him, the former prime minister argued that „geographical circumstances had shaped the psychology of the islanders“. One of the historian’s tasks, according to Wiegeshoff, is to question such deterministic interpretations of otherness. Ziegler then opened another perspective by characterizing the conference theme as closely linked to questions of transnational and global history. Ziegler listed „three main lines of inquiry“ that the contributions to the conference would be centred around. Firstly, they would trace the „historical contexts“ of „British island ideas“ in their substance, form and application respectively. Secondly, „the connection between popular and cultural representations of insularity and their visible and tangible impact on political, social and cultural practices“ would be addressed. Thirdly, the idea of insularity would be investigated *critically*: The „claim of unity“ inherent in many references to islandness, which obscures internal and external tensions, required deconstruction. This was particularly relevant where the island idea „[casts] silence on regions or groups perceived as different, backward and not an integral part of the ‘island nation’“.

The conference’s first session focused on „Cultural imaginations of the ‘Island Nation’ and competing conceptions of national belonging“. ROSS ALDRIDGE (Gdansk) discussed Dover and the Channel Tunnel in relation to Britain’s island identity, reconstructing references to the famous cliffs of Dover in contemporary political debates and literary texts. Aldridge argued that the use of cliff and tunnel imagery in Cameron’s

[1] Winston S. Churchill, A History of the English-Speaking Peoples. Vol 1. The Birth of Britain, London 1956, p. viii.

[2] For a recording of the panel, see: http://voicerepublic.com/talks/abschied-vom-kontinent (30.05.2018).

[3] David Cameron, EU speech at Bloomberg, delivered on 23 January 2013. For the script of the speech, see: http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg (24.06.2018).

'Bloomberg Speech' aligned with metaphors used in recent campaigns of the UK Independence Party. Throughout, the cliffs of Dover served as a signifier for the sovereignty of the nation, the Channel Tunnel being identified with the threat of invasion from the continent. The sentimental atmosphere that surrounded the cliffs of Dover in literary texts of the nineteenth century and in the context of the World Wars had been replaced by one of hostility.

PATRICK BAHNERS (Frankfurt am Main) focused on insularity in the Whig interpretation of history, especially in Thomas Babington Macaulay's popular five-volume „The History of England", published from 1800 to 1859. Bahners recounted how, according to Macaulay, the British had only become „emphatic islanders" in the thirteenth century when the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons merged and became one nation. This was the first demonstration of islandness uniting the British. The tradition of a strong parliament also went back to the thirteenth century in Macaulay's account. Along with a firm belief in the authority of the constitution, the parliament had preserved the British nation's 'island identity'. The imperative of a strong parliament and the island identity became driving forces for the nation's progression towards ever greater liberty. Underlying this account was the conviction that constitutional history was self-sufficient; due to their constitution and parliament the British were in possession of the means to work out their own destiny. From this Whig perspective on British history, islandness served as an emblem for the constitution's and the parliament's unifying strength.

The keynote lecture was delivered by JULIA ANGSTER (Mannheim) who exposed a shift within the understanding of islandness that was closely linked to the experience of imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. Angster outlined how the British had established a clear hegemony among the European powers by 1815. They were in possession of the strongest naval forces and were dominating world trade. This British Empire was a boundless global network shaped by British concepts and values but not subject to a tight administrative control. It was a space, loosely connected by seafarers' excursions, disparate and heterogenous in its character. This Empire was built outside the realm of state relations, and the aim was to navigate the world by curiosity, to map it in a scientific manner. Its rulers were guided by their firm belief in rationality and progress. The Empire brought into being a sense of liberal values' universal validity, and a sense that European cultures formed a superior unit compared to their global counterparts. It was this perspective that inspired British conceptions of insularity prior to the 1840s; more than a locus, the island was the home base for a global network, the vehicle from which the Empire operated. Through analysing the geographical language of the 1860s, Angster then reconstructed the decline of this idea of insularity. With the disruption of the balance of power on the European continent, national rather than imperial interests began to govern discourses across the European lands and the British Isles. Territory rather than knowledge was now conceived as conveying global power. Angster argued that this turn from imperial to national rationale evinced how closely intertwined British and European histories of the time had been. Throughout her talk and likewise in the discussion that followed, Angster emphasised that she was referring to a shift in *rationale* and *narrative* of legitimating imperial rule rather than to one in practices of this rule. In this context, it was important to remember for how long the narrative of the Empire as one of well-connected seafarers had served to justify and to disguise the violent repression and exploitation that the 'excursions' led to.

The second session centred on conflicts between British and Irish references to islandness. JAMES STAFFORD (Bielefeld) reconstructed political discourses of insularity in the Kingdom of Ireland in the decade before the French Revolution. At this time the idea emerged that the Irish isle could replace Britain as the centre of trade between Europe and the United States. These utopian discourses were largely inspired by Ireland's economic prosperity at the time. They were furthered by the relatively long period of domestic peace that the Irish looked back upon. Meanwhile, the British government, afraid of „another American experience" even closer to

their borders, was eager to bind the Kingdom of Ireland through tariffs and trading barriers institutionally to their economic and political system.

PAMELA LINDEN (London) spoke about 'the fragmentation of British Jewish identity' in the interwar period. She first outlined the arrival of Jewish migrants in Ireland and how they adapted to the island's mentality, their religious life being overseen by the Chief Rabbi in London. Linden showed how Jewish life in Ireland could only be understood within this triangle of oversight of London, of traditional Jewish culture in the immigrants' home, and of encounter with the native communities in Ireland. Linden exemplified this by reconstructing the case of Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, the first Chief Rabbi of Ireland, who came to Dublin during the Irish War of Independence. By following Herzog's conflicts with his successor in Belfast, Rabbi Jacob Schachter, Linden exposed the frictions between Belfast and Dublin and with their London supervisors respectively as another dimension of complexity in the Irish Jews' quest for identity.

The final session of the conference juxtaposed „islandness" and „interconnectedness" in contemporary British politics. SIMON J. MOODY (London) employed the concept of insularity to assess British defence policy and strategic planning and the British army's preparations for nuclear combat in the context of the Cold War. Moody pointed to the historic tensions in British defence policy between establishing oneself as separate from the continent and seeking a connection, visible in the changing emphasis on maritime or land forces. Maritime forces were the prime concern for the longest period of British history. Therefore, the 1945 decision to provide forces against the perceived Communist threat on the European continent marked a critical juncture in British history. The introduction of nuclear weapons signified the beginning of this new period. They seemed the only means of defence against Communism and to ensure that the UK remained at the high table of global politics after the Empire had disintegrated. But the nuclear age also led to new fears of invasion, the island being a particularly vulnerable target for Soviet attacks.

CHARLOTTE LYDIA RILEY (Southampton) provided an in-depth analysis of British newspaper reports on overseas development and aid spending, thus disclosing the UK's post-imperial international connectedness. Riley focused on the 1960s, a decade that marked the peak of newspaper circulation in the UK. She reconstructed the characterisations of the recipients of foreign aid and their relationship with the UK but also traced the disputes on what purposes development spending should serve. Riley revealed that attitudes towards foreign aid were closely aligned with the different political camps' perceptions of the British Empire. Although supporting foreign aid spending was a distinctive feature of the Labour Party and the left-wing press, the Conservative camp occasionally also argued in its favour. By the latter, aid was perceived as a way of securing political stability in the recipient countries and maintaining imperial ties through continuing relationships with the former colonies[4].

Altogether, the contributions exemplified how employing insularity as an analytical category enlightens the study of the British Isles' past and contemporary politics and culture in their transnational and global contexts. Yet, the final discussion also left room to problematise the analytical potential of insularity. It was noted that, in present-day political discourse, references to the UK's and, particularly, England's islandness were dominated by conservative and right-wing activists' attempts to redefine the nation's identity as one of separateness from the continent. The fact that British islandness had also always formed the background to a keen interest in internationalism and connectivity and that islandness had laid the foundations for a very specific British cosmopolitanism, was somewhat disguised by the current political climate. Furthermore, it was argued that the result of the referendum on 23 June 2016 had tinged the perception of British insularity with an anti-European teleology. The tendency to interpret British discourses of na-

[4] See also: Charlotte Lydia Riley, Tropical Allsorts. The Transnational Flavor of British Development Policies in Africa, in: Journal of World History, 26, 4 (2016), pp. 839-864.

tional identity in this teleological way had also been warned against in the public panel that had preceded the conference.

The panelists and the contributors to the conference were far from regarding the Brexit vote an inevitable result of the islanders' search for their distinctiveness. Yet, the fact that recent developments seem to misguide contemporaries from all political camps to interpret British discourses of islandness in a deterministic way, makes it even more important for historians to ask for insularity in British history in a critical and diversifying way, perhaps even in a comparative perspective and in connection with questions of class or gender. As Churchill put it in the preface to his History of the English-Speaking People: „Knowledge of the trials and struggles is necessary to all who would comprehend the problems, perils, challenges, and opportunities which confront us to-day"[5].

Conference Overview:

Welcome & Opening Remarks

Christiane Eisenberg (Berlin), Wencke Meteling (Marburg), Andrea Wiegeshoff (Marburg), Hannes Ziegler (London)

Section I: Cultural Imaginations of the 'Island Nation' and Competing Conceptions of National Belonging

Ross Aldridge (Gdansk): 'The Chalk of Britannia' – The Place of Dover and the Channel Tunnel in Britain's Island Identity

Patrick Bahners (Frankfurt am Main): 'Emphatically Islanders' – The Insularity of Whig Historiography

Almuth Ebke (Mannheim) An 'Island Nation'? Changing Conceptions of Britain, ca. 1981

Keynote Lecture

Julia Angster (Mannheim): A Global Island – Great Britain and the World in the Nineteenth Century

Section II: The 'Island Nearby' – Conflicting British and Irish Insularities

James Stafford (Bielefeld): 'The Mart in Europe for the Trade of America' – Ireland and the British World in the 1780s

Pamela Linden (London): The Fragmentation of British Jewish Identity Post 1921

Stuart C. Aveyard (Chichester): Britishness and Perceptions of the Northern Ireland Conflict

Section III: Islandness vs. Interconnectedness in British Politics

Benjamin Bland (London): 'The Island Race' – Islandness, the Nationalist Imagination, and Far Right Political Identities in Post-War Britain

Simon J. Moody (London): An Airbridge to Armageddon – The British Isles and Extended Deterrence in the Cold War

Charlotte Lydia Riley (Southampton): 'This is Work for the Future of Mankind' – Insularity, Imperialism and Internationalism at the End of Empire

Final Discussion & Closing Remarks

Tagungsbericht *'Splendid Isolation'? Insularity in British History*. 04.05.2018–05.05.2018, Berlin, in: H-Soz-Kult 22.08.2018.

[5] Churchill, English-Speaking Peoples. Vol 1, p. xvii.