



**National identification 'from below'  
International Conference  
Gent, 7-8 March 2008**

**Review  
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An international conference on national identification 'from below' was organised on 7 and 8 March 2008 in Ghent (Belgium) by the Department of Modern and Contemporary History at Ghent University and the Department of History at Antwerp University, in collaboration with the ADVN - Center for Archives, Documentation and Research, and supported by the Research Foundation-Flanders (FWO). Its aim was to counter the overinsistence on top-down processes and indoctrination in the research of nations and national(ist) movements. Much of this research is informed by a limited conception of the constructivist paradigm, interpreting national identity as a middle and upper class concern brought to the masses through a whole range of nationalising media (schools, army, press, monarchy, church, etc.), overemphasizing the idea of elite construction *ex nihilo*.

Consequently, many scholars have extrapolated the national(ist) discourse of elites and states to the masses they addressed. However, these generalisations do not necessarily hold true. There is a need to study not only the production of national discourse, but also its popular appropriation and the masses' creativity in forging new national symbols 'from below'. This conference wanted to replace the 'indirect' view (through an elite or middle class lens) by a 'more direct' perspective, based on qualitative sources of (and not merely about) ordinary people. The temporal framework of the conference was the late 18th century to the end of the First World War, with Europe as its geographic limit.

In his opening speech, co-organiser **Maarten Van Ginderachter** (Ghent University) expanded on the programme. He distinguished three approaches for the study of nationhood from below: first of all, history from below applied to the field of nations and nationalism, might refer to a methodological shift in perspective, namely from a bird's eye view to a worm's eye view. Practically this means the study of national identification in very specific and concrete micro-cases often at the local level. Second, national identification from below may pertain to a more conceptual

interpretation. This means that one tries to write history starting from the experience of people, rather than inferring their experience from their surroundings or from the discourses that are addressed to them. Third, there is the narrower heuristic interpretation of history from below, meaning a history using qualitative sources that are produced by ordinary people. These three forms of history from below may coincide or overlap, but this need not be the case. Van Ginderacher described how only from the 1990's nationhood was increasingly studied from below by way of micro-case studies at the local level and using ego-documents; nationhood from below in its third sense, using ego-documents from ordinary people, is even mainly an innovation of the last ten years. He also singled out the social functionality of national identification as one of the fields where new ground can be broken 'from below', as it could help explain why certain top-down strategies are appropriated by lower social groups and others are not.

The key-note address by **John Breuilly** (London School of Economics) touched immediately on a methodological subject. Discussing the historical research which distinguishes between social 'substance' (material grievances, confessional zeal, desire for social change) and national 'form', he detected a link with the false dualism between history from below (or social history) and history from above (or political history). He pleaded for a way out of this dualism, by considering the different roles the appeal to national symbols and motifs can play in popular movements. Thus a distinction can be made between 'motivational' and 'structural' nationalism: with the former, mutual manipulation is the typical relationship between elite and popular politics (cf. the approach by Miroslav Hroch); in the latter case, the nation becomes the field within which popular movements act, rather than being a specific value to pursue (cf. the approach by Ernst Gellner). Breuilly stressed that the making of a strong sense of identity precisely depends on the national being a matter of conflict simultaneously between different appropriations (and even rejections) of the national and the implicit acceptance of the national as the field which frames various social conflicts. He also warned against the fragmentation of ('national') stories of popular experience and identity (as happened with earlier history from below on class), and pleaded for a focus on the global framework of (the politics of) nationalism (rather than more diffuse concepts such as 'national identity').

Among the micro- or local cases presented at this conference, figures the paper by **Oliver Zimmer** (Oxford University), who examined how 'the national came into town', a previously neglected object of analysis by students of nationalism. Towns are ideally suited to investigate nation-formation as the product of a process of redefinition between state and society during the 19th century, rather than as a top-down process of cultural and institutional homogenization. Nationalism became an intervening rather than a competitive force and the local responses were directed by among other things political cultures, tradition and economic

circumstances. In the three German towns (Augsburg, Ulm and Ludwigshafen) Zimmer researched, the local liberal elites linked the German national concept with that of 'progress', thus also trying to shield the town from those aspects of nationalism they considered as detrimental to the prosperity of it. This integrated approach triggered, not for the last time during this conference, a discussion concerning the definition of the from below-concept.

The paper by **James Brophy** (University of Delaware) on the Rhenish Borderlands focused on the first half of the 19th century, more precisely the period between the public sphere-institutions of the old, absolutist regime (salons, journals, voluntary associations) and those from post-revolutionary Europe (parliaments, parties, press). In the latter formal channels for political expression were blocked and the first mass political public formed opinions through media and cultural practices that were not intended for formal political communication. In the Rhenish Borderlands cultural spheres as reading, singing, festivities, religion as well as market-economies, shaped the political identities of the popular classes and ordinary Rhinelanders adapted discourses of nationhood to fit their own needs. Interestingly, Brophy took into account the larger transnational arenas of popular communication in northwestern Europe, before the 'national' languages and national political boundaries hindered daily migrations of border communities. Also for the common Rhinelanders, the area constituted a transnational communicative forum, which played a significant role in the development of their political and cultural attitudes. To illustrate the difference between the popular and bourgeois views of the German nation in the Rhineland, the paper used for its case-study the divergent reception of the Rhine Crisis of 1840 among popular and bourgeois strata.

Jean-François **Chanet** (Université Lille-III) tried to find out whether, in the case of the humiliated French patriotism in the slipstream of the war with Prussia (1870-1871), patriotism manifested itself more vigorously among the working classes when they were directly exposed to a foreign threat or whether it owed at least as much to the diffusion of information by elite groups and institutions. From the outset, Chanet remarked that there are scarcely any sources that give direct access to popular opinions and feelings. What is clear though, is the lack of a unitary concept of patriotism; the German invasion also aggravated rather than attenuated the differences of opinion among the French.

The paper by **Laurence Cole** (University of East Anglia) on recent developments in the research of national identification in the Cisleithanian part of the Habsburg Monarchy, highlighted the departure from a number of assumptions in the established literature, also as a result of taking the view from below. The new studies, increasingly carried out at regional and local levels, emphasise the potential fluidity of (multi-layered) national identity, the limited appeal among the masses of overtly national politics

and the popular allegiance to the Habsburg dynasty and state. Notwithstanding these reservations, Cole stated that popular identities were still 'nationalised', though not simply as a result of top-down manipulation but also as part of a structural process.

Another micro-level study, by **Ilaria Porciani** (University of Bologna), examined the response by women from the urban middle and lower middle classes, before and after the unification of Italy, to the watchwords of independence, nation, constitution and liberty. She concluded that the reaction, especially in northern and central Italy, was spurred by two factors: the emotional and passionate form patriotism took on, with the emphasis on the building of a national family, and the tenor of the demonstrations of 1846-1847, which often took the form of processions which women could relate to. And after the unification, it was the construction of a national secular school system which engaged women in an active way. These women acted thus as intermediaries for top-down nationalism.

The research by **Antoon Vrints** (University Ghent) on the influence of the First World War on Belgian national feeling among the lower classes, tried to find out in what way, if any, material wellbeing and hardship was linked with the concepts 'Belgian' and 'German'. Vrints wanted to transcend the discussion by focussing on its concrete significance and function in the particular social context of the war, by applying Amartya Sen's 'entitlement approach' to the issue (the context of moral and social perceptions). The lower social groups, Vrints concluded, only appropriated a particular form of national identification if it was socially functional for them and after they had adjusted it to their own needs. His study could also shed new light on the complex history of competing national identities in Belgium after the war. During the ensuing discussion the need for comparison transpired with similar cases of 'shared suffering', to look at both pre-existing class structures and the longer term postwar) legacy of the wartime identification and to include the reception of the refugees by the homefront.

The overview by **Miguel Cabo Villaverde** (University of Santiago de Compostela) of nation-building and national identity in Spain highlighted the historiographical debate between the thesis of 'weak nationalisation' and the new paradigm. The latter wants to take into account regional complementarity, the combination with other identities (class or religion) and the view from the rural and urban popular classes. Cabo Villaverde concluded that for the Spanish case a lot of work from below still has to be done.

**Francesco Dall'Aglio** (University of Rome) investigated the pattern of survival of the Bulgarian national idea among the lower classes under the Ottoman domination in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was different from that of the exile intellectuals as it drew heavily on songs, folk tales, legends

and myths of heroism and brigandage (creating the hajdut-figure). Dall'Aglio argued that popular nationalism played an important part in establishing the state-nationalist identity after independence.

**Silvia Cresti** (Freie Universität Berlin) analysed (among other things through the study of festivities, dress-code, reading...) the way small, traditional Jewish communities (consisting of peddlers, shop-keepers, publicans..) in the Prussian province of Silesia from the 1840s until the end of the century, defined Germanness, compared with how urban and educated middle-class German Jews did. She found no difference, due to the fact that the former adapted social norms and intellectual patterns (Protestant values) of the latter, as part of their social rise, although they not yet belonged to it.

A number of papers could also come into Van Ginderachters second, conceptual category of from below-historiography. This is the case for the study by **Dora Dumont** (State University of New York at Oneonta) on how the popolani (the lower classes) of Rome experienced the new Italian identity in 1870, in a city which twin legacies of ancient imperial glory and papacy provided the Italian and foreign elites with a sort of tabula rasa. Dumont searched for the popular experience of national formation as reported by others, particularly the police, and concluded that compared to the rural classes, they made far fewer explicit references to it.

The paper by **Lone Kølle Martinsen** (European University Institute, Florence) concerned the historical fictional work by B.S. Ingemann, the foremost Danish author in that genre during the 19th century. His fictitious description of medieval Denmark, deliberately written for a broader public, makes use of popular tradition and myth and uses 'peasant language'. The fact that he applied the concept of ordinary people as a social and political category in the historical landscape of Denmark, threatened the elite ideas on writing history for the people.

**Andrew Thompson** (University of Leeds) considered the role the concept of Empire played in the self-image of the people of Britain (more cosmopolitan or insular). In what way did the concept represent what were supposed to be typical British characteristics and how did it help to transcend the sub-national identities? He used for his research two realms of popular culture and experience: exhibitions and migration. He concluded that the popular conception of British identity was partly mediated through official and elite discourses, as the exhibitions showed. But non-elite feelings and attitudes towards national identity were also being mediated through realms of experience, migration providing a key example.

**Martin Lyons** (University of New South Wales) went through the censorship reports on the letters the French soldiers that fought in the Alsace during WWI, wrote home. It provided him with a test-case in which both soldiers and Alsaciens negotiated their sense of French national identity. This

(mediated) worms' eye view showed how the integrationist, official discourse on *la grande patrie* collided with the soldier's experience of the linguistic and religious diversity on the ground. Also, national feeling among the (mostly peasant)soldiers could be reduced mostly to the defense of their own region or village and material considerations.

**Miika Tervonen** (European University Institute, Florence) described how Finnish nationalism and nation-building during the 19th century sharpened and politicized the ethnic boundaries between the Finnish-speaking majority and minority groups. In the process, the political elite, who derived their power from the Russian empire, had to define their national Fennoman movement from mid 19th century onwards against internal 'Others', such as the tiny minority of itinerant Roma. However, this boundary-making, as reflected in the press, revealed a gap between not only the urban bourgeoisie and the upper- and middling peasantry (who had vested economic interests in maintaining a tied-down labour force and restricted mobility), but also between the latter and petty landowners and landlords, who were involved in economic and social dealings with the gypsies.

There were also some papers specifically based on ego-documents produced by the lower classes themselves, the third, heuristic, approach outlined by Van Genderachter.

The very interesting case presented by **Stephanie M. Hilger** (University of Illinois) of the 'Swiss amazon' Regula Engel, who in 1821 published her remarkable life story, and whose constant wandering around Europe caused a breakdown of identification processes linked to one nation, immediately prompted the methodological question on the definition of 'from below' and whether, in this case, 'from outside' would not be more appropriate.

This did not apply to the case, presented by **Anna Kuismin** (Literary Archives of the Finnish Literature Society & University of Helsinki), of the self-taught Finnish peasant Pietari Päivärinta who wrote his own life story. Although he wrote himself into the *Bildung* of the people, which was being promoted during the 19th century by the elite-Fennoman movement, he worked a double strategy, aiming his work both for his peers and learned people. The (functionalist) question remained tough why an (il)literate peasant would want to adhere to the new Finnish nationalism.

Part of the research by **Tom Verschaffel** (University Leuven, campus Kortrijk) of the Belgian migration in Northern France during the second half of the 19th century, concerned the development among the (mostly Flemish) workers of a hybrid identity, involving both nation as well as region and locality. The study of the construction of these hybrid identities needs a from below approach, focusing on daily practices and primary sources produced by the migrants themselves.

The heuristic contribution of **Eberhard Fritz** (Archives of the House of Württemberg) to the conference focussed on the postcard, an interesting source for the view from below although far less studied than its 'older brother', the letter. He presented two collections of postcards sent by German soldiers during World War I to the (peaceful) homefront. The ensuing discussion pointed at several methodological problems for drawing general conclusions on the basis of postcards, such as the question of the (semi-)literacy of the correspondents, the link between content and pictures (in the case-studies the latter were predominantly romantic rather than patriotic) and possible censureship.

To wind up the conference, **Niek van Sas** (University of Amsterdam) presided a panel consisting of Ilaria Porciani, Martyn Lyons and John Breuilly. Martyn Lyons made the heuristic point how far popular experience really is accessible for the historian and what role the medium plays. Surely for the 20th century there is no shortage of sources at all but on the contrary an abundance, albeit they are mostly indirect. There are many official and from below discourses, and therefore there is no monolithic view on either side of the divide, which makes it impossible to make a synthesis. The point is to look at the interaction between top and bottom. John Breuilly distinguished four ways in which the popular grasped the national in a modernising society:

'non-national' (Europe around 1800, with a 'nationalised' elite and an non-national populus);

'opposition-national' (where the popular stood opposite the elite);

'fragmented national' (with dissenting jokes, nostalgia, images in ego-documents);

and 'contained nationalism' (where the popular interest is integrated in the national).

To conclude, Van Sas remarked tongue in cheek that given the worm's limited vision, the worm's eye view should be dubbed (after the Dutch expression) the frog's perspective. He also pondered whether, after the great generation of nationalism research (Gellner, Hroch, Smith...), there is need for a new paradigm.

This conference, whose findings will be published by an international publishing house, has at least (re)kindled the methodological and heuristic debate on the history of nationalism from below.

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