

## Conference Report

“Political Proteus: Nationalism’s Entangled Histories” organized Michael Goebel, financed by the Pierre du Bois Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation, Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, 26-27 Août 2022.

The 2021 instalment of the Pierre du Bois Conference, organized by Michael Goebel, was an unusual one in several respects: Standing in the shadow of the Covid pandemic, it should have been the conference’s 2020 instalment, but was postponed twice. When it finally took place, in hybrid form, but mostly as an in-person event, for many of its participants it was the first respite after nearly one-and-a-half years of hibernation, the first physical handshakes with colleagues from afar, sweetened by marvelous late-summer weather on the shores of Lake Geneva with views of the Mont Blanc.

Like world affairs in recent years, however, its topic was more somber: Nationalism, or more precisely the global history of nationalism, for the discussion of which a committed internationalist city and institution provided the propitious backdrop and vantage point. Although no one at the conference expected the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the renewed topicality of nationalism was clear enough in the summer of 2021, pressed upon the participants

by the partial de-globalization brought about by the Covid pandemic as well as years of the rise of nationalist populism in Western Europe, Russia, the United States, India, or the Philippines. As highlighted by the conference's background note, as well as Irina du Bois' and Michael Goebel's opening remarks, the theme's urgency in current affairs contrasted unfavorably with about two decades of relative neglect by historians and other social scientists. Although nationalism had been a key ingredient of historical and political research in the 1980s and 1990s, talk of globalization, the supposed erosion of nation-states, and the rise of global history as a disciplinary sub-field began to sideline it from the research agenda from the 2000s. The conference participants thus strove collectively to address the question of what historians can contribute to the study of nationalism in the wake of their discipline's global turn.

If transnational and global history have forcefully driven home an argument about the global rise and spread of the nation-state form, it is that this phenomenon cannot be understood as having emerged from within single (nationally defined) societies, which then traveled as an intellectual template from one place to the next, but rather as an integral part of global processes itself. The conference consequently brought together scholars from, and of, different world regions and different themes.

Instead of following the usual paper-after-paper format, the event was structured mainly through a series of roundtables, each of which featured three speakers and a chair, who put a series of questions to the speakers, so they could address them jointly from the angle of their main interests of historical research. The themes were "Global History, Eurocentrism, and Nationalism" (with Sebastian Conrad, Cyrus Schayegh, and Cemil Aydin), "Nationalism and Internationalism" with Nicola Miller, Glenda Sluga, and Sandrine Kott), "Nationalism, Race, and Racism" (With Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Tiffany Florvill, and Alex Lichtenstein) "Multinational Empires, War, and Violence" (Michelle Campos, Pieter Judson, and Ron Grigor Suny), "Colonialism, Decolonization, and Nationalism" (Richard Drayton, Frederick Cooper,

and Lydia Walker), and “Nationalism, Trade, and Economic Globalization” (Grace Ballor, Stefan Link, and Marc-William Palen). Most of the 90-minute roundtables were subsequently published on the Graduate Institute’s Youtube channel, where there can still be viewed by those not able to make it to Geneva, or tune in online in August 2021.

The conference’s keynote lecture, which took place in the evening of the event’s first day, was held by Prof. Bernard Yack, a renowned political theorist at Brandeis University. Entitled “Being in Time: The Experience of Nationhood,” the lecture focused on what Yack called the “sine qua non” and the “most distinctive feature of nationalism,” which in his view consisted in “a way of imagining our existence in time.” Instead of dwelling, as Benedict Anderson famously did, on the sense of connection with “people who dwell not in our presence,” Yack concentrated on emotional ties with “people who dwell not in our present”— that is, the “intergenerational resonances” of nationhood. On a more upbeat note, he concluded that such a sense of “being in time” eventually allowed that nationhood was “not necessarily incompatible with cultural diversity.”

In addition to the roundtables and the keynote lecture, the conference also featured two workshops, in which the pre-circulated papers by graduate students and recent postdocs were being discussed. The first, showcasing work by Thomas Gidney, Yorim Spoelder, and David Motzafi-Haller, focused on the relationship between post-WWII decolonization and various forms of nationalism. The second, with papers by Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, Christopher Szabla, and Joel Veldkamp, zoomed in on various examples of historical migrations and how these related to instances of nationalism.

Apart from revealing the irredeemably Protean nature of nationalism through history, a good part of the debates at the event concentrated on the relationship between the study of nationalism and methodological nationalism in the social sciences. What does it mean to attempt to write histories “beyond the nation-state,” or not taking the national unit of analysis

for granted? How can this be achieved without forgetting or minimizing the continuing power of nationalism to shape our political world? The conference participants, of course, did not provide unitary answers to these questions. Good historians as they are, or prey to their own *déformation professionnelle* if you will, they insisted on the specificity of time and place. They nonetheless collectively and forcefully agreed that their profession's global turn and the historical study of nationalism need not, indeed should not, be opposites.

In order to substantiate and publicize that claim many of the conference participants wrote short think pieces about the relationship between nationalism and global history, which have been published by the profession's flagship journal, *The American Historical Review*. The special thanks of the conference organizers therefore go to the journal's then-editor, Alex Lichtenstein, and his successor, Mark Philip Bradley. They also go to the Swiss National Science Foundation, which alongside the Pierre du Bois Foundation, generously funded the event. And finally, they go especially to the student assistant, David Motzafi-Haller, and his helpers who turned both logistics and the surrounding events, such as the conference dinner at the Perle du Lac Restaurant, into a remarkably smooth and pleasant affair.