Interdisciplinary Research Forum Newsletter 2

Varieties of Nationalism and Diaspora

The University's second Interdisciplinary Research Forum (IRF) workshop was held on Thursday 21 May 2020. Because of restrictions relating to the Covid-19 pandemic the IRF, the workshop moved online using Blackboard Collaborate. Four academic staff members with similar research interests presented papers on nationalism, diasporas and identity. Following on from the presentations, members of the audience were given the opportunity to direct questions to the speakers and also to engage in discussions surrounding the topic. The event, which was chaired by Professor Svetlana Stephenson, included as speakers Professor Alistair Ross (who was also the workshop convener), Dr Erdi Ozturk, Dr Gordana Uzelac, and Professor Don MacRaild, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange at London Metropolitan University. During the course of the session, a variety of related themes in the study of nationalism, diasporas and identity in a global context were explored, drawing specifically on perspectives from the disciplines of history, international relations, politics and sociology. Different methodologies, and the use the concepts of fundamentalism, economic nationalism and demographic change to survey contemporary diversities were introduced. Academic staff and PhD students from a wide range of disciplines across the university attended the virtual workshop and were actively involved in the wider debate that took place following the presentations.

Background

The topic of Nationalism and Citizenship has attracted considerable political and academic interest, particularly since the increase in global development and expansion of populist and nationalist movements in many countries across the world. Global transformations in citizenship laws can be seen to reflect increased insularity and nationalist reaction to diasporic movements, migration and more specifically to refugee and asylum seekers. There have been variations in responses to this by groups and individuals, ranging from efforts to define national identities and values to constructing multiple and shifting identities.

Over recent decades the concept of diaspora can be seen to have shifted considerably from its historical confines in the Jewish and African experience, and instead, can now be observed across a wide range of settings. In an era of global networks, the role and influence of the nation-state appears to have gradually declined, and for some authors, can no longer be viewed as the main pre-cursor for collective identification. The concept is now frequently applied to both European and non-European migrants.
Presentations and Discussion

Dr Erdi Ozturk and Dr Bahar Baser: New Turkey’s New Diasporas

In the first presentation, based on a paper co-authored with Dr Bahar Baser of Coventry University, Dr. Ozturk used the Turkish diaspora governance policy as a case study for demonstrating how diaspora governance allows the state to construct ideological and repressive transnational state strategies. His presentation commenced with a detailed explanation of the diaspora studies literature and expansions in state-led diaspora engagement initiatives together with expanding diaspora governance institutions across the world. He explained how various home states have constructed concepts such as public diplomacy and soft power for encouraging and mobilizing diasporas in the interest of the state. While this may be interpreted as enhancing citizenship rights for the diaspora and creating opportunities for incorporating them back into the home nation, he suggested that some authors have questioned the motives surrounding these initiatives. Dr Ozturk explained that when diaspora governance is employed by authoritarian states, this is often a form of strategy for monitoring and controlling diasporas that are perceived as a threat by home communities.

Professor Alistair Ross: Cohort Cohesion: Young Europeans’ Constructions of Nationalism and Migration

Professor Ross’s presentation was concerned with young people and their understanding of nationalism and migration. His interest centred on the experiences of these groups of young people, and how these experiences contributed to their construction of national identities. Professor Ross’s research draws on empirical data collected through open ended discussions with small groups of young people (between the ages of 12-19) across 30 European countries and examines the main concerns and suspicions held towards nationalism and how young people associate their unease with racism. He discussed how a majority of the participants associated such attitudes with older generation of people and individuals residing within rural localities. He also suggested that many young people admired the EU’s effort to accept migrants and refugees from Syria during 2015 and how this acceptance heightened individual feelings of being European. His findings point to common trends, in regard to values surrounding human rights, which can largely been explained by factors such as political transformations in Europe, demographic shifts towards a more diverse society and advancements in technology surrounding the use of social media.

Dr Gordana Uzelac: Rhetorics of Economic Nationalism: Bargaining with Migrants

In her presentation and supporting paper, Dr Uzelac focused more on the host nation rather than migrants, drawing on latest approaches that view economic nationalism not as a form of economy but more as a form of
nationalism. From this perspective, Dr Uzelac described how an economy is not restricted to production, consumption and distribution, but is also based on various symbols, myths and memories that are made up of particular values and norms which can typically be defined as national. She also suggested that economic nationalism becomes more perceptible under certain conditions, such as when external forces appear to visibly steer the economy away from the very norms, values and traditions that constitute the national space and are recognised as being destructive to the foundations of national society. Dr Uzelac also discussed how perceptions of migrants as both economic benefit and economic determinant are increasingly normalized, using a comparative analysis of speeches by Boris Johnson and Nicola Sturgeon.

**Professor Don MacRaild: Reflections on diasporas and transnationalism**

As a historian Professor MacRaild explored diasporas as evidenced realities and discussed how transnationalism can be used as a method for explaining the problem of evidence through a historical perspective, focusing on how individuals and organizations communicate across diaspora spaces. He used several historical examples of how previous generations communicated across diaspora space. His discussion problematized the conventional conceptions of diaspora and offered different ways for establishing empirical approaches for understanding and explaining transnationalism.

Following the presentations, audience members were given the opportunity to direct questions to the speakers. Several questions were put forward in relation to the future of nationalism and identity within Britain, and what can be expected/predicted for the future of the union and the type of nationalism which is likely to prevail. These questions generated varied responses from the panel, which in turn led to a very interesting and lively discussion among both the speakers and the audience.

Towards the end of the workshop Professor MacRaild suggested the need for more regular meetings in the near future, with larger events, such as one day seminars or conferences.

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