



(Re)constructing communities in Europe, 1918-1968. A Venture into the discursive practices of community building. Stefan Couperus, Universiteit Utrecht; Harm Kaal, Radboud University Nijmegen, 18.12.2013-20.12.2013.

Reviewed by Tanja Vahtikari

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2014)

(Re)constructing communities in Europe, 1918-1968. A Venture into the discursive practices of community building

Since the work by Benedict Anderson (1983) on *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983. , a wide range of studies in historical and social sciences have analyzed the discursive construction of national communities and identities. This conference report in shortened versions has appeared on *Historici.nl* (27.2.2014) and in the *Urban History News*, May 2014, Volume 8, No. 6. It will also appear in: *Informationen zur modernen Stadtgeschichte*. The international conference collaboratively organized by two Dutch Historical Institutes to discuss the discursive practices of community building, and the phenomenon of (re)constructing communities in Europe in the interwar and postwar period, set out to broaden this perspective: nations as discursive constructions were viewed side by side with other levels of community building ranging from local neighbourhoods to transnational expert communities, and when viewed more thematically, from political and social to cultural and moral communities. This approach allowed for fruitful comparisons across the various scales, and in the continuum of the two World Wars. The conference presentations demonstrated the high importance given to the notion of community in the discourses and practices of inter- and postwar reconstruction. Reviving and readjusting the idea of community on the basis of its late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century origins was considered urgent in the midst of war-torn landscapes and societies.

As noted by HARM KAAL (Nijmegen) in his opening speech, and made explicit in several presentations, the processes of producing inter- and postwar communities were *high modernist in nature*. The efforts to build communities were unwavering in their belief in progress, and reliant on the growing body of technocratic experts *à planners, architects, social scientists* *à utilizing tools such as community interviews, statistics, and visualization of sociological knowledge*. With regard to electoral propaganda and public debates on electoral strategies in the postwar Netherlands, Kaal argued that whilst sharing a common vision of political community based on the notion of being a *people's party*, most Dutch political parties relied on the persistent social determinist views on class relations and political behaviour on which knowledge was provided by burgeoning institutions of sociology and political science.

The notion of community was a product of a truly transnational discourse, and one that was accepted across very different kinds of political systems. The analysis of LIESBETH VAN DE GRIFT (Nijmegen) pointed to reconstructing communities through inner colonization as a common practice in interwar Europe both in democratic and non-democratic countries. The *trans-political* nature of community was also illustrated by DAVID KUCHENBUCH (Gießen) in his account of the re-establishment of the metaphor of *human scale* in urban planning during the 1930s and 1940s in the proclamations of the architectural avant-gardes, in democratic Sweden

and in totalitarian Germany alike. 'Human scale' featured prominently in the discourses on the 'neighbourhood unit', which was one of the key concepts of postwar reconstruction. As argued by STEFAN COUPERUS (Utrecht), in the immediate postwar period there were many intertwined discourses of community at play. They all came together in the planning of neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood unit was promoted as an ideal socio-spatial entity but also as a body political, aiming to forge decentralization and regeneration of urban democracy. The short-lived postwar experiment of neighbourhood councils (*wijkraden*) in Rotterdam, however, shows the difficulty of turning the all-encompassing community enthusiasm into feasible policy schemes.

While in the vocabulary of architects and urban planners 'neighbourhood unit' often equaled 'community', there were those who contested this mindset. One such person, introduced by KENNY CUPERS (Urbana-Champaign), was sociologist Ruth Glass, to whom living in a neighbourhood unit was no automatic route to a true community. All in all, women would have deserved more attention amongst the constructors of community discussed at the conference. Cupers also pointed out the ambiguous nature of community idealism in the postwar city: the ideal inner-city neighbourhoods were 'discovered' by sociologists and planners as an ideal-community-like social fabric at the very same time as they were cleared on the way of new communities to be built.

Another ambiguity, between the idea of community and the reality of community, was addressed by JON LAWRENCE (Cambridge). He introduced the case of postwar Bermondsey, London, which during the 1940s and 1950s became an object of a wide ethnographic study. Bermondsey traditionally had a strong place identity based on class, kinship, and differentiation ('down here' against 'up there' in the West End). While it became apparent that in the postwar period the old Bermondsey was changing along with its rapidly altering tenant population, the local Labour party politicians continued to cultivate an understanding of Bermondsey as an unchangeable community. Expert knowledge and politics became intertwined at all levels of community construction.

Community building was a notion that travelled from one locality and group to another. When relocating, that notion nevertheless needed to be readjusted to fit the new and different sociopolitical contexts. This was demonstrated by ANDREAS JOCH (Washington) with

regard to the work of architect-planners Walter Curt Behrendt (1884-1945) and Oscar Stonorov (1905-1970), who in the interwar period relocated from Germany to United States. In the new continent some of their community ideals clashed with the individualistic socio-political system and the American political culture.

However, as emphasized especially by ROSEMARY WAKEMAN (Fordham), constructing communities in the postwar era should not be seen merely as a result of a top-down modernizing force of the State and the experts. People had an active role to play in the performances of community and in successful postwar reconstruction, even though the community they cultivated was not necessarily the same as advocated by the authorities. Wakeman also elaborated on the nature of community as 'a phantasmic utopian concept', something that only existed somewhere other than in the present 'community, as such, never really 'was'.

This nature of community 'just out of reach' was prominent in several presentations focusing on the construction of transnational communities. The analysis of MARLEEN RENSEN (Amsterdam) focused on the efforts of pacifist circles of European intellectuals in the interwar period to overcome the devastation and national antagonisms of wartime by imagining a new cosmopolitan and supra-national intellectual community. Intellectuals, such as French writer Romain Rolland and Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig, wanted to restore the century-old notion of the 'Republic of Letters', which was to be founded on reason rather than on politics and nationalism. Sustaining this community in the world of ideological divides proved difficult. A similar 'paradox of transnationalism' was pointed out by ANNE-ISABELLE RICHARD (Leiden) in relation to Europeanist organizations in the interwar period. In these organizations, whose aims and membership were transnational, national considerations continued to play a determining role.

Two presentations took the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning, founded in 1913, as their point of departure. Whilst MICHEL GEERTSE (Architectuur Lokaal) used the Federation as a case study to explain the evolution of the transnational planning dialogue over the two World Wars as a cyclical rather than a linear trajectory, PHILIP WAGNER (Berlin) showed how, instead of simply adapting to new Cold War geopolitical realities, transnational expert networks with their ideas of transboundary community continued to be sites for the discussion of post-war international order.

After the Second World War the concept of national community as a primary level of identification lost some of its appeal, especially in West-Germany, and was replaced by local and regional sentiments. JEREMY DE-WAAL (Vanderbilt), in his examination of the three hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Lübeck and Bremen, discussed the proliferation of Heimat discourses, societies and literature, post-1945, in these cities. Historical narratives and traditions were re-adjusted accordingly: on the one hand to forge the spirit of local reconstruction by reference to earlier narratives of communal survival, and, on the other, to facilitate identification with democracy, federalism and European unification in reference to the old Hanseatic tradition. Inventing new traditions, rather than re-writing the existing ones, was at the heart of SEBASTIAN HÄSCH's (Stuttgart) presentation. In the early-1960s, the governors of Hesse, the district originally created by the American military administration in 1945, successfully established an event named *Hessentag* to create community identity amongst Hesse's diverse population.

Despite the competing trends of localism and transnationalism, in the interwar and postwar periods the language of community often equaled the language of nation. MÁTÁ ZOMBORY (Budapest) noted that in the immediate post-Second World War Hungary the idea of nation remained valid, albeit compromised by the politics of earlier authoritarian regimes. In this context reconstruction was seen as a national task, for which, for a short period of time, the discourse regarding democracy was the key issue. In Britain, after 1945, the national community and unity, no less discursively constructed than elsewhere, formed a central cultural narrative, largely uncontested in the public discourse. With the example of anti-communism, MATTHEW GRANT (Essex) explored the British postwar public discussion on citizenship, central to the conception of national unity, as a complex and selective practice of inclusion and exclusion. In postwar Britain anti-communist rhetoric stayed within the boundaries of the national community being constructed: communists were presented as 'bad citizens', and their opposition as a requirement of 'good citizenship', but in the legal sense communism remained a legitimate political option. Along similar lines, WIM DE JONG (Nijmegen) showed that in the Netherlands anti-communism played a key role in visions of democracy which emphasized discipline and diversity.

In various European countries historians were among the most eager constructors of national communities. STEFAN BERGER (Bochum) offered a broad treatment of

national history writing in Europe from the end of the First World War to the 1960s. The First World War reinvigorated the languages of traditional community. In the interwar period old and new, liberal, fascist and communist nations alike were forged with the languages of community. The notable exceptions were the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne and the Annales School that actively tried to replace the language of ethnicity and community with the language of citizenship and society. The re-establishment of traditional languages of community after the Second World War was challenged first in the 1960s with the critical scholarship on social history.

Along with 'identity', 'community' is a concept that is constantly used, and sometimes abused, in research literature. The presentations at the Ravenstein conference did not abuse the term in an empty fashion. Rather, they illustrated how important it is to analyze how contemporaries at each moment in history have used, and abused, the concept for their own purposes.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Harm Kaal (Nijmegen)

Keynote 1:

Jon Lawrence (Cambridge), Languages of place and belonging in England from the 1930s to the 1960s

Chair: Harm Kaal

Panel I: Forging the local

Chair: Wim van Meurs (Nijmegen)

Liesbeth van de Grift (Nijmegen), Reconstructing communities through inner colonisation, 1890-1930

Natalia Starostina (Young Harris), Cheminot garden-cities and the practices of paternalism and social control in interwar France: extolling virtue or generating boredom?

Jeremy DeWaal (Vanderbilt), The turn to local communities in early postwar West Germany: the case of Hamburg, Lübeck, and Bremen, 1945-1965

Stefan Couperus (Utrecht), The neighbourhood unit as a body politic: forging a democratic community in post-war Rotterdam

Keynote 2:

Stefan Berger (Bochum), Constructing national communities through history in Europe: from hyper-nationalism to the search for alternative national histo-

ries, 1918 to the long 1960s

Chair: Harm Kaal

Panel II: Questioning nationhood in the interwar period

Chair: Stefan Couperus (Utrecht)

Ronald Kroeze (VU Amsterdam), The problem of building a moral community in a pluralist country: the case-Oss

Fabien Thöofilakis (Berlin), Community membership, national identity and discourse: how to say and define *Deutschtum* in Western and Central Europe (1914-1945)

Florian Köhrer-Wielach (Mainz), Beyond nation and region: offers of belonging in interwar Transylvania

Panel III: (Re)constructing nationhood after 1945

Chair: Liesbeth van de Grift (Nijmegen)

Matthew Grant (Essex), Constructing a Cold War national community: citizenship and anti-communism in postwar Britain, 1945-56

Wim de Jong (Nijmegen), Dutch McCarthyism? Anti-communism as a tool for the image of a democratic community (1920-1960)

Mãrtã Zombory (Budapest), Nation and democracy after the catastrophe. Conceptions of political community and the discourses on the past in early postwar Hungary

Harm Kaal (Nijmegen), Constructing communities in postwar election campaigns: the rise of people's parties

Panel IV: European and transnational vistas on community

Chair: Phillip Wagner (Berlin)

Anne-Isabelle Richard (Leiden), A sense of belonging, the Dutch interwar European movement between Europe and Empire

Koen van Zon (Nijmegen), A democratic European community? (1952-1960)

Maarten van den Bos (Pax Christi), A Vatican conspiracy? Religion, reconciliation and the unification of Europe, 1944-1950

Marleen Rensen (Amsterdam), The republic of letters

in interwar Europe

Keynote 3:

Rosemary Wakeman (Fordham), Urban imaginaries and regimes of expertise

Chair: Stefan Couperus

Panel V: Technologies of neighborhood building

Chair: Stefan Couperus (Utrecht)

David Kuchenbuch (Gießen), In search of the human scale â notions of "Community" in German and Swedish urban planning in the early 1940s

Andreas Joch (Washington), Community eludes the architect? German architect planners, American democracy, and the question of community building in Transatlantic perspective

Kenny Cupers (Urbana-Champaign), From the past into the future: the neighborhood unit in Europe, 1930s-1950s

Panel VI: Creating expert communities

Chair: David Kuchenbuch (Gießen)

Tracey Loughran (Cardiff), Constructing and reconstructing trauma: psychological medicine and the creation and transformation of discursive communities, c. 1914-1945

Phillip Wagner (Berlin), Competing visions of a transboundary expert community: the International Federation for Housing and Town Planning and postwar international order

Michel Geertse (Architectuur Lokaal), From garden cities to new towns: continuity and change in transnational planning dialogue 1913-1993

Panel VII: Manifestations of cultural and religious communities

Chair: Anne-Isabelle Richard (Leiden)

Erika Regner (Vienna), Communities arising from literature â overstepping borders and boundaries

Sebastian Häßsch (Stuttgart), Constructing community: the use of *Heimatfeste* (carnivals to honor home) in the German Land Hessen

Ondřej Matějka (Prague), Constructing Czech socialist community 1948-1968: a Protestant perspective

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Tanja Vahtikari. Review of , *(Re)constructing communities in Europe, 1918-1968. A Venture into the discursive practices of community building*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41766>

Copyright © 2014 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.