

## Comments on the Project: Boundary Demarcation and Local Politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries in the Alpine-Adriatic Borderlands

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### Contents

Three Important Methodological and Practical Contributions

The Projects

Conclusions

The project presented by our Japanese colleagues in Florence examines the ways that individual activists and social groups sought to demarcate and popularize particular social, cultural, and political boundaries in local politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The setting for their work is the Alpine and Adriatic borderlands of the former Habsburg Monarchy and Kingdom of Italy. In the past decade, histories of these Alpine and Adriatic borderlands have benefitted from the application of exciting new methodologies and approaches. Our Japanese colleagues engage several of these important new methods to great effect in their individual research projects. In my essay I will point out three ways in which I believe the significance of their work extends well beyond the geographic boundaries of the Alpine and Adriatic worlds. Important elements of their work could be of considerable interest to historians of many other parts of Europe and possibly for historians of other parts of the world during the same centuries as well. I will then turn to a brief discussion and analysis of the common contributions made by each individual project. Finally, I will draw what I believe are some larger lessons from these studies and I will suggest how we might continue this work in future studies.

### Three Important Methodological and Practical Contributions

In the first place, historians have understood for some years, that many of the most important developments in societies can best be studied from the margins or borderlands of that society. It is with regard to these vulnerable regions that ideas and attitudes about identifications/identities are often the strongest. Activists and politicians in the center of a state (or the metropole of an empire) project their claims about national identity onto border regions where people most often came into contact with people from other ethnic nations or political states. It is in these marginal regions that nationalists expected the contrast between the national “self” and the “other” to be the strongest and most clearly marked. And yet, as historians of borderlands have learned, in terms of ethnic worries, it is in these regions that social and cultural mixing among language groups can also take place. So while nationalist activists expected to find strong contrasts between their own people and those of a different nation in border regions, those same regions were also places where nationalists worried most about the fear of mixing between nations and possibly even the dilution of the strength of the nation. This ongoing contradiction made these border regions sites where scholars could most usefully interrogate certainties about all kinds of identities. It is also important to note, however, that in the past decade historians have focused their interest in borders and boundaries increasingly on the idea of mental maps, and not simply on specific places. This trend emphasizes the degree to which historians understand borders as a conceptual



phenomenon as much as a real one. The work that the Japanese project participants presented in Florence used all of these ideas to analyze several diverse but related kinds of boundary, from gender difference, to linguistic, to national, to racial difference, but also even to ideas of political difference.

A second methodological point of equal importance is that in the past few decades, historians have more fruitfully started to relate local events to national, state, or imperial trends. Instead of imagining a history written “from the top down” or a history written “from the bottom up,” historians have recently tried to bring these different levels of analysis together. In doing so they bring examples from different scales into conversation with each other, often by tacking back and forth between local, regional, and state examples in the same work. Historians may use local examples to explain what meanings national trends have for local people, or they examine the ways in which national trends play out at the local level. In the most extreme situations, global historians who seek to give local meanings to larger global trends use this strategy.

The interrelationship of these levels in history writing is critical to developing a more nuanced understanding of how people’s personal identifications or views of the world relate to the larger categories of existence that states employ to describe their populations. This interrelated approach is in part a product of the understanding from recent years, that individuals at the local level rarely see themselves in the same terms that the state or science use to categorize them.<sup>1</sup> While states—or politicians—may divide people into national or ethnic categories in official documents or public speeches, people do not often see themselves in the terms imposed by these categories. Local people may use local points of reference rather than national ones to express their personal loyalties or their identifications. Furthermore, recent sociological literature has emphasized that local forms of identification are not fixed but are rather the product of changing situations. In some situations people may feel highly nationalist or may feel that they belong to an ethnic group. In other situations people may ignore or even avoid such identities (national indifference).<sup>2</sup> Thus the questions for historians are less about investigating specific identities and more about investigating the situations in which people adopt or express those identities for their own purposes. The work of the Japanese scholars also highlights the differences between ethnic or political identities at the national level, and the often different, hidden ways that people respond to these identities at the local level.

A third point clearly demonstrated by the presentations of our Japanese colleagues, is that ideological writings, political activism, and public agitation around certain issues do not *reflect* realities on the ground so much as they seek to *influence or create* those realities. Whether nationalist activists are writing about differences in nation, race, or gender, they are all attempting to create a world that follows their ideas, and not necessarily to reflect real relations in a world that already exists. This point becomes clearer when we compare local politics and local concerns to politics at the national or imperial level. Each historian at this workshop examined activists who sought to mediate between their own ideological goals, and the ways in which local people understood or responded to those goals.

For historians to gain an appreciation of those local attitudes, they must situate their work in a deep understanding both of regional and local contexts and also in a context of changing national and imperial conditions. Concepts and ideas—such as “resistance” or what it means to be “national” or what the “good of the nation is” or what the “national duty of a woman” might be—all change their possible meanings according to changing circumstances such as war. In this regard, the historians at the workshop also trace the ways that these concepts change their significance in popular cultural memory, depending on changing circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker discusses this distinction between actual groups and categories; a difference that he claims is often forgotten or ignored both by scholars and their subjects. Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity Without Groups” in Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 7–27, especially 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> Here Brubaker’s concept of groupness as event, group making as a project, and especially ethnicity as a form of cognition. Brubaker, “Ethnicity Without Groups,” 12–18.

## The Projects

Let me start with one of the most important abstract conceptualizations of border, that of gender. Rin Odawara analyzes this form of border in a project that studies Italian discourses of race propagated during the First World War. In particular she investigates the eugenic ideas found in Italian writings about alleged forms of sexual violence and its consequences that German occupation forces had directed at women victims in Belgium and France during the first year of the War. Her subject in this paper is the Italian gynecologist and President of the National Federation of anti-German Leagues, Luigi Maria Bossi. Bossi discussed the issue of the rape of Belgian and French women by “barbaric” German soldiers in the context of contemporary debates about possible justifications for abortion. In Bossi’s eugenic view, the violent and coercive context of rape guaranteed that any child conceived in this manner could not be considered eugenically healthy. It would be, to quote a French example, “the child of the barbarian.”<sup>3</sup> Bossi clearly favored a policy of abortion for the victims of such rape by the Germans. However, Odawara focuses our attention on a more interesting aspect of the gendered nature of the debate about abortion, one that interrogates the fundamental relationship of women to citizenship.

Odawara analyzes this discourse in the context of a questionnaire that Bossi publicized about the issue of abortion, in which he asked whether raped women should have the right—not the duty!—to an abortion. What is striking both about the replies he received and about Bossi’s commentary on the subject, is the degree to which the discourse moved away from the “right” to abortion of the suffering woman, to her alleged obligation to abort for the sake of the nation. Although in her own commentary on the matter feminist Anna Franchi disputed this attitude, reminding readers that imposing unwanted abortion could cause renewed suffering for the female victim, ultimately the female victim does not matter to Bossi. In his arguments, Bossi placed the interest of the nation far ahead of the interest of the individual subject—in this case the woman victim. As Odawara notes, arguments about abortion may sound superficially familiar to us, but we should see them in their historical context, even if these discourses helped to construct a discourse about women and abortion that remains with us today. Odawara uses a public discussion of abortion under wartime circumstances to illustrate the civic position of women and the clear limits on their alleged rights. For Bossi, the gender boundary here demands that individual women citizens nevertheless undergo abortions for the sake of the larger national community. Placing the needs of the nation ahead of the rights of the individual is a common trope during the First World War. We can see it clearly in other areas of debate, as for example in the allegedly democratic idea of national self-determination that became so popular during and immediately after the War.

In the discussion, colleagues asked Rin Odawara to consider Bossi’s possible indebtedness to earlier eugenic ideas, particularly those of about barbarism and heredity of anthropologist Cesare Lambroso or sexologist Paulo Mantegazza. How did earlier debates about Italian population politics perhaps help to shape the wartime debate about women and abortion? Several European nationalists movements had already in the late nineteenth century made the claim that children or even women “belonged” to the nation, and therefore should be under the authority of the nation when it came to making most life choices.<sup>4</sup> To what degree were these ideas about abortion typical or exceptional for the period? Or had the experience of war itself lent greater power to ideas about race that were perceived as being scientific? Finally, colleagues raised the question of the Italian imperial context: to what extent might these discourses be related to developing discourses in the Italian colonies?

The work of Yoshiko Fujii examines local peasant organization and politics in the multi-lingual region of

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Harris, “The Child of the Barbarian: Rape, Race, and Nationalism in France During the First World War,” in *Past and Present* 141 (1993): 170–206.

<sup>4</sup> Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

Lower Styria near the town of Marburg/Maribor. Fujii refers to “liberalism in Lower Styria,” but her subjects are in fact farmers, a social group not known for its involvement in liberal politics or for sharing in liberal ideas and values during the nineteenth century. In fact, at the parliamentary or diet level of politics, and certainly empire-wide, peasants were known as adherents to anti-liberal generally Catholic social parties. Fujii examines the programs and activities of the Christian Farmers Union (*christlicher Bauernbund*), finding that many of their practices and values line up with liberal and national traditions, rather than with traditional Christian social ones. This farmers’ union emphasized farmers as independent producers, as opposed to the collective rhetoric of Christian social farmers’ organizations. It also emphasized both German nationalism and imperial patriotism. As such it is an organization that does not fit at all easily into the traditional categories of Imperial Austrian politics, although given Styria and Carinthia’s histories of anti-clericalism often going back to the reformation, it perhaps makes more sense in this Styrian context. Still, the existence of this regional organization demonstrates how local activists could forge a political ideology and organization out of varied traditions, one that made sense in their region and at the turn of the century, if not in the empire as a whole.

The discussion of this project reminded several colleagues of the need to learn even more about who local nationalists were socially, in order better to understand their subjectivities. Who were the people who considered themselves to be farmers in an independent and liberal sense, one that could compete with Catholic popular politics? What were the cultural traditions in the area around Marburg/Maribor that might have facilitated this kind of identification? How did the question of language use and nation relate here—if at all—to the liberal idea of an independent farmer? Another important observation that could apply to many projects was the warning against creating a binary opposition in our writing, between people who felt strong nationalist commitments and those who exhibited nationally indifferent behavior.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the same person could exhibit both kinds of behavior. The challenge is to research adequately the context or the situation in which a person expresses or avoids a nationalist commitment.

Takako Furukawa’s project on Alpinism directly challenges several traditional elements of Austrian historiography and political sociology, especially the famous three-camp (*drei Lager*) model of Austrian political history. Her project investigates interwar Austrian Alpine Associations, many of their changing membership policies, and the nationalist political activism of some of their leading members. Her close analysis of the ideological changing positions adopted by individual activists like Eduard Pichl in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates a surprisingly flexible and often changing understanding of national identification, nationhood, as well as what she refers to as “political indifference.” Specifically what she means by “political indifference” is the ability of Alpine Activists frequently to ignore particular ideological demands made by the parties with which their organizations were associated. Like national indifference, political indifference functions, according to Furukawa, as a situational or opportunist adherence to certain political ideals. Furukawa takes two examples to demonstrate the ideological and nationalist flexibility of her allegedly radically committed subjects. One is the ideological exclusion of Jews from German nationalist social life, and in this case from participating in the German nationalist system of Alpine huts. The second and related example is the official exclusion of the Social Democratic alpine organization the Friends of Nature from participating in the fee system that enabled members of one Alpine organization to use the huts of another organization at reduced rates.

These official policies clearly reflected the ideological positions adopted by Austria’s German nationalist parties. Furukawa points out, however, that in actual practice, some branches of the Alpine Association opposed the exclusion of Jews and kept up contacts with Jewish alpinists. Other sections maintained the fee reduction relationship

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<sup>5</sup> On the concept of national indifference, Pieter M. Judson, “Nationalismus und Indifferenz” in *Habsburg Neu denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa*. 30 kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte, ed. Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl (Vienna: Böhlau, 2016); Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis” in *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 93–119.

with the Socialist Friends of Nature. They could do this because of the original liberal structure of the organization gave local clubs considerable latitude in their practices. Furukawa argues that the liberal origins of these associations—in terms of their values and practices—made it possible for them to practice forms of political indifference in the interwar years when liberal organizations became increasingly nationalist. Furukawa documents increasingly pragmatic and opportunist behaviors among alpine associations, their leaders and their members, which leads her to characterize the situation at the local level as a case of political indifference. In essence, it seems, mountaineering outweighed the demands of politics in the lives of many—perhaps most—people who practiced it in an organizational setting. This suggests that the interpretations of mountaineering developed by historians like Rainer Amstädter that view alpinism as an instrumental force for ethnic nation building and for integrating the borderlands with the center, may not be accurate.<sup>6</sup> In fact the opposite may have been the case. Alpinists in Austria may have pursued contacts with their Nazi equivalents in Germany, for example, more in order to raise money for their hut system, and not necessarily to pursue a common program of anti-Semitic German nationalism. Thus mountaineers in Furukawa's telling often remained fundamentally aloof (or indifferent) to the demands of politics, despite the fact that politicians viewed mountain climbing as the quintessentially nationalist pastime. Moreover, the ability of an ideologue like Eduard Pichl to change his positions on occasion suggest that despite the virulence of public nationalist discourse in the interwar period, some principles of nineteenth-century liberalism still shaped many nationalists' thinking on occasion.

In the discussion colleagues were impressed with this difficult effort to re-think the traditional model of Austrian politics. One colleague also made the point that in considering questions of national or political indifference, one should not consider opportunism necessarily in a negative light, but rather see it as a normal constitutive element of human behavior, (a valuable point for several of the projects). Others compared the ways in which classical nineteenth-century liberalism saw itself as being above divisive politics in a way that nationalism too claimed to be above the many petty social conflicts that too often divided national society. In particular, however, colleagues were interested to learn more, if possible, about those local branches of the Alpine Association that had continued to maintain ties with Jews. Colleagues also pointed to the general unifying potential of ideas about the appropriation of nature for the nation that was inherent to alpine nationalist ideology. This appropriation was not limited to the mountains but also had been applied by people in other regions and in a similar manner to the Adriatic Sea as well.

Perhaps Tamami Suzuki's topic most directly and openly addressed the themes of boundary construction, borderlands, and national indifference that were the foundation of the workshop. Her work addresses the famous Option of 1939 under which the German-speaking inhabitants of South Tyrol were asked to choose whether they would migrate to Germany as citizens of the Reich or remain in Italy and fully accept Italian nationality, with all the cultural requirements that entailed. In general terms, the vast majority voted to for the option of leaving, but almost all of them stayed in South Tyrol. Local inhabitants did not understand the question, of course, simply as a question of identity. This work calls into question many presumptions about the degree to which local populations had been nationalized by the time of the Second World War. By examining individual and group motivations of people in the local villages Suzuki seeks to gain a clearer understanding of what considerations were behind an ostensibly simple question of nationality. From the point of view of the Italian Fascist and German Nazi states, the option constituted an opportunity to engage in state and nation building among the population of the Alto Adige/South Tyrol. For individuals and families, however, the option presented new opportunities for survival, to avoid conscription, or to pursue beneficial strategies for the local economy. In seeing people's responses to the Option in terms of migration, rather than in terms of nationalism or identity, Suzuki also opens up a different approach to the issue. Yet the need to pursue this research in terms of individuals and small communities, and the difficult issue of finding appropriate sources makes this a

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<sup>6</sup> Rainer Amstädter, *Der Alpinismus. Kultur, Organisation, Politik*. (Vienna: Universitätsverlag, 1996)

challenging topic, especially given limitations on the archives.

In the discussion, colleagues praised Suzuki's strong focus on the local context of imperial policy. They also asked whether she might also broaden that context to frame the imperial background to the history in terms of Fascist and Nazi population policies? As with Furukawa's project, colleagues saw in Suzuki's work a useful chance to reconsider the traditional connotations of the term "opportunism," both as a term of opprobrium among nationalist but also as a critical category of analysis among historians. One colleague again counseled against creating a false binary between "nationalism" on the one hand and "national indifference" on the other. He suggested that many Tyroleans must have felt both nationalism and indifference, love for the local landscape as well as an understanding of greater possibilities in leaving. It might even be helpful in this case—if possible for some individuals—to list the kinds of priorities that people cited when they made their decisions or changed their decisions.

Yuki Shinsenji's work interrogates the many different possible meanings of terms like "resistance" in local historical memory in the Alto Adige or South Tyrol. In particular, she organized her presentation around the seventieth anniversary of the "liberation" of Bolzano/Bozen. As the most important city in the former Habsburg province that was annexed to Italy after the First World War and later subjected to Nazi occupation at the end of the Second World War, the city and the surrounding region has been the object of several nationalist political projects imposed by outsiders after 1918. The Italian government—especially once fascism came to power in 1923—sought to Italianize the region. In particular the fascist regime devised several different strategies, from outlawing the use of German in the schools and public life, to settling war veterans on land near Bolzano, to founding of industries that encouraged Italian speakers to migrate to the region for work. Later, during World War II, the Nazis occupied the region and imposed their terror on its inhabitants. Under these circumstances it is clear that the idea of resistance, which usually is framed as a popular resistance movement to Nazism on which today's Republic was founded, is highly problematic. In recent years some revisionist historians have characterized "resistance" more in terms of a fratricide that hurt the nation. But either way, the situation of the Alto Adige/South Tyrol complicates these arguments even more. Does resistance in Bolzano mean resistance to Italianization? To Italian fascism? To German Nazism? In her project Shinsenji examines the many ways in which these histories are remembered today and asks how they relate to each other, if at all? Did resistance to fascism also include resistance to Nazism, or vice versa? And what complexities does the simple term "resistance" imply? To some extent she finds that the difference between national commemorations in Alto Adige/South Tyrol and those in the rest of Italy require the adoption of different kinds of historical amnesia. Moreover, she also finds a general lack of popular support or enthusiasm for such commemorations. Is the adoption of a specifically South Tyrolean identity perhaps a regional way out of the general compulsion to choose between a national identification of "Italian" or "German" ?

In the discussion colleagues made several suggestions, in particular that Shinsenji find possible ways—perhaps through secondary reading—to compare these processes of commemoration to those in other problematic Italian regions such as the Val d'Aosta, or even in the south of Italy. This is especially important since, as she pointed out, the very concept of resistance is generally politically controversial in today's Italy, and especially, because as Professor Riall pointed out, Italian scholars themselves have not yet themselves undertaken the work of regional comparison with regard to resistance. Shinsenji's project is made more interesting—and more complicated—by the fact that for political reasons, in order to maintain its exceptional administrative and financial status, the Alto Adige/South Tyrol has to remain a linguistically mixed region. (Without a significant population of German and Ladino speakers, the province would lose a great deal of its financial benefits.) Thus reconciliation through commemoration may be beside the point today, where ethnic difference defines the very identity of the region. Finally it seems to me that it would be useful to consider some of the work by historian Laurence Cole about the attempts of veterans and their families in this region who found themselves on the wrong side of the new border after

the First World War. How could Italian- or German-speakers whose men had been loyal troops in the Habsburg military commemorate their families' sacrifices, when commemoration in Alto Adige/South Tyrol was all about national unification and the glorious victory of the Italian state? Many of them nevertheless sought to find subtle ways to commemorate their families' sacrifices.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusions

The European scholars were impressed with the sophistication of the individual projects and of the larger Japanese group project of which they form a part. Their work does not hesitate to ask difficult questions of the material, and to challenge where necessary the existing historiography about the Alpine-Adriatic border regions. In this, the Japanese historians do potentially have a distinct advantage. As outsiders to the European field they do not need to be bound to the truisms and conventions that govern the practice of history in European societies like Austria or Italy. They should draw strength from this fact and use it to their advantage. As outsiders both to these countries and to Europe in general, the Japanese scholars can bring different perspectives to these histories. With regard to the subjects of boundaries, borderlands, nationalization, and indifference, Japanese experience and Japanese historical scholarship can bring the perspectives of a past maritime empire in Asia to bear on imperial and national questions raised in European history. Their perspectives in turn can help Europeans to see their own histories in fresh terms. It is certainly true that like all outsiders, the Japanese scholars face the burden of having to learn the subtle meanings of foreign language texts in order to study the sources at a high enough level of intricacy. They must also learn the secondary literature—also in foreign languages—and the various internal historiographic debates about a subject. All of this is in itself extremely difficult. But once they have gained this significant knowledge, they should not necessarily feel bound by European traditions as they develop their topics and their approaches to the history of these regions.

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<sup>7</sup> Laurence Cole, "Divided Land, Diverging Narratives: Memory Cultures of the Great War in the Successor Regions of Tyrol," in *Sacrifice and Rebirth. The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War*, ed. Mark Cornwall and John Paul Newman (New York: Berghahn, 2016): 258–286.