

Disappointment in the 20th century

Germany

Deadline for submitting proposals is 29th July 2011.

The 20th century was marked by high-flying expectations and great hopes, but also by various disappointments. Disappointments were not only ubiquitous during the dramatic caesuras of European history in 1914, 1945, 1968 and 1989: They were also present in the history of social movements and of the new beginnings in the post-colonial period as well as in connection with the planning of experts for the future and the promises of mass culture. In fact, disappointment virtually represents a key experience of modernity. Therefore this workshop is aimed at studying typical examples of individual and collective experiences of disappointment (including its impact and, if applicable, the respective coping strategies) by systematically applying the research methods of contemporary history. Consequently disappointment is on the one hand examined as a historical notion, the frequency, significance and context of which need to be specified on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand, an analytical concept of disappointment, which establishes disappointment as an independent category of historical experience, opens up innovative possibilities of analysing political, socio-cultural, communicative and emotional dissonances in modern mass societies.

The range of attitudes and patterns of behaviour which may result from the experience of disappointment is quite broad: it ranges from a rationally handled loss of idealism and the respective learning processes through disillusionment, resignation and apathy to frustration, anger and rebellion. Subjective disappointments may lead to an attitude of more or less complete rejection or may even contribute to radicalisation. On the other hand, the capacity of adjustment and the act of coping with disappointment, i.e. the readiness to renegotiate political and cultural priorities and social relations, is particularly significant. Such processes will be analysed in three panels during the workshop:

1. New beginnings and disappointments. Whenever contemporaries perceive their historical situation (i.e. a chain of events they undergo or witness) as a new beginning or even as a caesura, vast horizons of expectation are regularly opened up. Especially the major political breaks in European 20th century history (i.e. 1918/19 and 1945, to an extent also 1968 and 1989/90) were always accompanied by high-flying hopes for a democratic and socially equitable system – hopes, which, however, were rapidly followed by individual and collective disappointments. Such disappointments were inevitable whenever there was a lack of ability or willingness to adapt these expectations to meet the factual complexity of democratic politics. Another related area of enquiry pertains to the radical changes and new beginnings which arose from decolonisation which, subsequently, also prepared the ground for post-colonial disappointments. Most of the former colonies went through intricate international and transnational processes, resulting in the alternation of phases of enthusiasm and hope for a new era on the one hand and periods of disappointment and frustration on the other. Political independence was seen as a new beginning and therefore gave rise to expectations of solidified cultural identity, economic prosperity and political self-determination. These hopes ended in lasting and steadily increasing disappointment, first in the 1970ies with regard to the economic circumstances and, since the deep caesura of the 1980ies, also with regard to the political situation (due to the establishment of military regimes). Even if there currently are no radical political changes, burning problems such as disenchantment with politics or populism once again pose the question of what forms of collective disappointment exist in modern democracies and how significant they are. This leads us to study further important and current questions related to the history and theory of democracy: What is the impact of potential disappointments on the formation of political will in democratic systems? To what degree can disappointment - which is in fact probably inevitable - be sustained by modern democracies and under which circumstances? Which precautions are taken by democratically elected politicians in order to prevent disappointments or, at least, to limit their impact? How do democratic governments cope with changed time horizons due to political disappointments? Which preventive strategies are developed?

2. (Planning) expertise and disappointment. Disappointments were often caused by unfulfilled planning expectations. Beyond political caesuras and new beginnings, the Western world was also shaped by an increasing “academisation” of social and political life during the 20th century. This academisation led to numerous practical attempts to make reliable predictions and to plan the shaping of the future rationally. Since the last third of the 20th century confidence in the management capacities of politicians has clearly decreased – what has happened virtually amounts to a “disenchantment with politics” [Steinmetz 2007, 10]. This also applies to post-colonial disappointments which arose after the belief in progress backed by modernisation theories (and the paradigm of

hope pushed by the industrialised “First World”) had come to an end in the “Third World” in the 1970ies. If we start from the assumption that prognoses and planning postulates are specific forms of reducing complexity, disappointment can be conceived as the return of social complexity and contingency caused by unforeseeable changes. In this context the impact and consequences of such disappointments need to be analysed. To what extent did experts, academic elites and their networks realise the limited scope or even unsuitability of their planning models? Did they reflect on their theoretical assumptions and empirical findings? What are the consequences which the experience of disappointment had for international cooperation and the efficiency of transnational relations between experts? Did a partial loss of idealism and the subsequent learning processes result in methodical reorientation and real renegotiating processes within communities of experts but also, for example, with political partners? To what extent did disappointments lead to disillusionment, to rejection and, consequently, to the interruption of communication?

3. Disappointments in popular culture. Finally, one of the specific characteristics of modern consumer and popular culture as well as its functional logic is that it generates potential disappointments. Firstly, the triumph of American consumer culture led to disappointments about the cultural development of democracy. From this point of view a democratic system simultaneously based on mass culture appeared to be a (capitalist) aberration which either required habitual rejection or a renegotiation of one’s own position. Secondly, the focus is on the promises made by consumer culture itself. The ever increasing removal of constraints on needs resulted in the opening up of ever new expectation horizons. This was due to a media-based, continuously intensifying communication process between suppliers and consumers. To the degree of whether promises previously made to consumers or their rising hopes were not fulfilled or only partially fulfilled, a materially based pattern of disappointments came into being. A third research prospect which, until now, has hardly been considered by historical research refers to the interior world of pop culture, especially to the relationship and communication processes between the “stars” and their “fans”. As icons of modernity and as objects of projection for the respective “system of needs” conveyed by the media, the stars of modern pop culture attract special expectations. It is virtually one of the public duties of celebrities to meet the expectations of their fans and to avoid disappointing them by using customised media-based strategies and techniques (staged photographs, star postcards, the internet, personal web sites, etc.). The respective communication processes and expectations on the one hand and disappointments aggravated by the media on the other hand can be observed in many fields such as sports and pop music, but also in the movie and television sector.

We are inviting historians as well as colleagues working in neighbouring disciplines such as political science, sociology or communication studies. The workshop will take place at the Institute für Zeitgeschichte in Munich the second and third december 2011. It is explicitly open to graduates who, in view of a future research project, are interested in the above-mentioned topics. The working languages are German and English.

The abstracts of the proposed papers should not exceed 500 words. The deadline for submitting proposals is 29th July 2011. Please send your proposal in a PDF or WORD file format to:

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