

Petitions and petitioning: Voice, Politics, Practices, Codes, Technologies

Jane and Aatos Erkko Professorship Academic Conference

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Convener: Jane K. Cowan, University of Sussex and Jane and Aatos Erkko Visiting Professor in Studies on Contemporary Society in 2018–2019

List of Speakers, their Titles and Abstracts

Golfo Alexopoulos, University of South Florida
“Petitioning in the Soviet Union”

This talk examines the practice of writing letters to officials in the USSR, which was common throughout the Soviet era, right up to the collapse of communism. After a brief overview of petitioning in the Soviet era, I will focus on the period of Stalinist rule in the 1920s and 1930s. Citizens wrote to state authorities for many reasons, both within the context of the criminal justice system (to obtain a reduced sentence for themselves or others) and to address problems of everyday life (obtain work, seek housing or a ration, etc.). The common practice of petitioning was made possible by certain assumptions regarding the nature of Soviet power and the identities of Soviet citizens. I will explore some of these assumptions and the ways that they persisted in the Soviet era, prompting a particular construction of party leadership that posed distinct challenges under Gorbachev. I will also explore various forms of self-fashioning that petitioners deployed in order to improve the likelihood that their appeals would be successful. The language and style of citizen petitions, including the deployment of “ritual laments” and subtle threats, suggest that petitioners maintained a feeling of powerlessness as well as a belief in the efficacy of the petition. Petitioning involved hope in the chance encounter, the faith that one would be heard if only his/her narrative were constructed in just the right way for just the right audience.

Julie Billaud, University of Sussex
“Strategizing for relevance: NGOs’ submissions to the Universal Periodic Review”

In this presentation, I explore, from an anthropological perspective, the written contributions of NGOs in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a human rights monitoring mechanism established in 2008, as part of the reform of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (now the Council) in Geneva. The UPR is formally defined as a peer-review mechanism, in which states are primarily responsible for assessing the human rights performance of other member states. Civil society - identified in the official UN language as “stakeholders” and including NGOs, national human rights institutions, trade unions and civil society organizations - can intervene but in a limited way. NGOs can provide information on the human rights situation in a country, lobby members of the Working Group, speak at the plenary adoption of the report by the Human Rights Council (at the end of the UPR process) and monitor and collaborate in the implementation of UPR recommendations by the State under Review. Despite the open recognition of the importance of their involvement in the mechanism, NGOs’ participation remains a highly contested issue. Since the creation of the UPR, the modalities and very possibility of NGOs’ participation have been (and continue to be) the subject of debates. Based on participant observations at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and interviews collected during ethnographic fieldwork in 2010-2011, I reflect on the different narrative techniques NGOs have devised in order to make their voice heard. I ask: How do NGOs operate in a platform where the legitimacy of their presence is constantly questioned? What types of discursive strategies should they develop to circumvent the rules that

limit their participation? In other words, how do audibility restrictions limit and generate NGOs' participation? I will focus in particular on the 'translation' work carried out by (1) UN drafters in charge of selecting and summarizing written contributions from civil society, (2) international NGOs that support the efforts of NGOs in the South, including through training. I highlight the contradictory effects of knowledge practices, forms of expertise and bureaucratic procedures on the articulation and understanding of social criticism. Finally, I examine the forms of discipline and modes of subjectivation generated by the bureaucratic modalities of non-state actors' participation. I pay specific attention to the phenomenon of 'epistemic capture' that occurs when OHCHR experts seize and take ownership of contentious information provided by NGOs. While such processes give this information legitimacy and value within the official discourse; they also distort ideas in a way that reduces their critical content, and make them compliant with the dominant paradigm.

Keith Brown (Keynote), Arizona State University

"Shaming power: On petitions, manifestos and the politics of intimacy"

In 1970, Albert Hirschman identified categories of exit, voice and loyalty to describe consumer or client choices where an organization underperforms in relation to their expectations. Less than a decade later, Vaclav Havel's essay "The Power of the Powerless," was distributed, outlining how ideology depends on banal complicity on the part of citizens, and articulating the widespread, distributed potential for dissent to bring about systemic change.

Focusing on these two widely-cited, yet half-century-old, texts, this paper seeks to explore the family-resemblances that run through the long history of attempts by subjects or citizens to shape the terms of the language-games their rulers play. The paper will focus in particular on practices of petitioning, and how the petition mobilizes, articulates and positions shame. In particular, the paper will focus on cases in which the petition operates simultaneously as statement of supplication, grievance and entitlement—thus burdening the recipient with the task of disambiguation, as well as granting the responsibility of resolution. While drawing on material from high-profile and seemingly straightforward petition campaigns in contemporary China and the 1970s Soviet Union—in which transnational organizations lobbied on moral grounds for individual rights to free movement--the empirical core of the paper will focus on the early 20th century period. In particular, the paper will examine the role of shame in appeals made to different authority figures by individuals and associations involved on different sides of the struggle to create a Macedonian polity. Drawing on sources from the Ilinden Uprising of 1903, as well as activism following the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the paper argues that political actors adapted an existing cultural artifact to serve new purposes. Specifically, a familiar mode of address by commoners or subjects to kings and emperors came to be deployed in a discourse of shared rights and common cause.

Jane K. Cowan, University of Sussex and Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies

"The League of Nations minorities petition procedure as a site of struggle between competing justice projects"

The minority petition procedure established in 1920 by the League of Nations, allowing 'anyone' to submit a communication drawing the League's attention to an alleged 'infraction' of a minorities treaty, constituted an unprecedented innovation in international relations and created a new political field. This presentation considers the minority petition procedure in terms not of its 'success' or 'failure' but of the very different aims of the diverse array of actors who engaged in it. With a focus on petitions related to the region of Macedonia and its inhabitants, I explore the minority petition procedure as a site where competing justice projects were asserted, enforced and contested. Articulating the new political order of the Versailles treaties, the dominant project aimed to guarantee a peaceful postwar, post-imperial 'New Europe' of nation-states by transforming implicitly or explicitly nation-seeking 'nationalities' into 'minorities'. Resisting minoritisation and

the domestication it implied, advocates of a second, unfinished project for nationhood used the procedure to demand recognition of an autonomous Macedonia and revision of unjust borders. 'Minority states' (those bound by minorities treaties), for their part, mostly aimed to limit League oversight of their 'internal affairs', including of 'their' minorities, so as to consolidate the nation-state, while reforming internationalists aimed to expand and universalise minority rights and protections.

The struggle over what constituted a 'just' solution to the minorities 'problem' or 'question' and the shifting balance of power between the competing projects were enunciated not only in the semiotic content of discourse in and around petitions—the original communication, bureaucratic evaluation and state response—but in the very technologies of procedure, and debates over procedure, within the League's bureaucratic space: on what constituted a petition, on 'conditions of receivability' for petitions and specific instances of interpretation, on rules concerning distribution of files, and so forth. In the case of petitions concerning Macedonia, these issues crystallised around the 4th condition of receivability: that petitions must not contain 'violent language'. Through several examples, I explore the preoccupation with and responses to the language of petitions on the part of state representatives, bureaucrats and petitioners' internationalist allies.

Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, University of Brighton, and **Susanne Melde**, former PhD student, University of Sussex

"From petition to friendly settlement: Who wins?"

International human rights law was developed in order to prevent the repetition of World War II's 'barbarous acts'. The aim was to create instruments effective at killing in the bud governmental arbitrariness, a descent into dictatorship, and the dissolution of peace (war). In this perspective, the protection of the individual through the examination of petitions before international institutions is not so much an end in itself as a means to an end.

Such a state-orientated or 'good governance' perspective seems apt at explaining that the interest and voice of the individual petitioner can easily get lost in international human rights adjudication proceedings - without this being institutionally highlighted as troubling.

This is no better illustrated than in the De La Torre case which ended with a friendly settlement before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. The case is exceptional on many counts, not least because it was pursued by lawyers of associations outside the instructions, and probably even knowledge, of Mr De La Torre himself. What it shows is that a friendly settlement can serve the progressive development of human rights law. Here, this was achieved due to an alignment of a set of particularly favourable political circumstances.

It would be wrong, however, to think that friendly settlements routinely work this way. For a contrast, one can turn to the European Court of Human Rights' system where friendly settlements are now being pursued vigorously. They become a management tool which enable the Court to swiftly dispose of a great number of cases which would otherwise engorge further its enormous case load. These settlements generally favour the state. Despite their name, they are often very harsh on the applicant.

Andrew Graan, University of Helsinki

"Say Macedonia!: Affective politics and the life/afterlife of mass petitions"

This presentation explores the life and afterlife of a 2004 postcard-writing campaign that was undertaken in the Republic of Macedonia in order to examine the material paraphernalia of mass petitions and the conditions of their political potency. As Francis Cody (2009) has argued, mass petitions have a performative quality: petitions create the very collective subject that they claim to represent. Mass petitions and their complementary paraphernalia—t-shirts, posters, stickers,

slogans, websites, images—thus mediate and materialize a particular form of affective politics, one that registers both in the thrill of issuing calls for redress but also in the not-so-infrequent disappointment of underwhelming response. But, what happens to such affective paraphernalia in the wake of petition actions? And, what happens when they are re-animated in shifted contexts and toward shifted ends?

This presentation takes up these questions by examining the 2004 Macedonian postcard-writing campaign and the 2018 recycling of the campaign's primary slogan and imagery. Organized under the slogan, "Don't You FYROM Me: Say Macedonia!," the 2004 campaign petitioned leadership at the Council of Europe to revise their conventions for referring to Macedonia, a topic which had been highly politicized due to the longstanding dispute between Macedonia and Greece over the former's name. Remarkably, the visual paraphernalia of the 2004 postcard campaign reappeared in adapted fashion fourteen years later, during 2018 protests against the Prespa Agreement by which Macedonia would change its name to "North Macedonia" in exchange for an end to the Greek obstruction of the country's NATO and EU accession. T-Shirts and posters proclaimed, "Don't You NORTH Me: Say Macedonia!," if their target addressee(s) and political aims differed from the postcard campaign in significant ways. This presentation thus constructs an ethnography of this echo, of a slogan and image divorced from the material form and communicative structure of mass petition, to reflect on the thick history of affective politics.

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies

"Comments on Billaud and Dembour and Melde in light of her research at the Human Rights Committee"

Matthew Hull, University of Michigan

"Complaint and satisfaction: Customer service and police procedure in India"

In 2013 the Indian state of Punjab contracted with a corporation to operate a new police phone helpline. The corporate call center not only takes complaints but also monitors, directs, and reports police response to them. Following police reports of the action they took, center staff call complainants back to determine if they are satisfied or not. Reports of dissatisfaction are submitted to higher police authorities in a manner resembling petitions. This paper will explore the linguistic, ideological, organizational, and material convergence and divergence of this practice from conventional petitioning within the police.

Dmytro Khutkyy, Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies

"Electronic petitions in the Eastern European and the Baltic States: What effects for policy making?"

Civic activists invest significant efforts in e-petitions, as they seem to be a reasonable means for achieving an instant resonance in the media and in government offices. The digital format allows the collection of thousands of signatures and mobilizes heated debates in social media. And wherever e-petitions are legally binding, the government is obliged to respond to them. Taking this into account, is it useful to inquire under what circumstances e-petitions actually affect public policy? With this aim, the study compares e-petition campaigns in three Eastern European states (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) with those in three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). These countries started from similar politico-economic settings, yet followed different political paths. Therefore, they represent suitable case studies for the analysis of e-petitions impact on government policies. The study is based on the analysis of expert interviews and self-reported statistics of e-petitions platforms. In the presentation, I will present my findings on e-petitions in each of the six states and their effects for public policy.

Parvathi Menon, University of Helsinki

"Protection through petitioning: The case of the Iraqi mandate"

In the framework of my study of the humanitarian authoritarianism of protection measures, I wish to examine the politics of petitioning in the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, using the example of the Iraqi Mandate.

Petitioning was a measure intended for the inhabitants of the mandated territories to report any abuses thereof. I will examine how petitioning subsumed within it both humanity and control by the authorities: humanity, by granting the system's subjects a voice, on the one hand, and control, by disallowing issues of self-governance under the guise of minority protection, on the other hand.

Agathe Mora, London School of Economics

"From earth to paper: Property claims and the materiality of loss in post-war Kosovo"

In the last months of the Kosovo war in 1999, between 70,000 and 200,000 Kosovo Serbs had to flee Kosovo, leaving most possessions behind. Seven years after the end of the war, in 2006, the United Nations put in place the Kosovo Property Agency (KPA), a mass claims mechanism mandated to adjudicate war-related property claims. More than 90 per cent of such claims were lodged by displaced Kosovo Serbs.

This paper analyses the impact of the process of claiming on claimants' relationship to their lost property. It does so through a focus on the ways in which claimants deployed the concept of property in their narratives of loss. Claimants' language of property is one of mourning that materialises loss in objects. Property, through such 'melancholic' objects, stands in for the all-encompassing loss they suffered in 1999. At the same time, because the KPA process focused exclusively on immovable property rights, articulating the lost home as property also became a way of sanctioning grief by voicing the recognised injury of war-related loss of property. The paper argues that claiming property through the KPA impinged on claimants' subjectivities as much as it transformed their relationship to their reputed property by way of documents. The substance of loss-as-property shifted from earth to paper: the Agency's decisions came to embody and materialise property, itself generating new forms of social action and highlighting the importance of paper in articulating political and legal subjectivities.

Nil Mutluer, Humboldt University Berlin

"In between victimisation, marginalisation and hope: Academics For Peace and their encounters in exile"

Started as a petition calling on the Turkish government to cease oppression and violence against its citizens in Kurdish provinces, and asserting "We will not be part of this crime", the petition of Academics for Peace signed in January 2016, turned out to be the beginning of the purge in academia. After the petition was published, the government started a lynch campaign to the signatories of the petition. They were taken under custody and fired from their universities; with the failed coup of July 15th, 2016 the purge accelerated. Hundreds and thousands of academics from Turkey found themselves in European and North American universities as academic exiles. This presentation will discuss the encounters of Academics of Peace members in European and North American exile. Depending on their own respective priorities, national and international bureaucracies and media institutions position them either as victims of an authoritarian state, or as the supporters and representatives of marginalized groups. Yet their critical voices also carry the hopeful promise to transform transnational academia in a more diversified and inclusive direction.

Leyla Neyzi, Sabanci University

“The Academics for Peace petition: An autoethnographic account”

“I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member.” I felt the way Groucho Marx did until the unprecedented consequences of what became known as the Academics for Peace petition. While I lived in the US from the age of 17 to study anthropology, I was aware of the “red lines” of Turkish society. I barely remember receiving the petition online, and suspect I only fully read the text when I found myself in court more than two and a half years later. Why then did I become one of (what became known as) the “first group” of 1128 signatories on January 10, 2016? Is this a “club,” and do I feel like I might belong? Using an autoethnographic approach, I argue in this presentation that the first decade of Justice and Development Party rule created the conditions for this petition. I refer in particular to the expansion of the public, the breaking of the silence concerning taboos about the past (and present), and growing advocacy on the part of the intelligentsia vis-a-vis society's “others”. I also argue that the petition reflects historical continuities vis-a-vis the role of educated elites (“aydın”—the enlightened) in Turkey. Examining the language of the petition, I trace its agency, focusing on the social relations it engenders between signatories, between signatories and diverse others (family members, Kurds, the media, transnational academic networks), between signatories and state institutions (universities, police, courts, law), reflecting on the affect and mobilization it generates.

Evthymios Papataxiarchis, University of the Aegean

"Petitions and print culture in the making of the trans-state public"

Petitions constitute a legitimate, institutionally formalized way of referring to a higher order – the state bureaucracy, the church, regional authorities (or even the press) – and implicating it into an interested scheme of action that is initiated and partially executed ‘from below’. In this capacity petitions work as stimulators: they transmit political messages to higher levels of governance – often, especially in the case of collective petitions, through the use of appointed delegates and structures of inter-personal mediation – and eventually produce responses. In this paper I want to analyse the work of petitions in connection to other forms of communicating grievances (such as letters to the press) and in the context of an emerging print culture. How are petitions implicated in two modes of conducting and communicating the conflict –bureaucratic and journalistic? How do they become important vehicles of political mobilization and a fundamental ingredient of irredentist political technologies? These questions will be addressed through the microhistorical investigation of a tax revolt in the border town of Ottoman Ayvalik during the early phase of the Tanzimat, in a conjuncture when there is a shift from the bureaucratic to the journalistic mode of conducting and communicating the conflict.