

NATIONALISM Theory, Ideology, History

Second Edition

Anthony D. Smith

polity

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 Concepts	5
The Meanings of Nationalism	5
Definitions	9
2 Ideologies	24
Fundamental Ideals	27
Core Concepts	31
Nationalism as Culture and Religion	36
Voluntarism and Organicism	39
‘Ethnic’ and ‘Civic’ Nationalisms	42
3 Paradigms	47
Modernism	49
Perennialism	53
Primordialism	55
Ethno-symbolism	60
Conclusion	63
4 Theories	66
Ideology and Industrialism	66
Reason and Emotion	72
Politics and Culture	77

	Elites and Everyday Nationalism	82
	Construction and Reinterpretation	85
	Conclusion	93
5	Histories	95
	‘Great Nations’, Small <i>Ethnies</i>	96
	Nations Before Nationalism	100
	Nations in Antiquity?	110
	Nations in History: An Alternative View	115
	Conclusion	125
6	Prospects	129
	Proliferating Nationalism	129
	The Demise of the Nation-state?	132
	Hybrid Identities?	136
	The Dissolution of Nationalism?	139
	The Consumer Society	141
	Global Culture?	143
	Internationalizing Nationalism	146
	Uneven Ethno-histories	150
	Sacred Foundations	153
	Conclusion	157
	<i>Notes</i>	159
	<i>Appendix</i>	172
	<i>References</i>	177
	<i>Index</i>	197

3

Paradigms

In early 1789, the Abbé Siéyès published a pamphlet, entitled *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?*, in which he attacked the privileges of the nobility and clergy, identified the Third Estate with the nation, and proclaimed the sovereignty of the nation:

The Nation exists before all things and is the origin of all. Its will is always legal, it is the law itself . . . Nations on earth must be conceived as individuals outside the social bond, or as is said, in the state of nature. The exercise of their will is free and independent of all civil forms. Existing only in the natural order, their will, to have its full effect, only needs to possess the *natural* characteristics of a will. In whatever manner a nation wills, it suffices that it does will; all forms are valid and its will is always the supreme law. (cited in Cobban 1963, I: 165; italics in original)

The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* later that year put the matter even more succinctly: 'The source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation: no body of men, no individual, can exercise authority that does not emanate expressly from it' (see Baker 1988: 271). A year later, in the summer of 1790, French men and women celebrated the *Fête de la Fédération*: national guardsmen and loyal citizens came together to celebrate the new French federation. Everywhere, altars were erected with the inscription:

‘The citizen is born, lives and dies for the fatherland.’ Processions were held, hymns sung and oaths sworn, with outstretched interlinked arms, in imitation of Jacques-Louis David’s painting *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784). Embracing in ‘holy fraternity’, the citizens swore everlasting allegiance to France, to uphold her national unity and obey the sovereign people. In Paris, on 14 July, on the Champs de Mars, LaFayette administered the oath and Talleyrand provided a mass and benediction under streaming flags, and intoned ‘Sing and weep tears of joy, for on this day France has been made anew’; while at Notre Dame, a half sacred, half profane cantata, *Prise de la Bastille*, was performed, set to passages from the patriotic Book of Judith (Schama 1989: 502–12).

As the Revolution proceeded, popular fervour increased. A new flag, the tricolor, was adopted, along with a new national hymn, the ‘Marseillaise’, subsequently to become the national anthem. The King’s title was changed from ‘Louis, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre’ to ‘Louis, by the grace of God and the constitutional law of the state, King of the French’. Regionalism was curbed, politically and culturally, to create ‘*la république, une et indivisible*’. From 1793, the French language was promoted throughout the land by the efforts of the Abbé Gregoire and of Barère, a member of the Jacobin Committee of Public Safety under Robespierre. The first plebiscites were held in two Papal enclaves, Avignon and Venaissin, to ascertain the (French) will of their populations. A national conscript army of citizens was mobilized, which defeated the invading armies of the monarchs at Valmy in September 1792 and thereafter; and in the flush of victory the ‘patriots’, as the revolutionaries called themselves, began to export to the ‘liberated’ territories they had conquered the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. To celebrate this national renewal, great popular fêtes were organized in 1793 and 1794. Designed by David, to music by Gossec and poetry by André Chenier, they featured great processions and parades, hymns, colossal statues of Liberty and Nature, and rituals such as rebaptizing the soil with water, the release of thousands of doves of peace into the sky, and the descent of Robespierre, like some latterday Moses, from a giant plaster-and-cardboard mountain topped by a column

with a statue of Hercules and a Tree of Liberty (Schama 1989: 746–50, 831–6; Reichardt and Kohle 2008).¹

Modernism

What exactly was it that the French bourgeoisie was celebrating? Not just their accession to power and the end of aristocratic and clerical privilege. It was nothing less than the birth of a new nation of France, in the shape of the French Republic. In the work of the National Assembly and its successors, the process of building a new nation through constitutional change was pushed forward with immense vigour and zeal, in accordance with the rationalist blueprints of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment.²

Such planned ‘nation-building’ was essentially a modern process, which found no real parallel before 1789. There had, it is true, been welfare programmes of enlightened monarchs in previous epochs, great construction projects, and even the large-scale ‘modernization’ of administration, from the laws of Hammurabi in ancient Babylon and the reforms of Augustus in Rome right up to the modernization programmes of Peter the Great in Russia and Joseph II of Austria. But there was no collective design to their work; it was conducted in the name of, and on behalf of, an individual or a ruling class. Nor was there any ideology of the sovereign people sharing a common history and culture, to whom supreme loyalty was owed and for whom great sacrifices must be made. There was no question in earlier epochs of mobilizing the people to participate in politics at the centre, nor of the need for men, let alone women, to become politically aware and active ‘citizens’. Nor, as a result, was there any interest in providing an infrastructure and institutions which would cater to all the needs and interests of the citizens; nor, indeed, of instilling in the population at large, through mass, compulsory, standardized public education, the necessary attitudes and skills of a ‘citizen’, so as to maximize the power and well-being of the nation, and to imbue the citizenry with a purely secular respect for the laws of the nation.³

All this was new, a product of the centralizing programmes of the European absolutist monarchs from the sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, and of the growing reactions to their claims appearing first in the seventeenth-century Puritan revolts in Holland and England and reaching their culmination in the revolutions in the United States and France. It was, above all, in late eighteenth-century France that Pericles' exhortation to his fellow-Athenians in his Funeral Oration of 430BC, that they should 'fall in love with their city', became a living creed. Only then did his ideal of the active public-minded citizen of Athens strike a collective chord – no wonder that Rousseau and his followers looked back to classical Athens, Sparta and republican Rome for their models of civic solidarity and historic community. 'At this time, in fact', commented Durkheim on the French Revolution, 'under the influence of the general enthusiasm, things purely secular in nature became transformed into sacred things: these were the Fatherland, Liberty, Reason. A religion tended to become established which had its dogmas, symbols, altars and feasts' (Durkheim 1915: 214). As a process of 'nation-building' and as an ideology and movement, nationalism and its ideals of national autonomy, unity and identity, are relatively modern phenomena, which have placed at the centre of the political stage the sovereign, united and unique nation, and have made over the world in their image.⁴

The view that I have been outlining, and the historical developments that give it substance, may be called 'modernist'. Modernism comes in two forms, chronological and sociological. The first asserts, as I have been arguing, that nationalism – the ideology, movement and symbolism – is relatively recent; the second, that nationalism is also qualitatively novel. In the second form, nationalism is an innovation, and not simply an updated version of something far older. Nothing like it existed before. But, this is not simply a matter of the perennial movement of history, it is a phenomenon brought into being by a wholly new epoch and an entirely novel set of conditions. Nationalism, in short, is a product of *modernity*, nothing less. It is this last assertion that marks out true modernism.

But it is not only nationalism that is modern. So are nations, national states, national identities and the whole

'inter-national' community. All these, for the modernist, are not just chronologically recent, they are also qualitatively novel. The French Revolution inaugurated not just a new ideology, but a new form of human community, a new kind of collective identity, a new type of polity and, in the end, a new kind of inter-state order. In the conjunction and inter-linking of these novel phenomena, is mirrored the new world order of modernity. But, equally, they reflect the new conditions characteristic of modernity.⁵

What are the specifically modern characteristics of national phenomena, and what are the main conditions that have encouraged the rise of nations, national states and nationalism? In their replies to these questions, the various kinds of modernism diverge, and I shall discuss some of the ensuing theories and debates in the next chapter. But, we may briefly distinguish the following varieties of the overall modernist paradigm:

1. Socioeconomic: nationalism and nations are derived, in this version, from such novel economic and social factors as industrial capitalism, regional inequality and class conflict. According to Tom Nairn and Michael Hechter, specifically national sentiments and ideals are aroused by relative deprivation between regions within modern states or classes across states, between the under-developed peripheral and the developed core regions or between core and peripheral elites backed by the newly mobilized 'masses' of the periphery (Hechter 1975; Nairn 1977).⁶
2. Sociocultural: nationalism and nations, according to Ernest Gellner, are sociologically necessary phenomena of the modern, industrial epoch, emerging in the transition of 'modernization'. Nations are expressions of a literate, school-transmitted 'high culture' supported by specialists and by a mass, standardized, compulsory, public education system. By training a mobile, literate workforce, nations in turn support industrialism, just as the latter encourages nationalism (Gellner 1964, ch. 7; 1973; and 1983).
3. Political: here, nations and nationalism are forged in and through the modern professionalized state, either directly

or in opposition to specific (imperial/colonial) states. For theorists like John Breuilly, Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann, not only is the modern state the best predictor of nations and nationalism, its relationship with society forms the crucible for a reintegrative nationalism, which is the inevitable concomitant of state sovereignty (Giddens 1985; Breuilly 1993; Mann 1995).

4. Ideological: the focus here is on the European origins and the modernity of nationalist ideology, its quasi-religious power and its role in breaking up empires and creating nations where none had existed. Elie Kedourie has traced nationalist ideologies to the impact of the Enlightenment and Kantian ideas of self-determination, and ultimately to medieval Christian millennial doctrines; and he has demonstrated their destructive effects on non-European peoples when a discontented intelligentsia adapted these chiliastic European doctrines to their native ethnic and religious traditions (Kedourie 1960; and 1971: Introduction).⁷
5. Constructionist: this is a rather different form of modernism in that, though it assumes that nations and nationalism are wholly modern, it emphasizes their socially constructed character. Nations, according to Eric Hobsbawm, owe much to 'invented traditions', which are products of social engineering and are created to serve the interests of ruling elites by channelling the energies of the newly enfranchised masses. Benedict Anderson, on the other hand, views the nation as an imagined political community which fills the void left by the decline of cosmic religions and monarchies at the point where new conceptions of time and 'print-capitalism' made it possible to imagine nations moving through linear time (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1991).

Despite their differences, these varieties of the paradigm of modernity all share a belief in what one might call 'structural modernism'. There is no 'contingent modernism', no simple observation of an historical correlation between nationalism and modernity, but a belief in the inherently national, and nationalist, nature of modernity. It could not have been

otherwise. In this view, modernity necessarily took the form of nations and just as inevitably produced nationalist ideologies and movements.

Perennialism

Today, modernism represents the dominant orthodoxy of scholarship in nationalism. For many, the modernity of nations, national states and nationalism is simply assumed; for others, it is something to be, more or less stridently, insisted upon. And yet it was not always so. Before the Second World War, many scholars subscribed to the view that, even if nationalist ideology was recent, nations had always existed in every period of history, and that many nations existed from time immemorial – a perspective that can be called ‘perennialism’. It is probably fair to say that many members of the public hold a perennialist view to this day, especially where their own nations are concerned. But, in the nineteenth century and right up to the 1940s, many scholars subscribed to some version of perennialism, even those who, like Renan, favoured a more ‘voluntarist’ version of nationalism. This was partly aided by the popular equation of ‘race’ with ‘nation’, where the term ‘race’ often signified the separate culture of a descent group rather than hereditary and immutable biological traits and genes (and where today we might substitute the term ‘ethnicity’). Perennialism was also encouraged by the idea of social evolution, with its emphasis upon gradualism, stages of progress and social and cultural cumulation. It was easy, even natural, to see nations as collective exemplars exhibiting these very qualities of gradualism, development and cumulation, especially for those who were attracted to the organic analogy. Nor should we overlook the great advances made in national historiography and archaeology, disciplines that, if they were fed by nationalist conceptions, also encouraged and bolstered those conceptions with apparently ‘hard data’ and the tangible remains of distant material cultures.⁸

But perennialism should not be confused with a naturalist conception of the nation, which is the basis of latterday

‘primordialism’. Perennialists may subscribe to a ‘primordial’ conception of the nation, but equally they may not. All that is necessary for perennialism is a belief, founded on some empirical observation, that nations – or at least some nations – have existed for a long period of time, for whatever reason. They do not have to regard nations as natural, organic or primordial; indeed, they may, and often do, reject such ahistorical accounts. Perennialists need not be, and often are not, primordialists, and we need to keep the distinction in mind.

Perennialism comes in two main forms. The first, and more common variety, we may call ‘continuous perennialism’. All that is asserted here is that particular nations have a long, continuous history, and can trace their origins back to the Middle Ages or, more rarely, antiquity. Here, the emphasis falls on *continuity*. While ruptures and discontinuities are not ignored, they are relativized by an emphasis on the slow rhythms of collective cultural identity. In fact, a nation’s identity and history may not reach back beyond the Renaissance or the late medieval epoch, as, for example, with Sweden, Holland and Russia. Elsewhere, national origins may be traced still further back. Hugh Seton-Watson claimed that we could distinguish the ‘old, continuous nations’ from later examples that were deliberately created; the former included France, England, Scotland and Spain, and their longevity lent historical substance to the population’s sense of immemorial nationhood. This is a position which, as we shall see, has recently received renewed support (Seton-Watson 1977: ch. 2; see also Gillingham 1992; Hastings 1997; see also the essays by Wormald, Foote and Reynolds in Scales and Zimmer 2005).

The other main form we may term ‘recurrent perennialism’. This makes a much bolder, general statement about the antiquity of nations. Particular nations, it says, are historical; they change with time. In Renan’s words: ‘They had their beginnings, and they will end.’ But the ‘nation-in-general’, as a category of human association, is perennial and ubiquitous, because it reappears in every period of history and is found in every continent of the globe. Here we are confronted by *recurrence* of the same type of collective cultural identity, even though it may be expressed in varied ways in

different periods of history. Though particular nations may come and go, the idea of nationhood itself is a universal, dis-embedded phenomenon, and as such could apply to many cultural or political communities in every age and clime.⁹

Primordialism

Perennialism is a paradigm peculiar to (some) historians. 'Primordialism', in contrast, tends to be the preserve of social scientists – and organic nationalists. Its origins can be traced to Rousseau himself, with his call to flee urban corruption and return to 'nature' to recover a lost innocence. This 'naturalistic' spirit soon entered into the very definition of nationhood. We can see it at work already in the passage of the Abbé Siéyès which I quoted at the outset of this chapter. Nations, he asserts, must be conceived as individuals outside the social bond, in the 'state of nature'; they exist only 'in the natural order'. Indeed, they share with God the attributes of existing before all things and of originating everything. In other words, nations are 'primordial'; they exist in the first order of time, and lie at the root of subsequent processes and developments. Siéyès (and other followers of Rousseau) may not have used this language, let alone regarded himself as a 'primordialist'; but his are vast claims, and already in 1789 they are being used to justify the absolute sovereignty of the will of the nation, well before Fichte and other Romantics made similar claims for the German nation. This kind of 'naturalizing' discourse paved the way for the essentialist and organic forms of nationalism that I touched on earlier, but it also influenced the more voluntarist kinds of nationalism.¹⁰

Biology and culture

This, then, is one variety of primordialism, that of an organicist nationalism. More recently, we have witnessed the rise of two other kinds of primordialism. The first is a *socio-biological* version, which holds that nations, ethnic groups and races can be traced to the underlying genetic reproduc-

tive drives of individuals and their use of strategies of 'nepotism' and 'inclusive fitness' to maximize their gene pools. For Pierre van den Berghe, these strategies are used to extend the individual's gene pool beyond immediate kinship ties, to wider ethnic kin. In this case, the cultural group is treated as a wider kin network, and cultural symbols (language, religion, colour, etc.) are used as markers of biological affinity. For Van den Berghe, this is an eminently rational strategy, since for the most part *myths* of ethnic origins correspond to *real* biological origins. That is why people who are not directly related are prepared to treat unknown co-ethnics as 'kin' and to nurture and defend them as if they were (Van den Berghe 1978 and 1995).

There are a number of difficulties with this account. The most obvious is the problem of generalizing from the level of individual reproductive behaviour to that of collective, and political, action. Even the extended family is too small to be politically significant, except in a few cases, and it is difficult to see how large-scale sociopolitical developments can be explained by recourse to individual or kin behaviour. A second, related difficulty is that myths of origin are rarely correlated with actual biological origins, assuming that these can be traced. As Walker Connor demonstrated (1994: 202), myths of origin generally fail to correspond to what we know about actual descent lines. Typically, nations will have several ethnic strains and origins, whereas myths of origin and descent presuppose a single, agreed or official source. Finally, by introducing the level of 'cultural signs', Van den Berghe dilutes the rigour and purity of his reductionist biological account, and suggests a much greater role for cultural and social factors that would necessarily diminish the influence of genetic factors.

A second, and more influential, version of primordialism holds that ethnic groups and nations are formed on the basis of attachments to the 'cultural givens' of social existence. Both Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz showed how 'primordial' ties persisted alongside the secular, civil ties, even in industrial societies. Geertz, in particular, contrasted primordial attachments with the civil ties of the rational order of modern polities and society. In the new states of Africa and Asia, Geertz discerned two powerful drives: for personal

identity, based on the continuing strength and hold of attachments to kin, race, language, religion, customs and territory; and for efficiency and stability, which finds its expression in the civil ties of the new political order. In fact, the desire for order and efficiency simply exacerbates primordial attachments among ethnic groups in the new states, because sovereign state power and its patronage becomes a new prize over which to fight and a new challenge with which to contend (Shils 1957; Geertz 1973).

Today, 'primordialism' has acquired pejorative connotations of fixity, essentialism and naturalism. This image is based partly on the unjustified association of primordialism with an organic type of nationalism, partly on a misreading of Geertz's celebrated essay, 'The integrative revolution'. In claiming that ethnic attachments and nations spring from the 'cultural givens' of social existence, and that many peoples' 'sense of self is bound up in the gross actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion or tradition', Geertz is not embracing an organic naturalism. For he immediately introduces a vital qualification, when he says:

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the 'givens' – or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed 'givens' of social existence . . . These congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times, overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves. (Geertz 1973: 259–60)

In this passage, the words 'assumed' and 'are seen to', and the reference to culture, tell us that for Geertz primordial attachments rest on perceptions and beliefs, and that it is not the intrinsic nature of these attachments that makes them 'given' and powerful; rather, it is human beings who see these ties as givens, and attribute to them an overpowering coerciveness. What Geertz is claiming, and what is so important about the primordialist contribution, is that we, as individuals and members of collectivities, *feel and believe in* the primordiality of our *ethnies* and nations – their naturalness, longevity and power – and that if we ignore these beliefs and feelings, we evade one of the central problems of explanation in the field of ethnicity and nationalism.

For a key question that confronts any theory of nations and nationalism is why they generate so much passion and such strong attachments. In seeking to answer this question, primordialists point to the durability and apparent coerciveness of these attachments, and to the need to take into account what we may call a 'participants' primordialism'; that is, the participants' vivid sense of the primordial nature of their own collective cultural identities. But this, in itself, is no answer, as Eller and Coughlan have pointed out. We need to know why so many people share this sense of primordiality and feel these attachments. This requires a rational, empirical analysis of ethnic attachments, not an assertion of the a priori nature and emotional content of such ties. In reply, Steven Grosby has made the interesting suggestion that people base their feelings of attachment on certain beliefs about the life-enhancing nature of such collectivities, and the life-sustaining properties of kinship and, more especially, of territory. This is a thought-provoking proposition, but it can only point us in a certain direction. In itself, it can hardly serve as an historical or sociological explanation for the various kinds of cultural community, or for their transformations over time. Nor can such a paradigm shed light on why people become attached to certain historic collectivities and not others (for example, Germany rather than Prussia), and why such attachments vary in scope, intensity and timing.¹¹

The instrumentalist critique

This is where an 'instrumentalist' approach can help. Like primordialism, the instrumentalist approach was pioneered in respect of ethnicity rather than nations or nationalism. It came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, in the debate about (white) ethnic persistence in what was supposed to have been an effective melting-pot. While Will Herberg had spoken of a triple American melting-pot (Protestant, Catholic, Jew), Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan showed how the various ethnic groups of New York adapted to an American lifestyle while retaining their identities. This sparked a lively debate through the 1970s on

the degree to which ethnic groups in the United States such as the Irish, Italians and Greeks should be seen as interest or pressure groups behaving instrumentally in the political marketplace – groups that had in later generations increasingly shed their cultural distinctiveness or were treating it as largely symbolic and optional. The implication was that ethnic leaders and elites used their cultural groups as sites of mass mobilization and as constituencies in their competition for power and resources, because they found them more effective than social classes.¹²

It was not long before an instrumentalist approach was applied to the genesis of nations. A particularly clear example can be found in the seminal debate between Paul Brass and Francis Robinson on the origins of Pakistan. For Brass, Pakistan was created by Muslim elites who manipulated Islamic symbolic resources in order to mobilize the Muslim masses of northwest India, at a time when British policies appeared to turn against Muslim interests. For Robinson, it was the other way round: existing Muslim attachments and ideologies (notably of the *umma*) persuaded the Muslim elites of the need to safeguard the Muslim community and culture by seeking greater autonomy for the Muslims of the Northwest United Provinces and Bengal. Yet, the distance between these two readings of the situation is not as great as it seems. Brass, for example, conceded the importance of existing traditions, especially where there was a rich cultural heritage and an institutional (for example, religious) framework, while Robinson was careful to insist on the political rationality of Muslim elite actions (Brass 1979 and 1991; Robinson 1979).

Nevertheless, in other hands, the instrumentalist approach can be used to uphold a strictly modernist paradigm. This is the case with John Breuilly's political theory of nationalism, which I consider in more detail in the next chapter. For the moment, I want to concentrate on his methodological aims. These he sets out in a concluding chapter of the revised 1993 version of his book, *Nationalism and the State*. Though his definition of nationalism refers to culture, Breuilly rejects any idea of cultural *identity* as a defining characteristic of nationalism (which he treats as a strictly political and modern phenomenon), because he thinks that would lead us back to an irrational primordialist 'need to belong'. Yet he also admits

that nationalism ‘derives much of its power from the half-truths it embodies’, adding:

People do yearn for communal membership, do have a strong sense of us and them, of territories as homelands, of belonging to culturally defined and bounded worlds which give their lives meaning. Ultimately, much of this is beyond rational analysis and, I believe, the explanatory powers of the historian. (Breuilly 1993: 401)

Perhaps so. But the effect, in Breuilly’s hands, is to limit the range of meaning of the concept of nationalism to a purely political – and strictly instrumental – usage. Nationalism becomes simply an argument through which sub-elites can mobilize people, coordinate the diverse interests of social groups and legitimate their actions, in order to seize or retain power in the modern state. It is a purely political argument, which says that there exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character, that its interests and values take priority over all others and that the nation must be as independent as possible. For Breuilly, nationalism is not about identity, unity, authenticity, dignity, the homeland or anything else, save political power, that is, political goals in the modern state. Nationalism is simply an instrument for achieving political goals, and as such it can only emerge under modern conditions. Anything else is beyond the pale of rational analysis (*ibid.*: 2).

Rationality, modernity, politics: this trinity is a recurrent feature of instrumentalism, and represents a closure of argument. Its effect is to delegitimize alternative approaches and to disqualify every paradigm of nationalism except the modernist. But, in practice, such a self-denying ordinance only serves to vacate ground which should come under the scrutiny not only of rational analysis, but of an analysis that would admit far more to its scrutiny than the top-down, elite-driven and rational choice political models currently on offer among so many modernists.

Ethno-symbolism

One such alternative is the kind of analysis encouraged by an ‘ethno-symbolic’ paradigm, the last of the four currently in

the field – a possible fifth ‘postmodern’ paradigm, which I shall consider in the final chapter, is as yet sketchy and fragmentary. Historical ethno-symbolism, in contrast to the others, focuses on the subjective elements in the formation of nations, the character and impact of nationalism, and the persistence of *ethnies*; and thereby seeks to enter into and comprehend the ‘inner worlds’ of ethnicity and nationalism.

Here I shall consider only the main concerns of ethno-symbolic perspectives, leaving to the next chapter a more detailed examination. The first of these priorities is to move away from the heavily elite-oriented analysis characteristic of most modernists, not so as to substitute a counterposed view ‘from below’, as advocated by the exponents of ‘everyday nationalism’ (see next chapter), but rather to emphasize the reciprocal relationship between ‘elites’ and ‘the people’, the non-elites or middle and lower strata of the population. For the latter, speaking generally, not only constrain elite nationalist projects from time to time within the social and cultural parameters of their traditions, they also provide their own motifs and personnel for nationalist goals and movements. A good example of this reciprocal relationship is afforded by the popular and intellectual movement of the Gaelic revival in late-nineteenth-century Ireland, richly documented by John Hutchinson (1987, esp.chs.4–5); in this case, against the background of rural evictions and agrarian wars, the traditions of the Irish peasantry and Catholic lower classes provided parameters and cultural myths, symbols, values and traditions for the ‘revivalist’ formulations of the Irish intelligentsia, which ultimately helped to mobilize support for Irish independence.

A second concern of ethno-symbolists, which I elaborate later, is the need for long-term analysis of social and cultural patterns over the *longue durée*, i.e. analysis of persisting long-term structures and processes, explored by the Annales School of French historians. By conducting investigations over several generations and even centuries, scholars can reveal the often complex relationships between past and present, and the place of *ethnies* and nations in history, so avoiding the anachronism of a ‘retrospective nationalism’ which would read into past conditions and politics current nationalist assumptions and aspirations. This is linked to a third ethno-symbolic concern: locating nations and

nationalism within a longer time-span and framework of earlier communities, especially ethnic communities.

The relationship here is often complex: there is no simple linear progression from one to the other; many ethnic communities flourish today within the borders of national states. Moreover, nations can be seen, from one angle, as specialized forms of ethnic groups, and, from another angle, as coexisting or competing with ethnic communities, as do the Flemish and the Walloons within Belgium, and the Catalans and Basques within Spain. Nations and *ethnies* can all be seen as part of a wider 'ethno-cultural' family of communities, and this may help to explain the frequent appeals of so many nationalists to the symbolic repertoires of the antecedent populations with whom they claim a deep cultural continuity, however fictive it might be (take, for example, Saddam Hussein's invocation of the Mesopotamian 'ancestors' of Iraq, or former Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah's invocation of the medieval empire of Ghana located some three hundred miles away from the present-day state of Ghana).

Fourth, for ethno-symbolists, the passion and attachment evoked by nationalism and nations is a central problem. Unlike modernists or perennialists, they attempt to offer historical and sociological explanations for the continuing strong emotional attachments of so many people to 'their' ethnic communities and nations, as well as for their capacity for fanaticism and self-sacrifice on their behalf. This in turn is linked to a final concern: the continuing hold exercised by modern national communities on so many people, even today. This they tend to explain by the influence of prior ethnic ties and by revealing the importance of subjective elements of shared symbols, values, myths and memories. In this way, they can also offer supplementary or alternative explanations of the intensity and contents of current ethnic and national conflicts, such as the clashes between Hindus and Muslims in India over the mosque at Ayodhya, the Orange Order marches in Ulster, and the status of Jerusalem and its holy sites (van der Veer 1994; Roshwald 2006).

As with the other paradigms, ethno-symbolism takes various forms. John Armstrong leans more to a perennialist standpoint, which tends to downplay the distinction between nations and ethnic identities (though he does make a distinc-

tion between nations before and after 1800, i.e. the watershed of 'nationalism'). This is partly because Armstrong adopts a phenomenological account, which sees ethnic identities as shifting clusters of perceptions, sentiments and attitudes. At the same time, he employs the cultural and symbolic boundary analysis pioneered by Fredrik Barth, and stresses the need for investigations of 'myth-symbol complexes' over *la longue durée* to understand the persistence of ethnicity (Armstrong 1982 and 1995; cf. Barth 1969: Introduction).

John Hutchinson, on the other hand, has adopted a more Weberian approach to distinguish modern cultural from political types of nationalism, and uncover the dynamics of the cultural forms. Hutchinson is also concerned with the part played by the past in both premodern ethnic revivals and modern nationalisms, and the way in which premodern cultural repertoires of myths, memories and symbols can be 'carried' by institutions into the modern epoch. My own analysis is concerned with a third problem: the nature and role of nations in history. While acknowledging the modernity of nationalism, the ideology, movement and symbolism, and the recent formation of most nations, I have become interested in the possibility of nations prior to nationalism, at least in a few cases, and its implications. But, in general, my approach has focused on the way that prior, and often premodern, ethnic ties and *ethnies* have influenced, and in some cases formed the basis for, subsequent nations and nationalisms (Hutchinson 1987 and 1994; A. D. Smith 1986 and 1991).

Conclusion

Ethno-symbolism arose out of a dissatisfaction with the claims of the rival modernist and perennialist paradigms, and the explanatory failure of primordialism. If, on the one hand, nations are neither continuously immemorial nor recurrent, and if, on the other hand, nations are neither all recent and novel, nor just products of modernization, then it becomes necessary to search for another paradigm that would encompass and do justice to the oft-remarked duality, or

Table 3.1 Paradigms of nations and nationalism

<i>Primordialism</i>	<i>Perennialism</i>	<i>Ethno-symbolism</i>	<i>Modernism</i>	<i>Postmodern(ism)</i>
Socio-biological Cultural	Continuous Recurrent	Phenomenological Historical	Socio-economic Socio-cultural Political Ideological Constructionist	Globalization Hybridization Everyday nation

Janus-nature, of nations and nationalism. Such a paradigm, while not neglecting external political, geopolitical and economic factors, would focus on subjective symbolic and socio-cultural elements, encourage more nuanced perspectives and approaches, and thereby address the vital symbolic issues of ethnic identity, myth and memory that so often prove intractable. Neither perennialism nor modernism sought to enter the inner world of nationalism; and without such a focus, ethno-symbolists argue, there is little chance of understanding other peoples' nationalisms and, as a result, of beginning to address the grievances and sentiments that fuel their conflicts.

The debates between adherents of the four paradigms have taken place on two levels: theory and history. Put baldly, of the four paradigms, the modernists have been strong on theory, but rather weak on history, whereas perennialists have been rather stronger on history, but weak on theory. Primordialism has either a flawed theory or none, and little or no history, being reductionist (sociobiology) or largely speculative or ahistorical (cultural primordialism). As for the ethno-symbolists, they have evolved no theory, only approaches. But, as one might expect, they are concerned with macro-history and its sociocultural elements, and, as such, they provide, in my view, a necessary corrective to the often sweeping claims of adherents of the other main paradigms.

Further reading

A perceptive account of the main paradigms of nationalism is given in *Rethinking Nationalism*, Hearn (2006). The varieties of modernism from Gellner to Anderson are explored in

Theories of Nationalism, Ozkirimli (2000) and *Nationalism and Modernism*, A. D. Smith (1998). Hastings (*Construction of Nationhood*, 1997) presents a forceful neo-perennialist approach, and the essay by Donald Horowitz, entitled 'The primordialists', in Conversi (2004), is a sympathetic review of cultural primordialism. For the debate between instrumentalism and primordialism, see Eller and Coughlan ('The poverty of primordialism', 1993) and Grosby ('The verdict of history', 1994). Apart from *Nations before Nationalism*, Armstrong (1982) and *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, A. D. Smith (2009), see the recent perceptive work by Roshwald (*The Endurance of Nationalism*, 2006) for the uses of an 'ethno-symbolic' perspective.