

## ETHNO-SYMBOLISM AND THE STUDY OF NATIONALISM

---

Anthony Smith

The *ethno-symbolic* approaches make a number of claims, which constitute a set of basic themes or motifs.

### I. LA LONGUE DURÉE

The first theme is the claim that, if we want to grasp the power and understand the shape of modern nations and nationalisms, we must trace the origins and formation of nations, as well as their possible future course, over long periods of time (*la longue durée*), and not tie their existence and formation to a particular period of history or to the processes of modernization. Nations are historical phenomena, not only in the generic sense that they are embedded in particular collective pasts and emerge, sometimes over long time-spans, through specific historical processes, but also because, by definition, they embody shared memories, traditions, and hopes of the populations designated as parts of the nation. Indeed, a central theme of historical ethno-symbolism is the relationship of shared memories to collective cultural identities: memory, almost by definition, is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities. That is why [...] historians have played so central a role in the delineation of the nation and in the rediscovery, transmission, and analysis of its ethnic heritage. It may also be the reason why historians dominated causal enquiry into the nature, course and appeal of nations and nationalism, at least in the earlier stages.

---

Anthony D. Smith (1999), *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Historical enquiry, while it may demystify and dispel fictions, can also reinforce the shared memories and aspirations of members, their *ethno-history*, by providing material or documentary evidence for events and personages held in reverence by the community. At the same time, it may reveal the long-term processes in which the rise of nations and the spread of nationalism are embedded. For historical ethno-symbolism, this double historicity of nations and nationalism – their rootedness in shared long-term memories or *ethno-history*, and the resulting need to analyse them over long historical time-spans – constitutes an underlying methodological postulate. (See Llobera 1994, ch. 1; Smith 1986, chs 1–2.)

## 2. NATIONAL PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

This long-term relationship between national past, present, and future constitutes a second major theme, and it can be examined under three headings: recurrence, continuity, and reappropriation.

*Recurrence*: For perennialists, the nation is a recurrent form of social organization and nationalism a perennial mode of cultural belonging. But this is to read the history of earlier epochs in the light of the nationalist present. [. . .] Using my own definition of the nation – *as a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members* (admittedly a fairly modernist definition) – it is clear that the majority of nations, and nationalisms emerged in the modern world inaugurated by the French and American Revolutions. At the same time, as we saw, there may be some nations that predate modernity, and there are certainly some widely diffused ethnic elements that recur throughout recorded history: these include ethnic origin myths, beliefs in ethnic election, the development of ethnoscaples, the territorialization of memory, and the vernacular mobilization of communities. All of which suggests that *modern* nations may have *pre-modern* precursors and can form around recurrent ethnic antecedents.<sup>1</sup>

*Continuity*: Under this heading falls the vexed question of the ‘date of commencement of nations’ (Hastings 1997, ch. 1) – or how far back in time it is possible to trace the origins of particular nations. If the first heading signalled the recurring components or potential *building-blocks* of nations-in-general, the rubric of continuity points to the persistence of cultural components of particular nations, for example, elements that have been handed down through the generations – names, symbols, languages, customs, territories and rituals of national identity. [. . .] Much more work needs to be done on identifying the links between earlier ethnic components and modern national cultures, a point made forcefully and critically by John Breuilly (1996).

However, with ideas of ethnic election and their secular transformations, as with memories of golden ages, a start has been made in establishing important cultural continuities, despite the breaks often introduced by conquest, colonization, migration, and assimilation. (See also Smith 1993a.) This should help to

counteract what John Peel has called the *blocking presentism*, and constructionism of so much current work on ethnicity, which views our understanding of the ethnic past as social construction based on present needs and reflecting the interests and preoccupations of present generations (Peel 1989).<sup>2</sup>

*Reappropriation*: If continuity signifies the forward reach of the ethnic past to the national present, the rubric of *reappropriation* represents the converse movement, a reaching back into the ethnic past to obtain the *authentic* materials, and ethos for a distinct modern nation. [. . .] Nationalist intelligentsias [can be seen as] as *political archaeologists* who aim, not to return to the past, but to recover its pristine ethos and reconstruct a modern nation in the image of the past *ethnie*. Hence, the quest for rediscovery, authentication, and reappropriation of the ethnic past by philologists, historians, archaeologists and ethnologists. Despite many instances of self-delusion and manipulation, it is necessary to treat these activities of nationalist intellectuals as an essential element of the complex interrelationship between national present (and future) and ethnic past. (See Smith 1981a, chs 5–6; Pinard and Hamilton 1984; Anderson 1991, ch. 5.)<sup>3</sup>

## 3. THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONS

The third fundamental theme, and claim, of ethno-symbolism concerns the ethnic foundations of nations and nationalism. The ubiquity of ethnicity is its starting-point. Ethnic groupings can be found in every epoch and continent, wherever human beings feel that they share common ancestry and culture. Such groupings come in various forms and display varying degrees of organization and self-awareness. As a first step, we may distinguish *ethnic categories* from *ethnic communities*, with other organizational forms such as ethnic associations in between. *Ethnic categories* are populations distinguished by outsiders as possessing the attributes of a common name or emblem, a shared cultural element (usually language or religion), and a link with a particular territory, *Ethnic communities* or *ethnies* (to use the French term) are human populations distinguished by both members and outsiders as possessing the attributes of:

1. an identifying name or emblem;
2. a *myth* of common ancestry;
3. shared historical memories and traditions;
4. one or more elements of common culture;
5. a link with an historic territory or ‘homeland’;
6. a measure of solidarity, at least among the élites.

This allows us to define an *ethnie* as *a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with a homeland, and some degree of solidarity, at least among the élites* (Smith 1986, ch. 2; cf. Horowitz 1985, chs 1–2).

There is, in most cases, a more or less powerful link between modern nations and pre-existing, and often pre-modern, *ethnies*. Ethno-symbolism claims that

most nations, including the earliest, were based on ethnic ties and sentiments and on popular ethnic traditions, which have provided the cultural resources for later nation-formation; and that even those new *state-nations* in Africa and Asia that sought to turn ex-colonies into territorial nations must forge a cultural unity and identity of myth, symbol, value, and memory that can match that of nations built on pre-existing ethnic ties, if they are to survive and flourish as nations. It is this *ethnic model* of the nation that has proved the most influential, with its emphasis on genealogical descent, vernacular codes, popular mobilization and historical nativism in a *homeland*. Most nations, including the first nations in the West (if we leave aside the earlier cases of the Jews, Armenians and Ethiopian Amhara), have been formed around *ethnic cores* – dominant populations united by presumed ties of shared ancestry and vernacular culture – and have gradually expanded their social depth, territory, and geopolitical range around this dominant ethnic core and presumed descent group, to include other ethnic populations, as was the case with the English, the French and the Castilians.

[. . .]

A crucial part of this third theme is the popular basis of nations and nationalism. Nations may have emerged around elite groups, but even in these early stages, élites were repeatedly forced to take the cultures and interests of wider strata into account. These vernacular cultures and interests were often popular and ethnic in character; they assumed ties of affinity based on presumed common origins and shared customs, linked to *regna* or kingdoms, as Susan Reynolds has argued for early medieval Europe. Even a modernist like Eric Hobsbawm admits the importance of pre-existing (and often pre-modern) *proto-national* communities of language, religion, and region, though he refuses to allow any linkage between them and the rise of a modern, state-creating nationalism (Reynolds 1983; Hobsbawm 1990, ch. 2).

#### 4. THE CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF ETHNIES

The fourth major claim of ethno-symbolism is that the pre-existing components and long-term continuities of ethnic communities and nations are cultural and symbolic rather than demographic. The *differentia specifica* of *ethnies* and nations, as well as their continuities, appear in the myths, memories, symbols, values, and traditions of an ethnic community which regards itself as ancestrally related, culturally distinct, and linked to a particular historic homeland. For John Armstrong, following Fredrik Barth, the contents of the *myth-symbol complex* communicated by vernacular linguistic codes, tend to differentiate *ethnies* and guard the cultural border of the community against outsiders (Armstrong 1982, ch. 1). For myself, this differentiating function needs to be complemented by an analysis of the unifying role of a whole range of cultural and symbolic components – myths and symbols, but also values, memories, rituals, customs, and traditions. Distinctive clusters of these components mark out the boundaries of various *ethnies*, but they also serve to unite the members

of each *ethnie* and structure their relations and activities. Hence, although in one sense the major symbolic and cultural elements of an ethno-symbolic approach are *subjective*, in that they focus on the perceptions, memories, beliefs, and values of individuals and communities, their long-term patterning produces a *structure* of relations and processes that is independent of those beliefs and perceptions, one which can provide a framework for the socialization of successive generations of ethnic and national members and for the regulation of their interests through myths of ethnic descent and symbols of territory and community. (See Smith 1998, ch. 8.)

This emphasis on culture, in the broadest sense, introduces some flexibility into ethnic membership, which in normal circumstances allows for a degree of demographic replenishment and cultural borrowing, and hence social and cultural adaptation. This suggests that, contrary to approaches that sharply distinguish between an open and flexible *civic* nation and a rigid and closed *ethnic* nation, the *ethnic* components constitute only one, albeit ever-present, set of (often contested) elements within the totality of modern nations, and they can also encourage openness and receptiveness to outside influences. The history of modern Catalan nationalism is a case in point. (See Miller 1995; Smith 1995, ch. 4.)<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, circumstances, internal and external, that bring to power nationalist intelligentsias who, in their quest for authenticity and cultural purity, increasingly seek to purge their cultures of foreign elements and ultimately of outsiders. Despite the very different emphases on *genealogy* or *ideology* in myths of descent, the drive for cultural homogeneity and purity is more common in the case of *ethnic* nationalisms, that is, those whose criterion of national membership is genealogical rather than territorial.

[. . .]

#### 5. ETHNIC MYTHS AND SYMBOLS

Of particular importance among the cultural components of ethnicity are myths of ethnic origin and election, and symbols of territory and community.

Myths of origin and descent constitute the primary definers of the separate existence and character of particular *ethnies*. [. . .] They include accounts of the time and place of the community's origins, and trace the lines of descent from presumed common ancestors; thus Turks trace their ancestry to Central Asia in the first millennium, and to their founding father, Oghuz Khan, and Jews do likewise to Abraham and Canaan (or even to Ur or Haran). Equally important for the survival of *ethnies* has been the development of myths of ethnic election. These may be missionary or covenantal in character. Missionary election myths exalt their *ethnies* by assigning them god-given tasks or missions of warfare or conversion or overlordship; so the Franks or the medieval French monarchs interpreted their role as latter-day king Davids defending the new Israel (France and/or the Church), and the Russian Tsars came to see in Orthodox Russia a third Rome, the only truly Christian kingdom after the fall of Constantinople.

Covenantal election myths tend to set the chosen people apart from their profane surroundings, through a covenant between the deity and the elect, namely, a conditional promise of continued divine favour in return for constant observance of divine commands and ceaseless performance of a singular moral and ritual code, such as the Israelites were enjoined to practise in the Old Testament.

[. . .]

Symbols of territory and community take a variety of forms. They include emblems of difference (flags, totems, coins, ritual objects), hymns and anthems, special foods and costume, as well as representations of ethnic deities, monarchs and heroes – like Pharaoh's double crown, the Jewish Menorah or the fleur-de-llys. Particular interest and significance attaches to the symbolism of ancestral or sacred territory and the development of *ethnoscapes* – landscapes endowed with poetic ethnic meaning through the historicization of nature and the territorialization of ethnic memories. These poetic landscapes often come to be associated with crucial events and personages in the history of the ethnic community and may be invested with sacred significance, a powerful motif of ethnic nationalism.

[. . .]

#### 6. 'ETHNO-HISTORY'

A further major theme concerns the multiple, changing and uneven nature of *ethno-history*. By *ethno-history* is meant the ethnic members' memories and understanding of their communal past or pasts, rather than any more *objective* and dispassionate analysis by professional historians. Such a mode of historical discourse has three facets: it is multi-stranded and contested; it is always subject to change; and it is globally uneven.

Given the multiplicity of interests, needs and outlooks of members of any community, the likelihood of a single, unified version of the communal past emerging in any relatively free society must be minimal. In fact, the past is as much a zone of conflict as the present, and we can therefore expect to find, at any given point in time, two or more versions of the ethnic past, often in competition or conflict. This was the case in Greece throughout the nineteenth century, when a classical *Athenian* version of Hellenism held by westernised intelligentsia and merchants was pitted against a Greek Orthodox popular *ethno-history* which harked back to the medieval glories of the Byzantine empire. [. . .] A similar conflict erupted in France in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and particularly during the Dreyfus Affair, when a medievalizing monarchist and Catholic vision of French *ethno-history* was challenged by a secular, revolutionary and classicizing interpretation of the French past. (See Campbell and Sherrard 1968, ch. 1; Gildea 1994, chs 3, 7.)

If *ethno-history* is always multi-stranded and contested, this implies a continuous process of reinterpretation of national identities. Homi Bhabha's dualism of traditional *pedagogical* and everyday practical *performative* narra-

tives of *the people* fails to capture the complexity of a situation in which every generation fashions its own interpretations of national identity in the light of its reading of the ethnic past or pasts. The fund of ethnic elements, the ethno-historical heritage handed down through the generations, is always being reinterpreted and revised by various social groups in response to internal differences and external stimuli. Hence, British, Japanese or Egyptian *national identity* is never fixed or static: it is always being reconstructed in response to new needs, interests and perceptions, though always within certain limits. (Bhabha 1990, ch. 16)

From a comparative standpoint, the incidence of ethno-history is markedly uneven. Some communities can boast a *rich* or well-documented, and eventful, ethnic past; others can only summon up the barest memories and sketchiest traditions. (For example, Russian or Arab ethno-histories are eventful and abundantly documented, while Slovak and Estonian ethno-histories are more sketchy and poorly recorded). This *unevenness* of ethno-historical cultural resources is itself a source of national competition and conflict, as the less well-endowed communities seek to attain cultural parity with the better endowed. Hence, the appeal for Finns of the national epic of the *Kalevala*, edited in 1835 by Elias Lonnrot, as they strove to free themselves from Russian political and Swedish cultural domination.

[. . .]

#### 7. ROUTES TO NATIONHOOD

Another central ethno-symbolic concern is the manner in which nations in the modern world have come to be formed. Armstrong, indeed, presents a complex schema on the emergence of nations, showing how a variety of factors operating at broader or narrower levels combine to create the terrain and impetus for particular nations. These factors include differences in nomadic and sedentary lifestyles with associated nostalgias; the influence of great religious civilizations like Islam and Christianity; the impact of imperial administrations and *mytho-moteurs* (constitutive political myths); the differences in ecclesiastical organization; and, at the lowest and most dependant level, the role of language *faults* and of particular languages (Armstrong 1982, ch. 9).

[. . .] I have sought to identify *patterns* of nation-formation, depending on the initial ethnic starting-point. The important distinction here is between *lateral* and *vertical ethnies*. The former are aristocratic and extensive, their boundaries are ragged, and they rarely (seek to) penetrate culturally or socially the middle or lower classes. The latter are demotic and intensive, their boundaries are compact, barriers to entry are relatively high, and their culture spreads across all classes, if unevenly at times. There are also immigrant *ethnies*, or rather, *part-ethnies*, which have hived off from the main body to set up colonies and gradually form a separate new *ethnie*. We can then trace the routes by which modern nations have been formed from these three ethnic *bases*: a route of *bureaucratic incorporation* by which aristocratic *ethnies* may forge strong states

and incorporate outlying regions and lower classes into their upper-class ethnic culture and symbolism; a route of *vernacular mobilization* whereby an indigenous intelligentsia uses folk culture to mobilize middle and lower strata and create ethnic nations; and finally, an *immigrant-colonist* route in which the founding immigrant part-*ethnie* is supplemented by waves of pioneering colonizers who together create a *plural* or polyethnic immigrant nation and culture. (See Smith 1989.)

#### 8. THE LONGEVITY OF NATIONALISM

The final theme of ethno-symbolism concerns the power and durability of nations and nationalism. Nationalism is a modern ideological movement, but also the expression of aspirations by various social groups to create, defend or maintain *nations* – their autonomy, unity and identity – by drawing on the cultural resources of pre-existing ethnic communities and categories. Nationalism, defined as *an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining identity, unity and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential nation*, has proved a powerful instrument for forging a world of nations based on pre-existing ethnic ties and sentiments; and it is one that has by no means run its course.<sup>5</sup>

These aspirations for nationhood can be found in pre-modern epochs, but they are particularly widespread and powerful in the modern era. This suggests that nationalisms, as well as nations, are likely to be recurrent phenomena in future, as they were in past epochs (Billig 1995). However, the underlying ground of their persistence is not simply their frequency and intensity in the modern epoch. Both frequency and intensity are products of deeper causes, namely the ability of modern nationalisms to draw sustenance from the pre-existing memories, myths, symbols, and traditions of each ethnic community and region. Where such memories, myths, symbols, and traditions are either lacking or negative – conflictual, ambiguous, and disintegrative – the attempt to create new communities and cultural identities is likely to prove painfully slow and arduous, especially where the new identities lack clear boundaries and must compete with well-established and deep-rooted identities and communities. [. . . The] attempts to create a European cultural identity raise serious doubts about the possibility of transcending nations and superseding nationalism, since the very idea of ‘Europe’, insofar as it can be pinned down and given systematic coherence, appears as a pale reflection of the much more rooted, vivid and tangible national identities. Here, again, I have employed an ethno-symbolic approach to uncover some of the deeper, unspoken cultural myths, memories and assumptions about the ‘new Europe’. (See Delanty 1995; Benda-Beckman and Verkuyten 1995.)

The ambiguities and nebulous character of European cultural identity contrast strongly with the dramatic and powerful diaspora nationalisms of the Greeks, Jews, and Armenians with their rich memories of golden ages of saints and heroes, their stark symbols of trauma and suffering, and their potent

popular myths of glorious restoration in their age-old homelands. [. . .] The implication [. . .] is that the continuing power of myths, symbols, and memories of ethnic chosenness, golden ages and historic homelands has been largely responsible for the mass appeal of ethnic nationalism in the aftermath of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet empire; and that we are therefore unlikely to witness the early transcendence of ethnicity or the supersession of nationalism.

#### NOTES

1. For this definition of the nation, see Smith (1991, ch. 1). For a general discussion of the problems of defining the concept of the nation, see Connor (1994, ch. 4). Though the distinction between *ethnies* and nations is crucial, it does not correspond to the chronological or the sociological divide between pre-modernity and modernity. Not only do many *ethnies* persist (or are crystallized) in late modernity and also become ‘modernized’; a few nations antedate modernity (chronologically and sociologically) and owe little or nothing to the processes of ‘modernization’.
2. This is very much the view put forward by the editors and most of the contributors to Tonkin *et al.* (1989); reacting against the idea that the ‘past determines the present’, they have opted for an equally unilateral understanding in which, for the most part, ‘the present shapes the past’ – or, at any rate, our understanding of it. One could equally well claim that our ‘understanding’ of the past is inevitably shaped by the frameworks of meaning handed down from previous generations, even when we dissent from their particular views of the past. (See also Eriksen 1993a.) The question of continuities of nations is also bedevilled by definitional problems. For Walker Connor (1994, ch. 9) we can only speak of mass nations; nations only exist when a majority of the designated population participates (indeed votes) in public life; whereas for Adrian Hastings (1997, ch. 1) nations can be said to exist when a significant minority of the population outside the ruling élite reveal a national consciousness, in which case we can speak of medieval nations.
- But are these ‘nations’ in the full sense of the term (a modern, and modernist, sense?), or only potential or ‘pre-national’ peoples? Perhaps we should avoid trying to draw too hard-and-fast lines between *ethnies* and nations in each case, but rather identify processes (of territorialization, homogenization, legal standardization, etc.) by which nations are formed, often discontinuously, out of pre-existing *ethnies*.
3. That is why cultural nationalism, as Hutchinson (1987, ch. 1) highlights, is so important for the creation of nations. This was also probably the case with pre-modern *ethnies*. A religious culture provided the foundation for the crystallisation and persistence of fluid ethnic categories. From this standpoint, nationalist ‘political archaeology’, for all its rhetoric, is not as fictive and fantastic as modernists are apt to portray.
4. The open, assimilatory character of Catalan linguistic nationalism can be contrasted with the relatively closed and more exclusive character of Basque religious and ‘racial’ nationalism. For a rich and illuminating study of these ethnic nationalisms, see Conversi (1997).
5. For this definition of nationalism, see A. D. Smith (1991, ch. 4). On globalization and nationalism, see Billig (1995, esp. ch. 6) and Guibernau (1996, ch. 7).