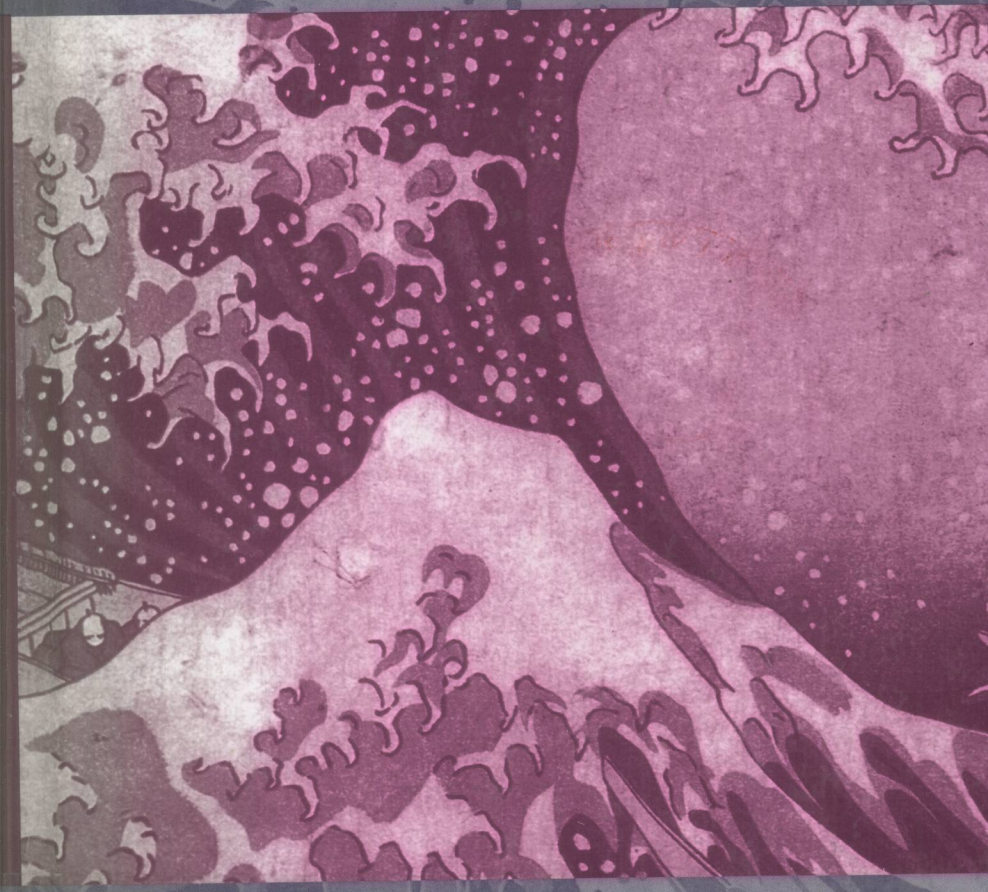
key concepts

Nationalism



ANTHONY D. SMITH

NATIONALISM

Theory, Ideology, History

Anthony D. Smith

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Preface

This book aims to provide a short introduction to the concept of nationalism. Its purpose is to offer students and readers a critical synthesis of much of the existing scholarship in the field, focusing on the main theoretical contributions rather than the huge corpus of empirical studies. My chief objective is to examine the various theoretical, ideological and historical facets of the concept of nationalism, and the central paradigms of explanation in the field. Inevitably, this has meant shifting the focus of attention in the later chapters from 'nationalism', understood as an ideology, movement and symbolic language, to the object of its concerns, the 'nation', understood both as a contested concept and as a form of community and institutional behaviour. In practice, the two concepts are closely related, but I believe it is important not to conflate them, especially as it is possible to discern different forms of the category of the nation prior to the appearance of the *ideology* of nationalism, and outside the area of the latter's provenance.

In a short book of this kind, I make no claims to comprehensive treatment. Inevitably, certain areas have been neglected or omitted. For the debates on such topics as liberalism and nationalism, or gender and nation, the reader is asked to consult the already large literatures in these subfields, as well as my general discussions in *Nationalism and Modernism*. Similarly, while the overall organization and

tone of the book reflects my own views as an active participant in the debates on nations and nationalism, my primary concern with tracing the lines of these debates, especially in chapter 4, has meant that less space was available for developing my own views on the subject. Nevertheless, I have tried to sketch, in chapter 5, an alternative history of the nation. I hope also to have been able to convey something of the passion and complexity of the debates in the field over the last half century, while providing a clear framework for grasping the different contributions to the study of nationalism.

I should like to express my thanks to John Thompson and Polity for asking me to contribute to their series on Key Concepts in the social sciences, and to Seeta Persaud for her help in preparing the typescript. For any errors and omissions, however, as well as for the views expressed, the responsibility is entirely mine.

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The countries of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt,
Thou settest every man in his place
Thou suppliest their necessities:
Everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned.
Their tongues are separate in speech,
And their natures as well;
Their skins are distinguished,
As thou distinguishest the foreign peoples.
. . .
All foreign distant countries, thou makest their life (also)
For thou hast set a Nile in heaven,
. . .
The Nile in heaven, it is for the foreign peoples . . .

(From *The Hymn to the Aton*)

Contents

Introduction

This short book aims to introduce the concept of nationalism to readers and students for whom the field is unfamiliar. It focuses on nationalism primarily as an ideology, but also as a social movement and symbolic language, and explores its meanings, varieties and sources. Inevitably, this entails a consideration of related concepts, such as the nation, national identity and the national state. As a result, the scope of this work is broad and necessarily interdisciplinary: in particular, it draws on the disciplines of history, sociology, political science, international relations and, to a certain extent, anthropology. The latter is included because some attention needs to be given to the cognate field of ethnicity; for, as I hope to show, ethnic identities and communities constitute a large part of the historical and social background of nations and nationalism.

The significance of this topic should not be in doubt to anyone even mildly familiar with events since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Few of the many international political crises of the last decade or so have not involved a strong component of ethnic sentiment and nationalist aspiration, while some of them – notably those in the former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East – have been triggered, and even defined, by such sentiments and aspirations. These have proved to be the most bitter and intractable conflicts, the most costly in terms of lives and

resources, the most resistant to the efforts of governments and others to accommodate the interests of the respective parties, and the most impervious to the blandishments and threats of friend and foe.

But, beyond the headlines, with their descriptions of the conflict and violence of 'hot' nationalisms, we encounter a more stable and taken-for-granted structure of 'international' relations, which shape and channel the processes and events of the modern world. This is something which is often referred to as 'a world of nations'. By such a phrase is meant not some essentialist reification of nations or nation-states, but, rather, a political map and institutional and emotional framework in and through which personalities, events and wider processes of change leave their mark and contribute to the transformations that have forged, and continue to shape, the contemporary world. Michael Billig (1995) refers to this map and framework in terms of an everyday, 'banal' nationalism, one that is habitually 'enhabited' in society – ingrained into the very texture of our lives and politics, ever-present, if barely visible, like 'unwaved flags'.

But the significance of nationalism is not confined to the world of politics. It is also cultural and intellectual, for 'the world of nations' structures our global outlooks and symbolic systems. I am not claiming for nationalism any significant degree of intellectual coherence, let alone the tradition of philosophical engagement characteristic of other modern political traditions such as liberalism or socialism. Nevertheless, even if it lacked great thinkers, nationalism – or perhaps we should say, the concept of the nation – has attracted considerable numbers of influential intellectuals – writers, artists, composers, historians, philologists, educators – who have devoted their energies to discovering and representing the identities and images of their respective nations, from Herder, Burke and Rousseau to Dostoevskii, Sibelius, Diego Rivera and Iqbal.

The cultural and psychological importance of the nation, and hence of nationalism, is even more profound. The ubiquity of nationalism, the hold it exerts over millions of people in every continent today, attests to its ability to inspire and resonate among 'the people' in ways that only religions had previously been able to encompass. This suggests the

need to pay close attention to the role of symbolic elements in the language and ideology of nationalism, and to the moral, ritual and emotional aspects of the discourse and action of the nation. It is not enough to link a particular national(ist) discourse to specific political actors or social groups, let alone read off the former from the social position and characteristics of the latter. Nationalism has its own rules, rhythms and memories, which shape the interests of its bearers even more than they shape its contours, endowing them with a recognizably 'nationalist' political shape and directing them to familiar national goals.

It is these rules, rhythms and memories of nationalism with which I shall be particularly concerned here, for they provide a bridge from the outer world of power politics and social interests to the inner world of the nation and its characteristic concepts, symbols and emotions. This concern in turn shapes the way in which I have structured the argument of this book. That argument revolves around the major, underlying 'paradigms' of understanding in the field, and the political, historiographical and sociological debates which they have fuelled. These debates are diffuse and wide-ranging. They concern not only competing ideologies of nationalism, nor even just the clash of particular theories. They involve radical disagreements over definitions of key terms, widely divergent histories of the nation and rival accounts of the 'shape of things to come'.

Each of these debates and differences requires separate consideration. I start, therefore, with terms and concepts, outlining the main differences in approach to the definition of key concepts such as '*ethnie*', 'nation', 'nationalism' and 'national state', and offering my own route through this minefield. Next I consider the ideology, or ideologies, of nationalism, notably the debate between 'organic' and 'voluntarist' approaches, as well as the vexed question of a 'core doctrine' of nationalism.

Chapter 3 turns to questions of explanation, and discusses the basic divide between 'modernist' and other approaches. It then outlines the key features of the four main paradigms of explanation – modernism, primordialism, perennialism and ethno-symbolism – revealing their theoretical interrelations. Chapter 4 continues this discussion by showing how

the key theoretical debates in the field over the role of ideology, rational choice, the modern state and social construction in the genesis of nations and nationalism derive from these four paradigms and reveal their respective strengths and limitations.

The fifth chapter relates different 'histories of the nation' – modern, medieval and ancient – to particular theories and their master-paradigms, and then argues for an 'ethno-symbolic' reading which links modern nations to premodern *ethnies* through myth, symbol, memory, value and tradition. A final chapter considers the prospects for nations and nationalism in a 'postmodern' epoch of ethnic revival, globalization and increasingly hybridized identity – as well as the utility of 'postmodernist' and constructionist understandings and cultural ethno-symbolic interpretations of the future of nations and nationalism.

My aim throughout is twofold: in the first place, to outline the key debates in the field as clearly as possible, and, second, to offer my own ethno-symbolic account. This is clearly no easy task. Though I outline (and defend) such an approach at various points, I am conscious of the need to give as much coverage as possible within the constraints of space to alternative theories and readings, to provide readers with the necessary information and argument to allow them to make up their own minds. Similarly, while aiming for clarity throughout, I am concerned to reveal the full extent of scholarly divisions and disagreements about the phenomena of nations and nationalism. There are no easy solutions in this much-disputed field of study, and it would be idle to pretend that we are on the verge of some general consensus. At the same time, we possess today much more information about specific cases and the role of various factors on which to base our discussions and disagreements; and that in itself allows a clearer view of the field and its problems, and hence of the tasks ahead. It is in this spirit that I offer this brief introduction for those new to the field.

1
Concepts

If there is one point on which there is agreement, it is that the term 'nationalism' is quite modern. Its earliest recorded use in anything like a recognizably social and political sense goes back to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and the French counter-revolutionary cleric, the Abbé Augustin de Barruel at the end of the eighteenth century. It was rarely used in the early nineteenth century; in English, its first use, in 1836, appears to be theological, the doctrine that certain nations are divinely elected. Thereafter, it tended to be equated with national egotism, but usually other terms, such as 'nationality' and 'nationalness', with the meanings of national fervour or national individuality, were preferred.[1]

The Meanings of 'Nationalism'

It was really only during the last century that the term nationalism acquired the range of meanings that we associate with it today. Of these usages, the most important are:

(1) a process of formation, or growth, of nations;
(2) a sentiment or consciousness of belonging to the nation;
(3) a language and symbolism of the nation;
(4) a social and political movement on behalf of the nation;

(5) a doctrine and/or ideology of the nation, both general and particular.

The first of these usages, the *process of formation* of nations, is very general and itself embraces a series of more specific processes which often form the object of national*ism* in other, narrower senses of the term. It is therefore best left for later consideration when we look at the term 'nation'.

Of the other four usages, the second, *national consciousness or sentiment*, needs to be carefully distinguished from the other three. They are, of course, closely related, but they do not necessarily go together. One can, for example, possess considerable national feeling in the absence of any symbolism, movement or even ideology on behalf of the nation. This was the predicament in which Niccolo Machiavelli found himself when his calls to Italians in the early sixteenth century to unite against the northern barbarians fell on deaf ears. On the other hand, a group could exhibit a high degree of national consciousness, but lack any overt ideology, let alone a political movement, on behalf of the nation, though it is likely to possess at least some national symbols and myths. The contrast between an organized ideological movement of nationalism, on the one hand, and a more diffuse feeling of national belonging, on the other, is sufficiently clear to allow us to treat the concept of national consciousness or sentiment separately from that of nationalism, even if in practice there is often some degree of overlap between them.[2]

The term national*ism*, therefore, will be understood here as referring to one or more of the last three usages: a language and symbolism, a sociopolitical movement and an ideology of the nation. That each of these nevertheless presupposes some measure of national feeling, certainly among the nationalists themselves, if not the designated population at large, needs to be borne in mind; for it serves to connect the more active and organized sectors to the usually much larger, more passive and fragmented segments of the population.

As a *sociopolitical movement*, nationalism does not differ, in principle, from others in terms of its organizations, activities and techniques, except in one particular: its emphasis upon cultural gestation and representation. The ideologies of

nationalism require an immersion in the culture of the nation – the rediscovery of its history, the revival of its vernacular language through such disciplines as philology and lexicography, the cultivation of its literature, especially drama and poetry, and the restoration of its vernacular arts and crafts, as well as its music, including native dance and folksong. This accounts for the frequent cultural and literary renascences associated with nationalist movements, and the rich variety of the cultural activities which nationalism can excite. Typically, a nationalist movement will commence not with a protest rally, declaration or armed resistance, but with the appearance of literary societies, historical research, music festivals and cultural journals – the kind of activity that Miroslav Hroch analysed as an essential first phase of the rise and spread of Eastern European nationalisms, and, we may add, of many subsequent nationalisms of colonial Africa and Asia. As a result, 'humanistic' intellectuals – historians and philologists, artists and composers, poets, novelists and film directors – tend to be disproportionately represented in nationalist movements and revivals (Argyle 1969; Hroch 1985).[3]

The *language and symbolism* of nationalism merit more attention, and their motifs will recur throughout these pages. But, despite considerable overlap with symbolism, the language or discourse of nationalism cannot be considered separately, since they are so closely tied to the ideologies of nationalism. Indeed, the key concepts of nationalism's distinctive language form intrinsic components of its core doctrine and its characteristic ideologies. I shall therefore consider this conceptual language under the heading of ideology in chapter 2.[4]

The *symbolism* of nationalism, on the other hand, shows such a degree of regularity across the globe that we may profitably extract it from its ideological framework. A national symbolism is, of course, distinguished by its all-encompassing object, the nation, but equally by the tangibility and vividness of its characteristic signs. These start with a collective proper name. For nationalists, as for the feuding families of Verona, a rose by any other name could never smell as sweet – as the recent dispute over the name of Macedonia sharply reminded us. Proper names are chosen, or

retained from the past, to express the nation's distinctiveness, heroism and sense of destiny, and to resonate these qualities among the members. Similarly with national flags and anthems: their colours, shapes and patterns, and their verses and music, epitomize the special qualities of the nation and by their simple forms and rhythms aim to conjure a vivid sense of unique history and/or destiny among the designated population. It matters little that to outsiders the differences between many flags appear minimal, and that the verses of anthems reveal a limited range of themes. What counts is the potency of the meanings conveyed by such signs to the members of the nation. The fact that every nation sports a capital city, a national assembly, a national coinage, passports and frontiers, similar remembrance ceremonies for the fallen in battle, the requisite military parades and national oaths, as well as their own national academies of music, art and science, national museums and libraries, national monuments and war memorials, festivals and holidays, etc., and that lack of such symbols marks a grave national deficit, suggests that the symbolism of the nation has assumed a life of its own, one that is based on global comparisons and a drive for national salience and parity in a visual and semantic 'world of nations'. The panoply of national symbols only serves to express, represent and reinforce the boundary definition of the nation, and to unite the members inside through a common imagery of shared memories, myths and values.[5]

Of course, national symbolism, like nationalist movements, cannot be divorced from the *ideology of nationalism*, the final and main usage of the term. The ideology of nationalism serves to give force and direction to both symbols and movements. The goals of the sociopolitical movement are defined not by the activities or the personnel of the movement, but by the basic ideals and tenets of the ideology. Similarly, the characteristic symbols and language of nationalism are shaped by the role they play in explicating and evoking the ideals of the nation and furthering the goals laid down by nationalist ideology. So, it is the ideology that must supply us with an initial working definition of the term '*nationalism*', for its contents are defined by the ideologies which place the nation at the centre of their concerns and purposes, and

which separate it from other, adjacent ideologies (see Motyl 1999: ch. 5).

Definitions

Nationalism

The ideology of nationalism has been defined in many ways, but most of the definitions overlap and reveal common themes. The main theme, of course, is an overriding concern with the nation. Nationalism is an ideology that places the nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being. But this is rather vague. We need to go further and isolate the main goals under whose headings nationalism seeks to promote the nation's well-being. These generic goals are three: national autonomy, national unity and national identity, and, for nationalists, a nation cannot survive without a sufficient degree of all three. This suggests the following working definition of nationalism: 'An ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential "nation".'

This is a working definition based on the common elements of the ideals of self-styled nationalists, and it is therefore inductive in character. But it inevitably simplifies and extracts from the many variations in the ideals of nationalists, and assumes thereby something of a general, ideal-typical character. This definition ties the ideology to a goal-oriented movement, since as an ideology, nationalism prescribes certain kinds of action. Nevertheless, it is the core concepts of the ideology that define the goals of the movement and thereby differentiate it from other kinds of movement.

However, the close link between ideology and movement in no way limits the concept of nationalism only to movements seeking independence. The words 'and maintaining' in the definition recognize the continuing influence of nationalism in long-established, or in recently, independent nations. This is important when it comes to analysing, as John Breuilly