



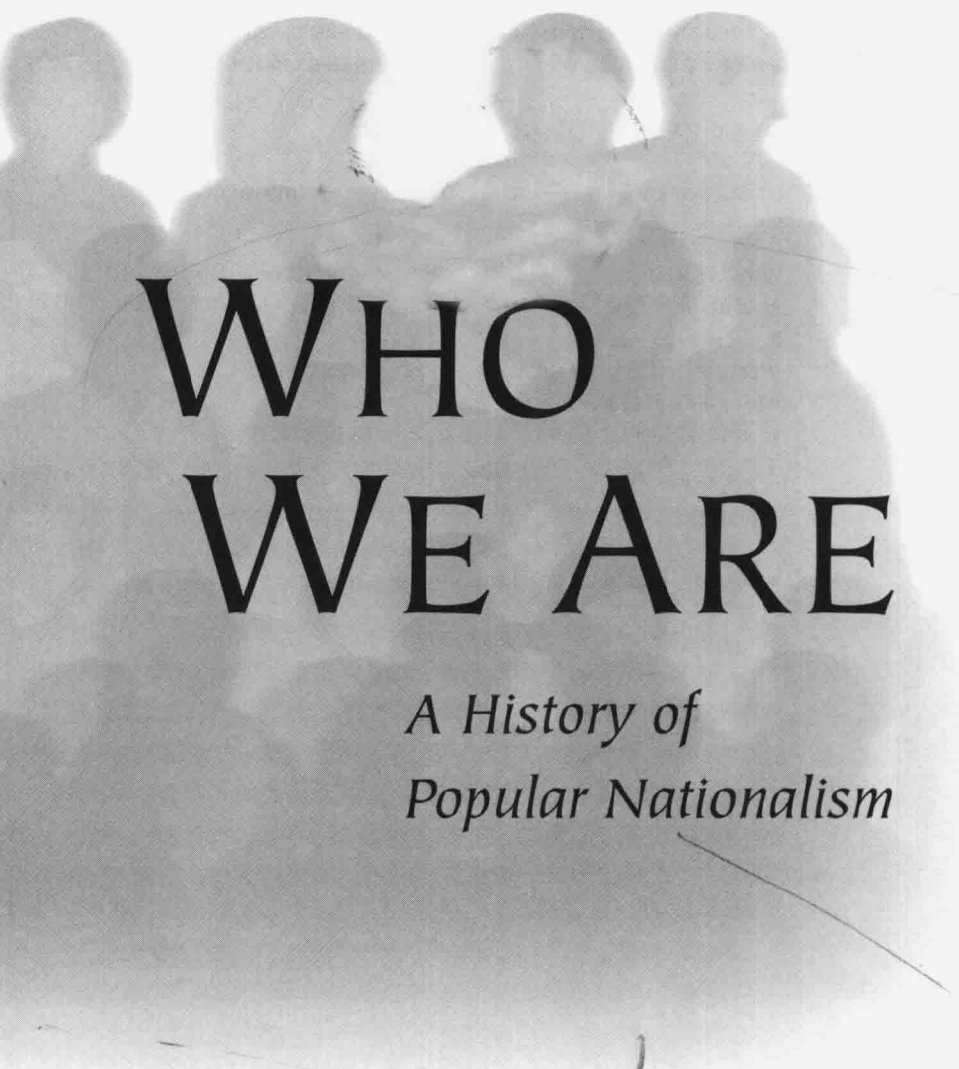
ROBERT H. WIEBE

WHO
WE ARE

*A History of
Popular Nationalism*

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*A History of
Popular Nationalism*

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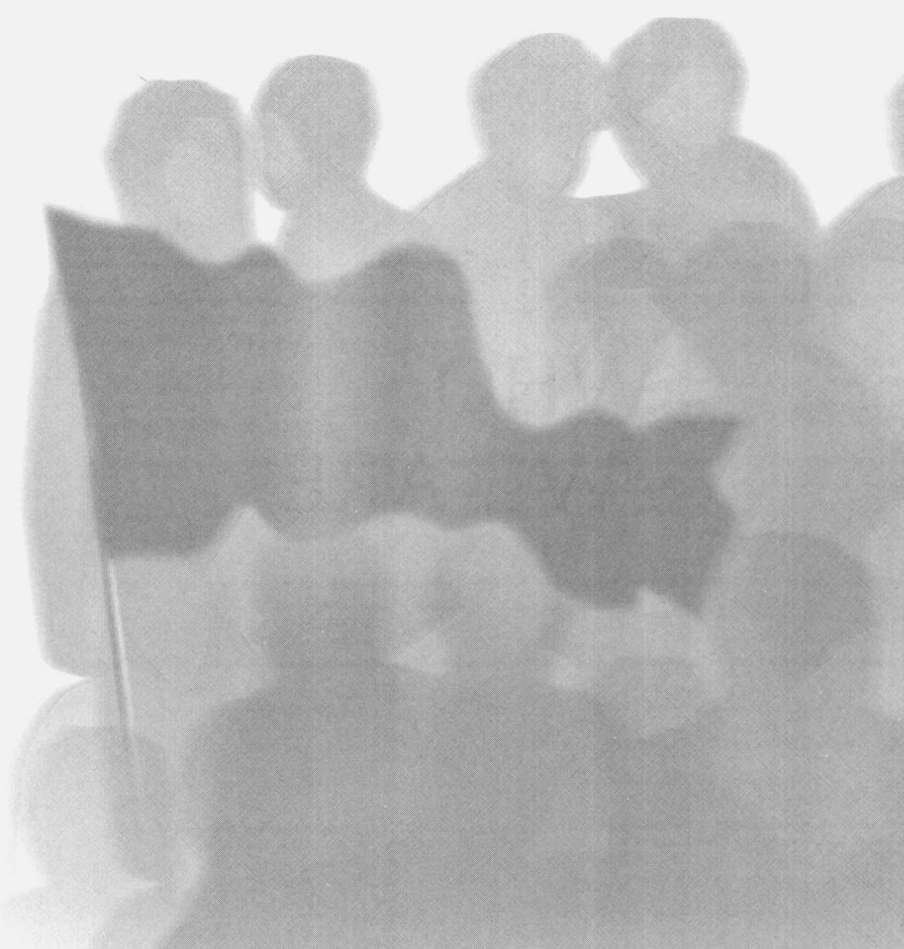
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Foreword

I first met Bob Wiebe in 1972 when he came to teach at Harvard University for a year. At that time, five years after the publication of *The Search for Order*, he was the star among American historians. Throughout his career he was continually sought for panels and presentations. His gentle manner, attentive listening, and willingness to attempt large synthetic hypotheses when we all cowered within our specialties never failed to draw our admiration.

In 1972 some magic drew us together as fast friends. From this vantage point I learned of Bob's growing frustration that no one was listening. Although Bob remained steadfast in his core concerns, with each book, fewer and fewer of us paid attention to his ever-sustained concern for the changing fortunes of American democracy.

The Search for Order became the profession's best seller in 1967, and remained so for the next 30-odd years because it continued the core tradition of American history: it examined the life and health of the American experiment with democracy. This was

Wiebe's lifetime scholarly question, the center of his patient discussions with students, the impulse behind his many synthetic historical lectures, articles, and books. We professionals didn't listen, but we liked Bob a lot.

The Search for Order was everything that the series editor, David Donald, promised: "the take-off book." In 1967 the social sciences were flying high as the best methods for explaining contemporary life. Historians were then struggling to adapt their approaches: quantitative economic, social, political and demographic history; urban history; detailed social studies of immigrants; and estimates of social mobility rates. Such initiatives divided the profession between the new historians and the old. In the midst of these aggrandizements and wounded egos, Bob's *Search for Order* appeared as a triumphant synthesis of the old and the new.

Prof. Wiebe was always the conscientious professor, an avid and thoughtful reader of the relevant literature. He was not an archives man. For the decades from the Reconstruction through World War I he crafted a wonderful synthesis of historical events and 1960s social science. His history explained the world we were all then living in, and I would argue it is, even more, an explanation of 2001.

What we professional American historians did not do was to attend to Bob's concern for the democratic experiment. Yet this was the question that drove all his work. Few attended to his crucial study of small-scale communities in the United States, *The Segmented Society* (1975), where he set forth his thesis that democracy was practiced inside these communities, but that outside their boundaries they feared strangers and manifested all manner of intolerance for the new and the liberal.

Bob never gave up. In effect he wrote a whole social-political history of the United States from the eighteenth century to the present. His last volume, *Self-Rule* (1995), was an attack on the bankruptcy of the media, public relations, and corporate, bureau-

cratic, and judge-ridden contemporary America. The book called for a renewal of trust in the competence of local democratic decision making. I still hear his voice, as many of his friends and students do, when I read the daily news.

Sam Bass Warner, Jr.

April 2001

Foreword

Writers on nationalism can be divided into two diverse but distinguishable groups. The first is composed of the nationalists themselves, who view nationalism as a natural, irresistible force—the expression of a deeply rooted collective identity formed by language, ethnicity, religion, history. National history, therefore, is the history of the nation's growing consciousness of its own existence and the fulfillment, often against terrible odds, of its common destiny, which usually means the formation of a territorial state. The second group is made up of nationalism's critics and victims, who emphasize its historicity, artificiality, sometimes even its pathology. It is no surprise that many of the most prominent members of this group are émigrés or exiles—George Mosse, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson—who have felt the lash of national hatred or discrimination.

Among the virtues of Robert Wiebe's approach to nationalism is that he has learned from both groups, but belongs to neither. Here is Wiebe's definition of his subject: "Nationalism is the desire among people who believe they share a common ancestry and a

common destiny to live under their own government on land sacred to their history." He has chosen his words with characteristic precision: a people's common ancestry and common destiny may be imagined or invented, they are often matters of belief rather than fact; but a people's aspiration to live under their own government is real and must be seen as part of a larger movement for self-determination. While Wiebe is at pains to show how often national aspirations have been misused, corrupted, and perverted, he never doubts their fundamental authenticity and legitimacy. The world, he believes, is full of divisions and diversity; cosmopolitanism is an idle, empty dream. People, therefore, have the right to decide who they are and who they wish to be, a right that cannot be rejected in the name of an essentially bogus, often hypocritical universalism, which he regards as just "another form of provincialism." In a series of extraordinarily well-informed, wide-ranging, and provocative chapters, Wiebe traces the origins of nationalism in Europe and its spread throughout the world.

He begins by establishing nationalism's relationship to democracy and socialism, which he sees as the other two emancipatory movements produced by the growing mobilization of European society. Each movement builds on immediate human experiences—the family, public life, work—and then extends them into visions of those extended communities that a mobile society seems to require—nation, political community, and class. In the end, all three are subverted by their relationship to states, the most significant sources of organized political power in the modern world. The state is the snake in Wiebe's garden; it entices nationalists into a "Faustian bargain" in which, in exchange for promises of power, nationalists sell their democratic souls. "Wherever nationalism disappeared inside state patriotism," he writes, "the mongrel results bristled with aggressive, coercive qualities." Nationalism for Wiebe is essentially populist and potentially democratic; states are essentially authoritarian and characteristically repressive.

Wiebe's final chapters push off from nationalism's European sources and follow its often tragic history in the second half of the twentieth century. He ends with an extraordinary analysis of the contemporary world and an eloquent plea for accepting humanity's deep and indelible diversities. Does Wiebe have the answer to the new century's discontents? Probably not. But his final chapter is a beautiful illustration of Raymond Aron's admonition that while we may have lost our taste for prophecy, we should never forget our duty to hope. Like all true believers in democracy, Wiebe never loses the hope that men and women eventually will find a way to determine for themselves who they want to be.

James J. Sheehan
April 2001

Preface

For at least a century and a half, nationalism has been one of the most effective answers to questions of identity and connectedness in a fluid world: who (identity) we (connectedness) are. This study traces nationalism's rise and decline as a popular movement, first in Europe and its offshoots, then elsewhere around the world. Nationalism rose and fell along with two other great movements, democracy and socialism. A history of nationalism does not make sense without them or, for that matter, without proper attention to the most important alternative ways of dividing people in modern times: by languages, races, religions, and states.

It scarcely needs saying that in a study of this length I have not written a comprehensive history of anything. I pick and choose unashamedly. In particular I concentrate on popular movements. By popular I do not mean either democratic or spontaneous; I mean movements with widespread appeal, both in space and among diverse people in many walks of life. Elites who have communicated among themselves about nationalism over the past

two centuries do not interest me very much. Nationalism's ability to mobilize a general population does. How do we account for its waxing and waning fortunes? What has happened to it as it has spread around the world? The uncontested truth that nationalism has taken on characteristics peculiar to each of these sites only gets us started. That fact becomes an intrinsic part of each story without explaining how any of those stories relate to one another. How far can nationalism be stretched to cover these highly varied stories? On the one hand, nationalism's adaptability has been one of its greatest assets. As we track that variety globally, it is as if we were discovering nationalism afresh over and over again. On the other hand, when we try to make nationalism good for everything, it becomes good for nothing. Hence, one of our primary challenges is to recognize what, in an infinite universe of events, nationalism can and cannot explain. Coming full circle, how do those inherent limitations help us understand nationalism's remarkable success among some people under some circumstances, its ambiguous effect at other times and places, and its patent failure at still others?

Think of what follows as a grid. Chapters cut across the account, breaking it horizontally by time and place; common problems integrate it vertically. Chapter 1 discusses the meaning of nationalism and sets the terms for the chapters following. Because Europeans and their kin abroad more or less monopolized nationalism until the First World War, chapters 2 and 3 focus exclusively on that story. Migration was the motive force behind its origins (chapter 2). Related movements, democracy and socialism, and related developments—in state building, in race theories, in church ambitions, and in linguistic innovations—were the shaping influences in its history before the war (chapter 3). Case studies of Irish, German, and Jewish nationalism that illustrate these trends carry us overseas to the United States, where people had remarkable freedom to participate as they wished in migration-inspired movements. Chapter 4 explains America's place in this transatlan-

tic history, with emphasis on its liberal government, its cultural diversity, and its white racism. Two world wars wound the United States tightly into the final phase of nationalism's Europe-centered story, one that actually ended on another continent with the founding of Israel (chapter 5).

Meanwhile nationalism was spreading worldwide. Chapter 6 addresses this diffusion, largely during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, through three of the most significant ways nationalism expressed itself outside Western society: state-dominated nationalism, with Japan, Turkey, and Mexico as case studies; the pan movements, with Pan-Africanism the primary illustration; and anticolonial-postcolonial nationalism, with Nigeria as one example. India's history highlights the difficulty of extracting nationalism's thread from any of these tangled skeins. Chapter 7 demonstrates how during the 1960s and 1970s nationalism throughout the world—including Europe once again—became integrated into a genuinely global process, only to find itself competing at a disadvantage with god-driven and gun-driven alternatives that one way or another outbade it. At the turn of the twenty-first century nationalism worldwide was clearly in decline, with its greatest strength in Western society's well-established liberal states. Canada's recent history illustrates that proposition. Finally, chapter 8 returns to the challenges of understanding that underlie this study and invites a reassessment of nationalism in light of its history, our history, and everybody's prospects. My hope is not that you will come to like nationalism—I am not its advocate—but that you will come to see it as so thoroughly human that no simple judgment does it justice.

Acknowledgments

A grant from the Spencer Foundation enabled me to begin this project; four weeks at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center encouraged me to rethink it. Throughout its development, the College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University provided unusually generous support, as it has throughout almost all of my career. The Northwestern University library fed my insatiable appetite for published materials. I am especially grateful to James McMahon, Catherine Feeney, Sharon Smith, and the staff of the interlibrary loan division.

I owe an immense debt to colleagues who helped me identify useful readings: James T. Campbell, Jonathon Glassman, Peter Hayes, T. W. Heyck, John R. McLane, Edward Muir, Carl Petry, Conrad Totman, and Ivor Wilks. Unlike the skeptic who promised to bury me with my notes, many friends kept the faith, alternately prodding and cheering me on: Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Herbert and Barbara Bass, Daniel and Naomi Feldman, Patricia Albjerg Graham, Barbara Heldt, Peter Parish, Gerry Smith, and Clarence Ver Steeg. Josef Barton, the master of the positive re-

sponse, listened patiently to my original, ill-formulated hypotheses, advised me on readings in a breathtaking variety of fields, and offered suggestions to the very end. A friend indeed. James J. Sheehan gave the manuscript a careful, critical reading to my great benefit.

For the settings in which I could explore aspects of my work, I am particularly grateful to Willi Paul Adams, Tony Badger, Tom Bender, Christopher Beneke, Ellen DuBois, Mary Furner, Robert J. Norrell, and—again—Peggy Anderson and Peter Parish. Special thanks to those critics whose rejection of my scholarly judgments obliged me to reconsider them: Joyce Appleby, John Ashworth, Drew Gilpin Faust, Daniel Walker Howe, John H. M. Laslett, Daniel T. Rodgers, and the persevering Betty Wood, who has been nudging me leftward for fifteen years. In these discussions, Robin Einhorn made the single most arresting observation: that I had returned to the theme of community unraveling that marked the start of my career. I still do not know what to make of that insight.

I apply some ideas from chapter 1 to a different end in “Humanizing Nationalism,” *World Policy Journal* 13 (Winter 1996/97): 81–88; and I turn material from Chapter 4 to a different intellectual purpose in “Framing United States History,” in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Thomas Bender (ed.), forthcoming.

Not a person who knows me would wonder for a second to whom this book is dedicated. In this project, as in everything else, Penny has made the difference.

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