

National Thought in Europe

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A Cultural History

Joep Leerssen

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- Persecution, says he, all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred among nations.
- But do you know what a nation is? says John Wyse.
- Yes, says Bloom.
- What is it? says John Wyse.
- A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.
- By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.
- Or also living in different places.
- That covers my case, says Joe.

James Joyce, *Ulysses*

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Note: in some cases, illustrations have been reproduced from banknotes so as to demonstrate their wide currency as part of a state-endorsed iconography.

Foreword to the Third Edition

1: What is unchanged, and what has changed

In the twenty years since this book first appeared a revised edition has become necessary. The book's historical substance and central argument have remained unchanged. The aim is still to trace the *longue durée* emergence of nationalism in Europe as a transnational and 'entangled' process in intellectual and cultural history,^{*} and to do so by following its antecedent traditions, these being:

- the post-1400 state-formation process;
- the Enlightenment idea of popular sovereignty;
- a long-standing discourse of ethnocentric stereotypes, opposing the domestic/familiar, 'own' cultural community against ethnotypes of foreigners; that discourse was systematized into schemata of 'national characters' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

These three source traditions were fused into a political doctrine in the decades between Rousseau's *Du contrat social* (1762) and Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808). National thought and (in its political instrumentalization) nationalism have deeply affected cultural production (both knowledge production and artistic production), public opinion (the self-image around which communities defined themselves as a nation), and political agendas. In the century between the battles of Waterloo and Verdun, nationalism had manifested itself in three political modes:

- as the adoption of 'national' cultural agendas by the centralizing 19th-century states;
- as autonomist or separatist movements in self-defining cultural communities disaffected from the increasingly centralized state;
- as unification programmes for self-defining cultural communities dispersed across different states.

In the process, the blueprint was created for the 'nation-state': an ideal one-on-one match between the state and its constituent 'nation' (i.e. the cultural community de-

* The appellation 'cultural history' has wrong-footed some readers, particularly those who, being used to the American usage of the term, expected it to refer to everyday and popular culture. Indeed this book deals rather with the elite culture of artists and intellectuals, as per the *Kulturgeschichte* or *cultuurgeschiedenis* of Burckhardt and Huizinga; as such it is closer to intellectual history or history of ideas, while including fields of cultural production such as literature, the arts, and knowledge production. This in turn often elicits the question how 'representative' these developments in high culture were for nationalism as a mass-mobilizing movement. My response is that 'representativity' has nothing to do with it: nationalism in Europe was influential primarily because it shaped ideas of the state and its institutions, while providing these with a legitimization as reflecting the identity and character of the nation-at-large.

fining itself as such). Inasmuch as the 'nation-state' is still our default notion of proper or normal governance, the legacy of nationalism is still with us, across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

All these elements have remained unchanged from the earlier editions and provide, in the outline as given here, the book's chapter structure. There are three reasons why a revised edition was considered timely. One is that the history of nationalism in Europe has gone through fresh twists and turns since the 1990s. Religion and immigration have become more important factors in national discourse than before, while the rise of ethnopoliticism and illiberal 'strongman' regimes also presents us with a new inflection of nationalism. For that reason, the closing sections of this book have been rewritten.

Secondly, research into 19th-century developments has deepened our understanding of cultural nationalism, of that nationalism which is predicated on a 'cultivation of culture' (Leerssen 2006). In various European academic centres and hubs, transnational or comparative research into the history of national movements has continued over the past decades. While it would be unworkable to keep a running tally of all the work that has been done in the field, the bibliography has been updated, and wherever feasible references to important new publications have been added.

Thirdly, the old, ingrained debate in nationalism studies between traditionalism and modernism has remained unexpectedly alive and sharp-edged. A clarification of this book's position is called for, not only regarding that debate, but also with respect to some other theoretical positions that dominate nationalism studies. This I will attempt to outline in the next pages, in slightly more explicit detail than in the original Introduction.

2: *Positioning National Thought in Europe: A transnational cultural history of nationalism*

The events and developments highlighted in this book are on the whole commonsensically close to other histories and theories of nationalism. Where it hopes to offer something fresh is its transnationalism and its historicization of cultural identity (and alterity). What has been foregrounded is the role of ethnotypes: the cultural interplay between images of Self and Other in the self-articulation of nations. Ethnotypes (stereotypes of ethnic identity and character), traditionally an object of study in Comparative Literature, form a very long-standing tradition in European history, but, as objects of discursive articulation, are at the same time more concretely documented and more historically variable than the 'ethnicities' to which they refer, and to which they impute a specific character and identity. To trace the ethnic self-understanding of the nation back to this discursive, documented tradition of ethnotyping (rather than to the purported, unchanging existence of anthropologically constant ethnicities) – to see ethnic identity as a constructed tradition, and to trace the history of that tradition's construction – that is what this book offers as a midway position between ethnosymbolism and modernism. It allows us to investigate ethnicities (as a discursively constructed object of belief) without buying into the ideology of their transhistorical permanence and their fundamental separateness. On the contrary: ethnotypes (their profiles, presence, typology and agency) can be registered in all their historical fluctua-

tion within the historical context of the period, from humanism to modernity. And they also help us situate the origin of nations in their encounter with the Others.

This book emphasizes modernity (manifested in the democratic and industrial revolutions, the rise of a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, and 'print capitalism') as the enabling condition that put the -ism in nationalism, allowing ethnotypes and national self-images to crystallize into a political doctrine for the modern state. This is close to the stance of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which highlights how modern media could make a modernizing society 'feel' like a traditional face-to-face community, and Anne-Marie Thiesse's *La création des identités nationales*, which highlights the role of artists and intellectuals, and their transnational exchanges, in that process. In addition, this book also moves close to the analysis of Miroslav Hroch (1968, 1985, 1996) in that the growth of nationalism is traced as a two-stage process, moving from a growing awareness of a group's cultural specificity (in language, character and collective memories) to the political vindication of that group, defined as a 'nation' on the basis of that specificity, and its entitlement to political empowerment. This two-stage development model can mediate between the 'hard' extremes of traditionalism (which sees nationality, including its political instrumentalization, as a timeless given in the historical landscape) and modernism (which emphasizes the conditions of modernity, e.g. exo-education, long-distance communication and print capitalism, as conditions *sine qua non* for the emergence of nationalism as social mobilization). What is particularly admirable in Hroch's approach is his comparatism: the refusal to derive a universal model from a single national movement, or from a very select few movements, and the insistence that typological models should be based on as broad and systematic a cross-national sample of cases as possible. (As also stated in the Introduction, this book, as a cultural/intellectual history, is more specifically concerned with Phase A than Hroch himself is, and wishes to foreground the transnational and multiscalar fluidity of Phase A as opposed to the more localized activisms of phases B and C.)*

* While acknowledging my very deep debt to Hroch and my sense of concord with his outlook, I should also pay heed to his aversion to addressing national movements in terms of their 'nationalism'. Unlike Hroch, this book does not avoid the word 'nationalism'. Being the cultural/intellectual history that it is, it must identify and label thought patterns, outlooks and political agendas; and when describing the ideology that vindicates the political empowerment of the nation, I use 'nationalism' as a well-established label. Hroch himself feels that the word is negative in its meaning, describing a political pathology, and therefore misapplied and derogatory to those whom he prefers to call 'patriots', and whom he credits with humane idealism and democratic intentions in their national vindications (specifically in the 19th century, in Phase A and early Phase B). This indicates two points of divergence between his phraseology and mine. [1] I do not share (possibly because I come from another linguistic background) Hroch's sense that nationalism is ipso facto a derogatory term. To be sure, in many later manifestations the ideology slid into a very unsavoury ethnocentric and exclusivist direction; and it should be recognized that some of the germs of that later derailment were already present in the ideology of some early *Vorkämpfer*, like Arndt. But that fact in no way taints, by mere association, the national activists whose inspiration was anti-absolutist, emancipatory, and inclusive, like Mazzini or Michelet, or purely cultural, like Elias Lönnrot or Thomas Price. I think these can be called 'nationalists' without implying any slur whatsoever on their character. [2] I

Both extremes, traditionalism and modernism, have their flaws. Traditionalism, in tracing the long-term constants of national identification, tends to employ reified and simplified notions of ethnic identity and to disregard the crucially important events of the last two centuries. In magnifying the historically distant Thermopylae, the Maccabees and Luther in the history of Greek, Jewish and German nationalism, respectively, it quite literally overlooks more recent and immediately important figures like Metaxas, Jabotinsky and Treitschke. There is also the problem of cherry-picking: Apparent and often arresting similarities between modern nationalism and premodern articulations of collective identity, held up as conclusive proofs of an ideological continuity, are exempted from exposure to incommensurable counter-evidence: the different sociopolitical contexts and ideological functions of long-ago and recent phenomena[†]; or the many historical identities and traditions that failed to survive from premodern into modern political life, or that only emerged after 1800. The long cultural memory of nationalism is allowed, anachronistically, to take the place of that ideology's short political history. What is worse, the traditionalist analysis in effect adopts, internalizes and replicates the genealogical historicism of the ideology it pretends to study, and sees the Thermopylae battle, the Maccabees and Luther much as Metaxas, Jabotinsky and Treitschke would see them. It is no coincidence that traditionalists are often apologists of the nation and work from a conscious sense of affinity with it; which may explain a tendency to view national continuity with a celebratory rather than a critical eye.

On the other hand, modernism tends to limit its explanatory framework to economic, social and political relations. That focus tends to disregard the crucially important role of cultural practices, either by overlooking them altogether or by reducing them to something that is in the deepest sense of the word *inconsequential*. Cultural praxis is artificially excluded from other forms of social praxis in that it is treated as the mere consequence or byproduct of other, allegedly more 'fundamental' factors (the state, the economy or social power negotiations), passively following trends set elsewhere in society, passively 'reflecting' society or modernity rather than engaging with it, rather than forming part of it, let alone influencing or changing it. Modernists are prone, I feel, to a form of circular reasoning: first excluding the field of cultural production from other fields of social praxis, refusing to take it into account, and then

myself am at pains to define a distinction (historically grounded and heuristically useful, as I see it) between patriotism and nationalism; not between 'good' patriotism and 'bad' nationalism, but between the former as an Enlightenment ideology of civic empowerment, the latter as a Romantic ideology of ethnocultural empowerment. To my mind, the successor ideology to Enlightenment patriotism was liberalism as much as nationalism. I realize, of course, that most Romantic Nationalists (in Hroch's Phases A and early B) were heirs to, and continuators of, the Enlightenment-democratic ideals of civic empowerment, public usefulness and political accountability; even so, their self-positioning in ethnocultural terms, as spokesmen for a cultural community as much as for a social constituency, constitutes a definite point of departure. Hence I am reluctant to describe actors like Jan Kollár or Thomas Davis simply as 'patriots'; and I mean no disrespect whatsoever when I describe them as 'nationalists'.

[†] I give an example regarding late-medieval and modern language vindications in the Appendix, pp. 278-283 below.

justifying that exclusion by outlining a history of ‘everything in society except culture’ which turns out to be, unsurprisingly, unaffected by culture. Sheepish objections that Paderewski was a pianist, Alecsandri a folk-song collector, Herculano a historian-novelist and Pearse a poet, will elicit the question what their cultural hobbies actually mattered to the broad masses of the population. The answer to that question must be twofold. [1] Culture, even ‘high’, elite culture, penetrated far more deeply and widely into the lower-middle and working classes than we would expect; but we cannot register that process, or its mobilizing power, unless we are prepared to look for it. [2] The influence and importance of artists and intellectuals cannot be invalidated by simply dismissing them for not being part of the broad masses (a questionable assertion to begin with*) – as if only the underrepresented portions of society are a proper topic for serious historians. The historical role of elites is worth studying, not because it is better documented or because they hogged the historical limelight, but because they were, by definition, powerful and influential. And elite-based or not, the influence of cultural productions worked, not just through popular mobilization but also through its impact on elite-controlled institutions. Nationalist cultural production, even if it did not shape the nation, eventually shaped the state – surely a process of some historical relevance, even if modernist social and political historians of nationalism should be reluctant to focus on it.

The dilemma (which of course I exaggerate for the sake of clarity) is that modernists tend to disregard culture and traditionalists to anachronize and de-historicize it. The need to steer a middle path between these two pitfalls is what made me qualify this book as a ‘cultural history’: historical without disregarding the agency of culture; culturally focused without overlooking the dynamics of its historicity. Ethnosymbolism was motivated by similar concerns, and is often considered as a sensible intermediate approach, allowing for an agency of culture (including cultural memory) while situating that cultural agency, and its political impact, in the conditions of modernity. Indeed, as is pointed out in the Introduction, there are many points of convergence between this book and the ethnosymbolist approach – although I prefer to replace the problematic reliance on self-perceived ethnicity (a slippery concept) by studying the textual record of self-articulated ethnotypes. A warning note should also be sounded, I think, regarding the risk of internalism and the need to acknowledge contingency. By internalism I mean that the ‘ethnic origins’ of modern nations tend to be sought, precisely, within the bosom of the cultural community that develops a national self-awareness. But as Walker Connor (1994; cf. Conversi 2004) has convincingly pointed out, nations should not only be seen in terms of their self-definition, but also in terms

* Artists and intellectuals, and what Hroch calls the protagonists (*Vorkämpfer*) of national movements, cannot simply be classified in an elite-or-else dichotomy. They include royalty (Ludwig I of Bavaria) and unfree-born serfs (Taras Shevchenko), men and women, clergy high and low, aristocrats and proletarians, and many struggling white-collar workers and petty-bourgeois (some of whom, but not all, rose to the higher ranks of the civil service and the university). If anything, cultural producers form a conduit between the elite and the mass of the population, and the national culture that they produce is accordingly perceived as something that transcends class divisions, much like the concept of the ‘nation’ itself.

of their self-distinguishing; setting themselves apart from their non-members and outsiders. The encounter with the stranger, foreigner or enemy is not something that occurs in the second instance, from the basis of an established national identity; rather, national identities are established as a result of the encounter with Others, and following the articulatory act of self-distinguishing oneself from those Others. The nation is not the group that produces identity articulations, but rather a group that crystallizes out of articulations (and in this I follow Rogers Brubaker's critique of 'groupism', 2004).

Much as the nation's Others can change in the course of a nation's history, so too the nation's self-definition can change; something that can be observed especially in the volatile nation-formation processes that took place in the borderlands between the Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman Empires, or even in Bavaria and Tyrol, or the Low Countries. The road from ethnicity to nation-state was anything but straightforward or even linear: it was a messy labyrinth with many dead ends and U-turns. In the historical record of nationalism we move through the twilight zone of regionalism; forking paths with stalled or abortive nation-formation; flat-lining ethnic self-definitions like 'Samogitian' or 'Illyrian'. While ethnosymbolism powerfully explains successful nation-formation cases, its tendency to do so finalistically, from a run-up tradition of group-internal ethnocultural self-definitions, should not be allowed to obscure from view [a] the importance of 'invented traditions' (where the ethnocultural root traditions are not the seedbed of the national movement but by-products and post-hoc contrivances), or [b] national movements that originate from outside pressure: loss of empire, or as competitive imitations of neighbouring movements.

Thus, having claimed at the outset how close I feel this book to be to the many fine scholarly traditions in nationalism studies, I have ended up taking exception to (some elements in) practically all of them. This is partly, no doubt, the narcissism of the small differences; I hope that it is also an attempt to take the best and improve further upon that basis, until such time that others can improve upon what may be useful in the approach exemplified by this book. That approach is a *historical* one, with more attention to what changed than what remained the same; a *culture-historical* one, with attention to the agency of cultural self-articulations; and a *transnational culture-historical* one, aware of the fact that, as Anne-Marie Thiesse stated, there is nothing more internationally entangled than nationalism. Of all topics, nationalism is the one where methodological nationalism should be most carefully avoided.

Finally, a word on the ongoing altercations concerning the use of 'ethnic' and 'civic' nationalism. I follow Anthony Smith in maintaining the usefulness of this conceptual distinction, for the very reason that prompts many scholars want to do away with it: namely, that in practice the two are always commingled. No manifestation of nationalism is either wholly civic, without any admixture of ethnic elements, or wholly ethnic, without traces of a civic commitment. That does not mean that the distinction as such is added. On the contrary: if any manifestation of nationalism is partly civic (defining the nation as a body politic bonded in society), partly ethnic (defining the nation as a cultural community bonded by tradition), then it becomes important to gauge the relative proportion between the two factors, almost like establishing the temperature, pH degree or specific gravity of a given substance. I think it can be

historically demonstrated that in the emergence of the political concept of nationality, the two definitions – ethnic and civic – were consciously reflected on and played off against each other by the intellectuals concerned, from Fichte to Renan (cf. below, pp.241-242). There has also been a demonstrable tendency in international confrontations, after Renan, to credit one's own group with a 'good' civic sense of nationality and to denounce the others as wielding a 'bad' ethnic sense. Completely abolishing the heuristic distinction would make it impossible to even register these historical processes, or to make a meaningful comparison between, say, the programmes of the Scottish National Party and the Hungarian Jobbik. I would, on the contrary, plead for enshrining the heuristic distinction into our very definition of nationalism, for the good reason that the two polarities always operate in tandem: nationalism can be defined as the ideology that conflates, albeit in varying proportions, civic and ethnic ideas of political cohesion. How that came about, and how that worked, is the topic of this book.

Preface

This book is the revised and expanded English version of the Dutch-language *Nationaal denken in Europa: een cultuurhistorische schets* (Amsterdam University Press, 1999). When it was decided to make that book available in English for a wider international readership, I took the opportunity to expand what was originally a survey handbook for students into an intervention in nationalism studies generally; an intervention which I thought was timely (despite the great amount of excellent work being done in that field, and the large number of existing publications) because I felt there was room for a view that was culturally oriented without reifying the notion of ‘culture’ into something static or primordial, and that was historically oriented without subordinating the cultural dimension of nationalism to its political one.

Portions of this book draw on previously published books and articles, referred to under my name in the bibliography. Some issues addressed here for the early nineteenth century are more extensively thematized in an ongoing project on the role of philologists and ‘men of learning’ in romantic and cultural nationalism; for that particular project, and its publications to date, I refer the reader to the website www.hum.uva.nl/philology.

When I have provided my own translations/paraphrases from non-English source material (rather than quoting published translations), the original is given with the source reference. Source references are given in the endnotes; the footnotes provide *obiter dicta* and information on side issues and background.

The form that this book has taken owes much to the European Studies programme at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, with its focus on the interaction between ideas and events, culture and politics, and European cross-border exchanges. I wish to thank my colleagues there, in particular the team with whom I teach the survey course on the cultural formation of Europe.

On going over this book I realized, even more than when I was first writing it, how deeply indebted my approach is to Hugo Dyserinck and his erstwhile Comparative Literature programme at Aachen University, where I studied in the 1970s. The fundamental tenets of this book (the contingent nature of state formation, the need to demythologize the discourse of national identity, the idea that nationalism is the political instrumentalization of ethnotypes, the link between romanticism and nationalism) all reflect the outlook of the Aachen comparatist school.

As always, I am deeply and happily indebted to the support and companionship (intellectual, moral and domestic) of Ann Rigney.

I dedicate this book to my mother, who remembers the war, and to my children.

Introduction

The aim of this book is to give a cultural and intellectual history of national thought in Europe. What does that mean, and how does this hope to add anything new?

There is an overwhelming body of research on nationalism, much of which focuses primarily on social and political developments. Nationalism is, after all, a political ideology – one of the dominant ones of the last two centuries. The rise of nationalism is usually analysed as a factor in the development of states, or in the development of national consciousness and national cohesion as part of a society's development towards modernity. After initial work by intellectual historians such as Isaiah Berlin and Hans Kohn, the study of nationalism was given a more political and social orientation in the 1960s and 1970s, and received a huge upsurge following the work of Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and A.D. Smith in the 1980s. Most of these studies attempted, on the basis of various sample cases, to arrive at a model of nationalism as an ideology. For Gellner, nationalism was a side effect of modernization with its shifting patterns of education and economic scale enlargement, driven largely by intellectuals; in this 'modernist' view, a sense of national identity was fabricated by nineteenth-century nationalists. Hobsbawm, while also taking a modernist view, advocated a more 'bottom up' societal model, claiming that nationalism was an ideology born of the people rather than imposed by intellectuals; Anderson stressed the developing role of media and the growth of communication as a crucial factor. There were also anti-modernist voices, which insisted that national identity has been a long-standing ideological presence in Europe since long before the nineteenth century. A very prominent role in this debate was played by A.D. Smith, who sought to steer a middle course, opposing Gellner's modernism by tracing the pre-nineteenth century ethnic origins of nations, while at the same time arguing that these ethnic identities were largely subjective and underwent an ideological transformation and modern instrumentalization in the nineteenth century.¹

These debates have brought to the foreground two main questions: How 'modern' or recent is nationalism as a historical phenomenon? Did the 'nation' (as a cultural and social community that people identify with and feel political loyalty towards) only emerge as a meaningful concept in the nineteenth century, along with the ideology that named itself after it, or does it, contrariwise, have a more long-standing presence in human affairs?^{*} And so nationalism is usually studied as something that emanates either from modernization processes or else from a social category called 'nation' or 'ethnicity'.

* There have been other debates over the typology and various sub-types of nationalism, e.g. the distinction between the expansionist nationalism of established states and the emancipatory nationalism of minorities, between an 'Eastern European' and a 'Western European' variant, or between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalism; cf. below, p. 169-170.