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Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism

Lloyd Kramer

The vast, expanding literature on nationalism may well defy every generalization except a familiar, general theme of intellectual history: texts about nationalism have always drawn their perspectives and passions from the evolving political and cultural contexts in which their authors have lived. Modern accounts of nationalism show the unmistakable traces of political, military, and cultural conflicts in every decade of the twentieth century—from the era of nationalist rivalries before World War I to the redefinitions of gender, literature, and history that have emerged in contemporary postmodernism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism.

This connection between the texts of nationalist scholarship and the modern contexts of politics and culture suggests why historical narratives of nationalism have become part of the history of nationalism itself. Nationalism's scholarly interpreters cannot easily separate themselves from the objects of their analysis, and their interpretations are often as diverse and fragmented as the nations they describe. This essay enters the debate on nationalism, describes recurring themes in the historical literature, and replicates a key characteristic of the historiography by stressing that the complexity of nationalism and its interpreters resists every simplifying, comprehensive definition. Histories of nationalism provide a striking example of how the history of ideas never reaches a point of uncontested closure and never finally escapes the political and cultural contexts in which all historical narratives are produced.

Like most analysts of nationalism, I assume that it is one of the decisive forces in modern history and that its significance demands careful, critical analysis. It also calls for always incomplete definitions, one of which can be drawn from the German historian Peter Alter. Nationalism is "both an ideology and a political movement which holds the nation and sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values, and which manages to mobilize the political will of

a people or a large section of the population.”¹ Nationalist ideas are thus a distinctive form of modern thought that shapes the political actions and cultural identities of individuals as well as groups. The meanings of nationalism and national identity typically depend on various dichotomies that define the nation in terms of its differences from other places or people—the dynamic process of identity formation that has received wide attention in contemporary cultural studies. My own view of the “oppositional” structures in nationalist thinking coincides with the concise description by Peter Sahllins: “National Identity is a socially constructed and continuous process of defining ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’.... National identities ... do not depend on the existence of any objective linguistic or cultural differentiation but on the subjective experience of difference.”² Sahllins thus assumes that something called national identity is “there,” but he also insists that national consciousness is a “constructed” identity. Nationalism, in short, does not express or reflect a natural, primordial reality.

The assumption that nationalisms are historical rather than natural phenomena shapes most of the scholarly literature, so that the study of nationalism leads to historical analysis rather than to biology or physical geography. Although there have been countless historical studies of nationalism in different periods, cultures, and conflicts,³ my discussion will refer to a small number of narratives that have made especially significant theoretical claims about the nature of nationalism. There is of course no way to analyze such theories without exclusions and generalizations, which I shall provide by focusing mostly on works about Europe and dividing the patterns of historical analysis into the following broad categories: (1) the description of nationalism as a central component of modernization, reflecting and also shaping intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political transitions from premodern to modern history; (2) the claim that nationalisms are modern religious movements, related to but also displacing earlier religions; (3) the argument that nationalism is a linguistic, literary construction that depends on new forms of communication, intellectuals, and narratives; (4) the description of nationalism as a discourse of gender and ethnicity that shapes individual identities and also expresses anxieties about sexuality, culture, and respectability; and (5) the argument that nationalisms can be divided into categories (good/bad, Western/Eastern, politi-

¹ Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, tr. Stuart McKinnon-Evans (London, 1994²), 4.

² Peter Sahllins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989), 270-71; and see Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, 1996).

³ A comprehensive survey of nationalisms throughout the world can be found in Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (Boulder, 1977); and see Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, “From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation,” in their edited collection, *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford, 1996), 3-37.

cal/cultural) and phases that represent sharp differences in the development of modern national societies.

My own narrative is more descriptive than critical, and it deals more with specific texts than with historical contexts, though I shall also note some connections between the historiography of nationalism and the wider political and cultural conflicts of the twentieth century. Historical writing about nationalism throughout this violent century exemplifies both the cultural fluidity of historical realities and the endless attempts to reduce these realities to narrative order.

Nationalism as Modernization

Human beings have expressed loyalties to specific places or traditions since the beginning of civilization, but most historians argue persuasively that nationalism is a unique creation of the modern era. Social modernization and nation-building seem to be inseparable, as Liah Greenfeld notes in her description of the “nation” as the “*constitutive element of modernity*” and in her suggestion that we should see “modernity as defined by nationalism.”⁴ Contrary to some critics who see nationalism as a throwback to premodern, tribal systems of identification or behavior, most analysts assume that both the ideologies and practices of nationalism emerged in Western Europe during the eighteenth century and spread quickly to other societies in the era of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Nationalism thus reflected certain transitional, historical processes (e.g., changes in political institutions, economic systems, and ideas about religion), but it also contributed decisively to the modernizing political, cultural, and social structures that helped to produce it.

This emphasis on the link between nationalism and modernity provides an influential framework for the questions of causality that historical narratives commonly seek to answer. In fact the causal explanations for nationalism represent the most prominent subdisciplines of modern historical knowledge: intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political. The historiography of nationalism thus expresses both the structuring categories of contemporary historical understanding and the complex, overlapping levels of human experience, ideas, and power.

The intellectual origins of nationalism (and modernity). Few studies of nationalism have matched the intellectual rigor of Hans Kohn’s classic work *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (1944), which defines nationalism as a “state of mind, an act of consciousness.”⁵ Writing in America as an exile from Nazi-controlled Czechoslovakia, Kohn sought to show

⁴ Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 18.

⁵ Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (New York, 1944), 10.

how the “idea” of nationalism could be progressive or liberal at a time when it had become so conspicuously linked to fascism and violence. As Kohn described it, the idea of nationalism developed during the Enlightenment in response to an intellectual and political crisis that accompanied the desacralization of the monarchy and the rise of individualism. The Enlightenment’s conception of free individuals provided a powerful ideal for those who challenged monarchical authority, but it also threatened to destroy the foundations of social solidarity. While the new definition of the individual as the locus of identity and rights “made possible a new realization of man and of the human,” Kohn explains, “it lacked the integrating force of creating a new symbol as the center and justification of society.” A declining allegiance to sacred authority thus stimulated the search for “a new order in freedom, based upon the autonomy of the individual.” Nobody recognized the importance of this search more clearly than Rousseau, and it was Rousseau who found a solution in “the sacred collective personality of the nation.” Free individuals could pledge allegiance to the nation rather than to kings or social classes, thereby retaining their place in a social system at the same time they asserted their right to freedom. The French Revolution carried Rousseau’s idea into practice, and nationalism provided “the integrating force of the new era which dawned over France, and through France over western mankind.”⁶

Kohn therefore describes nationalism as an intellectual response to the political, social, and cultural problems of integration and legitimacy in the eighteenth-century transition to modernity. The “idea” of nationalism in his view grew out of the high Enlightenment’s most significant historical legacy (assertions that the “free individual” forms the fundamental category of politics and society), and it clearly differed from irrational, reactionary nationalisms of the twentieth century. But Kohn’s intellectual history does not give detailed social explanations for the cultural processes that carried ideas of the “nation” from theorists such as Rousseau into the daily lives of people in all spheres of modern societies.

The cultural origins of nationalism (and modernity). The cultural diffusion of nationalism became a key theme for later historians who (influenced by cultural anthropology) wanted to explain how ideas about nations actually circulated in modern social systems. Benedict Anderson provided the influential model for such studies in his account of modern nation-building in the paradigm-shaping book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; rev. ed., 1991). Where Kohn analyzes ideas, Anderson emphasizes the development of newspapers, books, and administrative bureaucracies that made it possible for millions of people to “imagine” themselves as part of the same community. This imaginative act of identifica-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

tion depended from the beginning on new cultural institutions, because the dispersed people in these societies would never meet, never see most of the places in which their “imagined” compatriots lived, and never know anything about the millions of individuals whom they envisioned as their community.

According to Anderson, this remarkable redefinition of identities resulted from cultural transformations that evolved along with new technologies for distributing information in the early modern era. The emerging European state system and colonial empires (Anderson emphasizes the early national identities of creole functionaries in America) created legal and educational institutions that fostered identification with large territories, but nationalism for Anderson depended above all on the “convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language.” New technologies disseminated new cultural narratives in newspapers and novels, all of which “created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”⁷ Reading the stories of their nations in schools, literature and newspapers, individuals came to identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local worlds in which they lived their daily lives.

The economic origins of nationalism (and modernity). Other analysts have gone beyond Anderson in stressing the economic transformations that shaped nationalist cultures. Although the economic origins of nationalism are a familiar theme in Marxist historiography, the most influential recent advocate of this interpretation, Ernest Gellner, develops his argument with explicitly anti-Marxist perspectives. The general flight from Marxism in the 1980s, however, did not eliminate all Marxist perspectives from the study of nationalism, and the work of Eric Hobsbawm shows how such theories can still offer important insights into nationalism’s complex connection to modern economic forces. Despite their theoretical differences, Gellner and Hobsbawm both insist that the history of nationalism is embedded in the history of industrialization and capitalism.

Gellner views the transition from agrarian society to industrial society as the fundamental characteristic of modern history. This economic reality has affected all aspects of modern societies, including the rationalizing economic and political institutions that dominate the nation-state. Drawing on the perspectives of post-World War II social science, Gellner describes nationalism as a kind of instrumental ideology that both facilitates and reflects the development of modern economies. Industrial societies require complex divisions of labor, educated work forces, mobile populations, and workers who can communicate across long distances. No modern economy can exist without large

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983; rev. ed., 1991), 15, 49; citations from the first edition; and see Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), and John R. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994).

numbers of people who read the same language, follow the same regulations, and manipulate the same technologies. This economic fact of life leads Gellner to his main theme: nationalism provides the integrating structures of language, education, and law that create efficient, modern, industrial economies. "The roots of nationalism in the distinctive structural requirements of industrial society are very deep indeed," Gellner argues in a typical summary of his theory. Industrial societies may well draw on older "high cultures" to create their uniform national cultures (the unifying language has to come from somewhere), but Gellner sees no significant continuity between the new industrializing culture of nationalism and the mythic "pre-existing cultures" that nationalists claim as their origin.⁸

Hobsbawm also emphasizes nationalism's role in the creation of industrial economies and the transition from local to national economic systems. European nationalisms during the "liberal era" (1830-80), for example, helped to justify the creation of national economies and the integration of ever larger territories and populations into unified economic and political institutions. The economic utility of nationalism also remained significant in the later era of European imperialism (1880-1914), when socialist movements were challenging the liberal organization of national economies. Although Hobsbawm suggests that the popular, political aspirations of nationalists and socialists could sometimes overlap, he notes that nationalists served the economic needs of elites when they celebrated shared linguistic or racial traits and ignored the differences and conflicts within national economies.⁹ Nationalism for Hobsbawm, as for Gellner, is therefore a powerful political and cultural expression of modernizing economic processes that have destroyed older social hierarchies, generated new social anxieties, and produced new legitimating ideologies.

The social origins of nationalism (and modernity). Economic changes have altered the status of various occupations and social groups as well as the modes of production. This social pattern carries implications for the development of nationalism, because nationalists have often attracted followers from groups that are losing or seeking to gain social status. The search for the sources of nationalism has therefore turned to the social history of those people for whom nationalist ideas seem to carry the greatest appeal. The theme of "status anxiety," for example, appears often in Liah Greenfeld's *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992) as she seeks to explain why nationalism has been so influential in various cultural contexts. Greenfeld writes from a classical liberal perspective that emphasizes individual agency and challenges the materialist,

⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983), 27-29, 35, 38, 48-49; quotation on 35.

⁹ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 28-29, 38-41, 122.

structuralist or Marxist theories of other recent analysts, including Gellner, Anderson, and Hobsbawm. Yet Greenfeld also develops her own structural explanation for nationalism by focusing on the *ressentiment* of social groups who were unhappy about their lack of social influence (e.g., nobles in eighteenth-century France, unattached intellectuals in eighteenth-century Germany) or who worried about their nation's inferiority vis-à-vis other nations (e.g., Russian elites or German intellectuals who compared their nations to France and England).

The "status-inconsistency" of such groups produced what Greenfeld calls a "profound sense of insecurity and anxiety" that made them particularly receptive to the status-enhancing claims of nationalism—as one sees in the exemplary case of German intellectuals at the time of the French Revolution. Long frustrated by their inability to gain respect, German writers and philosophers discovered that nationalism provided a "practical, this-worldly solution to their problem, and put an end to their alienation.... From this time on the pride and the self-esteem they strove to defend was national pride and self-esteem. They changed their identity and became, passionately and irrevocably, Germans."¹⁰ This discovery of the nation may have occurred with unusual speed and passion among German intellectuals, but Greenfeld suggests that similar nationalisms of *ressentiment* have appeared wherever social changes or encounters with alien, apparently successful social groups have generated anxieties about social status and identity. Nationalism becomes in this view a modern, ideological expression of the perennial human quest for social recognition, and it appeals most to those people who feel the least respected.

The political origins of nationalism (and modernity). Most of the intellectual, cultural, economic, and social changes that have created and resulted from the transitions to modernity come together in the specifically political affirmations of the sovereign nation-state. Veneration of the nation-state became a pervasive theme of the French Revolution, which suggests why the discussion of nationalism's political history almost always refers to the influence of France. The Revolution of 1789, as most historians have described it, marked the culmination of political patterns (e.g., state-building) and ideologies (e.g., sovereignty of people) that formed the pre-history of nationalism. At the same time, however, France's Revolution marked the starting point for subsequent nationalisms that emerged in opposition to the French ascendancy. Even more important, perhaps, the Revolution generated ideas and practices that eventually spread to nationalisms throughout the world: the definitions of a sovereign nation and national citizenship, the drafting of a constitution, the patriotic rituals of a modern nation-state, the demands of universal military service, the

¹⁰ Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, 15-16, 153-54, 186, 250, 265, 358-59 (quotation on last pages).

establishment of national education, and the dissemination of national propaganda.¹¹

The French Revolution thus created a model for other nationalisms as well as new institutions for France, though the French model carried both negative and positive connotations for the European nations that defined themselves *against* the Revolution and Napoleon. The anti-French component of the new nationalisms was of course prominent in Germany, but it also shaped the political construction of British nationalism. As Linda Colley describes it in her book, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (1992), the idea of British nationhood developed rapidly during the wars against France's revolutionary and Napoleonic armies. British nationalism provided the theories and emotional identifications to mobilize millions of common people in support of a state whose political institutions had always remained closed and indifferent to the lower classes. In this new era of national warfare, however, the British government, like other governments, needed its population's active support in order to assure its own survival, and it was nationalism that brought these traditionally excluded people to the nation's defense. The "mass arming in Great Britain during the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France," Colley explains, "had provided irrefutable proof that patriotism ... transcended the divisions between the social classes."¹² All (male) persons who participated in the struggle against the national enemy became part of the nation and hence entitled to the rights of national citizenship and to representation in the images that sustained the "imagined community" of the British nation. The political claims of the French Revolution and the political claims of those who fought against it thus generated the modern political conceptions of citizenship and nationality. Yet this modern political culture of nationalism and powerful national institutions also drew much of its emotional power from premodern, even ancient, rituals of culture and religion.

Nationalism as a Religion

The origins of most nations are shrouded in obscurity or symbolized by semi-mythical figures, but both the obscurity and the myths offer nationalists the means to portray the nation as an object of reverence. The mysteries of a nation thus resemble the mysteries of a religion, as historians have often noted in their descriptions of the structural similarities between nationalisms and religious faiths. Ernest Renan, writing shortly after the French had lost Alsace and Lorraine to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War, was one of the first to

¹¹ For a typical summary of the French Revolution's influence on nationalism, see Carlton J. H. Hayes, "The Rise of Nationalism," in his book *Essays on Nationalism* (1926; New York, 1966), 46-48.

¹² Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992), 319.

stress that all nations depend on myths of origins and that these myths flourish because the early history of nations is unknown or forgotten. This process of forgetting the problematic, brutal aspects of a nation's origins makes it possible to celebrate the virtues of its founding heroes and to generate a mysterious sense of solidarity that unites people in "the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future." All nationalist creeds therefore praise the individual's willingness to make sacrifices for a higher cause and to affirm the nation in rituals of collective belief. "A nation's existence is ... a daily plebiscite," Renan explained, "just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life."¹³ People thus decide to belong to their nations as they decide to live or to affirm their deepest beliefs, and the freedom to choose nationhood should be respected (in Alsace, for example) like the freedom to choose all other ideas or actions.

Although Renan saw adherence to the nation as a public affirmation of beliefs, he did not offer much explanation for why people would choose to affirm their lives and beliefs through nationalism. The creation of this belief and its translation into actions thus received more detailed analysis in the post-World War I writings of Carlton J. H. Hayes, an American historian who sought to explain the sacrifices of the Great War and the power of patriotic ideologies by defining nationalism as the religion of modernity. Beginning with the assumption that all people need to believe in something outside themselves, Hayes argued that Enlightenment science and rationality weakened the faith in traditional Christianity without altering the human need or desire to believe in a transcendent reality. Science might offer reassuring truths for elite intellectuals, but it could never satisfy the "religious sense" of modern people, most of whom began to embrace the "nation" as a substitute or supplement for traditional religion during and after the era of the French Revolution. Like other gods, this new transcendent force exists before people are born and continues to exist after they die, enters into all spheres of life, gives purpose and value to individual experiences, and demands both respect and sacrifices. "On his own national god the modern religious nationalist is conscious of dependence," Hayes explained. "Of his powerful help he feels the need. In Him he recognises the source of his own perfection and happiness. To Him, in a strictly religious sense, he subjects himself."¹⁴

Modern nations thus acquired powers that Hayes compared to the powers of the medieval Catholic Church. Above all, the modern nation-state provided a "collective *faith*, a faith in its mission and destiny, a faith in things unseen, a faith that would move mountains. Nationalism is sentimental, emotional, and

¹³ Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" [1882] trans. Martin Thom, in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York, 1990), 11, 19.

¹⁴ Hayes, "Nationalism as a Religion," in *Essays on Nationalism*, 104-5; for his discussion of the "religious sense" and the Enlightenment, see *ibid.*, 95-100.

inspirational.”¹⁵ The most powerful expression of this new “religion” appeared in the millions of people who were willing to die for their nations during times of warfare, but the more normal affirmations of the faith could be found in the daily lives of its believers. Nationalisms therefore appropriated religious traditions as they developed their sacred symbols (flags), sacred texts (constitutions, declarations of independence), sacred figures (“founding fathers,” virtuous heroes) evil figures (traitors or heretical subversives), sacred places (national monuments, cemeteries), public rituals (national holidays and parades), sense of mission (responsibility to promote national ideals), mobilizing crusades (conflicts with those who oppose the nation’s mission) and sense of sacrifice (the nation has been saved by the blood of those who died, so that it might live).¹⁶

It is perhaps this last theme—those who sacrifice their lives in wars are the saviors of the nation—which links nationalism on the deepest emotional level to the ancient themes of religion. Nationalism gives meaning to death and helps assuage anxieties about human mortality because the nation continues to live beyond the death of each individual; every life and death is connected to a higher national spirit or reality that seems to promise an endless future existence. Although other theorists have questioned Hayes’s view of the “religious sense” in human beings or his account of the continuities between the medieval church and the modern nation-state, his emphasis on the religious, emotional tendencies in nationalism has reappeared often in subsequent studies. Hayes acknowledged that nationalism did not always replace religion; indeed, he suggested that the new faith frequently gained even greater appeal when it could be fused with traditional religious beliefs and rituals.¹⁷ In every case, however, the nationalist creed requires a language, a literature, and a group of interpreters who sustain the narrative of the nation like theologians or priests sustain the narrative of a religion. Nationalism is a religion, in other words, that relies on the languages and narratives of intellectual elites.

Nationalism as a Construction of Language and Literature

Historians have always recognized that the success of nationalist ideas depends on their wide dissemination in modern societies, but the communication systems and narratives that promote nationalist identities have become increasingly significant in the study of nationalism since the 1950s. The sociologist

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119-23. See also Salo Wittmayer Baron, *Modern Nationalism and Religion* (New York, 1947), Conor Cruise O’Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), and William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (eds.), *Many are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 1994).

Karl W. Deutsch first helped to focus scholarly attention on this theme in an influential work, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953), which attributed the success of nationalist ideas to the power of modern communications. "Membership in a people essentially consists in wide complementarity of social communication," he argued in his explanation of nationalism's cultural diffusion. "It consists in the ability to communicate more effectively, and over a wider range of subjects, with members of one large group than with outsiders."¹⁸ For Deutsch and other communication theorists, therefore, modern national identities were shaped by modern communication systems that conveyed the ideas and interests of elites throughout large territories and populations.¹⁹

This emphasis on the influence of communications has appeared more recently in the work of Benedict Anderson, which, as noted earlier, stresses the role of newspapers and novels in the creation of those "imagined communities" that become modern nations. Although Anderson is more interested in the emotional aspects of cultural identities than in detailed empirical accounts of communication systems, he also assumes that communicative processes create the cultural contexts in which nationalisms can develop. "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness," Anderson explains, "but by the style in which they are imagined."²⁰ The imagining of nations takes many forms, including the narratives of national novelists, the stories in national newspapers, the maps that students study at schools, and the interactions between colonial governments and their subject populations. No matter how much they may differ, however, these various nationalist narratives carry the influence of intellectuals. Anderson finds that the emergence of an intellectual class precedes the emergence of nationalist ideologies in every society that develops nationalist identities, but this class seems to be especially prominent in the emergence of newer nationalisms outside Europe. Writing after the decolonization movements of the post-World War II era, Anderson argues that "to an unprecedented extent the key early spokesmen for colonial nationalism were lonely, bilingual intelligentsias unattached to sturdy local bourgeoisies."²¹

Anderson's account of intellectual nationalists generally shows far more sympathy for the intelligentsia than one finds in Elie Kedourie's descriptions of similar groups in his book *Nationalism* (1960; fourth ed. 1993). The post-World War II anticolonial movements also influenced Kedourie, but, unlike Anderson, he condemned nationalism as a discourse of disappointed, frustrated intellectuals who mostly repeated philosophical mistakes that German Romantic theorists had made in the era of the French Revolution. Kedourie's early

¹⁸ Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (New York, 1953; 1966²), 71; citation from the first edition.

¹⁹ Deutsch notes the role of elites in *ibid.*, 75-78.

²⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

nationalists (e.g., Fichte) argued that national languages were the essence of human identity and that individuals could best assert their will through the life of the nation. According to Kedourie, this philosophical nationalism had disastrous consequences for Germans and every other national community that accepted linguistic definitions of the nation. "If language becomes the criterion of statehood," Kedourie argues in his critique of nationalist intellectuals, "the clarity essential to such a notion [i.e., the political state] is dissolved in a mist of literary and academic speculation, and the way is open for equivocal claims and ambiguous situations. Such an outcome is inescapable with such a theory as nationalism, invented as it was by literary men who had never exercised power."²² Kedourie thus blames intellectuals for the dangers of nationalism. Rejecting the clear, practical analysis of policies that characterizes the political language and policies of successful nation-states, German intellectuals produced an uncompromising linguistic view of nations that led to fanaticism, violence, and death.²³

Kedourie's denunciation of intellectual nationalism thus separates the ambiguous narratives of philosophy and literature from the clearer, pragmatic narratives of normal politics, but this is a distinction that poststructuralist accounts of nationalism will not accept. Represented most forcefully in a volume edited by Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (1990), this literary approach to nationalism also emphasizes the importance of communication, language, and writers in the construction of nationalisms, yet it suggests that nationalist narratives are comparable to most other discourses about the world. Like politics, literature, religion, and every other cultural practice, the meaning of the "nation" is constructed through narrative processes that resemble and include the narrative constructions of novels, films, and history books. For Bhabha and his fellow authors (writing in the wake of poststructuralist theory) the nation is a text, much as Anderson suggests in his discussion of "imagined communities." Bhabha goes beyond Anderson, however, in stressing that the narrators of this text must contend with contradictions and alien supplements that can never be fully accommodated within the master narrative that seeks to construct a fully coherent nation. The text of the "nation," like all other texts, relies on unacknowledged sources or assumptions, represses issues or ideas or people that would call its assertions into question, interacts with "others" (traditions, outsiders, critics) that can never be entirely effaced, and remains "always already" situated in a context of relationships that precludes pure identity or absolute origins.

²² Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, 1960; Oxford, 1993⁴), 42, 65; citations from fourth ed. Other key themes of the argument are in *ibid.*, 23, 35-40, 58-59, 62-63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 77-85.

Modern nations are therefore created by vast processes of “writing” that can never fully overcome their own internal tensions. As Bhabha describes it, there “is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it.”²⁴ The history of nationalism is thus a history of conflicts over competing narratives that seek to define a social community. More specifically, it is a history of contestation between those who seek a fully coherent narrative of the community’s existence and those whose presence, ideas, color or culture undermine the possibility of that coherence. Nations and nationalisms, in this view, repeatedly face a dialectical struggle between the quest for coherence or unity and the inevitable frustration of that quest by the challenge or complexity of difference (the quest and frustration that also appear in the history of writing). There would be no meaning in the search for unity within a nation or against other nations if the difference did not exist; nationalisms depend on difference. It is therefore the presence of “otherness” that both fuels the desire for a fully coherent nation/narrative and also makes it impossible for that totalizing desire to be fulfilled. The poststructuralist account of nationalism, in short, highlights the ambivalent relation between a much-desired coherent or pure national identity and the “other” that makes this coherence impossible. The nation, as Bhabha defines it, “is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples,” so that one always finds “cultural liminality—*within the nation*.”²⁵

Recent discussions of the literary and linguistic construction of nationalism have therefore moved toward a “multicultural” description of nations that focuses on the competing languages and narratives within a society rather than the unity of communications or the unity of “imagined communities.” Although intellectuals remain important in these recent histories of nationalism, they are viewed more often as persons who have tried (but failed) to efface the differences that enable them to construct their narratives and their cultural communities. This ambiguous, inescapable relation to difference “haunts” nationalisms in every part of the world, even or especially when the Other is most vehemently condemned. Intellectuals in Asia, for example, strive to separate their cultures from the West, but as Partha Chatterjee has noted, their anticolonial or postcolonial narratives continue to be defined with reference to the ubiquitous Western Other. To be sure, Asian intellectuals want their nations to modernize without simply following Western precedents; yet their organizing categories

²⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” in Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, 1; and see my review essay, “Nations as Texts: Literary Theory and the History of Nationalism,” *The Maryland Historian*, 24 (1993), 71-82.

²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, 299, and also *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994).

of analysis rely on a Western tradition from which they wish to declare their independence. Claims to independence are themselves linked to Western, Enlightenment conceptions of progress, so that the definitions of a “new nation” such as India necessarily depend on both the existence and effacement of an “other” that never disappears. Asian nationalism thus remains partly a “derivative discourse” for Chatterjee because “even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based.”²⁶

Despite their significant differences from other analysts of nationalism, Chatterjee and Bhabha extend the tendency of Kedourie and Anderson to focus on intellectuals and narratives that seek to create national identity or unity. The key theme of the more recent theoretical accounts, however, suggests that the desire for unified nations can never be fully realized, partly because the existence of “others” remains necessary for the conceptualization of the nation and partly because unity in any community is challenged by the presence of different narratives about reality, different cultural traditions, and different sexual and ethnic identities. Not surprisingly, therefore, analysis of the nationalist aspirations for totalizing narratives has now turned to the political, social, and cultural practices that give gendered and ethnic meanings to modern national identities.

Nationalism as a Discourse of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity

Contemporary studies of gender and sexuality have led historians to see that implicit or explicit assumptions about gender and sexual identity shape the public spheres of politics and culture as well as the more private spheres of families and childrearing. Analyzed in terms of the languages and practices of gender or sexual identities, nationalism can be seen as a powerful ideological expression of (and contributor to) modern definitions of “masculine/feminine” or “normal/abnormal” behaviors. These long-ignored sexual dimensions of nationalist ideas provide the theme for George Mosse’s *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985), the book that helped to open a new conceptual framework for exploring nationalism’s ideological construction and consequences.

Mosse argues that the emergence of European nationalisms in the early nineteenth century coincided with the emergence of new ideas about proper social behavior—especially the bourgeois emphasis on controlling sexual passions and on marriage as the only respectable, normal sexual relationship. In

²⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, 1986), 30; see also 37–38, and *The Nation and Its Fragments: Studies in Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993). See also Peter Hulme and Francis Barker (eds.), *Colonial Discourse/Post-Colonial Theory* (Manchester, 1994).

this new social world, Mosse explains, nationalism became an ally of “respectability,” channeling youthful passions into “love of the nation,” linking sexual identities to national identities, and “spreading respectability to all classes of the population.”²⁷ The new ideologies could overlap on various levels because both respectability and the nation created clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders or between normal and abnormal. National insiders came to be identified with normal sexuality and with adjectives such as “manly” or “virile,” whereas the outsiders came to be associated with abnormal sexual behaviors and “feminine” passions or weaknesses. Nationalisms defined good women as well as good men by claiming that women embodied the nation’s virtue (respectability) and that virile nationalists must defend the saint-like honor of their women. “The dynamic of modern nationalism was built upon the ideal of manliness,” Mosse notes in one description of the gendered nation. “Nationalism also put forward a feminine ideal, but it was largely passive, symbolizing the immutable forces which the nation reflected [e.g., Marianne for the French, Germania for the Germans].”²⁸

Yet the positive sexual images of the good nationalist relied also (as always) on images of the threatening Others who crossed the “normal” boundaries of sexual behavior and “respectable” gender identities. For proper people in all social classes, therefore, the “ugly counter-image of the nervous, unstable homosexual and masturbator ... became an important symbol of the threat to nationalism and respectability.”²⁹ Although Mosse notes that the “male bonding” of good soldiers and nationalists might well have generated homoerotic attachments, the nationalists believed that this specific expression of love and loyalty between men was free of eroticism because it was directed toward a shared love for the nation. It was always the “others” who were prone to sexual corruptions, which may explain why sexual anxieties could easily fuse with racism: those groups who were described as threats to the racial essence of European nations (e.g., Africans, Jews) were also described as sexual threats to national virtues (i.e., inclined to sexual license or homosexuality).³⁰ In short, the emotional aspiration for “pure” nations became virtually inseparable from the emotional aspiration for purified sex, social respectability, and what we might now call “family values.”

Mosse’s account of the connections between national and sexual identities has been extended in a collection of essays, *Nationalisms & Sexualities* (1992), which was edited by four literary theorists: Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger. As the editors explain in their introduction, con-

²⁷ George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985), 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 80, 134, 138, 147, 151.

temporary studies of nationalism and sexuality tend to share the assumption that the cultural meanings of such identities evolve in a dynamic, “relational,” interaction of differences. “In the same way that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ define themselves reciprocally (though never symmetrically), national identity is determined not on the basis of its own intrinsic properties but as a function of what it (presumably) is not.”³¹ This emphasis on the construction of identities through definitions of difference appears throughout *Nationalisms & Sexualities*, but it becomes particularly significant in discussions of nationalist anxieties about homosexuality. Lee Edelman finds such anxieties, for example, in the ways that Americans linked homosexuality to fears of communist subversion during the Cold War. Indeed, the author of an article in *Life* magazine defined the nationalist anxiety in one of the most familiar metaphors of the era: “Do the homosexuals, like the Communists, intend to bury us?” Assuming that the answer to this question called for aggressive action, American leaders of the campaign against communism sought to identify homosexuals in the government because of the “widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation.”³²

Such arguments about the influence of sexual categories on modern nationalisms provide new ways to analyze the emotional intensity that is aroused in “defense of the nation.” Defending a nationalist identity also means defending a sexual identity against threats from others, as Americans have seen in the reactions to proposals that women and homosexuals should have equal rights and duties in the military. Although advocates of traditional exclusions appeal to “nature” in order to support their views, the recurring theme in most recent studies of both national and sexual identities stresses that all identities are historically constructed—the anti-essentialist perspective that also appears in most accounts of ethnic identities.

Contemporary analysts of ethnic nationalisms usually reject the claims of nationalists who say they represent ancient racial, religious, and linguistic communities; in fact, as critical analysts note, such claims inevitably depend on modern narratives. The resurgence of ethnic nationalisms in recent decades, however, has brought ethnicity back into the debate; and Anthony Smith, for one, takes the ethnic claims and continuities of modern nationalisms as a central theme for analysis. Complaining that most approaches to nationalism assume too much of a break between premodern and modern forms of collective identity, Smith argues that national identities are rooted in an “enduring base of ethnic ties and sentiments” and that “ethnicity forms an element of culture and

³¹ Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, “Introduction,” in Parker, et al. (eds.), *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York, 1992), 5.

³² Lee Edelman, “Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet,” in *ibid.*, 268–69. See also Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, 1995), esp. 352–89.

social structure which persists over time.” Modern nations, in Smith’s view, evolve out of “culture-rich communities” that retain “the sentiments, beliefs and myths of ethnic origins and bonds,” all of which contribute to nationalist cultural movements and to aspirations for independent national states.³³

According to Smith, the defense of ethnic communities continues after independence because the new national states, like their colonial or premodern predecessors, inevitably create a “gap” between the state and its “people.” The aspiration for congruence between “state” and “nation” remains unfulfilled, thus fostering new forms of ethnic nationalism among intellectuals and other social groups who find themselves excluded from the dignity and status they wanted the nation-state to provide. Although intellectuals often see nationalism as a way to reconcile the need for modernization (science) and the need to protect national cultures (tradition), they eventually discover that the modernizing project ignores many of the “people” whom the state claims to represent. Ethnic nationalism for Smith thus grows out of a preexisting cultural base, but the ancient culture takes new forms among intellectuals who claim to speak for ethnic communities that have not been recognized, even in their own states.³⁴

Smith’s discussion of ethnicity does not examine the sexual identities that concern Mosse and other recent historians, but he shares their interest in the cultural representations of nationalism and their resistance to familiar, categorical distinctions between “good nationalisms” (Western) and “bad nationalisms” (Eastern). In contrast to Smith and Mosse, however, most authors narrate the history of nationalism with dichotomies that categorize, praise, and condemn the cultures they describe.

Nationalisms as Categories of Historical Analysis

Nationalists typically describe their nations by emphasizing how they differ from others, so the history of nationalisms could be described on one level as a history of intellectual dichotomies (self/other) that create hierarchies of value. In this respect, much of the historical literature about nationalism replicates the intellectual tendencies of nationalist cultures, because it also categorizes cultures in terms of historical differences and contrasting patterns of “good” or “bad” development. This dichotomizing structure in the historiography of nationalism has appeared throughout the twentieth century, beginning with Friedrich Meinecke’s distinction between “cultural” nations and “political” nations in *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (1907). As Meinecke de-

³³ Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (1971; New York, 1983), xxxi-xxxii; citations from the preface to the second edition; and see Smith, *The Ethnic Revival* (Cambridge, 1981); *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986); and *National Identity* (London, 1991).

³⁴ Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, xxxvi, 231-54.

defined the difference, cultural nations were “primarily based on some jointly experienced cultural heritage,” whereas political nations were “primarily based on the unifying force of a common political history and constitution.”³⁵ This distinction referred of course to the contrasting histories of Germany (cultural nation), France, and England (political nations), and it gave Meinecke the conceptual means to affirm the philosophical and cultural achievements of Germany.

Although Meinecke’s categories have often reappeared in other histories of nations and nationalisms, the subsequent evolution of German nationalism and Nazism made most historians far more critical of the “cultural” nationalism that he had admired. Indeed, the ideologies and actions of fascist nationalisms in the 1930s and 1940s have often been interpreted as the final, horrifying expression of a dangerous “Eastern” nationalism that celebrates culture, race, and irrationalism against the political democracy, civil rights, and rationalism of “Western” nationalisms. Hans Kohn provided the classic account of these distinctions during World War II, but his dichotomies have helped to shape the meaning of nationalism down to our own day. “While Western nationalism was, in its origin, connected with the concepts of individual liberty and rational cosmopolitanism current in the eighteenth century,” Kohn argued, “the later nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe and in Asia easily tended toward a contrary development.” This “later nationalism” in places such as Germany thus broke with Western Enlightenment traditions and turned to a disastrous, Romantic desire for “mystical integration around the irrational, precivilized folk concept.”³⁶

Other writers have expanded Kohn’s view of the differences between “West” and “East” by focusing more on politics or social systems, and they have not always made their organizing distinctions as explicit as Kohn’s. Yet the fundamental opposition (West/East) remains an influential paradigm for authors whose research has otherwise carried them far beyond the views and methods of Kohn’s generation. Much of the appeal of this dichotomy stems from the fact that societies in Western Europe *did* develop in ways that differentiated them from other societies to the East. Neither England nor France, for example, had to struggle for the establishment of a national state. Later Eastern nationalisms, as John Plamenatz has noted, faced the challenge of creating new states or asserting the existence of distinguished high cultures—cultures that could not avoid comparative references to the Western national states and cultures that had preceded them (the Slavs offer an example of this complex process).³⁷ Although

³⁵ Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimer (Princeton, 1970), 10.

³⁶ Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, 330, 351.

³⁷ John Plamenatz, “Two Types of Nationalism,” in Eugene Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (New York, 1976), 27, 29-31.

early “Risorgimento” nationalisms could still build their claims for new political states on what Peter Alter describes as the cosmopolitan, “liberal” legacy of the French Revolution, most central European nationalists later embraced an “Integral” nationalism that defined “one nation as the Absolute,” asserted the superiority of specific cultures and races, and described the relations between these cultures or races in a Darwinian language of endless struggle.³⁸

Similar categorical differences shape numerous recent accounts of European nationalisms, including the careful, imaginative works of Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (1992), and Liah Greenfeld (whose argument has been noted in the context of “modernization” theories). Brubaker uses history to explain why it was always easier to become a citizen of France than a citizen of Germany, a significant cultural difference that he traces to contrasting conceptions of “nationhood.” According to Brubaker, France has drawn on the legacy of 1789 to define the nation and rights of citizenship in terms of an allegiance to universal political values and a residency or birth on French territory, whereas Germany has always defined its nation and citizenship as a “community of descent.” French nationalism has therefore been “assimilationist” and inclusive for those who accept French political and cultural ideals; German nationalism has stressed ethnicity and therefore remained essentially closed to others. To be sure, as Steven Vincent points out in another discussion of the French/German dichotomy, the “universalism” of French nationalism has often excluded certain social groups and asserted its claims with violence rather than with intellectual arguments (e.g., revolutionary warfare within Europe, imperialism outside Europe).³⁹ Still, for Brubaker, Vincent, and many others, the distinction between French and German, Western and Eastern, remains the most useful analytical system for categorizing the history of nationalisms—even when the analysis turns to contemporary conflicts in Bosnia, India or the Middle East.

The most comprehensive restatement of these enduring categorical dichotomies can be found in Liah Greenfeld’s *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. This provocative work includes an exceptional wealth of information and theory about nationalisms in England, France, Russia, Germany, and the United States, but its structuring assumptions essentially repeat the oppositions between West and East that have shaped so many books on nationalism since the 1940s. In Greenfeld’s view nationalism first emerged as an affirmation of individual dignity, freedom, rationality, and political equality in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. This early English nationalism was a “good” nationalism

³⁸ Alter, *Nationalism*, 19-23, 26-27; quotation, 26.

³⁹ Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 1, 14, 72, 111-13, 115, 119, 177-78, and K. Steven Vincent, “National Consciousness, Nationalism, and Exclusion: Reflections on the French Case,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, 19 (1993), 433-49.

because it emphasized civic and political responsibilities, recognized the value of individual liberty, and built its political theories on the solid base of practical experience. The same kind of constructive nationalism soon reappeared in America, where it steadily evolved in more democratic directions (except in the slaveholding South) throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Meanwhile, the French developed their own nationalist ideology, stressing rationality and liberty but unfortunately placing more faith than the English in abstract views of reason and the state. Russian nationalists, by contrast, asserted their national identity in terms of “blood and soil” or “spirit,” thereby rejecting reason and celebrating the mystery of the “people” rather than the freedom of individuals. Although this Russian irrationalism was bad enough, the full danger of anti-Western nationalisms emerged finally in the German Romantics’ rejection of rational, democratic, individualist ideals. “The Romantics,” Greenfeld explains, “had no understanding and no taste for the liberty of the individual—namely personal independence and freedom from coercion and arbitrary government.”⁴⁰ German intellectuals therefore conceived of their nation as a higher reality of philosophy and language which manifested itself in the German *race*, the influential theme that would shape German nationalism from the early Romantic poets to the genocidal policies of Nazism. “Germany was ready for the Holocaust from the moment German national identity existed,” Greenfeld writes in a sweeping denunciation of a German nationalist culture that she blames for Marxism as well as for Hitler.⁴¹

Greenfeld’s book thus brings together new and old arguments to reaffirm the analytical categories of most Western writing on the history of nationalism. Returning to the conceptual framework of her predecessors, she draws stark distinctions between Western and Eastern nationalisms and clearly asserts the superiority of Anglo-American, civic-individualist nationalisms against the dangers of German-Russian, ethnic-collectivist nationalisms. The brutal history of “Eastern” nationalisms provides persuasive evidence for Greenfeld’s dichotomies, but her themes also conform to the self-representations of “Western” nationalisms, ignore the brutality of “Western” national states (e.g., she does not discuss the racist destruction of Native-Americans), and show how the history of nationalism in the 1990s remains haunted by the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1940s. Strongly influenced by these inescapable historical contexts, Greenfeld narrates the meaning of modern nationalism with the polarities and oppositional categories of the twentieth century’s most conspicuous political and military conflicts.

⁴⁰ Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, 348-49; and on other nationalisms cf. 31, 79, 86, 167-68, 256, 261, 409, 420, 449, 476, 484.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 384; see, also, 387-95.

The Future of Nationalism and its Interpreters

I have suggested that the historiography of nationalism precludes definitive conclusions, much as nationalism itself eludes definitive narratives. It is therefore impossible in my view to isolate one theory or narrative of nationalism and assert its clear superiority over all others, though I think the most innovative recent work appears in the cultural histories of nationalist ideas. Every theory I have summarized offers insights that would-be historians of nationalism must consider as they construct new accounts of nationalist ideology or action; indeed, few historians will be able to move beyond the explanatory categories that have already been used to describe nationalism's pervasive influence in modern world history.

We can nevertheless expect new theories to emerge, in part because nationalism shows few signs of disappearing, in part because the evolution of nationalist institutions and ideas will direct attention to new problems, and in part because the dynamic history of culture is bound to produce new conceptual perspectives for describing what we have seen before. In recent years, for example, new theories about gender, sexuality, literary narration, and the cultural construction of identity have helped historians to redefine the meaning and influence of nationalism. Whatever else one might say about the study of nationalism, it has always been a field in which the political and cultural contexts of the interpreters has had an especially visible effect on the themes of the discourse. This historical pattern will surely continue in the future, so that changing contexts will inevitably help to shape new narratives about nations and nationalisms. (There is of course never a single context that accounts for historical texts, just as there is never a single nationalism or a single influence on any specific nationalism.)

The cultural construction of scholarship, like the cultural construction of nationalisms, is a dynamic process, dependent on relations of identity and difference, influenced by economic forces as well as ideas, and generating new interpretations or new careers like nationalisms generate new states. Historical analysis of nationalism thus remains as open-ended as the contemporary, evolving history of nations. It is also true that disputes between theorists of nationalism persist and recur like disputes between nations, though the conflicts of scholars rarely carry the same deadly consequences. But who can predict the conflicts and consequences of scholarship and nationalism in the next century?

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