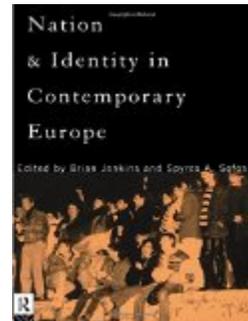


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian Jenkins, Spyros A. Sofos, eds. *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. x + 294 pp. \$40.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-12313-6; \$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-12312-9.

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Nation and Identity...Once More

These days, nationalism studies tend to become some kind of meta-discipline overshadowing all other specializations in the social sciences.[1] A search in the UCLA catalogue produces almost a hundred books published the past ten years with at least two of the keywords “Europe,” “nation,” and “identity” in the title. Consequently, in order to be what reviewers like to call “a significant contribution to the discipline,” a new book in this field should either offer a solid and inspiring overview of the theoretical state of the art or—even better—become a hallmark in the development of the theory of the nation in its own right. The third, less ambitious, but probably the most needed option would be to write a book that brings theory and reality together harmonically. The debate Gellner versus Anderson versus Smith seems to be past its peak and there is no reason, as Rogers Brubaker phrased it, to continue to flog the dead horse of primordialism.[2] Therefore, the editors of this compilation are quite right to deal pragmatically with the current theoretical debates and focus on the link between theory and a wide variety of “nationalisms” in European nation-states.

What (most of) the thirteen authors and editors of the compilation reviewed here have in common is not primarily a special competence in the field of nationalism studies, but rather the fact that they belong to the faculty of the University of Portsmouth, as lecturers in area studies or European languages. The book *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe* is the work of a research group of the same name, established at this university in 1993. In the preface, the editors admit that this close collabora-

tion did not lead to a “collective theoretical perspective,” but at least they think they have found a minimal consensus in their “shared insistence on the importance of global economic and political change as an explanatory framework” (p. ix). A rather meager result, considering the fact that this book is “the fruit of genuine collaboration, facilitated by a programme of research seminars” (p. ix).

Part I—“Nation and Identity, Theory and Context”—deals with questions of nationalism in contemporary Europe on a more theoretical and/or comparative level. The theoretical cornerstone of the book is the chapter “Nation and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe,” written by the two editors. The other two chapters in this part—one on languages of racism written by Martin Evans and one on immigration and citizenship by Mark Mitchell and Dave Russell concentrate on central questions of nationalism in Europe today on a more concrete level of analysis. The editors’ chapter does not open any new theoretical perspectives, but it is a good and, above all, matter-of-fact survey of current theories that bodes well for the rest of the book. Evidently, economic globalization, worldwide cultural assimilation, multicultural societies, and European integration will change the nation, national identities, and nationalism without, however, eliminating them. First of all, Jenkins and Sofos explicitly refuse to flog Brubaker’s dead horse. Secondly, in the Smith-Anderson debate the editors steer a pragmatic middle course: the nation has some “eternal” roots (in a non-primordial sense), as Anderson’s imagined commu-

nities have to be based on some “raw material.” Yet, in the sense of what Yuri Slezkine describes as the “Great Ethnological Predicament,”[3] the editors underline that the possible criteria of national unity—language, culture, territory, ethnicity, history etc.—are so heterogeneous and non-congruent that they merely serve as raw material and do not determine the structure. Consequently, the nation as a political artifact is the main interest of the editors: “(The nation’s) power therefore can be unifying, homogenising, as well as democratising as far as the national community is concerned. The way the nation is imagined is therefore crucial in exploring the relationship between nationalism and democracy” (p. 14). They furthermore argue that the French voluntary and the German ethnic versions of the nation are stereotypes. Consequently, the real interest lies where these types of nations and nationalisms meet historically or geographically. This conclusion basically opens the floor for the regional specialists to present the relevant case studies.

Part II—“Nationhood and Nationalism in Western Europe”—focuses on the (re)construction of national identities in Britain, France, and Germany. France and Germany being the classical examples in any discussion of the relation between state- and nation-building, the authors of these two chapters obviously, did—as the idea of the book prescribed—read each other’s texts and offer a pair of solid, contrastive overviews for the concept of the nation in Germany and France in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Kenneth Lunn’s contribution “Reconsidering ‘Britishness’” opens with the idea of “Englishness” on the cricket field. A nice metaphor, really, but quite lost in the subsequent list of causes for the re-emergence of fears about the dilution of British stock: the loss of empire, economic and diplomatic decline as well as European integration. This fear, according to Lunn, leads to the urge to “establish continuity with a suitable past,” to invent traditions (Hobsbawm)(p.87). Here, Lunn inserts an explicit warning that the histories on which these constructions of “Britishness” are based are not simplistic evocations of historical identity, but rather selective constructions in a permanent process of (re)formation (p.86). Next, the author focuses the historical construction of “Britishness” in the interwar period. Having discussed some ideas by Priestley and Orwell in detail, he concentrates on British cinema and newsreels in the 1930s next. Here, the issue of national identities fades into the background and it becomes obvious that Lunn’s main interest is in labor history. In his conclusion, Lunn is—in contrast to most readers, I guess—surprised that “at the end of the

twentieth century, and following an intense period of radical political and economic change...the image of Englishness evoked remained significantly rural,” and that the “dominant sense of Britishness is a manufactured product, engineered to appeal.” This idea that history-based national identities are constructions should not come as a surprise, and yet, the final lines of the chapter seem to lead us back in the other direction: “The retreat in the 1990s to a vision of England and Englishness which are in many senses mythological is an indication not merely of the barrenness of contemporary political discourses in dealing with concepts of national identity, but also of the powerfulness of the historical making of what passes for that identity” (p. 98).

“Multiple National Identities, Immigration and Racism in Spain and Portugal” is one of two chapters in Part III—“State, Nation and Region in Southern Europe” (the other chapter dealing with Italy and focusing recent regionalism and the crisis of the Italian state). The author is David Corkill, who lectures the languages of the Iberian peninsula at Leeds University. His article opens in the same erratic way as Kenneth Lunn’s: somehow it has the look and feel of a conference paper for an audience of specialists in Iberian history and politics, moving back and forth through history in a rather associative way, hurrying from the failure of nineteenth century nationalism in Spain to Franco’s intolerant conservative nationalism in the 1970s in less than two pages. At the same time, Corkill has the irritating habit of naming the authors of his quotations in the text without further explanation, leaving the reader with the unpleasant feeling he ought to know these names.[4] With the end of authoritarianism in the 1970s, the author slows down somewhat, but the consistency of the argument hardly improves, because he keeps switching between daily politics, minority legislation, and national symbols. Some figures on immigration and two related “flashpoints” from the Portuguese and Spanish debates in immigration follow. Next, but without an apparent link to the previous sections of the chapter, Corkill explores the fate of the extreme right in post-authoritarian Iberia. All in all, his theoretical position remains extremely indistinct. At the beginning, he seems surprised that “Iberia demonstrates that centre and periphery nationalism can coexist with supranationalism in the form of plural identities” (p. 155). Later, he concludes that nationalism and separatism in Spain refute the idea that “modernisation and economic growth encourage integration and a weakening of parochial loyalties” (p. 169). Not only does this conclusion seem to be at right angles to the editors’ “ex-

planatory framework” quoted above, but a simple causal link between modernization and a decline of nationalism also is not quite the state of the art, apart from the fact that “modernisation” seems to refer here to processes of industrialization as well as to postmodern “atomization of society” and “erosion of class barriers” (p. 169). It seems doubtful, moreover, whether Basque nationalism should be characterized as a “parochial loyalty”: Current regional separatism in Spain seems to have definite overtones of a modern struggle for political power and economic resources.

For Part IV—“The Nation-State after Communism”—the editors chose Poland, Russia, and former Yugoslavia as case studies. Paul Flenley’s chapter on Russia—no doubt, one of the most complicated cases of nation-building around—is a relief in terms of the clarity of its style and the consistency of its argument. Flenley offers a well-structured and up-to-date view of “the relationship between Russian and Soviet identity in the Soviet period and analyse(s) the way in which the concept of Russia emerged out of the collapse of the Soviet Union” (p. 223). In all brevity, moving from nineteenth century Slavophiles to Lenin’s national compromise and Gorbachev’s nationality problem, his view is far from one-dimensional, arguing that “the Soviet system at one and the same time exploited, controlled and attempted to supersede Russian nationalist sentiment” (p. 223). As a condensed historical and political overview with a constant focus on the politics of nationalism and national identities his chapter probably comes close to what the editors really had in mind for the eight national case studies in the book.

The chapter on Yugoslavia offers an interesting perspective: the author, Spyros Sofos, resisted the temptation to let the eruption of post-communist nationalism predominate in his account. He rather concentrated on the rise and fall of another collective imaginary, the anti-nationalist new version of Yugoslavism based on a social contract and the prospect of economic development. Frances Millard’s Polish case study, however, seems to have missed the point made in the introduction: the nation is a political project indeed, but it is also a system of social classification.[5] If one accepts this double definition of the nation, there is no reason to continue with a “German” definition of nationalism as a per se aggressive, excessive form of patriotism. Nevertheless, Millard reduces the question of Polish nationalism to a question of electoral constituency of right-wing extremist parties in post-communist Poland and comes to an overly optimistic conclusion.

At the end of the book the editors themselves summarize the results of the common effort of the Portsmouth faculty: “The multiplicity and diversity of the processes of construction of national identities and nationalism is an essential part of national identity” (p. 285). At the same time, issues of migration, exclusion, and national homogeneity mark the common ground of contemporary European nationalisms. The rather pedestrian and meager (two pages) conclusion nevertheless reveals the crucial dilemma of the entire project: “Throughout the book, we have not attempted to formulate or impose any general theory of nationalism as it is clear that this would have obscured the astonishing diversity of nationalist projects in contemporary Europe” (p. 286). The editors, however, seem to confuse a common theoretical perspective with a binding (mono-causal) explanation such as Marxist economic determinism. Rather, they could have argued theoretically, why they wanted their authors to focus on one particular aspect of nation-building and nationalism, such as, for instance: symbols of the nation, economic development and nationalism, political discourses on the homogeneous nation or the use of history in the (re)construction of the nation. In this sense, the choice of a theoretical framework may be an article of faith for some, but it definitely does not imply the imposition of a single, all-embracing dogmatic explanation for all.

The editors had, as they admit in the conclusion, “the ambition to emphasise the internally contradictory nature of contemporary European nationalisms” (p.286). Rather, one might wish they had been more successful in dealing with the internally contradictory nature of the book and its authors. They ended up with a book comprised of a good theoretical introduction and a few excellent case studies, but—alas—also a book that includes far too many chapters by authors who obviously do not usually deal with questions of nationalism and nation-building in their research, or who simply offered the editors a reworked chapter on their own favorite topic, ignoring the central idea of the book.

Notes

- [1]. K. Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?” In *Daedalus* 122: 3 (1993), p. 37.
- [2]. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed* (Cambridge 1997), p. 15, n. 4.
- [3]. Y. Slezkine, “N. Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenetics,” In *Slavic Review* (Winter, 1996), pp. 826-862.

[4]. See, for instance, on page 157 the quotations from Brassloff and Payne: A. Brassloff, "Spain: Democracy and Decentralization," In A. and W. Brassloff eds., *European Insights* (Oxford, 1991); S. Payne, "Nationalism Regionalism and Micronationalism in Spain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26 (1991).

[5]. K. Verdery, "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'?" In *Daedalus* 122: 3 (1993), pp. 37-46.

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