

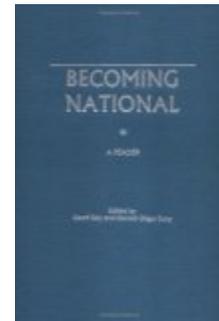
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Geoff Eley, Ronald Grigor Suny, eds. *Becoming National: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. vi + 518 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-509661-3; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509660-6.

Reviewed by Marie-Joelle Zahar (McGill University)
Published on H-Teachpol (September, 1998)



Back to the Future? Nationalism At The Eve of The Twenty-First Century

Putting together a reader on a subject as vast and diverse as nationalism is no little task. Readers, moreover, challenge our ability to organize knowledge in a creative, yet thorough manner. This is, however, what Geoff Eley and Grigor Suny have attempted in *Becoming National*, a valuable addition to the existing literature on the subject.

Being national is the condition of our times. The centrality of nationalism to the political organization of life in the twentieth century warrants a closer examination of the phenomenon at a time when, to quote Partha Chatterjee, nationalism is being viewed as “a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life” (p. 3). In the first part of the volume, Eley and Suny review approaches to the social construction of nationality. How one “becomes national” is the main question addressed in this section. The answers are diverse but they all converge around the notion of re-invention of the past. Noteworthy in this respect are two contributions. Miroslav Hroch traces the process of nation-forming to larger process of social transformation, mainly capitalist industrialization and the spread of market relations. He attempts to distinguish the social settings most fertile for the implantation of an active nationalist commitment. In the words of Eley and Suny, what makes his work so important is that “there is still relatively little literature exploring the social bases of the mass patriotism” of central and eastern Europe post-1848 (p. 16). What makes it even more important is his attempt to provide an explanation which combines the study of nationalism with a study of social processes and

delivers “a socially and culturally grounded model of political development” (p. 59).

Prasenjit Duara, on the other hand, differs with the dominant view which locates the nation in modernity. Looking at China, he argues that national communities should be understood as relationships based on inclusions and exclusions and proposes that an incipient nationality is the result of a perceptual hardening in the boundaries of an old community. Hardening occurs when the community adopts a “master narrative of descent” which clearly demarcates those who belong from those who don’t.

The notion of inclusion and exclusion underlies the second part of the volume. In this section, authors scrutinize the fabric upon which nationalist accounts are weaved. Nationalism, they argue, is created in dialogue with and in opposition to certain groups, namely women and other “races.” Women and “indigenous” colonial peoples have contributed to shaping nationalism at the same time as the “national” family refused to acknowledge them as full members in its fold. Of the many contributions to this section, I will focus on the chapters by Anne McClintock and Ann Stoler. McClintock studies the “historical practices through which social difference is both invented and performed” (p. 260). In the context of South Africa, she recounts the invention of “the archaic” in the Tweede Trek, the central symbolic representation of Afrikaner historiography, and establishes the centrality of the concepts of family, wife (Vrou), and

mother (Moeder) in this process. McClintock masterfully demonstrates how, at the same time as the nation is gendered by the use of domestic analogies, women are contained, disempowered, and relegated to the domestic realm. For her part, Ann Stoler takes a look at the “border” of categories. She studies mixed racial figures such as the *mitis* in the colonial Dutch Indies and in French Indochina. Stoler scrutinizes court cases involving *mitis* defendants and establishes that, in the colonial context, a subtle subtext links race and nation. In colonial Indochina and in the East Indies, apparently inclusive notions of citizenship defined by blood nonetheless allowed the perpetuation of all kinds of racial exclusions.

If nationalism is constructed out of diverse materials, it is defined and re-negotiated on the terrain of culture. Having established this contention in the second section, *Becoming National* takes a critical look at the horizons of nationalism in an increasingly interdependent world. It is difficult to single out “representative” contributions to this section. In fact, rather than advancing a single claim, the articles in this final part of the reader are representative of future directions for research and inquiry. Liisa Malkki’s questioning of the concept of nationalism in light of research on its meaning and expressions among refugees suggests new theoretical horizons. Paul Gilroy, David Morley and Kevin Robbins address the nationalism-culture nexus and the creation of identities in counter-distinction to an “Other.” The approaches are varied: history, anthropology, literature, and the like. The material of discussions ranges from exiles to television cartoons. The many contributions suggest however that, in spite of the seeming retreat of the nation-state, nationalism is here to stay. Indeed, it is a more virulent sort of nationalism that emerges out of the accounts, one that does not only build on a past but defines itself in terms of the present and in opposition to people with whom the community has “visible differences.”

If the two essential requisites of a reader are breadth and depth, then *Becoming National* has met its objectives. The reader does a good job at representing the various intellectual traditions on which the study of nationalism draws. Similarly, the volume gives voice to specialists from several fields—political science, sociology, anthropology, literature, psychology, and more—thus acknowledging the essentially interdisciplinary nature of its subject matter. It also offers a balanced mix of theoretical reflections and case studies drawn from a wide array of geographical areas such as Latin America, Europe (west,

east, and south), Asia, and North America. Finally, the editors must be commended for discussing nationalism not only in the academic and political contexts but also in its social practices. In so doing, they ensure that *Becoming National* will be useful to students of nationalism across the social sciences and to an interested non-specialist public as well.

Although *Becoming National* deserves praise for its breadth and scope, there is a gaping absence in the reader. The volume has nothing to say about the Islamic World. Yet, many of the contributions to the last section underline the way in which crucial contemporary debates and nationalist practices create the other in terms of Islam and the Orient. By excluding (readily available) analyses of (among others) Arab nationalism, the editors “sin by omission.” They commit the very mistake about which they are sounding the alarm when they state, “the late twentieth century discourse of German nationalism has become reinscribed with a racism, which is no less disturbing for its convergencies with similar racisms in Britain and France, where the common referent is increasingly the dangerous and sinister Islamic Other” (p. 480). Yet, by excluding the Islamic World from their analysis, the editors reinforce the academic perception of Middle Eastern / Islamic exceptionalism, perhaps unwittingly confirming the region as an academic “Other.” This omission resonates much like the practical construction of this other that the editors find to be at the center of the disturbing new variant of European nationalism.

On another note, the editors of *Becoming National* attempt to situate the individual contributions in the broader literature on the topic. However, given the variety of approaches, critiques, and avenues for future research that are represented in this reader, a concluding chapter would have been welcome. Instead, Eley and Suny prefer to leave it to their audience to spin the various threads of the theme together and come up with their own conclusions. This is a common shortcoming of edited volumes which map the intellectual debate’s past and present but refrain to draw even tentative conclusions and suggestions for its future. In spite of these two criticisms, *Becoming National* remains a valuable tool for students and researchers who seek a better grasp of the multi-faceted phenomenon of nationalism.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-teachpol>

Citation: Marie-Joelle Zahar. Review of Eley, Geoff; Suny, Ronald Grigor, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader*. H-Teachpol, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2317>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.