

# H-Net Reviews

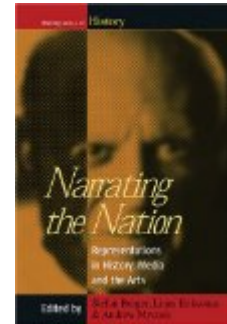
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, Andrew Mycock, eds. *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts*. Making Sense of History Series. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. 348 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-424-1.

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## What an Epistemologically Conscious “Scientific” History (of Nation) Would Have Needed...

The greatest phenomena in the history of man’s spiritual evolution are, as transition, simultaneously conclusion and commencement. They stand between the old and the new as truths that are originally valid only at their particular place in history.

–Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*[1]

*Narrating the Nation, Representations in History, Media, and the Arts* (New York, 2008) is an important, indeed significant, collection of essays that examine the historiography of presenting “nationhood.” There is a shared point of view in the historiographical perspectives of the contributors that warrants the collection being considered as a “transitional formulation” in Jaspers’s sense of the term. One sees the authors (and editors) as recognizing the value of the postmodern deconstruction of one “objective” reality for historical-contextual claims, but one sees also a movement among the authors and editors toward a new form of in-common historical reality that I choose to call a reality of “multiple objectivities.” *Narrating the Nation* can thus be seen as a watershed book for our time, opening an avenue for a global historiography of “in-common historiographical premises,” even as it insists on discerning the diverse and complex perspectives that constitute any particular study. The “in-common” is a methodological agreement, even as arguments will continue among the same historians who exercise it.

The plea for the in-common set of historiographical premises that constitute a methodology sensitive to

diverse approaches as well as differing epistemological premises is well articulated by Chris Lorenz in his essay. Lorenz, in his condemnation of the tenets of nineteenth-century historiography, even in its greatest innovators, such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Leopold von Ranke, writes: “What an epistemologically conscious ‘scientific’ history would have needed from its beginning ... was a reflection on how to compare different theories and narratives with each other, and a reflection on how to evaluate their different epistemological and practical qualities” (p. 49). Lorenz’s formulation of this “error” is in its best sense a significant thesis for *Narrating the Nation*’s historiographical contribution to our time, but, in the worst sense seems a failure to appreciate how he himself, and the other contributors to this collection, travel the same patterned path of Humboldt and Ranke. Among the contributions of Humboldt and Ranke to the in-common objectivity that became normative for historiography of the nineteenth century was the historicism that saw a constantly changing societal reality, as well as a more complex vision of human psychology derived from the many voices of the late eighteenth century that had deconstructed the classical models of character. One of the “needs” Lorenz, his fellow authors, and the editors of *Narrating the Nation* must address to truly “own” their innovative importance is to realize how they share a project that recurs every century, synthesizing the critical, deconstructive ideas of an age toward a new in-common foundation that will create a new normative practice.

The editors of the collection—Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock—have sought in their included authors the means to achieve Lorenz’s cogent statement of the goal of a differentiated and comparative address of the epistemologies that examine the issues of nation, if not within one essay, at least for the reader in their reflection upon the overlapping points of view among the essays. *Narrating the Nation* begins with an introduction and four essays that lucidly formulate the historiographical horizon by which we can comprehend the concept and fact of “nation” more thoroughly, indeed, more objectively in our time. Berger’s introduction, and essays by Allan Megill, Lorenz, Mark Bevir, and Ann Rigney offer what seems to me the alpha and omega of contemporary understandings of “what,” “how,” and “why” nations are a geographical and legal fact by dint of the narration of human culture as it is conceived by its members. My review will consider the strengths of these excellent essays, as well as what these very strengths suggest is still needed. The special studies of art, music, film, and other forms of national expression that are an extension of the historiographical perspectives of the editors and authors of the initial essays are each a gem of its kind. There is no weakness in thought or writing in this collection. Moreover, non-Western addresses of nationhood, which complete the text, open thought beyond Europe or North America toward the nations of the planet, albeit with an “in-common” set of historiographical premises, the ones I see as so significant for the next phase of scientific historiography.

Let me continue, however, with a more general view of “what is still needed” in considering the narrative construction of nations for contemporary historical inquiry even after this text’s well-articulated contributions to the problematic. In a time when 195 nations coexist in the world, 192 of which are in an internationally cooperative organization, the United Nations, a dwelling on what constitutes a “nation,” “national identity,” and “national allegiance,” as well as all other related issues in a world of emergent “internationalism” is certainly in order. Less than one hundred years ago “national sovereignty” was the only sovereignty recognized, and the tensions of nation in relation to the new sovereignty of internationalism did not exist. *Narrating the Nation* as a collection does not address this increasing tension of nation in its relations to internationalism, but it does establish a foundation in its address of the “nation” as an entity that enables that needed inquiry in subsequent studies. A second “need,” which to be sure would require a much larger text, are essays on the origin and evolution of the West-

ern nations (and other world “nations”), offering a history of narrative that gradually has become akin to the law of gravity in their presumed permanence to the majority of the human family. A developmental address of the evolution of the societal “nation” with an eye to the narrative discourse that accompanied that late medieval and early modern phenomenon in the West, for example, could be congruent with the theoretical perspective of most of the authors included in this collection. Perhaps the most glaring “need” still to be met is some progress toward the consensus that was sought for by the editors of the collection, a progress that could be stated as a set of axioms which might guide more pointedly future research in the narrative studies that are suggested.

As for two of these three needs, they do fall outside the stated purpose of this collection. The included essays that meet the objectives of the editors do not intend through the study of narrations to examine the problems facing the fact of “nations” in relation to internationalism, nor to examine, based on a longer history and more extensive sociology of nations indicated within their narrative understandings, the possible alternatives or at least augmentations of nationhood as many who are theorists of the European Union seek.[2]

The chief audience that informs the purpose of this collection is that of contemporary historians of culture who are interested in historical inquiry guided by narrative evidence of what nations are now and were in the recent past as exemplified in the expressive evidence of their members. Berger writes in his introduction: “Given the huge importance of interlinkages between the different genres and their practitioners, both historians and scholars of literature, music, film and the arts need to study fictional, artistic, musical, visual and historiographical representations of the national pasts alongside each other. Ultimately, therefore, the book becomes a plea to integrate further our studies of different genres and bring together in a truly interdisciplinary manner research on history, literature, film, the arts, and music” (p. 10). Berger appeals here to a wider scope of expressive narrative that can enable diverse historians in the arts as well as the sciences to find an “in-common” when comprehending “nationhood,” an in-common that benefits from focus on the *historia* of the telling within disciplines that can range from art through zoology in how national perspectives can be discerned. Although the sciences do not become a focus for Berger or the other contributors, studies have been conducted into national perspectives that influence the scientific narrative as well as the arts.[3] The third “need” of an epilogue

that reviews historiographical perspectives that are in-common among those whose essays are included in *Narrating the Nation* would make sense. The collection is a consequence of a five-year program entitled “Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe” funded by the European Science Foundation. I believe that the funding source warrants what can be considered a justified outcome, that is, a set of axioms that can enable more focused inquiry by those who are drawn into the compelling, overlapping arguments of the historians of this collection.

Axioms of historiography, to be sure, are not a normally shared set of guidelines, especially among the English-speaking members of the profession. Yet, as difficult as a common set can be as a normative outcome, the United States did manage ten amendments in its young Republic, and recent discussions on H-Net that take up the presence or absence of “laws” in historiographical inquiry seem to point to a new interest in the possibility of shared dialogue within certain agreed on parameters.

Bevir in his essay offers a statement of objectives that can be seen as supportive of in-common axioms: “If we disagree about the relative merits of narratives, we might try to draw back from the point of disagreement until we find a common platform—consisting of ways of reasoning, standards of evidence and agreed propositions—from which to compare the narratives” (p. 71). That “nationhood” is a narrated concept is agreed on by all the included authors, and squares in its epistemological premises with what I contend is the foundation of all sound contemporary historiography—probing with differing tools of inquiry and thus kinds of evidence the beliefs and conceptual justifications of all those who consider themselves members of a “nation,” as well as examining those astute historians of a certain epoch whose narrative strategies reflect their own nation as well as epoch. This does not make contemporary historiography “postmodern,” though there is a range of thinking among the included authors from a modernist perspective to premises of historiographical practice that could be termed postmodern. To seek an in-common set of premises concerning the epistemological bases of examining “nationhood” in our time is an enlightened goal, one that can establish what our time lacks—a dialogue among historical inquirers akin to the dialogues that are standard among the inquirers of the physical sciences.

The emphasis on cognition in its depth and dimensions is the avenue for finding axioms of “nationhood”

as narrative. Axioms create a distance from the literal, seemingly “self-evident” fact by providing a concept for exploration of the “why,” the “what,” and the “how” of that fact. Axioms are vehicles for thought, not proven grounds of truth in themselves. Megill’s essay, which begins the text, states succinctly this path toward possible axioms shared by all contributors to the project: “we should think of historical writing, not as something that engages in the building of national identities, but rather as something that critiques all historical identity-claims, and in doing so, as a by-product, opens a space for constitutional allegiances and behavioural norms that stand at a remove from what is *simply* given to us by the past” (p. 32). Megill in so stating reminds the reader and fellow historiographers of “nationhood” that the result of inquiries into the narrative of nation leads to how we ourselves think and act within our nation—a truly Nietzschean reminder, and in that an explicit intention of Megill’s own respect for Nietzsche (p. 22). Such action would be within a self-critical mind-set. Deliberation of axioms can be an avenue for praxis with historical analogues as models. In his distinction between having an “identity” as a member of a nation or simply having an “allegiance” to a nation, Megill provides a platform for acting with some distance from nationalistic self-identity, and thus a platform for more critical choice in one’s praxis within national movements, goals, and yes, wars. What Megill terms the “master narratives” of identity—think of Hegel’s test of a nation as that entity one is willing to die for—are best replaced by new narratives that can embrace allegiance to one’s society with critical comprehension, even remove.

Narratives are shown in this collection to differ not only because of the national political-social-economic-ideological heritages of each society, but also because of cognitive differences among its own members. The contributors take into consideration the multiple objectivities of a society in interpreting the diverse self-images that are expressed among its members. In doing so, this collection performs a function that can be recognized in Nietzsche and his contemporaries, the surpassing of the previous normative accounts of human psychology and its range of normative political praxes. Many of the included authors not only participate in their generation’s deconstruction of the normative twentieth-century psychologies that emerged from Nietzsche’s generational peers as they in their turn enact the spiral renewal of culture, but also begin to contribute to a new shared normalcy that will be the next historiographical phase.

Lorenz and Rigney bring up for historiographi-

cal consideration the fecund historiography of narrative forms that Hayden White has developed. These historical-logical forms of representing reality coexist within every Western society, even as national styles of narration contribute to their expressive logic. Lorenz, while appreciating the generative historicism critically possible through White's narrative typologies (p. 36), does not see how this focus is indebted to past generations whose stylistics White has deepened and augmented; past generations that in their time deconstructed what had become lazy, indeed false, concepts of interpretation. On the next page, Lorenz tells the reader that the historiographical difficulties inserted into the study of history that contributed to the false consciousness of "nation," which we in the first decade of the twenty-first century have inherited, can be initially located in the historiography of two centuries ago, for example, in Humboldt. But it is Humboldt in his text on general linguistics that introduced the notion of the diversity of human expression out of its finite means, an understanding that Noam Chomsky credits for his own work in transformational grammar(s).[4] Again, we must understand how a spiral development in the deconstructive address of normalcy, and the construction of a new normalcy is constant in the culture of nation and the regions of the world. In 1836 when Humboldt, building on Friedrich Schleiermacher and his own early inquiries that deconstructed previous understandings of language, wrote his text on linguistics, he was engaged in constructing a new normalcy alongside his contemporaries. Rigney, in crediting White with "pioneering work" in comprehending the role of narrative in historical accounts, also problematizes this finding with the lingering value of "facts" whose account lend themselves to an antinarrative, a discursive account that follows "the rules of evidence" (pp. 85-86). Here, the false consciousness of our inherited normalcy, not adequately deconstructed, interferes with a full appreciation of the discernments possible with the new cognitive tools, such as those that White offers. The "courtroom" of the historical account, neutral as Ranke would have it, cannot be found if one truly discerns the narrative diversities White examines. White's metahistory is not solely of "plots," but of the tropes that establish and carry events. What one has then is a product of "multiple objectivities," each objectivity a truth that is carried by the style of trope distinctive to this or that historiographer, not a false narrative. Sound use of facts may not give us the one neutral truth, but it can pit one sound narration of events against the subtle differences of another sound narration by dint of how the stories are told image by image, as they locate themselves within the scope of

the event as viewed by multiple tellers. Rigney argues well for the role of the fictive narrative to do the work of what Nietzsche would call the monumental truth of an event (pp. 86-87), but the nonfiction in itself can in the hands of the historian communicate the memorable within the scope of its narrative truth.

Bevir's concept of "radical historicism" that cuts away the lingering concepts that have been surpassed, such as the neutral truth attainable "wie es eigentlich gewesen war," is perhaps the most "postmodern" voice in its sense of cutting the Gordian knot of traditional "developmental historicist" accounts of nation. Like Habermas's demand of a *nullpoint* for considering German historiography, Bevir's wiping the slate clean has its merit. Yet the shared narrative tools and understandings of all the contributors of this collection can be located in the critical theories of the past, if the spiral of historiographical antecedents is traced back generation by generation. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's study of national differences in the staging of *Merope* (1733) can be seen as his deconstructive contribution to the study of national theaters in 1767.[5] Lessing's later *The Education of Humankind* (1780) indicated an autonomy of human interpretation in its potential diversity that is now with us. Can we speak of a "developmental historicism" of cognition that must be appreciated?

Among the fine collection of essays, that of Heidemarie Uhl, "From Discourse to Representation: 'Austrian Memory' in Public Space," fulfills the project of a developmental historicism. Her essay not only offers a finely developed history of the changing Austrian address of the National Socialist regime in Austria, but also fulfills the move toward the "in-common" as historiographical theory. For Uhl, the "in-common" is reflected in her nuanced use of memory and memorial, which is integral by this time to all historians engaged in reconstructing nationhood and national identity with an eye to its changing ideation over time. Uhl differentiates between the "liquid" and the "concrete" representations as memorial, adapting the concepts from Aleida Assmann. The former are "representations of memory in monuments and on commemorative plaques, in museums and exhibitions, during anniversaries and on days of remembrance" (p. 207). The "liquid" are the narrative plots, and myriad addresses of past events as memory creates its selections and hiatuses. For the time both before and after the Waldheim debate, liquid and concrete memory is viewed by Uhl in its changing intents and forms. Her cogent presentation of the key ideas of a phase reflects her incisive mind. Her essay moves from "crystallization" to "crystal-

lization” of a societal segment of thought (pp. 207-208). The particular “concrete” and “liquid” memorialization of each phase in the changing post-World War II address of the National Socialist regime’s crimes is carefully described. Uhl does not drown us in the general, rather carries us from particular to particular. Austria, which can be called a nation that has always preserved its memories well, spawning thinkers who rely on memory, such as Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Edmund Husserl, and others (not only Jews), finally memorializes its crimes against the Jews and other minorities—the current phase of memorial according to Uhl, a phase that struggled to become against the kind of resistance of memory Freud had described.

## Notes

[1]. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 244.

[2]. See, for example, Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[3]. See Mark E. Blum, “Contrasting Historical-Logical Narrative Conventions in Germany and Austria and Their Influence upon Inquiry and Explanation in the Arts and the Sciences: An Example from the Economic Inquiries of Gustav Schmoller, Max Weber, Carl Menger, and Ludwig Mises,” in *Political Economy, Linguistics and Culture, Crossing Bridges*, ed. Jürgen G. Backhaus (New York: Springer, 2008), 59-100.

[4]. As cited in Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965), v.

[5]. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Munich: Wilhlem Goldmann, 1966).

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