

John Breuilly Interview for H-Nationalism **Question & Answer Transcript**

Informational Query: At least one list member wondered if the Thomas Eriksen Gellner lecture you mentioned in your interview has been published? Are they published in *Nations and Nationalism*?

John Breuilly's Answer:

The annual Ernest Gellner lecture is published in *Nations and Nationalism*. There is usually a period of about one year between lecture and published version.

Question: The debate between ethnosymbolists, primordialists, and modernists seems to be basically focused on why and when nationalism and nations first developed. Would it be fair to say that nationalism studies have been heavily -- perhaps too heavily -- focused on the origins of nations and nationalism? Have other topics, such as the persistence of nationalism, been neglected?

Thanks,

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John Breuilly's Answer:

That is a very good question. I do think the question of origins is important, as I think I indicated in my interview. I also think it bears upon the question of persistence; if you think you have an idea of what caused something, you might think you have an idea about when that cause might cease operating. However, I think the matter is complicated in a number of ways.

First, again as I indicated, nationalism seems to go through constant transformations which in turn are related to new developments. At the very least we need to distinguish between different kinds of nationalisms and which might persist or not. For example, one might argue that aggressive ethno-nationalism will cease to operate in a territory which has been ethnically cleansed. Michael Mann, in *Dark Side of Democracy*, suggests something of the kind for the northern hemisphere (with the pessimistic implication that this is still something to be completed in the southern hemisphere).[1]

There has been a lot of discussion about whether "nationalism as a whole" might be coming to an end; an argument, for example, Hobsbawm advances. But I think that is different from the argument about persistence or not in particular cases. And we are then back to what we mean by nationalism. Billig, for example, in *Banal Nationalism* argues that there are various reasons why "hot" nationalism comes and goes, but in addition argues that it can only re-emerge after a period of absence if sustained by a more continuous "cool" or "banal" nationalism.[2] If one agrees with him, one might argue that nationalism simply persists in this low-level way for so long as there is a world of nation-states and a tendency to see things in terms of national "us and them." But one might then have a set of arguments about the decline of "hot" nationalism. So far as I know, no one has attempted to provide this in any general or theoretical way but rather on a case-by-case basis. John Hutchinson in *Nations as Zones of Conflict* does advance an original and powerful argument about the periodicity of nationalism which might help.[3] But it is a good question that I need to think a lot more about.

Notes

[1]. Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2]. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

[3]. John Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict* (London: Sage, 2005).

Question: Twice during the interview, you mention the distinction between civic and ethnic types of nationalism. In the first instance, in reference to a paper on the American Civil War, you say that you "think that the theoretical debates about the ethnic/civic nationalist distinction are important for historians of nationalism." (11) Later, when commenting on the refrigerator metaphor, you say that "Nationalism should not be used as a moral term, or divided into good and bad types (civic/ethnic, western/eastern), or simply confined to the fields of political conflict and violence, but seen as a type of language, sentiment and politics which intrinsically both includes and excludes and which will take on a "dark" or a "bright" aspect according to situation." (13) My question is this: What, as a historian, is your position on the civic/ethnic distinction? As a non-historian writing a critique of this approach to nationalism, I would appreciate your insight.

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John Breuilly's Answer:

I do not think the distinction civic/ethnic is very useful if seen in terms of different types of nationalism which is used to group specific cases. That is how it originally worked in the form Hans Kohn presented it, of western and eastern nationalism. For powerful arguments against the distinction used in that way there is an article by Oliver Zimmer, as well as an essay by Rogers Brubaker republished in his book *Ethnicity without Groups*.^[1] However, I do think the discourse of nationality in a way operates between two poles, one of which is purely about inclusion/exclusion in terms of voluntary commitment to certain rules and institutions and the other in terms of involuntary characteristics shared with others. By and large, most of the arguments mix these elements in particular ways, e.g., centring on history or customs or language or religion, often in complex combinations. I think they are only sharply defined when in conflict. So precisely because in the American Civil War there was an argument about excluding Afro-Americans or German and Irish immigrants from the nation, so those who came into conflict with people arguing such cases, presented a sharp argument about a nation based on the universal principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In practice both sides constantly modified and combined their positions (e.g., Lincoln was originally satisfied with the continuation of slavery in the states where it was the law but not to see it extended to other states). So I think we need both to see the need always to combine choice and "groupness" in national discourse, used both to identify and to include/exclude, and that sharply counterposing these two poles as actual types against one another reflects particular kinds of conflict.

Notes

[1]. Oliver Zimmer, "Boundary Mechanisms and Symbolic Resources: Towards a Process-Oriented Approach to National Identity," *Nations and Nationalism* 9.2 (April 2003), pp. 173-193; and Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Question: In discussing the origins of the Confederacy during the American Civil War, Brian Holden Reid has written that, "drafting a constitution, no matter how delicate the legal refinements, does not make a nation." This in reference to the urgency with which the newly formed Confederacy had set about the task of drafting a Constitution, before in fact they did much of anything else. At the same time, writing at the beginning of the Civil War a contributor to *_De Bow's Review_* wrote that "every nation and every sovereign State exists only by virtue of a constitution."

Do you think that we have here encapsulated a difference between American (maybe even New World?) and European notions about the formation of nations? For Americans, and we have seen this in Japan after WW II and in Afghanistan and Iraq today, drafting a constitution does seem to function as a surrogate for the act of nation-building. Do you agree?

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John Breuilly's Answer:

I cannot answer this at all adequately in a short time. I do think the notion that "new nations" can be constructed by an act of will, symbolised and expressed above all through a constitution is a powerful idea which goes well beyond the USA. Arguably it played an important role in the French revolution. In the 1848-49 revolutions constitutions were often seen in this way. That is particularly true of some of those debating in the German National Assembly. But of course for many involved in such debates, the constitution would only work if it took into account the specific historical situation and was negotiated in order to construct a necessary consensus.

It helps, of course, if one wins the particular war or revolution which made it possible and indeed even imperative to draw up such a constitution in the first place. After all, if the South had not been defeated (and that, I think, would have counted as victory), might the constitution have become the basis for a "new nation"? There were many who seemed to think this could happen at the time, including outsiders like Gladstone.

And in modern Europe, Habermas famously argued for "constitutional patriotism," in a way making the Basic Law of 1949 a founding document. But it seems to me that no historian seriously argues that a shiny new constitution is sufficient. And such a constitution itself becomes a repository of myths and memories in just the same way some people argue ethnicity does. Because the constitution has a variety of meanings: as a set of rules shaping the form and conduct of rule, as a political act which brings certain people together in a certain way, as a commitment to a particular set of principles, and as an historical myth of origin. Maybe the USA has put too much faith in just one aspect of that, that is as a commitment to a set of principles. But maybe others put too much faith in something else, such as a notion of historic community or the capacity of self-interest to generate solidarity.

But I don't think I have begun seriously to answer this question.