

John Hutchinson Interview for H-Nationalism

Question & Answer Transcript

Question: At one point in the interview, you mention that nationalism studies have focused too heavily on the production of nationalism, and have given too little attention to its broader reception. A couple of queries: (i) Could you elaborate a little on this point, perhaps suggesting works that have successfully done this and/or ways that you think reception could be better explored? (ii) Is the production-reception distinction the best way to open things up, or would it be better to think instead about expanding our definition of the production of nationalism?

John Hutchinson's Answer:

Production-reception of nationalism

Scholars have neglected the study of how nationalist ideas are received because it is so difficult to research. It requires us to know what the stock of existing ideas and sentiments was among specific groups and how these interacted with nationalist ideas: were the latter rejected, did they displace older ideas, or were they re-interpreted through traditional lenses. One would expect to find such studies in anthropology, for example by Clifford Geertz on how Indonesian national leaders such as Sukarno were conceived and constructed themselves through traditional conceptions of charisma and authority.

As I mentioned in my interview in my study of Irish cultural nationalism I was interested in the translation of ideas into social action. In practice, it meant examining how certain integrative visions of national identity were constructed by historicist intellectuals (archeologists, philologists, poets etc) and when and how they were selectively adopted by political journalists who were interested not so much in history, the arts, or language but economic and social-political programmes. During the early twentieth century these political manifestos in turn influenced a rising generation of educated Catholics, but this intelligentsia provided its own twist to ideas initially promoted to unite Catholics and Protestants. Upper class Catholics trained in Jesuit colleges who expected to be the new governing class had much more internationalist (European) conception of the Gaelic revival; those from more humble peasant-farmer and small town backgrounds brought the xenophobic passions of their class to the revival, making it an anti-modernist movement. In the process the early visions of the historicist intellectuals took on meanings quite unintended by their authors.

I suppose I'm saying that we should be talking about appropriation rather than just reception, because reception can imply passivity. It is easy to align a production-reception distinction to elite-mass distinction, with elites as producers and the masses as receivers. But of course that is quite wrong on two fronts. First, there are quite a range of groups within societies each their chosen spokesmen and women, and so the process is complex and dynamic. Second, everyone in the process of their daily life is a meaning producer, even at a low level.

I can't think of any study of nationalism that adequately conveys this complexity. Often the evidence isn't to be found. There are studies of the ideological pronouncements and actions of elite figures and there are good studies, though not enough of social movements, but linking the two levels is rare.

I agree then that we have to expand our definition of the production of nationalism. Billig's and Yoshino's studies, however, provide a good start.

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?

John Hutchinson's Answer:

Constitutions and nation-building

If I were Walker Connor, I would say that with constitutions one is talking about state- rather than nation-building. But it is true that many nations do justify themselves as missionary peoples by virtue of an ancient or a modern constitution. Can the act of making a constitution, by itself, form a nation? I've got my doubts, and I agree with John Breuilly's answer to this question. I don't think the concept of nation was to the fore when the USA was constituted. Historians tend to argue that an American nation was born only after the civil war. The idea of blood sacrifice for the nation is a much more potent factor, as we see also in the case of Australia. It was the battle of Gallipoli in 1915 where so many young Australian men died that was perceived as the rite of passage for the nation. Constitutions by themselves are too bloodless to stir people; they have to be associated with some other climactic event, for example a war of liberation or religious revival.

(Please note that we also posed this question to John Breuilly, after his H-Nationalism interview. His reply can be viewed here: <http://www.h-net.org/~national/interviews.html>.)