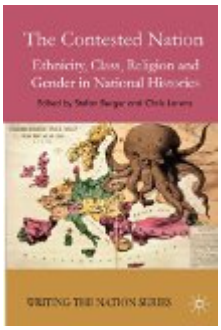
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz. *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 634 S. $110.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-50006-8.



Reviewed by Michael Bentley

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2009)

In 2003 the European Science Foundation began a five-year programme of research on the ways in which the national histories of Europe had been framed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. The fruits of that endeavour are now beginning to appear and the current volume comprises the third of a six-volume series called Writing the Nation that will range across many aspects of historical writing during the great age of professionalization and burgeoning national identity. One of the general editors of the series, Stefan Berger, joins here with the accomplished Dutch historiographer and theorist, Chris Lorenz, to bring together twenty essays focussing on one slice of the investigation: the problem of conflict in European historiography with particular reference to ideas about ethnicity, religion, class and gender. It should be said at once that this is a very valuable investigation of major themes and one that should be on the bookshelf of anyone seriously interested in the history of European historiography. The bibliography alone would make the venture worthwhile and there is no doubt that these essays will form a significant starting-point for further work.

All the major states of Europe find some representation in the volume and in places where no single historian could render the story coherent – Spain and Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands, the Habsburg empire, the Nordic countries – a partnership or team of writers brings its expertise in language and context to the rescue. The geographical areas are wrapped inside an envelope of theoretical overviews introducing the idea of conceptual history (Chris Lorenz), the nature of master-narratives (Krijn Thijs), the place of women in European historiography (Jitka Malečková), nation and ethnicity (Joep Leerssen), religion and nation (James Kennedy), class and the 'Other' (Gita Deneckere and Thomas Welskopp) and the perspective offered by Jewish historiography (Ulrich Wyra). These are meant to identify key problems and open the ground to be explored in the detailed coverage of territories. Inevitably this works only partially because authors writing on their specialisms want to produce their own arguments and approaches so they either ignore edito-

rial admonitions to write in particular ways or make themselves sound uncomfortable by obeying their instructions in a wooden or formulaic way. Nor do the specified desiderata have equal weight in national histories. Ethnicity can be central, as in the Balkans. Religion can supply a master-narrative, as in Spain. Class can bulk large in one developing state such as Germany and yet play little part in another such as the Netherlands. Gender suffuses all things everywhere but is the devil's own job to locate in historiography which is why most contributors do not try very hard to find it outside a perfunctory paragraph or two. At one level these difficulties merely speak in support of comparative history whose point is to isolate difference as much as similitude. At another level – one perhaps more prominent in the mind of the reader – the authors of the geographical essays sometimes feel rather 'forced' by the agenda set for comparison, rather as though a market gardener skilled in producing tomatoes had suddenly been told to grow mushrooms.

Some of the better mushrooms grown here shoot from marginal land. Doubtless this is a distortion that follows from so much more having become known about the major states of Europe but maybe readers will share this reviewer's sense of learning most from essays dealing with the periphery – with the Iberian peninsula, with the Nordic countries, with the Belgium/Netherlands tension, with the patchwork quilt of the Habsburg lands, with Greece and Turkey, rather than the more familiar territories of Britain, France, Germany and Italy where less scope remains for riveting the imagination with new information and viewpoints. Even so, each piece has its free-standing merits and the sense of disjunction will only become marked in a professional obsessed with consistency or a perverse reader like the present one who reads the case-studies first and turns to the interpretative introduction only later and senses the distance between form and content.

The 'Contested Nation' is a very ambitious book and like all ambitious ventures it will attract easy criticism for its omissions or inevitable slips in the detail. Most of the corrections will prove far more small-minded than the book itself and may be passed over without comment apart from an obvious lament for imperial ideologies as instruments of contestation which one would normally expect to see in the nineteenth century. Just two thoughts seem reasonable, otherwise, in sketching the book's limitations. The first is unfair because it could not have been otherwise. ESF funding means that the work can relate only to Europe; yet of course time and again one senses that a comparison with extra-European territories such as those of South and Central America would not only shift perspective but better suit the nodes of comparison chosen for this text. A purist might want to insist, therefore, that 'The Contested European Nation' would have made a better title, though an anti-purist could equally remark that it is long enough as it is. A second difficulty cannot fly over the heads of the editors since it is of their making. They are right to defend the idea of a conceptual history which drives a penetrating rod through the national histories of Europe. But which concepts? They plainly believe that the ones deployed are the most rewarding, but these ways of organizing the material could also be described as the most conventional, and frankly wearisome, descriptors of social experience. Naturally one sees that other questions and issues were ruled out of court because they are to be treated in other sections of the programme but the confinement does make itself felt in some parts of the story offered here.

Good books provoke responsible criticism and the last word belongs not to disparagement but to achievement. The team marshalled by Lorenz and Berger have done excellent work and their conclusions offer a fundamental reference-point for the study of national and transnational historiographies across the European continent.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/

Citation: Michael Bentley. Review of Berger, Stefan; Lorenz, Chris. *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24917

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.