Definitions, periodization, and prospects for the *longue duree*

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**ABSTRACT.** Two related problems face the study of nations and nationalism. Primordialism, as the belief that nations have usually existed from time immemorial, has generally been discarded by scholars. However, perennialism, the belief that a few nations existed in antiquity or the Middle Ages, and revived subsequently, has more support, along with the concept that national self-assertion generally becomes stronger at historical intervals. Probably more support has been given to the use of ethnie (as presented especially by Anthony D. Smith) a lengthy preparatory stage for the typical nation when its name, constitutive myth, historical memory, and territorial attachment are acquired. More research is needed on the chronological and geographical variations on these themes.

**Defining nation and ethnie**

Any social science approach to a historical problem demands careful development of definitions, with full awareness that these definitions will, to a great extent, determine the response scholars will bring to the issues posed. The examination of the phenomenon defined as nations is no exception, although at the start of many research projects students do not recognize this. In some studies the problem, or at least certain aspects of it, have already been carefully examined; in effect the parameters of the approach have been set in advance, as in many studies of economic development. To be sure, problems of nationhood and ethnicity in specific regions have attracted close scrutiny. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, it should be evident that generalizations concerning the characteristics of nations over centuries are just beginning.

The social science approach, especially concerning Europe, has been to assume that the unit of study should be the nation-state whose boundaries have been, with minor changes, represented on twentieth-century maps. For example, during the earlier decades of that century Carlton J. H. Hayes’ textbook provided a handy framework for numerous treatments of individual countries, but by 1933 he had published a probing collection on the origins and diffusion of nationalism. In 1935 he published the revised edition of his textbook of which part four, treating the nineteenth century, was entitled *Democracy and Nationalism*. Whereas earlier editions of the textbook had
taken the nation-state (especially in Europe) as the natural unit of study, the 1935 edition and his 1933 collection became major models for students during the interwar years and for some time thereafter. Hans Kohn (1944) provided a similar emphasis on diffusion of the nationalist ideology to other European countries during the post Versailles years.

With the revival of interest in nationalism during the 1960s, scholars began to wonder whether diffusion could account for the rapid growth and fervor of nationalism (see especially Waldron, 1985). Some turned to economic explanations, including Marxist explanations derived from nationalist movements outside Europe. Anthony D. Smith (1984: 299–300), on the other hand, questioned whether even in England the obvious widespread consciousness of class distinctions was so marked by a ‘lack of cultural depth’ as to be incapable of sustaining a protracted struggle for social transformation. Crawford Young (1993: 22–23) suggested none of the modern diffused ideologies could exert sufficient affective attraction in many developing countries to overcome ‘primordial’ religious and family loyalties.

The issue is a critical one, going back to the French Revolution as the widely acclaimed beginning of forcible modernization. As the renowned American historian Lynn Hunt concludes a very recent article, the doctrines and practice of revolutionaries ‘made possible not only the Terror, but also the authoritarian police state of Napoleon, socialism, communism, fascism, and, of course, representative government’. But these same revolutionaries had discovered how difficult it was to preach the social contract while forced to engage in ‘the more mundane daily life with political institutions’ (Hunt 2003: 19). In fact, Maurice Agulhon (1979) has vividly shown how conscious these revolutionaries were of the need to replace the images and symbols of the former religious, political and social order. Whatever the validity of these symbols of Marianne in combat, their affective appeal to dissatisfied radicals was strong enough to dominate such radical movements for a half-century. Smith notes that Auguste Comte as well as John Stuart Mill agreed that the Revolution had performed a vital requirement by replacing status quo forces (Smith 1991: 145). Marx more than agreed; his ideology supported the achievement of the bourgeoisie in sweeping away clerics, kings, and nobles themselves, as well as their traditions, in considerable measure by substituting a nationalist ideology and its symbols. Once that was accomplished, the bourgeoisie had fulfilled, in Marx’s worldview, its historic function and (as Lenin insisted more thoroughly) should be swept away in its turn by a proletarian consciousness.

Like many others, Anthony Smith was quite aware of the tendentious nature of such rhetoric. Like most social scientists, he recognized the importance of economic modernization. Again, like most social scientists, Smith accepted the concept of social construction of received institutions and ideologies. In contrast to Marxist and marxisant analysts, however, he decisively rejected the assertion that classes (a category itself subject to social construction) must play a dominant role in the history of modernization. The
process of elite intervention in that history was far more complicated and contingent. For Smith, this insight opens up a realm of historical contingencies, including inherited national myths, symbols and other durable aspects of nationalism.

Periodization

The issues just treated and references to ‘primordialism’ suggest that forces operating to produce nationalism (some would add ‘and all recent nations’) are intimately related to historic periods. Smith advanced (1989: 107) a working definition of the nation, ‘a named community of history and culture, possessing a unified territory, mass educational system, and common legal rights’. Admitting (Smith 1989:107) that such a definition contained a large portion of the modernist position, he added ‘I take the definition from the ideals and blueprints of a generation of nationalists and their followers’. But he recognizes that one or more definitional categories may be missing in a concrete case.

Even so, the characteristics of a nation viewed as an ideal type severely limited Smith’s nuanced conceptualization of historical development of identity communities, his major field of study. His vigorous defense of the ethnie as a usual preparatory stage for the nation overcame this restriction. Previously this term, originating in Greek, had been widely adopted in France and elsewhere on the Continent to refer to an ethnic group that had not attained independence.1 Soviet Russian scholarship, however, tended to refer to national groups not recognized as union-republics (sometimes with UN membership) as ‘nationalities’, a common term for ethnic groups in the USA and some other English-language publications. Smith (1989: 110–3) points out that an ethnie that became a nation usually retained the name it had held – sometimes as far back as the medieval period, and occasionally dating back in the case of the Jews even to ancient times: ‘A multitude of ethnies in the ancient and medieval worlds ... at first sight resemble but are not nations’. These resemblances occasionally included similar myths, symbols, and histories and cultures.

In fact, the resemblances were so strong that theorists of national development, especially in the 1980s and later, found it impossible to distinguish between ethnie and nation chronologically. In English, the most elaborate rejection of the distinction, especially for Britain, has been Liah Greenfeld (1992). She ascribed nation status to the USA, a thoroughly modern civic nation with recognized boundaries but lacking many of the historic traditions and cultures attributed to civic nations by Smith (1986: 113). Several settler nations on attaining nineteenth or early twentieth-century independence without a preparatory period as ethnie also seemed to put in question the historical role of the ethnie.

Historiographical developments, such as the considerable recent literature arguing that France was not even linguistically unified until Napoleon III’s compulsory military service, followed a few decades later by mass public
education, appear to demonstrate that even the paradigm state for modernization theory emerged very unevenly. Scholars of modernization could defer their examination of national achievement of modernity by ascribing earlier manifestations to the ethnie. While gradually recognizing that civic nations emerged at a far earlier stage by adopting the affect characteristics of the ethnies preceding them, Smith (2000: 39) has rejected both rigid periodization and fixed ideology in defining the emergence of nations. Further data on a unified economy was attained by Greenfeld who has advocated the end of the sixteenth century with mercantile capitalism under Elizabeth I as the start of the modern English nation.

On the other hand, Andreas Kappeler, the most distinguished German historian of ethnies and nationalities in Russia, after systematic investigation concludes that no nationalism could exist in the eighteenth century there because the embryonic propagator of such concepts was not usually the political authority (Tsarism) but the religious force of Orthodoxy (Kappeler 1986: 83–99). Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (2001: 3) have recently pointed out that the relation between religion and nationality is one of the most under-researched topics in the entire field of nation and ethnic studies. This is, it seems to me, entirely correct. In the final section of this paper I shall endeavor to show, through two non-European examples, why this is, and why Smith (1994; 1996) and his two colleagues so candidly urge making up for the scarcity of research on the nationalism-religion connection. Here this urgency can be at least partially inferred from Smith’s earlier work (1984: 283).

Not only are the postwar ethnic autonomy movements simply a recent variation of a wider ethnic and national revival going back to the late eighteenth century in Europe; this latter revival is but the latest of a series of such resurgence, some of them purely local and others widely diffused. In pre-Roman antiquity, just as in the early European Middle Ages, and in the Far East and Africa more recently, that ancient and widespread social formation, the ethnie, has occupied a variable but important position in the hierarchy of human allegiance and has, on occasion, served as a focus for political movements and organizations.

It is fairly evident that in this remarkable appreciation, nearly two decades before his editorial group expressed the need for more research on relations of nationalism and religion, Smith was pointing to eras before those that most of us can handle historically to suggest the influence of religion on political allegiances resembling nationalism. More recently, this inference has been supported by Kappeler’s suggestion that it was often Orthodoxy rather than the Tsarist regime that instigated political moves in the early modern period.

At the same time that he was probing these ancient political motivations, Anthony Smith was moving during the 1970s from the dichotomy between primordialism and modernism to a triple distinction between primordialism (generally considered a questionable classification), perennialism, and modernism. In reference to my own work (Armstrong 1973; 1982; 1992; 1995) he saw both acceptance of very old ethnies (Jews, Armenians, etc.) that had periods of evident nationhood a millennium ago, and other ethnies that were completely
subjected politically, but evolved culturally – a historic pattern which one may consider (as Smith does) perennial nationhood. At the same time, my work occasionally identified discrete periods when general national assertiveness was clearly evident. Usually such periods alternated with periods when national and ethnic factors were far from the forefront of political consciousness. Examples might be the Voelkerwanderung between the Roman Empire and Charlemagne’s partial restoration; the struggle between popes and anti-popes; or between Reformers and Counter-Reformers, when appeal to national consciousness (especially linguistic) was strong. But the religious conflicts were followed by the age of absolutism until the French Revolution. One may term such alternations, usually involving a multitude of ethnic groups, ‘cyclical perennials’; but pending much more searching historical investigation, one cannot predict that sufficient regularities were present to be confident in using the adjective ‘cyclical’. I am sure Anthony Smith has such questions in mind, and will employ his extraordinary skill to clarify the issues.

Clearly the issues involving perennialism are closely involved with periodization as well. Although some scholars may prefer substitutes like proto-nation, retention of ethnie has good arguments. Whether these will stand up to deeper historic understanding of phenomena preceding the age of industrialization and the sharper turn of the French Revolution remains to be seen. It is at least possible that sweeping extension of research to regions outside Europe will support a conclusion that the ethnie is a highly appropriate term for the modern European heirs of Hellenism. This may not, however, be appropriate for Far Eastern peoples or Africans who have attained quasi-dominance in some Western Hemisphere regions after cruel struggles unarmed with the political and philosophic skills inherited by their European masters.

In contrast to Frederik Barth, Smith does not concentrate on symbols used as border guards. He does, however, stress the importance of symbols originating well before the modern era, along with the myths which articulated them. Even taken alone, this insight has given him a remarkable position as a theorist of the ‘legacy of the distant past’ and as an interpreter of modern investigations by specialized classicists and medievalists. (Smith 1984: 291). This is feasible only because Anthony Smith has an extensive historical background, especially in humanities like art history, rare among social scientists. This circumstance points clearly to the long research path that needs to be trodden to understand how nations emerged, what the turning points and essential transformation of characteristics were, and how changes were linked to the essential requirements of modern nationalist movements.

Prospects

Because the legacy of myths and symbols has derived to such a great extent from the Jewish and the Christian traditions, the center of investigation of ethnies (or whatever the perennialist may eventually employ for the longue
durée preceding modern nationalism) will revive investigation of the religious sphere. Understandably, many scholars will prefer to limit their scope to Europe, or to Europe and parts of the globe (possibly fewer than they imagine) where European religious patterns have been firmly implanted. However, even European Christianity has varied so much over time and place that the subjects that can be examined comparatively and in comparison to national subjects are inexhaustible. This applies not only to the familiar—and lamentable—divisions between Orthodoxy and the West, including the former’s intervals of iconoclasm. It also applies to the West’s Reformation and Counterreformation, echoing sharply still in parts of Europe, America, and southern Africa within separate churches, even before the impact of symbolic variations such as those in the pre-Tridentine and post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Churches. Corresponding changes following the Second Vatican Council, or accompanying medieval Renovatio of classic symbols, will require research extending far beyond the customary ecclesiastical or social science intellectual subjects.

Along with Steven Grosby, Anthony Smith has already been a pioneer of such investigations. It may seem to be an unwarranted imposition even to suggest that he might extend his study to new geographical regions. However, although it is over 50 years since I heard Arnold Toynbee lecture, and considerably longer since I intently studied his great volumes, I have not met a more profound prescription for grasping the nature (and lessons) of history than his advice to acquire a fresher and probably more valid perspective by thorough study of other civilizations. To Toynbee the classicist this prescription initially, and no doubt essentially, applied to the classic Greco-Roman civilization. But he offered as well the array of civilizations, long dead or uncomfortably alive, that rested on a different religious, and an enduring cultural basis from Western Christendom to a degree to which the latter civilization, variable as it was, could not offer.

Oriented (it is strange how one reverts to this curious verb, so familiar in military and civil life during the years around World War II) pragmatically while getting a belated higher education, I could scarcely acquire the full acquaintance with our classic heritage that Toynbee so superlatively demonstrated. I am convinced that Anthony Smith has an advantage there that will become evident as he works at his projects of explaining the myth-symbol complex that so often is related to the classics. Be that as it may, I chose Russia as my area study, which implied learning two languages of the region plus graduate courses in five disciplines directly related to it. As a third area specialization (for years I had qualified by the same criteria just mentioned for the Western European area) I chose the Middle East on the idea (in 1947) that, with drastically reduced requirements, it would be as important for Russian foreign and domestic policy as any region other than the Far East. From the perspective of civilizations the Middle East is more distinctive than Russia, which (in contrast to Toynbee) I have long had difficulty in conceiving as a separate Christian civilization. By studying and observing the Middle East, one does obtain a very special perspective on modern as well as earlier history.
The published response of the comparatively few scholars who have fully specialized on the Middle East testifies to the deep and lasting impression they have gained. This is especially true of the young Quaker scholar at the University of Chicago, Marshall G. S. Hodgson. Before his premature death in 1968 he had prepared (but not entirely published) the massive work on Islam’s history that, in my opinion, constitutes the masterpiece of area studies. Essentially it is a history of ideas and movements rather than of the externals of politics and economics, and for that reason is the more amazing. Consequently Hodgson begins the study with a discussion of Islamic civilization, skillfully and objectively comparing it to Western civilization while thoroughly establishing Islam’s claim to be a co-heir of Persian, Greek, and Jewish cultures. In his introduction, that has been compared in scholarly profundity to Toynbee’s work, Hodgson provides numerous practical suggestions valuable for any one undertaking a complex study of any civilization. Some readers will remain unconvinced that Iranian civilization and Arabic civilization remained distinct under the many centuries of Islamic influence; but, he writes ‘if we make it a single civilization, we must give some reason why’ (Hodgson 1974: 32).

For Xavier de Planhol, ‘The nations of the Prophet’ were rather different (1993: 22–26). ‘The major languages, Arab, Persian, and Turkish possessed numerous words to designate ethnic groups, but it is significant that none of these ever furnished the vocabulary for incipient nationalism’ (1993: 22). However, the concept of territorial patriotism arose well before nationalism in a distinctive country like Egypt, where the invader of this Ottoman possession, Bonaparte, tried to utilize the sentiment. ‘Even today in the Muslim world, nationalism arises not from a positive affirmation, but as in the nineteenth-century Central European and Balkan nations from a feeling of oppression’ (1993: 26). The anti-peasant sentiment in many areas undermines solidarity. ‘The nation (omma) is only an intermediary, a stopping point along the road to a superior stage’ – unity of Muslims (1993: 30).

In the final analysis, de Planhol can only term Turkey a complete nation, whereas Iran remains partly an empire, Afghanistan an anti-nation, the Maghreb rather stable royal states, those of Arabia unstable. Surely (to me) this is partly because where there are only temporary stopping points as states, no ruler, king or dictator, has legitimacy compared to that of the religious spokesmen.

For the time being these hints (which seem moderate to me) concerning the factors differentiating Islamic nations from contemporary European nations must suffice. But bear in mind that even a century ago modernizing nations of European origin confronted interventions by militant religious organizations only somewhat milder than those now prevalent in much, but not all of the Islamic sphere. One must hope that belligerent passions will subside enough to permit thorough exploration in the near future. Lacking personal observation or protracted study of eastern and southern Asia, any comments I might make about prospects there for really deepening our understanding of the evolution of nations would be of little value.

There is one other sphere, often dismissed or even ridiculed, that could present serious difficulties for a major new nation-state. Brazil, with a
population of nearly 200 million is the fifth largest country in the world, and next to the USA the largest in the Western Hemisphere. Brazil’s area and natural resources also place it in the front rank for future prospects. It has recently conducted a genuine presidential election, and is unified linguistically by the Portuguese language. At a recent meeting of the Council on Foreign Relations’ new Miami branch (consisting mainly of ex-diplomats and businessmen) suggestions were made that the USA give Brazil priority over Spanish American countries in the near future.

Nevertheless, a sharp religious division, accompanied by cultural cleavages, appears to threaten the country’s unity. Protestant missionaries work unhampered in this nominally Roman Catholic population, but pressure to return to non-Christian faiths is growing. In several Spanish-American countries such pressure has arisen mainly among native American Indians; in Brazil the population of non-European origin is predominantly African by descent, and close to a majority if one (somewhat questionably) combines ‘blacks’ and ‘pardos’ (brown). By far the greatest authority on the ancestral and reviving religions of this population is sociologist Roger Bastide. His book on African religions appeared in 1980; both the original French and the English translation attracted wide interest. Fifteen years later a second French edition appeared (Bastide 1995). While generally updated, the new edition was most remarkable for its brief preface by one of Bastide’s colleagues, who informs us that Bastide has become not only a Brazilian, but an initiate of the principal African religion in Brazil, candomblé.

My own brief observations suggest that candomblé has coexisted for centuries with Catholicism, as in the Bomfém church of Salvador da Bahia, where many of the adornments and motions of the worshippers suggest candomblé influences. Apart from Brazil, manifestations of clandestine takeover of Catholic churches by devotees of African religions have even appeared in the USA. The pantheist cult known in the Caribbean as santería was brought by Cuban immigrants to the south Florida church worshippers of Our Lady of Charity, popularly known as Our Lady of Exile (Tweed 1997: 79). In Bahia followers of European appearance predominated, whereas at Our Lady of Exile, Cuban blacks are more prominent. Elsewhere (New Orleans, Savannah) in the southeastern USA, where the African worship is known as voodoo, adherents are almost all from a tiny minority (generally politically inactive) of the African-American communities.

Bastide describes the formation of the pantheon (with somewhat varying names) of these religions as the coalescing, under forcible abduction of slaves from scattered African homelands, of regional or tribal deities, with each assigned to a special protective role perceived as helpful by the god’s devotees. Bastide’s description almost precisely fits the pantheons composed of Greek gods with differing attributes commemorated in the Homeric epics and subsequent Hellenist dramas. In turn, the Romans adapted their pantheon to the Greek model, usually retaining different names; e.g. Athena became Minerva, but remained goddess of wisdom. Even the barbarian Germanic
pantheon was similarly reworked on the Roman and Greek models. Incidentally, all three religions were of Aryan origin, thus ethnically and geographically remote from the African cults (Borkenau, 1981). Since the Brazilian experience, although centuries old, is still unfolding, following Bastide’s careful, yet sympathetic analysis may provide the serendipitous advantage of improved understanding of very remote ethnoreligious experiences in Europe. Nevertheless, the chief motive for carefully following the evolution of candomblé, santeria, and voodoo will probably remain the recognition that cults, which include features abhorrent and possibly dangerous for non-believing neighbors, require vigilance, restrained by tolerance for unusual beliefs, especially when they are the product of striving for solace during centuries of oppression. Years before candomblé was carefully scrutinized, a politically popular slogan in Brazil was creating a new tropical civilization. If this project is serious, results will inevitably look different from the civilizations of Europe, North America, and of the Muslim world.

I cannot anticipate completing systematically any of the various areas of research that Anthony Smith has so trenchantly identified. It is, however, a matter of great satisfaction for me to find, inspired by and often taught by Anthony Smith and his colleague John Hutchinson, such a devoted group intent on making consideration of nations and ethnies a major subject of research. I believe that in future decades their work will revolutionize the application of sociological models to history. My own suggestions on the broader influence of religion on nations and nationalism leads to consideration of how African religions with their novel, but far from unprecedented pantheon, may help in a needed reconsideration of the religious structures known to the nineteenth century. Perhaps this reappraisal will extend as far as the sociological pantheons (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) of that century or even to sociologist-theologian Peter Berger’s contention that all pantheons are to satisfy the human need for secure identification when confronting the inevitability of death.

Note

1 Roland Breton’s little book on the subject in German translation was published in Vienna in the *Ethnos* Series (Breton, 1983).

References


