

# NATIONS AND NATIONALISM IN A GLOBAL ERA



ANTHONY D. SMITH



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*For Diana*

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a Global Era

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Anthony D. Smith

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*For we fight not for glory, nor riches, nor honours,  
but for freedom alone, which no good man gives up  
except with his life.*

Declaration of Arbroath, 1320

*Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the  
secret of redemption.*

Baal Shem Tov



## *Preface*

Many people throughout the world have been astonished and saddened by the sudden eruption of ethnic conflict and nationalism across the globe. They had hoped for a world free of ethnic dissensions and national conflicts, in the belief that ethnicity and nationalism were being rapidly superseded. They forget that ethnic community has a long history and that nationalism, as an ideology and a movement, has been a powerful force in world politics since at least the French and American Revolutions. The recent resurgence of nationalism can only be understood as part of a long historical process, and analyses that commence with the fall of the Berlin Wall, or even the Second World War, are apt to be shallow and misleading.

My aim in this book is to assess some of the ways in which the resurgence of nationalism today has been analysed, and to offer my own viewpoint on recent trends in the formation of nations and nationalisms, building on ideas briefly adumbrated in the last chapter of my *National Identity* and an earlier article.<sup>1</sup> It is not my purpose to provide a survey of current nationalisms, or to discuss empirical trends in particular parts of the world. The reader will not find here any discussion of current struggles in the former Yugoslavia or

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the Caucasus or South Africa, nor of the prospects for Sikh, Palestinian or any other nationalism.

Nor do I seek to engage with the wider debates about modernity or 'globalization' and their consequences, except where they touch on issues of national identity and nationalism, since I believe that the key to an understanding of nations and nationalism as general phenomena of the modern world lies more with the persisting frameworks and legacies of historical cultures and ethnic ties than with the consequences of global interdependence. This is not to deny the magnitude of those consequences. Their main effect on modes of human association has been to undermine traditional structures of community and to diffuse the ideology of nationalism, 'disembedding' it from its particular national contexts. But the disembedding of nationalism was already achieved in and through the French Revolution, and it is possible to see nationalism, paradoxically, as one of the main forces for global interdependence.

My argument is rather that nationalism derives its force from its historical embeddedness. As an ideology, nationalism can take root only if it strikes a popular chord, and is taken up by, and inspires, particular social groups and strata. But nationalism is much more than an ideology. Unlike other modern belief-systems, it depends for its power not just on the general idea of the nation, but on the presence and character of this or that specific nation which it turns into an absolute. Its success, therefore, depends on specific cultural and historical contexts, and this means that the nations it helps to create are in turn derived from pre-existing and highly particularized cultural heritages and ethnic formations. This, not some revolutionary but abstract formulation, is what stirs so many men and women in so many corners of the world today. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, nationalism is far more akin to religion and religious community than to, say, liberalism and socialism. This is the main reason why current 'modernist' and 'post-modernist'

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critiques of nationalism seem so often to miss their mark, and why it is necessary to look elsewhere for the continuing power and vitality of nations and nationalisms in an interdependent world.

I am very grateful to Anthony Giddens and Polity Press for enabling me to set down my views on what has, once again, become a pressing international, as well as social and cultural, issue. I should like to express my warm thanks to Professors Giovanni Aldobrandini and Maria Damiani Sticchi for inviting me to Rome to give some lectures to students at the Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali which formed the starting-point for these reflections; and to the members of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism, and the Research Workshop on Ethnicity and Nationalism at the London School of Economics, for stimulating conferences, seminars and discussions of recent contributions in the field. For the views contained herein and for any errors, however, the responsibility is mine alone.

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# *Introduction*

In this book I want to examine why, at the close of the second millennium, there should be a resurgence of ethnic conflict and nationalism, at a time when the world is becoming more unified and interconnected, and when the barriers between ethnic groups and nations are falling away and becoming obsolete.

We are constantly being reminded that the globe we inhabit is becoming smaller and more integrated. Everywhere closer links are being forged between the economies and societies of our planet, and everywhere formerly independent states and nations are being bound by a complex web of interstate organizations and regulations into a truly international community. In every corner of the world ethnic pasts are being updated and old cultures fragmented and recast. Throughout the world humanity is bound to the wheel of automated technologies and encircled by a forest of mass communications. In short, our world has become a single place.

This 'compression' of time and space has fundamentally changed the ways in which human beings relate to each other and to their social networks. There is no doubt that modernity has brought a revolution in the ways in which we conceive of the world and feel about the societies into which

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it is divided. Perhaps the moment has at last arrived to realize the hope of Marx and Engels that a common literature and culture can emerge out of the many national cultures and literatures. Perhaps, too, the time has come to remould our political frameworks and ideologies, and sweep away obsolete divisions and ancient antagonisms, in line with the emerging international division of labour in which trade barriers are falling away and commodities and labour are able to move freely across continents. The same revolution has brought about the collapse of ancient traditions and religious values and has compelled many people to separate practices and beliefs from their former contexts and to incorporate a diversity of others – other cultures, other peoples, other ways of life – into self-images and social relations.<sup>1</sup>

But this is only one side of the contemporary picture. The other is represented by the rise and proliferation of all kinds of social movement and identity protest, from feminism to the ecology movement, from the civil rights movement to religious revivals. In particular, we are witnessing a rebirth of ethnic nationalism, of religious fundamentalisms and of group antagonisms which were thought to have been long buried. Ethnic protests for autonomy and secession, wars of national irredentism and explosive racial conflicts over labour markets and social facilities have proliferated in every continent. In the era of globalization and transcendence, we find ourselves caught in a maelstrom of conflicts over political identities and ethnic fragmentation. In India, the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Horn of Africa and southern Africa, bloody conflicts have erupted, and even in more stable and affluent societies like Canada, Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy and Germany, the tremors of popular ethnic movements and xenophobic racism and nationalism are felt periodically. For many people a ‘narrow’, fissiparous nationalism has become the greatest source of political danger in the contemporary world, while everywhere ethnic

and national identities remain highly charged and sensitive political issues.

How can this paradox be explained? Is it an inevitable product of a dialectic of cultural globalization which produces a new kind of identity politics in the wake of the disembedding revolution of modernity, or just a 'survival' from an earlier age of nationalist hatreds and wars? Is it simply a temporary aberration, which further capitalist or post-industrial progress will iron out in area after area? Or is this contradiction of modern culture likely to grow and intensify as it spreads across the globe?

There have been three main solutions to this paradox. The first suggests that contemporary nations and nationalisms are the epigoni of their illustrious predecessors, survivals from another epoch, which are destined to pass away once they have run their course in each part of the globe. This may take a few decades and cause much suffering and bloodshed, but essentially such ethnic nationalisms and racisms, however much they appear to proliferate and engulf successive regions of the world in the short term, are of no lasting consequence. They will soon be depoliticized and 'normalized'. In any case, they are not part of the great movements of history, the chariot of progress which is tied to the great structures and motors of historical change – the international division of labour, great regional markets, powerful military blocs, electronic communications, computerized information technology, mass public education, the mass media, the sexual revolution and the like. These are the forces of the future, and the accompanying trend to the small-scale and intimate is no more than a comforting diversion or smokescreen for the growing inclusiveness and resource maximization of human communities. In fact, we are already witnessing the breakdown of the 'homogenous nation' in many societies, whose cultures and narratives of national identity are becoming increasingly hybridized and ambivalent, and the emergence, some would say re-emergence, of looser polyethnic societies.

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A 'post-modern' era, like its 'pre-modern' counterpart, has little place for politicized ethnicity or for nationalism as an autonomous political force.<sup>2</sup>

A second argument is that nations and nationalisms are inevitable products, and producers, of modernity. Modernization, usually dated from the French and Industrial Revolutions (and sometimes from the Reformation), has transformed our whole way of life to a degree and in a manner unknown since the Neolithic Revolution and the birth of settled agriculture. Industrial capitalism, the bureaucratic state, total warfare, mass social mobilization, science and rationalism, mass computerized information and electronic communications, the breakdown of traditional family values and the sexual revolution, have altered the lives of every individual on the planet and thrown them out of their habitual practices and daily routines. New ways and unorthodox life-styles have disorientated and dislocated groups and individuals alike, destroying old structures and rendering ancient cultures obsolete. The revolution of modernization has brought very considerable fragmentation, but also new modes of communication and integration based on the new electronic technologies of information and dissemination. In this unprecedented situation, nations and nationalisms are necessary, if unpalatable, instruments for controlling the destructive effects of massive social change; they provide the only large-scale and powerful communities and belief-systems that can secure a minimum of social cohesion, order and meaning in a disruptive and alienating world. Moreover, they are the only popular forces that can legitimate and make sense of the activities of that most powerful modern agent of social transformation, the rational state. For this reason nations and nationalisms are unlikely to disappear, at least until all areas of the globe have made the painful transition to an affluent and stable modernity, on the Western model.<sup>3</sup>

A third view claims that nations and nationalisms are perennial. They are neither survivals of a nationalist era



about to be swept away or disintegrate, nor inevitable if regrettable products of modernity. On the contrary, it is modernity and the so-called 'post-modern' era that will pass away, while nations remain as the bedrock of human society. Nations and nationalism are the basic forces and processes of the modern as well as the pre-modern epochs, while modernization and modernity are really only the modes by which nations are realized in the contemporary world. For some, including many nationalists, this is part and parcel of a 'primordial' natural order; the members of a given nation may have been induced to 'forget' their nation and its (usually glorious) history, but nature will in the end reassert itself and the nation will be 'reborn'. For others, nations perform general human functions, providing social cohesion, order, warmth and the like; that is why particular nations, though no part of any 'natural order', seem to their members to be all-embracing and immemorial, and we in turn must admit the power and enduring quality of the fundamental cultural ties. Either way, the ethnic community and the nation remain essential building-blocks of any conceivable new order. Though their forms may undergo change, the substance of ethnic and national ties will persist beneath whatever social and political transformations may supervene.<sup>4</sup>

None of these viewpoints, in my opinion, does justice to the complexity of the situation. They are flawed on general grounds, and as guides to the paradox of global interdependence and fissiparous nationalism. Rather than viewing nations and nationalisms as obsolete survivals of an earlier, more insular era, or as inevitable products of global modernization and late capitalism, or as perennial and natural features of human history and society, we must trace them back to their underlying ethnic and territorial contexts; we must set them in the wider historical intersection between cultural ties and political communities, as these were influenced by, and influenced, the processes of administrative centralization,

economic transformation, mass communications and the disintegration of traditions which we associate with modernity. Both the longer time-frame and the recovery of the ethnic substratum are needed if we are to make sense of the ubiquitous appeal and enduring hold of national ideals at a time in history when other forces seem to presage, and hasten, the obsolescence of nationalism.

Accordingly, I will start by considering the approaches of those who see nations being transcended by globalization and a global culture, and the limitations of their analyses of ethnicity and nationalism. This is followed by an examination of the merits and fallacies of the modernist arguments, with some empirical counter-examples. Finally, the perennialist position is revealed as both untenable and significant. Each of these viewpoints, I shall argue, highlights some important dimensions of current developments, but each is limited. The 'global culture' approach goes well beyond the evidence and fails to grasp the import of proliferating ethnic nationalisms. The modernist approach is more realistic and firmly grounded, but it too lacks historical depth and specificity. The perennialist claim, on the other hand, has little explanatory power, though it draws attention to the need for a wider historical framework.

That framework forms the basis for an alternative approach which I believe to be both fuller and more convincing than its rivals. From this point of view, the problem is seen as stemming from the mutual influence of 'layers' of social and historical experience, and the derivation of national phenomena from ethnic and territorial symbolism and modes of organization. It therefore draws on a wide range of historical evidence of human association and identity to illuminate the underlying problem of the emotional depth and social hold of nationalism which continues to puzzle all who involve themselves in this field. This will also enable us to confront the paradox of fragmentation in a globalizing era from a deeper socio-historical standpoint.

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Only by grasping the power of nationalism and the continuing appeal of national identity through their rootedness in pre-modern ethnic symbolism and modes of organization is there some chance of understanding the resurgence of ethnic nationalism at a time when 'objective' conditions might appear to render it obsolete. Without such understanding, we shall remain bewildered onlookers of unpredictable political dramas in a world of contradictory trends and antagonistic forces.

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## *A Cosmopolitan Culture?*

In his study of the evolution of nationalism, mainly in Europe, Eric Hobsbawm claims that the phenomenon of late twentieth-century nationalist, or ethnic politics, is ‘functionally different from the “nationalism” and the “nations” of nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century history. It is no longer a major vector of historical development.’<sup>1</sup>

The building of nations around national states and industrial economies in the nineteenth century, and the anti-colonial movements of national liberation and emancipation of the mid-twentieth century were both, he claims, central to historical development. But this is not the case with the ethnic and linguistic nationalisms that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which continue to proliferate today. Nation-building and national liberation movements were ‘typically unificatory as well as emancipatory’, whereas the characteristic late twentieth-century nationalisms are ‘essentially negative, or rather divisive. Hence the insistence on “ethnicity” and linguistic differences, each or both sometimes combined with religion.’

In line with classical Marxist analysis, Hobsbawm regards these movements as having links with earlier ‘small-nationality movements directed against the Habsburg, Tsarist and Ottoman empires’. But, in another sense, they are

quite the opposite, a rejection of modern modes of political organization, based on

reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world, similar in this respect to the resentment of Prague Germans pressed into a corner by Czech immigration rather than to that of the advancing Czechs.<sup>2</sup>

These fears have been fuelled by recent international population movements and rapid, fundamental socio-economic transformations. Hobsbawm cites the examples of Estonian, Welsh and Quebecois responses to Russian and Anglophone immigration, and adds: 'Wherever we live in an urbanised society, we encounter strangers: uprooted men and women who remind us of the fragility, or the drying up of our own families' roots.'<sup>3</sup> He goes on to explain, in terms drawn from Simmel's analysis of group conflict, that

The call of ethnicity or language provides no guidance to the future at all. It is merely a protest against the status quo or, more precisely, against 'the others' who threaten the ethnically defined group.

For:

nationalism by definition excludes from its purview all who do not belong to its own 'nation', i.e. the vast majority of the human race. Moreover, while fundamentalism can, at least to some extent, appeal to what remains of genuine custom and tradition or past practice as embodied in religious practice, as we have seen nationalism in itself is either hostile to the real ways of the past, or arises on its ruins.<sup>4</sup>

Why, then, have ethnic and linguistic nationalisms become so prevalent today? Because, according to Hobsbawm, they constitute 'a response to the overwhelmingly non-national

and non-nationalist principles of state formation in the greater part of the twentieth-century world'. But this does not mean that ethnic reactions can provide any alternative principle for the political restructuring of the world in the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup>

Echoing a now familiar theme, Hobsbawm argues that the principles of such a restructuring have little to do with nations or nationalism. This is because nations have lost their former economic functions, though he concedes that large *states* will continue to exercise important economic functions. But in general global interdependence means that much larger economic units will provide the bases of community in the future. For Hobsbawm, it is axiomatic that nationalism 'is nothing without the creation of nation-states, and a world of such states, fitting the present ethnic-linguistic criteria of nationality, is not a feasible prospect today'.<sup>6</sup>

Given this principle, it follows that as an ethnic or linguistic phenomenon,

in spite of its evident prominence, nationalism today is historically less important. It is no longer, as it were, a global political programme, as it may have been in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is at most a complicating factor, or a catalyst for other developments.

Retreating before, or adapting to, the new 'supranational restructuring of the globe', 'Nations and nationalism will be present in this history but in subordinate, and often rather minor roles.' Taking his cue from Elie Kedourie, Hobsbawm is able to conclude that, with historians now making rapid progress in analysing the phenomena of nations and nationalism, this suggests that

as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak. The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling round nations and nationalism.<sup>7</sup>