

Aviel Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism*. New York:

Cambridge University Press, 2006. 349 pp., £17.99, \$29.99 (pbk)

Walker Connor once wearily expressed his view that, nowadays, 'everyone has a book on nationalism'. Happily, Aviel Roshwald's recent book is an exception to this rule of theoretical repetition. Roshwald has written an extremely important case-based theory of nationalism which deserves to rise above the din of academic overproduction to form part of the list of works that should be read by all scholars and students interested in the subject. Whereas much recent writing on theories of nationalism has been produced by social scientists, this book is very much the work of a historian who has broadened out from case studies to embrace a wider, synthetic approach.

Roshwald has established himself as an expert on nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Middle East. These areas, along with western Europe and North America, furnish the empirical raw material from which the book's theories are hewn. Roshwald's book is also refreshingly up-to-date, encapsulating the most recent historical case work and the latest theoretical developments. The footnotes are extremely dense and detailed, and are a treasure trove of scholarship in and of themselves. Consequently, the work does not attempt to pour old wine into new theoretical bottles or to cook up yet another theoretical schema. Instead, the book deepens and extends the revisionist 'ethnologist' school of nationalism theory. This school rejects the idea that nations are primordial and organically flow from our genetic predispositions, but also criticises the mainstream view that nations are exclusively modern phenomena and created by modern state elites (or sub-state elites) for functional or instrumental reasons. Instead, Roshwald defends the idea that nations derive their principal power from the encoding of cultural myths and symbols within historical institutions, and the fact that these collective representations need to resonate with the masses and their existing collective understandings in order to take root. Though probably absent from mankind's prehistoric past, Roshwald argues that nationalism may be found throughout most of our recorded history, from Antiquity through to the early modern period. He nicely highlights the cases of ancient Israel and ancient Athens/ancient Greece to show that mass sentiments about a shared 'imagined community' roused large numbers of people to political action even in Antiquity. This fascinating section is one of the strongest in the book and here Roshwald points to the large size of ancient Athens - with a population in excess of 100,000 - which precludes its classification as a mere face-to-face *gemeinschaft*. The book goes on to trace the tension between ascriptive 'ethnic' and voluntary 'civic' elements in nationalism to ancient Israel, where an 'ethnic' myth of descent from Abraham coexists with the more 'civic' covenant with God, in which membership rights are conditional upon individuals accepting the duties stipulated by the covenant. Roshwald views social contract theory as a secularised variant of covenantal theory, demonstrating one way in which a Judaic conceptual architecture laid the foundations of secular nationalism in the late eighteenth century. The book also shows, in a fascinating departure, how ancient Jewish nationalism in turn harked back to a yet more distant past by using archaic Hebrew inscriptions. Here, surely, is cultural nationalism *avant la lettre*.

Throughout the book, Roshwald employs Weberian *verstehen* in approaching his material. This means that while he remains detached from the veracity of

nationalist truth claims, he takes their social force seriously and attempts to comprehend the lineaments of nationalist psychology. Like Anthony Smith, upon whose work Roshwald draws heavily, this book takes culture seriously but avoids the pitfalls of 'cultural studies', postmodernist and anthropological approaches by maintaining theoretical rigour. What emerges is a work of historically-informed collective psychology. The major states of nationalist collective psychology which Roshwald establishes are victimhood, violation, chosenness and mission. These categories play a role, to a greater or lesser extent, in most nationalisms. However, depending on the case, certain modes may be more important than others. For instance, the narrative of Jewish nationalism draws heavily on motifs of victimhood at the hands of various oppressors, from the Egyptians to the Nazis and Arabs. However, similar concerns have also animated many others, such as the Ulster-Protestants, Afrikaners or Serbs, who wove a narrative of being alone in a hostile world. Themes of victimhood are less in evidence in American or British nationalism where a sense of mission tends to take centre stage. Here the author theorises that nationalisms which spring from universalistic substrates like Islam and New Testament Christianity lend themselves to missionary notions of spreading/defending a universalistic creed like Islam, socialism or liberty. On the other hand, nationalisms which emerge from an Old Testament mould, such as those of the Jews and some Protestant groups, tend to focus more on particularistic ideas of divine election. In both cases, History may replace God as the anointer, but the essential framework is set by the antecedent religious tradition. Roshwald convincingly shows how the foreign policy of a wide range of nations - not least the USA - is conditioned by its symbolic traditions and collective psychology.

Without doubt, the most innovative contribution of the book is the way it reconceptualises time and foregrounds the role of nationalism in guarding against the human fear of oblivion. Roshwald contends that annual national rituals and analogies with past events serve to bind members of the nation to their forbears across time. The collapsing of time between events 'then' and 'now' creates a sense of immortality and trans-historical kinship (i.e. 'circular time') which is exceptionally comforting and powerful to people. Nationalism is, however, caught between its imperative of making time stand still, and its modernising thrust of collective self-improvement. Like the 'ethnic-civic' dilemma, nationalism thus tends to straddle the tension between circular and linear time. Roshwald moves from description to prescription in considering the dynamics of ethnic conflict in situations as diverse as Texas, Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland and the Balkans. The book outlines a new theory of symbolic magnification in which threat perceptions are magnified by established collective psychology, creating positive feedbacks. Thus a group like the Jews, with their historic fear of violation and victimhood, will tend to overestimate the scale of the threat posed by enemies. Conflict management, he notes, should explore ways to reconfigure group myths and symbols so as to generate less threatening interpretations of a situation, leading to compromise. Roshwald also invests hope in conflict-weariness among the general public, which can lead to an ironic posture towards nationalist appeals and a willingness to compromise. Irony is certainly not lacking in this book, with regular displays of humour - something absent from most work in this area, including my own! Consider the phrase: 'if it walks like a goose and honks like a goose, it's a nationalist? Not quite. (If it goosesteps, it undoubtedly is, but that's another story)' (p13)

The last section of the book, namely that on the ethnic-civic debate, is well-written, but does not advance our understanding quite as dramatically. The book could

also have confronted its potential critics in a more direct way. For instance, the author allows that political exigencies can condition the way myths and symbols are used. But the crux of the issue is whether the symbolic deposits/frameworks or the political imperatives have been more important in explaining the character of nationalism. Also, more might have been said about cosmopolitan ideologies like liberalism and socialism and the way these can challenge nationalism and escape its narrative. After all, one could argue that many contemporary liberals genuinely desire a cosmopolitan civilisation, shorn of any nationalist accoutrements. There is not a symbolic reinterpretation which seeks to preserve a (suitably reformed) community, but is instead an attempt at what Arnold Toynbee called 'futurism', a clean break with the past that seeks to destroy the link between culture and territory.

These brief thoughts aside, Roshwald's provocative book will lead to considerable debate within the field and is a must-read for scholars and their graduate students.