

The nation as an artichoke? A critique of ethnosymbolist interpretations of nationalism*

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to offer a critique of ethnosymbolism in the light of recent approaches to nations and nationalism. The article will engage with ethnosymbolist interpretations on three different levels. Since ethnosymbolists present their approach as an attempt to revise the modernist analysis from within, it will first address their critique of modernism. It will then assess the analytical contributions of ethnosymbolism, focusing in particular on four issues: the antiquity of nations and national feelings, the importance of the past for the present and the related issue of the role of elites in nation-formation, the notorious issue of resonance and the plurality of ethnic pasts. Finally, it will question the normative implications of ethnosymbolism and conclude that ethnosymbolism is more an attempt to resuscitate nationalism than to explain it.

Introduction

Is the nation like an onion, which can be peeled away to nothing, as the neofunctionalists would suggest, or is it more like an artichoke, an analogy first used by Stanley Hoffmann more than thirty years ago, in an article on the fate of the nation-state in the context of the move towards European integration (Hoffmann 1968: 200–1; cf. Laitin 1986: 100–1; Laitin 2001: 583)? In this article, Hoffmann takes issue with the then dominant view that the irresistible tide of supranational functionalism will render national states obsolete. National sovereignty, this view assumed, could be chewed up leaf by leaf like an artichoke. According to Hoffmann, however, even an artichoke has a heart, which remains intact after the leaves have been eaten. In other words, people will transfer their loyalty for purposes of political advantage only so far, that is,

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until it reaches their heart. In my view, this is an excellent representation of the ethnosymbolist conception of the nation, hence the title of my article.

The aim of this article is to offer a critique of ethnosymbolism in the light of recent, 'constructivist', approaches to nations and nationalism. Not surprisingly, ethnosymbolists themselves are quite contemptuous of these approaches. Lumping them together under the blanket term 'postmodernism', they accuse them of having a 'polemical, satirical intent', which is 'to unmask the nation and reveal the power games of nationalism', without of course making their own intent explicit (Smith 1999: 165). I believe this is exactly what needs to be done. Thus, I will try to deconstruct the theoretical claims of ethnosymbolism and unmask the underlying intent of their propagators. I will argue that ethnosymbolism is more an attempt to resuscitate nationalism than to explain it, and that ethnosymbolists are latterday Romantics who suffer from a deep sense of nostalgia, which I take to be, following Steinwand, 'a sort of homesickness, a pain or longing to return home or to some lost past' (1997: 9). This conclusion might look a bit harsh, perhaps even unjustified, at first glance, but it is not, as I hope to show in what follows, and I believe that it is time for ethnosymbolists to face the logical conclusions and normative implications of their well-intended analyses. The main problem, in this sense, is not one of 'retrospection', that is the tendency to project back onto earlier formations the features peculiar to nations and nationalisms, but one of 'introspection'. (For an elaboration of the charge of 'retrospective nationalism' see Smith 1998: 196).

I will engage with ethnosymbolist interpretations on three different levels. Since ethnosymbolists present their approach as an attempt 'to revise the modernist analysis "from within", by revealing the debts of the modern nation to pre-modern ethnic ties' (Smith 1998: 202), I will first address their critique of modernism. I will then assess the analytical contributions of ethnosymbolism, focusing in particular on four issues: the antiquity of nations and national feelings, the importance of the past for the present and the related issue of the role of elites in nation formation, the notorious issue of resonance and the plurality of ethnic pasts. Finally, I will question the normative implications of ethnosymbolism.

Before proceeding further, a few points regarding the content and scope of the paper need to be clarified. First of all, I will not offer an extensive overview of ethnosymbolist arguments, concentrating instead on those aspects of ethnosymbolism that I find problematic. Secondly, I will confine myself mainly to the work of Anthony D. Smith and, to a lesser extent, John Hutchinson, not only because they are the main proponents of ethnosymbolism, but also they are the only scholars, to the best of my knowledge, who use this term to describe their approach. It is not clear whether other scholars who adopt similar approaches, such as John Armstrong or the late Adrian Hastings, would describe their work as 'ethnosymbolist'. In fact, even Anthony Smith refers to their work as perennialist in his recent surveys of the field. I will mainly focus on the recent work of Smith and Hutchinson, published after 1998,

having already discussed their early work elsewhere (Özkirimli 2000). Thirdly, and most importantly, the criticisms I will offer should not be read as a defence of a particular modernist theory, say, by Gellner, Hobsbawm or Anderson. Though I believe that these theories have made an important contribution to our understanding of nationalism, I have my own disagreements with each of them, the most important being their tendency to explain nationalism in terms of a single, all-pervasive factor, a point also made by Craig Calhoun (1997). However, I do believe that ethnosymbolists have been quite unfair to these theorists for the last two decades and a certain compulsion to redress the balance will certainly lurk behind my observations. I also believe that we should make our theoretical and normative assumptions clear at the outset. Thus I am broadly sympathetic to recent approaches that take the nation as a particular form of social construction and nationalism as a discourse – to be more specific, the work of Étienne Balibar (1990), Michael Billig (1995), Rogers Brubaker (1996), Craig Calhoun (1997), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993, 1999), Katherine Verdery (1993) and Nira Yuval-Davis (1997). In a normative vein, my position can be best described as ‘anti-nationalist’: I am, in the words of Anthony Smith, ‘violently hostile to all expressions of nationalism’ (Smith 1998: 106). However, unlike him, I do not see this as an obstacle to theorising nationalism.

Let me now turn to the ethnosymbolist critique of modernism.

Ethnosymbolism as critique

The whole ethnosymbolist project is based on a critique of what is seen as the most fruitful and comprehensive grand narrative in the field, namely modernism, to reveal its flaws and exaggerations and to develop a more viable alternative. In the words of its founding father, ethnosymbolism is no more than ‘an internal critique and expansion of modernism’ (Smith 1998: 145). In many ways, then, modernism is the *raison d’être* of ethnosymbolism.

However, ethnosymbolists have a particular image of modernism in their mind. According to them, modernists believe that ‘nationalism is an innovation, and not simply an updated version of something far older’ (Smith 2001a: 46). The nation, for modernists, is a recent artefact consciously constructed by elites who seek to influence the masses to achieve their goals. ‘Nothing like it existed before’ (Smith 2001a: 46). What is more, ‘nations and nationalism are intrinsic to the nature of the modern world and to the revolutions of modernity’ (Smith 1998: 3). In that sense, they were ‘the typical products of a certain stage of history ... and hence destined to pass away when that stage has been surpassed and its conditions no longer apply’ (Smith 1998: 8).

Ethnosymbolists are even more scornful of the ‘postmodernist theory of nationality’. This is somewhat ironic because they also reject the existence of such a theory and, in fact, this constitutes their main criticism of what they

perceive as postmodernist approaches (see Smith 1998: ch. 9). Postmodernists, Smith holds, see the nation as 'a text ... that must be read and "narrated", a particular historical discourse with its peculiar set of practices and beliefs' (Smith 1999: 169). 'Constructing the nation is more a matter of disseminating symbolic representations than forging cultural institutions or social networks', hence 'if you want to understand the meaning of national ... phenomena, you have only to unmask their cultural representations ... The nation is a communion of imagery, nothing more nor less' (Smith 1999: 167, 169–70). As such, it can easily be dissolved and its imagining and narration may cease (Smith 2001a: 79).

The ethnosymbolist account of modernism is a peculiar one, engendered partly by a misreading of the theories in question and partly by a conscious attempt to exaggerate the differences between modernism and ethnosymbolism. Smith openly acknowledges this, saying that he has deliberately magnified these differences in order to bring out some of the antagonistic underlying assumptions that can be made about nationalism (Smith 1998: 23). But, of course, too much magnification may amount to distortion, and this is what happens here.

First of all, despite an increasing sensitivity to the differences between various theories, ethnosymbolists still treat modernism as a unified, monolithic category. They tend to generalise from the claims of a particular theorist, in most cases Gellner, and present it as a common theme of all modernist explanations. At other times, they reduce modernism to cruder forms of instrumentalism. Very few theorists claim explicitly that the nation has been created *ex nihilo* and that nothing like it existed before. Hobsbawm talks about proto-national bonds and, in fact, this constitutes the major ethnosymbolist criticism of his account (Hobsbawm 1990: ch. 2). Anderson (1991) devotes more than half of his *Imagined Communities* to the historical conditions that gave rise to nations and nationalism. On the other hand, the assertion that the nation is a recent cultural artefact created by elites in their pursuit of political power is made by those who adhere to an extreme form of rational choice theory and by some orthodox Marxists. The same goes for the claim that nations will disappear once the conditions of modernity are surpassed. Even staunch modernists such as Gellner and Hobsbawm would recoil from saying this. Gellner, for instance, asserted that nationalism will lose its virulence, not that it will disappear (Gellner 1996: 111–12), and the same goes for Hobsbawm, who only argued that nationalism will no longer be the major vector of historical development (Hobsbawm 1990: 163).

The ethnosymbolist account of postmodernism is even more problematic and this time the problem is not one of misinterpretation, but one of lack of information, mixed with a strong dose of contempt. Most importantly, ethnosymbolists confuse historical or epistemic postmodernism, which holds that the modern era is at an end, with methodological postmodernism, which is at the bottom a philosophical and methodological critique, and these two with constructivism, which exploits deconstructionist methods and insights to

analyse established beliefs and social practices, not only to challenge them, but also to transform them (for this classification see Walker 2001). This may look like a minor confusion, but it is not, as it forms the cornerstone of the ethnosymbolist critique of postmodernism. The plot is simple: nationalism is intrinsic to modernity. The modern era is over but nations are still around. Let us then send postmodernism to the dustbin of history instead of nations! Now, of course, there is first the question of whether we have already reached the end of the modern era – and by the way, how do we know for certain when an era characterised by a particular configuration of economic, political and social forces ends and a new one begins? But even if we leave this aside, this account is still based on a spurious dichotomy. Ethnosymbolists assume an organic link between a belief in the modernity and constructed nature of nations and a belief in their gradual demise. If you believe in one, you are bound to believe in the other. This, however, is quite absurd. Nations may have emerged in the modern era, but they may have acquired an independent existence in time. Ethnosymbolists are right in saying that nations will not be superseded in the near future, but this is not because they are rooted, but because the whole process of the reproduction of nationhood continues unabated and there are no compelling alternatives on offer.

This is not the only confusion that bedevils the ethnosymbolist critique of what they see as postmodernism. No serious constructivist – I am not saying postmodernist, and in any case postmodernism does not consist of Julia Kristeva – would argue that the nation is a text to be read and narrated, and it is indicative that Smith never cites any references for these views. Text and discourse are not interchangeable terms: discourse is not only language or rhetoric, it is more akin to ideology, and as Anthony Smith himself notes in the above-mentioned quotation, it includes beliefs and practices, in most cases underpinned by a whole set of institutions. In that sense, constructing the nation is not only a matter of disseminating symbolic representations, though this is also important; it also includes the forging of cultural institutions and social networks. Moreover, the nation is, among other things, ‘a daily routine, a community based on habit’ (Hoffmann 1968: 208). Thus it cannot be dissolved at will. As Stanley Hoffmann notes in the above-mentioned article, ‘their very existence is a formidable obstacle to their replacement’ (Hoffmann 1968: 178). Having said that, dissolution or transformation is of course a possibility; nations and nationalism will not be with us forever, no matter how much ethnosymbolists might regret this, and one of the aims of the constructivist project is to bring about this transformation (for an elaborate statement of constructivism see Tilley 1997; cf. Wodak et al. 1999 and Marvin and Ingle 1999).

It is possible to summarise what I have said so far with the help of a quotation from Anthony Smith, who concludes his criticism of Gellner’s model with the following words:

The attempt to impose a single, abstract ‘pure type’ of modernity ... on the rich variety of historical processes, so as to illuminate the underlying logic of the contrast and transition between a state of ‘tradition’ and one of ‘modernity’, exaggerates the historical gulf between them and denies important continuities and coexistences between elements of both (Smith 1998: 37).

Let us now substitute some of the terms Smith uses with others: The attempt to impose a single, abstract ‘pure type’ of modernism ... on the rich variety of modernist explanations, so as to illuminate the underlying logic of the contrast and transition between ‘modernism’ and ‘ethnosymbolism’, exaggerates the theoretical gulf between them and denies important continuities and coexistences between elements of both. In short, the ethnosymbolist image of modernism and postmodernism is idiosyncratic and to a large extent misleading. Ethnosymbolists are so obsessed with criticising what they perceive as the modernist narrative that they rarely address the real issues raised by these theories (for a more or less complete list of these issues see, again, Smith 1998: 146).

I will now move on to an assessment of ethnosymbolism as theory and dwell on four specific issues that are recurrent in ethnosymbolist analyses. While doing this, I will return to some of the themes I have discussed in this section and show why the criticisms raised by ethnosymbolists do not constitute a threat to a solid constructivist perspective.

Ethnosymbolism as theory

Anthony D. Smith begins his recent monograph on nationalism with the following headquote from *The Hymn to the Aton*:

The countries of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt
 Thou settest every man in his place
 Thou supplied their necessities ...
 Their tongues are separate in speech
 And their natures as well
 Their skins are distinguished
 As thou distinguishest the foreign peoples. (Smith 2001a)

This quotation constitutes a concise summary of the ethnosymbolist position with regard to nations and nationalism. In the same book, Smith identifies three major concerns common to all ethnosymbolic perspectives. The first is to move away from the exclusive elitism of modernist approaches. The second is long-term analysis, that is, ‘the analysis of social and cultural patterns over *la longue durée*’. And the third is ‘the problem of collective passion and attachment’ (Smith 2001a: 57–8). All this, Smith concludes, can help us to grasp both the persistence and the transformation of collective cultural identities. I will take up each of these issues in turn and offer, in a Smithian spirit, ‘an internal critique of ethnosymbolist arguments on their own terms’ (Smith 1998: 5). I will conclude this section by identifying and examining a

fourth theme, that of the plurality of ethnic pasts, which occupies an important place in Hutchinson's analysis of nations (Hutchinson 2000, 2001).

Let me begin with the first issue, that of the antiquity of nations and national feelings.

The antiquity of nations and national feelings

The ethnosymbolist position on this issue is quite clear: it was possible to trace the elements of national structures, sentiments and symbolism, 'in sufficient and well documented quantities, back to at least the late medieval period in a number of European nations from England and France to Poland and Russia'. More importantly,

it was possible to find examples of social formations in pre-modern periods, even in antiquity, that for some decades or even centuries approximated to an inclusive definition of the concept of the 'nation', notably among the ancient Jews and Armenians, but also to some extent among the ancient Egyptians, and perhaps the medieval Japanese and Koreans. In other words, the concept of the 'nation' was perennial, insofar as *recurrent instances* of this formation could be found in various periods of history and in different continents. (Smith 1998: 190, original emphasis)

Now there are three different issues here. The first is the question of terminology: which term should we use to define these premodern social formations? Ethnosymbolists are quite keen on this and criticise the so-called perennialists such as Doron Mendels and John Armstrong for conflating ethnicity and nationhood (Smith 2001b: 18). But they themselves switch terms very easily. Hence after elaborating on the differences between modern nations and premodern collective cultural communities, Smith argues that 'a few nations emerged in premodern epochs' (Smith 2001b: 21), like the Jews and Armenians, and that 'the concept of the nation refers to a type of cultural resource and of human association that is potentially available in all periods of history' (Smith 2001a: 84). Or just recall the passage I have quoted at the beginning of this section. There Smith talks about national structures, sentiments and symbolism, not ethnic ones. This confusion reaches its apogee when Smith stresses the ideological novelty of modern nations in his recent book. This, he concludes, 'makes the modern nationalist-based nations different from the earlier pre-nationalist nations in the medieval period or antiquity' (Smith 2001a: 118). Nationalist-based nations versus pre-nationalist nations: terminological chaos at its best!

The second and third issues concern the nature of premodern social formations. Were they elite- or mass-based and what was the major source of solidarity: religion, culture or politics? On the first issue, ethnosymbolists seem to be quite ambivalent. On the one hand, they argue against the exclusivist elitism of modernist explanations (Smith 2001a: 57), on the other hand, they refer almost exclusively to a few elite documents to prove the existence of premodern nations – and the famous *Hymn to the Aton* is no exception – and accept Connor's observation that we can never know what the masses thought

or felt in premodern times (Smith 2001a: 71). The same ambivalence characterises the ethnosymbolist answer to the second question. Smith for instance accepts that “‘religion’ stood in for ‘citizenship’” in premodern times and that ‘rights and duties were primarily determined by religious law and membership of the ethno-religious community’ (Smith 2001a). But then, he argues, in his reply to Breuilly, that significant numbers of people in several pre-modern societies were included in representative political institutions and that there were many more cases of vivid ethnic identities, with political significance, than Breuilly allows (Smith 1998: 197).

So in this, as in other matters, what characterises the ethnosymbolist position is ambivalence, or an urge to be ‘in-between’, to use Fred Halliday’s term. This ambivalence becomes quite conspicuous at times. Hence, having discussed a number of cases of elite nationalism in premodern times, Smith concedes in a footnote that

it is a moot point how far, despite their early politicisation, we can or should regard these upper- and middle-class sentiments of collective cultural identity as cases of ethnicity tied to statehood or of a *national* identity or of particularist nationalism. (Smith 1998: 242, original emphases)

But this is the heart of the matter. Can we say that a nation or nationalism exists as soon as a few visionaries start to dream about it? If that is so easy, then I would like to dream of a cosmopolitan world, a world without nations, and disseminate this ideal through all possible means, to as many people as possible. I also know that I am not alone in this. A few other, quite influential, scholars, like Fred Halliday, Martha Nussbaum and David Held, also believe in this ideal. The death knell seems to be sounding for nationalism...

As for the issue of culture versus politics, the answer must be a cautious one. What matters is not the existence of cultural differences in premodern times, but their politicisation, their use for political purposes. As Calhoun notes, nationalism is not simply a claim of ethnic or cultural similarity, but a claim that certain similarities should count as ‘the’ definition of political community (Calhoun 1993: 229). Smith himself concedes this point, arguing that ‘it was the revolutionary nature of the economic, administrative and cultural transformations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe that brought culture and ethnic identity to the fore as a basis for polity formation’ (Smith 1998: 192).

This takes us to the second issue, the importance of the past for the present and the role of elites in nation formation.

Past, present and the elites

One of the main ethnosymbolist charges against modernism is that of ‘blocking presentism’, that is, ‘an exclusive focus on the views and interests of the present generation in shaping the past’ (Smith 2001a: 83). Modern nationalists, ethnosymbolists argue, ‘need to select from pre-existing repertoires of ethnic symbols, myths and memories if they are to mobilise “the people”’ (Smith

2001a: 77). And we should never forget that this 'selection and reworking takes place within strict limits' (Smith 1998: 129). In short, 'the sources of national identities are to be sought in popular sentiments and culture, and not primarily in the imaginations and inventions of elites' (Smith 2001a: 97).

Now a quotation from *Nationalism and Modernism*:

Who exactly feels the tangible, living reality of ethnicity? Is it ethnic leaders and elites alone or ethnic populations as a whole? If the former, cannot such ethnicity be the site of different, and contested, interpretations? ... Besides, who authenticates the cultural 'doings' and 'knowings' of the community, and is there only one standard of ethnicity? (Smith 1998: 160)

Leaving aside the question of different and contrasting interpretations of the past, to which I will return later, there are a number of important issues here. First, despite passing references to popular sentiments and culture and despite their dismissal of modernist elitism, ethnosymbolists seem to agree that the elites play a crucial, in fact indispensable, role in the formation of nations.

In the words of Smith,

most nationalisms are led by intellectuals and/or professionals. Intellectuals furnish the basic definitions and characterisations of the nation, professionals are the main disseminators of the idea and ideals of the nation, and the intelligentsia are the most avid purveyors and consumers of nationalist myths ... The pivotal role of professionals and intellectuals must remain constant or the movement risks disintegration. (Smith 1998: 56–7)

This brings us to the next step, that is, the exact nature of intellectual travails. For the ethnosymbolists, the answer to this question is, surprisingly, clear: that of selection, reconstruction and reinterpretation. And this process of reconstruction takes place within strict limits. Full stop. Here the ethnosymbolist story ends. But this is the point at which the inquiry should begin. Who exactly are the elites? In other words, who does the selection? Who decides what is authentic, what is not? For which purposes? How does the selection process take place? Which premodern materials are selected, which ones are left out? In what ways are they reinterpreted and to what extent? Smith argues in the case of Jewish nationalism that the elites 'could and did draw on a vast reservoir of collective memories ... which together recorded the collective experiences of the scattered Jewish people in many epochs' (Smith 1999: 209). This suggests that the elites are not that constrained after all, as they have so much to choose from. Take the case of Mustafa Kemal, who chose to ignore a heritage of 700 years and to appeal to the pre-Islamic past, something that hardly any Turk was aware of, let alone could remember. Finally, to what extent is a reconstructed and reinterpreted past the same past?

In short, what matters is not the presence of premodern cultural materials, but the selection process, the ways in which these are used and abused, and this necessarily reflects present concerns. Smith is right to point to the memories of previous bloody encounters to explain the atrocities committed in the war between the Serbs and the Croats (Smith 1998: 67). However, it is not the memories themselves, but the ways in which they are used by nationalist

ideologues that lead to atrocities. Serbs and Croats lived together, in fact married each other, for decades, until the rise of the likes of Tudjman and Milosevic. It is true that the present cannot alter what happened in the past, but it can ignore certain elements and emphasise others, exaggerate the relevance of some, trivialise that of others, and it can certainly distort realities. Note that I am not talking about pure manipulation here. The elites sometimes use these memories to bring about something that they believe to be in their people's interest. We need not resort to rational choice theory or crude instrumentalism to underline the salience of present concerns or to make sense of the behaviour of elites. This takes me to the notorious issue of resonance.

Perceptions, realities and resonance

Why would people willingly lay down their lives for the products of their collective imagination? This simple question forms the heart of the ethnosymbolist critique of modernism. Modernism, they argue, 'fails to account for the passion and fervour of mass followings for nationalist movements, and the frequent willingness on the part of the unlettered and poor to make great sacrifices and even court death to defend their countries' (Smith 1998: 128).

Of course the poor and the unlettered are prepared to kill and be killed for many things: their political ideals, their families and loved ones, their honour, at times even the soccer teams they support, not to mention religion. What makes the nation so special in the eyes of ethnosymbolists? How do they explain its resonance?

For them, the key to resonance is the persistence and embeddedness of 'the myths, symbols and memories' (the Holy Trinity of ethnosymbolism) that are powerful reminders of the unique culture and fate of the community. The appeal to 'the people' can only be conducted, Smith contends, through the discovery and use of their collective memories (Smith 2001a: 119). Now there are many problems with this 'even the artichoke has a heart' kind of answer.

First, Smith in particular and ethnosymbolists in general take the existence of 'the people' and 'collective memories' for granted. They never ask the questions 'which people' and 'whose memories'. This point is raised by Smith himself when he talks about the dangers of reifying cultures and ignoring power differences, thereby privileging as 'authentic' the voices of the most unwesternised 'community representatives' (Smith 1998: 209).

Second, ethnosymbolists also take resonance for granted. Many people simply refuse to fight for their country – and here I am not talking about the Vietnam War or the war in Afghanistan. There are many accounts of Turkish peasants refusing to fight in the War of Independence until the enemy armies reach the gates of their villages. And this points to another problem: when people do fight, it is not at all clear whether they really fight for their country or to protect their immediate locality or their loved ones. In his critique of Kedourie, Smith holds that he adopted 'a rather one-dimensional

psychologism that bypasses the social and cultural settings which contribute to the variety of human responses to rapid change in the modern world' (Smith 1998: 109). This applies to the ethnosymbolist explanation of resonance as well. People do respond in a variety of ways to the appeals of nationalist ideologues depending on the social and cultural settings in which they are located, hence the danger of taking resonance for granted.

How should we account for resonance then? In order to answer this question, we must first get rid of another spurious dichotomy that permeates ethnosymbolist accounts. The fact that something is constructed or imagined does not make it less real in the eyes of those who believe in it. Smith argues forcefully that nations are as much communities of emotion and will as of imagination and cognition (Smith 2001a: 80). Indeed. But they can be both at the same time. According to Smith, artefacts cannot generate passion. Are we to assume that only 'genuine', 'authentic' things can generate passion then? What is genuine and authentic anyway? Take love. Is it real or constructed? Do we love someone because he or she is the real, the authentic partner for us? Do we love that person because the myths, symbols and memories of our relationship have a long history? How do we manage to forget that person and carry on in case we are dumped? How do we manage to love someone else if he or she is 'the authentic' partner? The answer obviously is that love is something we have created in our minds, but also something we feel. The fact that our feelings are the products of some complicated cognitive processes does not make them less real to us. The same goes for the love of the nation, and in fact any other kind of love, of God, of family, and so on. It is Anthony Smith who reminds us of Durkheim's famous dictum and rightly so: ideas, once born, have a life of their own.

To go back to our initial question, I think the appeal of nationalist discourse can be explained by invoking three interrelated processes. And these are all mentioned in one way or another in ethnosymbolist accounts, but sadly, only to debunk modernist explanations. The first is the famous Phase A of Miroslav Hroch's model (1985): scholarly inquiry into the linguistic, historical and cultural attributes of the group in question. As Smith notes, 'typically a nationalist movement will commence not with a protest rally, declaration or armed resistance, but with the appearance of literary societies, historical research, music festivals and cultural journals' (Smith 2001a: 7). And these scholarly activities provide 'the tools and conceptual frameworks for finding out "who we are", "when we began", "how we grew" and perhaps "where we are going"' (Smith 2001a: 28).

These activities, of course, must be complemented by another, very important process, that of reproduction. Let us again quote Smith: 'The return to an authentic history and a vernacular culture must take a public form and be politicized' (Smith 2001a: 34). After all, it is through institutions, rules that 'individuals are united into social groups that can perpetuate themselves down the generations' (Smith 1998: 69). Smith, of course, would intervene at this crucial juncture and ask: how do we explain the attitudes of the first

nationalists? They cannot be the products of an educational system or of socialisation after all. This is, however, just a red herring. What we are trying to explain here is resonance, that is, why do masses respond positively to nationalist appeals. A different set of factors should be invoked to explain the appeal of nationalism to first a few visionaries and later the intelligentsia. Various theorists have already done this, such as Kedourie, Greenfeld and Nairn, to name a few, and I think the explanation lies in a combination of the factors they have invoked.

Combined, these two processes explain a great deal of the resonance on the part of the masses. Phase C, the emergence of a mass movement, is not automatic, to use Hroch's terminology, it is achieved. It should be preceded by Phase A and B, the various activities of nationalist ideologues to define and disseminate the nation.

There is, however, another factor that accounts for resonance and to find out what it is, we must abandon macro analyses and focus on micro variables, everyday life instead of public life, individual experiences instead of collective ones. As Smith puts it succinctly, 'it is because we know that our interests, indeed our very identities and survival, are bound up with the nation, that we feel such devotion to the nation and are prepared to make such sacrifices for it when it is in danger' (Smith 1998: 140).

But again, this view is not incompatible with a constructivist approach. Indeed, the same argument has been put forward by a number of modernist scholars, such as Charles Tilly (1994), Michael Billig (1995) and last, but not least, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1999), who advocates a lifeworld approach to the study of ethnic and national identities.

In short, there is nothing inevitable in people's responses to nationalist agitations. Resonance should not be assumed or taken for granted, it should be problematised – and please note that I have deliberately ignored some other possible sources of resonance such as interest calculations or pure coercion. The various conditions under which particular myths and symbols appeal to people should be identified and explored. More importantly, the cases in which these same myths do not evoke passions should be examined.

The issue of resonance is closely related with the final theme I will discuss in this section, that of the plurality of ethnic heritages.

The plurality of ethnic heritages

We have seen so far that the ethnosymbolist account is one of authenticity, a story of what is 'distinctive, unique and "truly ours"' (Smith 1998: 43). Yet all of a sudden, we learn that 'in reality, there were never certainties. There were always counter-myths of origin and alternative memories of national culture ... This meant that "national identity" was always being reinterpreted and refashioned by each generation' (Smith 2001a: 128).

Hutchinson tells us that ethnic formations 'often contain many different pasts, cultural heritages, and hence models of individual and collective

identity', that 'even many "established" nations are riven by embedded cultural differences that generate rival symbolic and political projects' (forthcoming: 11, 19). The return of the postmodern: Julia Kristeva strikes back!

But this confession undermines the whole ethnosymbolist project. If there are many different pasts and cultural heritages, if there are counter-myths of origin and alternative memories, if there are rival symbolic and political projects, which one is the authentic one? Which past is distinctive, unique and truly ours? How do we learn who we are and where we are going? Most probably, from the elites. But did not Smith tell us that the sources of national identities are to be sought in popular sentiments and culture, and not primarily in the imaginations and inventions of elites? Then who discovers the genuine, authentic culture, from among the many possible alternatives? If we cannot learn about our past without the active intervention and interpretation of elites, then why do we put so much emphasis on popular culture at the expense of elite inventions or the past at the expense of the present? Ethnosymbolists also told us that the elites were constrained by the existence of premodern cultural materials. But to what extent were they constrained if there were so many different cultural heritages? To me, it looks like they had quite a considerable freedom of choice.

I think now the stage is set for an assessment of the normative implications of ethnosymbolist accounts.

Ethnosymbolism as morality

Ethnosymbolists rarely address normative issues. Smith, for instance, briefly mentions the burgeoning literature on the relationship between liberalism and nationalism in his *Nationalism and Modernism*, but only to conclude that much of this literature is philosophical and normative, and hence lies outside the scope of his inquiry (Smith 1998: 210). Given this, my compulsion to discuss the normative implications of ethnosymbolism might seem misplaced.

My reply to this potential criticism is that the normative is never absent in ethnosymbolist accounts. It is indeed very much visible when ethnosymbolists criticise others, in particular those who are critical of nationalism. Hence we learn from Smith that Lord Acton's conservative analysis vindicates multinational empires, that Kedourie is 'violently hostile to all expressions of nationalism' and that Hobsbawm 'evinces a contempt and hatred for nationalism no less than Kedourie's' (Smith 1998: 9, 106, 125). Obviously, nobody can ask Smith to undertake a normative analysis of nationalism. But one at least wonders where his own preferences lie when he criticises others on normative grounds.

Yet neither Smith nor Hutchinson make their own preferences explicit. One has to read between the lines to discover them. Let me give it a try. According to Smith, 'no electronic technology of communications and its virtual creations

could answer to the emotional needs of the “global citizens” of the future, or instruct them in the art of coping with the joys, burdens and pain and loss that life brings’ (Smith 2001a: 136).

Or this from Hutchinson:

In the modern world a sense of nationality supplies through its evocation of ancient memories a sense of rootedness that provides anchors against unpredictability. It fulfills a range of important different functions which populations require and cannot satisfy by the secular doctrines of the Enlightenment, with its basis in ‘cold’ reason, universal norms and utility. (Hutchinson 2000: 658)

Another one: ‘In this way, they [national cultures] expressed the outlook and emotion of particular collectivities and of their individual members, in contrast to other analogous collectivities’. This last quotation is from Smith (2001a: 136) again, not from Herder.

The language becomes even more romantic when ethnosymbolists talk about the nationalism of particular peoples, whose plight they recount with a certain sympathy. Hence we learn from Smith that the Jews ‘constituted the original ideal and prototype of the nation’ (Smith 2001a: 103), that the Jewish experience is unusual as ‘few other peoples could boast so rich a variety and continuity of shared memories and traditions over so many centuries’ (Smith 1999: 209).

Now there is nothing wrong with such romanticism or nostalgia, even sympathy for a particular nationalism. After all, this is what a whole generation of historians did in the first half of the twentieth century. The problem starts when scholars, no matter how well-intentioned they are, develop theories and approaches which could be used as an apologetic discourse, to mitigate, and sometimes even to justify and legitimise discrimination or oppression. And this is what happens here. The ethnosymbolist case is particularly precarious as they claim they do not offer a normative analysis. A piece of nationalist propaganda would be less dangerous in this respect as we would take it as what it is, just a piece of propaganda. But ethnosymbolists are not writing political pamphlets. They are providing us with a sociohistorical analysis of nationalism and they claim political neutrality and scientific objectivity. I am aware that these are bold assertions that need to be carefully justified. Here are a few examples.

Except for ‘a few, mainly German, Romantic philosophers and historians, such as Fichte and Muller ... most nationalists have sought to unite individual desires through sentiments of love and fraternity, and only *in extremis* to subordinate them to the national will’ (Smith 2001a: 26–7). This is a very naïve representation of political realities, to say the least. Just a brief *tour d’horizon* over newspaper headlines would be sufficient to realise what these sentiments of love and fraternity have often meant in practice. Let us continue: ‘In contrast to the analyses of some latterday scholars, the nationalist ideal of unity seeks not some “objective” cultural uniformity, but a social and cultural union of families and of individual wills and sentiments’ (Smith 2001a: 26). Such unity,

we are warned, should not be confused with homogeneity. Here again nationalist ideals are presented as if they are quite innocent, harmless demands, without a consideration of their implications for those who are deemed not to belong to the particular nation. Was Milosevic only trying to bring about a social and cultural union of families? How would a Bosnian Moslem answer this question? One might, of course, consider this as one of those extreme examples: what about then the case of the Americans and the native Indians, the Australians and the Aborigines or the Turks and the Kurds? Ironically, this was one of the major arguments of the Turkish government, that they were trying to bring about a social and cultural unity of Turks and Kurds, when they were criticised by Western governments and human rights organisations.

Ethnosymbolists have an equally naïve picture of the West. According to them, 'many Western states have come to operate with a more civic and territorial version of nationalism, through which immigrants and refugees may find a legitimate place in the host nation as citizens' (Smith 2001a: 128). 'In liberal and democratic states, the aim of a national mass education system has been not so much to homogenise the population as to unify them around certain shared values ... allowing minorities among them to retain their own symbols, memories' (Smith 1998: 40–1). I am not certain whether the various minorities, immigrants and guest workers living in such civic Western states would have a similar picture in their mind. We should only remember the plight of the 400 Afghan asylum seekers who had to spend eight days in a boat when they claimed their legitimate place in the civic-territorial nation of Australia or the results of the recent presidential elections in France to see the other side of the coin.

Another example of this carelessness can be found in Smith's critique of Kedourie's analysis. For Smith,

Kedourie fails to see how nations and nationalism have become part of the very structure of modern society, and how they have been absorbed and assimilated by the vast majority of the world's populations for whom the colourful rhetoric and slogans of some intellectuals are at best decorative extras, 'icing on the cake'. (Smith 1998: 115–16)

Here, nationalist propaganda, which caused so much anguish and suffering all around the world, becomes a 'colourful rhetoric', a 'decorative extra', 'icing on the cake'. What would a Kosovar, a Bosnian Moslem, a Kurd or indeed a Jew living in Poland during the Second World War think of such a comment? That she is the victim of a colourful rhetoric, a decorative extra, some icing on the cake? Would she not be offended at the very least?

Let me then reiterate a point I made earlier: ethnosymbolists need to consider the normative and political implications of their well-intentioned analyses. I am fully aware that they cannot be held responsible for the ways in which their views are used by less well intentioned others. The least they can do, however, is to reveal their own normative preferences and perhaps to abandon their claim to political neutrality. Ethnosymbolists are not 'retrospective

nationalists', as other critics have claimed, but 'reticent nationalists': they are unwilling to disclose what they feel and that is the problem.

Concluding remarks

Where do we go from here? Anthony Smith's reply to this question is clear: we need a general explanation of nationalism, a causal analysis of the origins and formation of nations. Postmodernists, he argues, in their desire to demonstrate the fluid and constructed qualities of these phenomena, repudiate the need for such overall accounts. They lack historical depth, they are at best partial and fragmentary (Smith 1998: ch. 9). In Smith's words, 'they illuminate a corner of the broader canvas only to leave the rest of it in untraversed darkness' (Smith 1998: 220).

But is such an overall account of nationalism possible? Smith himself argues that

the great number of permutations of explanatory factors, the sheer variety of historical cases, above all the elusive complexity of definitional features of concepts of the nation and nationalism, renders the search for certainty ... implausible and untenable. (Smith 1998: 67)

And what does an ethnosymbolist approach imply anyway? We are told that

no analysis that ignores ethnosymbolic components will enable us to grasp the present self-understandings of nations ... And, without an adequate grasp of the inner history of nations, we shall find ourselves unable to gauge their future development in a global era. (Smith 2001a: 119)

This means that each case should be studied in its own specificity. In that regard, ethnosymbolists seem to concur with Calhoun, a postmodernist by Smith's criteria, who argues that

why nationalism comes to dominate in those settings where it does – or for some people and not others within an ostensibly national population – are questions that by and large can be answered only within specific contexts, with knowledge of local history, of the nature of state (and other elite) power, and of what other potential or actual movements competed for allegiance. (Calhoun 1997: 25)

Given this, I will argue, contra Smith, that we should in fact abandon our quest for a grand theory. Perhaps what we need is a theory of different nationalist practices (Walker 2001: 630; cf. Calhoun 1997). Such partial theories may indeed illuminate only a corner of the broader canvas, but so what, as long as we make progress? After all, it is the tiny glimmer of a distant lighthouse that matters for the sailor, not the bright sunlight.

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