

Gastronomy or geology? The role of nationalism in the reconstruction of nations

ANTHONY D. SMITH

*Department of Sociology, The London School of Economics,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK*

ABSTRACT. This article considers the debate that has recently developed in studies of nationalism between those scholars who see the nation as a modern and constantly changing construction *ex nihilo* and those who see it as an immemorial, unchanging communal essence. It outlines the so-called 'gastronomical' and 'geological' metaphors of nation formation and suggests a synthetic model which balances the influence of the ethnic past and the impact of nationalist activity. It shows that the central question which has divided theorists of nationalism is the place of the past in the life of modern nations. The author recognises the role of nationalists in national mobilisation but stresses that nationalists are not social engineers or mere image makers as modernist and post-modernist accounts would have it, but rather social and political archaeologists whose activities consist in the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the ethnic past and through it the regeneration of their national community.

Is the nation a seamless whole or an à la carte menu? Is it an immemorial deposit that archaeology has recovered and history explained, or a recent artefact that artists have created and media chefs purveyed to a bemused public? Are nationalists to be compared with intrepid explorers of an often distant past, or with social engineers and imaginative artists of the present? Does nationalism create nations, or do nations form the matrix and seedbed of nationalisms?

The debate that has developed around these themes represents a radical attempt to rethink the problem of nations and nationalism in the modern world. But it also has far wider and deeper ramifications for our understanding of history and ethnicity. Here I want to explore some of these themes and recommend a position that places nations and nationalisms within a much longer historical trajectory, one which does justice both to the created and the received elements of national identity, and attempts to grasp the explosive energy of nationalisms.

The nation as cultural artefact

Let me start with the nation, and specifically with the gastronomic theory of the nation. According to this view, nations are composed of discrete elements and their cultures possess a variety of ingredients with different flavours and provenances. For example, English national identity was shaped by various influences in the past – Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Danish, Norman – and English culture today is composed of a number of ingredients from the Caribbean, Cyprus, Eastern Europe and India. In this century, with so much immigration and intermarriage, there is no such thing as a pure English (I do mean British) nation or culture. Today's symbol of Englishness is the 'ploughman's lunch'. Its ingredients (bread, cheese, pickles) may be venerable, but they are not peculiar to the English, and their juxtaposition was a commercial fabrication of the 1960s. Similarly, the choice of Constable's painting of *The Hay Wain* as the quintessential symbol of an 'English' landscape was a Victorian and Edwardian invention; just as the kilt and tartans as the symbol of the Scottish Highlands was an invention of the age of Walter Scott.¹

In one sense, there is nothing particularly new here. The idea that nations are in some sense 'invented' goes back to Renan. The notion of the English nation as a cocktail of cultural ingredients is found in Daniel Defoe and it was generalised by a number of scholars including Kedourie, who stressed the recent and invented quality of nations and nationalism. What we have in the 'gastronomic' theory is no more than the logical conclusion of this line of argument.

But, if we look a little closer, we will see a major difference. The older theorists – Deutsch, Kedourie, Gellner, J. H. Kautsky, Hugh Seton-Watson, Tom Nairn, Charles Tilly – all assumed that nations, once formed, were real communities of culture and power: circumscribed, but potent, unifying, energising, constraining. They were, if you like, what Durkheim would have called 'social facts', with the qualities that he attributed to social facts: generality, exteriority, constraint. They were also social actors, indeed the largest and most powerful social actors on the political stage, and as such, they could not be fragmented and shattered into a thousand pieces like the mechanical nightingale of the Hans Andersen fairytale. They were real, singing nightingales, even if they could not, or would not, cure sick emperors or put obsolete empires back together again.

For the 'gastronomic' theory, however, the nation is like the artificial nightingale. It is a piece of social engineering. Speaking of the 'nation' and its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, etc., Eric Hobsbawm tells us: 'All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation'.² In other words, nationalists and their followers have put together the various ingredients of the nation – history, symbols, myths, languages – in much the same way as pub owners

put together the ploughman's lunch. In doing so, they often select elements with diverse origins, particularly if, as so often happens in modern societies, the state's boundaries include various ethnic communities. So, the modern nation is a composite artefact, cobbled together from a rich variety of cultural sources.

But there is a further element in the recent radical rethinking of the concepts of nations and nationalism: its insistence on the imagined quality of the national community and the fictive nature of unifying myths. There is a polemical, satirical intent here: to unmask the nation and reveal the power games of nationalism. Specifically nationalist instruments of elite manipulation are symbolic: they involve the creation of a culture-ideology of community, through a series of emotive symbols and myths, communicated by print and the media. But in fact it is ultimately a specious community, one that parades as a collective cure for the modern disease of alienation between state and society, and operates through historical fictions and literary tropes, of the kind that Benedict Anderson and his followers have described.³

France during the Third Republic provides a classic example of the way in which the imagined community of the modern nation has been constructed, indeed invented. Between 1870 and 1914, the high period of 'ethno-linguistic' nationalism, according to Eric Hobsbawm, republican nationalist French leaders sought to 'create France' and 'Frenchmen' throughout the area of the French state by institutional and cultural means. Military service for all, a regimented mass, public education system, inculcation of the spirit of glory and *revanche* against Prussia, colonial conquests and assimilation, as well as economic infrastructure, all helped to turn 'peasants into Frenchmen', in Eugene Weber's well-known formulation. But there was one field, in particular, which helped to create the imagined community of *la France*: history, or more specifically, history teaching. It was during this period that a single history textbook, the Lavissee history, was formulated in different editions for successive age groups and school levels, and prescribed for all pupils in every French school, both within France and in its colonies. Thus African and Vietnamese schoolchildren were all set on the path of grasping and identifying with the imagined community of France by repetition of the catechism, *nos ancêtres les Gaulois*, and by recitation of the history of France from Clovis to Louis XIV, Napoleon and the Third Republic.⁴

Now the standardisation of history through a canonical textbook is only one, albeit a particularly important, way of forging an imagined community. There are others. The creation of a canonical literature represents another popular strategy: Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth; Racine, Moliere and Balzac; Pushkin, Tolstoy and Lermontov, become icons of the new imagined community, creating in their reading publics a communion of devotees and providing the national image with a textual fabric. Music can also serve this collective purpose; a Sibelius or Chopin

has done as much for the image of Finland and Poland and the cultural communion of Poles and Finns as has a Runeberg or Mickiewicz. And here lies the point: these artefacts have created an image of the nation for compatriots and outsiders alike, and in doing so have forged the nation itself. Signifier and signified have been fused. Image and reality have become identical; ultimately, the nation has no existence outside its imagery and its representations.⁵

Let me give another European illustration. Recent Swiss historians have devoted some attention to the 700th anniversary of the Swiss *Eidgenossenschaft*. Their researches have revealed that both the official date for the foundation of the Confederation (1291) and the interpretation of it as a foundation myth were inventions of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was only the 600th anniversary celebrations of 1891 that consecrated the Oath of the Rütli in its present form, and turned it into the foundation document of the nation. From this, it is a short step to claiming that the Swiss nation was really a product of the settlements of 1848 and 1874, rather than a gradual growth from the late thirteenth century foundation myth. The myth is revealed as a fiction, if not a fabrication, of the modern nationalists; and the Swiss nation becomes a recently imagined community propagated, and re-presented, by those same nationalists.⁶

The position becomes even plainer when we turn to the recently formed states of Africa and Asia. In most of these cases, the nation cannot be anything but an imagined, and very recent, community, one that is being quite deliberately engineered in often polyethnic societies. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the boundaries of several new states were drawn artificially by the colonial powers in the 1880s, sometimes across ethnic categories and communities like the Ewe, Somali and Bakongo. In what sense, apart from the imaginations of nationalists, are these new states 'nations'? Even in their own eyes, they are no more than 'nations-to-be', 'nations of intent', in Robert Rotberg's phrase. Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zaire, Chad: deeply cross-cut by ethnic communities and regions, these territorial states are being used by their elites as the framework for inventing nations. They are territorial 'nations of design', a *mélange* of ethnic groups thrown together in a cauldron, as it were, by the colonial powers – as opposed to the 'old, continuous nations' of Western Europe. To this end, national histories, symbols, mythologies and rituals are being fabricated to implant a spurious unity and fraternity in their heterogenous and divided populations.⁷

The very novelty of these new states in Africa and Asia carries with it a sense of the fragility and invented quality of the nation-to-be. It takes much art and design to construct nations from such diverse ingredients. These nations of intent are novel cultural artefacts, of very recent vintage. Their presumed need for roots in history is the product of their lack of such roots. This is why charismatic leaders like Nkrumah, Nasser, Nehru and Sukarno in the 1960s sought to create 'political religions' after independence, in order

to mobilise their often divided populations and instil in them a spirit of self-sacrifice for the tasks of development. The representations and symbols of a political religion aimed to evoke a sense of unitary culture in societies which lacked even a semblance of unity and whose peoples had not only different cuisine and costume, but also diverse religions, customs and languages. Clearly, more than a nostalgic 'ploughman's lunch' was required if the state was not to disintegrate.⁸

What all this amounts to is a rejection of the orthodox 'modernist' theories of the nation and 'nation-building' of Karl Deutsch, J. H. Kautsky, Peter Worsley, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, Charles Tilly and Tom Nairn, in favour of a critical anti-foundational stance that questions the unity of the nation and deconstructs the power of nationalism into its component images and fictions. This essentially 'post-modernist' reading turns the nation into a 'narrative' to be recited, a 'discourse' to be interpreted and a 'text' to be deconstructed. Constructing the nation is more a matter of disseminating symbolic representations than forging cultural institutions or social networks. We grasp the meanings of the nation through the images it casts, the symbols it uses and the fictions it evokes, in the novels, plays, poems, operas, ballads, pamphlets and newspapers which a literate reading public eagerly devours. It is in these symbolic and artistic creations that we may discern the lineaments of the nation. For the post-modernists, the nation has become a cultural artefact of modernity, a system of collective imaginings and symbolic representations, which resembles a pastiche of many hues and forms, a composite patchwork of all the cultural elements included in its boundaries.⁹

It is an image that could well apply to an emergent nation like Israel. According to this account, modern Israel represents an imagined community incorporating a medley of ethnic groups and cultures of widely differing provenance. Christian and Muslim Arabs, Druse, Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews comprise its main components; but the latter include religious and secular Jews from many lands and times, from America and Yemen, from India and Romania, from Ethiopia and Russia. The ingathering of the exiles is a perfect reflection and precise symbol of the Israeli nation as an imagined and an invented community. What is taking place in modern Israel is the cultural construction of a new nation, which we witness daily in the work of cultural representation in Israeli 'texts' – in its newspapers, novels, plays, poetry, film, broadcasts, television and the like. It is a nation culturally far removed from any other, including the Jews of the diaspora, not only by virtue of its official language, Hebrew, but even more by the cultural contexts and assumptions of its symbolic representations. In and through concepts like *sabra*, *kibbutz*, *aliya*, *yored*, *zionut*, used in official pronouncements and everyday life, the work of symbolic construction permeates the fabric of social life and creates a community of shared assumptions and cultural practices out of ethnically and socially heterogeneous populations; in other words, a nation.¹⁰

Modernist and post-modernist accounts

At this point let me summarise the 'post-modernist' theory of nationality and contrast it with the hitherto fashionable 'modernist' accounts.

For 'modernists' like Deutsch, Lerner, Kedourie, Gellner, J. H. Kautsky, Tilly and Tom Nairn, the nation is a modern category, emerging into history in Western Europe and America in the late eighteenth century, along with the ideology of nationalism. The modern nation is a product of nationalist conceptions, but nationalism itself is a force generated by the needs of modernity, that is, of modern societies. Hence, nationalism and nations are intrinsic components of a modern capitalist, industrial and bureaucratic world. They are an integral part of its fabric. Though the fires of nationalism may burn less fiercely with the advance of affluence, nations and national states will remain the basic forms and elements of modern society. Hence every society and population must forge a viable large-scale community, and 'build a nation' where none had existed, because the nation is the only tested framework for economic and social development. In other words, nationalism was both the result of the need for growth and its motivation and dynamic, while the nation provided the only reliable basis and framework for that growth.¹¹

This is an optimistic, activist account. It sees the nation as a community of participants sharing common values and purposes, appropriate to a modern era of economic growth and political emancipation. In this account, nationalism may be a regrettable, even destructive, force in a plural world, but the nation is the only really viable unit of political organisation and community today. This is because for modernists the nation is socially and politically determined. Its foundations lie deep in the economic, social and political processes of modernisation since the French Revolution, if not earlier, and the nation partakes of the social and political benefits of modernity. It follows that for a modernist the interesting questions concern not the nature of nations and national states, but their historical origins and sociological bases.¹²

Now all this appears quite *passé* and uninteresting to a 'post modernist'. For one thing, it appears to reify the nation, to treat it as a 'thing' out there, with a dynamic of its own. For another, the modernist account fails to grasp the elusive, shifting character of all communities, including the nation. And third, for all their commitment to the idea that nationalism creates nations and not vice versa, the modernists shy away from the implication that the nation is ultimately a text, or set of texts, that must be 'read' and 'narrated', a particular historical discourse with its peculiar set of practices and beliefs, which must first be 'deconstructed' for their power and character to be grasped.

But there is something even more fundamental that divides post-modernist approaches from all their predecessors. This is their emphasis on cultural construction, as opposed to social and political determination. Here

there has been a twofold shift: first, from structure to culture as the locus of analysis, and second, from determination to construction and representation. What this means is the abandonment of any notion of social structure and the constraints that it operates over social and political phenomena. Nations (or anything else) are no longer the products of social processes like urbanisation or mass education or uneven capitalism, though uneven capitalism may still be lurking somewhere in the background. There is no need to search for origins or causal patterns. If you want to understand the meaning of national, ethnic or racial phenomena, you have only to unmask their cultural representations, the images through which some people represent to others the lineaments of national identity. For only in these images or cultural constructs does the nation possess any meaning or life. The nation is a communion of imagery, nothing more nor less.

It follows from this that 'post-modernist' accounts lack that optimism or activism that distinguishes modernist approaches to nationalism. There is, in fact, something weary and cynical, if not playful, about their conceptions of the nation, for all their recognition of its explosive power. Anderson, for example, certainly underlines the mass death that nationalism can inspire, but there is an air of fatality in his stress on human mortality, linguistic diversity and the onward march of chronological, empty time. It seems there is little hope for the inhabitants of Babel.¹³

Little hope, and less light. For what does this radical re-think of the problems of nations and nationalism illuminate? What insights can it reveal that earlier approaches prevented us from seeing? Is there anything new in the assertion that nations are imagined communities, composed of engineered and invented traditions? Couldn't most nationalists themselves have told us as much? Wasn't – isn't – that the business of nationalism – inventing national traditions, representing images of the nation to sceptical compatriots, imagining a community that as yet exists only in their dreams? Are we then to conclude that 'post-modernist' approaches to the nation are no more than the theory of nationalist practices?

There seems to be no other conclusion, and it suggests that the recent radical rethinking of the problem of nationalism has abandoned the attempt to understand it causally and has substituted a series of descriptive metaphors. To those who may affect disdain, but in reality are perplexed and repelled by nationalism and its often unpredictable manifestations, these culinary and artistic metaphors have an undoubted attraction. But their charm is in inverse proportion to their theoretical penetration and rigour. Probe behind their colourful exterior, and we shall be unable to discover any real clue to the origins, power and ubiquity of nations and nationalisms in the modern world. Compared to the older 'modernist' accounts, their 'post-modernist' successors seem historically shallow and sociologically implausible.

But have the 'modernist' accounts of Deutsch and Gellner, Nairn and Kedourie, J. H. Kautsky and Tilly, fared any better? Have they been able to

escape these charges? Have their activism and optimism enabled them to render a more plausible account of the rise of nations and the diffusion of nationalism? In many ways they have; but this has not been a consequence of their 'modernism'. Their relative success has been the result of their insistence on social determination: the belief that nations and nationalisms are causally determined by a variety of social and political factors. What has made their various analyses less plausible is their concomitant belief that these are all factors of 'modernity', that nations are products of factors operating in the last two or three centuries, which together constitute a revolution of modernity. In this vital respect, 'post-modernist' accounts concur. They too insist on the modernity, as well as the artificiality, of nations. They too see modern conditions like print-capitalism and political mobilisation spawning nationalisms that invent and imagine nations. And they too fail to see the ways in which these conditions operate, not on some *tabula rasa* population, but on varying degrees and kinds of pre-formed populations. The images and traditions that go into the making of nations are not the artificial creations of intelligentsias, cultural chefs or engineers, but the product of a complex interplay between these creators, their social conditions and the ethnic heritages of their chosen populations.¹⁴

The nation as historic deposit

It is at this point that a quite different concept of the nation suggests itself. This is the idea of the nation as a deposit of the ages, a stratified or layered structure of social, political and cultural experiences and traditions laid down by successive generations of an identifiable community. In this view, the contemporary situation of the nation is explained as the outcome, the precipitate, of all its members' past experiences and expressions. For this 'geological' standpoint, the ethnic past explains the national present. This is in stark contrast to recent anthropological approaches that emphasise how the present – its concerns, interests and needs – shapes and filters out the ethnic past.¹⁵

Let me illustrate with two examples. The first comes from early twentieth century India. In the 1905 agitation over the British partition of Bengal, the radical Indian nationalist Tilak turned to the Hindu past for inspiration in his campaign against the British authorities. He had already appealed to the local cult of the Marathi hero, Shivaji, in Maharashtra; now he extended the scope of his appeal by invoking the Hindu cult of the dread goddess of destruction, Kali. Even more interestingly, he turned to passages from the Hindu classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and used its essentially devotional poetry on behalf of a political objective, the fight against British domination. The advice of the great Lord Krishna to the hero, Arjuna, became, in Tilak's hands, no longer simply the advice of a god to the hero in a family feud, but an invocation to courage, heroism and resistance against aliens. In this

way, Tilak selected from the manifold past of the sub-continent of India certain specifically Hindu traditions and symbols, because he wished to extend the social composition of the Indian nationalist movement to the lower classes; and he also reinterpreted those selected aspects to fit a new, essentially political and national purpose which the original experiences and texts did not bear.¹⁶

Now, according to the 'gastronomic' theory, Tilak and his followers were like culinary artists devising a new recipe for the reimagined Indian nation, a hot and explosive Hindu recipe. As social engineers they devised a new political strategy for the mobilisation of the Hindu masses. From the standpoint of the 'geological' theory, however, all Tilak and his followers did was to rediscover layers of the ethnic Hindu past, deposits that had lain dormant for millennia in the Hindu consciousness, and allow these materials to dictate the shape of a reconstructed Hindu Indian nation. Indeed, modern India in this approach is largely another layering upon a pre-existing series of strata, without which it would be impossible to reconstruct, or indeed grasp, the modern Indian nation. To understand the ideas and activities of Tilak, of Indian nationalists, and of the modern Indian nation as a whole, we must trace its origins through the successive strata of its history back to the initial formation of a Hindu Indian ethnic community in the Vedic era.¹⁷

Modern Israel affords a second example. The heroic self-sacrifice of 960 Jewish men and women on the fortress of Masada in 73 CE was not an event of major significance in the shaping of subsequent Jewish history. Compared to the defence, fall and destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, it was insignificant. Masada, in fact, was barely remembered, despite the accounts in Josephus and later Jossipon, preserved by the Church; it was not commemorated by Jews or Judaism, nor mentioned in the Talmud or Midrash. Only in the early twentieth century was interest in Masada kindled – first in a Masada Society in London, and then in Yitzhak Lamdan's poem of 1927, entitled *Masada*, written in and for the Palestinian Yishuv. In that earlier period, the image of Masada as set down in Lamdan's poem answered to feelings of despair and defeat, as many Jews left Palestine, unable to face its hardships. Later, after 1948, Masada came to symbolise the spiritual victory of the Jewish people over a perennially hostile environment, a heroic affirmation of national will and dignity in the face of superior external forces besieging the infant state, an image reinforced by the vivid discoveries of Yigal Yadin's excavations.¹⁸

Now, for the 'gastronomic' theory, the recent Israeli selection of Masada, while in no way opportunist like the Englishman's 'ploughman's lunch', was determined by the needs of modern Israeli generations for whom it has become a symbol of siege and victorious self-sacrifice over all odds. It has become an important ingredient in the Zionist image of modern Israel, one with a special appeal and use for the nationalist imagination. For the 'geological' theory, on the other hand, Masada represents, like the rock

itself, one of the foundations of the Jewish people and hence of modern Israel, an undergirding of national will and aspiration in the face of tyranny and servitude. Ancient Zealot resistance represents a bedrock of the nation in its ancestral homeland, an historical prototype as well as an explanatory principle. Masada itself may have been of only symbolic importance, but the resistance of Maccabees and Zealots was crucial for grasping the later survival of the Jewish people, the necessary foundation on which later generations of diaspora Jewry could rest and build.¹⁹

As these two examples suggest, the 'geological' theory introduces a deep explanatory principle, namely, that modern developments cannot be understood without grasping the contours of much earlier social formations. Communities are, on this theory, built up in stages, each stratum lying on top of earlier ones, as in the ancient tells that punctuate the Middle Eastern landscape. The new ethnic layer or stratum has its own specific qualities, but it cannot be understood without thorough knowledge of the one beneath, and so on right back to the moment of ethnogenesis. Similarly, the later deposits or strata are to varying degrees shaped by earlier layers, at least in terms of their location and main features. Just as earlier deposits set limits to all the later strata, so the experiences of our ancestors limit and shape our own experiences. On this theory, the modern nation as an enduring descent group is in large part a precipitate of all the deposits of earlier generations of the community. The ethnic heritage determines the character of the modern nation.

We can take this theory a stage further. The modern nation becomes not just the collective precipitate of earlier deposits but a summation, and a new form, of those deposits. On this reading, the contemporary nation is simply the modern form of an age-old biological nation. According to this view, nations have always existed in one form or another. Human beings are recorded in the earliest surviving documents as belonging to nations; and nations are recorded from earliest antiquity as engaging in trade, diplomacy and war. Nations are ubiquitous. They are also immemorial. Like the family, the nation is a perennial feature of human history and society.

This is the perspective on the nation that I have described elsewhere as 'perennialism'. It was very popular, also in academic circles, before the Second World War. It remains popular in the world at large, even if most scholars today no longer accept its premises. Actually, it is only a radical form of the 'geological' theory of nations. It postulates an unchanging essence of the nation beneath different forms. Hence, each form adds a new layer of meaning and colour to the underlying principle of the nation. But it is the same nation, as it is the same rock or tell.²⁰

But is it the same nation? Is the nation like a rock or tell? Does it have strata and layers like geological deposits? Is ancient Israel one form of an unchanging essence of Israel, and modern Israel another (modernised) form? Are ancient Hindu India and modern India different forms of the self-same India beneath? What about all those modern nations whose ancient national

pasts are unknown or dimly remembered? Was the shamanistic culture of ancient Finland, recalled in the *Kalevala*, simply another form of an unchanging Finland and Finnish culture? Was the Zoroastrian religious culture of Sassanid Persia just another form of an underlying Persia and its Farsi culture? Or did the introduction of Christianity into Finland and Islam to Iran change more than the outer form of an underlying national substance? If they did, has not the revolution of modernity changed much more than the outer form of these communities?²¹

These are not just rhetorical questions. Merely to pose them is to highlight the implausibility of a 'perennialist' perspective. Clearly, modern India, Israel, Finland and Iran are not simply modern forms of an unchanging communal essence. They are quite different societies and polities from what we understand of ancient India, Israel, Finland and Iran, and not just in economics and politics, demography and social structure, where vast changes can be expected, but also in the more slowly changing realms of culture, language, religion and historical consciousness. Though we can detect some elements of continuity, the revolutions of modernity have created a radical break in the cultural realms too, a break that can at times amount to a displacement, a break in continuity and memory – as if lightning had struck and split the communal rock, and a destructive fire had ravaged several cultural layers of the ancient tell.

The nationalist as archaeologist

Yet the fact that such questions about the identity of ancient and modern communities can be, and have been, posed suggests that the 'geological' metaphor is not wholly misleading. The nation is not a purely modern creation *ex nihilo*, much less a *mélange* of materials constantly reinvented to suit the changing tastes and needs of different elites and generations. The nation may be a modern social formation, but it is in some sense based on pre-existing cultures, identities and heritages.

The questions are: how shall we understand the relationship between modern nation and pre-modern culture? Does the modern nation lie like another layer on top of pre-existing ethnic traditions? Or does it simply emerge and grow out of earlier ethnic communities?

Neither of these alternatives captures the essential processes at work in the formation of nations. Nations cannot be likened to recent strata inertly covering much older ethnic cultures, even if they are related to earlier cultures. A geological metaphor fails to convey the active dynamism, the transformative power, which is characteristic of what we call 'nation-building'. It has no room for popular participation, for interaction with other nations, for projects of reconstruction or for the influence of different ideologies and myths. It presents a closed, static image of the nation, one far removed from the powerful currents of modern national will and aspiration.

Nor can we convincingly claim that modern nations simply 'grew' out of earlier ethnic communities and cultures. There is nothing immanent or cumulative about the nation. An evolutionary metaphor minimises the discontinuity, the dislocation and struggle with outside forces which has so often accompanied the rise of modern nations. Nations cannot be regarded as part of some natural social order, as a necessary and irreversible process of growth, as nationalists themselves like to claim. Once again, this is to omit the unpredictable event, the conflict of interests, the influence of participants and the impact of external structures and forces. The rise of nations must be placed in the context of specific modern conditions, even where these are shaped by past experiences and ethnic heritages. How then shall we understand this complex process?

Let us return for a moment to the question raised by the episode of the rediscovery of Masada. Why was this ancient and obscure act of heroism raised to such symbolic heights? It was not simply an ingredient in the Zionist imagination of modern Israel; in fact, it hardly figured in early Zionist imagery. Nor can we regard it as a fundamental base or foundation on which modern Israel rests. The fact is that 'Masada' was both literally and symbolically rediscovered by particular groups at a specific moment in Jewish experience. Its cult was actively propagated, and it struck a deep chord in the hearts and minds of many Jews, both inside Israel and in the diaspora. There is an obvious explanation: in the popular modern Jewish consciousness Masada echoed the heroic resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters and more broadly the martyrdom of the Holocaust. This is what gave a relatively unknown episode of ancient Jewish history its great resonance. That, and the excitement of Yadin's discoveries on the fortress itself.²²

This example suggests a different perspective on our problem of the relationship of the ethnic past to the modern nation, one that accords an important role to the nationalist as archaeologist. We commonly think of the archaeologist as an excavator of the material remains of past ages. But this is to omit the underlying purpose of the discipline of archaeology, which is to reconstruct a past era or civilisation and relate it to later periods, including the present. This is done, of course, pre-eminently by dating. Chronology is the expression of a linear worldview that relates the past to the present and the future. Hence, in dating relics of past epochs, the archaeologist locates a community in its historic time, and in that sense provides a symbolic and cognitive basis or foundation for that community. In doing so, the archaeologist reconstructs the modern community by altering its temporal perspective and self-view.

But the archaeologist also fixes communal location in space. Excavations determine the where as well as the when. 'We', the present generation of the community, are located in specific places on the map. We are told of 'our origins' in space as well as time. Archaeology suggests the stages of 'our development', as well as those of earlier peoples who have not survived, in

the land of our origins, the cradle of 'our civilisation'. It also reveals and preserves the different achievements of those past stages in the homeland and hence the possibilities for future developments. And archaeologists do all this in the name of, and through the use of, modern science.²³

What I am arguing is not that the archaeologist is a prototypical nationalist – though he or she may well be – but that we should regard the nationalist as a kind of archaeologist. This is not because archaeology has been central to the formation of modern nations, though it often has been, but because nationalism is a form of archaeology and the nationalist is a kind of social and political archaeologist.

What does it mean to say that nationalism is a form of political archaeology? And how does this suggest a new perspective on our problem? We may start by observing that all nations require, and every nationalist seeks to provide, a suitable and dignified past. This is true even of revolutionary nationalists, who seek out a distant, pristine past, an era of primitive communism. An ancient or primordial past is essential to the enterprise of forming nations for a number of reasons. It lends dignity and authority to the community and bolsters self-esteem. It suggests precedents for all kinds of innovation. This helps to make often painful changes more acceptable to the people. Moreover, the past provides *exempla virtutis*, models of nobility and virtue for emulation. The French revolutionaries, for example, modelled the France of their dreams on ancient republican Rome and looked to the likes of Cincinnatus, Scipio and Brutus the consul for moral and political guidance. Modern Greeks looked back to the age of Periclean Athens, modern Irishmen to a pagan Celtic era, modern Indians to the heroes of the Ramayana and Mahabarata, and modern Jews to Moses, David and Judah the Maccabee. All these ancient heroes and golden ages now entered the pantheon of the modern nation.²⁴

But there is a deeper reason for the drive to rediscover an ethnic past, or 'ethno-history'. This is the need to reconstruct the modern nation and locate it in time and space on firm and authentic foundations. The role of nationalist intellectuals and professionals is to rediscover and reinterpret the indigenous ethnic past as the key to an understanding of the present epoch and the modern community, much as archaeologists reconstruct the past in order to locate a culture, community or civilisation in history, and thereby also relate it to the present era. Both are animated by the belief that the ethnic past explains the present, an understanding that is quite different from the modernist and post-modernist belief that the past is a construct of the present or simply a quarry of materials for its needs.

There is, however, still something missing from this historicist understanding. It is the element of active intervention by nationalists and others in the construction of the nation. This is not the social engineering or culinary art of post-modernist approaches, nor even the herculean social and political labours of 'nation-builders' (or better 'state-building') beloved of the modernists, important though these are. The active role of

nationalism, and of nationalists, is threefold: rediscovery, reinterpretation and regeneration of the community. Let me take these in turn.

Rediscovery is fairly straightforward. It involves a quest for authentic communal 'ethno-history', the recording of memories, the collection of indigenous myths and traditions, the researching of fresh dimensions and the location of new sources, like the ballads of the Finnish *Kalevala* or the Irish sagas of the Ulster cycle of epic poetry. This is the role *par excellence* of the nationalist historian, philologist, anthropologist and archaeologist, the starting point of cultural nationalism.²⁶

Reinterpretation is more complicated. Weighing the sources, sifting the traditions, fixing the canon of ethno-history, selecting from myths and memories, so as to locate the community in a significant context, raises all kinds of questions of evidence and verification. But in this case the ethnic past is reinterpreted to make the national aspirations of the present appear authentic, natural and comprehensible. Forming part of a single unfolding drama of national salvation, that past must be selected and interpreted in a specifically national light. But the present too is selectively appropriated and interpreted, in accordance with the ideology of national authenticity. And nationalism postulates the need for a dignified, vernacular and preferably glorious, past. Hence, the nationalist actively intervenes in both history and the present, to provide particular interpretations of the communal past, according to the nationalist criterion that accords primacy to explanations in terms of an authentic past.²⁶

This view accords considerable importance to the transformations wrought by nationalist activity but sees its role as rather more limited than that envisaged by both modernists and post-modernists. The latter regard the nation as the conceptual product of nationalism. As Gellner put it: 'Nationalism invents nations where they do not exist', though he added that it needs some pre-existing cultural materials to work on. Hobsbawm agrees: 'Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round'. All this leaves out the role of the ethnic past, and hence of nationalism as a form of archaeology.²⁷

We see this particularly clearly in the third activity of the nationalist: that of collective regeneration. Regeneration involves a summons to the people, mobilising the members of the community, tapping their collective emotions, inspiring them with moral fervour, activating their energies for national goals, so as to reform and renew the community. Here the nationalist-archaeologist is revealed as a missionary romantic, drawing political conclusions from the cultural work of rediscovery and reinterpretation: 'if this is how we were, and that is how we must understand things, then this is what we now must do'.²⁸

Such an approach suggests a more subtle view of the relationship of the ethnic past to the present than that presented by modernists or post-modernists, but also one which is more dynamic and active than that embodied in the geological metaphor. The past is not some brew of random

ingredients put together by artistic inclination, nor a quarry of cultural materials out of which nation-builders invent nations, nor yet a succession of epochs on whose foundations the modern nation securely rests. The ethnic past is composed of a series of traditions and memories which are the subject of constant reinterpretation.

Several factors influence such reinterpretations. One, the impact of nationalist ideology, I have already discussed. A second is the scientific evidence at any given moment in time. Interpretations of 'our' ethnic past will depend, not only on nationalist ideology, but also on what historians currently tell us about past events or epochs. Historical research can change our evaluation of heroes or events of the community's past, just as it can explode myths. A third influence is social and political: whether the interpretation has popular resonance. Does it mean anything to a wider audience? Can it take root among the people at large? Thus the tale of Joan of Arc took root among the French people in the nineteenth century, as historians and Catholic apologists began more detailed and sympathetic enquiries into her trial and fate and as a more religious and popular nationalism swept the country.²⁹

The final influence is less tangible. It is the patterning of a particular ethno-history and its symbolism, the relationship over time between certain key components that recur in that community's history. For example, the dominance of the state in Russia, the relative weakness of Russian civil society and Russian liberalism, and the consequent alternation between periods of strong, cruel leadership and factional anarchy, set limits to all subsequent developments in Russia. These patterns are also expressed in peculiarly Russian institutions, language and symbolism: in concepts of tsar, zemlya, narod and the like, in the role of the Kremlin, in the diffusion of bureaucracy, in conceptions of space and territory, chosenness and mission. Such concepts, institutions and symbols impose limits on the way subsequent generations grasp the experiences of their communal forebears. As a result, not only is Russian history utterly unlike French, German or any other history, but it also sets clear limits to subsequent interpretations of itself, irrespective of the ideology of the interpreter.³⁰

The upshot of all this is to confine the role of nationalism to that of discovery and interpretation of the past for the mobilisation of the present. The nationalist finds that there are clear limits to the way in which his or her chosen nation can be reconstructed. These are the limits of particular ethno-histories, as determined by scientific, popular-political and cultural-symbolic criteria. Thus Masada could be woven into the drama of the rebirth of Israel and given its due, because the scientific evidence of Yadin's excavations coincided with a popular sense of siege and determination bred by the Holocaust and Arab encirclement; and because Masada, though itself a lesser episode, echoed many similar acts of Jewish heroism and martyrdom through the ages *al Kiddush HaShem*. It fitted well into a dominant pattern and symbolism of Jewish experience over the centuries. In rediscovering and

reinterpreting the siege and martyrdom of Masada, Jewish nationalism was able to add another regenerative motif to its understanding of Jewish history, and thereby inspire and mobilise many Israelis and Jews to greater heroism and self-sacrifice.³¹

Conclusion

Perhaps the central question in our understanding of nationalism is the role of the past in the creation of the present. This is certainly the area in which there have been the sharpest divisions between theorists of nationalism. Nationalists, perennialists, modernists and post-modernists have presented us with very different interpretations of that role. The manner in which they have viewed the place of ethnic history has largely determined their understanding of nations and nationalism today.

For nationalists themselves, the role of the past is clear and unproblematic. The nation was always there, indeed it is part of the natural order, even when it was submerged in the hearts of its members. The task of the nationalist is simply to remind his or her compatriots of their glorious past, so that they can recreate and relive those glories.

For perennialists, too, the nation is immemorial. National forms may change and particular nations may dissolve, but the identity of a nation is unchanging. Yet the nation is not part of any natural order, so one can choose one's nation, and later generations can build something new on their ancient ethnic foundations. The task of nationalism is to rediscover and appropriate a submerged past in order the better to build on it.

For the modernist, in contrast, the past is largely irrelevant. The nation is a modern phenomenon, the product of nationalist ideologies, which themselves are the expression of modern, industrial society. The nationalist is free to use ethnic heritages, but nation-building can proceed without the aid of an ethnic past. Hence, nations are phenomena of a particular stage of history, and embedded in purely modern conditions.

For the post-modernist, the past is more problematic. Though nations are modern and the product of modern cultural conditions, nationalists who want to disseminate the concept of the nation will make liberal use of elements from the ethnic past, where they appear to answer to present needs and preoccupations. The present creates the past in its own image. So modern nationalist intellectuals will freely select, invent and mix traditions in their quest for the imagined political community.

None of these formulations seems to be satisfactory. History is no sweetshop in which its children may 'pick and mix'; but neither is it an unchanging essence or succession of superimposed strata. Nor can history be simply disregarded, as more than one nationalism has found to its cost. The challenge for scholars as well as nations is to represent the relationship of ethnic past to modern nation more accurately and convincingly.

Here I have suggested an approach that balances the influence of the ethnic past and the impact of nationalist activity. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive theory of the role of nationalism. There are many other factors that need to be considered. But nationalists have a vital role to play in the construction of nations, not as culinary artists or social engineers, but as political archaeologists rediscovering and reinterpreting the communal past in order to regenerate the community. Their task is indeed selective – they forget as well as remember the past – but to succeed in their task they must meet certain criteria. Their interpretations must be consonant not only with the ideological demands of nationalism, but also with the scientific evidence, popular resonance and patterning of particular ethno-histories. Episodes like the recovery of Hatsor and Masada, of the tomb of Tutankhamun, the legends of the *Kalevala*, and the ruins of Teotihuacan, have met these criteria and in different ways have come to underpin and define the sense of modern nationality in Israel, Egypt, Finland and Mexico. Yigal Yadin, Howard Carter, Elias Lonnrot and Manuel Gamio form essential links in the complex relationship between an active national present and an often ancient ethnic heritage, between the defining ethnic past and its modern nationalist authenticators and appropriators. In this continually renewed two-way relationship between ethnic past and nationalist present lies the secret of the nation's explosive energy and the awful power it exerts over its members.

Notes

1 For the kilt, see Hugh Trevor-Roper: 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), 15–42. For the English rural landscape, see Alun Howkins: 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Colls and Dodd (1986), 62–88.

2 E. Hobsbawm: 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983, 13). For Kedourie's much earlier formulation, see Kedourie (1960, 1 and passim). What is new here is the stress on artifice and representation.

3 See Breuilly (1982, Conclusion) for the idea of the nation as a pseudo-solution to the modern split between the state and civil society. For the analysis of literary devices, see Anderson (1983, ch. 2); see also Samuel (1989, vol. III).

4 History textbooks in the Third Republic and thereafter are carefully analysed in Citron (1988); cf. also Weber (1979). For Hobsbawm's recent analysis, which is particularly critical of ethnic and linguistic nationalism, see Hobsbawm (1990).

5 For musical nationalism and Chopin, see Einstein (1947, ch. 17). For the influence of Sibelius' tone-poems of the *Kalevala*, see Layton (1985). On the role of literary intellectuals in Europe, see Smith (1981, ch. 5) and Anderson (1983, ch. 5).

6 See for example Fahrni (1987) and the critique in Im Hof (1991). Though the date and celebration of the Oath may be the products of nineteenth-century Swiss nationalism, its memory and significance were preserved as early as the White Book of Sarnen in the 1470s and then by Aegidius Tschudi's Chronicle of the sixteenth century, from which Schiller took the materials for his play, *Wilhelm Tell* of 1802. The position is more complex than 'post-nationalist' scholarship suggests.

7 See Rotberg (1967) for this phrase. For Nash (1989), ethnic relations are best viewed as a

cauldron, but also as a refuge, one that often preserves and enhances the power and ties of ethnicity.

8 See Apter (1963) for the classic statement; also Binder (1964). For a penetrating recent survey of ethnicity and nationalism in Nigeria, see Igwara (1993).

9 For an application of the idea of 'imagined community' to modern Greek nationalism, see Kitromilides (1989). For the use of this type of discourse, see the essays in Samuel (1989, notably vol. III).

10 For earlier analyses stressing ethnic differences in modern Israel, see Friedmann (1967) and Smooha (1978).

11 'Modernist' accounts include Deutsch (1966), Kautsky (1962), Kedourie (1971, Introduction), Tilly (1975, Introduction), Nairn (1977, chs. 2, 9) and Gellner (1964, ch. 7 and 1983).

12 A detailed discussion of some of these 'modernist' approaches can be found in Smith (1983).

13 For Anderson, nationalism is here to stay. It is like kinship and culture, not ideology. A more sceptical mood is conveyed in some of the essays in Samuel (1989) and in Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman (1989). See also Elshtain (1991) on cultural representations of collective sacrifice.

14 For a more detailed critique of the concepts of 'invention' and 'imagination' in relation to nations and nationalism, see Smith (1991b); for a critique of the 'modernist' standpoint, see Smith (1988). Cf. also the discussion of the case of ancient Sri Lanka in relation to these theories in Roberts (1993).

15 See the introduction and essays by Ardener, Just and Collard in Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman (1989). In the same volume, however, Peel criticises what he calls the 'blocking presentism' of some of these contributions. Cf. also Kapferer (1988).

16 See M. Adenwalla: 'Hindu Concepts and the *Gita* in Early Indian National Thought', and R. I. Crane: 'Problems of divergent developments in Indian nationalism, 1895–1905', both in Sakai (1961). The problem of what we may term ethnic Hinduism, i.e. the ethnicisation of a Hindu religious community, has become a burning issue today.

17 For the modern Indian nationalist rediscovery of the Hindu past, see McCulley (1966) and Kedourie (1971, Introduction). Tilak was only one of a series of Indian nationalists, including Pal, Banerjea and Aurobindo, who sought in a glorious Aryan Hindu past the roots and inspiration for nation-building.

18 Lamdan's poem and the adverse circumstances of the Palestinian Yishuv in the 1920s are discussed in Schwartz, Zerubavel and Barnett (1986). For the Jewish resistance on Masada, see Josephus: *Jewish War* VII, 323–33.

19 For the Zealot resistance movement, and its religious dimensions, see Brandon (1967, ch. 2); for the role of Masada, and the excavations, see Yadin (1966).

20 See for example Walek-Czernecki (1929) and Koht (1947); for fuller discussion of 'perennialism', see Smith (1984b).

21 For discussions of the culture and historicity of the *Kalevala* sagas, see Branch (1985) and Honko (1985). For the demise of Zoroastrianism in Iran after the invasion of Islam, see Frye (1966).

22 See for example Elon (1972) on the influence of the Holocaust on modern Israel, and its cult of heroism and military resistance.

23 For the nationalist uses of archaeology, see Chamberlin (1979); also Horne (1984). See also the discussions in Smith (1986, chs. 7–8) and Renfrew (1987).

24 See Mary Matossian: 'Ideologies of "delayed industrialisation": some tensions and ambiguities', in Kautsky (1962). For classical *exempla virtutis*, especially in the French Revolution, see Rosenblum (1967) and Herbert (1972).

25 For an analysis of the nature of cultural nationalism, and its interplay with political nationalism, see Hutchinson (1987) and also Lyons (1979), both of whom discuss the Gaelic revival in late nineteenth century Ireland.

26 For the ideal of cultural authenticity in Herder, see Berlin (1976). For applications of this ideal in the appropriation of the ethnic past, and for nationalist intervention in history, see also Hobsbawm (1990, ch. 4) and Smith (1991a, ch. 4).

27 Gellner (1964, ch. 7); and Hobsbawm (1990, ch. 1), for whom 'invention' is an exposure of nationalist delusions.

28 It is particularly among 'vertical' demotic *ethnies* that we find this process of 'vernacular mobilisation'; cf. Anderson (1983, ch. 5) and Smith (1989).

29 For Joan of Arc and her 'rediscovery' in nineteenth-century France, see Warner (1983). On the question of the popular resonance of nationalist interpretations and ethnic myths, see Kedourie (1971, Introduction) and Smith (1984a).

30 On tsarist Russian ethnic concepts and institutions, see M. Cherniavsky: 'Russia', in Ranum (1975) and for the patterns of Russian history, see Pipes (1977).

31 On the Zionist revolution and its connections with earlier Jewish conceptions, see Yerushalmi (1983) and Almog (1987); cf. also Smith (1992).

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