

## Review Article

### Return to the Organic: Onions, Artichokes and the ‘The Debate’ on the Nation and Modernity.

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*Nationalism and Modernism*, by Anthony D. Smith. London & New York: Routledge, 1998. ISBN: 0415063418.

*Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, by Umut Özkrimili. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. ISBN: 0333777123.

*Understanding Nationalism*, edited by Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson. Cambridge: Polity. ISBN: 0745624022.

There exist in intellectual history periods where, following intense deliberation on a question, something like a consensus emerges. Typically the consensus amounts to a refinement of the competing views on the question rather than some final resolution. These refined views are then presented as the official ‘debate’ on the question, and faithfully reproduced in university courses world-wide. Something of this sort has happened with theories of nationalism, or to be more accurate, with theories of the modernity of the nation. Indeed, the issue of the modernity of the nation looms large in the Smith, Özkrimili and Guibernau & Hutchinson texts.

The modernity of the nation is a question most famously articulated by Ernest Gellner when he asked: ‘Do nations have navels?’, that is, are they the progeny of pre-modern ethnic parents, or are they new imaginings produced by modern conditions without parents at all? The ‘debate’ identifies three answers to this question: (i) the primordialist: the nation is an organic and enduring part of human society; (ii) the modernist: nationalism, a product of modernity, constructs nation as if they were organic but they have no essence; they are like an onion which can be peeled away to nothing; and (iii) the ethno-symbolist: the nation is a modern imagining of a pre-existing ethnic group and so, like an artichoke, has modern ‘leaves’ surrounding an ethnic ‘heart’<sup>1</sup>.

Of these three views, the latter two are the ones which dominate ‘the debate’ with the Özkrimili text sympathetic to the modernist view, whilst the Smith and Guibernau & Hutchinson texts favour ethno-symbolism. However, while they may dominate ‘the debate’ at the expense of primordialist theory, they do so at a significant cost to their accounts of the subjectivity of ordinary people’s ethnic and national identities, a cost that, for all its faults, primordialism does not incur. Where modernism typically ignores the 300-pound atavistic gorilla in the corner, ethno-symbolism fails to ask the right questions about this atavism. Ten years of research and reflection have shed much light on the history and evolution of nations and nationalism, but added very little to the pressing question of why we ordinary folk ‘primordialise’ our *ethnies*<sup>1</sup> and nations, and the political and social consequences of this. In this article I will hope to show how this is the case, using the example of Zulu nationalism in South Africa during recent times, and arguing that we need

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<sup>1</sup> A metaphor introduced by Özkrimili 2000.

to return to the subject which inspired the 'organic' primordialist: our ethnic and national atavism.

### **Gellner's Ghost**

The origins of the debate on the modernity of the nation dates back to the 1960s, and more specifically the arguments of Ernest Gellner. In his 1964 *Thought and Change* Gellner sketched the broad outlines of a theory of nationalism more fully developed in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Gellner's argument was that nationalism, the belief that political and national units should be congruent, arose in response to the particular conditions of the modern age. More specifically, Gellner points to the changed role of culture in modernity. Whereas in traditional societies culture reinforced the role-bound structure of society and therefore could be specific to each social strata, modern industrial society requires the social mobility of all. Consequently, everyone must learn the high culture (language, literacy, numeracy, technical skills) functional to the operation of the economy, and the state facilitates this through mass education.

To the theoretical account of the changing role of culture, Gellner adds a historical-sociological dimension. The spread of modernity is uneven as it moves outward from Western Europe across the traditional world. As it spreads across the world, modernity destroys local villages and towns, drives people towards cities, and generates conflicts between newcomers and the more established. Over time this conflict becomes ethnicised, and before long the intelligentsia on both sides drive nationalist movements of secession. Nationalism then, is the political process by which high culture is imposed on society, and the nation is the 'high cultural' identity invoked by nationalism. These are phenomena peculiar to our modern times.

While Gellner's arguments have come in for much criticism they mark the first real attempt to understand nationalism in terms other than those of nationalists themselves, lifting theories of nationalism to a higher level of sophistication. Up until World War Two the serious scholarly work on nationalism were either histories of particular nationalisms or typologies of nationalisms. Gellner's intervention changed all that. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a flood of modernist theories linking nationalism to different features of the modern world from international capitalism, to industrialisation, the state, urbanisation and cultural practices. For most modernists, nationalism produces the nation, that is, the nation is a new phenomenon 'invented', 'imagined' or 'constructed' to serve the particular ends of the social structure/class/élites. Not only is it not what it presents itself to be, but it has no essence. It is, in the words of Stanley Hoffman, an onion which can be peeled away to nothing.

In the 1990s modernist theories came under attack from a new school of ethno-symbolists led by Gellner's student, Anthony Smith. Placed somewhere between primordialists and modernists, ethno-symbolists affirm the significance of pre-modern *ethnies* in the formation of modern nations, placing more emphasis than modernists do on popular forms of cultural engagement and the endurance of these forms over time. If modernists see the nation as an onion, a recent construction of many layers, then ethno-symbolists see the nation as an artichoke, with modern leaves surrounding an ethnic heart. Today the debate on nationalism and modernity is one of the onion versus the artichoke.

But before we get there we should start with nationalist discourse itself and the much maligned 'organic' primordialist.

### **The nation as organic**

Perhaps the classical western expression of the primordialist view of *ethnies* and nations comes from German romanticism. On this view *ethnies* and nations were basically the same thing: an 'organic' social entity or 'organism' given by nature and so both an essential and enduring feature of human society bearing a distinct cultural essence. Clearly for these classical primordialists the 'modernity' of the nation does not emerge as a key question -- the *ethnie*/nation has always existed and it will always do so. This noted, nationalist discourse does allow for some flexibility in the life-history of the nation, at least in so far as the nation, like Sleeping Beauty, may enter a period 'slumber' or 'recess' only to be 'awakened' by the Handsome Prince, a nationalist hero. For nationalist smoochers think Garibaldi, Bismark, Buthelezi, Milosevic and company.

As Orkirimli (2000:67) points out, these 'fairytale' beliefs are elements in the most nationalist histories. Typically these histories claim: (i) the antiquity of the nation, (ii) a golden age of some sort, (iii) the superiority of the national culture to others, (iv) a period of 'slumber' or 'recess' and (v) the national hero who comes and awakens the nation. Certainly this structure applies to the story of the Zulu as told by Zulu nationalists down the twentieth century but especially during the transition to democracy from 1990 to 1994 (see Buthelezi 2000). Notably the same structure applies to the current discourse on the African renaissance propagated by ANC leadership (see Makgoba 1999). The point is this: these nationalist narratives are usually more romantic myths aimed at contemporary audiences rather than actual histories of the past. Like fairytales, they engage and comfort with pleasant fantasy, offering little by way of real explanation.

There are more sophisticated primordial accounts of *ethnies* and nations however. These are of two types: sociobiological or cultural. Sociobiological primordialism is associated with the writings of Pierre van den Berghe. Drawing on Darwinian views, van den Berghe argues that an individual will co-operate with her relations over outsiders so as to maximise the survival of her genetic material. This drive to secure genetic reproduction is just naturally given, and helping one's family ensures the survival of one's genes. For van den Berghe this bias towards kin becomes generalised down history to larger groups like tribes, ethnic groups and nations who we recognise as kin groups through shared physical appearance and cultural characteristics. On this view the ethnic group is actually an extended family.

The obvious criticism levelled against van den Berghe is that common cultural characteristics do not always coincide with common genetic heritage. The evident changes in the number, composition and even existence of ethnic groups and nations are inconsistent with the idea of an enduring biological community. Indeed, the Zulu foundation myth is one of nation-building through including many different peoples (see Buthelezi 2000). Thus genetic homogeneity was not a requirement of being Zulu. One possible response that Smith (1998:150) notes might be to appeal to psychological mechanisms like 'projection' and 'identification' through which ordinary people imagine the *ethnie* to be a family of sorts. However, this shifts the basis of group identity away from

genetics and into the social realm. The nation now just seems like a family, whereas van den Berghe's claim is that it is actually a family.

Following from this, the most persuasive of the primordial arguments come from scholars who emphasise the cultural rather than natural basis of group identity. Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz are those thrust forward in the 'debate' as the representatives of cultural primordialism. For these scholars, the significance of the 'primordial' ties of kinship, religion, blood, race, language, locality and the like for ordinary people are central. These bonds form the deeply-rooted and emotionally-charged basis of ethnic and national identification. Thus being Zulu becomes about the ties of history, of culture, of language, food, place, landscape -- all the cultural goods we absorb as children and grow to love as adults. In sum we are all born into a people constituted by a distinct and deeply-rooted cultural essence.

Ranged against the cultural primordialist view of *ethnies* are the instrumentalists. These scholars start from the notion that ethnic identities are socially constructed not essentially given, and may often be chosen as a strategic means to an end -- hence the designation 'instrumentalism'. A good example is Eller and Coughlan's (1993:187) critique of cultural primordialism. They hold that Shils & Geertz make the mistake of reading 'primordial attachments' as (i) *a priori* or given prior to social experience of interaction, (ii) as more powerful than other ties, thus over-riding them and (iii) as affective or emotional. They go on to criticise this placing of primordial ties, and thereby ethnic identities, outside of the social realm, as the overwhelming evidence from empirical studies shows how, in response to changing conditions, ethnic and national identities are chosen and re-imagined by different generations, genders or various interest groups.

Two examples from the Zulu case illustrate the instrumentalist case nicely. The first is the impact of the British in redefining Zuluness in the late nineteenth century by describing and treating all black people in Natal as 'Zulu'. Despite the fact that these people were not part of the Zulu kingdom and did not see themselves as Zulu, 'Zulu' they became to officialdom, and with time, even to themselves (Wright and Hamilton 1996). The second is the significance of gender for ethnic identity construction amongst the Tsonga, an ethnic group adjacent to the Zulu in the north of KwaZulu-Natal. Webster (1991) found ethnic identities were profoundly gendered in the same community such that women defined themselves as Tsonga and the men as Zulu. Webster explains this through the greater power that each identity offered the respective gender, but whatever the reason, the point is that ethnicity is not necessarily more fundamental than other social identities and may even be embraced strategically. It is a cultural product not a cultural given.

While Eller and Coughlan's argument is persuasive when directed at crude cultural primordialism, it is not clear that it ought to be directed at Shils and Geertz specifically. Both Smith (1998:157-8) and Özkirimli (2000:72-3) argue that Shils and Geertz do not regard primordial ties as merely matters of emotion, nor do they *a priori* prioritise primordial ties above other concerns. Indeed Geertz gives prominent place to the role of the state in stimulating beliefs about primordialness. Smith and Ozkirimly agree that a more accurate reading of cultural primordialism is of a theory which focuses on the perceptions and beliefs of people. This more sophisticated cultural primordialism is an approach which identifies the webs of meaning that participants embrace, and the way certain ties are presented as foundational of social relations, that is, it draws attention to the way we 'primordialise' aspects of the world.

If this reading is correct then much of the sting goes out of the primordialist/instrumentalist debate as both sides agree that the ethnic group is not simply culturally given. For Özkrimili (2000:73), this move so bankrupts the old debate that, on his view, any theorist who defines ethnicity or nationality solely in terms of how people feel could be called a cultural primordialist. However, this claim is overstated as instrumentalists and primordialist may well still differ in respect of *how* these feelings come about. Do they emerge out of an interest-based choice, as some instrumentalists suggest, or are they an imposed social inheritance presented in essential terms? The latter seems closer to the work of Geertz and Shils. A further consequence of ‘sophisticated’ cultural primordialism is that it breaks the association between some essentialist account of *ethnies/nations* and the longevity of *ethnies/nations*. One does not have to embrace the story of a pre-social, essential, organic entity to argue that *ethnies/nations* are pre-modern.

This is precisely Anthony Smith’s move when he introduces the idea of perennialism to describe those theorists who believe that nations have been around for a long time but who are not necessarily primordialists. This view is at the heart of Anthony Smith’s own ethno-symbolist position. In effect we can read Smith as re-orientating the terms of the primordialist/instrumentalists debate (what is the *ethnie/nation*?) to a new question (how old is the nation?). While successful, this move does have some theoretical costs, notably it sets to one side the central questions identified above: why do we ordinary people ‘primordialise’, and must we ‘primordialise’? Must we ‘primordialise’ only in respect of ethnic groups and nations -- as Smith suggests -- or does this apply to any identity?

While Smith and other ethno-symbolists advance some argument about *how* we primordialise and thus how *ethnies/nations* endure over time, without answering the *why* question too many pressing issues are ignored. Are we to believe nationalists that *ethnies/nations* necessarily have a special status as political identities? If so, what does this mean for human rights, regional and international governance? If so, what does this mean for the design of political institutions, especially the state? What of minorities, immigrants and national groups within countries? What does it mean for tolerance, liberalism, socialism and indeed enlightenment beliefs more generally? Smith and the ethno-symbolist may have defined for themselves a debate they can win, but is it really the debate to win? In answering this we must first consider what arguably has been the most significant school in nationalist theory: modernism.

### **The nation as onion**

As already noted, modernism emerged as a reaction to primordialism, especially the popular narratives of nationalist themselves. For the modernist of any shade, primordialism is suspect. This is because before the modern epoch nations were largely unknown, most people had a very local sense of things and to the extent that their sensibilities were attracted by larger collective actors they were things like cities, religious communities, empires and kingdoms. Further, it is far from easy to define and differentiate the special cultural content of various nations in the world today. Indeed, many nationalists bicker amongst themselves as to what the ‘true’ cultural content of the nation is<sup>2</sup>. Lastly, the enduring character of nations is not supported by the historical record. Nationalists struggle to explain the rise and fall of nations. Why is it that they ‘slumber’ for so long and ‘re-

awaken' later? For modernists, nationalists have put the cart before the horse. Nations have no existence apart from the beliefs and goals of nationalists who appeal to 'the nation' to legitimate political, cultural or economic projects. In short, nationalism invents nations, or more accurately, nationalists imagine them, and nationalism only emerges under modern sociological conditions.

To the modernist suspicion that primordialism is bad science is added a normative view that nationalism is often conducted in bad faith. This has two moments to it. The first is that nationalists engage in some form of deception from, at the one extreme, the conscious manipulation of popular sentiments for élite ends to, at the other, a sentimental imagining of a collective fantasy blind to historical truth. The second moment of bad faith is political. As Fred Halliday (2000:158-9) observes, fixing one's ethnic group/nation as given closes the door on others. This is why nationalism is often associated with wars, massacre, intolerance but also 'the everyday nastiness of much nationalism, its petty-mindedness, its mean-spiritedness, the endless self-serving arguments, the vast culture of moaning, whingeing, kvetching, self-pity, special pleading, that "Narcissism of small differences" that Freud so rightly denounced'.

Modernist accounts of nations and nationalism can be divided into those which emphasise the link between nationalism and socio-cultural transformations like Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Miroslav Hroch; those which emphasise the link between nationalism and modern economic transformations like Tom Nairn and Michael Hechter; and those that emphasise the link between nationalism and modern political transformations like John Breuilly, Paul Brass and Eric Hobsbawm. Space forbids anything but a quick sketch of one protagonist from each. Given that I have already covered Gellner I will move straight to Hechter's model of internal colonialism and then look at John Breuilly's views on the state.

Michael Hechter's arguments arose in response to ethnic conflict in the United States in the 1960s. The mainstream response to this crisis was 'assimilationism', the view that minority groups were poor as they were isolated from the national culture. The solution was to educate and socialise children of these groups in the cultural mainstream, and thus bring to an end to maladjustment. For Hechter the assimilationist view was too optimistic. It assumed that over time, capitalism would draw all underdeveloped regions and peoples under its purview, eventually bringing both a degree of cultural homogeneity and economic prosperity to all. Against this view Hechter proposed the 'internal colonialism' model drawn from Leninist theory, and also used in leftist analysis of apartheid South Africa (see Wolpe 1995). This model holds that the 'core' will dominate the 'periphery' politically and exploit it economically. The core are the 'advanced groups' of people created by the spread of modernisation across new territories, and the periphery are 'less advantaged' groups within the same space. Through what Hechter calls a 'cultural division of labour' the advanced group secures the prestigious social roles for its members, identified in (often 'metropolitan') cultural terms, while excluding the other ('indigenous' cultural) group. On the Marxist view the 'less advantaged' are dependent on the advantaged for exploitative jobs, credit, commerce and trade. Group solidarity is further enhanced by the perception of economic oppression and good intra-group communication. Thus cultural differences are super-imposed on exploitative economic relationships, so creating fertile ground for nationalist movements.

Hechter's thesis is a powerful one but is commonly criticised on two grounds. First, it does not fit the facts. Hechter develops his argument through a case-study of Celtic

nationalism in Britain yet Scotland does not fit the model as it is far from being under-developed. Similar examples of minority cultural groups with little real political power and yet substantial economic status abound. Catalonia and Jewish Americans are two further cases. Moreover, internal colonialism cannot explain nationalist movements in places where there is no uneven development. Second, Hechter reduces cultural cleavages and ethnic sentiments to economic and spatial factors, yet it is far from clear why these cultural differences must take ethnic form as opposed to the cultural differences of English classes for example. Further, why must cultural and regional boundaries always coincide? The association might be a common one, but it is not the only one. This suggests that forces other than 'spatialised economics' influence the formation of 'cultural groups'. To put it another way, ethnicity must be treated as an independent variable alongside economic processes, not subservient to them.

To this point, one commonly directed against modernists, someone like Gellner might reply by pointing to the intersection of interest and culture, and the links between culture and identity. There are at least two problems with this. First, the association between culture and identity should be recognised as an empirically contingent one (see Piper 2002a). This is because the 'defining culture' of an *ethnie* or nation often changes, or is contested, while membership of the *ethnie* or nation is typically socially-ascribed by one's descent. Thus, at least for the individual, one may be able to contest the meaning 'being an X' but it is very difficult to shed the X identity as it is ascribed by others and not simply chosen by oneself. For this reason I prefer to think of ethnic and national identities as (usually) made rather than chosen, and made across generations rather than in one lifetime. The point is that it may turn out that the cultural requirements of modernity have identity consequences or it may not.

Second, the Gellnerian is still unable to explain why we 'primordialise' our ethnic or national identity. To put the problem another way, why do ordinary people often feel so strongly about their ethnicity/nationality but less so about other identities? Many modernists would argue that this is not always true, that often ethnicities/nationalities are embraced more lightly. However, even if this is true some of the time (for example with multi-cultural civic nationalisms), much of the time it is not. There are countless examples of the powerful sentiments evoked by ethnic nationalisms. Further, if it were true that 'primordialisation = identity + disempowerment', then why does this not apply to social identities like gender or class? Is it not because of the way ethnicity is constructed in cultural terms, and the particular affective character of many of our cultural attachments? Surely this must set ethnic identity apart from most others.

If empirically the problem of primordial subjectivity is a real one, then it is a problem that haunts most modernists, including our final theorist John Breuilly. Like Hechter, John Breuilly's theory of nationalism is firmly empirically rooted. In his *Nationalism and the State*, Breuilly considers thirty nationalist cases pointing out that nationalism is above all about politics and politics is about power. This stems from his definition of nationalism as 'political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such actions with nationalist arguments'. The theoretical problem then becomes trying to understand why nationalism has played such a significant role in pursuing power, more especially state power. Roughly following Durkheim, Breuilly identifies modernization as being about a change in the division of labour from 'corporate' (mechanical) to 'functional' (organic). The state itself is a product of this process with public powers being handed over to specialist state institutions understood as 'public' as

opposed to the 'private' realm of the market and the individual. The emergent problem of this design was how to relate public interests of citizens with the private interests of individuals. Nationalism offered this solution politically (the nation is a body of citizens who regulate themselves) and culturally (the nation is a collective community as indicated by a common culture). In this way nationalism could link the ideas of community as defined both the state and by society. Indeed, again in Durkheimian fashion, Breuille observes that nationalism is distinguished by the unabashed celebration of 'the community' or as he puts it 'nationalists celebrate themselves rather than some transcendent reality'.

The major critique of Breuille centres on his limitation of the definition of nationalism to exclude nationalism as the language and ideology of cultural identity. This he does for methodological reasons yet his own analysis identifies a cultural identity as the basis for political mobilisation by nationalists. Further, while recognising that 'people do yearn for cultural membership' Breuille resolves not to interrogate why this is, as it is too hard a problem! However, as Smith points out, investigating the process of nation-building is to come to terms with the self-understanding of nationalists. Much of the point of nationalism is to develop a people with a distinct sense of cultural identity, personality etc. As Smith argues (1998:95) nationalism is not just about élites but also about ordinary people and how 'the latter can and do reshape the nationalist ideology in their own image'. It is this focus on ordinary people, their 'primordialised subjectivity' and how this links to national identity that Breuille fails to address.

In short then, modernists may have the most convincing explanation of nationalism as an ideology and political movement of modernity, but they struggle to account for nationalism as a process of identity formation or 'nation-building', and why it is that ordinary people often, if not always, tend to 'primordialise' their ethnic and national identities. It is these latter questions that ethno-symbolists believe they have the better answers to.

### **The nation as artichoke**

Ethno-symbolism is the third and final school in 'the debate' on nationalism and modernity, positioning itself between primordialism on the one hand and modernism on the other. For ethno-symbolists, nations are not simply a product of modern processes but are often, if not always, heavily influenced by a pre-modern ethnic legacy. At the same time, this ethnic legacy is not naturally given, immutable, organic or the only significant social identity as crude primordialists believe. Rather, ethnic identities and the nations they inform are socially produced and reproduced through cultural processes which mark insiders from outsiders. Thus ethno-symbolists make a distinction between nationalism, which is acknowledged as a modern ideology or movement, and the nation, which is partly modern, but also typically founded on a ethnic base which stretches back into pre-modernity. Thus the nation can be compared to an artichoke in that, while it may have has modern 'leaves', they surround a pre-modern 'heart'.

John Armstrong is commonly identified as the founder of the ethno-symbolism. Heavily influenced by Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, Armstrong adopts the social interaction model of identity formation. This view holds that groups tend to define themselves not so much by what they have in common but by how they differ from others. This means that group identity stems from processes of boundary construction and

maintenance. For Armstrong, ethnic boundaries are constructed and maintained through what he terms 'myth-symbol complexes'. Here certain symbols are taken as 'border guards' distinguishing 'us' from 'them'. They become integrated into myths which, over time, define an ethnic identity in relation to a common polity and help engender a sense of solidarity. Thus symbol, myth and communication are central to ethnic identity formation for Armstrong.

It is another ethno-symbolist, John Hutchinson who fleshes out the kind of processes by which these cultural goods come to define group membership. Hutchinson advances a theory of cultural nationalism which, against Breuilly's political definition, identifies 'nation-building' as a central nationalist phenomenon. Thus cultural nationalists, typically those who are cultural producers (poets, artists, performers, school teachers, religious leaders), look to create or reinforce a sense of national identity through a process of 'moral regeneration'. This amounts to cultural work which affirms the common identity and gives it a particular meaning so as to build solidarity. Examples would include nationalist works of art and literature, language movements, introducing national holidays, rituals and festivals and so on. Hutchinson sees cultural nationalism as flourishing periodically in times of national crisis, and existing alongside political nationalism. The key point is that cultural nationalism acts as a constraint on political elites, both in circumscribing their world-view and in helping construct the popular view which political elites must appeal to under modern conditions.

Notably Hutchinson's model applies almost perfectly to Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaner identity was built in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Further, it was built by religious leaders, teachers and artists in explicitly linguistic and cultural movements during a time of 'moral crisis and decay' amongst descendants of Dutch settlers. It was only later in the 1930s and 1940s that this cultural nationalism was succeeded by the political nationalism associated with the National Party (Hofmeyer 1987, Grundlingh 1992, Giliomee 1995:191-7). This is not the case with the Zulu however, in the sense that the dominant forms of Zulu nationalism have been political rather than cultural, although Zulu cultural nationalists have made periodic, if somewhat desultory, attempts at moral regeneration (see Piper 2000: 200-1). Indeed Waetjen (2001) argues that one of the reasons Zulu nationalism 'failed' as a political project in recent times was because of a lack of a common content to Zuluness due to its gendered character. To my mind this speaks of a failure of cultural nationalism.

In both Armstrong's and Hutchinson's accounts then, there is a profound sense of the importance of culture in constructing national identity and the ways this will impact on political nationalism. There is a key point of difference between these two views, and that concerns the endurance of ethnic groups down history. Where Hutchinson is cautious about projecting cultural nationalism back into history, Armstrong argues that the construction of nations can only be understood over the *longue duree*, that is several centuries, and that this perspective shows that nations were not invented in the modern era but were founded on existing, intense, long-standing and recurrent forms of ethnic identification. Armstrong arguments here are mainly historical, and he points to the slow evolution of national identities through the long-term survival of what he terms 'myth-symbol complexes'.

However, perhaps the most sophisticated version of the ethno-symbolist view belongs to Anthony Smith. Best articulated in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Smith follows Armstrong in looking to the past for evidence of ethnic communities (or *ethnies*) which provide the foundation for modern nations. Like Hutchison and Armstrong, Smith (1998:

190) is looking for cultural evidence (national ‘structures, sentiments and symbolism’) and he finds much of it going far back. He uses this to develop a ‘historical sociology’ of *ethnies*. Like Armstrong and Hutchinson, Smith is not arguing that ethnic groups are natural, organic or primary but culturally constructed. However, like perennialists (and Armstrong) he suggests that they have been around for a long time and do, on the whole, provide material for modern nations.

Moreover, and this is where Smith offers something distinctive, *ethnies* do this in two ways depending on whether they are ‘lateral’ *ethnie*, which are communities like aristocracies that do not deeply penetrate the social scale, or ‘demotic’ *ethnie*, which include a wider range of social strata and are more intensely bound to each other. Smith argues that ‘lateral’ *ethnie* tend to impose the national identity from the top-down the social scale by securing and then wielding state power, and this tended to yield ‘civic’ nationalism. Conversely ‘demotic’ *ethnie* tend to yield an ethnic nation through a process of cultural nationalism very similar to Hutchinson’s characterisation. Smith also notes that there is a third route where nations are formed through immigrant fragments to a country conjoining in a multicultural nationalism of some sort.

Thus for Smith, while nationalism is modern, nations are only part-modern. Modernity does give nations their unique characteristics: a definite territory, a public culture, economic unity and common rights and duties for citizens. However, nations are also the product of older, pre-modern ethnic ties and histories, and this lends them the mythical and symbolic dimensions which informs elite presumptions and popular consciousness. This means that the past places certain constraints on the present. This point is powerfully made by Caroline Hamilton (1998) in *Terrific Majesty* where she argues that the ‘inventions’ and ‘reinventions’ of Zulu history as centred on the figure of Shaka by white officials were significantly constrained and limited by indigenous accounts. In brief, the dominant narrative of Zulu history as centred around Shaka derives from an dialogue between of black and white. It was not simply invented nor imposed, nor was it ever uncontested or unauthorised. For Smith this helps explain why the most successful nations are those which are based on pre-existing *ethnies*, and why state-driven nationalisms as post-colonial African and arguably the EU, struggle to transcend ethnic differences.

While Smith’s basic thesis is persuasive there are three major problems that trouble me. The first is his definition of the nation drawing on various objective elements like a definite territory, economic unity etc. While it may be true that all nations are practically associated with these things, it is wrong to assume that this constitutes nationhood. If all there was to nationhood was the possession of certain objective characteristics then it would be possible to assign nationhood to a people who do not feel they are. The Zulu are a case in point. Despite possessing many of the objective criteria of nationhood most Zulu people do not believe that the Zulu have some special right to self-government or territory (Piper 2002b). Indeed, this wrong ascription is typical of much popular discourse on the Zulu, but intellectual work too. For example in *Liberalism, Community and Culture* Will Kymlicka writes ‘Why should the blacks be viewed as a single people when they are in fact members of different nations, each with its own language and political traditions’(1989:248). Of course, this is not what the vast majority of black people say when you ask them.

The point, very simply, is that nationhood cannot be read off objective criteria linked to the state, or culture for that matter, but is better seen as a form of *political* identity, and thus involves the subjective self-understanding of ordinary people. This means

that national identity is always in a process of political construction – very much the assumption underlying what cultural nationalists do – but also Michael Billig’s (1995) account of banal nationalism. Of course the question of why national identity arises can be explained in respect of the objective features of modernity but they do not constitute the identity. For this we need to turn to the self-understanding of ordinary people, and in my view, when we do that we ought to confront the question of this particular social identity is often primordialised.

Now ethno-symbolists do go somewhat down this road. They acknowledge the importance of popular subjectivities and point to the role in myth-symbol complexes in identity construction and transmission over generations. However, this response has its limits. First, as ethno-symbolists themselves acknowledge, the historical evidence of the subjectivities of ordinary people is patchy at best and often non-existent. This makes it difficult to interrogate the historical status of ethnic and national identities, like Zuluness for instance. A second and more substantial criticism comes from Breuilly and is targeted at the account of how these myth-symbol complexes are transmitted down time. Breuilly argues that institutions like the state play a central role in the transmission of myth-symbol complexes, but there is a marked institutional discontinuity with the advent of modernity, and thus ethno-symbolists must explain how this transmission nevertheless occurs. Smith’s response (1998:197) is to argue for the significance of institutions of everyday life as it were, as opposed to the narrow modernist list of state, economy and the like.

Smith’s argument could be right but we do not yet know as it too underdeveloped. Indeed, and this brings me to my third claim, it is likely to remain under-developed until theorists of nationalism can offer some account of why ‘primordialisation’ occurs. Clearly answering a *how* question is not the same as answering a *why* question, but it does seem that some micro-sociological and/or social psychological account of how ‘primordialisation’ is parasitic on some account of why it occurs. For example, for the crude primordialist this type of atavistic projection is ‘just what people do’ -- it is naturally the way they are. On this reading the need to explain how it happens disappears as it is naturally given. At the other extreme are those who doubt whether people actually ‘primordialise’ at all, or if they do, it is because of some error caused by nationalist ideology or some similar story. On this view, the problem and thus its explanation, disappear. However, for the ethno-symbolist and I would suspect for most scholars of nationalism, it is clear that ordinary people often, if not always, do ‘primordialise’ ethnic and national ties. Why do we ‘primordialise’ at all? Smith does not say although he clearly believes we do. Why these ties and not others? Again, Smith does not say, although he assumes that this ‘primordialising’ picks out a difference between ethnic/national and other social identities. Answering these questions would enable us to account for subjectivity in the kind of robust way needed to do more than observe that *ethnies* and nations have been around for a while. They would enable us to understand why people make them *in this way*.

## Conclusion

One of paradoxical outcomes of ‘the debate’ on theories of nationalism and modernity is a wide-spread scepticism about a general theory that can explain all the myriad forms of nationalism. Smith claims that he believes it still desirable to search for one although it may well turn out to be impossible. Özkirimli views such a desire as a misplaced modernist

desire for one objective truth, and we would do better to abandon such a quest and embrace various partial theories that account for the various forms of nationalism. In my view this scepticism is somewhat misplaced and quickly forgets much of the progress in understanding, for example, the modernity of nationalism and the significance of ethnic identities for nation-building. Moreover, I suspect much of this scepticism comes from a frustration born of not addressing a question central to ethnic identification and thus nation-building: ‘what motivates primordialism?’

In my view we have already made much progress down this road. Most would agree that ethnic identities are socially made rather than given by nature or God or anything else. Most would agree that ethnic identities are inherited rather than chosen by an individual. Yes, ethnic identities do rise and fall, but typically this is a complex and long process over generations. Most would agree that the meaning of ethnic identities is typically constructed in cultural terms. Most would agree that these terms are often primordially charged. Why? To me, the answer to this must come from some psychological account of human development that moves beyond a simple essentialist or interest account. Cultural primordialists were the first to gesture in this direction and their impulse seems a good one.

How are ethnic identities primordialised? We have some suggestions like Barthian boundary maintenance. In my view this explains how one knows who one is, but it does not explain why one feels strongly about it. Thus an answer to the ‘Why?’ question might help. Knowing the answer to these questions will help pick out what separates ethnic and national identities from other identities; it will help fill out our understanding of nation-building; and it will help us better relate the political and cultural moments to nationalism, and thus its broader social and political significance. While answers to these questions are no guarantee of a general theory, they can only help for they address that aspect of nationalism which ordinary people think makes it distinctive: its atavism.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here I follow Anthony Smith in using the French term ‘*ethnies*’ for the more cumbersome ‘ethnic groups’.

<sup>2</sup> For an example from Zulu nationalists see Maré 1992:68-73.

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