

## REVIEW: THE SOCIOLOGY OF NATIONALISM

*Jonathan S. Hearn*

David McCrone (1998), **The Sociology of Nationalism: Tomorrow's Ancestors**, London and New York: Routledge, pb, £14.99, ISBN 0415114608, 207pp.

The burgeoning literature on nationalism is replete with numerous comparative and case studies, selective readers, as well as the bold theoretical disquisitions of Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson, and such. But only recently have we begun to see attempts to synthesise and overview this literature in book form. David McCrone's **The Sociology of Nationalism** now joins James Kellas's **The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity** (1998) and Craig Calhoun's **Nationalism** (1997) as a major effort to map the confusing terrain of nationalism studies, offering the student of nationalism a way into this contentious subject. In contrast to Kellas and Calhoun, however, McCrone's effort is not so much an attempt to put things in order, as a weaving of a path through the thicket of conversations. The product of extensive reading, and years of research and writing on the subject in regard to Scotland, the book does not so much argue a theory as offer an almost avuncular tour of a landscape with which the author is intimately familiar.

The first chapter explores major theoretical debates around the definition, causes, and origins of nationalism. Sensitive to the mercurial nature of the concept, McCrone avoids handy definitions of nationalism, choosing instead to trace out relationships between the terms that structure academic discussions. Two interrelated dichotomies that run through the literature are central. First there is the idea that nationalisms come in two types: ethnic, based on cultural and biological essentialisms, and civic, based on constitutionally defined political membership. Secondly, there is a tension between those who tend to locate the origins of nationalism in pre-modern

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*Review: The Sociology Of Nationalism*

ethnicities, and those who tend to locate it in the ideological effects of industrialisation and the modern state. McCrone aims to show that these oppositions can be useful, but also problematic, in that the ethnic and civic dimensions are not easily teased apart in real life, and most examples of nationalism can be understood to combine both modern and pre-modern elements.

The following chapters develop these themes. After arguing the need for concepts of ethnicity and nationalism to be grounded in the theorisation of identity (a point I will return to), McCrone examines the central role of the social construction of history in the creation of nationalist discourses. These forays into theory culminate in a chapter exploring the work of the late Ernest Gellner and the responses of his critics. This is not only an approach warranted by Gellner's stature within the study of nationalism, but also pedagogically valuable because it ties together large portions of the academic discussions by orienting them around Gellner's influential and robust ideas (for a volume with similar merits, see Hall 1998). In the latter chapters McCrone continues to survey various theoretical issues, while also outlining the historical development of the phenomenon in question. Thus he moves from notions of nationalism as nineteenth century nation-building, to the question of liberatory nationalism involved in the post-World War Two anti-colonial struggles, then on to the perplexing cases of neo-nationalism (e.g. Scotland, Catalunya, Quebec) in the industrial and post-industrial 'West', and finally confronting the troubling developments of the post-communist nationalisms of eastern Europe. In this way most of the major sub-topics of nationalism studies are dealt with by the end of the book.

In the final chapter McCrone grapples with the diversity and perdurability of nationalism at the end of the twentieth century. He argues that we should not expect to be able to formulate a general, unified theory of nationalism, because nationalism is not a discrete natural phenomenon, but rather is substantially constituted by our theorising about it. But while no bright new theory of nationalism is on offer, as McCrone himself points out, the book is '... informed by the fact that the author is both a sociologist and a Scot...' (p. ix), and thus certain problems and questions are made central. Throughout the book he seeks to demonstrate that nations (as cultural identities) and states (as political institutions) are different kinds of phenomena, notwithstanding being relatively congruent in some instances. None the less, there is a long intellectual and ideological history of linking the two, and McCrone tends to portray the present period as one in which they are becoming increasingly de-coupled, with national identities freed up to seek a

### *Scottish Affairs*

variety of constitutional arrangements appropriate to particular cultural-historical situations.

This conviction feeds into the main arguments of the concluding chapter. He observes that despite globalisation appearing to siphon off power from the nation-state, in many respects the state has become even more pervasive in private life, rumours of its death being greatly exaggerated. But given his clear distinction between the nation and the state, the 'state of the state' becomes a somewhat separate issue from the future of nationalism. Rather than a matter of state-building, McCrone is inclined to locate current nationalisms in the framework of identity-politics (p.183). Engaging with Anthony Cohen's recent work (1996), he observes that nationalism has an irreducibly personal dimension, that it is not simply an aggregate phenomenon, but a medium through which individual identities are made. Drawing on the ideas of Neil MacCormick (1995), he argues that late twentieth century politics, particularly in the European Union, calls for complex and embedded conceptions of sovereignty and political membership, as opposed to the monolithic models of sovereignty inherited from previous centuries. Thus when McCrone turns to what positive developments might be currently taking shape, a relatively postmodern picture emerges of multiple identities, national and otherwise, achieving expression and recognition through variegated forms and levels of political institutionalisation.

The book as a whole points to the development of what has been called 'liberal nationalism', placing the accent on the voluntaristic aspect of national identity. This is the thrust of the book's sub-title: 'tomorrow's ancestors'. Whereas nationalism has so often been understood as the weight of immutable ethnic identities bearing down on the political present, McCrone seems to want to emphasise an active and creative stance in regard to the future. As he puts it, modern nationalism '... is a response to the problem of who we wish to become' (p.183). In the end, while eschewing grand theory, McCrone makes both a sociological and normative case for the increasing relevance and preferability of civic, liberal forms of nationalism.

This is a stimulating reading of both the literature and the historical moment, provoking further questions in turn. McCrone deftly lays out the many ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the concept of nationalism, and one feels inspired to ask for further unpacking of the concepts of identity, culture, and liberalism that have been put into service here. Identity is one of those irreducible and unavoidable concepts, like causation, which we rely on to make sense of our experience. Recent theoretical discussions of identity, as

*Review: The Sociology Of Nationalism*

by Stuart Hall, emphasise formal qualities of indeterminacy, mutability, multiplicity, and contextuality. But at this theoretical level identity can only tell us so much; it becomes more illuminating when we specify its content and say what it is about. How and why does identity become politicised in particular instances? If contemporary nationalism is to be understood as identity-politics, rather than nation building or resurgent ethnicity, what, in turn, explains identity-politics? One wonders if we are not, again, thrown back upon the state. In regard to the more civic neo-nationalisms, these are associated with liberal democracies, whose very legitimacy is premised on the recognition of individual and group rights, as long as these do not threaten the stability of the polity. Thus identity-politics might best be understood as an adaptation to liberal-democratic frameworks for sorting out competing claims on society's material and symbolic resources.

As an anthropologist, this reviewer is keenly aware of the ways in which 'culture' is often treated as a final explanation for things little understood. In current discussions it can be very difficult to say what qualifies as a 'cultural identity'. Would being, for instance, gay, socialist, a hill walker, and Scottish involve one in various overlapping cultural identities? Or is only the last one truly a cultural identity? If so, why? When we try to make a distinction here, we are easily drawn into deceptively holistic and integral conceptions of culture, i.e. the culture of the ethnic nationalist. The problem for ethnic nationalism is that culture is metamorphic and unbounded - but if we construe liberal nationalism as the tolerance and even encouragement of diverse cultural identities, then it may be the institutions of liberalism, rather than culture, that provide the more stable and necessary conditions of civic nationalism.

It may be that we are not so much living through a disengaging of cultural identities and the state, as a complicating of their relationship, a new phase of modern differentiation. This is perhaps simply a re-phrasing of McCrone's argument. As the state becomes more powerful and complex, and more subtle in its capacities to recognise interests and elicit support, it takes on these more varied forms we have discussed, and the extreme diversity of human social life is rendered more explicit by the increasing institutionalisation of different axes of identification. By confronting the baffling variability of this subject in such a lucid and affable manner, McCrone's book invites these and many further reflections on nationalism.

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*Scottish Affairs*

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