

## REVIEW: RETHINKING NATIONALISM

*Shanti Sumartojo and Ben Wellings*

**Jonathan Hearn, Rethinking Nationalism. A Critical Introduction.**

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 304 pp, pb, £19.99, ISBN 1403918988.

First the bad news: students of nationalism have another title in an already crowded market place introducing them to theories that have been used to explain nationalism over the past twenty-five years. The good news is that Jonathan Hearn's **Rethinking Nationalism** not only explains existing theories, but also goes further and begins to outline a new way of understanding nationalism.

This is the third publication from Palgrave Macmillan in as many years that surveys recent nationalism studies literature. Hearn's book sits alongside Day and Thompson's **Theorizing Nationalism** (2004) and Özkirimli's **Contemporary Debates on Nationalism** (2005) and covers much of the same source material. The book is organised in linked pairs of chapters that alternate between explorations of the existing literature and Hearn's 'rethinking' of this material, interspersed with textboxes that provide specific illustrations of the general themes being discussed. Whilst Hearn's stable-mates from Palgrave Macmillan examine nationalism from the point of view of social theory and social constructivism, Hearn approaches nationalism with insights gained from anthropology.

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### *Review: Rethinking Nationalism*

As in other introductory texts, Hearn begins by covering the Big Two, what he describes as ‘primordialism’ and ‘modernism’, adding his own take on these stalwarts of nationalism studies theory. Hearn is critical of primordialist approaches for their assumptions about the psychologically deep-rooted nature of nationalist ties and sentiments and, although a little more sympathetic to the idea of nationalism as a modern political ideology, argues that modernists have misunderstood modernity itself. For Hearn, modernity is not simply a temporal phase of social development sandwiched between feudalism and post-modernity, but is instead a far less coherent set of events about which it is too early to say whether they form a distinct, single stage in history or not. Both of these points have implications for the study of nationalism – Hearn suggests that locating the origins of nationalism in some stage of human history may not be all that useful in understanding it.

Whilst his examination of these ideas is thorough and sophisticated, his most original and interesting work comes in his second pair of chapters on culture and power. Hearn re-cuts the somewhat stale cake of nationalism theory based on the antinomy of primordialism and modernism by presenting refined understandings of culture and power as the main means by which nationalism can be most readily comprehended. This fresh approach allows him to draw on a broader range of sources, including anthropology, gender and urban studies.

An example of his insightful contribution is the discussion of the city and its role in driving the development of nationalism. In Chapter 7, ‘Rethinking Power’, Hearn draws in part on the work of urban theorists, including Jane Jacobs and Saskia Sassen, to sketch out how cities are central to the development of nationalism, identifying two main mechanisms by which cities can drive nationalism. The first is urban civil society, which provides the social infrastructure through which the discourses of nationhood can be expressed. Whilst these networks do not always concern themselves explicitly with nationalism, their presence ensures that ideologies and narratives can be transmitted and communicated which, under certain conditions, become nationalism in its political form. The second role the city can play in driving nationalism is economic – not only is it where national economic decision-making occurs, but the economic activity which the city itself generates draws in the regions around them. These two processes can determine the success of nation-states. Hearn completes his argument for the importance of cities by linking them to the process of uneven development – because of their central role in the economy – and thus to classical nationalism theory.

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By focusing on power and its urban expression, Hearn illuminates an exciting connection that touches on globalisation, economics, modernisation and social capital. However, his discussion of power is not limited to the political and economic elites of major cities. Hearn argues that it is best to understand nationalism ‘within a broader conception of power as inherent in all forms of social organization. This will help sensitize us to how the powers latent in all social relations become manifestly organized in nationalist terms under certain conditions’ (p.145). Evidently, these ‘certain conditions’ play a large role in explaining why, where and when routinised and latent national ideologies become more explicit, political and ‘active’. He concludes that scholars of nationalism are concerned with politicised culture, and that culture matters because it is essentially political. Thus, for Hearn, nationalism represents the pursuit of power, deriving from, and feeding into, social organisation. What is commonly understood as ‘culture’ (particularly language and religion) is really another dimension of the pursuit of power.

Hearn’s book is more than an introduction: readers who are already familiar with the existing literature will get the most out of it. Similarly, students at the honours or masters level are perhaps more likely to be able to grasp the ‘rethinking’ parts of Hearn’s work than undergraduates. Whilst Hearn is absolutely right to attempt to move beyond ‘primordialism’ and ‘modernism’, he hints that primordialism is something of a straw man in the theoretical literature when he describes it as more of a broad tendency than a unified perspective. In one sense, however, Hearn (inadvertently) steers close to something like a primordialist stance by explaining nationalism as the operation and pursuit of social power. He almost seems to suggest that human beings have an *innate* tendency to accrue power to themselves and their group, which in some cases becomes nationalism.

Hearn concludes his book with a useful summary of ten main ideas that point out areas of possible future research, and this kind of thinking is sorely needed if the field of nationalism studies is to move into fresh areas of inquiry. In fact, Hearn himself has risen to this challenge – his claim that this book represents a ‘point of view’ rather than a theoretical approach may be a bit modest, as the links he makes between culture and the social organisation of power suggest valuable new concepts to guide students of nationalism in their research and studies.

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