



Nationalism: Theory and its Discontents

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Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics

David Brown

Routledge, 2000

HBK: ISBN: 0-415-17138-5 £55.00

PBK: ISBN: 0-415-17139-3 £17.99

pp. 198 (including: appendix, end-notes, bibliography, index)

Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction

Umut Özkirimli

Macmillan, 2000

HBK: ISBN: 0-333-77711-5 £47.50

PBK: ISBN: 0-333-77712-3 £15.50

pp. 253 (including: Foreword by Fred Halliday, bibliography, index)

Containing Nationalism

Michael Hechter

Oxford University Press, 2000

HBK: ISBN: 0-19-829742-4 £19.99

PBK: ISBN: 0-19-924751-X £13.99

pp. 256 (including: list of figures, list of tables, end-notes, bibliography, index)

Nationalism studies are now well served by a plethora of books meant to present theoretically universal explanations and analyses of the phenomenon. Therefore, the volumes under review, David Brown's *Contemporary Nationalism*, Michael Hechter's *Containing Nationalism* and Umut Özkirimli's *Theories of Nationalism* are part of a competitive corpus of literature. Not surprisingly, the vogue for analyzing and re-analyzing nationalist theory, and its application for novel ends, is driven by the seemingly greater saliency of national identities for explaining, at least in part, some of the more notable developments – wars in the Balkans, mass slaughter in Central Africa, civil conflict in South and South East Asia, problematic peace-processes and increasing xenophobia in Western Europe to indicate a few examples - in contemporary world affairs. Even the recent 'War against Terrorism' in Afghanistan has been increasingly portrayed as a war of nationalities in popular coverage by CNN – not known for the most nuanced of approaches to conflict coverage - with the Pashtun versus other Afghans, as opposed to simply fundamentalists versus the 'civilized' world. Thus there is an optimistic market for textbooks, like the volumes by Brown and Özkirimli, and more sophisticated studies, such as Hechter's, about nationalism. However, the very popularity of the topic also encourages skepticism as to the degree each new work can contribute originally or comprehensively to a crowded field.

Brown's *Contemporary Nationalism* 'provides a clear and illuminating framework for understanding nationalist politics', according to the blurb on the back cover. The titles of its nine chapters are promising in indicating that thematic discussions of nationalist theory and relevant case-studies are covered. And, indeed, the first three chapters, 'The Conceptual Languages of Nationalism' (chapter 1), 'New Nations for Old?' (chapter 2) and 'Are There Two Nationalisms? Good – Civic and Bad – Ethnocultural' (chapter 3) are clear and illuminating as to important definitional ambiguities and debates endemic in nationalism studies. The rigor of chapters 2 and 3 has been especially assured by prior publication in *Nations and Nationalism* and subsequent revision. The start of demarcated subsections, such

as those covering the primordialist, situationalist and constructivist approaches in chapter 1, are concisely preambled by shaded boxes highlighting the subsection's fundamental focus. As such, these chapters are user-friendly and accessible, even if the first-time student of the field may have to take some time to absorb the material.

Perhaps most significantly, Brown breaks with the easy dichotomy deployed by many others of civic nationalism as inherently liberal and ethnocultural nationalism illiberal (p. 68). Instead, Brown argues, the illiberalism of a specific nationalism is contingent on the degree to which its representative elites have a marginalized or insecure status and are members of a national community with a significant perception of external threat which encourages it to 'mobilise itself as a collective entity... and thence to suppress individual liberties so as to promote that mobilisation.' (p. 65) Given this supposition, 'the difference between liberal and illiberal manifestations of nationalism cannot be explained by reference to the distinction between its civic and ethnocultural forms.... the political character of both is surely protean rather than Janus-faced.' (pp. 68-9)

Brown's analysis to this point is laudable and useful, allowing as it does a nuanced approach to evaluating the characteristics of particular nationalisms as based on their dynamic development according to context rather than stereotyped ascription of static characteristics. A case in point is Hechter's assertion in *Containing Nationalism* that nationalism is more prevalent in Canada than in the United States (pp. 3-4). But is this still true in the aftermath of the September attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and then overwhelming public support for U.S. forces to go to war against Afghanistan for the cause of national defence?

Unfortunately for Brown's subsequent chapter, 'Constructing Nationalism: The Case of the Basques' (chapter 4), the depth of required research for contextual appreciation of the Basque 'civic-ethnocultural convergence' (p. 86) in the 1990's as inherited from existing tendencies since the early twentieth century (pp. 81-4) is lacking and indicative of similar problems elsewhere. It is not that Brown's research is fundamentally misguided; but his particular reliance on books by Daniele Conversi (1997) and Juan Díez Medrano (1995), both very adequate initial resources, obscures the relative dearth of independent and up-to-date research conducted by Brown himself on the topic. His use of few recently published sources – the bibliography lists three books (although a number of one volume's chapters appear as different sources), one other chapter and three journal articles in print post-1995 on Spain and/or its peripheral national identities - regarding a region since then undergoing the throes of a developing (and collapsed as of December, 1999) peace-process does not indicate that he has fully grasped the contemporary context of Basque nationalism. Thus, his assertion that 'Basque nationalism is now finally beginning to be modified by an internally generated self-confidence focused on a new optimism for a negotiated... route to self-determination' (p. 88) needs to be taken with a handful of salt.

This said, discussions of Singapore, (chapter 5) where 'civic nationalism has legitimated the authoritarian suppression of individual liberties' (p. 95), and Ghana (chapter 6), in which the regime has been able to, paradoxically according to some theorists, 'generate political support from economic hardship' (p. 125) as based on the success of a re-invigorated nationalist ideology, are based on a fair extent of primary knowledge, as indicated by details of Brown's other writings listed in the bibliography. Both chapters are unusual, informative and relevant to



expounding on earlier theoretical premises. This is especially true in his aforementioned questioning of the over-used equation of civic as liberal and ethnocultural as illiberal nationalisms. Brown's use of his primary empirical knowledge of the Australia experience in chapter 8 ('How Can the State Respond to Nationalist Contention?') to critique a corporatist approach to ethnic group claims again places his arguments on a firm footing.

Given his familiarity with the Singaporean, Ghanaian and Australian cases, it is unclear as to why Brown ventured into deploying cases with which he is less competent, except for the possible reasons that inclusion of a more diverse set of cases, and especially some European, would allow him to render a textbook of purportedly global applicability and that some of these cases were among the most politically notable and hence academically fashionable by the late 1990's. This would account for disjointed inclusion of 'brief essays' (p. 152) in the co-authored appendix on Northern Ireland, Rwanda and Kosovo. (pp. 158-67)

The cursory nature of these afterthought essays is evident simply in the extent and content of the cited research. For example, discussion about Northern Ireland is supported by citation of only three websites (pp. 158-60) accessed on two days in November 1998, and May 1999. Brown's coverage of Kosovo is referenced only by two websites accessed on 21 April 1999 (p. 181); there are no sources listed in the bibliography which can be identified as specifically on Kosovo, Serbia or Yugoslavia. As for Rwanda, five sources are cited, but only one from a refereed journal. The other four are brief pieces, each at most four pages in length, all from current affairs magazines or bulletins, and with one from 1992 quoted as pertaining to the 1994 massacres (p. 161); in the bibliography no books particularly about Rwanda appear. Certainly Gérard Prunier's *The Rwanda Crisis* (1995) could have been a source, or at least the more journalistic volume by Philip Gourevitch (1998). In short, Brown's book does not do justice to the intended material as a whole, and instead, despite some good chapters, smacks of a volume cobbled together hurriedly as based mainly on previously published and then revised articles supplemented by insufficient additional research on vogueish case studies.

Özkirimli has written a more focused and thorough volume, albeit one of less ambitious scope as its intent is to deal only with theories of nationalism without extensive case studies, although some empirical observations appear. *Theories of Nationalism* is a disciplined book, which adamantly sticks to its stated purposes: '[1] to provide a systemic overview of some key theories of nationalism and to consider the main criticisms raised against them.... [2] to diagnose the deficiencies of the classical debate and to specify the theoretical problems we are still facing...and finally, [3] to propose... an [alternative] analytical framework that can be used in the study of nationalism.' (p. 7) In the first two of the three stated endeavors, the author succeeds, although the final purpose, to provide an alternative analytical framework, is rather more scant even if interesting.

In a sense, this book is not so much a discussion about nationalism *per se* but rather an epistemology, in this case of nationalism as a subject of academic discourse, in the cast of H. Stuart Hughes' *Consciousness and Society* (1977). The substantive chapters are periodized, as indicated in 'The Introduction' (chapter 1), and preambled by 'Discourses and Debates about Nationalism' (chapter 2) which provides a historical overview and tables central questions and fundamental problems – centered on issues of definition, evolutionary time-frame and typological differentiation (p. 57-62) – in the evolving theoretical discourse

about nationalism. The historical section locates the study of nationalism as developing through four time-frames: 1) the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the nascence of the nationalist concept, and most influenced initially by German romanticism; 2) 1918-45 when nationalism became a subject of academic inquiry, particularly by historians; 3) 1945 to the late 1980's as consideration of nationalism also became pertinent in the social sciences; 4) and from the late 1980's to the present as theorists sought innovative ways to view nationalism apart from prior 'classical' methods and approaches (pp. 15-56). Discrete chapters are then dedicated to the primordialist (chapter 3), modernist (chapter 4) and ethno-symbolist (chapter 5) schools of nationalist theorists working during the third period, with a dip into the approaches of cultural and gender studies as 'New Approaches to Nationalism' (chapter 6) and largely correlating to the fourth time-frame.

Coverage of primordialism (20 pp.) is more truncated than that of modernism (81 pp.), as well as less defined. The relatively brief discussion of primordialist perspectives on nationalism is accounted for by the assertion that a good number of theorists have 'suggested that the sociological usage of primordialism should be abandoned altogether' (p. 83) as overly deterministic, ahistorical, ill-defined and anti-intellectual in its assumptions. However, the resultant comparative brevity doesn't sit well with the author's view that 'primordialists are not unlike the modernists... in terms of the diversity they harbour.' (p. 65) Furthermore and unlike the chapter on modernism as outlined by the table of contents, discussion of primordialism is undertaken in only two sections providing definitions, subdivided as the naturalist, sociobiological and culturalist approaches in the text itself, and a critique. That about modernism is constructed of sections which, beyond covering definitions, are clearly dedicated to sets of specific theorists, Tom Nairn and Michael Hechter as focusing on economic transformation, John Breuilly, Paul Brass and Eric Hobsbawm on the political, and Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Miroslav Hroch on the socio-cultural. This inflicts some structural imbalance on the comparative analysis, especially as the chapter on ethno-symbolism also revolves around specific theorists, namely John Armstrong and Anthony Smith.

The final chapter 'By Way of Conclusion' (chapter 7) is Özkirimli's presentation of not only his critical summary of the various debates and theoretical differences presented thus far; it also provides a skeleton structure for his suggested framework for analysis of the nationalist phenomenon. This entails the propositions that: there can be no 'grand' theory of nationalism, only partial theories concentrating on specific aspects; there is no single nationalism for any one nation but rather multiple nationalisms with differing ideologies and social constituencies; the common characteristic of nationalism is the style and content of its discourse promoting the idea that the interests of the nation are of incontrovertibly primary importance, meaning that the nation is therefore the sole source of legitimacy and demarcates a singular realm of identity, loyalty, responsibility and norms; efficacy of this nationalist discourse is dependent on its daily, mundane and popularly socialized usage; and consideration of nationalism must take into account the variation and degree of individuals' national self-definition as influenced by their other social identities contingent, for example, on gender, race, ethnicity, class and age. (pp. 226-32) With this suggested framework, the author seeks to dismantle the monolithic façade of traditional approaches to the study of nationalism whose proponents try to identify singular and universal causal factors and characteristics.



One can't fault Özkirimli for a lack of intellectual courage, taking on as he does much of the pantheon of established nationalist theorists, and it will be interesting to see him apply his analytical proposals to a major empirical study in the future. This is especially true as an intent of his proposals is to help 'address issues neglected or ignored by the mainstream literature.' (p. 233) However, a note of caution must be sounded as to the inward-looking nature of the book's focus on nationalist theorists as though they operated apart from other fields of inquiry and had the last or definitive word on any number of topics. For example, Eric Hobsbawm highlights the case of late eighteenth-century France where only half of the populace actually spoke French, but dedicated discussion about the relationship in France between language and national identity was not 'revealed' (p. 220) by modernist scholars of nationalism; a well-known and definitive work on the topic in English is by the historian Eugen Weber (1976).

The problem with Özkirimli focusing so narrowly on work by scholars of nationalist theory is that he creates, or rather reinforces, a perception that the study of nationalism is the result of a self-referential and -perpetuating academic community. Thus, various theorists are apparently credited with conceptual and empirical innovations or observations obtained and generalized from elsewhere and, on occasion, interpreted at odds with case-study specifics. This self-referential quality of *Theories of Nationalism* limits the book's purpose in covering the idea of nationalism as it developed in academic discourse, as this evolution took place courtesy of much intellectual borrowing from elsewhere. Özkirimli's explanation that nationalism studies is dominated by publications produced in the 'Anglo-Saxon world' and hence his focus on 'Anglo-Saxon literature', (p. 7) rather than simply Anglophone, does not indicate the diversity of influences on and contributions to the field. Leaving aside the pre-1945 Germanophone (pp.16-9, 23-4, 26-34) and Francophone (pp. 19-22, 24, 34-6, 40) thinkers cited as influential on national conceptualization, the number of significant theorists – Hans Kohn, Karl Deutsch, and Elie Kedourie as well as Hobsbawm, Gellner and Hroch – coming from 'cosmopolitan urban settings destroyed by the rise of nationalism' (p. 128), or, in other words, not the Anglo-Saxon world, is substantial. Therefore, while the book is a useful complement to the already existent corpus of works on nationalism, almost by definition it narrows rather than expands the reader's appreciation of the many influences which have given rise to the academic understanding of nationalism today.

Hechter's *Containing Nationalism* is a different volume from those by Brown and Özkirimli. Instead of a textbook, Hechter has written more for the advanced scholar of nationalism studies and cognate fields. He is already an established name in the field, as indicated by a section dedicated to his past work in Özkirimli's book, and, probably due to this, does not undertake much of the repetitive exercise of discussing at great length the varied definitions of and classical debates about nationalism. This doesn't mean he ignores in chapter 1, 'Nationalist Puzzles', definitions and categories of nationalism, the nation, its distinguishing features and types necessary for his analysis, but rather he covers them with an informed brevity tailored to the rest of the work. This entails an attempt to chart innovative ground through discussing three main themes: the causes of nationalism's modernity (hence placing himself squarely in the modernist school of nationalist theorists); reasons for the different degrees of nationalism in different countries; and, most significantly, possible means of containing nationalism's 'dark side' (pp. 3-4) with its causal relevance, in 1994 alone, to 'eighteen of the world's twenty-four wars' while about three-quarters of

the world's refugees were fleeing from or displaced by ethno-nationalist conflicts. (p.3)

Chapter 2, 'Causes of Nationalism', is also concise, managing to provide explanations for group formation, group solidarity, the modernity of nations and national identification. While certainly Özkirimli could pick holes in Hechter's coverage, the striking feature is that the author is able to usefully clarify in only fourteen pages what so many others take entire books to do. Chapter 3, 'Indirect Rule and Absence of Nationalism', and chapter 4, 'State-Building Nationalism', are roughly paired in a before and after sequence in relation to the rise of nationalism. The before phase is pre-nineteenth century when, in both the European and imperial contexts, indirect rule, reliant on 'the existence of groups mediating between individuals and the state' (p. 40), allowed for primary states to arise and function as enlarging and culturally diverse political units. The next phase of state-building nationalism replaced indirect with direct rule which centralized political power and eliminated much of the autonomy of local authorities. Not only was political control centralized; the hitherto cultural heterogeneity of states, which indirect rule catered for, was discouraged to create cultural uniformity through near-compulsory assimilation in an attempt to foster singular political loyalties. Not surprisingly, implementation of assimilationist policies were not always successful and met with some resistance, on state peripheries, among local notables and alienated intellectuals, and by groups resenting the erosion of their prior autonomy.

Chapter 5, 'Other Types of Nationalism', highlights some of the responses to imposition of or attempts to institute direct rule: peripheral nationalism in the Ottoman empire, although with a somewhat ahistorical jump directly from final imperial dissolution at the end of World War I to Kosovo in the 1990's (pp. 76-7); secession of Norway from Sweden in 1905 and Ireland from the UK in 1922, even though the Irish Free State remained nominally linked to the British empire by Dominion Home Rule until proclamation of full sovereignty in 1949; irredentist nationalism as 'the least prevalent form of nationalism' (p. 84) and with the least chance of successful realization; and unification nationalism particularly embodied by Italy and Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. Hechter then turns to brief discussion of inclusive versus exclusive nationalisms, correlating to state-building and unification nationalisms, and, at odds with Brown, implies the culturally inclusive variant is linked to the liberal ideal of citizenship and the exclusive to an illiberal emphasis on collectivity. (p. 91)

However, and regardless of the significance of material covered to this point, much, if not most, of the discussion reiterates concepts, ideas and analyses found elsewhere. But there is more originality in the final three chapters, especially with Hechter's questioning the assumption 'that national identities are intrinsically salient' (p. 95), even if he then reverts to some already established ideas about the cultural division of labour playing a decisive role in determining the long-term saliency and character of various national identities (chapter 6, 'The Saliency of National Identity'). While experiences of conquest, occupational segregation through institutional arrangements, and/or immigration can mandate the emergence of a cultural division of labour as a foundation for divergent national identities, the effects can perhaps be undone or at least their troublesome political differences contained. This is if provisions are made to provide 'culturally distinct groups with an interest in controlling state policies, or at least those policies that are most directly relevant to their welfare.' (p. 112).



Chapter 7, 'Demands for Sovereignty', explores 'reasons why the demand for sovereignty varies in peripheral nations that are subject to direct rule... [and] concludes by considering some institutional impediments... that may have the paradoxical effect of inhibiting non-violent nationalist groups at the expense of violent ones.' (p. 115) Self-determination may be considered a universal good by some but other benefits – economic welfare especially – can be gained from accepting less than full sovereignty (p. 116). If the central state is responsive, through allowing for state-provided goods and services which cater to the distinctive preferences of its different cultural groups, it may be that there will be a lower demand for sovereignty by such groups (pp. 121-2). But there are countervailing forces: economic and military globalization can still encourage demands for sovereignty 'by reducing the net benefits of attachment to multinational states' while institutionalizing a state's peripheral culture can result in a belief that there will be 'greater net private benefits of sovereignty to people who owe their jobs and social standing to maintenance of this culture.' (p. 124) The development and strength of demands for sovereignty by minority nations is further affected by the emergence and influence of nationalist organizations, as well as the extent of institutional barriers to collective action which, in turn, helps determine the incidence of violence as an apparent strategic imperative where pacific means are disallowed or seen as ineffective in the particular context.

To this point, Hechter's argument has considerable merits, and as a conclusion the author embarks on a prescriptive path as to how 'Containing Nationalism' (chapter 8) can be achieved. He summarily dismisses others' promotion of consociational arrangements and electoral renovation as adequate remedies to offsetting violent conflagrations, and instead looks to federation, a system in which a 'central government incorporates regional units into its decision procedure.' (p.139) While historically federations have both intensified and inhibited nationalist conflicts, and a balance must be struck between regional dependency on and autonomy from the centre to avoid too much or too little decentralization (p.152), efficacy in deterring conflict depends on additional provisions other than just federation. It is at this important juncture that Hechter falters.

While his faith in the necessity of widely perceived procedural fairness by a state's political and bureaucratic institutions is well placed, the concomitant requirements of transparency in state decision-making, a free press and broadcast media, and political representation at the centre for minority nations (pp. 153-4) are not innovative ideas. Indeed these have already been part of many reformist initiatives in democratizing countries and post-conflict regions. Meanwhile, the contention 'that peripheral autonomy is desirable simply because it preserves cultural diversity ... [which] may result in future social pay-offs' is utopian to the point of being useless, despite the economic benefits that could be accrued from tourists visiting culturally anomalous areas (p. 156). Even the stronger argument, that to 'the degree that national solidarity is enhanced by institutional autonomy this sets the stage for a more efficient social order – provided that the central government remains a viable source of relevant collective goods' (p. 157), leaves many crucial issues untouched and despite the assumed benefits of a stable social order to the state.

Any researcher who has spent significant time in what are coyly referred to as 'divided societies' will have run across strong opinions about the character of certain groups, and often these have little to do with economic, social or political analyses of costs versus benefits outside of an over-riding sense that there is a

long-term benefit in excluding the 'other.' Over the last fifteen years, this reviewer has been told by more than a few Israelis, Moldovans, Spaniards, ethnic Hungarians, white South Africans and Northern Irish Protestants why, respectively, a good number of Palestinians, Russians, Basques, Rumanians, black South Africans and Irish Catholics are not to be trusted, and, if given just half a chance, would - depending on the more precise context - commit murder, rape or theft. At the very least, the 'other' would not be satisfied until they 'pushed us into the sea' according to one Tel Aviv resident or 'destroyed democracy' as a *Madriño* put it.

In other words, Hechter provides remedies which have only partial relevance to those parts of the world where they are most needed, as he suggests little real method, in the immediate sense, for dealing with the most troubling aspects of nationalist and ethnic discord, that being the hatred and sometimes willingness to inflict harm on others. But then, he does not intend - despite any assertions of universal applicability - to recommend provisions for areas with non-spatially concentrated groups or groups whose territory does not coincide already with an intermediate political boundary, if we can go by his citation of one data-set relying only on a small number of countries (pp.147). Deriving evidence from this circumscribed data that state centralization encourages nationalist rebellion and therefore balanced decentralization is a primary weapon against nationalist violence leaves aside, by definition, deductive consideration which takes into account areas where some degree of federalization is not already in place or whose national groups are interspersed. So what is to be done for the Kurds or the Roma and Sinti, both groups victimized in more than one state, or in cases of communal conflict within autonomous areas, such as the Spanish Basque Country (despite its implicit inclusion in the data-set) where it is not simply Basques pitted against the Spanish state but, more problematically, against moderate Basques and resident Spaniards?

While instituting or tinkering with federal arrangements could be pacifying in the long run, how many years are being considered? And in that time, how many other conflicts, refugees and reasons to remember communal grievance will have sprung into existence? Hechter is not necessarily wrong in his prescriptions, but his work lacks a full appreciation, beyond the economic and institutional, of what conflict between ethno-national groups entails. Perhaps Özkirimli could step in and encourage Hechter to take into account alternative partial theories of nationalism which may better pertain to incidences of extreme violence directed not at agents of the state - soldiers, police, politicians, civil servants - but civilians, such as mass rape in Bosnia, Palestinian suicide missions, and genocide in Rwanda while Burundi teetered on the brink.

Finally, there is a question none of the authors considers and perhaps scholars of nationalism are unwilling to take into account given a vested interest in keeping ourselves employed. Maybe the issue is not so much that 'nationalist violence is far greater than may be commonly appreciated' (Hechter, p. 5) with 'a world torn apart by nationalist conflicts.' (Özkirimli, p.232). Given the diversity of cultural, ethnic and national groups worldwide - numbered collectively in the many thousands - coupled with widespread economic and social inequalities, with a concomitant relationship to the exercise of political power and influence, a more relevant issue for theorists to consider may not be why communal violence happens so frequently, but so seldom.



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