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Caspar Hirschi

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## Reviews

A. D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant and Republic*, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2008; 243 pp; £19.99 pbk; ISBN 9781405177986

Having published his first book on nationalism in 1971, Anthony Smith has now, with his latest one, produced no fewer than a dozen volumes on the same subject. This is an exceptional accomplishment, and the fact that his work does not merely repeat itself but has continually integrated new themes testifies to both this author's open-mindedness and the extraordinary dynamism within nationalism studies during the last 40 years. The book under review is another fruitful experiment presenting a rearranged set of theoretical terms and tools spanning an impressive breadth of space and time. Yet the question remains whether it can contribute to a clearer and more thorough understanding of nation formation, or whether it rather accentuates the theoretical and terminological confusion nationalism studies are currently mired in.

With his reflections on the 'cultural' foundations of nations, Smith continues to broaden his older theory about nations' 'ethnic' origins. Presented in 1986, this theory was one of the earliest counter models — and perhaps the most widely recognized — to the modernist approaches by Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson and Breuilly. In recent years, Smith has directed his attention towards the religious roots of nations and nationalism, with special emphasis on the biblical Jews. In this respect, the current study can be seen as an attempt to bring his later research into line with his earlier work. Nonetheless, he stresses that what he presents is 'in no sense a theory', but instead a 'useful supplement and corrective to the dominant modernist orthodoxy', taken from an 'ethn-symbolic' perspective (xi).

The book opens with an explanation of the theoretical debate's current state and with a set of definitions, followed by a convincing, if not entirely new, criticism of most modernists' historical myopia and of Hans Kohn's influential typology of 'civic' and 'cultural' nationalism. Chapter 2 focuses on the 'ethnic' and 'religious' roots of nations and covers a range of themes, from myths of origin to ideas of a sacred homeland, and from golden age to concepts of sacrifice and destiny. The book's core argument unfolds in chapters 3 to 6, which put forward the claim that three types of ancient 'public cultures' have been most critical in the emergence of both pre-modern and modern nations. Smith refers to them as 'hierarchy', 'covenant' and 'republic' — 'hierarchy' meaning a sacred community that is believed 'to mirror and embody the celestial order

on earth' (76) and that has found its purest embodiment in ancient Egypt; 'covenant' standing for a 'more egalitarian' and 'more intimate form of sacred communion', imagined as chosen by a deity 'to carry out His will' (77) and modelled on the example of the ancient Jews; and 'republic' representing a self-governing commune 'answerable to no outside power' and historically grounded in the Greek polis (80).

In the same chapters, Smith makes the case that, at least with regard to ancient Egypt and Judah, we can assume the existence of nations in Antiquity, and he then traces the different types in a historical tour de force through medieval, early modern and modern Europe and Asia. The last chapter, entitled 'Alternative Destinies', ends with the conclusion that in modernity most nations are still to be seen as a mixture of all three types of public culture and that it would be premature to predict the global victory of the civic-republican model of the nation, whose major historical prototype was revolutionary France.

Smith's attempt to reintegrate pre-modern history into the study of nations and nationalism is certainly to be welcomed, as it highlights the degree to which even modern nationalism draws on cultural practices and ideological concepts that are indeed of very old origin. The notions of chosen people, patriotic sacrifice, common descent or collective self-government are just a few of many. However, to weave these very different cultural strands into a terminologically coherent model is a complicated undertaking, and here Smith noticeably struggles. First, his distinction between 'ethnic' and 'religious' elements of nations can work for modern, but hardly for ancient, history, as these two categories anachronistically divide features inseparable in most ancient cultures; it might indeed better reflect the history of Smith's nationalism studies than that of the cultural foundations of nations. Second, and more important, the triad hierarchy–covenant–republic has limited explanatory power, as it assembles three terms on different categorical levels (social stratification vs. alliance vs. form of government). Nor is it clear on what ground Smith is able to subsume them all under the term 'public cultures'.

These categorization shortcomings do not, of course, fundamentally devalue Smith's counter-narrative to the modernist version of nation formation, but they are symptoms of a broader problem trapping many critics of modernism. Their rebuttal of modernist core arguments is often sound and forceful, but once it becomes necessary to formulate an alternative explanatory framework, the account quickly becomes blurred and opaque. Smith's addition of another supplement to his already broad and abstract terminology rather aggravates this dilemma. Really needed today by nationalism studies is what Smith is unwilling to give: a new theory which combines greater historical accuracy, without a concomitant loss of conciseness.

Caspar Hirschi  
*Clare Hall, Cambridge*