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Round Table Symposium on Anthony D. Smith

John Hutchinson (LSE)

Introduction

Last year's ASEN conference assessed the intellectual legacy of Anthony D. Smith, our founding editor-in-chief, and the present issue contains a special section of papers drawn from this conference that includes Eric Kaufmann's memories of Anthony as a teacher and institution-builder. This symposium derives from a Round Table discussion at the end of the conference that considered this legacy as it might relate to future research in the field.

Anthony Smith's work was interdisciplinary in character. Trained in Classics, he completed a MSc and PhD in Sociology before undertaking a second doctorate in Art History, but he told me that he saw himself more as a historian. He used the neologism 'ethno-symbolism' to characterize his mature work, a term invented jokingly by a collegial critic, Fred Halliday, but it is in the end a label, not a system. It is tempting to polarize Smith in relation to modernists as in the famous 'Do nations have navels?' debate with Ernest Gellner, but in this instance Gellner deliberately adopted a radical stance. As Smith stated in *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism* (2009: 1-2, 24-5), ethno-symbolism should be seen as a 'supplement and corrective' to modernism, in considering the symbolic world of culture 'as much part of social reality as material and

organizational factors'. He also took seriously the work of what he called neo-perennialists, historians who substantiated the existence of *some* nations before the modern period, though he considered their work under-theorised. While he was an inventive formulator of classifications and typologies and was committed to discovering causal pathways, he was skeptical that any single approach or methodology could be used to explain the protean forms of nationalism. He enjoyed scholarly exchanges (though not polemics), was a man of enormous intellectual curiosity, and as he investigated new topics his ideas evolved accordingly. In a career spanning forty seven years, he drew on theoretical insights from many fields to explore a huge range of topics as they related to nationalism: such as state formation and intellectual crisis, the role of premodern ethnicity, dominant and non-dominant groups, war and commemoration, missionary and covenantal religions, republican and hierarchical concepts of political community, myth-symbol complexes, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, and the contribution of the arts (including cinema, painting and music) to identity formation. It is not surprising that his work has had such an impact on so many fields of study. It will be many years before we can offer a full assessment of his contribution to the study of nationalism

In this brief symposium Jonathan Hearn (political and historical sociologist) and Siniša Malešević (sociologist) offer reflections on Smith's theoretical approaches and future research agenda, while Susan-Mary Grant (historian), Benedikte Brincker (political sociologist), and Athena Leoussi (art historian and sociologist) examine how his ideas can be productively applied to illuminate historical questions.

Both Hearn and Malešević, while recognising the significance of Smith's conceptual innovations, ideal-typical constructs and his defence of the historical embeddedness of nationalism, offer thoughtful critiques, though of a different character. Hearn is wary of claims that nations are 'continuous, self-same historical entities', pointing to the transformations accompanying apparent continuities of names. He criticises Smith for a functionalist approach to identity and for stressing the importance of identity at the expense of power. Nationalism, he suggests, is rather a response to the modern problem of rule in a centralised state and who should do it (the people), with the question then arising: who are the people? Malešević acknowledges Smith's complaints of a 'blocking presentism' in classic modernist accounts, their tendency towards elite-centred instrumentalist explanations, and their neglect of the emotional power of nationalism. However, he argues that Smith's analysis is overly cultural and that these problems can be addressed by an alternative modernist *longue durée* approach that focuses on the gradual historical development of organisational capacities (that interestingly are led by city networks as well as states), of ideological penetration and of micro-solidarities.

These are important issues. The question of continuity is a complex one for Smith, for whom the disruptions created by the triple revolutions (economic, military-administrative, and cultural) generating modernity are indispensable for explaining the waves of nationalist revolutions since 1800 (Smith 1986:131-8). He uses terms of 'rediscovery' rather than invention to describe the nationalist turn to the past (to a 'golden age') but this implies a breakdown of established identities. Crucial to Smith is the *sense* of continuity held by nationalists and their communities (often in tension with existing

traditions) and how this can be plausibly maintained. The charge of functionalism may arise from considering Durkheimian influences in his later writings, but Smith was an eclectic thinker. Hearn rightly observes a Weberian strain in Smith, a persisting influence, if particularly pronounced in his early writings, where he outlined causal sequences to explain how and why the past has been reconceptualised by nationalists to overcome a crisis of meaning engendered by a 'scientific state' (Smith 1971: ch.10). These sequences I gratefully adapted in my *Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* (1987). Hearn clearly stands on different conceptual ground to Smith who regards nationalism as not just about political rule (important though this is) but about (for its followers) answers to the huge and recurring earthquakes generated in modernity, which often result in a collapse of established systems of authority. Nationalism, for him, is about 're-enchantment', charting new pathways to the future via the past, and collective sacrifice, as well as addressing the question of governance. As Hearn states, and here Smith would agree, it is hard to see how in practice power and identity can be discussed separately from each other.

Illuminating though Sinisa Malešević's contribution is, Anthony Smith might wonder if a *longue durée* modernist approach is not an oxymoron. Smith, however, distinguished between a chronological and a structural modernism, and one could interpret Malešević's discussion of the interrelationship between long range organisational and ideological developments as a broadening rather than as a refutation of his analysis. In Smith's writings state and nation formed in interaction over time. Moreover, a collective identity (with a *perception* of continuity) was fashioned out of different (and contingent) social

processes (migration, war, religious conflict) rather than being based on simple cultural transmission. His key contention was that it couldn't be constructed *ex nihilo*. He would agree with the importance of micro-solidarities: in his work, religious reform movements (in different periods) could be powerful generators of egalitarian brother/sisterhoods and might pioneer national attachments. Unlike Malešević, however, he was prepared to recognise the possibility of premodern aristocratic nations, given the persistence of rigid religious and secular hierarchies in modernity.

While the first two papers address meta issues, the next two papers focus more on the utility of Smith's concepts for explaining specific historical phenomena. Smith's discussions of concepts of (religious) mission and chosenness and ethnoscape are deployed by Susan-Mary Grant in her analysis of the formation of early American national identity. This is a study that links the triumph of particular religious (though secularised) conceptions of the nation to dramatic social change (the catastrophe of civil war). She identifies two competing visions of the land and nation, one missionary, of the American continent as a commodity granted by God to the conquering colonists that was realised in the Southern practices of chattel slavery, the other Covenantal, derived from the Puritans in the North East, as a place of spiritual grandeur provided to the elect that they might become a 'New Israel'. This latter and later vision of a primeval wildness (side by side with the pastoral) was represented in the transcendental Hudson River school of painters, initially of the North East. The question was: could an identification with a landscape be sufficient to bind Americans without a distinctive history, for this was not an ancestral but a 'God-land'. Grant argues the concern about the lack of a

powerful national identity during the 19th century became pressing with territorial and demographic expansion, the development of federal government, and increasingly bitter divisions between North and South. The images of the painters portraying the awe and majesty of the land, previously consumed by an elite, came to resonate among a broader public, only after the horrors of civil war, photographic depictions of which showed the land as a site of Union collective sacrifice and suffering. This provided a means to unite missionary and Covenantal images in a story of national renewal. This, she admits, remained a largely northern perspective and one with questionable relevance to immigrant America.

Anthony Smith was passionate about the visual arts, music and architecture and always encouraged his students to pay attention to the role of the arts in the context of the broader society. This is still a neglected topic in the nationalist literature, but in his last two books, *The Nation Made Real* (2013) and *Nation and Classical Music* (2016), co-authored with Matthew Riley, he again performed a pioneering role, in investigating artistic intellectuals as cultural agents in making the nation palpable by enabling people to see and to feel the nation. It is fitting that in the final paper, Benedikte Brincker and Athena Leoussi, two of his former Ph.D. students, take inspiration from his work to present a brief comparative study of the symbolic development of Britain and Denmark as two modern nations governed by constitutional monarchies. It focuses on parliamentary buildings of the two countries and key composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Carl Nielsen. As they point out, Smith demonstrates his usual fertility in constructing analytical distinctions, between the didactic, evocative and commemorative

in national art, and in differentiating between national and nationalist art. In their paper they outline the development of national visual and musical styles and forms; and the complexity of attributing the term 'national' to behavior, including artistic behavior and its products.

We may agree that it is now time for students of nationalism to move on from the classic debates of the 1980s and 1990s about the origins of nations. But as the contributors show, there are still neglected areas (music and the arts), and there are emerging topics that call for our attention. These include the unexpected rise of a pervasive populist nationalism in Europe (cited by Hearn) and the novel, possibly unstable, symbiotic relations between contemporary religious and nationalist movements. In seeking to understand new issues, it is likely, as Hearn suggests, we will wish to turn, if only as a point of departure, to the rich corpus of Anthony Smith's concepts, ideal types, and theories formulated, 'illustrated and fleshed out through his vast comparative knowledge of historical cases'.

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