ANNALES

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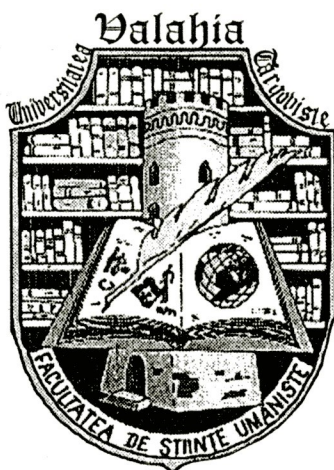
SECTION
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Tome IV-V

CUPRINS

Notes et discussions

Compte-rendus

NATIONALISM AND HISTORICISM: THE NATIONAL APPROACH DURING THE XIX AND XX CENTURIES

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History as a discipline contributes both to how we understand what nations and nationalism are and to the intellectual constitution of nations themselves. Historians participate in the active imagination of those political communities that we call nations as they elaborate the narratives that make up national histories. As historians helped generate national consciousness and nationalism, their own discipline acquired the task of *discovering* or *recovering* the "national" past.

The historical past, in distinction from all past occurrences, exists in so far as it can be recreated and imagined. "History," writes Anthony Kemp, "is a literary structure whose literariness must always be denied; its grip on the imagination and on the whole perceived structure of the world is so great that its human origin, its createdness, cannot be acknowledged."(Kemp 1991: 106)

The study of history in the modern period was primarily dedicated to change in the evolution of political and social humanity with an effort to explain causality. More frequently, from Antiquity through the Renaissance (and even into the present), history was pressed into the service of politics or morality, rather than left as an *objective* search for truth. History was seen as useful for moral understanding or political legitimation. With the reconfiguration of political communities as "nations" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intellectuals and statesmen used narratives about the past to provide legitimacy for these new political constructs.

Despite the dedication to critical examination of evidence and objectivity, values and politics could not be excluded from most historical writing. For most historians, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who have organized their history as encompassing or partially illuminating *the story of a nation*, historical writing can be viewed as a specifically national prejudice by which the superiority, naturalness, and indeed unavoidability of the modern nation can be retroactively substantiated.(White 1973: 2)

Since the sixteenth century three major distinct and coherent forms of social organization have emerged to become dominant, first in Europe and the Americas and ultimately throughout the world: capitalist economies, sovereign territorial states, and human communities that conceive of themselves as "nations." "Nation" as a word in modern usage was derived from the Latin word *natio*. The early meanings of nation were a group of people born in the same place or having common genetic ancestry, but also one's place of birth, or a society of university students from the same region or speaking the same language. The word came into English in the fourteenth century, and by the sixteenth century was loosely related to *group* or *class*. Foreign or strange people were referred to as "nations," though in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries nobilities like

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the Polish *szlachta* and the Hungarian *nemesze* also designated themselves the nation. Among the meanings attached to the word "nation" in early modern Europe one sense was a territorialized one: all the people of a given state. Here nation was equated with the population of the state, and countrymen and nation become synonymous. This usage can be distinguished from two other senses of nation: the cultural meaning in which nation is equivalent to nationality or ethnicity, a group of people sharing a common culture and (usually) language; and the political meaning in which nation is equivalent to state, as in the United Nations. In this last usage nation means *sovereign state* or a people that lives in and possesses a sovereign state. All of these meanings have come down to our times, both in ordinary language and in social science.

Often, "nation" is employed to mean a group of people who imagines itself to be a political community distinct from the rest of mankind and deserves self-determination, which usually entails self-rule, control of its own territory (the "homeland"), and perhaps a state of its own. "Nationality" refers to an ethnocultural or linguistic group, an ethnicity. "National" refers to something related to or emanating from the "nation" but also that which distinguishes one nation from another. To "nationalize" is to give something to the nation or to make something harmonious with the nation.

Nations in the modern sense exist within a *discourse of the nation*. They are political communities that imagine themselves in a particular way that became possible only with the coincidence of the idea that cultural communities ought to become political communities and that the ordinary people within those communities ought to be able to rule themselves or at least choose those that govern them.

The nation emerges as a central subject in history in the eighteenth century most importantly in the universal histories of *Johann Gottfried von Herder* (1744-1803). Often credited as the founder of what would later be called *"historicism"* or *"the historical sense,"* Herder saw history not simply as the source of political strategems but as a way to understand human reality distinct from the application of abstract reason. The real nature of things could only be discerned in historical development. Each age contained a heritage from the past that it passed on to the next age, and a people, the *Volk*, rather than humanity as a whole, were the carriers of culture.

Herder's more cosmopolitan approach to the nation, in which each nation as part of the tapestry of humankind enriched others, gave way to a more particularistic view of the superior qualities of one nation over another. People, nation, and state were closely identified and more over, the state became the principal protector and moral teacher of the nation. (Berlin 1986: 169)

Without a doubt the greatest European influence of nineteenth-century historiography was *Leopold von Ranke* (1795-1886). Ranke stood against the enemies of the church (materialism, rationalism), threats to the state (capitalism, imperialism, racism, liberalism), and opponents of the nation (socialism, communism, ecumenical religion). In his first major work, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, 1494-1535* (1824), Ranke introduced his approach: "History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume; it seeks only to show what actually happened".(Iggers 1983: 69)

In the Middle Ages, he wrote, the "peaceful progress" of peoples into nations was hindered, but eventually reformers emerged in the Renaissance and Reformation who attacked the idea of the universal church and the universal state (while maintaining the essential unity of European culture and Christianity) and introduced the "national" idea.

This constitution of nations led to a new phase of European civilization and historical development. New rules for governing the relations of people, church, and state within the nations developed along with rules among the various nations, namely the balance of power. Ranke, like Michelet, saw the French Revolution as the moment when nations came into the final stage of self-consciousness and the great powers found a common purpose in maintaining each by all the others. By the mid-nineteenth century history had ended, and the shape of future development had been fixed. For Ranke the nation is the sole possible principle of organizing humans for "peaceful progress." The principle of nationality was the only safeguard against humanity falling back into barbarism and had to be treasured as an eternal, immutable idea of God, though only knowable when actually realized in an historical form when peoples actually become nations.(Iggers 1983: 69-83)

The tension between a narrative of an emerging nation, with themes of resurrection, past glories and heroes, and the disciplined empiricism preached by Ranke was resolved in several national historiographies in favor of a more romantic representation of the past in England, France, Italy and Russia. Even historians less directly engaged in nationalist or state-building projects were deeply affected by the emerging discourse of the nation that assumed without serious questioning the natural division of humanity into separate and distinct nations, the generally progressive evolution of peoples into nations, and the claim that nations had a unique right to sovereignty and political representation.

Nationalist histories were foundational to the conviction that non-ruling nationalities were distinct nations with historical continuity even though they did not possess states of their own. The idea of the nation in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was far from the concept of an ethnolinguistic community that would become dominant later in the century.

In the last third of the nineteenth century historicism was attacked by the new social sciences not only for its naive inductionism, but also "for its presupposition that the nation was the sole possible unit of social organization (and the sole desirable one) and its conviction that, *therefore*, national groups constituted the sole viable units of historical imagination." (White 1973:175)

Social science turned toward more generic human problems of a transnational character and articulated other units of analysis, like society and culture. But the essential historicism of professional history and its focus on and location in the nation remained powerful frames for the practice of history-writing through most of the twentieth century.

In the years between World War I and World War II a small number of historians, primarily in the United States and Britain, were instrumental in defining and developing an historical and conceptual literature on nationalism.(Ritter 1986: 294) Foremost among those writing on nationalism in the interwar period and into the post-war years were *Carleton C. J. Hayes* and *Hans Kohn*, who operated largely in the tradition of intellectual history, concentrating on the major nationalist thinkers from Herder and Fichte, and E. H. Carr and Alfred Cobban, who primarily focused on the international state system and problems of self-determination. The most influential exemplar of this literature was *Carleton J. H. Hayes* (1882-1964), who as a young historian at Columbia University opened his first major study on nationalism (1926) with the confident claim that "the most significant emotional factor in public life today is nationalism."(Ritter 1986: 302)

Hayes distinguished between *"nationality"* - a "group of people who speak either the same language or closely related dialects, who cherish common historical traditions, and

who constitute or think they constitute a distinct cultural society" - and "nation" - a nationality that acquires political unity and sovereign independence. For Hayes both nationality and nation were objective, real communities, the first cultural, the second political, and he essentially collapsed nation into state. Nationalism was a *"condition of mind,"* an emotion, the fusion of love of country or native land (patriotism) with nationality.

His object of study was the ways in which nationalities acquired historically-generated coherences and differences. Nationality came into being when a group acquired a common language, which then became the transmitter of historical memory. Along with language Hayes proposed a number of aspects of human nature, already evident in ancient tribes, that laid the basis for nationality: an innate human sense of history, a natural gregariousness, a need for something internal, a propensity for faith in some power outside oneself, proneness to celebrate heroism, and collective fighting prowess . Once cultural distinctions appear, they in turn give rise to beliefs that the members of one nationality are different from all others, indeed that they are *"the tabernacle of a unique civilisation"*. Thus, nationality has existed from the "dawn of history" and is the natural way human society divides itself. Though he recognized the nationalities were mutable, Hayes also believed that historical development led to the dissolving of multinational communities and states into single nationalities and ethno-national states. (Ritter 1986: 328)

Nationalities for Hayes were ancient, but nationalism was modern. Only in modern times did patriotism fuse with nationality and produce nationalism, a new phenomenon that preaches a unique two-fold doctrine: "that each nationality should constitute a united independent sovereign state, and...that every state should expect and require of its citizens not only unquestioning obedience and supreme loyalty, not only an exclusive patriotism, but also unshakable faith in its surpassing excellence over all other nationalities and lofty pride in its peculiarities and its destiny."(Kohn 1965: 19)

Hayes' historical evolution of the psychological condition of nationalism was adopted and elaborated in an impressive series of studies by *Hans Kohn* (1891-1917). For Kohn nationality was an historical product, and, as important as objective features might be, "the most essential element is a living and active corporate will." "Nationality," he wrote, is formed by the decision to form a nationality." (Kohn 1965: 35)

Most historians and historical sociologists following Hayes and Kohn either elaborated their ideas or simply accepted the presence and reality of nationalism in the modern world while supplying their own narratives or typologies.(Setton-Watson 1977: 25) Further theorization of nations and nationalism was delayed for several decades, leading the anthropologist Clifford Geertz to take note in 1963 of the "stultifying aura of conceptual ambiguity that surrounds the terms 'nation,' 'nationality,' and 'nationalism' has been extensively discussed and thoroughly deplored in almost every work that has been concerned to attack the relationship between communal and political loyalties."(Greenfeld 1992: 23-27)

The move from the articulation of a pre-existing "national" community by intellectuals and the media to a process of invention of the community itself can be dated roughly to the early 1960s. The opening shot in the modernist attack on the nation came from a professor of government at the University of London, *Elie Kedourie* , who worried that the modern phenomenon of ideological politics, was not only not likely to bring about peace among humans but was a mere preface to the two great ideologies in power in Kedourie's time, socialism and nationalism.(Ritter 1986: 348)

To these original doctrines Herder and Fichte added an appreciation of human diversity and the belief that language is the "external and visible badge of those differences which distinguish one nation from another; it is the most important criterion by which a nation is recognized to exist, and to have the right to form a state on its own." Kedourie was convinced that the principle of national self-determination was radically subversive to the system of international relations and to the stability of existing governments. He concluded pessimistically, like Hayes (and Lord Acton before them), that "nationality does not aim either at liberty or prosperity, both of which it sacrifices to the imperative necessity of making the nation the mould and measure of the State.(Kedourie 1993: 10)

Though Gellner, like Kedourie, rejected the naturalness of the nation, he went beyond Kedourie's idealist argument that the nation was the product of bad ideas and proposed that nations were the functional responses to the need of industrial societies for larger groups of people to communicate easily with one another.(Gellner 1983: 127) Even though he noted the importance of intellectuals in the new national arena, Gellner's focus on broad social forces and the grand transition from structure to culture largely ignored particular agents and actors who constructed the national ideology and movement. It would be left, first, to social historians and, later, to cultural studies to provide a more specified analysis of particular individuals and groups and their reimagination of politics. (Gellner 1983: 145)

Like other theories of modernization, Marxism centered its attention on what it considered the fundamental processes of social change, which were "in the last instance" economic and material, and either neglected the epiphenomenon of the nation or saw it as reflective of the other more primary processes. But the evident reductionism of orthodox Marxist theories of nationalism was seriously questioned by a number of influential Western Marxists, among them Tom Nairn, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson.

Himself something of a Scottish nationalist, *Tom Nairn* boldly challenged the almost universally negative assessment of nationalism by his fellow Marxists, and from within the fold, he wrote provocatively: The agent of nationalism is the intelligentsia, "the most conscious and awakened part of the middle classes," which responds to uneven development with a particular political ideology.(Tom Naim 1996: 79)

Eric Hobsbawm, a longtime member of the British Communist Party and one of the principal pioneers of social history, was resistant to Nairn's sweeping critique of the Marxist legacy. He repeated Lenin's advice to Zinoviev, "Do not paint nationalism red." . In the major summation of his work he begins with a working definition of the nation as "any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a 'nation'." Accepting Gellner's definition of nationalism as "primarily the principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent," Hobsbawm positions himself firmly in the modernist camp, asserts that the nation is an invented idea, and states: *"Nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round."*(Hobsbawn 1990: 8-12)

This concept of the nation as civic and non-ethnic continued through the age of liberal nationalism in the early and mid-nineteenth century. The "principle of nationality" operative at that time argued that national self-determination was appropriate only for nations that met a minimum size. Multiethnicity was acceptable in larger states, and assimilation was seen as, not only a positive good, but an inevitable process.

The apogee of nationalism was reached after the two world wars when the principle of national self-determination was enshrined in the creation of new states and the

redrawing of maps. Nationalism had moved from left to right, from a liberating doctrine to a "mere reflex of despair,something that filled the void left by failure, impotence, and the apparent inability of other ideologies, political projects and programmes to realize men's hopes. It was the utopia of those who had lost the old utopias of the age of Enlightenment, the programme of those who had lost faith in other programmes, the prop of those who had lost the support of older political and social certainties.". "(Hobsbawn 1990: 144)

A significant contribution to the historicization of nationalism was made by the Czech historian, *Miroslav Hroch*, who in a series of close studies of a number of stateless nationalities in Europe developed a periodization of national movements. Hroch postulated three stages in the evolution of nationalism: *Stage A*, in which small groups of intellectuals, often clerics, write grammars and histories, collect folk tales and songs, and often in the isolation of their study begin the elaboration of what will constitute the *national "story"*; *Stage B*, when larger numbers of patriots - journalists, teachers, and political activists - spread the message of nationalism through the press, schools, and political circles; *Stage C*, the moment when effective popular mobilization occurs. Hroch's schema was a further refinement of Deutsch, Gellner, and Hobsbawm. Whatever the effects of industrialization affected the emergence of nationalism only as they were mediated through the growth of social communication and as particular readings of the "great transformation" were articulated by intellectual agents.(Anderson 1991: 4)

The modernist writers, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, established a social history of nationalism by the early 1980s that increasingly insisted on bringing politics and agency back into the story. From the more essentialist view of the nation as a real thing, given, objective, natural, and perhaps primordial in origins, a significant body of scholarship now argued that nations are humanly-engineered political communities, relatively modern in their origins, the products of hard intellectual and political work by activists and intellectuals, politicians, statesmen and women. Rather than simply the modern manifestation of communities of descent or blood, as many ethnonationalists would have it, modern nationalities and nations were seen - in Benedict Anderson's widely-employed phrase - as *"imagined communities"* based on subjectively experienced allegiances and identities.(Andreson 1991: 6)

As historians contextualized the study of nationalism and social scientists became more sensitive to historical contextualization, scholars from various disciplines explored the constitution of membership in the new national community - the ways in which membership was gendered; how "nationality" was reconstructed; new definitions of citizenship; the state's role in forging a more homogeneous nation from the center; as well as the opposing process of creating boundaries at the margins. The intimacy that history and the nation had held for each other was directly confronted. Cultural studies approaches problematized not only nation but ethnicity and race, not only gender and class but all transhistorical categories.

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