

The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism
edited by John Breuilly

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Patrick Murray (University of Glasgow)

The recent independence referendum campaign in Scotland has brought nationalism to the forefront of public discourse. As well as having a profound effect on the ongoing discussion surrounding the various identities within the purported ‘community of nations’ that currently make up the North Atlantic archipelago, the debate regarding how Scotland should be governed has also solidified the prominent role of an overtly nationalist party in Scottish and by extension British politics. At the time of writing, the most popular civic movement of the post-referendum age identifies itself as nationalist, with membership of the Scottish National Party soaring to unprecedented levels. In such a context, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* presents a timely examination of nationalism, its variegated roots and identities, triumphs and trials, efflorescences and extinctions across a wide range of ethnic, social and cultural landscapes.

The editor, John Breuilly, introduces the thirty-six essays comprising the *Handbook*, presenting an exordium on the ‘concepts, approaches [and] theories’ of nationalism. In particular, he highlights the historical specificity of nationalism *contra* other political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and conservatism which espouse universalist and transhistorical ideas. Outlining the history of the notion of collective societies based on ‘national’ identity, the editor provides a concise précis of the topics discussed throughout the volume.

The pluralities of the introductory chapter’s title – ‘Introduction: Concepts, Approaches, and Theories’ – are important to note. While acknowledging that ‘one can argue that nationalism is a distinct global historical subject that needs to be considered within the frame of national history,’ Breuilly argues that ‘it is so various in time and space and combines ideas, sentiments, and politics in so many different ways, that it is difficult to see how there could ever be a satisfactory account, let alone theory, of “nationalism as such”’ (p. 15). Although

nationalism might appear at first glance homogeneous in character, drawing political impetus from a perception of shared identity, it nonetheless evades easy characterisation.

Why this is the case is demonstrated throughout the book. Because the key premise of nationalism – mutual belief in a singular community or ‘nation’ – remains in perpetual flux, its ideological derivative is also prone to change. As Breuilly writes, throughout the history of nationalism from the ‘baseline’ of 1450 (p. 29) there have been almost as many nationalisms as there are nation states, and almost as many catalysts for such movements. Thus, the contributing authors discuss motivations for nationalism as various as unification (John Breuilly, ‘Nationalism and National Unification in Nineteenth-Century Europe’ (p. 149-174)), secession (Don H. Doyle and Eric Van Young, ‘Independence and Nationalism in the Americas’ (p. 97-126)), colonialism and anti-colonialism (Bruce J. Berman and John M. Lonsdale, ‘Nationalism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa’ (p. 308-317); John M. Lonsdale, ‘Anti-Colonial Nationalism and Patriotism in Sub-Saharan Africa’ (p. 318-337)) and religious consanguinity (Fred Halliday, ‘Nationalism in the Arab World since 1945’ (p. 435-452)). Social, religious, economic and political circumstance as well as perceived ethnic affiliation and kinship have all served to inform (and indeed misinform) popular understandings of mutual commonality and belonging.

In another respect, the *Handbook*’s historical bent is significant because it not only foregrounds the multiplicity of nationalist paradigms but also serves as an important reminder that the history of nationalism is not a teleological one. Peoples, communities and collectives lose and gain ‘national’ consciousness as the circumstances of socio-political and cultural life develop. Accordingly, nationalisms emerge and disappear, evolve and modify through differing states and times, both for good and ill. In two perspicacious essays which may be read side by side, the more pernicious consequences of exclusivist nationalism, including ethnic division, racism and xenophobia are tackled head on. Roger Eatwell’s analysis of fascism addresses directly the role of racist concepts in the establishment and perpetuation of extreme nationalist ideologies, while John Darwin’s ‘Nationalism and Imperialism, c. 1880-1940’ delineates the symbiotic relationship between a particular strain of nationalism – underpinned by nineteenth-century European capitalist expansionism – and imperial enterprise (p. 341-358). Darwin explores the extent to which such paradigms would come under strain from particularised nationalisms: post-1918 ‘[t]he age of [imperial] partitions was over; the world of nations was on the march’ (p. 353). Recognising the more nuanced understanding of imperialism that has emerged in scholarship over the past twenty years or so, Darwin

summarises how nascent or recrudescing nation-state identities struggled against the contrapuntal exertions of macro-economic forces in the middle of the twentieth century.

These deliberations are helpfully given a wider context by John Hutchinson's examination of 'cultural nationalism' (p. 75-94). Paying special attention to what he describes as 'cultural nationalist movements whose primary aim is the formation of nationalist *communities*' (p. 75) Hutchinson sets out the various strategies of self-identification and realisation employed by a range of social strata. A key idea emerging from Hutchinson's essay is the notion that driving many revivalist nationalisms is a dynamic tension between cultural and political validations: '[t]here is,' the author asserts, '[...] often a pattern of alternation between cultural and political nationalisms, for while communitarianism by itself will fail against a hostile state, a mobilization of all collective energies to achieving or building a state can lead to deracination, and in turn a further wave of revivalism' (p. 91).

Elsewhere, several studies examine nationalism's relationship to other political theories. John Schwarzmantel in particular offers a thought-provoking analysis of nationalism's relationship to socialist internationalism. While the exclamation in *The Communist Manifesto* that 'the working men have no country' may be considered emblematic of socialism's abrogation of national identity in favour of an economic view of societal structure, Schwarzmantel shows how 'the relationship between nationalism and socialist internationalism was [...] reciprocal' (p. 639). 'Socialists,' Schwarzmantel argues, 'had to accept that they worked, though not exclusively, in a national context' (p. 639). Such is the power of nationalism, it permeates discourses which consciously attempt to elide its compelling appeal.

Paul Lawrence's chapter, entitled 'Nationalism and Historical Writing' (p. 713-730) concludes the collection with an apt examination of the role of historiography in formulating our understanding of how the narratives of nationalism and nationalist thought have developed. As this admirable and broad-ranging collection of erudite scholarship shows, nationalism remains a significant and substantial presence in socio-cultural relations. Constant examination and re-examination of its various historical formulations and manifestations facilitates a clearer understanding of its multifaceted character.