

## Interview - Anthony D. Smith

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, SEP 3 2013

Professor Anthony D. Smith is one of the founders and foremost scholars of the interdisciplinary field of nationalism studies. His best-known contributions to the field are the distinction between 'civic' and 'ethnic' types of nations and nationalism, and the idea that all nations have dominant 'ethnic cores'. He is President of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism at the London School of Economics, and the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Nations and Nationalism*. He is author of numerous works on nationalism, including *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of the National Identity*, and *The Antiquity of Nations*. Professor Smith took his first degree in Classics and Philosophy in Oxford, and his master's degree and doctorate in Sociology at the London School of Economics.

Professor Smith answers your questions about the origin of nations, changing conceptions of nationhood in the EU, and the links between nationalism and genocide.

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### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

At the moment the field is quite fragmented. There used to be key debates about the antiquity of nations and the nature of nationalism, but nowadays there are many different sub-fields; for example feminism, everyday nationhood, discursive analysis of nations, neo-evolutionary psychological approaches, as well as quantitative research on nationhood. In America in particular there are kinds of quantitative or rational choice-type approaches which are still much favored there. So it's difficult to say which are the most important or seminal research areas. Different people jump in at different points in the debate and open up new lines, so that it is really quite difficult to say *this* is where the bulk of research or the most important areas of advance are.

I would even go so far as to say that in a field like nationalism, it's doubtful whether we can speak of particular progress or lines of advance. In this respect it's a bit more like humanistic or literary studies, which have a certain cyclic character, or have a stability that is quite different from what we find in the natural sciences. The study of nationalism has a strong cultural, literary element to it, which is not found in some of the other social sciences that deal with more economic matters, for example.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

The world- that is a very big question! You are referring to the political world in particular. Some of the greatest and most important factors were first of all the Second World War and secondly the collapse of the Soviet Union; these were the two big world events which shaped my world view and which continue to resonate with me because they had personal consequences for me, and also they had consequences for my studies in the field of nationalism. Indeed, they were very influential in causing me to take up the study of nations and nationalism.

In the mid-1980s I began to adopt what was later called an ethno-symbolic approach to the study of nations and nationalism, and while I wouldn't say I am a doctrinaire proponent of this point of view, I do find it useful in

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supplementing and perhaps correcting some of the overemphasis, particularly of the modernists in their study of nationalism. I continue to think that this is a valuable approach.

### **What was the impact of your PhD advisor Ernest Gellner's scholarship and teaching on your own work?**

He had a very considerable impact. He was a forthright exponent of that current of thinking about nations and nationalism that we call modernism, ie the belief that nations as well as nationalism are post-1789, and also that they are intimately connected to, if not dependent on, even derived from, the processes of modernization, an elastic concept which includes not only industrialization per se, but also political mobilization, secular education, urbanization, and so forth. He was a very radical exponent of this point of view, saying that nothing before 1800 really mattered for the study of nationalism.

At first I found myself very much influenced by this point of view. My early studies in nationalism concerned the role of the intellectual classes in that process. However in the early 1980s, I began to reconsider this method and this position, and I came to view the process of nation creation and nationalism as in part derived from, or generally located within, a much longer time process of ethnic revival and ethnic decline, which goes back to antiquity. It was this view that led to my analysis of nations and nationalism in terms of myths, memories, symbols, values, and traditions, which is the core of the ethno-symbolic approach.

So yes, Professor Gellner's work had a great impact, but it also influenced me to embrace a very different point of view as well. Certainly it is a major influence in the field, even today, but I feel that it needs to be supplemented and corrected by the considerations that I have just mentioned.

### **What is nationalism, according to you? And where do nations come from?**

The term "nationalism" has very many meanings. For myself, I like to confine it to a movement and an ideology, and not let it encroach on the idea of sentiment, consciousness, the growth of nations, and all the other things that are sometimes all called "nationalism." It seems to me that that is somewhat separate. The ideology and the movement hold that the world is divided into nations, as a matter of fact. In other words, nationalists believe that the primary division of the world is the national division. According to this view, each nation has its own character, its own history, its own destiny, and loyalty to the nation is the supreme loyalty that overrides all others. Belonging to a nation is what fulfills a person or put negatively, without belonging to a nation, one is "lost" or "alienated" in the world. There is also the belief that nations should have the right to express themselves most fully, and that they are cultural units which need to "find their identity"; that is to say, that people should seek to identify with nations, see how they are distinctive from other nations, and cultivate those distinctive characteristics. And finally, at a broader level, nationalists argue that a world of peace and justice can only be founded on a world of free nations; without free nations, you can't have peace and justice, or indeed stability. So there is a complete worldview within the nationalist ideology. It doesn't cover every sort of thing, it doesn't cover issues of distributive justice, for example, but certainly it covers matters of world regulation, if that's the right word.

Crucially, it links culture to politics. Political units are determined, in the nationalist view, by cultural groupings. These cultures can be of some antiquity, but they may be very modern, recently put together, and very often they are selectively drawn from the past by intellectuals, but usually they have some roots in the past (when I say "the past" I mean the pre-modern past). This was true of the initial modern nations- that's to say England and France in particular, but also Scotland and Denmark and so on- and they became a model for nation creation elsewhere, first in Europe, and then outside.

Now we come to the question of what is a nation, and that's much the most difficult question of all. For me, it's a community; it's a type of community that is based on the idea that people perceive a given territory as belonging to them, rightly or wrongly. So that's the first characteristic: it's a territorialized community. The second characteristic is that it's a community of myth, memory, and symbol. This is what the members of a nation share in common, to a greater or lesser degree: myths, memories, symbols, traditions, which differ from those of other nations. Thirdly, the members of those nations have forged a distinctive public culture, which includes rituals and ceremonies and public

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codes of conduct; a political culture of symbols, flags, anthems, stamps, coins, and so on, that mark out this nation from another nation. And finally, the members tend to observe- and here I'm more careful, because not all members do- common customs and laws.

Now this leads on to the vexed question of whether every nation has a state or must have a state of its own. And it is clear when we look around that there are cases of nations which don't have states- Catalonia and Scotland would be examples. Even if many of the inhabitants want a state of their own, some don't. So I think that I would not write into the definition of nation the desire for, let alone the actuality of having, a state. Of course a nation-state is actually a rarity; "nation-state" implying that there is a single culture with a state sitting on top of it. We don't have that usually, we have a state which has a number of cultures in it, one of which is dominant, so it's a polyethnic state, if you like. And there are many different varieties empirically. So it's quite a complicated question as to the relationship between the nation and the state. I prefer to keep the definition of the nation separate from the state, while allowing for the fact that in historical practice, many nationalists have wanted a state of their own. Which is what Weber says, that "a nation is a community of prestige which would, if permitted, have aimed to possess a state of its own," but the implication of course is that it may not.

This is a controversial question, but because of the cases that I have mentioned (and I'm sure there are others), we need to keep the questions quite separate. When I say that the members observe common laws, the laws may well be those of a community which is not yet an independent state of its own, but will just have some autonomy, as in Catalonia or Scotland. So that is how I would define a nation. It's the most difficult concept in the field and one which has engaged the most debate. One is always looking to see whether one's own definition fits the various empirical cases or whether it can be amended or supplemented. Here I differ from those who argue that there is no reality to the nation, that it is simply a discursive metaphor, and that nationalism is real but nation is simply a claim, a stance on the part of people. This is the position of some scholars in the field now. I don't agree with this; I think that once created, nations have powerful impacts, the collectivity that is the nation has a sort of feedback onto the members themselves which is independent of their own predispositions, their thoughts, their emotions, and so on. Of course, if it's allied to a state, that's even more the case.

### What is the relationship between nationalism and ethnicity?

Again, another very vexed topic! Originally when I studied nationalism I did not really think of it in terms of what's called "the ethnic hinterland." But as I proceeded, it struck me more and more that we cannot divorce the study of nationalism from the study of ethnicity. Ethnic groups are the primary communities from which nations are formed, and which nationalists seek to turn into nations, and then perhaps acquire a state of their own. "Ethnicity" has various grades. One can talk about *ethnic categories*; that is to say aggregates of population, who share a particular set of dialects, customs, and place, but who do not recognize any link among themselves, for example, dwellers of adjoining valleys which have a common dialect and so forth but they have no unity, neither a real cultural unity much less a political one. They may also be divided into city-states: the Phoenicians were divided into city-states in antiquity, they spoke the same language, they had the same cultural practices, but they had no unity; indeed, they fought among each other. The same could be said of the Greek city-states, although there we saw a greater sense of unity, because they had the Olympic Games, the common Gods, common Homeric poems, and so forth.

The next step up is an *ethnic association*. Here the members of the different groupings that constitute the ethnic category begin to have organizations in common, they deal with each other in some way, economically, politically, perhaps, but particularly in terms of culture, they might have a common religious center, for example the ancient Sumerians had a common religious center. And the next stage up again is an *ethnic community*. Here, the aggregates of the population have come together and think of themselves as a single community, they may have a single ruler or they may have institutions which are common, but they share common myths, memories, and symbols, they have a sense of attachment to a common territory, and they feel themselves separate: there is a boundary between them and those outside.

Ethnicity in its various forms is very often the basis of nations. When it is desired by nationalists to create modern nations, it is to ethnic categories, ethnic associations, and particularly ethnic communities that they turn for the basis

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on which the nation can be created. And what are they doing? They're forging a distinct public culture, they're regularizing the laws and customs, they're standardizing the myths and memories through poetry, music, and so forth, and they are securing the boundaries, in a more administrative or political sense of the term: the idea that arose during the French Revolution of France's "natural frontiers," which most ethnic groups would not have thought about originally. As I see it, and that was the argument in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, many- not all, but many- modern nations base themselves on antecedent ethnic ties, either in the weaker form of ethnic categories, which were selected from a number of other categories and turned into the ethnic basis for nations, or ethnic associations, or ethnic communities. If there had been no such units in the world, I don't think we would have had nations or nationalism.

I think it is more a negative argument than a positive one, in a way. I am not saying that for every ethnic community there is a nation, by no means! Many ethnic communities have withered on the vine; the Frisians, for example- there is no Frisian nation. There are lots of ethnic groups that have not been the basis of a nation. Only some are selected. Why these are selected by nationalists, that's a very interesting study. A lot of external factors play a part: external wars, migrations, religious movements; these are factors that lead to the disruption of traditional organization and traditional practices, and begin the process of creating an intelligentsia who are the normal- not the only, but the normal- vehicle for the creation of nations. In the West it was slightly different, it was kings and ministers and bureaucrats that created nations, from the top-down—although, even here, there had to be an ethnic basis on which to do it. The English and the northern French were the basis on which the kingdoms of England and France were based, and hence the English and the French nations.

This is a complex question, and it is extremely difficult to decide the point at which ethnicity or an ethnic community, as I would call it, becomes a nation. But it seems to me that when there is a definite movement- and this is where nationalism comes in -to create a distinct common culture, and laws and customs, and to standardize the cultural heritage and boundaries, then we have the moment of crossing over into nationhood.

### **You have taken degrees both in Nationalism and Art History. Where do you see the connections between these two disciplines?**

In fact my most recent book, *The Nation Made Real*, tried to spell this out. The rise of modern nations in the West in particular- I want to stress this, because there is a debate about whether there are nations in antiquity, or in other parts of the world (the Far East, for example)- coincided with artistic movements of neo-Classicism and Romanticism, which sought in the past a legitimation for, and an understanding of, the communities which were to form the basis of the nations which the nationalists wanted to establish.

Modern nationalism arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. So did what we call "history painting" and "history sculpture" (around 1750), and the connection was not fortuitous. To my mind, one of the most important elements in the conjuncture was the new interest in the cult of authenticity. It stemmed from Rousseau's idea that we should return to nature, we should lead the simple life, we should give up corrupt urban civilization, and this turned increasingly into the idea that what counts is sincerity and authenticity. Of course these things had been around before, we only have to remember what Polonius says to Laertes: "to thine own self be true." But only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century did this become the object of scholarly, cultural, and ultimately political activity, trying to make not just a nation in the sense of any old group that could be put together with boundaries, but one that was authentic, that was "genuine" in some sense.

Now what this meant, of course, was the subject of debate both amongst the nationalists and between the nationalists and everyone else; and it is still subject to debate, since many people dismiss the idea of authenticity. But nevertheless it played a remarkably important part from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea that we should seek in life that which is authentic has affected all types of activities; for example, we want to put on Shakespearean plays that are performed as they were in Shakespeare's day, or Bach's music as it was played in Bach's time- in other words, authentic costumes, period instruments, and so on. We find this desire for authenticity in all sorts of ways, even down to eating "authentic food" rather than fast food.

So that became a link between painters and sculpture on the one hand, and on the other hand nationalist intellectuals

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forging nations. And very often the latter employed the former to construct the idea of the nation, to make it real for people. After all, if you want to get peasants to believe that they are members of a nation, you're not going to go around saying that they have to believe in autonomy and authenticity and all the rest of it; it's going to mean very little to them. But if you put it in the form of images, of pictures, and sculptures, or music, that will make much more sense; it will be accessible, it will be palpable. And that is where artists came in, they too were attracted by the idea of the nation: for one thing, they found a niche there that could employ their talents, particularly if the nation acquired a state, and the state gave commissions to the artists. So I think there are very many links between the arts and artists and the growth of modern nationalism. Now whether this is true in other lands, in the modern period or in antiquity, that is a subject for research.

### What is the role of nationalism in genocide?

This has also been a very vexed topic. The majority of nationalisms in the world, and when I started doing my research I counted some 200 nationalist movements, did not lead to genocide. And I think we have to bear this in mind. Some did; or at any rate some provided the basis on which those who wished to exclude or ultimately murder others who they deemed not to be part of the "authentic" nation. That is where nationalism plays a part. In other words, it is probably a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition; lots of other factors have to intervene before the ultimate stage of genocide is reached.

It may also be true that the rise of nation-states and the filling up of the world, as it were, by exclusive nation-states- nation-states with sealed borders- made the possibilities of genocide that much more likely, since you couldn't flee to other places easily. There were colonial genocides: the Germans in Namibia, and of course the British among the Aborigines in Australia, and the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. But one genocide has eclipsed them all, and lends the topic a huge importance: the Holocaust and the associated massacres by the Nazis of many others alongside the Jews, then imitated in Rwanda and of course the Cambodians, another type of genocide there of "inauthentic" Cambodians, that is to say people who were not working the fields, but were working in the cities.

So I would say that nationalism plays a part in the lead-up to genocide, and by its role in the construction of a system of national states makes it more likely, but it is not itself responsible. There was plenty of German nationalism before the Holocaust which did *not* lead to the murder of the Jews or anybody else, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The other factor of course is war, war itself which allows the perpetrators to hide their dastardly acts under the cloak of *Nacht und Nebel*, as the Nazis called it: night and fog.

### How might the concept of nationalism be altered by changing conceptions of state sovereignty in the EU?

You're talking about the idea that nationalism will be superseded or turned into a purely cultural phenomenon—"defanged," as some people call it. It is interesting that one of the fathers of nationalism, Herder, did not envision a political nationalism. His was a cultural nationalism, and there have been plenty of cultural nationalists who have wanted to disassociate the community from the state itself, even if there was a state. There is theoretically that possibility, but it hasn't in practice worked out very well. The tendency has been for cultural nationalists to turn themselves pretty quickly into political nationalists. That may not have been their volition, they may have been forced into that position by others, particularly those suppressing the cultural nationalists: we shouldn't forget the role of the *ancien regimes*, of the colonial powers, of imperial powers even to this day in suppressing nationalism and forcing what might have been a cultural movement into more political channels.

The other route is to supersede nationalism by wider unities, of which the EU is the best known example. It's also a problematic example, and it could be said by cynics that EU loyalty is itself a form of nationalism on a larger scale, that the fervor with which it is held, the desire to construct a single European space with borders, a common set of symbols, and shared myths and memories- the memories aren't too good, I have to add- but also a common public discourse, ceremonies and rituals, an EU anthem, flag, etc, is certainly an attempt to supersede national loyalties, but with the risk that it itself creates a new large-scale nationalism.

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It hasn't caught on, I think it's fair to say, for the very simple reason that one of the factors that made nationalism so popular, and allied to this idea of "authenticity" which it's not clear that the EU possesses, is the idea that "the people" who are the "authentic" population- meaning the common people in particular- participate in the community. Now, their degree of participation in the European community is very low, I think everyone would admit this, the so-called "democratic deficit." And there's no doubt, however much it changed its shape, nationalism originally emerged in the modern world allied to a desire for greater democracy: overthrowing the *ancien regime*, representative government, parliamentary government perhaps, and an appeal to the common people, to their culture—admittedly selectively. This has not happened in postwar Europe. Even the European parliament, which aims to compensate for this, has not really struck a chord with most members of the European national states. "Europe" is perceived as an elite-driven project.

Whether it's necessary that it should be like this, I don't know. It sprang from the intentions of the founders, John Monnet and others, who insisted that the construction of Europe had to be top-down, that it had to be done in the manner of the kings and ministers of the separate European states like France or England—which worked, but it took a few hundred years to work. It didn't work in the rest of Europe, where the national states that emerged, emerged in opposition to the state, to empires: to the Romanov empire, the Habsburg empire, the Ottoman empire. These were intelligentsia-led uprisings appealing to the culture of the people. I am not at all sure that in the time allotted to the European project by the elites any such democratic devolution will be possible.

As for the other route, namely a revolt of the people against the powers that be, that is not something that the EU elites want to consider. So I'm somewhat skeptical about the possibilities of transcending nationalism and the system of nation-states. There is of course a further possibility, namely the rise of a global culture of cosmopolitanism as such. Again, there has been very little take-up of such an idea. There is a great deal more tolerance in the West for other cultures. But even in the case of England and France, or in a different way the United States, the idea that somehow we should drown the nation-state in a sort of sea of cosmopolitanism which supersedes the particularistic notions of identity which have emerged over the centuries in each of these countries, doesn't seem to have won many adherents. It seems to be confined to some intellectuals, who preach this with the best of intentions but without much sociological basis.

**Your book *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* argues that sacred belief remains central to modern national identities. What light can this scholarship shed on the Arab-Israeli conflict and recent attempts to negotiate a peace deal?**

I would have thought that it is relevant, in the sense that both peoples have a deep, underlying belief in the sacredness of their role in the moral economy of the world. The one because it is underpinned by Islam, a world religion, and the Arabs are the leaders of the Islamic world in terms of the historic nature of their role as the bearers of the creed of Islam to other countries and because the Qur'an is written in Arabic. This sense of "choseness" and of a covenant with God, with Allah, underpins the beliefs of the Arabs, including the Palestinians, in their claim to retake the land which is now Israel and make it part of the Arab-Islamic domain.

On the other side, the Jews, who after all pioneered the concept of "choseness," have not given that up. Yes, of course, we meet secular Israelis, we will find them scoffing at the idea that they are in any sense chosen- except perhaps for suffering. But nevertheless whether they like it or not, whether it is their intention or not, this deep tradition of "choseness," of being set apart, of being elected to do God's will, or at any rate to have a separate course in history, remains a powerful cement for modern Israel. It may not be stated in those terms, but a great deal of the public ceremony and ritual and of the underlying day-to-day assumptions about the place of the Jews in history, and the place of Israel in Jewish history and in the world, is based on this idea. And it is united, and of course this is the key factor- with a belief that it is only in a particular place in the world that this destiny can be worked out. The joke goes that Moses made a mistake, he should have marched further west to Switzerland! But he came to Palestine, and it is there that the Jews rallied: not to Uganda or Kenya, but to the land of Israel, or Palestine. And this has been, I regret to say, a focus of the conflict between two nationalisms, nationalisms fueled in the one case more obviously than the other, by sacred beliefs, beliefs in the sacred communion of the citizens, which I hold to be, even today, the definition of a nation, the underlying definition of a nation if you like.

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I'm afraid this leads to a rather pessimistic outlook as to how this conflict could be resolved, because people are usually not ready, certainly not in a short space of time, to give up such long traditions which form the bedrock of their identity. The question then would have to be, since these are analogous identities, if I may put it like that, how they can be made to compromise and be dovetailed to fit each other, rather than trying to erode them, which I don't think is going to work. You have a left-wing group in Israel that wants to do that, but it is relatively small and there is a very large and vociferous religious minority that won't hear of it. And on the Arab side too, an even smaller minority of those that might consider such an idea, but a very much larger contingent of those that have no desire to give up their God-given identity. So I am very pessimistic about the chances. However, there are always external factors that come into play: American pressure, the world situation as such, economics and so on, which may force *amodus vivendi* between the two that is not a wholesale peace, which I think is very unlikely, certainly in my time.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of nationalism?**

The first piece of advice is to read the basic theories and debates in the field, because without that background, to plunge into the particular sub-fields that are currently on offer would give a very distorted picture of what the overall field is, and lead to a shallowness in understanding. Second, in selecting a sub-field for research, it is important to relate that research to the wider debates, and to keep a broad view of the subject even when focusing on a narrower terrain. Third, in terms of the values that one brings to such scholarship, to my mind it is extremely important to have cognizance of, and to recognize, the importance of cultural diversity and of the other person's nationalism. That is quite a difficult thing to do, to try to see yourself into the other's nationalist shoes, particularly if the scholar is him or herself involved in a particular national group. I do not accept Hobsbawm's advice that a nationalist cannot teach the subject. One cannot teach the subject if one can't see and feel the other person's identity and sense of nationalism. That is when a more balanced, a more nuanced, and a more insightful study will emerge.

So historically situated, connected to wider debates, and empathetic of the other person's nationalism: these are the three things that I would urge on younger scholars entering the field. There are no doubt other things that would be important to consider, but these seem to be the *sine qua non* of a deeper, more profound study of the subject of nations and nationalism, which remains one of central features of the modern world.

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*This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor of the website and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Georgetown University.*