Gabriella Elgenius: Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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BOOK REVIEW


Research on nationalism frequently has the good fortune of being interdisciplinary, and for excellent reasons: it needs a historical dimension in order to trace origins and transformations; it needs political science for the institutional context, but perhaps even more importantly, it has to be sociologically and anthropologically informed, since nationalism – a modern kind of metaphoric kinship ideology – is upheld through informal social relationships and given meaning through symbols and rituals.

Nowhere else has a research community succeeded better in fulfilling the requirements for innovative and credible research on nationalism than at the London School of Economics, where a shifting, but always impressive team of researchers have made huge contributions to the field in the last decades.

Gabriella Elgenius, although now at Oxford, has her background from this environment, and it shows clearly in her magisterial book on national flags and national days. The project amounts to a comparative investigation of these key symbols and rituals of nationhood, and it is an ambitious one. As she remarks in the introduction, few systematic comparisons have been made in the field before, and as a matter of fact, most comparative work on nationalism concentrates on a handful of cases (or just two). In her case, singling out European flags and national days for closer scrutiny (with a short analysis of national anthems thrown in as a bonus) has entailed meticulous historical research, symbolic analysis, and a thorough investigation of the shifting relationship between state and nation, on the one hand, and elites and masses, on the other. She succeeds in showing that these core symbols of nationhood carry out comparable work in quite different societies, by using similar (but far from identical) means, but have developed under very diverse circumstances and in different historical periods, ranging from the pre-modern cross flags (like the Danish one) to post-imperial flags like that of Bosnia-Herzegovina – and celebrating nations which may in important ways be quite different; homogeneous or heterogeneous, large or small, hierarchical or egalitarian.

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Elgenius has wisely chosen not to revisit the theoretical debates of the 1980s and 1990s, concerning the historicity of nationalism — is it wholly modern or based on pre-modern ethnies — and the relative role played by ethnicity (ius sanguinis) and territory (ius solis) in the formation of nations. Rather, through her many examples, she shows that the European nations have developed asynchronously and in distinctive stages. Of course, the modern conceptualisation of the nation as founded in the cultural unity and social solidarity of its citizens is a modern one, but national sentiment — and identification with particular historical events, patron saints or cultural heroes, symbols or indeed flags — is often much older. (As Ernest Gellner once remarked, wryly, even nations with no navels do their best to invent them post hoc — in other words, it is never too late to acquire a glorious history.) National days and flags are physical manifestations helping citizens to imagine their community more powerfully.

Both flags and national days emerge out of historical moments deemed crucial for the history of the nation. Before nationalism proper, symbols like flags were the exclusive property of the elites — indeed, commoners would typically not be allowed to use them at all — and the massive dissemination of the modern French tricolour after the Revolution, to mention a famous example, signifies the democratic spirit which had motivated the political upheavals originally. Actually, as Elgenius points out, the American ‘Stars and Stripes’ was the first national flag to represent an entire population.

Elgenius does an excellent job in classifying and typologising both national days and flags, and she offers more than one typology for each (for example, flags are cross flags, tricolours, heraldic flags or post-historical flags, each associated with a particular historical period). She has interesting reflections on usually overlooked details, such as the use of colours (red is by far the most popular — she argues that it symbolises blood and sacrifice, which it doubtless does; but it may be added that red is also the most basic colour in human culture, excluding black and white). Even more interesting is her examination of the causes for the relative success or failure of particular national days. Why, for example, is it that the Norwegian Constitution Day is massively celebrated across the country, while the older Day of the Swedish Flag generates little enthusiasm? True to her historically oriented mode of analysis, she offers, towards the end of the book, no less than 16 arguments. The most important factor may be a subjective sense of national vulnerability and a widespread conviction that the national day is created by the people and not by the state. Whether a country celebrates its defeats or its victories (another interesting source of variation) seems to matter less.

Both flags and national days denote the boundaries of the nation. For this reason, they can never be entirely uncontroversial, since the ideals of
nationalist ideology – an all-encompassing unity including all citizens and excluding all non-citizens – are neither unproblematic nor fully realised in practice. In any complex society, there will always be people who wish to be included (but usually on their own terms) as well as people who reject the form of inclusion they are being offered. Yet, in spite of several decades of active identity politics among European minorities, indigenous as well as immigrant, sometimes leading to multiculturalist policies, sometimes to political decentralisation, no flag or national day has been revised or moved as a result. These symbols do inevitably change in meaning as the nation changes in character (the Christian cross on the Norwegian flag goes unnoticed by the many Muslim children waving it in children’s parades on Constitution Day), but only devastating wars and revolutions seem capable of changing them. Claude Lévi-Strauss once wrote that myths were ‘machines for the suppression of the passage of time’. In our modern societies, the central myths are narrated through symbols and rituals – flags and national ceremonies – and they render the nation timeless and eternal.

This rich, tightly argued, densely packed book is essential reading for all students of nationalism. Restricting itself to Europe, it should also pave the ground for further work, where the flags and national ceremonies of other continents are similarly examined. Although most of them may have a postcolonial origin, they are certain to reveal a similar diversity as the European ones do. Unsurprisingly, there are many postcolonial flags which resemble the new Bosnian-Hercegovinian one, and in this they depart from the European mainstream: They signify not a shared past, but hopes for a shared future.

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