

Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism

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New entries in the history of nationalism have, as the saying goes, tough acts to follow. Titles like Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism*, or Hans Kohn's *The Idea of Nationalism* have become canonical texts and had no serious challengers in recent years. Azar Gat's *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* rises to this implicit challenge with confidence and a fair amount of success.

Gat is Ezer Weitzman Professor and chair of the history department at Tel Aviv University, as well as being the author of several previous books, including *War in Human Civilization* and *Victorious and Vulnerable: Why Democracy Won in the 20th Century and How It Is Still Imperilled*.⁽¹⁾ He credits Alexander Yakobsen with co-authorship of *Nations*, citing conversations ('His [Yakobsen's] wisdom and brilliance are unmatched') (foreword) over a number of years that resulted in Gat writing the present volume.

Gat himself places this work in the canon of nationalist studies that begins, loosely speaking, with Ernest Renan's 1882 essay *What is a nation?* ⁽²⁾ International 20th-century events like the two world wars kept general interest in the subject alive, since it seemed to offer a way of explaining the otherwise inexplicable; more local incidents, such as the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, also guaranteed attention from scholars in neighboring states. However, explaining how nationalism works – why nationalist feeling flares in one place and not another; why it thrives under certain conditions in one country and dies in another under the exact same conditions – brings to mind the allegorical blind men describing an elephant. Every part is vital to the whole picture but no part *is* or can be the whole picture. Attempts to synthesize a holistic view of nationalism are usually only partially successful due to the sheer number of elements that can go to make up nationalist feeling in any one location. Any theory which accounted for them all would make for an unreadably long book and contain so many qualifying clauses as to be a little ridiculous.

Gat uses *Nations* as an opportunity to synthesize and critique the dominant theories of nationalism that developed between the late 19th and the late 20th centuries. By selecting this wide time span, he has the opportunity to engage with a range of scholars, including Anthony Smith, Walker Connor, Tom Nairn,

Pierre van den Berghe, Eric Hobsbawm, Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, Liah Greenfield, and Benedict Anderson. Gat is highly critical of most of these sources, despite – or perhaps because of? – their hallowed place in the canon of nationalist studies.

Nations is broken into six chapters authored by Gat and a final chapter written by Alexander Yakobsen. Yakobsen is named on the front cover and, as mentioned above, Gat credits him with helping to generate the initial idea for the book. Giving him the last chapter is a slightly odd choice since it prevents the last thought in the book from being Gat's own, but Yakobsen's discussion does add a more overtly political and legal aspect to the discussion. Yakobsen has a slightly more formalistic writing style than Gat's chattier approach, but the difference isn't too jarring. However, Yakobsen's chapter might have stood better as an appendix rather than the final chapter had the book been produced differently.

The introduction is a thought-provoking discourse on what brought Gat to write this particular book and on the historiography of nationalism in general. Gat also takes the opportunity to define very specifically some of the terms he will be using, including 'ethnos' and 'ethnicity' as well as 'nationalism' and 'patriotism.' The definitions are in themselves an interesting discussion. For example, the definition of 'peoples' begins, 'Peoples are strangely rare in the literature on the nation and nationalism, despite common usage of the term in ordinary parlance. There have been peoples everywhere ... but scarcely in the scholarly discourse' (p. 22). It is worth the reader keeping these pages bookmarked as some of Gat's definitions are outside the ordinary run or add nuance to a common definition and occasional reference may be helpful in later chapters.

Chapters two and three explore the development of kin-culture communities and the evolution of these communities into tribes and then states. This is a fascinating discussion, synthesizing and comparing a broad range of material across Europe, Africa, Asia and South America. He points out that the focus of most nationalist scholars in the past has been on Europe and certain selected Asian cases whereas places like Africa and South America have gone largely unstudied. Over the course of the book, he manages to develop almost worldwide coverage, although sources limit him somewhat in extending his work to the Arctic, Australian, or North American indigenes.

Chapter four covers premodern *ethne*, one of Gat's preferred terms for communities that might otherwise be called nations or that develop into true nations. Chapter four provides the first real meat of Gat's argument, allowing him to work out his theory that nationalism, perhaps by other names, pre-dates the French Revolution and the subsequent 'age of nationalism'. Gat's aim seems to be to challenge theorists such as Benedict Anderson who argue that a specifically modern development – in Anderson's case, printing technology and literacy – is necessary for the rise of nationalism. Instead, Gat argues that the community feeling which helps to define nations were in evidence long before the start of the modern period. He argues his case well in this and the following chapter, and although no theory of nationalism can hope to cover all angles, Gat's theorizing helps to add depth and complexity to what he seems to consider an over-simplified field.

Chapter five tightens the focus to Europe, the classic field for nationalist studies. Gat examines the appearance of national states in 'emergent Europe', then takes a geographic look at the south against the north, and finally ends with a long disquisition on the possibilities of nationhood in premodern Europe. Chapter six, as one might anticipate, brings Gat's argument close to the present, examining the relationships between peoples and the nations they create or fail to create, the differences between civic and ethnic nations, and the effects of globalization on national conflict or solidarity. The last chapter is similar to Gat's introduction; Yakobsen muses about the history and development of nations and what makes for a constitutive or normative aspect of this process.

Throughout the book, Gat seems to specialize in taking issue with the best-known scholars in the field including most of those named above and often singling out Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm. For example, in the preliminary literature survey in the introduction, Gat writes:

Anderson has coined the enormously successful phrase 'imagined community' to describe the impact since the late fifteenth century of print technology. Allegedly, print created large-scale networks of shared culture based on the printed vernacular beyond the 'real,' face-to-face communities of the local village and town. However, although the advent of print technology undoubtedly represented a quantum leap in communication, large-scale 'imagined communities' of shared culture had existed before, infused with a sense of common identity and solidarity (p. 12).

It is worth reflecting on whether this is an argument Anderson would take issue with. Gat also follows up on the main textual argument by seeming to suggest in his footnote that, since the question of print and nationalism had been dealt with by Hayes and Kohn, Anderson's work may lack value or be a rehash. It is unfortunate that Gat's entirely legitimate critique of or conversation with previous scholars occasionally comes across as dismissive of generally well-respected theorists. While no-one's work is above criticism, and ideas should never be considered set in stone simply because they are well-respected, Gat sometimes dispatches earlier work with scanty analysis or contextualization. While an idea developed in 1882 may no longer have currency today, it is always worth remembering that it had currency in 1882.

Some of his points of disagreement may seem a little tendentious and it is worth reading *Nations* with copies of *Imagined Communities* and *Nations and Nationalism* close to hand as comparative texts. However, for the most part, Gat's analysis is done in the spirit of academic discourse and discussion rather than *ad hominem* attack. He makes a good point when he talks of the study of nations and nationalism as having been codified by a few 'great thinkers' in the last half of the 20th century; questioning those ideas, even if the discussion then leads back to evidence in their favor, is not a pointless exercise.

Gat's aim with *Nations* seems to be to start – or restart – a conversation about the history of nations and nationalism, more the former than the latter. Most of his chapters will leave readers with more questions than answers; the lack of a bibliography or bibliographic essay may be felt here as a serious lacuna. While Gat provides detailed footnotes and the careful reader can amass a startlingly long reading list from the text itself, a bibliography or source essay would have added greatly to the value of the work. Since one of the strongest elements in the book is Gat's handling of the historiography, a bibliographic essay would have been particularly appropriate.

Nations will sit a little awkwardly in the canon of nationalist studies; at times it is difficult to tell what audience Gat is writing for and whether he is making his own argument or reacting to those of other scholars. The chapters are all interesting but sometimes seem to be loosely connected essays on the same topic rather than chapters of a book with a single coherent argument. The book would seem to suggest a perfect outline for a seminar or workshop to discuss the work of the canonical nationalist scholars along with *Nations*. The introduction is, perhaps, the strongest piece in the book and may make readers wish that Gat had taken a more theoretical approach to the entire work, rather than settling down to case studies. The connections he makes, though, are quite thought-provoking and, particularly for those with an interest in comparative studies or non-European nationalisms, may suggest new directions for study or exploration.

It is worth noting that not all of the questions raised by Gat's work are articulated by the author himself: while he explores such rewarding topics as whether nationalism can exist before a printed language or the relationship of religion to nationalism, the reader may come up with others such as: is a comparative study suitable for this type of material? Can you fruitfully compare such widely varied states, countries or peoples? These are not intended as criticisms of Gat's work; rather, as a strong commendation of the value of *Nations* in engaging the reader.

Nations is a stimulating and valuable addition to the canon on nationalism. Gat's work will be valuable for seasoned scholars as well as students prepared to engage deeply with their source material.

Notes

1. Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford, 2006); *Victorious and Vulnerable: Why Democracy Won in the 20th Century and How It Is Still Imperilled* (Lanham, MD).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ernest Renan, 'What is a nation?' <
http://web.archive.org/web/20110827065548/http://www.cooper.edu/humanities/core/hss3/e_renan.html
[2]> [accessed 29 September 2013].[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author thanks the reviewer and does not wish to comment.

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