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Introduction: nationalism and national identities

Martin Bulmer and John Solomos

This issue of Ethnic and Racial Studies is composed of a number of papers that are concerned broadly with questions of nationalism and constructions of national identities. This is a theme that we have covered in some depth in the journal over the past four decades, both through the publication of key theoretical papers and through case studies of nationalism in specific nation-states and geopolitical environments. It is also a field of scholarship and research that has grown in importance over the past few decades, along with the revival of nationalist movements and ideologies in various parts of the globe (Brubaker et al. 2006; Calhoun 2007b).

Like the other themed issues we are producing this year we do not see the eight papers that make up this volume as linked by a singular analytical or regional focus. Indeed, they are written from rather different theoretical perspectives and cover a wide range of countries and draw on a range of methodologies. Taken together, however, they shed light on the processes through which nationalist sentiments and ideas are articulated and given a social and political meaning in specific situations. They cover a broad range of different kinds of nationalist movements and ideologies, and they also draw on different theoretical perspectives and empirical methodologies.

The first paper by John O’Loughlin and Gearóid Ó Tuathail focuses on a comparison of forms of ethnic separatism in two important geopolitical environments, namely Bosnia-Herzegovina and the North Caucasus. The main focus of the paper is a critical comparison of attitudes to ethnic separatism in the two geopolitical environments, and the authors draw on surveys in both locations. The authors emphasize the need to situate the commonalities and differences between the two regions within a wider social as well as political frame. They also highlight the importance of locality and levels of trust as important factors in explaining the role of separatist sentiment in both of their case study locations.
The next paper by Jordi Muñoz explores the evolution of ideas about the nation and national identity in the context of the democratic transition in Spain after the period of the Franco dictatorship. The emphasis in this paper is on the role of ideology, religion and region of residence as factors in explaining national pride and its role in the process of political democratization and the evolution of new forms of democratic political identity. An important theme that underlies Muñoz’s analysis is that processes of democratization necessarily rely on a re-invention of ideas about the nation and the role of political identities within the broader collectivity.

The article by Cenk Saracoglu takes a somewhat different angle, focusing as it does on the construction of political identities in the context of contemporary Turkish society. Drawing on the growing role of internal migration from Eastern Anatolia to the major urban conurbations, Saracoglu suggests that the tendency to identify these migrants as Kurdish is in fact not the result of the actions of political and state institutions, but a process of ethnic identity formation that owes much to the everyday processes of social and cultural change that have shaped the urban spaces of contemporary Turkish society. In doing so Saracoglu suggests that the tendency to focus much discussion about the role of Kurdish identity in Turkey on the role of the state is in fact quite misleading, since it is perhaps equally important to look at city life as a space through which such political identities are both made and re-made.

The paper by Diego Muro shifts the focus somewhat by examining how the ideological and political discourses of radical forms of Basque nationalism engage with the question of war memory. Muro argues that within the political rhetoric of ETA the language of war memory is used as a way of justifying the contemporary role of political violence. The usage of historical memory takes the form partly of utilizing the collective memory of the Spanish Civil War and earlier conflicts as a way of justifying the violence of ETA’s actions and to draw an ethnic boundary between Basques and Spaniards. The paper illustrates the use of war memory as a political tool for fixing ethnic boundaries and as a tool for re-imagining the past as a series of heroic past wars that culminate in the on-going violent struggle between the Spanish state and Basque radicals.

A recurrent theme in the analysis of contemporary Africa is the linkage between conflicts and forms of ethnicity. The paper by Ukana Ikpe examines this issue from the perspective of how conflicts that have been pervasive in Nigerian society since independence have been seen through the lens of inter-ethnic conflict and communal clashes. Ikpe’s analysis highlights the role of the state in shaping ethnic politics in postcolonial societies such as Nigeria. He argues that the structure of state institutions is heavily dependent on forms of clientelist politics,
with state officers dispensing resources to clients in exchange for loyalty and services. This is a phenomenon of the postcolony that has been noted by other commentators on African state institutions (Mbembe 2001).

The paper by Pedro J. Oiarzabal returns to the Basque case, but explores it from a rather different angle from that of Muro. Drawing on both historical and contemporary sources Muro explores the mechanisms through which Basque ethnic identity helped to shape processes of national identification and state building on both sides of the Atlantic, including Spain and Latin America. In this sense Basque ethnicity is not merely a part of the formation of Basque ethnonationalist politics but has played a role in wider discursive formations and political struggles.

The final paper in this themed issue is by Lawrence Markowitz and it focuses on a comparison of the nationalist movements in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Markowitz is particularly interested in how low nationalist mobilization in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has to be seen in the context of the ways in which nationalist movements and their leaderships either took or missed the opportunities offered to them by the changing political environments. In emphasizing the role of political leadership this paper returns to a recurrent theme in this issue as a whole, namely the importance of political mobilization in shaping the boundaries of how the nation is defined and struggled over.

Two of the articles in this themed issue, on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the North Caucasus and on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, are explicitly comparative, and this enhances their interest, particularly when the comparison is between societies quite far removed from each other. In general, we think that there is currently insufficient comparative work in the field of ethnic and racial studies, both at a general theoretical level (cf. Schermerhorn 1970) and in comparative studies of specific societies or aspects of those societies (cf. Akenson 1992; Shafir 1995). The Editors would like to encourage the submission of more such comparative articles.

The question of nationalism and nationalist politics seems likely to remain an important concern for scholars working in the field of ethnic and racial studies. This is not to say that we can imagine that nationalisms as they exist today represent the same discursive formation as earlier forms of nationalist politics. Craig Calhoun, among others, has pointed to the inherently political nature of national identity, and the pervasive role of political movements in shaping both nation-states and democratic institutions (Calhoun 2007a). From this perspective it is important that research and scholarship on these issues address the question of what explains the
continuing role of nationalism as a source of mobilization and political identity formation.

References


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