

Ulrich Bielefeld. *Nation und Gesellschaft: Selbstthematizierungen in Deutschland und Frankreich.* Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, HIS Verlag, 2003. 416 S. EUR 30.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-930908-83-7.



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Do We Need Another Grand Theory of Nationalism?

Nothing seems to be quite as difficult or as complicated to talk about as nationalism and the nation; the very words drift out of focus with every attempt to make them clear and definite rather than qualified and murky. Part of the problem, as Ulrich Bielefeld ably demonstrates, is that nations have all been created by people pretending that they already exist, that is, by men and women who assume, in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary, that the nation's citizens already share a single history, culture, language or, most dangerously, a destiny rooted in biology. As Bielefeld puts it, drawing on Ernest Renan, "Die Nation ist eine Gemeinschaft, die vergessen hat, daß sie keine Gemeinschaft ist" (p. 156). Yet, for better or for worse, and despite their underlying incoherence, nationalism and the nation were and remain among history's most powerful concepts; they have also been the focus of powerful thinkers' attempts at understanding both their own societies and the more general process of national self-conceptualization (*Selbstthematizierung*). Bielefeld's book traces and tries to untangle two strands in this intellectual history; he pairs French and German intellectuals to see how these nations' respective nationalisms expressed themselves in the early

nineteenth century, after 1871, and following World War I. As one might expect from the word "Gesellschaft" in the book's title and from the word "Gemeinschaft" in the above quotation, Bielefeld's disciplinary home is sociology, but he is also well versed in the philosophy and literature of French and German national aspirations. His goal is to broaden and deepen our understanding of nationalism's conceptual history, and on the whole, including some tough slogging through difficult ideas, he succeeds.

Of course, no one person can ever know enough about nationalism as a theory, as a set of historical developments or as an assemblage of content that fills minds in various national communities. At one point in his two long introductory chapters, thirty-seven and sixty-three pages respectively, Bielefeld talks about the "praxeologische Ebene des Wissens" (p. 83), by which he means the often fictional beliefs about the nation that people acquire in the course of their education and upbringing. Perhaps without knowing it, Bielefeld then uses terminology from East German Marxism to describe such acquisitions, and he buttresses his argument histor-

ically, using an example that seems to spring from people, a time and a place that both preceded and participated in the construction of a specifically German consciousness, "In einem deutschen Sinnspruch wird dieser Prozeß der aktiven aktuellen Aneignung des Erbes unmittelbar deutlich: 'Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vätern, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen'" (pp. 83-84).^[1] Every professor of German literature and almost every educated nineteenth-century German would know immediately that the quotation comes from the "Nacht" scene of Goethe's *Faust* (lines 682-683), but Bielefeld offers instead a footnote that contains a revealing example of precisely the difficulty he or any other scholar might encounter in trying to track down the origins of what people believe, "Dieser Sinnspruch, dessen Autor und Quelle ich nicht kenne, stand unter der Gravur eines Bildes von einem pflegenden Bauern, das in der Wohnstube eines Münsterländer Bauern hing. Als Kind rätselte ich immer dann, wenn ich das Zimmer des Nachbarn betrat, über die Bedeutung des Satzes" (p. 84). The point here is not to expose a *Bildungslecke*, if such things still exist in postmodernity, but to reinforce my opening contention about the difficulty of dealing with nationalism and the nation. One never knows enough to make all the connections, and the same humility that springs from the recognition of our limited ability to trace the content of national identity ought to make us wary of any new, grand theories about this curious beast called the nation.

Bielefeld rests his explanatory model on the notion of *Selbstthematisierung*, which he defines as the construction of a "fiktionale Einheit als Bestandteil der Wirklichkeit.... Gruppen, die nun politische Selbstbestimmung tatsächlich erlangen oder verlangen (können), müssen sich aus sich selbst begründen, müssen bestimmen, wer sie sind, ihre Stellung und ihren Anspruch aus ihrer Geschichte oder Kultur ableiten und sich so von anderen nach innen und außen unterscheiden" (p. 10). In a sense what Bielefeld offers is a further development of Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities," with both the convincing overall logic and the concrete explanatory difficulties that arise whenever someone applies Anderson's ideas to a particular nation. Here, aside from the problem of determining which groups already have or could have a claim on nationhood, as well as deciding who would then be inside or outside the geographic and the cultural, linguistic, and conceptual borders around such a group, one wonders if it is possible to separate any group's history from the process of its self-conceptualization. Which came first, when one always presupposes the other? For exam-

ple, for Germans to have taken 1871 as a moment of self-definition assumes a kind of agreement about group identity that may well have happened retrospectively if at all, unless we know that Bavarians celebrated while the Austrians remained silent. What German Jews (already a complicated term), Prussia's Polish population, or the Sorbs might have thought, both before and after the event, makes things even more complicated, but a theory that cannot account for such complications is hardly worth having. To be fair, Bielefeld is aware of the difficulties, and he gives himself enough room at a conceptual level to accommodate specific questions about concrete situations, "Nicht daß alle gleich oder das gleiche denken und sich tatsächlich verstehen, sondern daß unterstellt wird, daß sie es können (und damit andere eben nicht), daß häufig nicht gefragt wird, was denn unter den kollektiven Sammelbegriffen genauer zu verstehen sei, macht die Selbstverständlichkeit des Nationalen aus" (p. 14). Bielefeld is also writing intellectual rather than national history, and his review of the literature is outstanding, even if *Selbstthematisierung* does not turn out to be of much help in advancing our understanding of particular nations and specific nationalisms.

Bielefeld's real object of inquiry is the field of sociology, which he calls "eine typisch moderne, das heißt ausdifferenzierte und schließlich professionalisierte Form der Selbstthematisierung" (p. 255). His comparative history of French and German sociologies is also a confrontation between French and German varieties of nationalism, which he sees converging in the aftermath of WWI and the anti-Semitism of the Nazi era. Not surprisingly, Bielefeld begins with Johann Gottlieb Fichte, albeit only after a detour through Julius Langbehn and Georg Simmel. Fichte "steht für die Gründung des deutschen, protestantischen Nationalismus" (p. 121), which proceeded from the primacy of language to the Volk as a locus of national identity. In other words, German nationalism defined itself ethnically, while the French, having had both a long tradition of central government and the experience of the French Revolution, made their version of nationalism voluntary. However, rather than picking a French philosopher or sociologist, Bielefeld pairs and compares Fichte with Maurice Barres (1862-1923), a novelist and "der einflussreichste literarische Vertreter eines 'neuen Nationalismus'" (p. 157). Bielefeld gets to Barres by way of Ernest Renan, who thought of the nation as a continual plebiscite, but of individuals rather than groups. Essentially, Bielefeld's argument is that Barres added ethnicity to Renan's formulation, which allowed French and German con-

cepts of the nation to mingle in a shared, anti-Semitic brew, "Die Konzeption der Nation als Wahlhandlung und freier Wille, das universalistisch-republikanisch-französisches Konzept also, wurde als französisch, has heißt als partikular bestärkt und als spezifisches erneut thematisierbar, während das partikulare Konzept der Ethnie oder des Volkes als partikular-deutsches universalisiert wurde" (p. 146).

Having dealt with the foundation and convergence of these two intellectual traditions, Bielefeld shifts his attention to a time when sociology functioned more or less openly as a "Selbstthematierungswissenschaft" (p. 219). 1871 presented both France and Germany with problems of self-conceptualization, and sociologists viewed their task as, "die unsicher gewordene Stabilität der Gesellschaft, die nicht an sich glaubt, sich aber selbst schafft und ein Bewußtsein davon gerade in Form der Soziologie entwickelt, zu sichern" (p. 219). His primary examples are Max Weber and Emil Durkheim, both of whom assumed the existence of the nation as the often unspoken equivalent of *Gesellschaft*. Thus, Durkheim's work on suicide looked to society rather than the individual for explanations of a larger problem, specifically, a lack of connection with the newly truncated and traumatized nation. So too were Weber's studies of immigration and integration ultimately concerned with the viability of the *Kultur* as an answer to social problems such as the role of the rural population in the nation and the decline of the Junkers in East Prussia. Bielefeld presents a convincing case for Durkheim's and Weber's parallel development and theoretical overlap, and he also shows that their shared nationalist mission proved incapable of even pretending to solve the problems of post-World War I Europe. For all its reliance on the messy and dangerous baggage of nationalism, Durkheim's and Weber's sociology was ultimately a humanistic science that could not become openly racist, as newer nationalists were demanding, without a radical restructuring.

That next step came from a generation of men who, although they had not participated in the fighting, nevertheless took the defeat personally—even if they were French and, nominally, on the winning side. For these "kalte Enthusiasten," as Bielefeld terms them (p. 273), the situation no longer involved the dream of a nation but some vague threat to the Volk. For Louis Celine, "der antisemitische französische Schriftsteller par ex-

cellence" (p. 305), it was the voluntary tradition of French nationalism that made its reconfiguration along traditionally German lines necessary, perhaps, in an odd twist, with the aid, potentially, of anti-Semitic Germans. This time Bielefeld's candidate for a comparison from the other side of the Rhine is also a writer, Ernst von Solomon, an author of considerably less talent than Celine, but, as one of Walter Rathenau's assassins, an anti-Semite of the first order. Sociologists are no longer at the forefront of these developments, because these men are no longer concerned with the Volk as an object of empirical inquiry, which it never really was, but rather with the idea of the *Volk*, which Celine and von Solomon claimed to embody no matter what people in France or Germany thought about them or their enterprise. Having jettisoned the nation, French and German nationalisms converged in an ever more intellectually incoherent morass.

After 1945 one might have hoped for the end of nationalism, but the concept of self-determination flourishes in spite of the fact that it remains unclear which groups might justifiably determine their own fate under what circumstances. The classic European example is now former Yugoslavia, where people killed each other because, at least in part, they spoke the same language with different alphabets. The fiction of common histories, languages and cultures continues as strongly as ever, because every nation, as Bielefeld concludes, "müssen auf Selbstbestimmung bestehen, wissend, daß es diese nicht gibt, durch den Verzicht darauf aber demokratische Gesellschaft nicht möglich ist" (p. 389). In other words, nations still need self-conceptualizations. Whether Bielefeld's account of how such constructs developed and how they work is the best grand theory we have is open to question, particularly his implicit claim that the six theorists he focuses on exemplify the trajectory of nationalism's rise. However, even if another writer might have derived similar ideas differently, readers of Bielefeld's book have access to a concentrated mass of insight and information that more than justify its place on library shelves.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Claus Trüger, *Studien zur Erbetheorie und Erbeaneignung* (Leipzig: Verlag Philipp jun., 1981).

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