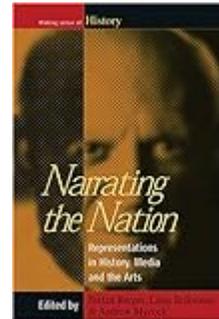




**Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, Andrew Mycock, eds.** *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts.* Making Sense of History Series. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. 348 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-424-1.



Reviewed by Niklas Olsen

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2009)

## St. Berger u.a. (Hrsg.): Narrating the Nation

Narrating the Nation has its origins within the program Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in 19th and 20th century Europe (NHIST) that was funded by the European Science Foundation and ran from 2003 until 2008. The volume is the result of the first cross-team conference of the program that took place at the University of Glamorgan in May 2004. For details about the program and about the other volumes that are beginning to appear, see (22.09.2009).

Besides an informative introduction authored by one of the editors, Stefan Berger, the book contains all in all 14 contributions. These contributions are arranged within five parts that cover themes related to respectively: 1. Scientific Approaches to National Narratives 2. Narrating the Nation as Literature 3. Narrating the Nation as Film 4. Narrating the Nation as Art and Music 5. Non-European Perspectives on Nation and Narration.

What standards and norms for the writing of national history does the volume promote? It is the three papers of the first section, on Scientific Approaches, that address this question in the most comprehensive manner. Together, these essays outline a fairly optimistic and af-

firmative position as to our ability to write a properly 'scientific' national history. Central for this position is among other things the ambition of deconstructing classical master narratives on behalf of narratives that include multiple memories, identities and traditions, and of relating history to politics in a more cautious way than the master narratives did.

Focusing on the relation between history, identity and politics, Allan Megill takes in his essay issue with what he sees as a political commitment in the NHIST-program; a commitment that seemingly aims to denationalize national history on behalf of increased European solidarity and understanding. In his introduction, Stefan Berger offers a comprehensive reply to the criticism raised by Megill. Instead of promoting normative policy in the present, he considers that the public role of historiography "is largely a matter of countering fantasies about the past that arise in people's minds as pseudo-justifications for agendas and ways of life that they wish to promote in the present" (p. 26). According to Megill, such a historiographic critique of all identity-claims that is committed to objectivity might open space

for the making of de-essentialized, de-mystified and thus sounder national solidarities and behavioral norms.

A compatible program of historical writing is found in Mark Bevir's essay. Its ambition is to substitute "positive" styles of social science (based on objective facts and causal explanations) and developmental historicism (based on narratives framed by principles of nation, liberty and progress) as approaches to national history with a so-called radical historicism "that lends itself to perspectival critique and decentred narratives" (p. 58). Also this program aims to "debunk earlier national histories by narrating them as contingent products of historical contexts" and "to acknowledge the diversity of the characters, identities, customs and traditions found in a nation" (p. 69). Yet radical historicism does not entail radical relativization. It refers instead to "shared normative rules and practices" (p. 71) by which rival narratives can be compared and the reasonableness of some narratives can be defended against others.

Chris Lorenz attempts to outline a common analytical platform by means of conceptual clarification. His aim is to challenge the conventional opposition between history as a science and history as myth, which, he states, was long identified as "opposed to both truth (myth is fiction) and to the rational (myth is absurd)" (p. 42), and he does so by illuminating the status of these categories at the birth of professional historical writing in the works of Ranke and Humboldt. According to Lorenz, by recognizing the "theoretical, non-empirical aspect of scientific history as one of its two defining characteristics" (p. 48), Ranke and Humboldt in fact incorporated a mythical dimension into scientific history. However, following their Christian worldview, they infused scientific history with new myths charged with universal claims, such as the myth of the nation. Lorenz consequently urges us to follow Ranke and Humboldt by acknowledging that history will always involve myth, but also to diverge from their work by recognizing the plurality of narratives, theories and methods, and by developing tools "to compare and evaluate them rationally" (p. 49).

The theoretical reflections in Megill's, Bevir's and Lorenz's papers are certainly more elaborate and complex than rendered here. Still, they share a considerable amount of features. Most prominently, they all focus on deconstructing and criticizing existing approaches to national history. At the same time, they do not focus on the question of how a comprehensive national history as based on a plurality of perspectives can actually be

written (provided national history is still a legitimate objective). But of course, the theoretical problems pertain to other kinds of historical writing as well, national or not. Moreover, what might have been expected from the contributions is not only more elaborate reflections on how we move from detailed criticism to comprehensive narratives. It would also have been helpful to engage in a more thorough discussion of whether it is possible to integrate, theoretically and empirically, the plurality of histories into narrative forms of writing histories that include generalizations and grand interpretations and at the same time avoid the pitfalls of the classical master narratives. In short, an emphasis less on critique and more on narrative would have been desirable in order to tackle the conceptual uncertainties of writing perspectively plural histories and thus to more fully live up to the underlying ambitions of the theoretical essays and the volume more generally.

Historicization and deconstruction of classical master narratives is also at the centre of the volume's eleven analytical essays in which scholars from different fields and countries analyze aspects of how the nation has been narrated in historiography and other genres, mainly in Europe, from the 19th century onwards.

The bulk of the analytical essays are well-written, informative and acute in pursuing the theoretical ambitions of the volume. Among the many interesting essays are those by Michael Wintle and Jie-Huyn Lim. Using paintings, caricatures and fans, Wintle shows how 19th century works of art were characterized by tensions and interrelations in the pursuit of national and transnational memorial cultures, while Jie-Huyn Lim demonstrates how, at the end of the 19th century, Japanese historiography tried to invent the Japanese nation by proving Japan's equivalence with Europe while simultaneously highlighting its difference from the rest of Asia, that is, by inventing an orient in an invented orient. These and other essays successfully and in sometimes surprising ways demonstrate the constructed, contested and plural character of all national histories.

Yet, as an ensemble, the analytical essays are also characterized by certain blind spots or deficiencies. Two issues are to be briefly mentioned here. First of all, the volume would have profited from some considerations, possibly on the part of the editors, as to how the notion of collective memory is to be understood, and how we can study the conditions in which a given collective memory is made, structured and restructured. Secondly, in illuminating representations of the nation and the na-

tional, there is a tendency in the essays to refrain from clarifying the specific intentions and agencies that motivated and created these representations as well as from probing into their actual significance and influence in the form of a history of reception. As a result, what the national represents, and how it is constructed and maintained, remains at times somewhat unclear. In combination with more elaborate reflections on how we move

from critique to narrative, further conceptual definitions and wider-ranging investigations would have made the volume more complete.

Still, *Narrating the Nation* is highly interesting and has a lot to offer. It is, at the same time, a focused and many-faceted volume, which everyone can draw inspiration from, both theoretically and thematically. Against this background, the book can be warmly recommended.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

**Citation:** Niklas Olsen. Review of Berger, Stefan; Eriksonas, Linas; Mycock, Andrew, eds., *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25950>

Copyright © 2009 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.