Nationalism and Ethnic Politics

A Review of “The Inner Frontier: The Place of Nation in the Political Theory of Democracy and Federalism”

Luis Moreno a

Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

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Book Reviews


This book sheds light on basic concepts and notions within the epistemological and ontological realms concerned with power and territory. Its general theoretical purpose is to reassess the idea of nation through the lens of democracy. Such an endeavor reaches other conceptual dominions regarding nationalism, although the fact that the author embarks from a nonnationalist vision of the nations is to be underlined. In the normative undertaking of the author, the moral and political value of the federal principle prevails. For Máiz, federalism is an integral part of the very core of the theory of democracy, which ought to take on board the republican federal idea of the nation. According to the latter, deliberative democracy must respect citizens’ preferences and must aspire to the maximum identification between governors and governed—the least mediated possible. Regarding participation and democracy, the insistence of the author in deliberation and inclusion is grounded in the consideration that all kinds of political matters—linguistic policies, myths, or symbols, to name some of them—ought to be subject to public debate by minorities and majorities, as nothing can be regarded as “natural” or “evident” beyond discussion.

The suggestive title of the essay (*The Inner Frontier*) makes reference to the clear ethnic and organic separation within the polity between the self and the other—“us” and “them”—a distinction put forward by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Such a difference has largely been dealt with in studies of modern anthropology, political science, social psychology, and sociology. For Georg Simmel (1858–1918) the *in-group* needed the plaster of a shared culture as a minimum common denominator. Ludwig Cohen Coser (1913–2003) applied the dichotomy *in-group/out-group* in his theory of social conflict. Closely linked with the latter duality, William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) had also put forward the notion of *ethnocentrism*, according to which the in-group’s own worldview is the central reference to which all others’ collectives are scaled and rated with. Fichte pondered that, in an advanced national state of development, the charismatic leader (*Protektor*) would be legitimized by an organic integrality in which parts of the totality ought to be sacrificed to the interests of the whole nation. Such a vision has
been identified as a prognosis of the Nazi epiphenomenon of Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich.

In the first chapter of the book, a critical appraisal of Fichte’s assumptions, as confronted with those of Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836), serves the purpose of assessing the theoretical propositions of the former in considering a nation with no republic and vice versa. In either of the two cases, the concepts of “nation,” “state,” “people,” or homeland (patrie) become synonymous and interchangeable among them. The syncretic finding of the notion nation-state seemed to have harmonized previous categories. However, the spatial, cultural, and political equivalence between state and nation is the exception that confirms the general rule in modern states. Only in 10% of all contemporary nation-states does the territorial political unity correspond with the territorial distribution of one homogeneous ethnic group. In the rest of the polities, regional or national minorities coexist within the frontiers of the same state in varying degrees and manners. Such a reality has been stubbornly relegated in the general research program of the human and social sciences by both modernist-functionalistic and historicist-deterministic schools of thought.

In Chapter Two, Máz criticizes the taxonomic confusion of labeling nationalism as either civic or ethnic. The former form of nationalism reflects a widespread formulation among Western academics and has gained a scientific reputation vis-à-vis the latter ethnic form. Such a classification would be associated with the conceptual pairs of “political nation” and “cultural nation,” and in a higher conceptual hierarchy to those of “Civic West” and “Ethnic East.” In a similar vein to the analyses carried out in Chapter One, the ideas of Ernest Renan (1823–1892) and Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) are confronted showing a dichotomy of the “good” French nationalism and the “bad” German nationalism; the latter having been made responsible for various disastrous consequences to mankind (for example, Franco-Prussian War and the two World Wars during the twentieth century). In fact, and beyond their conceptual divergences, both authors share the “modernist” idea that a nation must be congruent with a state and vice versa. The French thinker spelt out how after the “state formation” of the République une et indivisible an ethnocratic “nation building” was imposed by the state in the resulting Une nation une. Why not acknowledge, Máz wonders, the diversity as an internal condition of the French nation—pluri-national and, certainly, of a pluri-ethnoterritorial composition?

In Chapter Three, the author switches from the registry of political philosophy to that of discourse analysis. An examination of the usual narratives, as well as of the interpretative frames and approaches of nationalist ideology is carried out. Máz digs in the ontological idea of the nation, leaving aside its expressive manifestations. By criticizing the generic and minimalist label of “nationalism,” the author offers three versions of the idea of nation and contends that there are elements in the three of them as to be found in the tenets
of pluralistic federal republicanism embraced by Máiz himself. Certainly the
nation possesses diacritical constitutive elements but its nature is processual
and contingent. According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), the nation
incorporates conventional and arbitrary relationships that are not “natural.”
And the nation is the effect but not the cause of nationalism. However, not
everything is contingent in the nation. Taking on board the “perennialist”
theses of Anthony Smith, we are warned by Máiz that the nation cannot
be simply equated to a modern Zollverein created to fulfill the needs of
contemporary mercantilism and capitalism. Such a consideration explains
the palingenesis, or “the eternal return,” of the nations. Some may become
dormant in the flow of history only to revive culturally and politically in
subsequent stages. How to explain, otherwise, that stateless nations such
as Bavaria, Brittany, or Sicily had not followed the same pattern of politi-
cal “resurrection” as other substate national communities, such as Catalonia,
Flanders, or Scotland?

In the fourth chapter, Máiz, a Professor of Political Science at the Uni-
versity of Santiago de Compostela (Spain), elaborates on the nonnationalist
concept of the nation. His aim is to go beyond the conceptual limits framed
by recent debates on “liberal nationalism.” The latter have pursued the task of
reconciling the rights of citizens’ autonomy and freedom with those related
to their membership to a cultural and linguistic community. Let us remember
that, at the beginning of the 1990s, some Canadian political philosophers
(Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, James Tully) concerned with the analyses
of a social reality close to them (Québec, first nations, and the Canadian
federation) challenged the traditional “established” liberal view, which made
political justice and citizen’s rights concordant on the basis of an univocal
loyalty towards one cultural and national community. A major claim of the
defenders of “the politics of recognition” was that collective rights in multi-
cultural societies were to be considered compatible with the principles and
practices of political liberalism. The initial focus of those liberal thinkers was
on the culture, but, later on, they developed wider normative views related to
the whole interaction between nationalism and the principles and practices
of democratic liberalism.

In the final fifth chapter, a nonnationalist concept of the nation nei-
ther civic nor ethnic but cultural, political, and republican is put forward by
Máiz. It is a federal concept of the nation that the author develops within
the normative theory of plurinational federalism and that brings together
the principles of freedom and equality with those of self-rule and shared
rule. Máiz strives to link conceptually state, nation, and federalism. Interter-
ritorial solidarity, financial self-sufficiency for self-government but also fiscal
co-responsibility are all basic pillars in his understanding of plurinational
federalism. This conception of federalism incorporates a necessary coopera-
tive dimension and one of creative competition by the constituent units for
providing better policies and services to the citizens.
This book is a valuable contribution to the study of the nation within the theory of democracy and federalism. It bridges discursive narratives concerning nation and democracy and advances a substantive normative theory on federalism that greatly improves the quality of an unfinished academic debate. The reading of *The Inner Frontier* is at times demanding but gratifying throughout its dense pages, as it seeks conceptual clarification in a domain filled with equivocal terms and no little confusion. It will be of interest for all those concerned with the political future of our plural societies and the democratic quality of our contemporary democracies.

Luis Moreno

*Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)*


Erika Harris’ *Nationalism: Theories and Cases* offers a good introduction to the dense and complex subject of nationalism. The book provides a basis for a working knowledge of the role nationalism plays in contemporary politics. She is able to draw on a dense literature and to provide the foundations for a study on nationalism. Harris draws from various subfields within political science to explore nationalism. Each chapter has two distinct sections. First, she spends a majority of each chapter explaining a theory or particular issue at stake within nationalism and then she provides a case study that reflects the issues just studied. The case studies focus (for the most part) on Eastern European nationalism and nationalism in postcommunist Eastern Europe. The main drawback of the book is a lack of study on African, South American, or subaltern nationalisms. Despite this flaw, Harris’ book would act as an excellent complement for an undergraduate-level course in political science or for anyone looking for an introduction to nationalism.

Harris’ book is divided into three parts. The first part covers historical perspectives of nationalism. Here she looks at the history of the idea of a “nation” and nationalism, as well as addressing several important theories of nationalism. Chapter Two presents what I take to be the most important offerings of the book. In this chapter, she gives a brilliantly succinct exegesis of two theories of nationalism: primordialism and modernism. In her explanation of these theories, Harris is able to compress volumes of literature into several pages that effectively explain the main aspects of the theories. If one were looking for an outline or introduction to these approaches to nationalism, Harris’ book offers an excellent starting point. Additionally, derived
from her expertise in the field, she is able to point the reader to the key names and texts for further reading.

The second part of the book explores contemporary debates surrounding nationalism and identity. It is in this part of the book that Harris presents her main argument: There is a strong link between democracy and nationalism. Harris argues that nationalism was an integral part of postcommunist transitions to democracy. Although she is clearly attempting to establish a link between the two, it is not clear whether or not she is presenting a causal relationship. She seems to be simultaneously claiming that nationalism became an integral part of democratization and that democratization contributes to nationalism. Her analysis focuses primarily on Eastern Europe and postcommunist transition, which is unsurprising given her previous research in this area. However, the argument linking nationalism and democracy would have been aided by incorporating a deeper analysis of other transitions of which there are several readily available, and oft studied, examples. She does make reference to this type of work but does not offer much comment beyond that. Incorporation of other transitions would help further qualify her thesis. Harris addresses several very unique cases of transitions but her analysis should be wider than just postcommunist transition. By the end of this part of the book, Harris moves to looking at issues facing multinational states and the issue of diasporas. Both of these chapters help segue into the third, and final, part of the book.

In the third part, Harris explores the role of the nation in a globalized world. In the final chapters of the book, including the last two in Part Two, she presents forward-looking questions that will affect studies of nationalism going forward. The book can be said to progress both thematically and chronologically. She effectively provides a historical look at nationalism, contemporary issues, and the problems of the future for nationalism in this short book.

As mentioned above, Harris provides case studies at the end of each chapter. The lack of diversity within the case studies is the book’s greatest shortcoming. Except for the case of multicultural Britain, none of the cases assess nationalism in a Western European context. Further, she does not offer much in the way of analysis of African, South American, or subaltern nationalisms. Presumably, the rich and complex nature of these variants would offer a whole other level to her study. As it stands, Harris’ book offers an excellent introduction to theories of nationalism and how they can be applied in some cases. However, this book is not comprehensive nor should one expect it to be. Harris helpfully offers the reader many avenues for further study placing her book as a good introductory text that should be read alongside others. Nonetheless, the lack of inclusion of these other types of nationalism appears to be a significant drawback to the book.

In addition to presenting a bit more variety in the case studies, this book would benefit from incorporating at least one more chapter that looks
at nationalism in other transitioning societies. Her analysis of postcommunist transitions is quite strong and the book would only be strengthened by a similar analysis on postcolonial transitions, for example. Including a chapter such as this would help the reader see how the conceptual framework offered in Part One can apply to more cases.

In her analysis, Harris demonstrates her knowledge of the field and incorporates most of the central work on nationalism. She provides very useful and detailed footnotes that point the reader to further areas of study. Additionally, she provides a very comprehensive bibliography to help guide the reader.

In the end, Harris’ work offers an excellent introduction to nationalism. Readers looking for a well-written and clear entry into the field will benefit greatly from this work. Even with the minor drawback identified above, *Nationalism: Theories and Cases* expertly covers a very dense and complex field in a manner that would be useful to academic and nonacademic readers alike.

Robert Maciel

*University of Western Ontario*

NOTES

2. Ibid., 100–101.