

Nations

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes and focused on the subject of ‘national histories’. The session is aimed at second- or third-year undergraduate history students and is designed to help students understand how the past informs ideas of ‘the nation’ and nationhood.

Context and aim

This seminar activity draws on a number of examples of ‘national histories’ from across different regions and periods to help students think about the ways in which the past can inform varying ideas of ‘the nation’ and nationhood.

Students are asked to prepare for the session by reading from one of four ‘national history’ case studies relating to specific countries/regions: Britain (Colley), Russia (Hosking), Namibia and Zimbabwe (Kössler), and Spain and Cuba (Schmidt-Nowara). Some of these are concerned primarily with one nation-state, others with post-imperial forms of nationhood; each is connected to the long entanglement of nationhood with empire.

In doing so, this exercise encourages students to not only think about how the past is incorporated into particular forms of national identity and notions of belonging, but also what is excluded, changed and revised. By thinking comparatively across these examples, students will also be prompted to think about how individuals, events, movements and ideas connect national histories as well as where and why divergences in those histories have occurred from one form of nationhood to the next.

Preparation

Students should read ONE of the following in preparation for this session:

Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness: An Argument', *Journal of British Studies*, 31:4 (1992), pp. 309–29.

Geoffrey Hosking, 'The State and Russian National Identity', in Len Scales and Oliver Zimmer (eds), *Power and the Nation in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 195–211.

Reinhart Kössler, 'Images of History and the Nation: Namibia and Zimbabwe Compared', *South African History Journal*, 62:1 (2010), pp. 29–53.

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, 'Columbus's Remains, Columbus in Chains: Commemoration and its Discontents in Late Nineteenth-Century Spain and Cuba', in his *The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), pp. 53–95.

Please note: some of these histories include material which might upset some students, especially with respect to racism and xenophobia.

Description of activity

Introduction to the topic [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief overview of the aims of the session. It may be helpful to reassure students that they are not expected to have in-depth knowledge of the different histories explored in each piece of set reading. Instead, they should focus on key arguments.

Part 1: Small group work [15 minutes]

Divide students into groups so that each group is balanced in terms of preparatory reading (i.e. at least one student reading about X, another reading about Y and so forth). Students who read on the same subject can help one another out in answering the questions below, but ideally, this should be a 'show and tell' situation!

For each set reading, students should briefly summarize their findings for the group. The aim of this part of the seminar is to afford students time to share their knowledge but also gain familiarity with the different histories in play.

Part 2: Small group discussion [10 minutes]

In the same groups, students should discuss the following questions:

- What do the histories of the nations in question have in common with one another? Think about the ‘stories’ each historian is trying to tell and the role history plays in each/all of them.
- How do these readings differ? For instance, do they focus on different values, or start at different times in the past?
- Are there common groups or communities these histories include or exclude?
- When have the nations discussed in these readings seen a change in their ideas of nationhood, and why?

This part of the seminar has two aims: first, it encourages students to think about how ideas of nationhood engage with history in different ways; and second, to understand that the relationship between history and nationhood is not the same across all times and places. Students should be encouraged to think primarily about the prominence of particular people and ideas in these histories rather than focusing expressly on questions of evidence and veracity as such.

Part 3: Large group discussion [10–15 minutes]

In the final part of the seminar, students are encouraged to compare their findings and reflect on the questions posed in Part 2. In doing so, they might also be prompted to discuss resonances particular to their own understanding of nationhood and history. For instance, they might discuss:

- How does history inform your own understanding of nationhood (whichever nation(s) you may identify with)?
- Where have you recently seen history inform broader debates about nationhood in the media?
- Do you think the history of your ‘nation’ (however understood) has changed recently? If so, what has caused that change?

These are, of course, very big topics and will bring up complex questions from students; however, students should be encouraged to bring their own perspectives to the discussion in order to emphasize the multiplicity of ‘the nation’ as an historical concept. The place of history in relation to those ideas should be interpreted generously and students should be encouraged to leave the session thinking about these complex relationships rather than having a fixed answer to these questions.

Wrap-up [5 minutes]

To encourage reflection and awareness of the complexity of the issues at stake, ask each student to EITHER state one way in which this session has challenged their existing ideas of ‘the nation’ and nationhood, OR raise one question about the national histories involved.