

Nations

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

The greatest challenge in suggesting reading about the history of nations is that it is simultaneously one of the oldest forms of writing and one of the newest. It would be entirely reasonable to offer works like Herodotus's *Histories* as a formative text in the writing of histories of nations given its later influence on European and broadly 'Western' modes of national-historical thought; but that would be both an oversimplification of what Herodotus was trying to write and, frankly, a rather stale starting point. Equally, the founders of so-called 'historicism' in the nineteenth century – not just Leopold von Ranke but also Thomas Babington Macaulay, François Guizot and others – were certainly historians of their own 'nations' as they then understood their borders (both cultural and political); but they were also inheritors and advocates of wider worldviews that thought in civilizational terms. It is, therefore, both impossible and unfair to draw a straight line between a simplistic set of older 'national histories' and current histories that appear to shed these constraints. Instead, this annotated bibliography explores a number of texts that – regardless of when they were written and published – either set out important ideas of how nationhood has been understood historically and/or how it has been challenged. Equally, the list reinforces the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship in defining and refining what nationhood has meant and continues to mean at a global scale.

The concept of ‘the nation’

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

Among the most influential studies of nations and nationalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, *Imagined Communities* rests on the principle that nationhood is an imaginative process. Anderson – a political scientist as well as an historian, and therefore drawing on a number of interdisciplinary influences – argued that differing ideas (‘imaginings’) of nationhood arose because varied communities articulated and circulated different ideas of who they were (or were not). This, Anderson argued, took several forms in the course of history: in some instances – particularly in Western nations – the media and, in particular, the rise of newspapers played an essential role in defining the attributes of ‘the nation’ across its expanding readership; in others, memorials, public institutions and ritual afforded the essential foundations for these communities. Arguably, the most important contribution *Imagined Communities* has made is in moving understandings of national histories beyond the simple binaries of ‘fact’ and ‘myth’ and instead asking how and what nations remember, forget and institutionalize as part of developing a sense of who they are (and are not).

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Published, appropriately, in the same year as Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, this is a book of six essays by the two editors and four other influential historians from varied political alignments: Hugh Trevor-Roper, Prys Morgan, David Cannadine and Bernard Cohn. At the core of each essay is the contention that the inventing of traditions – Hobsbawm discussing English Association Football at one end, Cannadine the rituals of the British monarchy at the other – has historically served socio-political purposes in the defining of particular communities. Morgan’s essay on Wales, for instance, makes the case that – however ‘true’ the activities at the core of Welsh traditions – they often served to preserve a kernel of what might otherwise have been lost. The influence of anthropology suffuses many of these essays, wherein tradition (and the rituals it creates and justifies) is more interesting for what it means rather than whether it is empirically ‘true’. Comprised solely of white, male scholars, the book is very much of its time, with half the chapters devoted to ‘Britain’ or its component nations (indeed, the book did much to encourage the notion that the separate histories of the ‘four nations’ must be disentangled from a monolithic concept of ‘Britain’). The book has aged less well than *Imagined Communities*; however, its core thesis remains influential.

Inclusion, exclusion and ‘the Other’

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Fundamentally, Said’s book is not about the formation or articulation of national identities as such: the canvas on which he works is much broader than this. Said was first and foremost a literary theorist and critic, whose scholarship made formative contributions to postcolonial studies across numerous disciplines. His central argument was that, from approximately the late eighteenth century onwards, Western Europeans articulated a contemptuous view of what was then described as ‘The Orient’ (primarily the present-day Middle East and North Africa) and its people as servile, corrupt, despotic by nature, and – crucially – in need of ‘progressive’ Western values. Such ideas were articulated and circulated through an expanding set of representations of ‘The Orient’ in literature, art and philosophy, which helped to reinforce gathering imperialist ambitions in those regions. Crucially, for the study of national histories, though, Said articulated the notion of ‘The Other’ in the construction of identities and the importance of culture in reinforcing such ideas in a developing postcolonial mode of criticism. *Orientalism* has since been revisited and criticized for flattening ‘The Orient’ and the varied Western responses to the Islamic world; however, scholars have also tried – with varying levels of success – to extend Said’s approach well beyond what he originally set out to describe.

Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

Highly influential in the study of British domestic and imperial history in the ensuing decades, *Britons* rests on the central argument that, in the course of the eighteenth century, Great Britain as a nation – and with it *Britishness* – came to be understood as essentially Protestant and (with some qualifications) ‘free’. These essential qualities were articulated not only in positive terms – ‘what Britain is’ – but also in negative terms – ‘what Britain is not’ – in the form of the Catholic ‘Other’. To this latter category was ascribed not only the attributes of an historically opposing faith, but also a tolerance for tyranny and absolutism. In constructing her thesis, Colley drew directly from Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities’, but also adapted Edward Said’s notion of ‘the Other’ to help articulate how identities were formed in opposition to an imagined group. *Britons* was criticized early on for blurring distinctions in these categories: not least of them ‘Protestantism’ and ‘Catholicism’; variations within social groups; and ‘English’ as opposed to ‘British’. It has, however, remained highly influential in studies of national identity and nationhood.

Challenging national narratives

Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2008).

While formulations of nationhood and national histories often become influential through abstract theories and models, profound impact can also be made when a scholar challenges fundamental assumptions about the historical composition of those nations in real terms. Such was the case with Imtiaz Habib's *Black Lives in the English Archives*. As Habib himself acknowledges early in the book, English Black populations had historically been understood to have come into existence with the transatlantic slave trade. This has fostered an assumption (still common in some circles) that Black populations did not exist in England prior to their enslavement and transportation to the country, and were therefore excluded from the wider national narrative. Through an extensive engagement with parish records, tax documents, household papers and many other sources, supported through the provision of a rigorously produced chronological index of those records according to location and document type for those Black lives, Habib proves that Black people – if not always a coherent Black community – were present in England even at the outset of this period.

Conclusion

Scholarship on nationhood, and the history of nations generally, has undeniably shifted towards an emphasis on those themes that challenge the fundamental coherence of the nation-state across chronologies. As the examples above have suggested, much of this scholarship draws our focus towards those individuals, communities, ideas and even objects that call into question the permeability of international borders and the defining terms of national identities from the medieval period onwards. Many recent studies look instead to the spaces 'between' nations – once conceived as frontier spaces, but more commonly now thought of as 'liminal' or spaces of vital encounter and exchange – to help complicate the wider, global picture. Nevertheless, the dominance of this mode of writing can be easily overstated. Histories framed within national contexts continue to pose essential questions about the multiple meanings and resonances of 'nationhood' in a vast range of manifestations: from daily practices and engagements with 'the nation' to *longue durée* analyses of national cultures; from 'the nation' in the archive (both physical and digital) to the traces of long-forgotten or silenced articulations of nationhood. As these histories continue to develop, it will remain essential that scholars see these scales of analysis as mutually informative and complementary rather than as fundamentally opposed to one another.