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THE RISE OF NATIONALISM AGAINST, OUT OF AND WITHIN RELIGION

David A. Bell (2001): The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

New approaches to the history of political thought and political cultures are producing interesting reinterpretations of the intellectual developments of the eighteenth-century, which was for long studied as one dominated by the Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and emancipation of the middle class. Three approaches appear as particularly apt to lead to new findings: Firstly, the linguistic approach continues to reveal important aspects of mental changes experienced during the transition to modernity. Secondly, the religious (or pseudo-religious) contexts of much of eighteenth-century political thought are being taken seriously by an increasing number of historians, whereas some studies affected by modern social sciences still tend to ignore this dimension of past political thought. Thirdly, scholars in several countries are involved in the study of the formation of national sentiments and identities before the invention of the idea of national representation at the time of the French Revolution.

As a result of these approaches, it has become evident that the modern concept of nation did not simply appear out of nothing during the French Revolution to replace previous religious frames of mind and to become the new foundational concept of political discourse.

David A. Bell's new book *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* skilfully combines these three approaches to the study of eighteenth-century thought. Bell is one of those historians who aim at reconstructing an authentic picture of the eighteenth century without teleologically exaggerating the degree of modernity of the era. Yet the simultaneous consideration of both the traditionalist and innovative dimensions of the eighteenth-century mental world convincingly demonstrates how fundamental conceptual shifts the contemporaries actually experienced. Bell's book provides an important, innovative, thought-provoking, and with proper historical evidence documented interpretation of the rise of nationalism in the leading state of eighteenth-century Europe. Bell shows how, in the course of the eighteenth century, the love and even cult of the nation rose to the core of political discourse, taking the place which had previously belonged to religion. He argues, however, that this rise of nationalism was based on the application of concepts and strategies adopted from religious life, which continued to provide the most useful analogies for the new cult of the nation as well.

Bell's methodological choices are closely related to what is known as conceptual history. Bell does not apply the category to himself, but he is aware of work done in the field, and his own approach could well be seen as one application of the genre. Bell defines his research strategy as an attempt to "trace the different things that the *nation* and *patrie* meant to educated French people during the eighteenth century, and the extraordinary actions they took to try and make the world conform to their ideal visions." (p. 20) He does not believe in such explanations of changes in consciousness which are based on causal relations to structural changes. He rather maintains that the languages of politics and the conceptual changes within them have their independent histories which cannot be reduced to mere reflections of economic, social or technological changes. He says to be "departing from the linguistic approach" (p. 227), however, and trying to consider the religious and cultural backgrounds of the conceptual changes he is studying.

Bell opens the discussion with a helpful conceptual distinction between the old phenomenon of national sentiment and the new one of modern nationalism. French national sentiment had existed ever since the Middle Ages, but modern nationalism, which was invented in the late eighteenth century, was a political program, which aimed at actively constructing a new nation instead of merely defending and praising an old one. During the eighteenth century, the meanings of the term *nation* changed in fundamental ways throughout Europe so that the nation turned from a divinely ordered division of humanity into a conscious human construction. According to Bell, already the beginning of the eighteenth century marked a major turn in the development of the cult of the nation, as the concepts of *nation* and fatherland (*patrie*) began to gain new roles in political discussions. In conventional understanding, *nation* referred a people united by common qualities, whereas *patrie* referred to the area to which the speaker was emotionally attached and to the ruler of which he or she was loyal.

Bell sees the rise of French nationalism as being connected with a profound change in the vocabulary of human relations used by the French, which started in the late seventeenth century. New political terms were taken into use, older terms were used in increasing frequencies, and conventional terms were given new and sometimes revolutionary meanings. The transformation included the emergence of new, secular or redefined concept such as *peuple*, *société*, *civilisation* and *public*, and above all *patrie* and *nation*. By the late eighteenth century, *patrie* and *nation* had already become the most important words in the French language of politics. The rise of this new semantic field also opened the way to the emergence of a newly defined concept of citizenship which, after 1760, allowed the French political elites to understand themselves as active political agents rather than as mere passive subjects of the king of France. The idea of nation-building through political action was not, however, invented before the years preceding and following the Revolution of 1789. Thereafter, the active construction of nation could mean the reduction of regional differences, the strengthening of division into citizens and foreigners, and intensified political education to the citizens, among other things.

Bell rejects previous interpretations of nationalism as a purely political strategy. He sees nationalism, patriotism and religion as deeply intertwined phenomena the relationship of which has not yet been thoroughly investigated. His own solution has been to study the use and changing meanings of the concept of nation in different discursive areas, including religion. He suggests that French nationalism rose both *out of* and *in opposition to* Christianity. Even though the Gallican Church did little to contribute to the actual invention of modern nationalism, Bell considers the emerging new understanding of the role of religion in society as a primary factor explaining change in the language of nation. It was the increasing separation drawn between God and this world, the deepening division into politics as public business and religion as a private matter, and the bitter memories of religious strife, which led to the rise of the concepts nation and fatherland in political discourse, Bell argues. As the conception of divinity changed, new conceptual tools were needed. The concepts *nation* and *patrie* emerged to fill the gap left by the exclusion of divinity from the political order. In the long run this conceptual transformation meant that the French became capable of seeing themselves as equal members of a distinct, uniform and sovereign nation, which was a product of human will and thus changeable.

Yet the cult of the nation did not suddenly replace all religion. Early French nationalism, while attempting to reorganise political reality in this world, often built on the long tradition of Catholic propaganda. Bell's work shows that no modern distinction between religious and secular yet existed, nor was there a deep division into traditionalists and rationalists in this era. It points to numerous analogies between the eighteenth-century French language of nation and traditional religious thought: The redefined eighteenth-century concepts of human relations such as *patrie* carried a sense of sacrality which had been characteristic of religious concepts. In the war propaganda of the Seven Years' War, ideas and practices from the Wars of Religion were followed. The division into "barbarians" and "savages", for instance, recalled earlier religious divisions of men. Also the construction of the canon of "sacred" Frenchmen built on the use of religious language and symbolism. Finally, Bell suggests that attempts to regenerate the French national character before and after the Revo-

lution also copied Catholic practises of propaganda, which provided the only available model for the conversion of the masses into supporters of a single ecclesiastical — or national — community.

The rise of the language of French nationalism is particularly important to understand because of the overwhelming cultural and linguistic dominance of France in eighteenth-century Europe. Bell does not consider influences outside the French borders, but, in future studies it might be worthwhile to focus on parallel changes in the language of nation in countries of Northern Europe on a comparative basis and thereby also to test Bell's central theses on the analogous relationship of religious and early nationalistic thought. As Bell himself suggests, a parallel rise and semantic change of the vocabulary of nation and fatherland can be discovered from other European states as well, even though the exact timing varies from country to country. In England, the term *nation* had been in frequent use ever since the first biblical translations. In Sweden, the term *fäderneslandet* had equally old roots, as had the Dutch *vaderland*. All of these became redefined in the course of the eighteenth century. Bell sees the French development as peculiar due to its high degree of reflectivity, its emphasis on political will as the basis of nation and the rapid rise of a nationalist program soon after the Revolution. In eighteenth-century France, the meanings of the words nation and fatherland became objects of conscious discussion. Bell's learned analysis of sometimes heated debates on the nature and even existence of the French *nation* and *patrie* helps to understand the fast rise of modern nationalism after the Revolution. Bell argues, for instance, that already in the 1710s and 1720s it became possible to speak about nation or fatherland as an authority that might rise above the monarch or exist independently of him.

Bell's thesis on the importance of religious analogies in eighteenth-century political discourse should be tested in other contexts, as it is known that national churches continued to play a role in the development of the language of nation in other European countries as well. Indeed, some preliminary findings suggest that nationalism could rise not only *out of* and *in opposition to* but also to some extent *within* the established religion. The scholars should, by focusing on the religious semantics of the language of nation, consider the possibility that religion was not merely replaced by nationalism but could

itself develop into the direction of a civil religion supporting nationalism. Evidence from several Protestant countries, at least, suggests that the national churches could be actively engaged in the construction of national sentiment and perhaps even the nations themselves. A number of Protestant preachers spoke about a distinct and uniform nation in their state sermons. Through frequent use in states sermons, nation and fatherland became gradually redefined, though not with the same radical conclusions on equality and popular sovereignty, which can be found in some late eighteenth-century French political treatises.

Bell's synthesis of French conceptual developments calls for studies in which the role of the clergy of the established churches in the redefinition of nations is taken seriously. Such conceptual studies are needed, as our understanding of some eighteenth-century conceptual changes continues to be limited. For instance, Bell's comparison of French and English language of patriotism reveals not only differences in the degree of xenophobia between the countries but also the underdeveloped state of the study of some eighteenth-century English political concepts, including that of nation. Bell sees differences in the use of the concept of fatherland in these countries but does not really have a study of the English language of nation on which to build, not to say one that considers its religious dimensions with the care with which Bell has studied France. In the lack of such work, Bell's conclusions on the relationship between religious universalism and definitions of nation in different countries remain somewhat vague. Between Protestant national churches, huge differences in definitions of the boundaries of "the second Israel" existed, and hence Bell's point about an easy union between Protestantism and the classical concept of *patria* cannot be taken as a self-evident generalisation.

The pace of the rise of the French cult of the nation, as reconstructed by Bell, deserves attention as well, as some of the major turning points seem to correspond with or may have affected parallel discourses in other countries. Bell suggests, on the basis of scarce sources, that the early years of the reign of Louis XV already allowed such public debate on *patrie* and nation in which the natural rather than divine origin of these was emphasized. Bell illustrates the growing frequency of the concepts with somewhat rough statistics drawn

from library catalogues and from a database of French texts. These show that the concept of *nation* became increasingly popular in France after the 1730s, whereas the concept of *patrie* had been quite frequently used as early as in the 1710s and 1720s. Its political importance, however, remained marginal until the 1750s. The major breakthrough of the language of nation seems to date from the time of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), that is, about the same time as the intensity of the discourse on nation and fatherland increased in other Western European countries as well. What was new in the French history of war propaganda was the presentation of the conflict as one between mobilized nations rather than monarchies or religions. Bell gives an abundance of instances of the fashionable character of the concepts *nation* and *patrie* in the cultural and political life of the France of the mid-1750s. Even some contemporaries pointed out in the 1750s and 1760s that the word *nation* had never been repeated as often as in their days and that nothing else but works recommending patriotism was printed. As in some other countries, the crown was particularly active in sponsoring patriotic war propaganda in France, attempting to show that the love of *patrie* could be compatible with a monarchical constitution, turning the kings of France into leading patriots, and defining the patriotism as the love of king. The critics of the crown, in turn, used the terms to restore the power of some institutions or the moral community of citizens working for the common good.

By the 1760s, the concept of nation had become central to French political culture. The neologism *national* seems to have emerged after 1730, been used to form expressions such as "national character" and "national spirit" in the 1750s and to have gained real popularity in France in pre-revolutionary years. The frequency of the terms *patriote* and *patriotique* rose dramatically in the early 1770s, which Bell takes to reflect readiness for political action to create a proper *patrie*. It was after 1771 that such new interpretations of nation and *patrie*, which enabled the development of nationalistic doctrines after the Revolution, began to emerge. It became possible to think of nation as something to be constructed, and it was no more difficult to imagine a fatherland distinct from or even without a monarch. Once such concepts were possessed, it was not a long step to proceed to the invention of the modern concept of representation, which

saw the nation as the sole source of political power. *Nation* and *patrie* could now both become revolutionary concepts.

Bell demonstrates how the meanings of the concepts of nation and fatherland became widely debated and “radically destabilized” as a consequence of the collapse of the old regime. The discussants did not agree on their meaning or even on the very existence of a nation. Many felt that so diverse a compilation of peoples as late eighteenth-century France was did not yet constitute a proper nation, and hence the nation had to be constructed. Such nation-building work meant the birth of French nationalism, which was, because of the very need of creating a nation through political action, stronger than that of smaller states where a relatively uniform nation was already felt to exist. The way to the construction of a unique French nation — which was neither a copy of Old Israel or a version of Rome but something much more — had opened.

To this reviewer, Bell’s analytical account of the rise of French nationalism appears as overall convincing. This book has many features of a classic work, and it will be essential reading for all future scholars of the eighteenth-century language of nation. Its important thesis on the analogous character of modern nationalism and traditional religion provides a starting point for an authentic understanding of the eighteenth-century mental world. The thesis will certainly be supplemented and perhaps partly revised by future studies, but the main argument stands on a solid ground: nationalism developed both *against* religion and *out of* it. It may even have developed *within* it as well.

Notes

- 1 Pasi Ihalainen, “The Concepts of Fatherland and Nation in Swedish State Sermons from the Late Age of Absolutism to the Accession of Gustavus III”, forthcoming 2003.
- 2 Ihalainen 2003; Peter van Rooden’s analysis of the Dutch eighteenth-century discourse on *vaderland* refers to the same possibility. Peter van Rooden, “Godsdienst en nationalisme in de achttiende eeuw: het voorbeeld van de Republiek”, *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis vanaf de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940*, edited by N.C.F. van Sas (Amsterdam 1999), pp. 201-236.

- 3 See Hans-Martin Blitz, *Aus Liebe zum Vaterland. Die deutsche Nation im 18. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg 2000); Ole Feldbaek, *Dansk identiteitshistorie*, vol. 1: *Fædreland og modersmål* (Copenhagen 1991);