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978-0-521-29885-8 - The Ethnic Revival  
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# *The Ethnic Revival*

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge  
London New York New Rochelle  
Melbourne Sydney*

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521298858](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521298858)

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First published 1981  
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2010

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-23267-8 Hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-29885-8 Paperback

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*To My Mother*

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The reason for the Alsatians' not feeling themselves as belonging to the German nation has to be sought in their memories. Their political destiny has taken its course outside the German sphere for too long; for their heroes are the heroes of French history. If the custodian of the Colmar museum wants to show you which among his treasures he cherishes most, he takes you away from Grunewald's altar to a room filled with tricolors, *pompier*, and other helmets and souvenirs of a seemingly most insignificant nature; they are from a time that to him is a heroic age.

– Max Weber

Historicism led me out of the circle of individual problems to the broad avenue of social questions that are not as deep but are more immediate.

Every generation in Israel carries within itself the remnants of worlds created and destroyed during the course of the previous history of the Jewish people. The generation, in turn, builds and destroys worlds in its form and image, but in the long run continues to weave the thread that binds all the links of the nation into the chain of generations. The spirit of each generation turns about continually in its circuit and the spirit returns again to its circuit, the point of the nation's existence. The soul of each generation (a generation is for a nation what an individual is for society) emanates from the soul of the (collective) 'body' of all the preceding generations, and what endures, namely, the strength of the accumulated past, exceeds the wreckage, the strength of the changing present.

– Simon Dubnow



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## Preface

backs on the materialism of city life, on technological advance and commercialism, and on the ever-increasing complexity of a centralised, regulated state, and sought instead some antidote far from the capital, which might restore them to themselves and express concretely a more 'natural' and more 'spiritual' form of existence than that which they had abandoned. And here, in this twofold movement, at once rejection and quest, lies the mental spring of that ethnic renaissance which we have been witnessing for the last two centuries and which has re-emerged once again in its European heartlands today.

This revival, like the twofold movement that underlies it, has been a highly self-conscious and much-discussed creative process. Unlike previous revivals, this modern renaissance of ethnic solidarity and sentiment has taken its cue from a highly charged romantic nationalism which, though often aggressive and fanatical, has tried to channel the passions and claims it unleashed into the creation of a new global political order based upon the 'nation-state'. Ethnic nationalism has striven to turn the ethnic group into that more abstract and politicised category, the 'nation', and then to establish the latter as the sole criterion of statehood. Its lack of success to date in securing such 'national congruence' has not deterred nationalists from pursuing their ideals or from spawning new separatist movements in every continent. Though it has many powerful opponents, the ideal of the nation has been generalised to encompass a vast number of ethnic communities, large and small, and now exerts considerable pressure upon the global system of states which has been constructed with scant reference to the aspirations of ethnic communities and ethnic nationalism.

Today, ethnic nationalism proposes a radical alternative legitimisation and rationale for the world political system to the prevailing statist framework. This new ethnic legitimisation has its disadvantages. Among the latter, we may count: the difficulty of providing a clearcut demarcation for the entity entitled to be called a 'nation' (though such vagueness may aid particular nationalist causes), the chronic problem of controlling nationalist passions and preventing them spilling over into aggressive acts which will undermine the hopes for an 'orderly' development of the world system, and the dangers of ethnic closure and exclusiveness both for individual citizens and for foreign immigrants, especially where the state becomes closely identified with a single ethnic community.

On the other hand, an ethnic rationale also possesses several advantages over the present *étatiste* legitimations. They include: the generalising capacity of ethnic nationalism, its mobilising popular

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potential, and its identity functions. These factors are closely inter-related. The modern ethnic revival, unlike its predecessors, has largely forsaken traditional solipsist attitudes. Modern ethnic nationalisms have had to ground their aspirations in an overall critical discourse, appealing to general principles like popular sovereignty, inalienable rights and cultural diversity. They have had to become reflexive and make use of universal notions of 'liberty', 'spirit', 'nature' and 'history', which are applicable to many ethnic communities and to different strata of the population. Hence, the 'multi-class', popular, appeal of ethnic nationalism, as each class and each stratum has moulded its general precepts to fit their needs and ideals. Yet, not only can it fire and mobilise all kinds of strata, it can also minister to the special identity needs of those groups which had become estranged from their communities, like the disillusioned intellectuals and artists in Brittany. The ethnic renaissance has the power to heal the rift in the alienated consciousness of marginalised men and women, and to draw from them its special ideological character.

That character and consciousness is an essential aspect of the 'ethnic' dimension of modern social life. For it is exactly the conceptual forms and content of ethnic movements that are so problematic. Recent research on nationalism or 'ethnoregional' movements has tended to concentrate either on their ideological formulations, largely divorced from social conditions, or on those conditions and social background alone. There has been little attempt to provide a more unified picture, or to integrate the different kinds of analysis. But a sociological approach must treat both the ideological forms and the social conditions as equally problematic. Hence it becomes necessary to supplement recent analyses of the social background with an investigation of the conceptual forms and content of ethnic nationalisms. Only in this way can we grasp the special significance of ethnic meanings and ideals, which continue to act as ideological 'switchmen' of the ethnic revival.

What follows, then, is essentially a work of interpretation. I do not intend to add to the innumerable case studies of ethnic movements, whether of nineteenth-century European nationalisms, or twentieth-century 'Third World' separatisms or European 'neo-nationalisms'; nor to the more-or-less empirical surveys of recent ethnic nationalisms. Instead, I hope to fill the lacuna left by the few existing theoretical interpretations of the causes, origins and significance of ethnic movements in the modern world, since their predominantly economic approach fails to do justice to some important dimensions of the ethnic renaissance.

I am encouraged in the belief that such a need exists for alternative

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interpretations by the parallel work of Professor Walker Connor, to whose original and perceptive articles I am much indebted, even on those occasions where our views diverge. I should also like to express my gratitude to Dr Maria Hirszowicz, Dr Nicos Mouzelis and Dr John Stone, for some helpful suggestions and stimulating discussions on questions of ethnicity and nationalism. I am also very grateful to the Cambridge University Press and to Susan Allen-Mills for approaching me to write on this subject and publishing the results. Naturally, responsibility for the views expressed here, as well as for any errors and omissions, rests with the author alone.

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June 1980*