The Ethnic Revival
Editors: Jack Goody & Geoffrey Hawthorn

The aim of this series is to publish books which will focus on topics of general and interdisciplinary interest in the social sciences. They will be concerned with non-European cultures and with developing countries, as well as with industrial societies. The emphasis will be on comparative sociology and, initially, on sociological, anthropological and demographic topics. These books are intended for undergraduate teaching, but not as basic introductions to the subjects they cover. Authors have been asked to write on central aspects of current interest which have a wide appeal to teachers and research students, as well as to undergraduates.

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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, pompiers, 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

At the recent exhibition of Post-Impressionist art, held at the Royal Academy in London, a room was devoted to paintings, mainly by French artists, of life in Brittany at the end of the last century. Since the mid-nineteenth century, artists and writers had been attracted by the ‘picturesque’ quality of Breton life and landscape, especially the archaic customs, the religion and the distinctive costumes of the peasantry, and the harsh, primitive character of their labour. Gauguin was not untypical of this reaction, when he exclaimed: ‘I love Brittany; I find there the savage, the primitive. When my clogs ring out on this granite soil, I hear the dull, muted, powerful tone which I seek in my painting.’* Others responded to Brittany’s pagan, Celtic heritage, with its elements of mysticism and fatalism; or to what they saw as the ‘simplicity of soul, the link with past ages, the sadness and the religiosity of the Breton people’, which isolated them ‘from the sounds of the profane world, from the life that belongs to Satan’. Perhaps most striking is the testimony of Emile Bernard, who admitted:

I returned a devout believer . . . Brittany has made a Catholic of me, capable of fighting for the Church. I was intoxicated by the incense, the organs, the prayers, the ancient stained glass windows, the hieratic tapestries, and I travelled back across the centuries, isolating myself increasingly from my contemporaries whose preoccupations with the modern industrial world inspired in me nothing but disgust. Bit by bit, I became a man of the Middle Ages, I had no love for anything save Brittany.

By no means all the artists or writers who made the Breton pilgrimage followed Bernard all the way back to traditional faith. Each of them found in Brittany what he sought, what answered to his particular needs. Yet all of them had this in common: they all turned their

* This, and the other quotations, are taken from the articles, and entries on particular artists, by Mary Anne Stevens and John House in the exhibition catalogue, entitled Post-Impressionism, Royal Academy of Arts, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979–80.
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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 legitimation and rationale for the world political system to the prevailing statist framework. This new ethnic legitimation 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 interrelated. 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 ‘ethneregional’ 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 Hirschowicz, 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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