

The Origins of Nationalism

In this wide-ranging work, Caspar Hirschi offers new perspectives on the origins of nationalism and the formation of European nations. Based on extensive study of written and visual sources dating from the ancient to the early modern period, the author reintegrates the history of pre-modern Europe into the study of nationalism, describing it as an unintended and unavoidable consequence of the legacy of Roman imperialism in the Middle Ages. Hirschi identifies the earliest nationalists among Renaissance humanists, exploring their public roles and ambitions to offer new insight into the history of political scholarship in Europe and arguing that their adoption of ancient role models produced massive contradictions between their self-image and political function. This book demonstrates that only through understanding the development of the politics, scholarship and art of pre-modern Europe can we fully grasp the global power of nationalism in a modern political context.

CASPAR HIRSCHI teaches History at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. His previous titles include *Wettkampf der Nationen: Konstruktionen einer deutschen Ehrgemeinschaft an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit* (2005).

The Origins of Nationalism

*An Alternative History from Ancient Rome
to Early Modern Germany*

Caspar Hirschi



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To my parents

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Preface

In 1963, the political scientist Kalman H. Silvert edited an anthology on nationalism in ‘developing countries’ with the slightly awkward title *Expectant Peoples*. The book did not receive much attention at the time and has been long forgotten, despite the fact that it made Silvert a pioneer in the field of nationalism studies. In his foreword, Silvert introduced a new question, which would later be raised repeatedly without ever being answered conclusively. The question was: how to justify ‘yet another book on nationalism’?

If an author of the early 1960s had to give reasons for a new contribution to the study of nationalism, how severe must the pressure be now, after hundreds, if not thousands more books have been published in the meantime? The answer probably has to be ‘very severe indeed’. No author will be able to escape the pressure. However, this is no bad thing. There are still good arguments to justify yet another book on nationalism.

The one given in this work is short and straightforward: I believe that it is time for a fresh start in nationalism studies and that this book can help to encourage it. In the last two decades, research in the field has been dominated by a few works published in the 1980s. Scholars of nationalism benefited greatly from these works, not least by expanding their field enormously, but they also paid a heavy price for building on studies that preferred catchwords to theoretical coherence and broad-brush historical statements to the examination of original sources. I believe that the costs caused by following these studies now outweigh the benefits.

This book will combine a new theoretical argument with a new historical analysis of the origins of nationalism. By doing so, it will try to convince both theory aficionados (most of them sociologists and political scientists) of the merit of source-based historical assertions and staunch positivists (most of them historians) of the worth of theoretical tools. First and foremost, however, it will invite scholars in the

field to reintegrate the history of pre-modern Europe into the study of nationalism.

I am aware that publishing this book is an ambitious, maybe even an audacious undertaking. There is a chance that reactions to the work will rebound on the author in the form of a one-way ticket to the no man's land between the boundaries of historiography, sociology and political science. Nevertheless, given the present state of nationalism studies, it seems to me a risk worth taking. If the book can help to overcome the current theoretical and methodical framework of nationalism studies, then its basic purpose will have been achieved. If, in addition, it can motivate some scholars to adopt and extend its approach, then it may be deemed a success.

Compared to my previous book on the topic, published in German under the title *Wettkampf der Nationen* in 2005, this study is larger in scope and smaller in size. It contains a broader theoretical argument, adds further reflections on national honour and gives a more detailed analysis of the political roles aspired to, but not acquired by Renaissance humanists. Finally, it includes three new parts: one on patriotism in Ancient Rome, one on nationalist transformations of language and one on the relationship between nationalism and religious fundamentalism in the early modern period.

Due to the abundance of secondary literature on the subjects covered in this book, I tried to make a virtue of necessity by citing only titles upon which I based an argument, relied on for information or commented on explicitly. I do not suppose that many readers will prefer a heavily referenced tome to a more easily readable book or will want to know about the exact extent of my reading. Those who do are kindly invited to read the footnotes of my German publications.

As to primary sources, I took a different approach because they are the foundation of my method and argument. The book quotes widely from ancient, medieval and early modern documents, ranging from public speeches to legal treatises, royal decrees, political poems, religious pamphlets, humanist histories and correspondences. The majority of these sources are written in Latin, the bulk of the rest are in older forms of German, French and Italian. The English translations given in the book are either my own or taken from English editions (to which I occasionally add slight changes for a more literal rendering). To aid the flow of reading, I cite the original wording only when it adds further value to an argument.

In addition to written documents, I include visual sources which play more than just an illustrative role. Each figure is accompanied by a descriptive caption that clarifies the explanatory function of the image

for arguments presented in the main body of the text and is linked with other captions into a narrative of its own.

Writing a book in a foreign language brought all the major excitement and minor horror of a journey through an exotic country. Being equipped with a good map soon proved not enough, and so I felt lucky to find native guides, who were familiar with the territory and climate of the English tongue. Their rescue was especially needed when I made excursions into metaphorical speech. Andrew Liston helped to edit chapters of the first draft, while Katherine Hughes accompanied the whole writing process with an admirably sharp eye for incorrect language and incomplete arguments.

Most of the manuscript was written between 2007 and 2010, when I was a Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge. In this unique institution, I found a socially and intellectually stimulating environment and, together with my family, an ideal temporary home. Thanks to a generous early career fellowship granted by the Swiss National Foundation, we could afford to rent a beautiful college flat, surrounded by the even more beautiful garden of the Needham Institute.

During the same period, I was able to research and teach at the Cambridge Faculty of History and be part of the Subject Group for Modern European History (owing to a different and ongoing project of mine on eighteenth-century official experts and public critics in France and England). Thanks to the group's weekly research seminar, I received a constant flow of ideas, some of which have found their way into this book. Of particular interest was a seminar series on nationalism and Romanticism organised by Tim Blanning in Michaelmas Term 2007.

Tim contributed to the progress of the book in many other ways. He supported my initial proposal submitted to Cambridge University Press; he later helped me by commenting on the first few chapters, and he eventually read the whole manuscript, thereby providing me with valuable suggestions for the final revision. When visiting him in his Faculty office I usually left with a lot of good advice and a bag of lovely clothes that his children had grown out of and my children were about to grow into.

Another helpful provider of children's clothes and intellectual support at the History Faculty was Ulinka Rublack. Shortly after my arrival, she offered me the opportunity to present my findings on Martin Luther and the German nation to her seminar students. It turned out to be the start of a lively exchange about, among other things, the interrelation of intellectual and material culture in the formation of nations.

When I was interviewed at Clare Hall for the research fellowship competition in early 2007, Alex Watson, as a member of the committee,

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asked me how I would distinguish between pre-modern and modern nationalism. I do not remember my answer, but however satisfactory it may have been, I was fortunate enough to be given another chance by Alex when he agreed to read the manuscript three years later. His comments and corrections are much appreciated.

Several people helped to complete and publish this book with expert assistance of various kinds: Dominik Hunger of Basle University Library delivered fine reproductions of early modern woodcuts and engravings; Andreas Hauser gave useful advice on how to structure the captions for the figures; an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript enabled me to clarify a few crucial points; and, finally, Elizabeth Friend-Smith at Cambridge University Press showed great patience in discussing the book's subtitle and the length of its captions before overseeing its smooth publication.

The person to whom I owe the most, both for this book and for everything else, is my wife Martina Schlauri. She left a secure job in Switzerland and shouldered the bulk of the burden of parenthood to enable her husband's academic adventure in Britain. While this book was underway, she gave birth to our second daughter, Joséphine, and our third daughter, Mathilda, who have enriched the lives of their parents and their elder sister Charlotte enormously. Thanks to Martina, the shared experience of family life and the solitary pursuit of my studies complemented each other beautifully. Still, the happiest moments during these eventful years came on those rare occasions when I could leave with her for a weekend *à deux*.