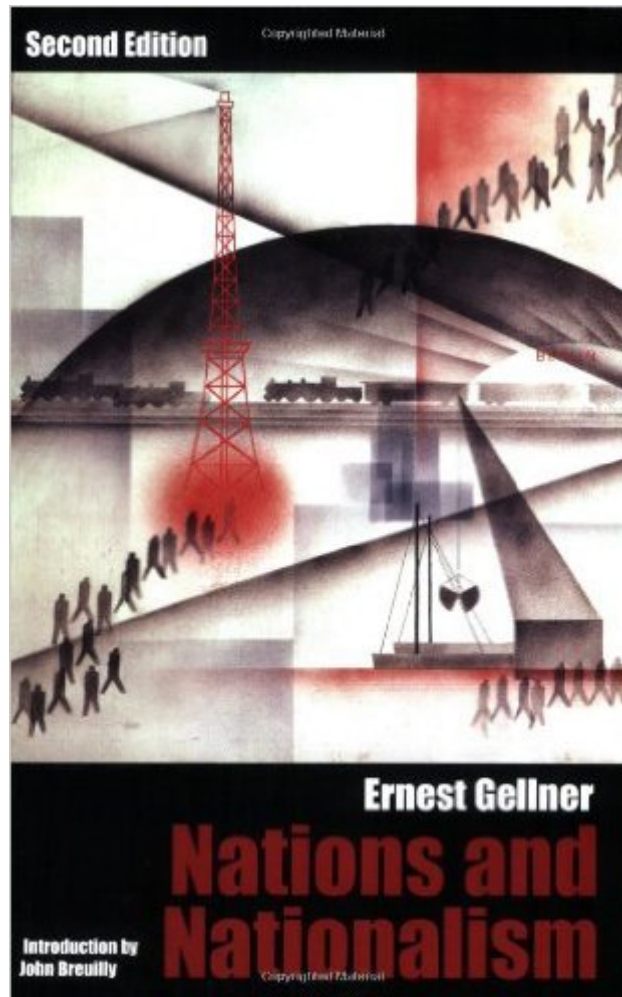


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# Nations And Nationalism, Second Edition (New Perspectives On The Past)



## Synopsis

From reviews of the first edition: "Brilliant, provocative . . . a great book." •New Statesman "An important book . . . It is a new starting line from which all subsequent discussions of nationalism will have to begin." •New Society "A better explanation than anyone has yet offered of why nationalism is such a prominent principle of political legitimacy today. This is a terse and forceful work . . . the product of great intellectual energy and an impressive range of knowledge." •Times Literary Supplement "Periodically, an important book emerges that makes us, through the uniqueness of its theory, perceive history as we have not seen it before. Ernest Gellner has written such a volume. Students of nationalism will have to come to grips with his interpretation of the causes for the emergence of nationalism, since he has declared that most of the previous explanations are largely mythical." •American Historical Review First published in 1983, *Nations and Nationalism* remains one of the most influential explanations of the emergence of nationalism ever written. This updated edition of Ernest Gellner's now-canonical work includes a new introductory essay from John Breuilly, tracing the way the field has evolved over the past two decades, and a bibliography of important work on nationalism since 1983.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Truly one of the most important books ever written about nationalism, this is also one of the few modernist accounts of nationalism that ages well. While this book was published in 1983, it is

basically an expanded version of a chapter from Gellner's earlier *Thought and Change* (1964) with some alterations. However, even 36 years later his thesis is still as strong as ever: nationalism is a result of the transformation from agrarianism to industrialization. I'll try to summarize his thesis briefly. Gellner describes the agrarian society as one where power is concentrated at the top with a complex division of labor and an emphasis on informality and intimacy. Basically each group lives in their own happy little world cut off from the rest. But then things begin to change. The transformation to modernity involves a huge number of changes in society: the peasants have to pick up and move to the city for work. There mobility, formality (the 'Diploma Disease') and a universalised high culture replace intimacy, informality and various low cultures, and the peasants feel alienated (a touch of Marx?). The intelligentsia of the peasant group then decide to save their low culture by turning it into a high culture, which can only survive through state-supported education. Thus the peasant people decide to return home, secede to form a new state and - presto - they've become a nation. This part of the story is obviously the violent part: Gellner claims that things will get better in late industrialism, where we'll have 'muted nationalism' after all those secessions have taken place. While simplistic, there is a lot of truth to this story, which is well documented in the large number of nations which emerged in this way, especially in eastern Europe. However, Gellner neglects several things, most importantly what basis these peasants have for feeling like they have something in common besides their class. He also relies too much on the structural changes in society - nothing is left up to individuals or even groups, since nationalism is socially, not ideologically determined. Therefore the peasants themselves have no say in any of this: they're just riding the wave of history (Marx again?). Yet for its faults, this book is still a classic: it has influenced all other writers on nationalism and will continue to do so for quite some time. Definitely a worthy read.

As one of the most widely-cited works on nationalism, Gellner's book is certainly worth reading just for the sheer reference value. However, as a scholarly work, it fails to answer the question it seeks to demystify. Basically, it says that nationalism rose in industrial societies where people "needed" a new standardized form of identity -- which the "high culture" of the nation happily provided. It is a great macro-theory, but when put to the test of historical evidence, it falls short. Why do people love and die for particular national identities? If they just needed some modern standardized form of identity, most any form that enables dynamic communication and interchangeability in society would do. In short, Gellner fails to take into account the specific historical cases where group identity, rooted in previous historical experiences, has acquired a national character that has withstood enormous historical changes.

First, a few words on nationalism itself. Nationalism is important to study because during the 20th century, it has been one of the most despicable forces to ever hit this world and as such, needs to be understood. (And yes, I consider fascism a form of nationalism). The twin founding fathers of nationalism, Hans Kohn and Carleton Hayes, construct the skeleton on which other authors (Gellner, Smith, Hobsbawm, Hutchinson, Breuilly, Armstrong, Anderson, etc.) try to fill in the gaps by narrowing one component, and exploring that area in extreme detail. Breuilly looks at solely the political aspects, Hutchinson and Anderson look at the cultural, etc. Gellner looks at the political tied to the cultural. In short, culture for Gellner is everything. As Mel Brooks says in Robin Hood: Men in Tights, "the short, short version..." Gellner thinks that industrialization homogenized cultures, which in turn was bound to state-led educational facilities (schools, etc.). Teaching everyone the same thing, having them dress the same way, in short, nurturing a single identity created nationalism. Once culture bound with politics, nations emerged. Then nationalism came (independently). Now for the more detailed review: Gellner asserts the following explanation for the rise of nations and nationalism (two distinct things): Nations are self-defined by the inhabitants within them. All nations share a culture. Nationalism is a modern force which holds that politics and nations are congruent and inseparable. Without one, you cannot have the other. The reason for its modernity is simple to understand: allegiance to one's country hundreds of years ago was immaterial because people did not think in terms of nationality or country (and prior to 1648, there was no such thing as country). They may have thought in terms of religion or King, but certainly not nationality. And because of that central tenet, politics did not square with nationality. Politics was always present, but it squared with religion or king. Gellner contends that there exist 3 general, but distinct, stages of human societal development throughout history: Hunter-gatherer, agro-literate, and the industrial. It is during the industrial stage where Gellner sees the emergence of both nations and nationalism. Both the hunter-gatherer stage as well as the agro-literate fall flat in producing either nations or nationalism, the first because HG's had no states (hence politics not bound to that region) at all, and the latter because cultural diversity was the hallmark of the day. The prerequisite, which emerged only after peasants moved into the cities to find work, was cultural homogenization. In short, the glue binding politics and culture was homogenization. Once industrial societies emerged, however, all hell broke loose: shared culture, customs, languages, etc. replaced local, village-type culture. Regional dialects gradually gave way to a universal dialect. And the reason for homogenization? One Gellner offers is to maintain the status-quo. This homogenization shaped individuals into a more cohesive unit, and thus emerged collective group-think (dress alike, think alike--almost like Truman Show). In

addition, when societies moved from the agro-literate stage to the industrialized state, the nature of the type of work changed: it went from manual and static, to more sophisticated and fluid. According to Gellner, this feature produced the unintended effect of leading to both impersonalization and homogenization amongst the masses (within a region). Regional differences dissipated. So at this point in his argument, we have a standardization of culture. Another secondary point that he adds to his thesis is that any society based on capitalism needs to grow, and that growth spurs more societal transformations. This has the effect of a catch-22: on one hand, the need for a high-level of technical skill promotes egalitarianism because it is mobile. Contrast this with agro-literate days, where work was static and hence people were stuck in societal roles. On the other hand, specialization was not so great as no one could learn it--quite the opposite: give workers generic training, and they will venture off on their own and become masters of their trade. Gellner posits that since industrialization spurred great transformations in education, with little instruction after having acquired the basics, people can fluidly move from one position to the next (like going from HR to marketing to sales to data entry) within a company. Here is the gravy: people's fates are bound to education, because it is the key to societal mobility. And since educational institutions needed to be standardized, that is where the state comes in. Thus, politics is bound with culture. And as for nations and nationalism? They can emerge only when social conditions result in homogenization across the entire populace. Isolated pockets that retain their old, immature culture (in contradistinction to high culture) eventually acquire the high culture because inhabitants that seek work in the cities return to those very villages (more or less, civilized). In short, they saw their own shortcomings and adopted a higher level of culture (which is exactly what John Plamenatz contends in his distinction between the Eastern and Western types of nationalism). So there you have it. Some issues I have with his contentions: Clearly, Gellner looks only at the outcome of industrialization as nationalism. In short, if a society did not undergo industrialization, guess what? No nationalism or nations! That is why it is too Euro-centric (and Gellner's thesis is SILENT on the case of the Slavs--who had NO IDENTITY & did not even undergo industrialization until way later. Not to mention the developing countries. Are the Kurds industrialized? Do they not constitute a nation? And the Palestinians? Gellner confuses the differences between nationalism based on unity and nationalism based on independency (+ unity). He offers a cookie-cutter approach, a one-size fits all thesis that is profound, and certainly helps us to understand how Western Europe, which underwent industrialization, adopted a universal culture, and then had a nationalist movement, but he should have stopped there. It certainly was the case in England, France, Germany, Italy, and the US, but how about Romania? Or the Slavs? When did they industrialize? It was when the Austro-Hungarian

empire split after WW1 did they undergo a nationalist movement. And then, arguably, came their nation. In sum, Gellner's book is so profound because it explains how nations and nationalism emerged--at least in the industrialized, Western-European societies. A bit dry reading--certainly don't take it to the beach! Better yet bring a lot of coffee, highlighters, and keep the lights bright. But such an important work.

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