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## **‘PRIMORDIALISM’ IN NATIONALISM STUDIES: THEORY OR IDEOLOGY?**

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**Abstract.** For several decades, nationalism studies has seen an extended debate about explanations of nationalism and about the process of nation formation. An impressive set of labels has been coined to describe alternative approaches. One of the theories that has enjoyed unusual longevity is the approach known as primordialism, which stresses the deep historical and cultural roots of nations and nationalism and assumes their quasi-objective character. This resilience is surprising because of the difficulty of marshalling evidence to support such a theory, and because of the line-up of critics who dismiss it. This article explores the recent debate about primordialism. It suggests that authentic versions of primordialism are extremely hard to find in the academic literature, and that primordialism may better be viewed as an ingredient in nationalism than as an explanation of nationalism.

**Keywords:** nationalism, primordialism, perennialism, constructivism, myth

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## **'PRIMORDIALISM' IN NATIONALISM STUDIES: THEORY OR IDEOLOGY?**

### **Introduction**

More than 20 years after Rogers Brubaker (1996: 15, n.4) dismissed the primordialist view of nationalism as 'a long-dead horse that writers on ethnicity and nationalism continue to flog', this particular dead horse appears to display surprising capacity for survival. As Ronald Suny (2004: 22) colourfully put it, 'like the monster in slasher movies, just when you think that view is dead and buried, it springs up once more'.

There can be little doubt as to the marginalisation of primordialism, if the testimony of leading researchers in the field of ethnic studies is to be accepted. Thus, at the beginning of the century Kanchan Chandra (2001: 8) observed that it was 'now virtually impossible to find a social scientist who openly defends a primordialist position'. Rogers Brubaker (2009: 26) noted that even those who drew on evolutionary and cognitive psychology to re-specify the primordialist position accepted that ethnic groups were 'historically emergent and in some respects mutable', concluding that 'we are all constructivists now'. Andreas Wimmer (2013: 2) similarly commented on 'the hegemony of constructivism' and the emergence of a 'constructivist consensus', with primordialism squeezed out.

Recent overviews of nationalism studies, however, show continuing recognition of the significance of the primordialist interpretation. Three examples from the middle of the 2010s illustrate critical acceptance of the role that this position may play. Marco Antonsich (2015: 299) described primordialism as one of the positions in 'the classic debate' about the origins of nations, though noting that 'its analytical purchase is rather marginal'. Diego Muro (2015: 188) similarly identified primordialism (alongside instrumentalism and constructivism) as one of three schools of thought in accounting for the basis of identity, though describing it as 'one of the most discredited' traditions of enquiry in the sub-field of ethnicity and nationalism. Hugo Marcos-Marné (2015: 324-5) saw primordialism as representing the opposite end of the spectrum to constructivism, a continuum he regarded as useful in reviewing the analytical framework for the study of nationalism and ethnicity, though pointing out that pure primordialism is 'a difficult position to hold', one with which hardly any scholars identify.

These judgements continue an older tradition in the literature on nationalism, a corpus which suggests that 'primordialism' is a topic still worth debating. To give just a few examples—of greatly varying kinds—from the successive early years of the twenty-first century, primordialism is a significant subject of discussion or analysis in Özkırmılı 2000: 64-84; Brown 2000: 6-13; Smith 2001b; Fishman 2002; Horowitz 2002; Joireman 2003: 19-34; Eriksen 2004; Atsuko and Uzelac 2005: 51-88; Greenfeld 2006; Conversi 2007; Adamski 2008; Smith 2009: 3-21; Jackson-Preece 2010; Vermeersch 2011; Resnick 2012; Gat 2013:

1-18; Shahabuddin 2014; Haque 2015; Dieckhoff 2016; and Mahmudlu 2017. The sheer volume of this output, and the fact that it is possible to select examples easily for any recent year, suggest that primordialism has a continuing substantial presence in the theoretical literature on nationalism.

How is this conflict between those who bluntly dismiss primordialism and those who acknowledge it as a significant theoretical perspective on nationalism to be resolved? This article proposes to tackle this question by reverting to a long-standing epistemological distinction between the phenomenon in question and the perspective through which it is analysed, corresponding to the distinction made by Brubaker (2004: 31-33) between categories of practice and categories of analysis. Like other social phenomena such as class, ethnonational identity as experienced at the level of the actor needs to be distinguished from ethnonational identity as understood by the social scientist. The problem, in other words, is analogous to that pinpointed by Bourdieu (1987: 1) when he asked 'is class an analytical construct or a folk category?'. This article argues that it is reasonable to pose a similar question about primordialism: might it not be more useful to see it as a folk category rather than as an analytical construct? Might it not, indeed, serve better if seen as a component of nationalist ideology rather than as an explanation of nationalism (see Özkırımlı 2017: 51)?

The article begins precisely with the distinction between these two levels of analysis. Its first section deals with primordialism as a crucial factor in the formation of nationalist ideology (as an object of analysis); the second examines it as a theoretical perspective in nationalism studies (as a perspective from which to analyse). The article then considers briefly the level of support among scholars for this particular approach to explanation. It concludes by summarising the main thrust of the debate on primordialism as an explanation of nationalism, and by suggesting an alternative approach to terminology.

### **Primordialism as an ideology**

The role of primordial values in the constitution of ethnonational identity is neatly illustrated in an important comparative study of identity formation in Slovakia and Northern Ireland. By exploring subjects' responses to a range of identity-related probes, the researchers were able to generalise about the relative strength of primordialism and 'situationalism' (the latter referring to beliefs and discourses about the instrumental and socially constructed character of the group). As they put it,

Primordialism is defined as a sentiment, or affect laden set of beliefs and discourses, about a perceived essential continuity from group ancestry to progeny (perceived kith and kin), located symbolically in a specific territory or place (which may or may not be the current place of the people concerned) (Weinreich, Bacova and Rougier 2003: 119).

This understanding of primordialism as a category of practice rather than a category of analysis draws attention to the vast amount of material that has been generated by elites as part of the nationalist project. As John Hutchinson (2008: 18) put it, 'nations are modern political entities, created by nationalists who employ historical revivals in order to overthrow ethnic traditionalists'. Nationalist ideologists promote and propagate the notion that the roots of the nation (or, certainly, of *their* nation) are of ancient lineage (Breuille 1996: 149). How they do so is well known. Commonly depicted as 'fathers' of their nations, nationalist historians played a central role in the early phase of the nationalist movement not by virtue of their military capacities or political skills but through their historical writings. Examples include Paisii for the Bulgarians, Palacký for the Czechs, Daukantas for the Lithuanians, the so-called 'Transylvian triad' of Maior, Micu-Klein and Şincai for the Romanians, Hrushevsky for the Ukrainians, and Bofarull for the Catalans, to name just a few (Coakley 2012: 99-100). In each of these cases, and in others similar, the 'discovery' of the ancient past of the people played a vital role in facilitating the emergence of a sense of community and identity. By purporting to demonstrate the continued existence of the nation from a remote period, these writers provided a key to national identity by linking the current generation with its ancestors across the centuries (Smith 2000; Connor 1992). Not surprisingly, possessing 'a common tradition, a memory of sufferings endured and victories won in common, expressed in story and legend', has for long been recognised as 'the most potent of all nation-moulding factors', and indeed as uniquely 'indispensable' in this process (Muir 1916: 48).

The flavour of this primordial component in nationalism may be illustrated in the writings of Patrick Pearse, leader of the Irish nationalist revolt of 1916 that was to end in his own execution. For him the notion of national freedom was a unified, sacred and all-embracing construct, and was marked by 'apostolic succession', as it 'passes down from generation to generation from the nation's fathers'. The idea of national freedom, in this view, is 'not affected by the accidents of time and circumstance', in that it 'does not vary with the centuries, or with the comings and goings of men or of empires' (Pearse 1916: 4-5). This claim is unremarkable as a summary of beliefs that were and are widely shared by nationalists elsewhere. It aptly captures a core element in nationalist ideology: the idea of the nation as a primary community in time—as a primordial entity, greater than the sum of its parts, existing from an early stage in human history.

While the nationalist version of history is moulded by the perspectives of individual authors and interests and is repackaged as contemporary political circumstances change, it is nevertheless possible to detect a common core. This identifies the ancestry of the national community and typically provides the 'title deeds' to the territory within which it resides. Sometimes the nation is presented as having been there since before recorded history. In other cases it is said to have migrated there, but its collective birth is marked by a landmark

development, such as crushing its enemies in battle, surviving an honourable defeat at the hands of its own oppressors, benefiting from some kind of major dynastic event such as a geopolitically important royal marriage, or undergoing a transformative cultural event, such as conversion to Christianity.

The more committed nationalist historians, then, try to link their peoples with great and noble ancestors in the remote past. The peoples of the Bible (including in particular the tribes of Israel), the ancient Romans, and such noted warrior groups as the Celts, Scythians and Sarmatians were particularly popular among those engaged in tracking down distinguished forebears (Coakley 2004; 2012: 101-103). Thus, for example, one version of the Hungarian national myth traced the Magyars back to Nimrod, a descendant of Japhet, son of Noah, ancestor of a people forced to flee the confusion after Babel (Vambéry 1887: 27-30). The claimed ancestors of the English, the Saxons, were seen by 'British Israelites' as descended from the 'lost' tribes of Israel, children of Jacob who disappeared from history at the same time as the Scythians appeared in the historical record (the Scythians were said to be the ancestors, among others, of the Saxons; Baron 1915: 7-8). The Scottish highlanders were told that their Gaelic language was 'the language of Japhet, spoken before the deluge, and probably the speech of Paradise' (Shaw 1780: preface). One version of the Welsh national myth claimed that the ethnic name, Cymry, derived from Gomer, son of Japhet, and that their language was a dialect of Hebrew (Griffith 1968: 11).

Even if these fanciful claims were to be discounted—not a difficult challenge, given the limited evidence and their mutually conflicting nature—nationalist ideologists were prepared to make ambitious claims for the antiquity of their nations. Like English, Scottish and Irish nationalists, who saw their nations as extending back at least to the eleventh or twelfth century, Kurdish activists used historical arguments to buttress political claims, invoking 'the nation's putative antiquity', and 'its centuries-old struggle for statehood and independence' (Maxwell and Smith 2015: 784). Most Lithuanians, it has been said, saw their nation as located on the shores of the Baltic Sea 'from time immemorial' (Norem 1943: 1). This perspective has been vividly summarised in relation to contemporary Ukraine:

Nearly all the Ukrainian historians, and consequently also the intelligentsia, the politicians and the media think in ways stemming from the nationalist paradigm of history which boils down to the fact that nations are the main object of studies of the past and that they have a 'national territory' assigned to them, that they constitute lasting entities which have existed at least since the mediaeval times, and that the membership of a nation is determined not by a subjective conviction of the given population, articulated in its national consciousness, but by 'objective' factors, in practice: the external ethnographic features and the language (Adamski 2008: 100).

These examples, and many others which could be cited, illustrate the extent to which nationalist accounts of the past depart from the norms of mainstream academic historiography, which is much more demanding in respect of evidence (though academic historians sometimes put their skills at the disposal of nationalist leaders). Tendentious versions of nationalist history are common, notwithstanding the warnings of those such as Marc Bloch (1954: 29-35) against 'the explanation of the very recent in terms of the remotest past'. For nationalist ideologists, such warnings are irrelevant, since their goal is not a detached excavation of the past that seeks to make sense of complex and perhaps conflicting historical evidence, but rather a partisan pursuit of the real or supposed origins of their nations that rests on an assumption of historical continuity. As Renan (1896: 66) put it, 'the progress of historical studies may often be dangerous to the nationality', since it may undermine the selective and one-sided account of the past that is a vital component in nationalist ideology.

When assimilated into popular consciousness through such media as the education system, the popular press or forums of public debate, this stereotyped account presents the past as 'something beyond current politics and ideology, as something natural which is just "there"' (Breuilly 2009: 18). This conception of the nation as a cross-generational inheritance from the ancient world, where the 'nation' is an organic whole capable of surviving the savagery of its enemies and even the treachery of its own members, indeed suggests that the term 'primordialism' would be an appropriate descriptor.

### **Primordialism as a theory**

When we shift from the perspective of the actor to that of the analyst, the adequacy of the 'primordialist' label becomes much more problematic. We may trace its emergence in the academic literature in particular in the enormously influential work of Anthony Smith. The primordialist category did not feature at all in Smith's (1971) initial path-breaking overview of theories of nationalism. It first appeared in the preface to the second edition of the same book, which attributed it to a small cluster of scholars (Smith 1983: xxix-xxx). On the other side to the 'primordialists' were what Smith (1991: 43-51) described as the 'modernists'. In a later discussion of 'the modernist fallacy', he identified not just a 'primordialist' alternative but also a 'perennialist' one (Smith 1995: 29-50). In a further stage, he presented a hybrid approach, 'ethnosymbolism' (Smith 1998: 190-98). Smith's later work maintained this form of terminology (Smith 2001a), though the perennialist position was later replaced by a 'neo-perennialist' one (Smith 2009: 9-11), and his approach changed over the years (Kaufmann and Zimmer 2004: 71). His major theoretical work identified five main paradigms in nationalism studies (the first five listed below; Smith 1998: 223-5), and two further perspectives. While his description of these categories changed a little over time, they may be described as follows.

1. *Primordialism*: explanation of group solidarity as derived from 'primordial' ties which bind people together, either by virtue of genetic links, as in the 'sociobiological' theory of Pierre van den Berghe, or through perceived cultural similarities based on such features as language, religion, territory and kinship, as reflected in the work of Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz (Smith 1998, 145-53, 223)
2. *Perennialism*: perception of nations as having existed over a long time-span, possibly dating back to antiquity, as in the writing of Joshua Fishman; as expressions of enduring, non-rational psychological bonds, as in the work of Walker Connor; as forms of greatly extended kinship stretching back over a long time period, as in the case of Donald Horowitz; or as modern expressions of premodern ethnic identity rooted in the remote past, as represented by John Armstrong and other historians (Smith 1998, 159-69, 223-4)
3. *Modernism*: depiction of nations as wholly modern, dating from around the period of the French Revolution at the earliest, driven by the set of socio-economic and political changes that followed in the nineteenth century, and essentially created by elites, as in the case of the 'nation-building' school of the 1960s, and such authors as Karl Deutsch and Ernest Gellner (Smith 1998, 18-24, 224)
4. *Postmodernism*: perception of nations as 'imagined communities', as in the work of Benedict Anderson, or as contemporary expressions of new patterns of identity, which are shifting, fragmented, and potentially intersected by other lines of division such as gender (Smith 1998, 131-42, 224-5)
5. *Ethno-symbolism*: understanding of nations as entities that emerge from efforts to cope with problems of modernity through rediscovery, reinterpretation and political exploitation of ethnic symbols, myths, memories, values and traditions, as described in Anthony Smith's own writings (Smith 1998, 170-98, 224)
6. *Constructionism*: view of nations as primarily social constructions, emerging from efforts by elites to mould the masses into new collectivities, commonly by inventing new 'traditions' and perceptions of the past, as argued by Eric Hobsbawm (Smith 1998, 117-23, 129-31)
7. *Instrumentalism*: interpretation of national solidarity as a product of the efforts of elites to highlight cultural elements that are calculated to emphasise the boundary between members of the group and outsiders, a development compatible with the rational self-interest of members of the group, as in the work of Paul Brass (Smith 1998, 153-9).

This typology presents certain difficulties. The most obvious is that, even as ideal types, its several categories appear not to be mutually exclusive. ‘Primordialism’ and ‘perennialism’ may be seen simply as two mutually reinforcing ways of explaining why nations have existed for centuries—the former by proposing a type of quasi-genetic permanence, the latter by arguing historical continuity. The broadest alternative to these is ‘modernism’, which sees the nation as owing its roots to the major socio-political changes associated with the industrial revolution and the French Revolution. Indeed, this category is sufficiently broad to embrace the four remaining positions, since each assumes the essential modernity of the nation. They are distinguished by the fact that within this general temporal context they perceive nationalism as being driven by different social forces or factors: by the capacity of elites to manufacture a persuasive ideological argument (constructionism), as a consequence of rational strategic calculations (instrumentalism), through the creation of a belief system linking the present with the myths of the past (ethno-symbolism, itself a variant of constructionism), and as a response to a new world marked by shifting, unpredictable and cross-cutting patterns of identity (postmodernism, a particularly slippery category).

These four approaches may, then, be seen as stressing different aspects of modernity rather than as articulating conflicting perspectives, and as variants of ‘modernism’. Nationalist movements born after the French Revolution might well simultaneously compete with new patterns of identity, manipulate images of the past, seek to mobilise the public behind the national project, and be a response to the material self-interest of the putative members of the nation. Furthermore, numerous though these categories are, they do not exhaust the range of widely used labels. In particular, the terms ‘circumstantialism’ and ‘situationalism’ are sometimes used as equivalents to ‘instrumentalism’ (Larin 2010: 441). To add to the terminological confusion, the terms ‘constructionism’ and ‘constructivism’ appear to be used interchangeably in nationalism studies, perhaps not surprisingly, given the failure of efforts to maintain a distinction between them in disciplines where they have deeper roots (Restivo 2008: 94).

In considering the nature of primordialism as an analytical category, we may recall another useful description:

‘Primordialism’ is an umbrella term used to describe the belief that nationality is a natural part of human beings, as natural as speech, sight or smell, and that nations have existed from time immemorial. This is the view of nationalists themselves and was for some time the dominant paradigm among social scientists, notably the historians. Primordialism also constitutes the layperson’s view of nations and nationalism (Özkırımlı 2017: 51).

Many instances of primordial thought might be cited from the early twentieth century. For the psychologist Walter Pillsbury (1919: 90-125), nations had existed from ancient times as

expressions of fundamental social instincts. The social psychologist William McDougall (1920: 141, 282) took the view that nationhood depended on the existence of ‘a national mind and character’, which would include a set of ‘innate or racial qualities’ developed over the centuries. For the British naturalist Ernest Hanbury Hankin (1937: 27-41), similarly, nationalism could be traced back to primitive emotions and instincts; he saw it as linked to the notion of a ‘communal mind’—something which was greater than the sum of its parts.

Alongside ‘primordialism’, the related concept of ‘perennialism’ requires examination. This may be seen as the antithesis to ‘modernism’, parallel to the role that ‘primordialism’ plays in respect of ‘constructionism’. Smith (2001b: 242) traced this back to an earlier generation of scholars, who described the life-span of nations as extending over centuries, if not millennia. He saw ‘perennialism’ as referring to continuity in two ways—either in the sense that nations have always existed (as in the case of the Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Chinese and Japanese), or because they are a recurring phenomenon—they come and go, suffer absorption by other nations or are created anew (Smith 2001b: 243-4). As in the case of primordialism, the distant rather than the more recent past supplies the more obvious examples. For example, historians such as Ramsay Muir (1916: 57-80), though noting the transformative effects of the French revolution, identified several nations as having existed since medieval times, and interpretations of the nation as dating back to antiquity were common in the historical writing of the early twentieth century.

‘Perennialism’ and ‘primordialism’ may thus be seen as closely related concepts that tend to go hand-in-hand as theories of nationalism. They are differentiated primarily by the domain to which they refer. In the case of ‘perennialism’ the relevant dimension is time: it sees the nation as marked by persistence over a very long historical frame, in that the roots of the contemporary nation may be traced back to antiquity. In the case of ‘primordialism’ the argument is carried further: this durability is explained by reference to the nation’s innate, objective character and the set of features that one generation inherits from its predecessors. These characteristics may rest on genetic affinity, with genealogical descent providing the cement for national solidarity; they may be a product of linguistic community, with the ancestral language offering a mechanism for the production or reproduction of shared symbols that promote group cohesiveness and distinctiveness; or they may depend on other inherited factors.

### **Support for the primordialist position**

Before assessing the level of support for the primordialist position, it should be noted that contemporary researchers into nationalism usually either explicitly reject the intellectual structure that the primordialist label implies, or do not accept the validity of the primordialist-constructionist dichotomy, or altogether ignore the debate. While efforts to ‘spot’

primordialists have generated a shortlist of names, not all of these fit comfortably in the primordialist category.

It is appropriate to start with the four authors identified by Smith (1983: xxix-xxx) as illustrating the primordialist approach. The article by Edward Shils cited in this context, however, rests unambiguously on a *subjective* understanding of the 'primordial'; it refers to features 'attributed to' blood ties, and to the 'perception' of the role of membership of kin groups (Shils 1957: 142). In any case, the article in question does not purport to be a study of nationalism (Shils 1957: 144); and when Shils (1995) later turned to the nature of national identity, his discussion was general, not designed to demonstrate that the roots of nationalism were primordial. Indeed, Shils's intellectual parentage has been traced back to the same source as Gellner's: the singularly non-primordialist figure of Max Weber (Leoussi 2013: 1975).

The labelling of Shils as a 'primordialist' in this sense is as difficult to justify as the second figure cited by Smith, Clifford Geertz (Tilley 1997: 501-2; Özkırımlı 2000: 72-4). Though addressing the process of community formation more directly than Shils and referring to the role played by 'primordial attachments', he makes it clear that the social processes that are the subject of his analysis are based on contemporary interpretations, and are not in any way innate qualities. Acknowledging the central role of culture in shaping social relations, he stresses the importance not so much of objective social features but of 'assumed "givens"' of social existence (Geertz 1963: 109). It has been shown that categorising him as a 'primordialist' is based on a misinterpretation of his writing (Larin 2010: 442), as Geertz himself pointed out in a little-known public lecture in 1993 (Geertz 1994

Similar issues arise in respect of the categorisation of the two remaining authors. Thus, while it is true that Joshua Fishman refers to 'primordial' attachments to near kin, it is clear that he takes full account of the subjective dimension, seeing the nationalist project as directed at establishing a *myth* of 'common ancient origin', a project in which language has an obvious supporting role to play (Fishman 1972: 5). He did not see himself as a 'primordialist', notwithstanding the fact that he had been so described 'once or twice', a labelling that he attributed to 'my being too successful at conveying the primordialist viewpoint, rather than for espousing it' (Fishman 2002: 90, n. 2).

It is indeed the case that Pierre van den Berghe (1981: 15-36) accepted the significance of 'primordial' ethnic ties, which he saw as extensions of dispositions towards nepotism within kinship groups. But he explicitly presented his own 'sociobiological' perspective as a rejection not just of the view that only culture matters, but also of the notion of ethnic and racial group affiliation 'as an ascribed, "primordial identity", deeply rooted, given at birth, and largely

unchangeable', dismissing as misleading 'such crudely dichotomous ways of characterising intellectual positions' (van den Berghe 1978: 401).

This by no means exhausts the list of those who have been labelled 'primordialists' or 'perennialists'. Others mentioned by Anthony Smith (1998: 161-9) as sharing a 'perennialist' perspective on ethnicity include John Armstrong, Walker Connor and Donald Horowitz. None of their works cited to support this, however, lends itself to endorsement of the perennialist or primordialist interpretation of nationalism. Notwithstanding the long time-span covered by Armstrong in his monumental study of 'nations before nationalism', he drew a careful distinction between the process of the early formation of ethnic collectivities in Europe and its environs, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other, seeing the latter as essentially a late eighteenth-century phenomenon (Armstrong 1982: 4). In any case, in his later work he explicitly distanced himself from the 'primordialist' perspective (Armstrong 1995: 35). While Horowitz's classic study of ethnic groups and conflict indeed referred to the significance of extended kinship for ethnicity, his understanding of this phenomenon was unambiguously located within the domain of that which is socially constructed (see Horowitz 1985: 57-64). Walker Connor's major collection of essays paid full tribute to the significance of historical heritage and 'sense of shared blood' for the formation of the nation (1994: 197), but he left in no doubt his view that nations are a modern phenomenon (Connor 1990), even if, in generating a sense of communal identity, nationalist leaders stress the importance of kinship ties (Connor 1993).

As might be expected, the discipline of history is central to the debate about primordialism and perennialism, but those historians who have addressed the question most directly could not be seen as supporters of the perennialist position. Adrian Hastings (1997: 1-34) offered a robust, historically informed attack on the notion of nations as exclusively modern, arguing that English nationhood, in particular, has medieval roots. But his commitment to the primordialist position was qualified (Hastings 1997: 11-12), and it is not easy to find other historians who embraced it. Hugh Seton-Watson (1977: 8-9) distinguished between 'old nations' such as the English or French, which he dated from the early seventeenth century, and 'new nations' that appeared after the French revolution; but he generally reserved the term 'nationalism' for the modern period. Aviel Roshwald also argued that, while modern nationalism has older roots, it is not to be equated with the kinds of expressions of national identity that are to be found in the pre-modern period (Roshwald 2006: 8-44).

Similarly nuanced interpretations, stressing the modernity of nations and nationalism but acknowledging long-established roots, are to be found among other disciplines. Thus, both Josep Llobera (1994: xii, 81-5) and Liah Greenfeld (1992: 14-17) saw modern nationalism as dating only from the eighteenth century, though much earlier patterns of national identity,

ethnic consciousness and even collectivities that resemble modern nations may be found. Azar Gat (2013: 380) veered close to the primordialist position in concluding that ‘nations and nationalism are not primordial; nonetheless, they are rooted in primordial human sentiments of kin-culture affinity, solidarity, and mutual cooperation, evolutionarily engraved in human nature’—a judgement that could be seen as implying an element of biological determinism. Arend Lijphart has also been labelled a ‘primordialist’ (Armstrong 1995: 242, n. 2). While Lijphart accepted that in his earlier work he ‘tended to accept the primordialist interpretation of ethnic divisions and ethnic conflict’, he later moved away from this perspective (Lijphart 1993: 94); indeed, he subsequently described this flirtation as arising from a wide consensus in the social sciences up to the 1970s, one which he had accepted ‘without giving it much critical thought’ (Lijphart 2002: 11). The work of Harold Isaacs (1975), while acknowledging the significance of primordial and inherited factors at the individual level, similarly saw ethnicity as socially grounded.

The pursuit of analytical primordialists presents us, then, with a difficult challenge. Those to whom the label has been attached by other observers commonly reject it themselves; and those self-identifying with this position are extremely hard to find in the contemporary academic world. Four such individuals may nevertheless be considered, beginning with the best-known defender of ‘primordialism’, Steven Grosby (1994). In his view, there is a ‘primordial’ link between human beings and what they perceive as their territory (Grosby 1995). He cited the examples of Israel, seen as representing an attachment between people and land going back to the ancient world (Grosby 1991, 1999), and the Sinhalese, Japanese and Polish cases (Grosby 2005: 59-64), also with very deep historical roots. Grosby’s account began with a basic concept, ‘primordiality’—‘the physical fact of biological connectedness and a delimited area of land’. But, acknowledging that physical and biological realities are insufficient, he introduced an important subjective element, arguing that this process takes place only when these objective features are ‘perceived as significant, when they become objects of shared beliefs’. In other words, it is *belief* in a common blood-line that matters, rather than the actual reality of such patterns of descent. (Grosby 2001: 252)—an important departure from the principles of the ‘objective’ primordialist position.

Three others who give the impression of embracing ‘primordialism’ also fail to meet the conditions for inclusion in the narrowly defined category of analytical primordialism. Francisco Gil-White (1999: 814-5) appears to rally to the defence of primordialism, but his analysis rests crucially on *notions* of kinship and common descent, and *perceptions* of common interests linked to this on the part of ethnic actors; he makes no effort to offer primordialism as an authentic approach to the social scientific analysis of national identity. Stephen Van Evera (2001: 20) appears to offer a strong defence of primordialism, but he begins with an acknowledgement that ‘the constructivist claim that ethnic identities are

socially constructed is clearly correct', since ethnic identities are not genetic. He argues that 'the primordialist view has been prematurely dismissed and deserves a second look'; but it is clear that he sees the primordialist perspective as helping to account for the durability and pervasiveness of ethnic identity, not its immutability and rigidity. Murat Bayar (2009: 1653-4) also presents himself as explicitly defending primordialism, but, as in the case of Van Evera, he seems to equate primordialism with the notion of ethnic identities as relatively stable, if not fixed, rather than as emerging from a history of shared kinship.

If the contemporary academic world is virtually bereft of analytical primordialists (in the narrow sense in which the word is understood here), it was not always so. We encounter few problems in identifying primordialism in the early twentieth century (the examples of Pillsbury, McDougall, Hankin and Muir were cited above). Such writings, however, appeared in the context of a much more extensive exploration of the role of race in the formation of contemporary societies—a literature which, while acknowledging the possibility of hybrid groups, otherwise relied on primordialist assumptions and attributed stereotypical character traits to the various groups (see, for example, Knox, 1862; Sergi 1901). These views, and related judgements about 'superior' and 'backward' races, were associated both with those who, like James Bryce (1902), were to go on to become founding fathers of the social scientific analysis of democracy, and with others who, like Houston Chamberlain (1911), would become precursors of Nazism. This is not, of course, to suggest that those who accept biological primordialism necessarily share the racist values of the early twentieth century; but there is an obvious proximity between these two sets of deterministic views of the nature of national affiliation. Racist ideology implies belief in primordialism, though 'primordialism' is normally defined in such a way as to remain distinct from the racist perspective.

### **Debating the primordialist position**

Not surprisingly, then, attempts to promote the 'primordialist' position have proved controversial. It has been discounted as 'unsociological, unanalytical and vacuous' by Jack Eller and Reed Coughlan (1993: 183), and dismissed as irrelevant by Rogers Brubaker, who claimed that 'everyone agrees that nations are historically formed constructs' (Brubaker 1996: 15, n. 4). Those who are more detached from the debate commonly have their reservations. This is the case for Özkırımlı (2000: 64), who categorised primordialism as 'an approach, not a theory', and for Hearn (2006: 230), who described primordialism as 'more a broad tendency than a unified perspective', dismissing it as a theory. In a more fundamental but balanced critique, Özkırımlı (2005: 44) queried the whole point of debating the extent to which contemporary nations may have roots in antiquity, given its questionable relevance to the analysis of contemporary nationalism. In any case, Safran (2005) has shown that even Israeli nationalism, often cited as the prime example of the antiquity of nations and nationalism, is a quite modern phenomenon.

Defence of the primordialist position has in general been lukewarm. Some have simply defended Shils and Geertz, without necessarily accepting the 'primordialist' views attributed to them (Tilley 1997; Özkırımlı 2000: 72-4; Cohen 1999: 4). It has also been argued that, regardless of the merits of the primordialist position itself, the issues that it has raised are useful in drawing attention to the durability of ethnicity and to its significance as a social force—a feature often overlooked in the analysis of political nationalism (McKay 1982: 397; Cohen 1999: 10). Nagati (1981: 111-2) has argued that the primordial position may even be accommodated to what she calls the 'circumstantialist' (i.e. constructivist) one, giving due place to 'a (putative) notion of common blood, origin, descent, or kinship connection' in the creation of ethnic identity. Once again, 'objective' primordiality is replaced as an ingredient in ethnic identity by actors' perception of this. But to the degree that *perceptions* of cross-generational links and *beliefs* in the concrete character of the nation become necessary conditions, the foundations of the 'objective' primordialist approach (which sees such features in a deterministic way) are undermined.

Explicit or implicit disagreement over the value of the concept of primordialism has continued over the years, extending into such areas as a symposium on John Armstrong's contribution (see Kaufmann 2015). More specifically, three set-piece debates on the issue have taken place, all of them ultimately appearing in the pages of *Nations and Nationalism*. The first is the so-called 'Warwick debate'—an exchange in 1995 between Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner. In this, Smith restated his well-known critique of 'modernist' approaches as ignoring pre-existing ethnic ties and cultural sentiments, though presenting his alternative as an 'ethno-symbolic' perspective rather than as a primordialist one (Smith 1996). Instead of challenging this, Gellner engaged in a sweeping attack on what he described as the primordialist position, claiming that 'the world was created round about the end of the eighteenth century' and entirely dismissing developments before that period (Gellner 1996). This exaggerated rhetorical assault did little to illuminate the debate, and in any case it appears not to have reflected Gellner's own more considered position, which was much less categorical and more nuanced in dating the appearance of nations and nationalism (see, for example, Gellner 1994: 20-33).

The second debate, on 'the antiquity of nations', between Umut Özkırımlı and Steven Grosby, focussed nominally on perennialism rather than primordialism, but extended over the same ground. For Özkırımlı (2007: 528), Grosby's approach rests on uncritical assumptions about the past and about mechanisms for the transmission of ideas, and is forced 'to resort to countless qualifications' to be convincing. In response, Grosby (2007: 531) accepted that many qualifications about narratives of the historical evolution of the nation have indeed been made, but he argued that these were necessary, given 'the problem of the relative objectivity of tradition(s) and its (their) reception'. However, he offered no persuasive answer

to a central question: 'what is then the difference between the perennialists engaged in demonstrating the continuities between modern and pre-modern nations, and "missionary historians" who are trying to "scientifically" establish that their nations have existed from time immemorial?' (Özkırımlı 2007: 529).

These exchanges were neatly book-ended by a debate on Azar Gat's (2013) work, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Gat's challenging argument about the ancient roots of national identity was examined by two medievalists. Chris Wickham (2015) agreed that manifestations of national identity are to be found in abundance in the middle ages, but he argued that Gat exaggerated the significance of ethnicity in that period, that such national identity as existed was narrowly distributed and largely confined to elites, and that it was strongly challenged by other identities such as urban ones. Bo Stråth (2015) accepted the possibility that nations might well have existed in the pre-modern period, but stressed that nationalism, a phenomenon involving the masses, dated only from the time of the French revolution. Gat's response noted the range of evidence for the existence of nations in the pre-modern period, but agreed that nationalism in the modern world has acquired a new shape, very different from that of the medieval period. While again accepting that nations and nationalism are not primordial, he repeated his view that the sentiments on which they are based are embedded in human nature (Gat 2015: 393). The assessment of the debate's moderator was that, whatever about his views in the sociobiological domain, Gat's argument about the deep historical roots of nationalism had not been effectively dislodged (Hutchinson 2015).

## **Conclusion**

Almost a half-century ago, Giovanni Sartori (1970: 1052) noted the conceptual confusion that was holding back progress in political science, arguing that 'we need a filing system provided by discriminating, i.e., taxonomic, conceptual containers' in a context where 'we grievously lack a disciplined use of terms and procedures of comparison'. Notwithstanding decades of careful analytical work since then, though, the discipline continues to be marred by confusion deriving from lack of agreement on ordinary words, provoking Schaffer (2005: 25-26) to ask whether the matter might not be resolved by coining new terms. But if simply coining new terms offered a solution, nationalism studies would be in a fortunate position, since it has experienced a great deal of this practice. Using Smith's (1998) major theoretical work alone, it is possible to identify six basic terms of relatively recent origin (constructionism, ethno-symbolism, instrumentalism, modernism, perennialism and primordialism), a list that may be expanded by coining new terms or adding prefixes to existing ones (such as neo-perennialism and post-modernism). To these may be added related labels that have not been discussed in detail here, such as situationalism, circumstantialism, formalism or

relationalism. But enthusiastic neologism of this kind does little to sharpen our analytical focus.

It has been argued that 'good' concepts in the social sciences should meet eight criteria. Three of these pertain to acceptability to scholars: the familiarity, resonance and parsimony of any new terms. The remaining five have to do with functional efficiency: a term's internal coherence, capacity for differentiation from adjacent concepts, substantive depth, theoretical utility (including capacity to form part of a classificatory framework) and field utility (one-to-one correspondence between a set of terms and a set of objects; Gerring 1999: 366-384). If the set of terms used to describe theories of nationalism is evaluated by reference to these criteria, they are likely to be found sadly inadequate. Certain of them may well meet the yardsticks of familiarity and even resonance, but it is difficult to see which of the other standards they match. Such terms as primordialism and perennialism seem not to possess much internal coherence or capacity for differentiation from each other, or from other related labels; nor do they form part of a clearly defined set of categories for analytical purposes.

One possible short-term approach would be to try to clarify meaning by engaging in stipulative rather than lexical definition (a long-standing distinction; see Abelson 1967). The following terms might be proposed. Though stipulative, they are close to the lexical meaning generally associated with the terms themselves; the second and third refer respectively to the level of the actor and that of the analyst.

1. Primordality: the quality of 'coming first' (as in a form of biological descent, or transmission of other inherited characteristics)
2. Nationalist primordialism: a commitment to belief in primordiality in respect of the nation (a common ingredient in nationalist ideology that purports to explain the 'objective' character of the nation and its continuity over time from a remote period)
3. Analytical primordialism: an approach to the explanation of nationalism that rests on the view that modern nations and nationalism are expressions, at least in part, of *either* (a) objective primordiality (definition 1 above), *or* (b) nationalist primordialism (definition 2 above).

Here, 'primordiality' describes a relatively straightforward biological or genealogical concept. 'Nationalist primordialism' is a very common element in nationalist ideology, and sometimes, in modified form, is a key component in racist thinking. But 'analytical primordialism' raises difficult issues. As a supposed theory of nationalism, it invites confusion with an important ingredient in nationalist ideology. If the term is to be retained as a useful category, it needs to be narrowed in meaning to a form of academic belief in primordiality (definition 3a), in which

case it virtually ceases to exist, since there are no longer any takers for this approach. The only alternative is to broaden its meaning to the point where it no longer possesses analytical clarity (definition 3b), since it is in effect absorbed by the constructivist position.

A similar approach could be adopted in respect of 'perennialism', which is distinguished from 'primordialism' by virtue of the fact that it refers to continuity over time rather than to primacy in influence. But the two concepts tend to be closely associated in nationalist ideology, and 'perennialism' may be subjected to the same kinds of critique as 'primordialism'. If, however, these classificatory tools collapse, they bring down with them the rest of this terminological edifice. There is, then, a case for simply dropping these terms and seeking to build a fresh classification of theories of nationalism *ab initio*—a classification that might relate to such dimensions as the sociological basis of national identity (related to industrialisation or modernisation, or elite-generated), the geopolitical issues in question (integration or separation), the structural relationships involved (immigrant or indigenous groups), or any one of several other possible dimensions that underlie theories of nationalism.

We need to return, then, to the question raised in the title of this article: is the 'primordialist' account of nationalism a theory or an ideology? It has been argued above that if primordialism is defined in such a way as to distinguish it from other approaches to explanation, that is by stressing its 'objective' sociobiological basis, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to find any contemporary academic advocates. Such advocates begin to appear only to the extent that the definition of this approach is loosened, by admitting the appearance of 'subjective' or constructivist components; but such admission undermines the distinctiveness, utility and functional efficiency of the term in the first place. If the concept of primordialism as a scholarly category is to survive it all, it must not be as a box into which the contributions of researchers may be shoe-horned, but rather as an ideal type that need not be populated at all, but rather seen as one end of a continuum along which scholarly contributions may be arrayed (Kaufmann 2012).

Even this, however, risks conflating the level of the actor with the level of the analyst. It may indeed have been the case in the early twentieth century that nationalism succeeded in penetrating the understanding of scholars and in persuading them of the merits of the primordialist approach, but this relationship has long since evaporated. This article has put the case that primordialism, and its cousin, perennialism, in the relatively clear original or 'objective' sense of these words, are important not as tools of analysis, but in their status as raw data to be analysed.

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