

Performing the Nation

Steve Matthewman

Sociology, University of Auckland

Auckland 1010, New Zealand

s.matthewman@auckland.ac.nz

Brad West: *Re-enchanting Nationalisms: Rituals and Remembrances in a Postmodern Age*. New York 2015: Springer-Verlag; 152 pp.

In the social science literature there is a strong tendency to want to write nationalism's obituary. The usual arguments are that because of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, neoliberalism – and their disembedding, deterritorialising effects – the nation, and by extension collective and affective bonds to it, are all but gone. It would seem that contemporary social theory exacerbates such ideas, where great stress is placed upon flows (Manuel Castells, Scott Lash, George Ritzer), nomads (Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Rosi Braidotti), mobility (Mimi Sheller, John Urry), and liquidity (Zygmunt Bauman). This book serves as an important reminder that the nation and nationalisms are very much alive.

In standard sociological fare, it is common to read of the consequences of the abovementioned forces: weakening of collective bonds, the decline of the public sphere, and the increasing personalisation and privatisation of public space. Readers repeatedly see pronouncements of the diminution of notions of citizenship and civil society, and of their replacement by consumerist values and hyper-individualistic practices. They learn of increasing social distance and the weakening of moral life.

Against all of this, *Re-enchanting Nationalisms* reminds national attachment's ongoing power and significance. Many still desire national *attachment*, that anchor-

ing to a physical homeland. This, the author urges, is manifest through various rituals. Following Émile Durkheim, Brad West argues that social units find cohesion through action. Sacred phenomena are separated from quotidian life. They are celebrated and made meaningful within ritualised practices. The sacred refers to those things that hail us, that get our attention, that call to us. In so doing they also inspire forms of reverence. These practices are removed from the usual socio-temporal order: they only occur at particular times, in particular places, and in particular ways.

The new national ritual forms that are studied both theoretically and empirically in the book are: independent Australian travellers' visits to First World War battlefields in Turkey, American Civil War re-enactment in the United States, Australian commemoration of the Bali Bombings and humanitarian responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami. This review focuses on US Civil War re-enactments.

While Brad West's work reminds of the significance of national attachment and ritual, it should be noted that the author has been careful to chart a path between two equally flawed starting points. The first holds that modern subjects are essentially enchanted, to take the classic, if crude, Durkheimian position. The second that they are basically disenchanted, to take the classic, and less crude, Weberian position. Things are not simply enchanting or meaningful; they are made to be enchanting and meaningful. Ritual is a 'doing'.

Nor does the author think that there is any real reason for the nation to prosper for all time. It is not part of the natural order of things. As with other social constructions, its significance may very well wane in the future, but presently it seems to be playing an important role in securing individual and collective identity. Not that the book is interested in top-down state-sanctioned celebrations of nation. People are not treated here as cultural dupes or as mere vectors of structural forces. Instead, due respect is given to the participants in the various activities under study. The book thus offers an unabashedly cultural approach 'seeing it as a social force in its own right' (p. 7). Indeed, the author aligns himself with the strong programme in cultural sociology, which treats culture as an independent variable (Alexander, Smith, 2010). The book's interest is in new ritual forms, those which exist relatively independently of the formal structures of state; and those which cannot simply be

seen as the epiphenomenal expressions of society's material (which is to say economic) base. As the author explains it: 'The strong suit of cultural sociology [...] is in detailing the relationship between discursive and semiotic representations and the actions of actual people' (p. 8).

That said, one of the great pleasures to be had from reading this book is that theory is put in its proper place (this point will be returned to). He is healthily critical of his own intellectual attachments. Even the Strong Programme of Cultural Sociology comes in for some critique. And this book is no one-dimensionally Durkheimian offering. A range of interesting theorists loom large, including: Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean Baudrillard, Ulrich Beck, Clifford Geertz, Jürgen Habermas and Victor Turner.

B. West does acknowledge that today's national identities are heavily informed by consumerism, tourism and new leisure pursuits. Where many social scientists would see such influences as being negative, B. West gives reasons for optimism. He identifies new 'symbolic forms which are transformative and re-enchanting' (p. 11). He writes of new (and positive) individual experiences, identifying both prospects for identity transformation and for cultural renewal. B. West also adds that novel ritualised practices in the present can also lead to fresh appraisals of the past, ones that may be more inclusive in that they may incorporate new social actors in addition to generating new understandings. This is precisely what has happened with national re-imaginings of Gallipoli, where holidaying Australians and hosting Turks now find common ground.

This final point about new inclusions is very important. Nationalisms, and identities more broadly, are often thought to be based on exclusions. The argument is that part of who a person is will be based on who they are not. Individual and collective identities are framed by reference to non-assimilable Others. But B. West offers an alternative position through his reading of the available evidence. For example, he considers the 'rite of international civil religious pilgrimage' (p. 14) which is made possible by the global flows of huge numbers of people. This has been spurred by two factors: mass movements from war and colonialism, and mass movements from new work and leisure practices. In the case of Australian independent travel-

lers' tours of the First World War battlefields of Gallipoli, the author shows that new collective memories have been created, ones that both acknowledge and positively include the Other. This has led to a greater understanding of a former enemy. As such, B. West is correct to suggest that nationalisms can also be cosmopolitan in their orientation. This point is further reinforced by his study of the 2002 Bali Bombings. In the aftermath of the attacks national Australian commemoration brought forth new modes of international cooperation. Tourists were at the forefront of this. This leads the author to postulate the idea of tourists promoting a 'dialogical nationalism'. As with Gallipoli, this is an identity construction in conjunction *with* Others.

Having discussed practice, it is worth returning to theory, and the point about putting theory in its place. Chapter three of B. West's book considers US Civil War re-enactment. It is first introduced through the work of Jean Baudrillard. Re-enactments are often theorised as simulacrum - copies which blur the original, or copies for which no original exists. This makes them 'hyperreal' in J. Baudrillard's terminology. But B. West is not content to begin and end with grand theorising of the totalising philosophical variety. That works at far too high a level of abstraction. How can anyone know what is really going on from such a vantage point? In reading this section of *Re-enchanting Nationalisms*, Alexander Cockburn's (1996: 339) comments about J. Baudrillard came to mind: 'A few years back a French intellectual, Baudrillard by name, drove across the United States, spoke to no one and, having thus rapidly and silently traversed the continent, turned out a book called *America*, which enjoyed considerable vogue'. If you do not wind the windows down, if you do not turn off the freeway, if you do not get out and talk to the people, you are poorly placed to do the work of cultural sociology. For its mission is to understand the feelings and meanings individuals ascribe to their thoughts and deeds.

Ethnographic observations and interviews, which is what the author deployed, can yield insights into that experiential world. Admittedly, playing soldiers may appear trivial at first sight, but a lot of people - a lot of men - are doing it. It is one of the fastest growing leisure pursuits in the United States of America. In a particularly compelling section of the book B. West shows precisely what is at stake here. The real battle is for the nation's soul: what constitutes enduring truth? The na-

ture of historical and political orthodoxy is being questioned. What national past should be remembered in this turbulent present? How should the nation be imagined (and performed)? Upon examination, Civil War re-enactors are motivated by dissatisfaction with two things: (1) contemporary social arrangements, today's society is seen to be somehow inauthentic, and (2) with today's historians. Academic interpretations of the Civil War, such as that which is taught in the compulsory schooling system are disparaged for their political correctness. Thus, re-enactment is a form of historical understanding 'from below', a pedagogical tool as well as a leisure pursuit. It is teaching by doing, part acting, part activism.

The point has already been made that rituals take place at particular times, in particular locations and in particular ways. The pursuit of Civil War re-enactment took on its current meanings after the state officially withdrew from this type of commemorative activity. These re-enactments also mesh with a much broader post-Vietnam movement of paramilitary hyper-masculinities in which anti-heroes replace winners. The vanquished, in effect, turn victor. Other influences include: the religious Right's increasing incursions into popular culture, the spectacular re-enactments surrounding the Civil War's 125th anniversary (which helped return the activity to mainstream public attention), and the emergence of the wonderfully-named North-South Skirmish Association, whose shooting competitions with authentic and replica armaments of its own manufacture have given re-enactment both greater prominence and a feeling of enhanced authenticity.

The question of authenticity is a sociologically interesting one. Fredric Jameson (1981: 102) once said that 'history is what hurts'. While re-enactors can get injured their practices are sanitised. Very obviously, this is war minus the maiming and mass killing. It is sanitised in other important ways too. Enactors often seek to elide or suppress questions of slavery. For them, the war was really about the rights of states. Thus the past is celebrated, and the South is exonerated. Their activities can also be read as escape attempts. Re-enactors are escaping the mundanity of everyday life and its responsibilities as well as from the present and all of its challenges. They seek some golden age that aligns more closely with their own beliefs: in God and gender differences, and in a formal equality, but not in respectful recognition of dif-

ference, abortion or a functional welfare state. What they are really going into battle for is a non-existent cultural uniformity. As B. West so aptly puts it: 'By bringing together the logics of living history with political orthodoxy, Civil War re-enacting as a social movement has been driven by a new cognitive understanding of the past, one that is ritually based by privileging experiential learning and playfulness in advancing contemporary social conservatism' (p. 73). Here, then, the reader sees most of the premises of cultural sociology on display: it shows how the nation operates as a cultural symbol which exists relatively independently of instrumental and economic forces and shows how culture is itself deployed to effect social change.

This book shows why ritual matters, it is an important cultural element. It can work as a force for social and political change. It is central to the nation's reimagining. This book also shows why nationalisms matter, they are both durable and adaptable (p. 148). And, against the social science orthodoxy, here it is noted that nationalisms are often the product of global forces and that they are not simply the products of elite actions. There are nationalisms from beyond and below. There is a forceful reminder of this in his chapter on the place of Gallipoli in the contemporary imaginary. Here B. West shows the contributions of young Australian backpackers and Turkish tourist guides. It certainly is a business doing leisure with Australians, and military history is being re-written for contemporary consumption, but in so doing another, altogether more inclusive national identification comes about. This is no bad thing. Nationalisms are not closed systems of identification, and in this context it is legitimate to speak of 'a contemporary cosmopolitan remembering' (p. 29). As B. West puts it, we 'need [...] to understand that national meanings and symbols run deep and that they have adaptive qualities that allow them to become reinvented and re-enchanted in contemporary Western societies' (p. 137).

This is an important book, but as with any other it is not beyond criticism. Periodisations are always problematic. Is the book's subheading to be believed? Are we in a postmodern age? Few sociologists seem to make this claim in the twenty-first century (Matthewman, Hoey, 2006). 'Cosmopolitan nationalism' could be interpreted as an oxymoronic confection, and a post-colonial critique of B. West's work is imaginable on the grounds that the author does not go far enough in their attempts to

comprehend foreign culture from the actor's point of view. Finally, not all readers – this reviewer included – will fully subscribe to the tenets of the strong programme in cultural sociology. The programme has been criticised for elevating culture into Culture, for cleaving it from material relations, and for studying the motivating power of symbol systems without paying due attention to their socio-historical contexts (McLennan 2005).

References

- Alexander J. C., Smith P., 2010: *The Strong Program: Origins, Achievements, and Prospects*; in J. R. Hall, L. Grindstaff, M. Lo (eds): *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. London: Routledge; 13-24.
- Cockburn A., 1995: *The Golden Age is in Us: Journeys & Encounters, 1987-1994*. London – New York: Verso.
- Jameson F., 1981: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Matthewman S., Hoey D., 2006: *What Happened to Postmodernism? "Sociology"*, 40 (3), 529-547.
- McLennan G., 2005: *The 'New American Cultural Sociology'*. "Theory, Culture & Society", 22 (6), 1-18.

Wpłynęło/received 03.03.2018; poprawiono/revised 22.03.2018