ETHNOSYMBOLISM

lecture notes by Denis Bašić
based on Özkırımlı’s “Theories of Nationalism”
chapter 5
Ethnosymbolism emerges from the theoretical critique of modernism.

Broadly speaking, ethnosymbolism refers to an approach which emphasizes the role of myths, symbols, memories, values and traditions in the formation, persistence and change of ethnicity and nationalism.

The founder of the ethnosymbolist perspective within nationalism studies and the leading proponent of this approach was Anthony D. Smith.
Ethnosymobolic Approach to Nationalism

According to Anthony Smith, an **ethnosymbolic approach** stresses

- the need for an analysis of collective cultural identities over *la longue durée*, that is a time span of many centuries;

- the importance of continuity, recurrence and appropriation as different modes of connecting the national past, present and future;

- the significance of pre-existing ethnic communities, or *ethnies*, in the formation of modern nations;

- the role of memories of golden ages, myths of origin and ethnic election, cults of heroes and ancestors, the attachment to a homeland in the formation and persistence of national identities;

- the different kinds of ethnic groups that form the basis of various kinds of nations; and

- the special contribution of the modern ideology of nationalism to the dissemination of the ideal of the nation.
Ethnosymbolism vs. Other Theories of Nationalism

✱ The **ethnosymbolic approach**, Smith argues, differs from other approaches

✱ in underlining the importance of **subjective elements** in our understanding of ethnic groups and nations,

✱ in the weight it gives to **popular cultures and practices** and how these **set limits to elite understandings and strategies**.

[Note how ethnosymbolists underplay the role of the elites in the process of identity constructions. They actually put the opposite stress.]
Homogeneity of Ethnosymbolism

- Ethnosymbolists form a more homogeneous category than both the primordialists and the modernists.

- Guided by a common reverence for the past, they lay stress on similar processes in their explanations of nations and nationalism.

- For ethnosymbolists, the emergence of today's nations cannot be understood properly without taking their ethnic forebears into account; in other words, the rise of nations needs to be contextualized within the larger phenomenon of ethnicity which shaped them.
The differences between modern nations and the collective cultural units of earlier eras are of degree rather than kind, according to Smith.

This suggests that ethnic identities change more slowly than is generally assumed; once formed, they tend to be exceptionally durable under 'normal' vicissitudes of history, such as migrations, invasions, intermarriages, and do persist over many generations, even centuries (Smith 1986: 16).

In short, the modern era is no tabula rasa (blank slate).

[Notice that ethnosymbolists go back to determinism in identity, which is a form of fatalism.]
Ethnosymbolists vs. Their Opponents

- Ethnosymbolists claim to reject the stark 'continuism' of the perennialists and to accord due weight to the transformations wrought by modernity.

- On the other side, they also reject the claims of the modernists by arguing that a greater measure of continuity exists between 'traditional' and 'modern', or 'agrarian' and 'industrial' eras - hence the need for a wider theory of ethnic formation that will bring out the differences and similarities between contemporary national units and premodern ethnic communities.

[NOTE: The ethnosymbolist use of the concept of “continuity” has earned them the criticism of being “conceptually confused.”]
Goals of Ethnosymbolism

Smith contends that ethnosymbolist approach is more helpful than its alternatives in at least three ways:

First, it helps to explain which populations are likely to start a nationalist movement under certain conditions and what the content of this movement would be.

Second, it enables us to understand the important role of memories, values, myths and symbols. Nationalism, Smith argues, mostly involves the pursuit of symbolic goals such as education in a particular language, having a TV channel in one’s own language or the protection of ancient sacred sites. Materialist and modernist theories of nationalism fail to illuminate these issues, as they are unable to comprehend the emotive power of collective memories.
Finally, the ethnosymbolist approach explains why and how nationalism is able to generate such a widespread popular support.

Most of all perhaps, an ethnosymbolic approach can help us to understand both the durability and the transformations of ethnicity in history and the continuing power and persistence of nations and nationalism at the start of the third millennium. This is because it directs our gaze to the inner worlds of the ethnie and the nation.
According to Anthony Smith, it was John Armstrong who first underlined the significance of la longue durée for the study of nationalism in his 'pathbreaking' Nations before Nationalism (1982) and who embedded it within a larger inquiry into the pre-modern bases of ethnicity.

Armstrong's stated aim is to explore 'the emergence of the intense group identification that today we term a "nation"' by adopting what he calls an 'extended temporal perspective' that reaches back to antiquity.

Having examined ethnic groups in the course of their long historical journey, he stops at the 'threshold of nationalism', that is before the period when nationalism becomes the dominant political doctrine, the eighteenth century. He justifies this by noting that he is more concerned with the persistence rather than the genesis of particular patterns.
Ancient Ethnic Consciousness

* For Armstrong, *ethnic consciousness* has a long history; it is possible to come across its traces in ancient civilizations, for example in *Egypt* and *Mesopotamia*.

* In this sense, *contemporary nationalism* is nothing but the final stage of a *larger cycle of ethnic consciousness* reaching back to the earliest forms of collective organization.

* The most important feature of this *consciousness*, according to Armstrong, is its *persistence*. Hence the formation of ethnic identities should be examined in a time dimension of many centuries, similar to the *longue durée* perspective emphasized by the *Annales* school of French historiography. Only an extended temporal perspective can reveal the durability of ethnic attachments and the 'shifting significance of boundaries for human identity'.
Adopting the social interaction model of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, Armstrong argues that 'groups tend to define themselves not by reference to their own characteristics but by exclusion, that is, by comparison to "strangers"'.

It follows that there can be no fixed 'character' or 'essence' for the group; the boundaries of identities vary according to the perceptions of the individuals forming the group. Thus, it makes more sense to focus on the boundary mechanisms that distinguish a particular group from others instead of objective group characteristics.
Barth’s Attitudinal Approach

* For Armstrong, Barth's **attitudinal approach** affords many advantages.

* First, it makes **room for changes in the cultural and the biological content of the group** as long as the boundary mechanisms are maintained.

* Second, it shows that **ethnic groups are not necessarily based** on the occupation of particular, exclusive **territories**.

* Third, the key to understanding ethnic identification is the 'uncanny experience of confronting others' who remained mute in response to attempts at communication, whether oral or through symbolic gestures. **Inability to communicate** initiates the process of 'differentiation' which in turn brings a recognition of ethnic belonging.
Factors that ensure the persistence of ethnic identification

- **Ways of life** and the expectancies associated with them. Two fundamentally different ways of life, the nomadic and the sedentary, are particularly important in this context, because the myths and symbols they embody - expressed, notably, in nostalgia - create two sorts of identities based on incompatible principles. Thus, the territorial principle and its peculiar nostalgia ultimately became the predominant form in Europe, while the genealogical or pseudo-genealogical principle has continued to prevail in most of the Middle East.

- The second factor, **religion**, reinforced this basic distinction. The two great universal religions, Islam and Christianity, gave birth to different civilizations and the myths-symbols associated with them shaped the formation of ethnic identities in their own specific ways.
Factors that ensure the persistence of ethnic identification

Armstrong's third factor is the city. The analysis of the effect of towns on ethnic identification requires, Armstrong argues, examination of a host of factors, ranging from the impact of town planning to the unifying or centrifugal effects of various legal codes, especially the Lubeck and Magdeburg law. Then he moves to the role of imperial polities.

At this point, the central question is 'how could the intense consciousness of loyalty and identity established through face-to-face contact in the city-state be transferred to the larger agglomerations of cities and countryside known as empires'? Here, Armstrong stresses the diverse effects of the Mesopotamian myth of the polity - what he calls 'mythomoteur' - as a reflection of heavenly rule. This myth was used as a vehicle for incorporating city-state loyalties in a larger framework. For him, this might constitute the earliest example of 'myth transference for political purposes'.
Finally, Armstrong introduces the question of *language* and assesses its impact on identity-formation in the pre-nationalist era.

Contrary to commonsense assumptions, Armstrong concludes, 'the significance of language for ethnic identity is highly contingent' in pre-modern eras. Its significance depended in the long run on *political* and *religious forces* and allegiances.

[Note: It appears that, according to Armstrong, the most obvious characteristic of an ethnicity - its language - loses its primacy to the *politics*, which is a modernist argument.]
Nations before Nationalism

- While standing firm on his belief that nations did exist before nationalism, Armstrong nevertheless agrees with Anderson and Hobsbawm that, like other human identities, national identity had been an invention.

- The only remaining disagreement, Armstrong contends, is 'over the antiquity of some inventions and the repertory of pre-existing group characteristics that inventors were able to draw upon'.

{NOTE: The question is whether “the pre-existing characteristics” were also “invented”, “manipulated”, and “instrumentalized” by the previous generations of elites.}
John Armstrong’s key contributions to Ethnosymbolism

- It can be argued that Armstrong's work, with its focus on medieval European and Middle Eastern civilizations, offers a more comprehensive overview of the process of ethnic identification than other comparable studies in the field.

- For Smith, Armstrong makes a strong case for grounding the emergence of modern national identities on patterns of *ethnic persistence*, and especially on *the long term influence of 'myth-symbol complexes'*.  

- It was indeed Smith who explored these issues further and elaborated the framework of analysis developed by Armstrong.
According to Smith, if we are to move beyond the *sweeping generalizations of both modernism and primordialism*, we need to formulate clear working definitions of key terms like 'nation' and 'nationalism', thereby breaking out of an impasse which continues to bedevil progress in the field.

**The problem with modernist theories**, he argues, is that they *provide a definition, not of the nation per se, but of a particular kind of nation - the modern nation*. It reflects the characteristics of 18th and 19th-century nations in Western Europe and America, hence it is partial and Eurocentric.

What is needed is an ideal-typical definition of the nation, one that treats it as a general analytic category, which can in principle be applied to all continents and periods of history.

[NOTE: The problem is that modernist do not believe that “nation” existed in pre-modern eras while premordialists & ethnosymbolist do. The latter speak of “the nation before nationalism.” See John Armstrong.]
Anthony Smith’s definition of nation

Smith thus proposes the following definition of the nation, derived to a large extent from the images and assumptions held by most or all nationalists:

‘a nation is 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'.

Smith holds that such a definition reveals the complex and abstract nature of national identity which is fundamentally multidimensional.
Anthony Smith on the Origins of Nation

* According to Smith, *the origins of nations* are as complex as its nature. We might begin to look for a general explanation by asking the following questions:

  1. *Who* is the nation? What are the ethnic bases and models of modern nations? Why did these particular nations emerge?

  2. *Why and how* does the nation emerge? That is, what are the general causes and mechanisms that set in motion the process of nation-formation from varying ethnic ties and memories?

  3. *When and where* did the nation arise?
1. Who is the nation? What are the ethnic bases and models of modern nations? Why did these particular nations emerge?

For Smith, the answer to the first question should be sought in earlier ethnic communities (he prefers to use the French term *ethnie*) since pre-modern identities and legacies form the bedrock of many contemporary nations. He posits six main attributes for such communities:

- **a collective proper name**, **a myth of common ancestry**, **shared historical memories**, **one or more differentiating elements of a common culture**, **an association with a specific homeland**, **a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population**.

As this list reveals, most of these attributes have **a cultural and historical content** as well as **a strong subjective component**. This suggests, contrary to the rhetoric of nationalist ideologies, that the *ethnie* is **anything but primordial**. According to Smith, as the subjective significance of each of these attributes waxes and wanes for the members of a community, so does their cohesion and self-awareness.

[NOTE: It seems that ethnosymbolists advocate that cultural identities are changeable. How are then ethnosymbolists different from “cultural modernists” in this regard? Think of instrumentalism and constructionism of identities. The question is if the changes are “natural” or ‘induced.”]
Why and how do ethnies emerge?

* If the *ethnie* is not a primordial entity, then how does it come into being? Smith identifies two main patterns of *ethnie* formation: **coalescence** and **division**.

* By **coalescence** he means the coming together of separate units, which in turn can be broken down into processes of amalgamation of separate units such as city-states and of absorption of one unit by another as in the assimilation of regions.

* By **division** he means subdivision through fission as with sectarian schism or through 'pro-liferation' (a term he borrows from Horowitz), when a part of the ethnic community leaves it to form a new unit as in the case of Bangladesh.

* Smith notes that *ethnies*, once formed, tend to be exceptionally **durable**. However, this should not lead us to the conclusion that they travel across history without undergoing any changes in their demographic composition and/or cultural contents. In other words, we should try to eschew the polar extremes of the primordialist-instrumentalist debate when assessing the recurrence of ethnic ties and communities.
What can change an ethnic identity?

- **Smith** admits that there are certain events that generate profound changes in the cultural contents of ethnic identities. Among these, he singles out war and conquest, exile and enslavement, the influx of immigrants and religious conversion.

- Nevertheless, what really matters is how far these changes reflect on and disrupt the sense of cultural continuity that binds successive generations together. For Smith, even the most radical changes cannot destroy this sense of continuity and common ethnicity. This is partly due to the existence of a number of external forces that help to crystallize ethnic identities and ensure their persistence over long periods. Of these, state-making, military mobilization and organized religion are the most crucial.

[NOTE: Pay attention to the importance of “external forces” in identity construction. “Internal” or “external” forces, critics say, imply that the national/ethnic identities are constructed.]
Four survival mechanisms of ethnic communities

* The first such mechanism is 'religious reform'. The history of the Jews is replete with many instances of this. Conversely, groups who fell prey to religious conservatism tried to compensate for the failure to introduce reforms by turning to other forms of self-renewal. This was the dilemma faced by the Greeks at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When the Orthodox hierarchy failed to respond to popular aspirations, the Greek middle classes fumed to secular ideological discourses to realize their goals.

* The second mechanism is 'cultural borrowing', in the sense of controlled contact and selective cultural exchange between different communities. Here again, examples can be found from Jewish history. The lively encounter between Jewish and Greek cultures, Smith holds, enriched the whole field of Jewish culture and identity.
Four survival mechanisms of ethnic communities

- **The third mechanism** is 'popular participation'. The popular movements for greater participation in the political system saved many *ethnies* from withering away by generating a missionary zeal among the participants of these movements.

- **The fourth mechanism** of ethnic self-renewal identified by Smith is 'myths of ethnic election'. According to Smith, *ethnies* that lack such myths tended to be absorbed by others after losing their independence.
2. Why and how does the nation emerge?

* The existence of pre-modern ethnic ties helps us to determine which units of population are likely to become nations, but it does not tell us why and how this transformation comes about.

* To answer the second general question raised above, that is, 'why and how does the nation emerge?', we need to specify the main patterns of 'identity formation' and the factors that triggered their development.

* Smith begins by identifying two types of ethnic community,
  * the 'lateral' (aristocratic) and
  * the 'vertical' (demotic),
  noting that these two types gave birth to different patterns of nation formation.
“Lateral” vs. “Vertical” Ethnies

The 'lateral' ethnies’ were generally composed of aristocrats and higher clergy, though in some cases they might also include bureaucrats, high military officials and richer merchants. Smith explains his choice of the term 'lateral' by pointing out that these ethnies were at once socially confined to the upper strata and geographically spread out to form close links with the upper echelons of neighbouring lateral ethnies. As a result, their borders were 'ragged', but they lacked social depth, 'and [their] often marked sense of common ethnicity was bound up with [their] esprit de corps as a high status stratum and ruling class'.

On the contrary, 'vertical' ethnies were more compact and popular. Their culture was diffused to other sections of the population as well. Social cleavages were not underpinned by cultural differences; 'rather, a distinctive historical culture helped to unite different classes around a common heritage and traditions, especially when the latter were under threat from outside'. As a result of this, the ethnic bond was more intense and exclusive, and the barriers to admission were much higher.
The First Route of Nation Formation: Emerging Bureaucratic State

* According to Smith, the primary vehicle in the process of nation formation was the newly emerging bureaucratic state. Through a series of 'revolutions' in the administrative, economic and cultural spheres, the state was able to diffuse the dominant culture down the social scale.

* The major constituents of the 'administrative revolution' were the extension of citizenship rights, conscription, taxation and the building up of an infrastructure that linked distant parts of the realm.

* The economic revolution comprehends the movement to a market economy.

* The cultural revolution means the decline of ecclesiastical authority. The latter was particularly important in that it allowed the development of secular studies and of university learning. This, in turn, led to a 'boom' in popular modes of communication - novels, plays and journals. An important role was played in these processes by the intellectuals and professionals.
The Second Route of Nation Formation: Vernacular Mobilization

The second route of nation formation, what Smith calls 'vernacular mobilization', set out from a vertical ethnie. The influence of the bureaucratic state was more indirect in this case mainly because vertical ethnies were usually subject communities. Here, the key mechanism of ethnic persistence was organized religion. It was through myths of chosenness, sacred texts and scripts, and the prestige of the clergy that the survival of communal traditions was ensured.

But demotic communities had problems of their own, which surfaced at the initial stages of the process of nation formation. To start with, ethnic culture usually overlapped with the wider circle of religious culture and loyalty, and there was no internal coercive agency to break the mould. Moreover, the members of the community simply assumed that they already constituted a nation, albeit one without a political roof.

[NOTE: The latter point attracts a lot of criticism. Since we do not have the public opinion polls from this era, it is impossible to know what people “in general” “assumed”.]
Religious vs. Historic Cultural Community

The primary task of the secular intelligentsia was to alter the basic relationship between ethnicity and religion. In other words, the community of the faithful had to be distinguished from the community of historic culture. Smith identifies three different orientations among the intellectuals confronted with this dilemma:

- a conscious, modernizing return to tradition ('traditionalism');
- a messianic desire to assimilate to Western modernity ('assimilation' or 'modernism'); and
- a more defensive attempt to synthesize elements of the traditions with aspects of Western modernity, hence to revive a pristine community modelled on a former golden age ('reformist revivalism').

Whatever the solution espoused, the main task of an ethnic intelligentsia was "to mobilize a formerly passive community into forming a nation around the new vernacular historical culture it has rediscovered'.
Smith identifies a third route of nation formation in his later work, that of the **immigrant nations** which consist largely of the fragments of other *ethnies*, particularly those from overseas.

In countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, colonist-immigrants have created a 'providentialist frontier nationalism' and this has encouraged a 'plural' conception of the nation, which accepts, even celebrates, ethnic and cultural diversity within an overarching political, legal, and linguistic national identity.
3. When and where did the nation arise?

This is where nationalism comes in. **Nationalism**, Smith contends, does not help us determine which units of population are eligible to become nations, nor why they do so, but it plays an important part in determining **when** and **where** nations will emerge. The next step, then, is to consider the **(political) impact of nationalism** in a number of particular cases. But this cannot be done without clarifying the concept of nationalism itself.
Smith begins by noting that the term 'nationalism' has been used in five different ways:

1. the whole process of forming and maintaining nations;
2. a consciousness of belonging to the nation;
3. a language and symbolism of the 'nation';
4. an ideology (including a cultural doctrine of nations); and
5. a social and a political movement to achieve the goals of the nation and realize the national will.
Smith stresses the fourth and the fifth meanings in his own definition. Hence,

**nationalism** is 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining **autonomy**, **unity** and **identity** on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential "**nation"".'

The key terms in this definition are **autonomy**, **unity** and **identity**. **Autonomy** refers to the idea of self-determination and the collective effort to realize the true, 'authentic', national will. **Unity** denotes the unification of the national territory and the gathering together of all nationals within the homeland. It also signifies the brotherhood of all nationals in the nation. Finally, **identity** means 'sameness' that is, that the members of a particular group are alike in those respects in which they differ from non-members, but it also implies the rediscovery of the 'collective self' (or the 'national genius'.')
Four Central Propositions of the Core Doctrine of Nationalism

According to Smith, the 'core doctrine' of nationalism consists of four central propositions:

1. The world is divided into nations, each with its own peculiar character, history and destiny.

2. The nation is the source of all political and social power, and loyalty to the nation has priority over all other allegiances.

3. Human beings must identify with a nation if they want to be free and realize themselves.

4. Nations must be free and secure if peace is to prevail in the world.
Drawing on Kahn's philosophical distinction between a more rational and a more organic version nationalist ideology, he identifies two kinds of nationalism:

- 'territorial nationalism'
- 'ethnic' nationalisms.

These two types of nationalism are based on 'Western' = civic-territorial, and 'Eastern' = ethnic-genealogical models of the nation respectively.

On this basis, he constructs a provisional typology of nationalisms, taking into account the overall situation in which the movements find themselves before and after independence.
“Territorial” vs. “Ethnic” Nationalism

1. Territorial nationalisms
(a) Pre-independence movements based on a civic model of the nation will first seek to eject foreign rulers, then establish a new state-nation on the old colonial territory; these are 'anti-colonial' nationalisms.
(b) Post-independence movements based on a civic model of the nation will try to bring together often disparate ethnic populations and integrate them into a new political community replacing the old colonial state; these are 'integration' nationalisms.

2. Ethnic nationalisms
(a) Pre-independence movements based on an ethnic/genealogical model of the nation will seek to secede from a larger political unit and set up a new 'ethno-nation' in its place; these are 'secession' and 'diaspora' nationalisms.
(b) Post-independence movements based on an ethnic/genealogical model of the nation will seek to expand by including ethnic kinsmen outside the present boundaries and establish a much larger 'ethno-nation' through the union of culturally and ethnically similar states; these are 'irredentist' and 'pan' nationalisms.
SMITH’S REVISED VIEWS
Smith’s old definition of nation:
‘a nation is 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'.

Smith’s new definition of nation:
the nation is 'a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs' (2005 : 98).

Differences between the two definitions:
The new definition emphasizes 'self-definition' and 'historicity' at the expense of more objective factors such as 'a common economy' and 'common legal rights and duties for all members'. More importantly, 'agency', which was absent from the earlier definition, is now back: the members of the nation do not simply 'share' certain characteristics, but 'cultivate', 'create' and 'disseminate' them.
Differences btw. Nations & Ethnies

- Smith’ believes that nations and ethnies are both forms of cultural community, which share a high degree of self-definition and a fund of myths, symbols and memories. But nations differ from ethnies in terms of:
  - the residence of many members of the community in a particular historic territory or homeland;
  - the dissemination of a public culture to the members (as opposed to elements of common culture);
  - the spread of standard laws and customs among the members.
Similarities btw. Nations & Ethnies

* However, according to Smith, the linkages between pre-modern and modern types of cultural collectivities cannot be denied.

* The most obvious form of linkage is that of 'continuity' - particular nations can be traced back to the medieval epoch or even to antiquity, writes Smith, and members of modern nations often draw on the symbolic elements of earlier ethnies to which they claim kinship or an ancestral relationship.

* The second form of linkage is 'recurrence' of ethnicity and the nation form; both ethnies and nations are forms of social organization and cultural community that may be found in every period and in every continent.

[NOTE: The use of the concept of “continuity” and “recurrence” make Smith hardly distinguishable from perennialists.]
The final form of linkage between nations and earlier ethnic communities is provided through the 'discovery' and 'appropriation' of ethnic history.

Typically, a new national community and polity is elaborated by priests, scribes and intellectuals who select for this purpose symbolic elements from earlier 'related' ethnic and national cultures.

In the modern epoch, authenticity becomes their guiding light, the need to discover and use all that is genuine and indigenous, to construct national communities that will be pure, original and unique.
Smith’s Revised View on the Ethnic Origin of Nation

* The second revision in Smith's later work concerns **the ethnic origins of nations**.

While continuing to hold firm to the belief that ethnicity and ethnic ties play a key role in the formation of nations, Smith now claims that **a broader view of the cultural foundations of nations is needed**, with a view to highlighting the importance of other kinds of political and religious kinds of community – such as **the cultural traditions of 'hierarchy' and 'republic'** emanating from the ancient Near East and the classical world.
Smith’s Revised View on the Dating of the Ideology of Nationalism

- The third revision relates to the dating of the ideology of nationalism.
- Smith still believes that nationalism, as a doctrine, emerged in the 18th century.
- However, he now adds, several of its elements emerged considerably earlier and *a certain kind of popular and vernacular nationalism could be found in some 17th-century states like England, Scotland, and the Netherlands - and perhaps elsewhere too*.

[Note: Now it is even harder to figure out the difference between Smith’s later works and perennialism.]
A further aspect of Smith's later work is the stress he laid on the 'sacred foundations' of nations and their relationship to the older beliefs, symbols and rituals of traditional religions, in explaining the strength and durability of national identities.

These foundations, Smith maintains, can only be understood within the framework of the binding commitments of religion; 'so it is in the sphere of "religion" that we must seek primarily the sources of national attachments'. This will also enable us to make sense of the recent revival of 'religious nationalisms'.

It is clearly insufficient to argue that nations and nationalism arose out of, and against, the great religious cultural systems of the medieval world. We have to recognize the complexity of continuing relations between religions and forms of the sacred, on the one hand, and national symbols, memories and traditions, on the other hand.
A CRITIQUE OF ETHNOSYMBOLISM
How to understand Ethnosymbolism?

- The easiest way to understand ethnosymbolism seems to be through the study of its criticism.

- A quick glance at the literature will reveal that ethnosymbolists have had their fair share of criticisms. Some of these criticisms relate to
  - the **conceptual** and **methodological premises** of ethnosymbolist interpretations,
  - their theoretical prowess and explanatory value.

- In what follows, we shall examine five objections to ethnosymbolism:
Ethnosymbolists are conceptually confused

According to the proponents of this view, ethnosymbolist arguments constitute a typical illustration of the 'terminological chaos' that plagues the study of nationalism. Smith and Armstrong are accused of falling into the trap of the interutilization of the terms *ethnicity*, *ethnic group* and *nation*.

Ethnosymbolists are also charged with 'retrospective nationalism' (a charge, as we have seen earlier, that was also directed against perennialists). 'Retrospective nationalism' is the tendency to project back onto earlier social formations the features peculiar to modern nations and nationalism.

Smith rejects these charges, arguing that this is to confuse a concern for *la longue durée* with perennialism. Armstrong may use the term 'nation' for pre-modern *ethnies*, he says, but he clearly differentiates modern nations from these earlier cultural formations.
Ethnosymbolists underestimate the difference btw. modern nations & earlier ethnic communities

* Modernists claim that **national consciousness** is mainly a mass, not an elite phenomenon, and 'evidence of ethnic consciousness among the aristocracy or the literati cannot be accepted as evidence of national consciousness without evidence that it is shared across a broader spectrum of the putative nation'.

* There is always a time lag between the appearance of **national consciousness** among the elites and its extension to the masses; hence nation formation is a process, not an occurrence or an event. Modernists claim that there is no evidence of massive national affiliation in pre-modern eras.

* For Smith, 'absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence' and the argument from silence is a double-edged sword, as this might be construed as much one of masses taking their ethnic or national attachments for granted. What is more, it is not possible to argue that elite conceptions did not extend to the masses, because this suggests that we have more insight into the beliefs of pre-modern masses than did their elite contemporaries who chronicled these sentiments.

[NOTE: The number and authenticity of such chronicles is highly questionable.]
Modernists argue that Greeks in the classical period or Armenians in the 5th century were not, and could not be, nations in the modern sense of the term. Whatever their degree of cohesion and consciousness, these ethno-religious formations did not make claims to territory, autonomy or independence, nor could they, since these political claims were only authorized in the age of nationalism.

Modernists claim that there were only three kinds of collective sentiments in the Middle Ages: religious, political and ethnic.

- **The religious sentiments** contained loyalty to the church or to various heretic movements;

- **the political sentiments** included feudal, city-state, dynastic, monarchical and imperial loyalties; and

- **the ethnic sentiments** consisted of loyalty to the neighbourhood or the region.

Some of these loyalties faded away in time; others were replaced by new loyalties; still others provided the 'bricks and mortar' out of which the cultural unity of the future nation was built. However, it is not possible to know with certitude which of these sentiments was dominant in a particular situation.
Ethnosymbolist analyses lack historical detail and analytical rigour

Modernists maintain that Smith's analyses remain 'trapped in assumptions'. Smith assumes, for instance, that most people are 'deeply attached' to their ethnic communities or that they are willing to die for these communities. Yet he 'hardly reflects on whether the very assumptions that drive his research are true'.

Ethnosymbolists are accused of avoiding the evidence that does not prove their point. Thus, for instance, Smith claims that nationalists are constrained by historical facts and adds that '[t]heir interpretations must be consonant not only with the ideological demands of nationalism, but also with the scientific evidence, popular resonance and patterning of particular ethno-histories'. 'The more factually based the ethnic history, the more powerful the nationalist project'. For instance, the Zionist (Israeli nationalist) use of the Masada was powerful because archaeological evidence proved that this legend was indeed true.

Modernists criticize Smith for not considering any contradictory evidence. Thus, for instance, ‘German nationalism under Nazi ideological guidance’ was no less powerful though ‘its claims about Jews rested on outrageous pseudo-science'. 
Ethnosymbolists reify nation

Smith claims that the myths, symbols, values and memories that form the culture 'tend to be exceptionally durable under "normal" vicissitudes and to persist over many generations, even centuries', setting limits to elite attempts at manipulation.

The 'evolutionary historicism' that characterizes Smith's work, critics maintain, is based on three ontological assumptions: determinism, fatalism and finalism. In this perspective, history has clearly defined (and predetermined) stages of development, and historical evolution is perceived as having a mission; ethnies are destined to become nations, hence become the principal actors in the drama of history, with 'a purpose and a functional role in the Great Chain of Being'. There is little room for contingency in this 'teleologically crafted narrative'.

Perhaps more importantly, Smith reifies nations (and here one might add ethnies) by unproblematically accepting folk concepts and treating large-scale social actors as if they have singular and recognizable wills.
What is the difference between ethnosymbolists & modernist who put stress on cultural/social transformations?

- Even those modernists who put stress on cultural transformations in the nation-building process, they would not put ethnicity and nation as close as ethnosymbolists do.

- As distinguished from ethnosymbolists, they first of all believe
  - that religion and culture have pan-historically been manipulated by the elites,
  - that identities have been constructed by the elites,
  - that we cannot talk of either massive education or communication until the 19th century, and even then the literacy level wasn’t extremely high even in European countries.