

# New Approaches to Nationalism

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***Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism.* George Mosse.** Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1993. Pp. 220. \$35.00 (cloth); \$15.95 (paper)

***Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood.* Marc Shell.** New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. 368. \$35.00.

***Nations without Nationalism.* Julia Kristeva.** Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. 1990; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Pp. 122. \$19.95.

Whatever nationalism is, whether ideology, civic religion, popular sentiment, or mass psychosis, its influence on modern society, politics, and art has been profound, perhaps more influential than the political movements of liberalism, fascism, and communism, all of which it underlay, interacted with, and powerfully defined. Whether analysts view nationalism as a beneficial or detrimental historical force, they tend to agree that this potent and multifarious phenomenon warrants sustained and rigorous analysis. The recent burst of academic studies is, in part, the product of that consensus.

The current wave of nationalist movements around the globe not only provides powerful additional evidence for this assertion, but also presents interesting difficulties for those who study the topic. The three works under review here provide an opportunity to consider the challenges of analyzing nationalism in what is an increasingly nationalistic moment. In their respective strengths and weaknesses, these books confirm that our efforts to come to terms with nationalism as an historical artifact are always entangled to some extent with our sense of it as a contemporary political problem, and therefore, that we need to find ways of dealing with that entanglement in an honest and productive manner, so that we can elucidate nationalism without unwittingly perpetuating the errors that characterize its history.

## I

In *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism*, the historian of modernity George Mosse brings his formidable knowledge and analytical skills to bear on the cultural and political construction of the modern nation and the ways in which European Jews confronted [End Page 184] an evolving nationalism that at first aided their social and political liberation but eventually led to their exclusion, oppression, and extermination. While Mosse is not primarily interested in taking a political stand on the events he recounts, his analysis has a political bias that ultimately leads him to propose reenlivened liberal nationalism as a solution to the ongoing problem of intolerant right-wing nationalism. This final move raises illuminating questions about the links between these competing visions of nationalism, links that Mosse does not in the end fully probe, although they pose important problems for the solution he proposes.

*Confronting the Nation* argues that European nationalism has undergone a distressing transformation over the past two centuries: primarily animated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by a desire for political self-determination that tolerated a range of political, social, and religious attitudes, it became early in this century a "civic religion," wherein the cult of the nation facilitated the rise of "heightened and irrational" forms, like France's "integral" nationalism or Germany's "völkish" nationalism (1). According to Mosse, this dangerous, chauvinistic nationalism was the result neither of human nature nor of this or that politico-economic system or ideology. It grew out of an unfortunate confluence of unprecedented historical circumstances and groups of particularly opportunistic right-wing politicians and intellectuals who exploited those circumstances to their advantage. What they recognized more fully and responded to more effectively than their liberal and socialist counterparts was the fact that in the face of modernity's bewildering upheavals, Europeans desperately wanted the kind of stable psychological "shelter" (5) they had once found in organized religion: the radical right's innovation was to realize the potential of nationalism to serve as modernity's civic religion.

Mosse's greatest strength as an analyst of modernity is his success in accounting for modern nationalism's historical contradictions. His analysis of Jewish negotiations with the modern nation demonstrates the point. It begins by tracing the role played in the process of Jewish assimilation in nineteenth-century Europe by Enlightenment liberalism, which sustained both an ideal of inclusive tolerance and an "allegiance to national ideals" (4). Ironically, this investment in liberal nationalism left the Jews "ill-prepared to confront the new civic religion" (4) and led them to attempt a series of conflicting and unsuccessful efforts to weigh the claims of Jewish identity and tradition against those of the particular nations in which they lived. These ambivalent obligations led them to pursue two related but ultimately incompatible nationalist projects: the liberal agenda of assimilation into the nations of Europe and the integral agenda of founding a Jewish nation.

Considering the cases of the German Zionists, Max Nordau (the author of the popular work of cultural psychology,

*Degeneration* [1892]) and Gershom Scholem (the celebrated religious historian and friend of Walter Benjamin), Mosse articulates two exemplary responses to this dilemma. He argues that even Jews like Nordau and Scholem, who "engaged themselves fully in the Jewish national cause" and thereby formulated their own version of the civic religion, nevertheless maintained an "allegiance to liberal principles" (5). These case studies articulate the contradictory ways in which investments in liberal nationalism constrained Jewish responses to the cult of a national past and the construction of national stereotypes so crucial to civic religion. Thus while Jews in Germany adopted the ideals of middle-class respectability and patriotically served in the wars of national liberation against Napoleon I in order to prove their national loyalty, they failed effectively to counter völkish nationalist claims that only persons of "pure" German blood could participate in the nation. And while German Zionists nationalistically advocated the creation of a Jewish nation, and some, like Nordau, invented a stereotype of the "new Jew" who would inhabit that nation (which, not coincidentally, recapitulated integral nationalist structures both in its opposition to the dirty, feminized Jew, and its uncritical embrace of the völkish values of masculine vitality and health), their continuing investments in liberal conceptions of tolerance inhibited an unambiguous embrace of the integral nationalist project by denying some of its crucial tenets (the national type, the nation based on organic growth). [End Page 185]

Mosse's study of Jewish entanglement with nationalism also reminds us that anti-Semitism was extremely widespread during the period, held not only by völkish nationalists like the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, and self-loathing Jews like the Austrian sexologist Otto Weininger. Even liberal Zionists, like Nordau and Scholem, did not avoid involvement with the stereotypes, emotional dynamics, and ideological mechanisms of the very nationalism that would eventually exclude European Jews. Such facts have too often been underemphasized in literary studies, even by those who focus on fascist modernism and modernist anti-Semitism. Yet the popular and the avant-garde journals of the early century expose a number of contradictions in the development of anti-Semitism among the modernists that complicate the problem. Early critics of modernism, for example, adopted the tactics of anti-Semitic polemic in their assaults on pre-war avant-garde art movements, casting modern artists as degenerate (Jewish) aliens and their art as another symptom of the contamination of national "health" by "foreign" bodies, which according to integral nationalists, threatened the nation's "purity." In this context, modernist anti-Semitism, like Jewish entanglements with anti-Jewish stereotypes, emerges as a tactic of legitimation against a wave of cultural and political marginalization in a period when the marginal was embodied in the figure of the rootless, parasitic Jew. The point here is not to vindicate modernist anti-Semitism, but to historicize it more completely.

It is only in his concluding remarks, where Mosse briefly contemplates nationalism as a contemporary political problem, rather than as an artifact in the history of modernity, that his own politics begin to trouble his analysis. Intending to end on an optimistic note, he offers as "a striking if perhaps unrealistic alternative" to the current resurgence of chauvinistic nationalism (192), a reenlivened and particularly flexible version of liberal nationalism, based on Scholem's "unique and promising" vision of an "open-ended" nationalism that embraces "liberal and progressive values" while rejecting ideal types and the organicist nation crucial to the civic religion (8). By formulating such a nationalism, Mosse contends, Scholem "did what every educator should do, but most do not: attempt to break open petrified structures, to challenge accepted truths on behalf of an ethical ideal within which men and women can be honest and true to themselves" (192). This moment reveals Mosse's continuing investment in liberal ideals of universalism and tolerance. But he is too learned and honest an historian to entertain any totalizing, utopian dream that such a solution will yield a peaceful "new world order": he goes only so far as to assert the "hope" of rehabilitating such a magnanimous and flexible nationalism.

Yet while this hesitant but heartfelt conclusion may seem a just and commonsensical solution to the problem of nationalist intolerance, it underestimates a fact that Mosse himself identifies but does not adequately pursue, one which threatens his hopes of renovating liberal nationalism: the "danger" of intolerance and violence is "inherent in all nationalism" (9), including presumably the "more benign nationalism" he admires (5). Because he does not fully probe the nature and causes of this "inherent danger," Mosse can pass over the tangled links between his own cautious universalism and the particularist ideals of the right-wing nationalists he opposes. His final wish winds up, therefore, telling us more about his own political investments than offering a persuasive response to resurgent nationalist intolerance. Mosse finally emerges, however, not as a political activist but as a historian, for his work achieves with clarity and force its primary goal of recovering the changing face of the modern nation and the ways in which Jews confronted it.

## II

Marc Shell believes that we cannot understand modern nationalism and its relations to modernity until we understand the ancient concept of kinship and its long and conflicted cultural history. His *Children of the Earth* uses a dense, wide-ranging, and often fascinating analysis of Western kinship terminology to diagnose the disturbing dynamic Mosse hints at, [End Page 186] namely, as Shell puts it, that the celebrated and "apparently genial motto 'All men are brothers,'" with its universalist collapse of species and family, has spawned neither the religious nor the political utopia it promises, but a politics based on the intolerant particularist principle that "only my 'brothers' are men, all 'others' are animals" (vii). Because that politics has achieved its most grandiose and terrible articulation since the advent of modernity, Shell's efforts to explain why the reversal happens, how it shapes and is shaped by Western art and politics, and what we can do about it, illuminate modern nationalism both as an historical artifact and as a political problem.

Shell's point of departure is the seemingly straightforward distinction between "literal" and "figural" kinship. His work eventually persuades, however, that the distinction is (and has always been) impossible to sustain, and that the resulting "indeterminacy or deniability" of kinship relations produces an "unalloyable anxiety about who's in or out of a particular kinship group" that accounts for the "allure of a universalist kinship that renders knowledge of particular kin or nation besides the point" (vii), and at the same time makes "virtually inevitable the slide away from the purportedly humane ideal" toward a practice of particularist intolerance (194). Shell argues first that all kinship claims are "essentially fictions": even the literalist view involves the fiction that we can really know who our consanguineous kin are, for "any particular consanguineous link is always deniable, if not always denied" (4). So when it comes to kinship, whether familial, religious, or national, the literal inevitably "disappears" in the figural (4). It is therefore "no more or less fictive" to say with the family literalist that "only my consanguineous parent's children are my siblings," than to say with the universalist Christian that "all human beings are siblings," or with the particular nationalist that "all Frenchmen are siblings of the fatherland" (4). This state of affairs might not be a source of "unalloyable anxiety" if it

weren't also the case that "belief in the difference between literal and figurative kinship . . . is necessary to society if, as psychoanalysts and structural anthropologists generally aver, obeisance to the taboo on incest is a precondition for the continuation of society" (4).

Having located the horns of this dilemma, Shell proceeds in eight powerful chapters to demonstrate, first, that anxieties resulting from the "essentially" fictive nature of kinship have profoundly impacted Western literary works, political events, and national institutions (especially the modern institution of the nation); second, that although particular responses to the kinship predicament are necessarily shaped by local customs and traditions, because the ideal of universal brotherhood effectively "recognizes no being that is both 'other' and 'human'" (193), any embrace of universalism means the slide toward particularist intolerance may follow; and third, in tracing the historical consequences of the indeterminacy of fact and fiction in kinship, acknowledging that indeterminacy in any analysis of modern nationalism.

Shell's cultural history of nationalism's entanglement with modernity begins in Elizabethan England, where popular anxieties about kinship defined the initial construction of modern liberal politics, ideas of nationality, and experiences of national pride. He argues that Elizabeth, a "purportedly bastard and virgin queen" (viii), responded to overwhelming evidence of her family's incestuous tendencies in a series of little-known writings, where she reconstructed herself through language in such a way as to contribute to the development of modern English political institutions. Elizabeth's legitimacy was radically assailed during the early 1500s by a web of charges and countercharges of incest involving her father Henry VIII, his first wife Catherine of Aragon, his deceased brother Arthur (Catherine's first husband), Elizabeth's mother Anne Boleyn, her uncle Lord Rochford, and aunt Mary Cary (née Boleyn).

Elizabeth began countering the attacks in her juvenile poem *Glass of the Sinful Soul*, completed in 1544: she appropriated and adapted to her situation a traditional response to the problem of physical incest that was entailed by Christian universalism. If all men are brothers, as the New Testament states, then all acts of sexual intercourse must be incestuous. Christian thinkers have struggled with that problem for centuries, and solved it in a few cases either by advocating abstention or by spiritualizing incest (if all humans are brothers and sisters [End Page 187] in Christ, then all acts of sex are holy regardless of consanguinity, a view that has led Christian radicals to advocate bigamy and freeloze). Elizabeth secularized the latter tactic in order to relegitimize herself; the purported product or perpetrator of physical incest, she re-presented herself as a national locus of spiritual incest, a kind of secular English Mary, at once mother, sister, and wife to the Britons: the Tudor line was thus made holy, its monarchy recast as a divine Protestant kingdom on earth. Shell contends that by spiritualizing her family's history of physical incest, Elizabeth initiated the formation of the modern English nation state and its liberal political institutions: as she "established herself as the virginal Mother and Wife of the English people" (92), they became siblings not of Christ but of the nation, and English politics became a "liberal estate" (viii), the basis of modern English nationality.

Yet even as Shell retrieves the process by which Christian universalism was secularized in the construction of modern liberal politics, he also demonstrates how that secularization facilitated the rise of illiberal, exclusivist, and intolerant nationalist movements like Nazism. Despite Hitler's programmatic insistence that Nazism was anti-Christian, its supreme being located only in the *Volk*, Christianity's "ideal cancellation of kinship by nonkinship was a necessary although by no means sufficient" condition for the Nazis dehumanization and extermination of Jews and Gypsies (195). Under Shell's account, the distance between an Elizabethan conception of all nationals as brothers and a Hitlerian conception of all nonnationals as nonhuman is short indeed: the former is, in effect, the ideological flipside of the latter.

Because Shell so thoroughly tracks the historical recurrence of Western universalism's tendency to become its opposite, rigorously resisting the claims of Christian or liberal ethics, never letting today's politics get the best of him, he can in the end theorize an effective response to the continuing problem of chauvinistic nationalism. True tolerance, he contends, "is neither genial nor effortless" (198). A human existence uninterrupted by the "catastrophes of war and genocide" will require a series of painful concessions and admissions (198). First, we must "avow openly the rightful coexistence of human terrestrials and national territories that we do not much like or like too much (because they are too little or too much like us)" (198), which means exchanging a universalist ethics for a particularist one that allows for the existence of human nonkin (like that of early Judaism or Muslim Spain). Second, we have to "admit in good faith as ours the particularist likes and dislikes that constitute political and sexual being" (198). And third, we need to accept a "never-ending vacillation between acknowledging that our kin are ours even as we know that it is deniable that they are, and denying that our kin are ours even as we recognize that it is probable that they are" (198).

Unlike analysts who maintain a commitment to modern liberal politics, Shell is willing to confront the dark side of universalism, even if it means, as his argument suggests, that universalist ethics are not a solution to the problem of particularist intolerance, but one of its causes. At the same time, even though his work is a thoroughgoing critique of Western universalism, Shell never indulges in feelings of superiority towards the people, ethics, or politics he studies. He thereby succeeds in making clear how powerful anxieties about kinship are, how appealing universalism is as a response to those anxieties, and thus how difficult it is not only to mount such a critique, but to implement the sort of solution it proposes.

### III

Shell's account of Western kinship helps clarify the problems that confront analysts of nationalism by articulating and avoiding the pitfalls entailed by liberal or Christian universalism. Julia Kristeva's earnestly engaged *Nations Without Nationalism*, a collection of essays for a wide audience that seeks to diagnose and propose a cure for the current resurgence of integral nationalism, is all the more affected by these problems because it doesn't completely avoid them. The dynamic evidenced only briefly in Mosse's *Confronting the Nation*, where a continuing commitment to liberal politics hinders full acknowledgment of liberalism's [End Page 188] entwinement with illiberal particularism, troubles Kristeva more frequently, in part because her analysis is so animated by today's politics.

Kristeva's first and most important essay, "What of Tomorrow's Nation?," encapsulates the admirable aim of the collection: the effort "not to reject the idea of the nation in a gesture of willful universalism but to modulate its less repressive aspects" (7).

The current surge of intolerance begins, in this account, with the contemporary "values crisis and the fragmentation of individuals" that has "reached the point where we no longer know what we are and take shelter . . . under the most massive, regressive common denominators: national origins and the faith of our forebears" (2). Kristeva diagnoses this "cult of origins" as "a hate reaction," both of "those others who do not share my origins and who affront me personally, economically, and culturally," and of "oneself, for when exposed to violence, individuals despair of their own qualities, undervalue their own achievements and yearnings, run down their own freedoms . . . and so they withdraw into a sullen, warm private world, unnameable and biological, the impregnable 'aloofness' of a weird primal paradise--family, ethnicity, nation, race" (2-3).

Kristeva contends that psychoanalysis offers a hopeful alternative to this "defensive hatred," inviting "us to come back constantly to our origins," not as a means of escaping personal anxieties or demonizing the origins of others but "in order better to transcend" those origins (4). Accordingly, she exhorts us to "recognize ourselves as strange in order better to appreciate the foreigners outside us instead of striving to bend them to the norms of our own repression" (29). Once we have done that, she suggests, we will realize that the "recognition of otherness is a right and a duty for everyone" and that "it is reasonable to ask foreigners to recognize and respect the strangeness of those who welcome them" (31). An enlightened embrace of otherness, she hopes, will cure nations of nationalism's ugliest manifestations. Such a solution may respond to our disgust with nationalist intolerance, but in light of Shell's analysis it appears at best naive.

Kristeva seems to sense the limitations in her initial cure. Almost as soon as she has articulated it, the topic and methods of psychoanalysis drop out of the text. Writing less as a psychoanalytic theorist than as a political activist, she begins to search for a more properly political solution in historical precedent, seeking a model of tolerance that would avoid the error of "fantasizing about an apocalypse or a new salvific religion" (4), but offer "the optimal version of integration and of the nation today" (31). After briefly surveying past efforts (none of which were entirely successful) to achieve such a finely tuned toleration--the Greek attempt to "balance a concern for benefiting from foreigners with one to keep those foreigners removed from Greek citizenship" (19); Paul's conceptualization of Christianity as a "community of foreigners" unified as a single *ecclesia* of "new creature[s]" in Christ (22)--Kristeva settles on Montesquieu's Enlightenment vision of "the social body as a guaranteed hierarchy of *private rights*, which he called *esprit général*" (31). This "NeoStoic" cosmopolitanism provides a model, she contends, of "how the individual and the different can be integrated in a higher whole that not only respects each of them but . . . gives them their requirements for existential difference" (28).

Kristeva finds the ideal of *esprit général* compelling because it "brings together the national and the cosmopolitan without . . . erasing national boundaries," and therefore "runs headlong into" a "mystical" notion of the nation, "rooted in soil, blood, and language," that derives from Herder, German Romanticism, Nazism, and drives the plethora of contemporary völkish nationalisms (32). She is attracted to the contemporary French anti-racist youth movement SOS Racisme, led by the aptly-named Alsatian-West Indian intellectual Harlem Désir, because it rejects the "xenophobia, racism, and antisemitism" epitomized by Jean-Marie LePen's National Front (14), and thus is animated by precisely that cosmopolitan sense of toleration which acknowledges difference while opposing the *Volkgeist*.

But while Kristeva, like Mosse, attempts to bridge the gap between liberal universalism and nationalist particularism by recuperating a model of liberal nationalism, her work is inadequately [End Page 189] attentive to the recurrent process Shell anatomizes, whereby well-intentioned universalism turns into its opposite. *Nations Without Nationalism* begins therefore to replicate those dynamics: Kristeva's essay on France's ultranationalist leader, Charles de Gaulle, starts turning away from her goal of cosmopolitan tolerance. Like many other young intellectuals in late-sixties France, Kristeva acknowledges that she too protested against the aging de Gaulle, criticizing especially his "paternalism" toward Eastern Europe and resistance to movements of colonial liberation in Algeria. Here, she reconsiders her youthful assessment of *le Général*: acknowledging de Gaulle's failures and autocratic tendencies, she offers him, hesitantly, as the sort of "psychological father" (73) who, she imagines, might be able to adjudicate successfully the competing claims of universalist tolerance and national identification, turning the cult of the nation to enlightened ends: "There you have a President who is conceiver and strategist of the national discourse," who can avoid "the pitfalls of tyranny" while "modifying circumstances for the good of an increasingly enlarged community" (75). Kristeva explains this defense of the autocrat she once assailed on the pragmatic grounds that while "one can wish that the very idea of nation, saturated through the mingling of economies and cultures, might open up on other unions where the bond between human beings would be located, thus forcing political discourse to move away from national constraints" (76), such an eventuality is highly unlikely. The next best solution might be the reign of some similarly enlightened leader (perhaps she imagines Désir as one).

Under Shell's kind of account, however, such a suggestion could become a first slip toward intolerance: the cosmopolitan writer yearns for an enlightened strongman to solve the problem of chauvinistic nationalism, a hope not entirely different from that which seduced a number of early-twentieth-century radical intellectuals into authoritarianism. By entertaining the dream that some select class, group, or individual might be able to transcend or recast history, creating a world of cosmopolitan toleration, Kristeva approaches the slope that Pound, for one, threw himself down. His embrace of authoritarianism also began, we recall, as an earnest search for social and political justice. Kristeva isn't Pound of course. But part of the point of Shell's book is that any universalism could at any moment begin moving from the heights of magnanimous tolerance toward the depths of race hatred.

So while *Nations Without Nationalism* is admirable for the urgency of its effort to rehabilitate a cosmopolitanism that acknowledges the claims of national identification even as it opposes nationalist intolerance, Kristeva's work is somewhat misled by that urgency, failing to maintain sufficient self-consciousness to recognize and resist its own tendency to replicate the dynamics of reversal inherent in universalism. That Kristeva stumbles should neither surprise nor inflame us, however; as Shell demonstrates, this sort of mistake is not an exception in the history of Western politics. It's the rule. Such moments warn us, rather, that in our efforts to analyze modern art and politics, or to respond to contemporary nationalist violence, we should be wary of the temptation to imagine ourselves enlightened enough to transcend the irrational appeals of nationhood and to imagine others who embrace varieties of particularist intolerance (whether nationalist ideologues or reactionary modernists) as utterly different from and inferior (in political wisdom or emotional development) to ourselves. For such a self-conception is not only a self-serving fiction, but also (potentially) a first slip on the slide to intolerance. That such a fiction still tempts in itself

demonstrates why we need studies like those by Mosse and Shell.

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