

Book Reviews

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Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antloev (eds.), *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Richmond: Curzon, 1996. 362 pp. £16.99 (pbk.).

This book started life as a workshop on 'Comparative Approaches to National Identity in Asia', held at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in May 1994. Benedict Anderson was the keynote speaker at the workshop. Though the keynote speech does not feature among the chapters, the long shadow of Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2nd rev. edn: 1991) is palpably present throughout, but most of all in the editorial introduction.

The volume builds on a main puzzle, lucidly spelt out by the editors at the outset. Citing Liah Greenfeld's *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) as a case in point, Tonnesson and Antloev assert that the general study of nationalism, being based on empirical examples drawn from Europe and its cultural extensions, is nothing short of a 'distorted reflection of the European precedents' (p. 1). As true comparativists, the editors derive the basic rationale for the volume from this basic assertion and claim that the Asian cases are intended to 'test the explanatory range of theories established from Europe'; and, in a heuristic way, those parts of the non-European experience that existing theory cannot explain 'can engender fruitful questions leading to new theoretical insights' (p. 3). This, by any reckoning, is a tall order, a worthy challenge for a single authored volume, drawing on a compact empirical field. That the case studies presented in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, spanning across whole continental land masses, stretching over historical and contemporary experiences, encompassing Japan (Tessa Morris-Suzuki), Siam (Thongchai Winichakul), Annam and Vietnam (Christopher Goscha), two empires on India (Peter van der Veer and Arild Engelsen Ruud), the Philippines (Niels Mulder), the Himalayan states (Graham Clarke), the Karens (Mikael Gravers), China (Torbjørn Loden) and two studies of Malaysia (C. W. Watson and A. B. Shamsul) exude the flavour of its central arguments and shows how much careful editing and willing co-authors can achieve together. An added bonus is the interdisciplinarity that draws on the rich ensemble of symbols with which nations adorn their intricate selves, masterfully expressed in the deft manipulation of political and economic arguments, reinforced with clever cartoons, symbolic representations of intricate cultural diagrams and iconography.

The main strength of the volume derives from the ability of its authors to show how actors weave their living spaces and collective identity together to give them the form of a cultural and political nation. That some such constructs do not eventually find a position of equality and dignity in the comity of all nations is a contingency of political history and international relations rather than being indicative of inherent flaws in the structural design of the national project. In the Pantheon of Nations, thus, there are no historical failures, only historical accidents. Seen in this vein, the

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empirical cases reported here are consistent with the main theoretical argument of Benedict Anderson but carry, by extension, a methodological problem that is germane to his theory. Is the collective act of imagining a nation, or, in more social scientific language, nation-building, an act of instrumental rationality, or is it a transcendental act for which there is no price, a collective effort to unleash a suppressed spirit, suppressed through the presence of a malevolent other, or an inadequate understanding of self?

This methodological difficulty in distinguishing between two radically different self-perceptions of the actors engaged in nationalist discourse manifests itself in two different ways in the volume. In the first place, despite its claims to the contrary, the volume is unable to take a clear position on the issue of whether there *is* an *Asian* form of the nation, as distinct from African, Latin American or for that matter, Western forms of the nation. Is there an irreducible *Asian* core of which Chinese, Japanese or Indian nationalisms are variations, or, are all nationalist projects necessarily the constructs of power-hungry entrepreneurs? Second, how does one account for the 'unbelievable forcefulness of nationalist sentiment' or the 'sacred intensity of nationalist feelings' (p. 38). The nationalist is (sometimes) ready to kill or die for his convictions. Death is the end of all felicity. So, the nationalist actor, operating in the sacred mode, elects himself out of the domain of instrumental rationality, which is the mainstay of modern social sciences.

In its response to these theoretical and methodological problems, the volume offers a promising way forward in the concept of the 'nations-of-intent'. Unlike imagined communities, which are often no more than fanciful notions of gifted individuals, the nation-of-intent is future-oriented and interactive, drawing its strength from the support and ideas of present and future members of the nationalist project. While still rather hazy in its conceptual framework, for it cannot yet discriminate between empirically inadequate explanations of Hindu nationalism like van der Veer's reductionism ('Gender and Nation in Hindu Nationalism') and the far more sophisticated and empirically grounded formulation of Hindu nationalism as a nation-of-intent (Ruud's 'Contradictions and Ambivalence in the Hindu Nationalist Discourse in West Bengal'), *Asian Forms of the Nation* certainly presents a step forward in the comparative analysis of nationalism.

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Pritam Singh and Shinder S. Thandi (eds.), *Globalisation and the Region: Explorations in Punjabi Identity*. Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Redwood Books, 1996. 416 pp. £18.99 (pbk.).

What is common to such widely dispersed cases of regional autonomy movements as Quebec, the Basque region and Scotland, located within

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