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Anthony D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic*, Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp. xv, 245

Review by Mino Mirshahvalad

It can be a way to celebrate the memory of the recently deceased sociologist who made a significant contribution to our knowledge about ethnic communities in pre-modern and modern eras with his *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1987).

The penultimate essay of Anthony David Stephan Smith seeks to tackle with a range of different questions. When did the concept of nation emerge? Is there any correspondence between this notion and nationalism? Can we mark a specific point for the appearance of nationhood and hence suppose a pre-nation period in the history of humankind? Is it legitimate to talk about a category called “ancient nations”?

Through this relatively short essay, Anthony D. Smith broadens horizons of his previous analysis on the ethnic roots of nations. The volume opens with a trenchant critique of the modernists’ myopia and Hans Kohn’s typology of civic and cultural nationalism. Spanning an impressive breadth of space and time, Smith intends to present his own version of ethno-symbolism. The main thesis of this study was advanced as a response to the Walker Connor’s article of 1990 that nation and nationalism were born with the French and American Revolutions. He distinguishes between nation and nationalism, and in doing so distances himself also from John Breuilly who believes that nationalism precedes the formation of nations.

Although the first two chapters are dedicated to an assessment of the dichotomy between modernists and primordialists, the objective of the book goes far beyond a simple presentation of this duality. *The Cultural*

*Foundations of Nations* investigates various forms that nationhood can take on, offering a realistic prism through which we can review current issues related to nations, states, ethnics and religions. The greatest contribution of the author is the challenge that he poses to our typical perception of nationhood.

The book discloses the vast and deep historical knowledge of its author about ancient history of the Mediterranean and the Middle Eastern societies. For instance, he is careful enough to create two different subcategories for hierarchical type of “public cultures”: one with a king-god (Egypt) at the height of power, the other, with a king-god representative (Persia) on the throne (pp. 76-77), demonstrating his awareness of the recent debates in Iranian studies. However, ambitious short works of wide breadth are not exempt of imprecision and the Smith’s is no exception. Discussing about ancient empires, the author illustrates the Achaemenids’ hierarchical order attributing an «early Persian “Avestan” religion» to them (p.55). In this way, he ignores an important fact. Establishing a tie between the first Persian Empire and the holy book of Zoroastrianism buttresses the position of the Pahlavi literature (*Denkard* and *Arda Wiraz-namag*) on the antiquity of the Avesta, but such a connection contradicts the results of the modern scholarship. Recent academics contend that no *Avesta* was set down under the Achaemenids and indeed the perspective provided by the Pahlavi literature depends on legendary accounts and as such lacks trustworthiness.

The Smith’s is an attempt to establish a mid-category between primordialist and modernist definitions of nationhood. Both fronts have their flaws; the primordialists offer an «asocial mystification of human interaction» (p. 9), and are unable to represent the «origins and cultural shape of nations» (p. 10). Modernists, on the other hand, not only confuse nationhood with nationalism, but also overturn the relation that exists between them (p. 3). Therefore, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations* was written to remedy the defects of these categories. Yet Smith demonstrates this clarity in his debate only up to the point that he defines the two profiles, but he fails to keep it when he himself should offer his third path. Smith contends that ethnics and some national sentiments existed before the advent of modernity and his attempts aimed at revealing their ancient roots in order to challenge the modernists’ stance. However, if he shares the idea that nations, differently from ethnics, are marked by the possession of specific and politicized homeland (p. 31), then we may ask what can disentangle his position from that of modernists? Although readers may expect to find the Smith’s answer to the question whether nationhood was fabricated in ancient era or not, the author refrains from giving a definitive and clear answer to it.

This penultimate work of the British sociologist, albeit not beneficial to all social contexts, especially where notions like nationhood are yet to be consolidated, is an effective contribution that presents fresh approaches to concepts like “nation” and “nationality” setting horizons far beyond European space and “modern” time.