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Kenneth Cmiel

The nation-state is under the knife. Writers, activists, scholars of all kinds are pulling out their blades and, with glints in their eyes, pursuing that bloated sot "the nation" at every turn. The books reviewed here are just a sample of the material now pouring out of university and commercial presses. Everybody wants to know: Whither the nation?

What fin de siècle mania is this? Clearly, the intellectual fascination is related to the varied ways that nationalist and antinationalist sentiments are being played out across the globe. And the crosscurrents are staggering. The new social movements of the West, such as ecology, multiculturalism, and certain strains of feminism, now attempt to transcend the nation-state frame. International capital, a key enemy of the new social movements, just as much moves to leave the nation behind; money now dances off satellites and across borders with an agility unknown in history. Then there is the regional push to expand beyond the nation, expressed in EU and NAFTA politics. Added to this are the revanchist nationalisms of the Right in Eastern and Western Europe, the businessman-savior nationalism of Ross Perot or Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, the strongly divergent opinions on nationalism alive outside the developed world, and the persistent “traditional” nationalism in places like China or Japan. Still another complication is the restless movement of peoples around the globe, all in search of financial or political security—Southeast Asian immigrant communities are now found in rural Wisconsin.

The first mistake is to think that there is one current at play, one wind blowing the world into the next millenium.

All this must also be set against the backdrop of the end of the cold war, which has liberated some nations, made others uneasy, and spawned a new bout of hysterical right-wing nationalism seen in figures like France’s Jean-Marie Le Pen or our own Patrick Buchanan. The end of the cold war has also opened the space for more speculation about the nation. It is not that such thinking did not appear before 1989. Almost everything discussed in this essay can easily be traced to ideological positions.
beginning to be staked out in the 1960s and especially in the '70s. But the altered world scene has moved these ideas to center stage.

The books here represent the range of thinking being done about the nation today. Liah Greenfeld and Julia Kristeva are willing to defend nationalism, albeit in strikingly different ways. The other books are all critical. This indicates something very important about the current situation: diverse voices are suggesting that the nation-state frame either has outlived its usefulness or was part of the problem from the beginning.

There are huge disagreements on the subject. Alvin and Heidi Toffler claim that by the middle of the next century "such nation-states as Germany, Italy, the United States or Japan will no longer be the most relevant socioeconomic entities and the ultimate political configuration. Instead, areas like Orange County, Calif.; Osaka, Japan; the Lyon region of France, or Germany’s Ruhrgebiete will acquire predominant socio-economic status. The real decision-making powers of the future . . . will be transnational companies in alliance with city-regional governments." Greenfeld, on the other hand, stands among those quite convinced that the nation-state will continue to be the most important political force in the foreseeable future (Greenfeld, "Transcending"; Smith 143–77). A parallel debate cuts to whether or not the nation-state should retain its prominence. "We need to think ourselves beyond the nation," says the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who hopes to find new transnational loyalties to replace national patriotism ("Patriotism" 411). But there are other important voices who question the wisdom of such a transcendence, the historian David A. Hollinger, for example, in his Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (1995).

Arguments about nationalism run the risk of getting soggy and vague right from the start without a very important conceptual clarification, one absent from far too much contemporary talk about the nation. What is at issue is not so much the nation as the nation-state. As opposed to the more amorphous categories of nation or nationalism, the nation-state is a specific figuration that champions a correlation between a collective people and a particular government that rules a bounded space. A sense of nationhood—those of black nationalism or the "Queer Nation," for example (see Berlant and Freeman)—by no means necessarily translates into a desire for a separate state. Nor does a state necessarily have to map itself onto a single nation. The nation-state correlation, as so many writers have noted in the past 30 years, is really an invention of the modern world. Prior to that, imperial dynasties and religious states were the most
common polities on the globe. One thing Greenfeld's book does is present an argument for why the nation-state appeared for the first time in the seventeenth century.

There will be both states and nations in the future. The question, with the flow of capital, people, and information moving so effortlessly across borders, is this: In what new ways will nation and state relate to each other? Is it true, as Appadurai claims, that "[o]ne important feature of global cultural politics . . . is that state and nation are at each other's throats, and the hyphen that links them is now less an icon of conjuncture than an index of disjuncture" ("Disjuncture" 304)? And if this is the case, what does it tell us about our future?

Greenfeld does not think the nation-state is a necessarily bad political entity. Nor does she think it a fading political force. Her book develops the thesis that there are various sorts of nationalisms, some destructive and others not. Good nationalism, Greenfeld explains, is civic and devoted to liberty. Bad nationalism is ethnic and given to collectivism. Politically, the book has a distinctly neoconservative edge.

Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity is a work of historical political sociology. Greenfeld traces the coming of nationalist ideology in five locales—England, France, Germany, Russia, and the US. As history of ideology, her book is a tour de force. She moves effortlessly from thirteenth-century France, through seventeenth-century Britain, to nineteenth-century Germany, Russia, and the US (she knows all the languages). The book is loaded with material on the rhetoric of natio, patria, and the transformation of those words in modern European languages. However one assesses her ultimate argument, Greenfeld has provided a wealth of information on how political actors deployed natio talk.

One of Greenfeld's principal scholarly points is to challenge the standard social scientific view that the nation is a by-product of modernity. According to this interpretation, capitalism, individualism, print culture, urbanization—the usual cast of modernizing suspects—hit a traditional culture, destabilize it, and raise the need for a new integrating force. The nation fills that role. This picture of the birth of nationalism is found in dozens of major books, including Benedict Anderson's justly famous Imagined Communities (1983).

Greenfeld claims that this interpretation puts the cart before the horse. Nationalism, she argues, is in reality the trigger for modernity. Elites conjure up the image of the nation either to get people to fight for them or to raise taxes. Calls to "the nation" eventually get translated into references to "the people." In
the end a more comprehensive sense of political belonging emerges. From this, Greenfeld argues, other modernizing forces are set loose. Scholars like Anderson get it backward, Greenfeld contends. The modern does not create the nation; the nation creates a desire for the modern.

Greenfeld has produced the most exhaustive account of the intellectual history of the nationalist idea around, at least through the mid-nineteenth century. Similarly, the book’s attack on the established version of modernization theory deserves serious consideration. Yet her study also has its problems (see also Hoffman). Greenfeld continues a long line of reflection on the nation that tries to understand the phenomenon through its origins. In this respect she remains trapped by the legacy of Herder. Such an approach has many uses but is not necessarily helpful in reflecting on the current status of nationalism. Greenfeld claims that her book provides a reference point for contemporary politics (488–91), a claim that depends upon her belief that the nation-state form is not in any serious danger. This is simply wishful thinking on her part. She does not even begin to grapple with the multitude of forces chipping away at the nation-state. Neither ethnic particularism nor transnational finance is seriously considered.

Greenfeld, by looking to origins, also misses some of the different ways that the nation-state has been imagined. She ends her book with the solidification of the US regime after the Civil War. There is certainly a lot of nationalist rhetoric at that point, and she is on firm ground when she says that no one threatens the breakup of the state after that. Yet when she uses this to explain the basic character of American nationalism, she assumes that origin is destiny, that basic orientations are set at the founding. Drawing on language from the 1870s, she finds that the US became a civic nation devoted to liberty. She does not come to terms with the twentieth-century welfare state as a form of nationalism.

Greenfeld’s distinction between a civic nationalism devoted to personal liberty and ethnic nationalism that is tied to collectivistic authoritarianism leaves no room for early twentieth-century welfare state thinking. Herbert Croly, in The Promise of American Life (1909), explicitly challenged the idea that liberty should be the primary political value, and he did this in the name of a new nationalism. This “new nationalism” was the slogan that Theodore Roosevelt used in his 1912 campaign for the presidency.

Nor was such thinking restricted to the US. In France the theme of “solidarity” was central to the nationalist reformers of
the early twentieth century. In the hands of Émile Durkheim it expressed a sense that the nation had a unified purpose and that the state had an important role in making the nation flourish. It fed, in other words, into reformist, early welfare state politics (Bellamy 58–104). Roland Axtmann has recently argued that when theorists like Durkheim and Max Weber made the concept of “society” the core of the social sciences, they tilted them to a nationalist bias that still plagues them today. Since “society” was always implicitly understood to be the “national” society, Axtmann argues, social scientists have had trouble assimilating the transnational forces currently at work all around us.

Other examples of this new turn-of-the-century manner of understanding the nation-state abound. The German revisionist Eduard Bernstein argued in *Evolutionary Socialism* against the internationalism of Marx. The worker is becoming a citizen, Bernstein argues, and the relevant frame for political and social action is the nation (160; 169–70). It is now well established that Bernstein was deeply influenced by Fabians, who expressed their own version of a nation-state social democratic ideology (see Shaw). Virtually everywhere one looks, early twentieth-century thought that urged a more positive role for the state connected this to a certain form of nationalism (see Bellamy).

Nor was this incidental. The argument that citizens were part of an interconnected nation, part of a national family, was critical to prying tax dollars from people who would never meet each other, of creating an “imagined community” that would support the positive state. Indeed, Croly, Durkheim, Bernstein, and the Fabians all developed the notion that national societies were connected webs and that citizens had responsibilities to fellow citizens. That nationalism has been a critical ideological prop for the positive state for the past 90 years.

Yet it is exactly this version of the nation-state that is most in danger today. Greenfeld is not alone in ignoring it: not one of the writers under review here spends any time with it or has anything good to say about it. Greenfeld, associating her “good” nationalism with those that prioritized liberty, tips her neoconservative hand. I would be willing to listen to the case she makes for this, but she does not make it. Instead, she stacks the deck by writing as if only two strains of nationalism are possible—that leading to the concentration camps or that leading to the US of the 1870s.

Kristeva is another defender of nationalism. Like Greenfeld, she defends a civic nationalism that she thinks far superior to ethnic nationalism. Still, she understands this somewhat differently from Greenfeld. Whereas Greenfeld sees civic
nationalism as devoted to liberty, Kristeva sees civic nationalism as based on contract. In Kristeva’s version what is important is that we agree to join together as a nation instead of seeing the nation as a matter of blood.

Kristeva’s interest is immigration, and the immediate backdrop for her writing is the rise of the right-wing anti-immigrant nationalism of Le Pen’s French National Front along with the emergent multicultural response embodied in the organization S.O.S. Racisme, which formed in the early 1980s to defend the rights of Arab immigrants. Kristeva wants to tread between these two positions. Civic nationalism is important precisely because it is unconcerned with ethnic origins. By making citizenship contractual and legal, it opens a way for the Other to be included. It is without any of the racialist hues of the National Front. “The cult of origins is a hate reaction,” she says (2).

On the other hand, civic nationalism does not denigrate “France” as oppressive and exclusionary. Here is her disagreement, always most politely stated, with what she perceives to be the message of S.O.S. Racisme. Wholesale claims that France and French history are racist, she says, lead either to massive withdrawal of native-born French from civic life or else to that hyperbolic nationalism whose “aggressive, paranoid excesses are well known” (52). In either case it will not do Arab immigrants any good.

Kristeva’s objections to wholesale denunciation are more than tactical. An immigrant herself who has become a French citizen, Kristeva thinks there are good things in the best of French thought. The very idea of civic nationalism is one of them. “The respect for immigrants should not erase the gratitude due the welcoming host,” she writes. “Only a misguided concern for Third World populations could prevent parties of the left from expressing that point” (60).

Kristeva also thinks the most enlightened parts of French culture have known the limits of nationalism. Her primary political commitments, she says, are universal and cosmopolitan. And she finds no better guide to politics than the words of Montesquieu: “If I knew something useful to myself and detrimental to my family, I would reject it from my mind. If I knew something useful to my family but not to my homeland, I would try to forget it. If I knew something useful to my homeland and detrimental to Europe, or else useful to Europe and detrimental to Mankind, I would consider it a crime” (qtd. in Kristeva 28). The key is not to destroy the nation but to put it in its proper perspective. Kristeva, who left her native Bulgaria years ago to escape Communist rule, saw too much of Stalinism to affect any disrespect
for universalism and human rights. Her sympathies are firm, complete with polemical complaints about fashionable French intellectuals who denigrate French traditions and the Enlightenment (37; 46).

Both Greenfeld and Kristeva understand that there is more than one form of nationalism. Both suggest that one can find "the nation" a positive value without deifying it as the highest value. Flattening out all "nationalism" to a single overweening thing is a curse of too much contemporary analysis and is evident in David Simpson's *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory*. Simpson, a very sophisticated analyst, here opposes "theory" to "nationalism." Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Simpson argues, the Anglo-American fascination with "common sense" was a way of countering those more radical strains of the Enlightenment that championed abstract rationalism and theory. British writers portrayed this supposed common sense as central to the national identity. If maintained, this common sense could successfully resist French radicalism, Germanic fogginess, and homegrown rationalists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, or John Horne Tooke. Much of the book explicates the different ways that late Enlightenment and Romantic writers came to terms with these issues. Despite the twists and turns of method from the Enlightenment to today, Simpson argues in the closing pages, contemporary cultural wars are still driven by the same division—theory, radicalism, and internationalism on the one side (literature departments); common sense, national identity, and conservatism on the other (William Bennett and Lynne Cheney).

This book is filled with many shrewd readings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. I was especially taken by Simpson's gendered reading of the Romantic sublime and by his account of Britain's understanding of German idealism and drama. But precisely because there is so much that is good in the book, I was sorry that I was not persuaded by his larger argument. Simpson's distinction between "theory" and "nation" is too rigid. He does not explore how "the nation" is itself a product of theory or how eighteenth-century radicals developed their own form of nationalism. Paine thought in 1776 that it would be "repugnant to reason, to the universal order of things" if America remained a part of the British Empire. But he also thought that the time was ripe because it happened "to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government" (89; 108). Paine's combination of universal reason, nationalism, and state formation in a pamphlet called *Common Sense* runs roughshod over the distinctions that Simpson tries to make.
Simpson does not ponder the theoretical roots of notions of common sense in the eighteenth century. Thomas Reid is not a part of his story, and he also ignores the ways that theory might not necessarily be progressive, as the case of Paul de Man should at least suggest. Most of all, Simpson does not indicate any awareness that polemical references to a "national identity" is not the only use to which nationalism can be put. He reifies the concept.

A very different book is Tzvetan Todorov's *On Human Diversity*, a study of "nationalism, racism, and exoticism in French thought" from the eighteenth century to the present. The book is a wide-ranging critical assessment of dozens of writers on these subjects, a good place to begin one's study of French intellectual history. Apart from the discussion of nationalism (Todorov is skeptical), there are also introductions to French thinking about race, non-Western cultures, imperialism, and scientism. The writing is lucid although a tad bland. Todorov has a distinct point of view, but he is always aboveboard in presenting it.

While Simpson is mostly attracted to the radical Enlightenment, Todorov openly and firmly defends political moderation. Montesquieu is a hero for Todorov, who cites the exact same passage from the eighteenth-century author that Kristeva does on the necessity of layered political sympathies. Todorov thinks that Enlightenment humanism is the best ideal there is. He argues that placing particularisms of any sort to the center of one's political universe is quickly destructive, a belief he uses to challenge both nineteenth-century nationalism and late twentieth-century poststructuralism.

It is the shift to post-Enlightenment culture that Todorov finds problematic. Nineteenth-century Romantics and positivists, he argues, both distorting Enlightenment ideals, inject the ugly disfigurations of scientism, xenophobic nationalism, imperialism, and racism into French culture (although Todorov finds Helvétius a harbinger of what would come). Michelet's nationalism was chauvinistic, Todorov argues. Tocqueville, for all his decency, was also an imperialist. It was Rousseau, on the other hand, who knew that "cosmopolitanism and patriotism are incompatible, and the former is superior to the latter" (394).

Yet Todorov does not want to let the Enlightenment off the hook completely. The best Enlightenment values—moderation, toleration, universalism—can be twisted to bad ends. This was, according to Todorov, what happened in the nineteenth century. Universalism was surreptitiously connected to ethnocentrism. "Our values are the universal ones" was the new argument, a position that led to an inflated sense of a world-historical mis-
sion, which is why Todorov finds Michelet’s “humanitarian” chauvinism about France to be closer to the nastier right-wing, anti-Semitic nationalism of the late nineteenth century than to the more moderate thought of the Enlightenment. Michelet, Todorov notes, insisted that the French nation was the home of “universal” values and had a historic mission to “civilize” the globe.

Todorov defends the universalism of moderation, tolerance, and decency as placeless, timeless ideals. They are universal in that they are nowhere embodied empirically but are rather abstract norms available to all. They can always be used, when appropriate, to condemn us as well as others. A firm believer in human rights, Todorov argues that it is just flat-out wrong to say that all thinking is necessarily ethnocentric. There is a strong neo-Kantianism running through this book.

For Todorov, it is of primary importance that humanism take precedence over nationalism (or ethnic or racial pride, or any other particularism). Nationalism, Todorov argues, has been one of the most destructive forces of the last two centuries, legitimating colonialism and helping to bring on both world wars, among other things. Yet Todorov does not make any simple contrast between “nation” and “theory.” He knows that we inevitably move through the world embedded in some cultural frame. Moreover, he thinks this is fine, giving people both a sense of belonging and the cultural resources needed to live. The question is how to keep this from tipping over into some racist or patriotic frenzy.

His answer is to distinguish the cultural nation from the political. The former is a legitimate source of pride. It is quite normal to feel an affinity for the music, literature, or cinema of our society, but it is quite destructive to feel intense loyalty to a state. Cultural loyalties can be multiplied, Todorov says, while political nationalism cannot. We can develop an appreciation for a different culture while not “losing” our own. That is not possible in the political version of nationalism.

Here Todorov parts company with Greenfeld and Kristeva. He is wary of all political nationalism. Contractual nationalism he finds a mirage. We feel a part of a group because we know its culture, he argues, not because we decide to join, as Kristeva claims. Todorov’s solution to the nation-state problem is to erase the hyphen. Tying one’s nationalism to the state leads to disaster. It is precisely at the political level that some universal humanism is so imperative. Keep the nation, Todorov argues, but distrust the state.

Todorov is an Eastern European émigré who, like Kristeva,
became a French citizen after escaping Communist rule. Both his sense that we can “add” cultures to those we are initially raised in and his distrust of ideologies that encourage state aggrandizement reflect this background, as does his deep commitment to human rights. He finds poststructuralist posturing offensively removed from the most pressing problems of our time—scratch any Parisian leftist, Todorov argues, and you will find someone whose intellectual beliefs are miles apart from his or her dealings with the world in everyday life. In much of this, he sounds very much like his fellow immigrant Kristeva.

Todorov’s argument is a subtle one with nuance that cannot be detailed here. Yet his claim that the nineteenth century twisted the Enlightenment to bad ends is only partially successful. Some of the less savory odors of the eighteenth century keep wafting up at the edges of Todorov’s account, making his bolder assertions about the Enlightenment less edible. Yes, people like Montesquieu thought that cosmopolitanism should triumph over nationalism, but others, like Helvétius, saw it just the other way around. Yes, the pseudoscientific doctrine of racialism took hold in the nineteenth century, but good old-fashioned gut-level racist cant was common 100 years before among chaps like Voltaire. I can readily assent to Todorov’s claim that the Enlightenment was the source of much that is good in our world but nevertheless still find it dirtier than he is willing to admit.

There is also a troubling gap in Todorov’s account of nationalism. Like Greenfeld, Todorov does not come to terms with early twentieth-century welfare state nationalism. Durkheim is not discussed at all. Neither is the broader French tradition of solidarism. The only nationalisms of the early twentieth century discussed are those of racists and failures. This is not only a historical gap; it has important political consequences as well. Todorov’s critique of nationalism might help defend citizens against the state, but it does nothing to suggest how the state might have positive, material obligations to those living inside its borders. Indeed, Todorov has not addressed the welfare state at all.

If Todorov champions the cultural nation at the expense of the state, Michael Walzer, in What It Means to Be an American, takes the exact opposite approach. Like Todorov, he worries about aggressive nation-states. Walzer, however, thinks the problem lies in an inflated sense of national identity. The problem is cultural. While Todorov wants to diminish the state, Walzer worries about the nation.

Walzer’s answer is a two-tiered set of loyalties. On the one hand, we should celebrate and nurture smaller ethnic bonds than the national. Walzer pleads for cultural pluralism. It is best that
we identify ourselves as Italian Americans or African Americans and with a very strong accent on the first half of the equation. But at the same time, Walzer argues, civic respect should be nurtured for the republic’s institutions. The voting booth, the public school, the First Amendment—patriotism should not be a response to an *ethnos* but to institutions and laws. By combining these loyalties, Walzer hopes, we can avoid the overzealousness of arrogant nationalism without simply falling into a *bellum omnium contra omnes*.

Walzer’s message almost exactly repeats Horace Kallen’s essays on cultural pluralism first published in 1915. There is, in fact, nothing much new in Walzer’s book. Yet what is new is importantly misguided. Walzer creates his own fictional account of American history, falsely assuming that Kallen’s cultural pluralism has guided US moderate progressivism since early in the century. That is just flat-out wrong. Pluralism was virtually absent from the Progressive movement, as Rivka Lissak’s *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890–1919* (1989) and John Higham’s *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (1955) demonstrate. The “progressive” position at that time was a defense of the melting pot, a position that was aimed at imagining a distinctively “national” identity. Croly, for example, gloweringly quoted Crèvecoeur: “He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of men” (9). Such a quote was put in the service of Croly’s larger design of forging a national community. And this national community was in turn connected to Croly’s state-building project.

The melting pot ideal did not disappear with Kallen. Richard Weiss has shown that it became a central part of 1930s New Deal ideology. It became an unthinking national faith after the war, and came under attack only in the late 1960s (Mann). It is only then that Kallen was resurrected as an important theorist. Still, Walzer is by no means wrong in arguing that nationalist rhetoric has done some bad things. It denigrated more particular identities by demanding that people “Americanize.” Theodore Roosevelt was a huge defender of the melting pot idea, gushing praise to Israel Zangwill for his famous play, but Roosevelt (like Zangwill) was nevertheless bitterly hostile to what at the time was called “hyphenated-Americanism.” No “Irish-Americans” allowed in his national brew. Such thinking could also be exclusionary. Roosevelt argued that the Japanese would just not melt, and he supported a ban on their immigration (Dyer 130–39). Finally, the melting pot ideal was also at times clearly coercive.
As Ronald Takaki notes in *A Distant Mirror*, turn-of-the-century policy designed to Americanize Indians was not only a failure culturally but also cost Indians much of their land. Similarly, educational reformers, driven by a desire for national unity and a distrust of difference, forced deaf schools to drop sign language and use only spoken English. This was supposed to mainstream the deaf, “Americanize” them, but it had horrible consequences, as most of those born deaf can never learn to speak intelligibly. Douglas Baynton has shown that it was only in the 1970s, when cultural pluralism became more acceptable, that this policy started to be reversed and signing returned to deaf educational institutions.

Walzer, then, is constructing a fictional lineage for his own political pluralism, conceiving it not as a recently important form of political imagination but as the core of twentieth-century reform. Walzer’s book, in other words, should be seen as a defense of 1970s liberalisms in the face of recent challenges, notably communitarian political thinking and more radical forms of multiculturalism. And it should be seen as painting a brighter and simpler picture of moderate progressivism than the facts will allow.

However attractive Walzer’s ideals may or may not be, it is worth asking in the middle of the 1990s if they have any viability. Can cultural pluralism be combined with pride in civic institutions as easily as Walzer hopes? The increasing importance of cultural pluralism in the US in the 1970s coincided with an increasing disgust with our politics. In general, this cynicism about civic institutions has not abated over the decades. At the very least, Walzer needs to say much more than he does about how this dual loyalty might be put into practice and how it would survive.

The same might be said for even more radical forms of cultural pluralism, examples of which are the works of Giorgio Agamben and Takaki. Agamben begins his short essay by discussing the fissures that operate inside of any supposed community. Most community talk is riddled with premature closure, with illegitimate and limiting claims of essence or historical destiny. What is needed is a way to think about community not as being composed by some defining characteristics (“Italians are . . .”) but made up of belonging pure and simple. This type of community needs no “determinate contents” (84), no defining identity. It respects potentiality above all. This sort of community Agamben calls a “whatever singularity.” Agamben here continues the work on community being done by Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Inoperative Community* (1991).
If community cannot be a closed thing, if it is forever open to the potentially new, then the dream of a national community is simply impossible. In Agamben’s community, the idea of something being “un-American” makes no sense, for there is no defining essence in a “whatever singularity.” Yet Agamben is also aware that capitalism and the state will continue. Indeed, he recognizes that after the fall of Communism, they are sweeping the globe. Politics, in the future, Agamben argues, will not be community building but the perpetual project of communities against the state, “a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization” (84).

I doubt Agamben’s new community is actually coming. It remains far from clear that communities without identities are emerging anywhere except in the febrile imaginations of a few philosophers. It is not that I dislike the dream. It is for me the most attractive dream there is. It is that I am skeptical that such “whatever singularities” are possible on more than the level of personal behavior. Politics is too clunky for such subtlety. Even the new social movements seem far more down-to-earth and prone to defining themselves than Agamben’s theorizing. Politics, alas, demands more leaden language.

Still, the image of the state fighting communities is one worth pondering. Its distance from earlier welfare state thinking could not be more dramatic. Instead of the state embodying the will of the nation, we have a picture of numerous communities at war with the state. It is, and I say this with no relish, a far more plausible picture of our emerging politics than Walzer’s happy pluralism. Just think of insurance companies, Perotistas, and gay and lesbian activists—all communities distrustful of the state, all committed to struggling with the state.

Agamben does not ask what this perpetual warfare will do to government. Like Walzer, he assumes that the state will trudge on as before. Yet if this warfare between humanity and the state is constant, is it not plausible to surmise that hostility to the state will become permanent? With the fiction that the state embodies the nation’s will dying, who will defend the state? Who will keep it from becoming the recipient of increasing rancor and from being permanently wobbly? Isn’t that a good way of understanding recent politics in the US? And as for Agamben’s own Italy—the past decade has revealed a public far more disgusted with the state than even in America.

Takaki similarly ignores the possibility that his thinking might do nothing to stop the erosion of the state. His multicultural history of the US, A Different Mirror, reflects a different
strain of radical thinking about the nation than Agamben's. Like Agamben, Takaki sees history as communities fighting the state. Like Agamben, talk of a single national community is suspect. But unlike the Italian writer, Takaki has no trouble with community definitions. He thinks not in terms of potentiality and flux but of ethnicities in conflict. And unlike Agamben, he is optimistic about the future, even when his own analysis should probably sadden him.

*A Different Mirror* is beautifully written. It tells the story of numerous ethnic battles from the seventeenth century to the present. Takaki has a truly brilliant talent for finding the words of average people and using them to illuminate particular situations. Mexicans, Native Americans, African Americans, and Japanese immigrants are just some of the voices that sound so clearly in these pages. Takaki is among the best writers of history at work today.

Takaki's story, a tale of unremitting brutality and oppression, would have done Hobbes proud. Nineteenth-century nationalism creates wars for manifest destiny that obliterate Mexican communities. Twentieth-century nationalism, among other things, inters Japanese Americans in concentration camps. Anglo-Saxons surface in this book almost solely to dominate all others, including Irish and Jewish immigrants. Killing Indians, refusing Chinese immigrants the right to become citizens, enslaving Africans in the seventeenth century and after the Civil War depriving them of their rights—this is the saga that Takaki tells. It is amply littered with the cruelest violence. Only when he gets to the 1950s does Takaki suggest any cross-ethnic solidarity, favorably portraying Jewish- and African-American collaboration in the Civil Rights movement. Even here, however, he notes the tensions that fray that alliance in the late 1960s. Yet after all this, Takaki holds out the promise that we will get together to build a new multicultural America. He closes with Walt Whitman, celebrating the "varied carrolls" sung throughout the country (428). His own story should tell him something else: ethnic warfare is the way of the world, or at the very least the way of our world.

To criticize Takaki for closing with Whitman is really to criticize myself. I have done the same thing (Cmiel). Yet upon reflection, I have decided I was wrong. We move in a far different mental universe than Whitman, and using his optimism to buoy us is far too simple. Whitman, for starters, believed in progress. Takaki is far more contemporary in denouncing progress and destiny talk as central props for the subjugation of those peoples who were not "modern" enough (50; 176). Whitman saw some spiritual force as guiding the course of history, a fact crucial to
his optimism. In Takaki’s text, however, we are left on our own, which makes me far more suspicious about any possibility of transcending our brutalities.

Takaki suggests that a better knowledge of the past will help us learn to get along (16). I respect Takaki’s optimism. It is, dare I say it, a characteristically “American” faith in the power of education. But is there any reason to believe that any history will get through to a public devoted to the O. J. Simpson saga? And even if Takaki’s history does get through, why shouldn’t his readers take the message to be “Watch your own” instead of the Whitmanesque embrace? Takaki teaches that our history is one battle after another. With no faith in progress, nor any God directing the course of history, any leap beyond the war of all against all needs far more explanation than a few words from Whitman.

Contemporary US politics are increasingly beset by challenges to the old welfare state nationalism. On the capitalist right are those who feel they have surpassed state and nation for a more global sensibility. Next to them is a massive group of disaffected nationalists, including the religious right, Perot supporters, and growing numbers of middle Americans who continue to identify themselves as “American” but who grow ever more hostile to the state. Finally, on the liberal and radical left we have those like Walzer or Takaki who distrust the nation but still hope that the state will be very active.

Increasingly, as Appadurai says, the hyphen in “nation-state” is a mark of disjunction. Everywhere the old welfare state nationalism is in retreat. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Bill Clinton’s campaign for health care reform. Distrust of the nation was nowhere to be seen in that rhetoric. “For the Nation,” read a bumper sticker I saw supporting the plan. Clinton’s own language was dripping in the old nation-state idiom. “We need to restore a sense that we’re all in this together and that we all have a responsibility to be a part of the solution,” he told the country when he unveiled the biggest state welfare venture proposed in decades. At times he seemed positively desperate to restore the nation-state hyphen to a place of pride: “But let me say this—and I hope every American will listen because it’s not an easy thing to hear—responsibility in our health care system isn’t just about them. It’s about you, about me, it’s about each of us” (White House Domestic Policy Council 100; 101).

Yet, as we know, the sell failed—miserably. Those who see a gap between state and nation are growing. Of course, one might point out how cumbersome the plan actually was. But less than logical legislation has had no trouble generating support at vari-
ous moments in the past two centuries. In fact, Clinton’s sell failed. There is too much of the new post-nation-state rhetoric in the air, on all sides, to make nationalist words work easily.

There was a great paradox at the heart of the old national welfare rhetoric, the idiom Clinton has on occasion tried to revive. On the one hand, it was the source of exclusion and coercion. Those early twentieth-century reformers were defiantly hostile to difference, intent on Americanizing everyone. If you did not fit in you were an outsider. On the other hand, this language was an ideological prop for the welfare state, convincing citizens that the taxes they paid to the state actually supported, as Lyndon Johnson used to say, “fellow Americans.”

The Left must realize that if the metaphor of the nation as family is subject to routine abuse by people such as Walzer, Takaki, or Agamben, it will be much harder to dredge it up successfully when a national health-care package is proposed. Liberals and progressives need to develop new ways to convince people that they should pay taxes to aid strangers materially.

All the writers discussed here who want to think past the nation take the state for granted. That is a fatal flaw. It is entirely plausible that the state will become the site of extreme contention even while it actually does less and less. We can already see this happening, and not only in the US. In France there are signs of the fraying of the welfare state (see Dufourcq; Rosanvallon). In Africa there are signs of massive breakdown of the state (Davidson; Kaplan). And need any mention be made of the ethnic warfare in Southeast Europe? In the US the state is increasingly becoming the site where anger is vented. Cynicism about the state both feeds this anger and then generates more cynicism.

Broadly speaking, the authors reviewed here develop two strategies for surmounting nationalism. Greenfeld and Kristeva simply want more important values to trump the nation. The others want to break apart the nation-state in one way or another. The instincts of the latter are humane. They understand how nationalism can be destructive. Yet it is not entirely clear that they understand the variety of ways that the ideology has been deployed. After all, as Nicholas Lemann notes on the tortured subject of race in America: “It is during the times when there has been a strong sense of national community that the problems have been addressed. The Civil War was one such time, at least in the Union states, and the long stretch between the New Deal and the Vietnam War was another” (352).

If the progressive vision of the nation-state is dying or dead, the Left has not figured out an appeal to replace it successfully.
Fantasy talk about “whatever singularities” does not help at all. Takaki’s picture of constant ethnic hostility will not lead to a happy multicultural future, I fear, but to sullen withdrawal or racist outbursts, as Kristeva suggests in her book. Even Walzer’s pluralism shows no real sign of convincing people to support fellow citizens financially. There is no reason to think that communities against the state will provide more security than the nation-state did, whatever the latter’s limitations. Indeed, the gales swirling around us suggest that it will provide less. Whitman is not the poet we need to conjure up our future. Instead, we should be pondering

what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

—W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”

Notes

1. Yet I would urge scholars also to look at Aira Kemilainen’s Nationalism: Problems Concerning the Word, the Concept, and Classification (1964). While Greenfeld supersedes this book in many ways, Kemilainen provides an introduction to twentieth-century academic scholarship on nationalism, something not a part of Greenfeld’s project.

2. Croly knew very well the “liberty” talk common in the 1870s. His book was a reaction against it. He argued that liberty was an aristocratic political goal and that fraternity, national fraternity, needed to displace it as the principal political value (193; 207–08).

3. See Godechot and Cmiel for discussions of this particular form of nationalism.

4. Simpson only discusses the reputation of de Man prior to the surfacing of his wartime polemics. He argues that hostility to deconstruction “was a function of his [de Man’s] internationalism and his commitment to comparative literature” (181). But deconstruction in the 1980s, especially in its American version, was suspect not because it was so cosmopolitan but because of its seeming distance from all politics.

5. On the growth of cynicism in the 1970s, see Ricci 114–15.

Works Cited


