
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 25

Response to Thomas Kaiser's Review of David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*.

By David A. Bell, Johns Hopkins University.

I am grateful to Thomas Kaiser for his exceptionally generous, thoughtful and fair-minded review of my book. I could not ask for a better summary of the book's main points or for a more interesting set of questions and criticisms. I do have disagreements with the review, but some of these are over matters of emphasis, and some are the result of misunderstandings that I could have avoided by stating my own argument more clearly.

The language of "will" is a seductive thing, particularly when it comes to writing about a historical period obsessed with the *volonté générale*. In my book, I put a great deal of emphasis on the idea that nationalists envision nations as things constructed through political will. I presented this idea as the key distinction between nationalism and national sentiment. The latter, I suggested, consists of a set of beliefs and attachments and is a phenomenon whose history extends back to the middle ages. The former is a political program aimed at actively constructing a nation and is peculiarly modern. Feeling that this distinction was one of the more original things in my book, I developed it at length, repeated it often, and emphasized the ways in which I saw the "construction" in question as a political process, a product of collective political will.

I did not, however, mean to suggest that nationalists—even Jacobin nationalists—have ever seen the nation as purely the product of human will. I understand why Kaiser may have seen me making this argument, but "purely" is his word, not mine. As I pointed out in my introduction, nationalists in fact almost always insist on attributing to their nation a primordial essence, linked to such factors as its blood, or language, or historical territory. They see themselves not as creating a nation *ex nihilo*, but as completing, perfecting, repairing, rebuilding, or, as the French revolutionaries were wont to remark, "regenerating" something that had once existed in more perfect form in the past. I remarked in Chapter V that even the most radical of the French Revolutionaries, even while explicitly breaking with the French past, nonetheless almost reflexively had recourse to the language of "re-"covery, "re-"birth, and "re-"generation. One might call this their historical "re-"flex. One reason they did so was to avoid one of the paradoxes of nationalism. Nationalists justify their political claims by reference to the nation, and in doing so take the existence of the nation fully for granted. Yet at the same time, they propose programs which treat the nation as something as yet unbuilt or incomplete—in need of unification, linguistic reform, a more fervent national spirit, a new form of national education, etc. Nationalists escape this contradiction by pushing the source of national legitimacy back into history, suggesting that the nation established its rights at some point in the past, but now needs to be brought back to its former splendor.

For this reason, I am entirely in agreement with Kaiser's remarks about climate and geography and about history. French nationalists of all stripes have most definitely considered these things as foundation stones of the French nation. I did not mean to suggest otherwise. My point was rather that with the coming of the French Revolution, many of the French ceased to see these factors as sufficient. They started to believe—very suddenly, over a period of little more than a year in 1788-89—that despite

these factors France was still not yet a true nation and could only become one through a concerted program of nation-building—that is, through the exercise of collective political will. I don't think that Ernest Lavisse or Jules Michelet, both of whom belong squarely in the republican nationalist tradition, would have disagreed with this point. They both believed that a French nation had existed, in a certain form, in the distant past, for instance in the time of Joan of Arc. However they both also believed, passionately, that for France to be a true modern nation, medieval forms of national unity were no longer enough. To be a true modern nation, France needed the Revolution and the nation-building that accompanied it. I agree with Kaiser that the post-Revolutionary republican left historicized its national vision in a manner the Revolutionaries themselves would have found troubling. However, I think that the continuities between their thought and that of the revolutionaries are more important than the discontinuities, in large part because of that historical "re-"flex, which persisted even through the Terror and which anticipated the historical turn taken by republican nationalism in the nineteenth century.

In short, to respond to Kaiser's first principal criticism, I agree with him that French revolutionary nationalism had much in common with earlier representations of the nation. However, I would still defend my point that it was, in one fundamental sense, radically different: in its emphasis on the idea of nation-building—the idea of the nation as a construction project that might begin with already-existing foundations but did not, could not, stop at those foundations. This is why I placed so much emphasis on the fact that the language of "building" or "rebuilding" the nation, ubiquitous after 1789, is almost entirely absent before 1788 (the principal exception being in the works of Rousseau, whom I identify as one of the intellectual progenitors of the idea).

Kaiser also suggests that I skip too easily over the threats to French republican nationalism that arose after the Revolution, particularly by the Catholic Right, and that perhaps in general I do not pay enough attention to the many different varieties of nationalism. Again, I agree with him. My principal interest in the book was to trace out the genesis of republican revolutionary nationalism, which I see as the dominant form that nationalism has taken in France. (I of course agree with Kaiser about Vichy being an authentically French regime, but it hardly had the legitimacy of the Third Republic and represented what would have remained a distinctly minority tendency, had it not been for the trauma of 1940 and the Nazi occupation). I regret not having done more to map out the many varieties of French nationalism, but in the end stand by my initial sense that to do so would have come at considerable cost to the book's unity and concision.

But more importantly, I would still defend my proposition that in crucial ways French republican nationalism has been paradigmatic: that it expresses in a particularly clear and dramatic way an essential feature shared by all varieties of nationalism, including even the Vichyite variety. This essential feature, again, is the idea of nation-building, of the nation as a political construction or reconstruction. Vichy, for all its attachment to "tradition," arguably launched upon the most radical program of national rebuilding in all of French history, a program aimed not only at changing the social structure and habits of thought of the entire French population but also at purging the nation of "undesirable" and "alien" elements. Nothing is more evocative of the underlying similarity between Jacobin and Vichyite nationalists than the name the latter gave their program: the "National Revolution." Just as the Revolutionaries sought to use the methods of the Catholic Church against the church, so the Vichyites sought to use the methods of the Revolution—nationalist methods—against the Revolution. I went so far in my book as to suggest briefly—drawing on the work of Geoff Eley—that the French republican nationalist experience is even paradigmatic for such an apparently different case as that of imperial Germany.[1] In general, I would align my work with that of scholars such as Anne-Marie Thiesse, who have rejected the often self-serving distinction between "civic" and "cultural" nationalism and emphasized the basic similarities between all forms of modern nationalism, at least in Europe.[2]

In short, the principal differences between Kaiser and myself concern the extent to which we can see nationalism (as opposed to national sentiment) as a peculiarly modern and essentially unitary phenomenon, and the extent to which we can see French republican nationalism in particular as a paradigmatic case. I accept many of Kaiser's qualifications and am deeply appreciative of his careful reading, but in the final analysis I stand by my original argument.

One final note. I would like to draw the attention of on-line readers to one experimental aspect of the book which Kaiser did not mention: its internet appendices. While the book itself does not include a bibliography, I have placed on line roughly 140 pages of additional material, including a full bibliography, the original French texts for my citations, and the full texts of several short works that I discuss. This material can be found on-line at my web site: www.davidbell.net, and I welcome comments and suggestions on it.

NOTES

[1] See esp. Eley's essays *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1986).

[2] See Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999).

David A. Bell
The Johns Hopkins University
dabell@jhu.edu
www.davidbell.net

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172