

Book Review

Anne-Marie Thiesse, *The Creation of National Identities, Europe, 18th-20th Centuries* (=National Cultivation of Culture, vol. 26). Leiden/Boston: Brill: 2022, XII+234 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-36670-1

It is quite a peculiar feat, as Series Editor Joep Leerssen noted in the foreword of this book, that while Anne-Marie Thiesse's *La création des identités nationales* [The Creation of National Identities] has been translated in numerous languages – including Czech and Japanese – an English translation (up till now) had been lacking, even though, as Leerssen points out, the book constitutes a 'fundamentally important work' that holds an 'inspiring value'.

Reading *The Creation of National Identities*, one can only wholeheartedly agree with Leerssen: on the one hand lament the tardiness of the English translation whilst simultaneously recognizing the 'inspiring value' this work still has, 24 years after its initial publication.

The book is divided into 3 general parts that follow the creation of national identities in Europe from the late 18th century up to the 20th century. Part 1 consists of the 'rediscovery' of the ancient cultural traditions and artifacts that would act as the basis of the invention and development of national identities from the late 18th century up to the revolutionary year of 1848. Guiding the reader through a wide array of examples – ranging from the creation of 'national' epics, the role of language in the invention of a national identity, to the growing



importance of heritage, architecture and history – the book analyses how individuals and associations all across Europe – casting away the ‘universal’ culture that was based on the Greco-Roman heritage – would scour their regional heritage, searching for a cultural artifact (sometimes fabricated, sometimes genuine) that could act as the foundational piece that would foment the development of a national identity.

The first part of the book immediately gives an insight into the two fundamental principles that underpin Thiesse’s analyses, and simultaneously highlight why this book still holds relevance today. First of all, the book provides an exhaustive number of examples all across Europe. Thiesse is able to connect the more known cases – e.g. France, Germany, the United Kingdom – together with cases that provide unique and compelling insights – such as Norway, Estonia or Romania for example – that add to our general understanding of the formation and development of national identities across Europe.

This diverse array of cases highlights the second, and from my perspective, most important (and inspiring) facet of the book: from the onset, Thiesse embraces a transnational and comparative perspective that underpins all the analyses. As she explains, the quest for the creation of a national identity has always been intrinsically international: ‘there were no national antiquities that did *not* form part of the common European treasure’ (p.47).

The consequence of this transnational approach is twofold. First of all, the book is able to portray the creation of national identities in Europe as an interconnected process, highlighting how actors and associations in different states and regions would correspond with others or would emulate practices from different regions that had proven successful. Chapter 6, analysing the role of ‘foundational epics’ across Europe, is an illustrative example of this. Noting that ‘the world of European epic was particularly closely connected’ (p.86), the chapter delves deeper into the

transnational characteristics of the 'discovery' (and creation) of such 'national' epics. Using the case of Finland, Thiesse analyses how the formation of its foundational epic, the *Kalevala*, was the result of a transnational process of cooperation (and funding) between different regions and actors. Moreover, because of its literary (and financial) success, the *Kalevala* would subsequently act as a template for other regions and countries to follow suit, with the creation of the Estonian epic the *Kalevipoeg* a clear example that made reference to the Finnish case.

The example of the *Kalevala* which acted as a model for other countries or regions to adapt or imitate, illustrates the second fundamental element that is crucial to the book's transnational approach: because of the comparative methodology, Thiesse is constantly able to generalize cultural trends in Europe, presenting an overarching model which was (partly) applicable or relatable in the numerous cases that are analysed. The result is that the book can present itself as a sort of 'roadmap' that can assist further (comparative) research on cases or themes that were only briefly mentioned in the overall analysis, once again illustrating its present-day relevance.

This becomes apparent in the following two parts of the book. At the end of Part 1, Thiesse argues that more attention has to be given to the 'ongoing and continuous diffusion of the national idea in progressively widening circles', explaining how the interplay between the production and consumption of cultural and material goods would ultimately result in the nation's identity to become 'self-evident' (p.119).

The next two parts of the book would further explore this process, with a key role attributed to the emergence of national folklore from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as a fundamental cornerstone of the nation's identity, ultimately becoming the natural 'horizon' which would frame an individual's daily life.

Part 2 delves deeper into the origins and evolution of folklore in the second half of the nineteenth century. Structured similarly as Part 1, the book provides a wide array of examples – including the creation of ‘authentic’ folkloristic costumes, the development of ‘national’ landscapes, and the growing prominence of world fairs to present and promote a national folklore – tied together in a transnational perspective, noting how ‘cultural nationalism reverted time and again to cross-pollinations’ (p.142), despite the growing exclusionary features that would underpin certain characterizations of a national identity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Crucial in this part is the attention given to the growing role of the national (and global) consumer market – spurred on by the process of industrialization – that underpins the transformation of a national culture into a self-evident daily reality.

Consequently, because of this ever-growing diffusion, ‘at the dawn of the twentieth century, the principal elements of the “checklist” of identity were clearly established’ (p.177), leading to the third part of the book which further explores the intricacies of national identity in the ‘era of mass culture’ (p.177). In particular, the last part of the book pays specific attention to the process of ‘educating’ the masses through joyous activities such as sport and tourism, in particular focusing on the way these processes played out in totalitarian states – both communist and fascist – during the interwar period. While the shortest part of the book, Part 3 remains true to the overall structure of the book, and provides certain examples and themes that can (and have been) further analysed in the decades following the initial publication of the book: the field of tourism history for example has burgeoned in recent years, providing both an addition to the examples provided in the book (e.g. the analysis of tourism in Nazi Germany) and new cases that have helped to further develop our understanding the role tourism has played in the creation of national identities, and its always transnational character.

The tourism case illustrates how the book is still able to generate new questions and themes to further compare: one can ask for example whether the overall model of the creation and diffusion of European national identities from the 18th to the 20th century is applicable to other continents? How for example can we relate the development of the United States – only briefly mentioned in the book – and the British Dominion of Canada during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the model presented in the book, and can their similarities/differences further help our understanding of the formation of national identities? Or how did the development of the numerous ‘pan’-national movements in Europe during these centuries impede or contribute to the formation of national identities?

Raising these questions, above all, illustrates how this book, as Leerssen noted in the beginning, still holds ‘an inspiring value’ today, and is a testament to how this book, twenty-four years after its initial publication, is still worthy of critical engagement and discussion.

Kas Swerts
NISE/University of Antwerp