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**Contribution to the ASEN Debate on Joep Leerssen's *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History***

***Nations and Nationalism* 19(3): 411-16.**

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Let me first say I read Joep Leerssen's *National Thought in Europe* with great pleasure and sympathy, finding it a wonderfully nuanced account of the slow ideological evolution of ideas of national character or 'ethnotypes' as he calls them. It included many narrative by-ways in its account that were either new to me, or much more subtly developed than I had encountered before. Particularly interesting were some of the root sources of ethnotyping practice that Leerssen identifies. First, I was fascinated by the way he traces the impulse toward cultural categorisation back to medieval distinctions between the civilised, socially-controlled 'urb', and the wild and dangerous hinterland. Secondly, his identification of Tacitus and his recovery during the Renaissance as a key source for the rhetorical juxtaposition of the virtuous primitive and the degeneracy of the over-civilised, prefiguring the rhetoric of the noble savage, was very illuminating. And thirdly, I was very intrigued by his identification of the role of early modern drama in the formulation and stabilisation of stereotypes of national character, as part of the playwright's craft of working within dramatic conventions. These observations and many others made the book rich in insights and a pleasure to read.

As the narrative advances these feed into more familiar (to me) themes in the rise of nationalist thought in Europe. These include: ideas of geographical and climatological determinism in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Montesquieu); notions of patriotism and demos in the Enlightenment and revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the German-cum-romantic reaction to French cultural domination and conquest; and finally the great nation-state building projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and their violent convergence in two World Wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the book, in a more prescriptive vein, our contemporary world of the European Union, the reconstitution of former soviet states in eastern Europe, new migrations of peoples, and the post-9/11 demonisation of Islam, is presented as a battleground between continuing cultural essentialism and more promising impulses towards something like Habermas's civic, 'constitutional patriotism'.

It is a bit of a challenge to set out a debate when one finds so much to enjoy and agree with. But one always finds in such well-elaborated accounts conceptualisations and arguments that could be approached differently, viewed from a different angle. I will try to do this. Whether that will result in 'debate' in the narrow sense, or simply a diversified view on the subject, remains to be seen.

I have been asked to pay some special attention to the idea of 'ethnotypes', so I will try to anchor my comments to that concept. It seems best to start with Leerssen's definition of this concept:

I propose to locate [nationalism] in a tradition of ethnotypes—  
commonplaces and stereotypes of how we identify, view and characterize  
others as opposed to ourselves. In tracing the development of national  
thought and nationalism, it is important to follow, alongside the socio-

political 'nation-building' developments that take place in and between societies, also the discursive patterns of self-identification, exoticization and characterization that take place in the field of culture (Leerssen 2006: 17).

As my comments proceed, it will become clear that much hinges on how we understand the relationship, and distinguish between, the 'socio-political' and 'the field of culture'. I offer two lines of inquiry into this idea of ethnotypes. First, I ask whether we can adequately limit our account of evolving ethnotypes in Europe to the ideological universe of Europe. And second, and at more length, I ask whether in regard to nationalism, ethnotypes as they take shape after the 18<sup>th</sup> century are really the 'heart of the matter', or perhaps better understood as a secondary effect of a more fundamental political problem, that posed by the revolutionary idea of popular self-rule.

*The scope of European ethnotypes:* Leerssen's project is to reconstruct the development of stereotypical ideas of national character in Europe. I want to question how much we can really demarcate this as a process internal to Europe. As already noted, among his root sources for this ideological process are early, more general divisions between the civilised and the wild, between the legitimate centres of rule, and those in the periphery (e.g. Ireland) who must be subordinated and brought under the control of civilisation and 'proper' Christianity (Leerssen pp. 25-35). I suspect that this aspect of the process in question is not just a matter of early formation, but of ongoing composition of a system of ethnotypes. Just as medieval kings in Europe sought to colonise their hinterlands, by the modern period of nation-building, the universe of 'colonised

others' had been pushed out to a global arena of strange and difficult peoples. I suspect that the 'typing' of Europeans vis-à-vis each other, and in regard to 'non-Europeans' were in a complex symbolic dialogue.

One indication of what I'm suggesting is found in the illustrations on p. 215 of the chapter on 'Ethnic Nationalism and Racism'. There we see in parallel three posters/cartoons from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries demonising, respectively, Irish, German and Bolshevik enemies as 'ape-men', as backward, destructive forces. It is difficult to not to imagine that part of the wider symbolic context of these representations was an international race-typology in which non-European peoples, especially sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants in the Americas, were commonly likened to 'apes'. In effect, a European discourse of national types appears to articulate with a long-standing sliding scale between the civilised and the savage, the evolved and the backward, that operates in a transnational arena<sup>1</sup>.

Conversely, as Leerssen clearly recognises, the revalorization and codification of national 'folk' cultures and languages that was so characteristic of central and eastern European nation-building projects in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hroch's 'phase A'; 2000), was certainly in dialogue with a wider ethnographic impulse that reached well beyond Europe's borders. Surely the national discovery of the native nobility and virtue of various groups of European peasants, in some sense replayed the romanticization of 'primitives' encountered because of European colonial expansion, as 'noble savages'. Granted by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europeans and European descended settler societies had largely forgotten the potential 'nobility' of those they encountered and subjugated, and instead institutionalised

racialist notions of 'savagery' instead. But in some sense the ideological manoeuvre of revalorizing the rustic peoples had already been rehearsed in super-European context, and was thus available for internal re-application to European peasantries.

Again, arguments against the decadence, over-refinement and despotism of various European aristocracies and their mode of rule (especially France), have often drawn on orientalist conceptions of decadent states and societies in the 'east' (e.g. the Ottoman Empire). It is perhaps difficult to draw a sharp line between these rhetorical 'otherings' of non-Europeans, and the European ethnotypes that Leerssen directs our attention to, which play on similar evaluative juxtapositions. Finally on this point, I would simply question the idea of a specifically European discourse of national identities, full stop. I have argued elsewhere that nationalism in general should be viewed as arising out of the transatlantic social universe created by European colonial expansion, involving especially the rivalry of British, French and Spanish empires in the New World, and the interdependent crucial junctures of revolution/rebellion in the British colonies in 1776 and the French homeland in 1789. I think the relevant universe of ideas and ideological interactions feeding into the idea of nations spanned the Atlantic, and involved non-European others, including indigenous peoples, slaves and even such odd interstitial societies as pirates. I question whether Europe is indeed the complete heartland of nationalism (Hearn 2009, see also Kramer 2011).

Of course, we must sometimes demarcate boundaries simply to make investigations manageable, and there is a certain sense to treating Europe as a

bounded unit of analysis. But my argument on this point is that the more one looks, the more one will find the field of ethnotypes analysed by Leerssen bleeding into a larger ideological field of human categorization.

*The structural conditions stimulating ethnotyping?:* My second line of questioning, partly broached above, involves how we conceptualise the entire historical account of modern nationalism, and the causal processes that underpin it.

In Leerssen's account, nationalism is a highly codified symbolic system of 'ethnotypes', symbolic conventions for differentiating one's nation from all others, highlighting its uniqueness, and for characterising nations and nationals and locating them within a taxonomic system. This system crystallizes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the heyday of nation-building in Europe. Contributing to its formation are the successive pressures of Napoleonic conquest and resistance, and subsequent adjustment and consolidation of more sharply defined territorial states. These provide the historical crucible out of which the system of ethnotypes emerges. Everything before this period is cast as various 'source traditions' feeding into this coalescence, including the radical ideas about the nature of political authority and legitimate rule that came to the fore in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like many modernist accounts of nationalism, Leerssen's is 19<sup>th</sup> century-centred.

As I've already intimated, mine is an 18<sup>th</sup> century-centred account. It is not simply that the relevant symbolic universe of 'significant others' is wider than Leerssen perhaps allows. I would argue that an account of the rise of nationalism must be anchored in an account of transformations in the structures of rule, in the very institutions of politics, government, and their legitimation.

And, that what makes nationalism in the first instance, is the problematic positing of 'a people' with a right to self-rule. The attempts to substantiate and characterise these peoples, and compose taxonomic systems of such peoples, is a secondary effect of the initial problem posed: who are the people? ('what is the third estate?', see Sewell 1994). The novel revolutionary governments of 1776 and 1789 were ideologically and practically compelled to enact systems of government based on the idea of a demos, a people, a 'social contract', the general will. But it is the chronic indeterminacy of what exactly binds these 'peoples, contracts, wills' together, that has made a constant call to culture, ethnicity, or sometimes encompassing ideologies (religious or political) to fill in the void.

Profound historical transformations don't happen overnight, not even in one or two major political revolutions. But these revolutions need to be understood as the breaking points of previous systems, systems that were explicitly conceived as, and relied upon, vast, over-extended systems of patronage, running from monarchs on down. In the case of the British colonies of North America that would become the United States, Britain had established colonies in a variety of ways as quasi-self-governing entrepreneurial projects and experiments in religious community. Bound to the homeland more by trade than by effective rule, developing their own indigenous patronage networks only loosely articulating with those of the political core, when material conflicts arose over taxation and covering the cost of recent international war with France, the power of patronage was too thin and brittle to hold across the Atlantic (see Wood 1991). In the case of the French Revolution, a sclerotic monarchy and



aristocracy sat atop growing middling ranks that were effectively excluded from the main channels of patronage, despite clearly contributing as much to the life and economy of the country as those ensconced in those privileged networks.

The added stress of economic crisis caused that network to snap and collapse, to be briefly replaced by the effervescent dream of pure demotic rule.

The new forms of popular democratic government that eventually took hold in both cases, and set the model for most subsequent political revolutions (Armitage 2007), realised their demotic ambitions in limited ways, excluding women, indigenous peoples, slaves, and those of limited property. But those very exclusions have been problems for the definition of the nation ever since, and gradually altered by the pressures of nation-building. But my argument would be that it is the very blankness of this new canvass of political identity that is the crucial factor in the subsequent 'filling in' of the blank with various ethnological congeries of language, race, custom and so on. As Leerssen so skilfully shows us, this will have been done not out of whole cloth, but through an artful elaboration of long-standing conventions of cultural differentiation, combined with modes of scientific inquiry such as philology, to build up bigger and sharper images of national character.

Granted in central and eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rather than a response to imperial collapse, this 'filling in' was contrived in anticipation of the end of old imperial regimes, or attempts to create nation-states across an array of petty patronage systems (principalities)<sup>2</sup>. But these attempts to build the nation 'from the other end', in advance (while trying to make it look like it was always there in the form proposed) was made possible by those initial major ruptures of the 18<sup>th</sup>

century which put self-rule from below by relatively large populations on the map of political possibilities.

There is no disagreement here between Leerssen and myself about the general sequence of events; but the crucial historical junctures, the pivots on which history turns, are identified and prioritised differently. He does discuss the 18<sup>th</sup> century developments, particularly in terms of the political ideas of figures such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Sieyès (2006: 71-92). He emphasises in this context the absence of a settled use of the term 'nation', and the omnibus use of the term 'patriot' for those committed to this new form of people-hood (Smith 2003). For me this simply underscores my point. These new entities were brought into being under force of circumstances in which, for the key actors, the answer to 'who are we?' seemed relatively self-evident. It is only with time, political consolidation, the generalisation of the paradigm as a political strategy, and its invocation in fundamentally different political situations, that 'patriot' begins to need the support of something more essentialising, more rooted in place and culture. I would also note in passing that these essentialised notions of national identity based on language, race and culture are not the only means of filling in the blank of the overly-theoretical demos. Fundamentalist brands of religion and political ideology have also served, and continue to serve, this purpose.

It is perhaps telling that in the final part of the book where Leerssen begins to look forward to a time after the historical storms of nationalism, that he invokes Ernst Renan as a calmer voice of reason, rejecting racial and linguistic essentialisms of his day, and instead characterising the nation as an historically

formed 'daily plebiscite' (2006: 227-35). This appears to begin to point a way out of the darkness, a path that seems to lead toward Habermas in subsequent pages. But as Leerssen himself notes, Renan's famous essay points back to that original 18<sup>th</sup> century conception of the nation as self-determining demos, and while it may point to a way out, I think it also points back to the most significant origins of the phenomenon in question.

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<sup>1</sup> I have one minor quibble with the passing representation of monogenism and polygenism on p.211. While it is true that entrenched, supposedly scientific ideas of deep biological difference between 'races' persists through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the biblical account had offered the main support for monogenecist beliefs, while the pseudo-sciences of biological race tended to support polygenicism. The irony of Darwin's theory is that provided an alternate monogenecist explanation that dispensed with the biblical account and made better sense of the zoological data (see Stepan 1982, esp. ch 4).

<sup>2</sup> And of course one version of the *Sonderweg* thesis in regard to Germany is that it was in part the failure to fully displace an older military-aristocratic ethos of power patronage with a full-blown idea of demos that led to the disaster of fascism, a true modern nation-state only really forming after 1945 (cf. Elias 1996, Wolf 1999: 197-273).

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