

Caspar Hirschi, *The origins of nationalism. An alternative history from ancient Rome to early modern Germany* (Cambridge - New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) xiv + 241 pp., ISBN 9780521764117.

ROUNDTABLE REVIEW, AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

AND DEBATE

4. Duck or quack? On the lack of scholarly soundness and decorum in Joep Leerssen's review (Caspar Hirschi)

'Keep quiet and trust your readers!' was the answer of an experienced scholar ten years ago when I had just published my first book and expressed my bewilderment about a reviewer who seemed to have misunderstood my argument deliberately. I will always be grateful for his advice because it has taught me an important lesson in scholarly decorum and it has also spared me many unnecessary disputes. After all, it does not make much sense to write books if you cannot trust your readers.

So why reply now to a review of another book of mine? When I was approached by *Studies on National Movements* in the summer of 2013, the idea presented to me was a round table review with three contributors starting the discussion and me commenting on their critiques. I accepted with pleasure. It appeared to me that this was a good opportunity to discuss key arguments of the book from various angles without running the risk of a tit for tat with a single reviewer. The situation now is a bit



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different. Instead of three reviews there are only two, one of which, written by Steven Grosby, was published in July 2012, and has been openly accessible ever since. When it first appeared in *Reviews in History* I declined the offer by the editor to comment because I saw no reason to break the proven rule of silence, particularly as Grosby's piece looked interesting enough by itself. It would thus be inconsistent and slightly unfair to the first publisher if I did so now.

So there remains the review by Joep Leerssen, which prompts all sorts of questions, though not many that would allow for a productive debate about my arguments. Still, some of these questions have relevance beyond the book, and this is why I decided that, despite the change of circumstance, I would keep my word and write a response.

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The first issue I would like to address has little to do with the content of Leerssen's text, but rather its pre-publication history. In early 2015 I was invited to give a keynote at a conference on 'National identity formation in early modern Europe' at the University of Nijmegen. When I arrived the organiser of the conference told me that she had received an email with an alarming review of my book attached. It was sent by Leerssen and interpreted by the organiser as a sign of disapproval at my invitation. At the time, the editors of this journal had already sent me Leerssen's text, but I was still waiting for the other reviews. It was thus a bit odd to realise that before the planned roundtable review had even taken shape, its first and only contribution so far had already started to take on a life of its own in the nationalism research community. A few months later, amazement turned to astonishment when I attended a conference on 'Nationhood before modernity' in Oxford and was greeted by a well-known English modernist with the question: 'What do you say about Leerssen's review?' When I told him that it was not published yet, he mentioned that Leerssen had sent it to him, too. Apparently, Leerssen preferred to have the debate decided by networking his way through digital back channels before other reviewers, let alone the author himself, had anything to say. The simulation of an open debate serves the purpose of driving an unwelcome

perspective on the history of nationalism out of the field before it can actually be discussed.

As far as the review itself is concerned, Leerssen accuses me of committing three cardinal sins of historiography: using 'distortive anachronism', presenting history as 'a straightforward linear trajectory' and explaining important events 'monocausally'. I will start with the motif that runs through the review in multiple variations, anachronism. Lorraine Daston once said that historians, despite all their differences, were united, among other things, by 'a huge fear of anachronism'. Leerssen plays on this fear by portraying me as a serial sinner. According to him, my book contains a 'wealth of historical detail', all presented, however, in a misleading way. The sources I quote – contracts, missives, legal opinions, chronicles, commentaries, letters, speeches, broadsheets etc. – may look as if they have something to do with nations and nationalism, but actually they have not. This is a heavy charge, and one would expect it to be supported by evidence based on a critical re-examination of at least some of my key sources. However, Leerssen does not offer a single misinterpreted document to corroborate his accusation. Instead, he refers to famous men such as Ramses II and Assurbanipal, Alfonso of Burgos and Nils Ragvaldsson of Uppsala, Attila the Hun and Sartre, Goebbels and Goldhagen. These men do not share many characteristics, but they have one thing in common: they do not figure in my book. Even Schottelius, who is given most prominence in Leerssen's review, is only mentioned once in my book and, by the way, not labelled a nationalist. So what are all these names dropped for? They serve to entertain through ridicule (Ramses, Attila etcetera), guilt by association (Goldhagen), or mock counter-witnessing (two bishops at the Council of Basle indulging in 'erudite tribalism' – whatever that may mean – allegedly disprove my argument about the long-term significance of the Council of Constance for the construction of nations). Equally entertaining are the forays into ornithology, gastronomy and motorised mobility. However, what might work as polemic does not necessarily work as proof.

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Let's have a closer look at Leerssen's own version of the famous animal proverb. He says that something may look like a duck, walk like a duck and quack like a duck, but be in fact a goose. What should this signify exactly? Is it that something appears to be a duck at first sight, but on closer inspection turns into a goose and thus also looks, walks and quacks like a goose? Or is it that something seems to be a duck and continues to look like a duck, yet cannot be a duck because ducks have never been sighted in these areas? As Leerssen sees no need to expand, he must understand his version in the latter sense. He is absolutely certain that nationalism is a uniquely modern phenomenon, so when confronted with an abundance of sources from pre-modern periods that point to the contrary he must conclude that the content cannot be what it appears to be. In the end, this attitude deems the study of sources irrelevant in the quest for new historical knowledge and, at the same time, it reduces the possibility of adding new historical knowledge to existing conceptual frameworks.

This is exactly what Leerssen's accusation of anachronism amounts to: it is not about the interpretation of my sources, but about my use of the word 'nationalism'. Leerssen sticks to an old argument that is still used by many historians, although it is more suited to time-travel daydreams than historiographical research. He complains that I apply 'the word nationalism to periods antedating its actual usage' and, even worse, that I do it 'with cheerful insouciance'. Of course, the idea here is that serious historians explain the past in the language of that past and not in the language of the present. As consistent as this may sound, it is neither practically possible nor theoretically desirable. Leerssen's own language is a case in point. It would be easy to argue that Leerssen's accusation is hypocritical because he is guilty of the same sin. In his book on *National thought in Europe* he speaks – shall we say, with cheerful insouciance – of 'humanism in the early fifteenth century' or of 'Tacitus's democratic primitivism'. Evidently, the word 'humanism' was not in 'actual usage' during the early fifteenth century and neither were the Romans of Tacitus' time familiar with the term 'primitivism'. But why take examples from Leerssen's book when his review contains similarly frivolous anachronisms? Surely the most ironical of them is the phrase which Leerssen – not once, but twice – sets against my concept of pre-modern

nationalism. This is 'national feeling', an expression that is, be it in English, German or French, alien to medieval and early modern sources and for an obvious reason: it belongs to the language of Romanticism, which Leerssen studies in his book and, similar to Romantic authors, re-projects on pre-modern periods.

It is not my goal, though, to welcome Leerssen to the club of historiographical cardinal sinners. My point is that his inconsistent reference to anachronism is the symptom of a bigger conceptual flaw not unusual in nationalism studies. He falls victim to the essentialist fallacy. When Leerssen demands that historians should only use vocabulary available to the people they study he fails to acknowledge that even if we wrote about Tacitus in the language of the *Annals* or about Goebbels in the jargon of German Nazis, we would not cut through to the essence of history, but, by the simple process of selection and composition, build new constructions out of old constructions – just without admitting it as such. When he argues that speaking about nationalism in the Middle Ages is the same as assuming that there were buses in Lincoln's days, he regards 'nationalism' as a thing in the world, not a perspective on the world. Equally, when he speaks about 'primitivism' in Antiquity, 'humanism' in the Renaissance and 'republicanism' in the early modern period he does so as if they were things in the past and not projections on the past.

Why is Leerssen able to accept certain 'isms' as historically sound, while rejecting others as 'distortive anachronisms'? Why does he even condemn a phrase such as 'illegal immigrants' for the seventeenth century, when official travel documents had been in use for several centuries and when cities and principalities had policies in place to detect and expel strangers who had entered their territories without permission (a practice German authors alluded to when trying to expel 'foreign' words from the German language)? The answer, I think, is simple and can be derived from what I said above his misapprehension of conceptual frameworks: Leerssen confounds linguistic conventions within history writing with historical truths per se, and thus treats conventions as if they were sacred. Speaking of ancient primitivism, Renaissance humanism or early modern republicanism has been an established convention for a long time, whereas speaking of pre-modern nationalism has not. Conventionally,

historians relate nationalism to modernity. Conventions, however, are products of routines rather than of rationality, and while some have heuristic value, others do not make much sense when being scrutinised. This is exactly the point I make about nationalism in my book.

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Conventionally, terminological distinctions between modern and pre-modern forms of nation formation are derived from nationalist language itself. A popular distinction, even accepted by a die-hard modernist such as Ernest Gellner, is the one between nationalism and patriotism. It enables various binary oppositions with both epistemic and normative dimensions: modern-pre-modern; artificial-natural; extreme-moderate; aggressive-defensive; territorial-local; western-eastern; totalitarian-democratic etc. Most of these oppositions echo the uses of the two words in everyday speech, where 'nationalism' is often treated as an aberration of 'patriotism', resulting in many self-declared 'patriots', but hardly any 'nationalists'. I do not see how this normative dichotomy could be adequate to differentiate pre-modern and modern nation formation, all the more as 'patriotism' would ascribe a degree of stability and homogeneity to pre-modern political culture that does no justice to the transformations of national discourses in the late medieval and early modern period. As I argue in my book, 'patriotism', as an analytical term, only makes sense when being attributed to 'fatherlands' that are not constructed as national communities of honour, as are, for instance, ancient cities, medieval kingdoms or early modern principalities. Without this clear separation, a relapse into moral tales about good old patriotism turning into bad new nationalism is hard to avoid. This, I am afraid, is what happens to Leerssen when he contrasts 'Enlightenment patriotism' (understood as 'republican' and 'democratic') with 'the nascent ideology of nationalism' (understood as 'authoritarian' and 'anti-democratic') in his book. Such judgmental language is better suited to a moral philosopher than a historian, and indeed, Leerssen's own moral tale is inspired by Jürgen Habermas' ideal of 'constitutional patriotism', according to which it is both desirable and feasible to create, in Leerssen's words, 'a sense of solidarity between taxpaying citizens' without any 'sense of cultural

identity involved'. Here, again, we are in the realm of study-room daydreams.

More problematic still is the terminology used by Leerssen to reject my argument in his review. As already mentioned above, the assumption of a historical development from 'national feeling' to 'national thought' to 'nationalism' inevitably invokes the Romantic teleology of a rising consciousness of national belonging from ancient to modern times. If you want to find an exemplary linear trajectory, here it is – a historical upward movement from the guts to the brain. 'National feeling' proved to be a handy term to project nationalist notions on to heroes of the distant past even if they had never expressed any such notions themselves. After all, if they were just 'feeling' their sense of national belonging, the logic went, they could not yet speak about it. Leerssen, though, does not seem to be guided by this shaky logic, as he attributes the term 'source-traditions of national feeling' to pre-modern authors who clearly wrote about nations. So what does he mean with traditions of feeling – if this wording makes any sense at all? Did these authors only feel, but not think when they were writing about nations? As Leerssen distinguishes them from later proponents of 'national thought', we would have to come to such an absurd conclusion.

Again, writing a history of nation formation that evolves from pre-modern 'feeling' to modern 'ideology' only makes sense when sticking to an essentialist attitude, according to which nations emerged as something genuine but later turned into something false. Similar problems arise with terms such as 'national identity' or 'nationhood' as pre-modern antecedents to modern 'nationalism'. Apart from essentialist undertones, these terms rather impede an understanding of nations as 'contested terrains', with different groups seeking to enforce their respective constructions of the nation's 'true character'.

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So if the conventional language to distinguish pre-modern from modern forms of nation formation is of little heuristic value, what better alternatives are available? The answer given in my book is not, as Leerssen insinuates, that we should treat anything and everything as nationalism.

First, I argue for a strictly constructivist approach that analyses nations first and foremost as products of specific forms of speech, which are in return understood as products of specific political and cultural circumstances. Secondly, I introduce 'national discourse' as an umbrella term that covers 'all forms of speaking about nations' including, for instance, anti-nationalist cosmopolitanism or academic nationalism studies; the reason why it is important to consider these forms, too, is that they also play a role in the construction of nations. Thirdly, I treat nationalism as a form of national discourse 'that creates and preserves the nation as an autonomous value, 'autonomous' meaning not subordinate (but neither necessarily superior) to any other community' (p. 47). This definition is directed against two widespread misconceptions of nationalism: a) that it claims the highest rank within a 'hierarchy of loyalties' and b) that it forms a 'doctrine' similar to the dogmas of a codified religion or even an 'ideology' such as communism. My point is that nationalism is best understood as less fixed and more malleable than doctrines or ideologies. So when Leerssen writes that I see nationalism bound to a 'coherent ideology' following the Council of Constance and then criticises me for seeing 'stable ideological continuities' over many centuries, he imposes his own misconception of nationalism on my book and then blames me for prolonging it into the pre-modern past. It is a perfect straw man. Equally, if he had read my definition of nationalism closely, there would have been no need to ask why Ramses II is not to be considered a nationalist.

The only definition in my book that Leerssen discusses is that of the 'nation'. He even cites it to demonstrate how 'all-embracing' and thus useless it is. In order to make his case he gives two examples of 'human aggregate' that would also be covered by my definition: a city and a football team. Really? Let's re-read the definition. It starts with the term 'abstract community', which, for the sake of careless readers, is even specified in the same paragraph as 'with most of its members not knowing and never seeing each other'. Does a football team fall under this category? It would, to put it mildly, be interesting to imagine a game of football between two teams whose players 'never see' most of their teammates. How about cities? Are they 'formed by a multipolar and equal relationship

to other communities of the same category' (i.e. other cities)? You would only need to take a look at a modern or medieval map to see the nonsense of such a proposition. Towns and cities are – historically, legally, geographically etc. – set against the countryside. In other words, they form a bipolar and unequal relationship to the world surrounding them. Although some cities were stuck in long-lasting competitions with other cities, it would be odd to argue that the city, as a specific type of abstract community, was formed by such competitions.

Based on the definitions of nation, nationalism and national discourse, my book contains three main lines of argument as to why it is historically justified and analytically useful to speak of nationalism before modernity. First, it presents a great variety of sources – textual and visual, political and legal, scholarly and popular – whose language and content correspond to what is defined as nationalism in the book, and to what, I guess, most readers would regard as expressions of nationalist attitudes (thus Leerssen's refuge in a parody of the duck dictum). Furthermore, it develops a long-term perspective to demonstrate that modern nationalism 'could only become such a mobilising force because of its presence in politics, scholarship and art of long ago'. This perspective is based on the idea that nationalism is not to be understood as a modern 'invention', but as a pre-modern product of 'bricolage' – assembled by 'pulling existing bits and pieces out of diverse contexts and putting them together in a form unknown before'. Nationalism is thus described as a discourse which could easily be rebuilt and thereby adapted to changing circumstances. In other words, my long-term perspective is quite the contrary of what Leerssen calls – in yet another display of a straw man – a 'baton of tradition' handed down through the centuries. The third line of argument is that the concept of modern nationalism needs to be recalibrated, too, in consequence of my re-evaluation of pre-modern nationalism as a discourse dominated by scholarly elites. To quote from the book again:

Most modernist theories understand nationalism as a mass phenomenon and are principally devoted to the question of how it could have become widespread. As legitimate as this is, I do not think the criterion of nationalism's mass appeal is particularly helpful to understand the historical development of nations. It

might be more instructive to use nationalists' proximity to power as a leading benchmark. My point is that nationalists always spoke and acted in the name of the people but often did not need popular support to reach their goals. Even those nationalist movements which led to the foundation of nation states both in Europe and on other continents were predominantly carried out by elite minorities, who sometimes comprised a very small number of people. (pp. 15-16)

So while mass appeal can be a useful criterion to distinguish modern from pre-modern nationalism, it may be more important still to emphasise that while pre-modern nationalists had limited access to power and only rare opportunities to influence politics according to their desires, modern nationalists managed – often after long and fierce battles – to establish themselves in the centres of power permanently.

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Having discussed the issue of anachronism at great length, the two other cardinal sins I am allegedly guilty of can be dealt with more swiftly. As to the 'straightforward linear trajectory', Leerssen is satisfied with a single sentence from my book to make his point:

Even if the *nationes* at medieval universities had not much in common with later nations, they marked an important step towards them. (pp. 80)

This sentence is indeed typical of a book such as mine, but for other reasons than Leerssen claims. If a book covers a time span of more than 1500 years, it needs an overarching narrative to hold the historical analysis of different periods and places together. In my case this narrative is concerned with the long-term process that made the nation possible. So when treating a particular moment of historical change within this process one always has to do two things: analyse the particular reasons for this change and integrate the results into the bigger picture. Otherwise, the book could not be more than the sum of its parts. This is the purpose of the sentence quoted by Leerssen. If he still thinks that speaking of 'an important step towards' something is proof enough of a 'straightforward

linear trajectory' then he should be reminded that one can always take a step back or to the side or detour completely. In fact, my book contains several such non-linear movements, and even a glance at a chapter title such as 'From earth to heaven and back: the Middle Ages' would suffice to recognize this. To give another example from the conclusion, this time with reference to the early modern period:

In the previous chapter, I described the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a time largely dominated by religious fundamentalism. My argument was that after Renaissance humanists had introduced the concept of autonomous nations engaged in a multipolar competition between equals, the Reformation quickly re-established a bipolar and unequal system, which separated believers from infidels, saved from damned. (p. 213)

Given such passages, Leerssen's accusation of a 'straightforward linear trajectory' looks like an attempt to throw mud at the wall in the hope that some of it will stick.

The same can be said about his accusation that I explain important events 'monocausally'. Here, it is not even clear what he is referring to. I suspect it stems from my analysis of the Council of Constance, which Leerssen treats as the centrepiece of my book, even though it represents just one important transformation among many. The leading argument about the Council is that during its power struggles we can observe how 'nationes' turned from 'concrete corporations' into 'abstract communities' of honour for the first time. This is not exactly a causal, let alone a monocausal argument. I never suggest that the Council was the cause of nations as we know them, and neither do I claim that the new understanding of 'natio' replaced or even eradicated older ones. The question guiding my argument is, if you will, a Kantian one: what was the condition allowing for the possibility of nations as abstract communities of honour? The question actually helps to avoid simple cause-and-effect arguments, and the answers given are formulated accordingly:

This match of words [i.e. 'natio inclita' or 'honor nationum'] only became possible through the medieval labelling of certain corporations as *nationes*. And with the new understanding of *nationes* as representative bodies and the subsequent blend of *nationes principales* and *particulares* at Constance, the collective honour of a corporation was able to flow into an abstract community that transcended the barriers of the medieval society of orders. (p. 87)

You need a lot of imagination to read a monocausal explanation into this. Expressions such as 'became possible' and 'was able to' are clearly not made for statements of cause and effect.

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Looking at Leerssen's review in total, I cannot help but deplore a missed opportunity for a good debate. At the same time, I think it was important to respond to his sweeping charges and his pre-print, back-channel propaganda. It is one thing accepting criticism, but it is a different matter when serious academic debate is undermined to preclude unwelcome competition. The purpose of my refutation is to encourage all those nationalism scholars who are not yet familiar with my book to read it and form an opinion of their own. The book clearly wants to provoke, but I believe it merits a higher level of debate than the one launched by Leerssen.

It seems particularly ironic to me that Leerssen fashions his criticism as a defence of serious historical scholarship but violates basic scholarly standards in several regards. He makes heavy accusations without producing solid proof, is guilty of charges he raises against me, speaks at length about men who do not appear in my book, while failing to spell one of its prominent figures, Hutten, correctly, and he misreads a simple definition just to score a cheap point.

In the end, the duck-dictum rebounds on Joep Leerssen, but in a more solid and sophisticated version than the one he invents. A few years ago, the historian of science Steven Shapin ended a review about a book on pseudo-science with the following observation: 'A rule of thumb for sound

inference has always been that if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. But there's a corollary: if it struts around the barnyard loudly protesting that it's a duck, that it possesses the very essence of duckness, that it's more authentically a duck than all those other orange-billed, web-footed, swimming fowl, then you've got a right to be suspicious: this duck may be a quack.' Nobody doubts that Joep Leerssen is a serious historian, given his impressive publication record. If we had just this one review, though, we could not be so sure.