

## ***Textes et contextes***

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

9 | 2014

**Le Temps guérit toutes les blessures : la résistance à l'autorité de l'Histoire dans les concepts de nation et de nationalisme**

# Time Heals All Wounds: Resisting the Authority of History in the Concepts of Nation and Nationalism

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**Mark Niemeyer**

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Mark Niemeyer, « Time Heals All Wounds: Resisting the Authority of History in the Concepts of Nation and Nationalism », *Textes et contextes* [], 9 | 2014, .

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PREO

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Introduction

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## **Introduction**

- 1 Nations, in contrast with states, are generally recognized within the intellectual community as more or less artificially created entities. And while this view seems to contradict the way in which many people actually think about their own particular nations—perceiving them as natural units, somewhat like families, to which they often feel deep ties—the arguments supporting the view of nations as “invented” are compelling and long-standing. As early as 1882, for example, Ernest Renan—rejecting the claims of race, language, economic interest, religious affinities, geography and military necessity—declared in his lecture “Qu’est qu’une nation” (“What is a Nation?”), delivered at the Sorbonne, that “A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle.” People are members of a nation, he asserted, largely because—at least in theory—they want to be; and the very existence of a nation, he stated, is “an everyday plebiscite” ([1882] 1996 : 240 & 241).<sup>1</sup> In *La*

*Tentation de l'Occident (The Temptation of the West)*, published in 1926, André Malraux expressed a similar conception of the nation: “The mind creates the idea of a nation, but what gives it its sentimental force is a community of dreams. Our brothers are those whose childhood was played out to the rhythm of the same epics and legends that dominated our own” ([1926] 1984 : 97).<sup>2</sup> The reality of a nation, thus, is, to a great extent—and indeed somewhat ironically—in the minds of its people. And it is considerations such as these that led Benedict Anderson, in his now classic study, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, to define the nation as “an imagined political community.” As he states in his “Introduction,” “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (2006 : 6).

- 2 Near the end of the book, Anderson suggests that one powerful mechanism in the construction of the imagined national community, which helps strengthen its unity, is a tendency to resist the authority of history and to forget—or rather to simultaneously remember and forget—former divisive conflicts between often bitterly opposed groups and to recast these conflicts as internal disputes or “family feuds” that become inscribed as part of the national heritage or “family history,” often flying in the face of facts in order to do so. Anderson, in fact, cites Ernest Renan’s mention in his lecture of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre of 1572 and the Albigensian Crusade of the early thirteenth century as archetypal French examples of this phenomenon. In both cases, Anderson notes, bloody conflicts were rewritten as “reassuringly fratricidal wars between—who else?—*fellow Frenchmen*” (2006 : 200). Other examples offered by Anderson include the Norman Conquest of England (in which an invading foreigner, William the Conqueror, is transformed into a sort of “Founding Father” of England) and the American Civil War (in which the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States is represented as a war between “brothers”). In the twentieth century, he suggests, similar processes of rewriting history can be seen in certain “national” presentations of the Spanish Civil War and the Russian Civil War.

- 3 The articles in this issue of *Textes et Contextes* offer an indirect examination, exploration and reevaluation of Anderson's concept of the "reassurance of fratricide" in a wide variety of contexts, using different approaches to study the phenomenon of resisting the authority of history.<sup>3</sup> They treat various historical periods, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, and show how a rewriting of national history affects the ways in which the past is presented and perceived. The studies focus their analyses, in one way or another, on cultural aspects of the "reassurance of fratricide," sometimes confirming and sometimes challenging Anderson's assertions, in examples taken from England, Canada, the United States, Ireland, Germany, Spain and France.
- 4 The article that reaches the furthest back in time is Frédérique Fouassier-Tate's "Amnésie collective et réécritures de l'histoire dans les deux tétralogies historiques de Shakespeare," which examines the rewriting of English history in Shakespeare's two historical tetralogies.<sup>4</sup> As Fouassier-Tate notes, it was precisely at the time when these history plays were written that the concept of realm was shifting toward the concepts of state and nation. And these dramatic works, which do not represent simple reflections of the politics of their times, tend to both mask and reveal certain internal tensions in English history. The article, thus, does not fully confirm Anderson's suggestion that the rewriting of national history primarily serves to minimize former tensions, but it does, to a large extent, emphasize the importance of forgetting in the construction of national narratives—which include these plays by Shakespeare—and their role in creating an imagined national community, whose very constructed, or artificial, aspect they often highlight.
- 5 Mathilde Köstler in "The *Grand Dérangement* - A Wound Not Healed?" looks at the mid-eighteenth century deportation and dispersal of the Acadians—who had been living in British Canada—in what is commonly known as the *Grand Dérangement*. These British citizens of French descent can certainly be considered as victims of a fratricide, at least to the extent that one can see their British countrymen who forced them out of their homes and off their lands as their "brothers." Her focus is on the perspective of the Cajuns in Louisiana (who make up a significant part of the Acadians' present-day descendants) and their attempts to rewrite the history of the

*Grand Dérangement* in the wake of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, which itself can be seen as an example of viewing a past atrocity as a sort of "reassuring fratricide." The Cajuns, who have been seeking recognition, if not retribution, for this violent act of what at least one historian characterizes as an early example of ethnic cleansing, have gained an at least partial victory in the Queen's *Royal Proclamation* of 2004, which acknowledges the injustice of the *Grand Dérangement*, without actually apologizing for it.

- 6 Two articles focus on traumatic events—major wars in fact—in mid-nineteenth century America and the repercussions these conflicts had on the construction of national identity. Jeffrey Swartwood, in "Mixed Messages and Conflicting Loyalties: Reevaluating the Californio Community of San Diego during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848)," looks at the Californios, or Mexican residents, in the then small city of San Diego during the Mexican-American War. This community, which after the war was over tended to increasingly depict itself as a homogenous and unified entity (to a large extent in opposition to the Anglo culture that quickly began to dominate the city after the conflict), had, as Swartwood shows, been characterized by internal division before and during the Mexican-American War. It is, in fact, this "invented" unity of the past that in part has characterized the identity of the Hispanic community of San Diego up to the present day. Marc S. Smith, in "Painting the United States' Civil War: Or Creating a Brotherly War," analyzes paintings that depict various aspects of the American Civil War (1861-1865), no doubt the archetypal fratricidal conflict in the context of United States history. The American Civil War is also an archetypal example of how a country transforms such a conflict into a "reassuring" fratricide. As Anderson himself notes, "A vast pedagogical industry works ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great 'civil' war between 'brothers' rather than between—as they briefly were—two sovereign nation-states" (2006 : 201). Smith's focus on paintings produced from the 1860s to the 1890s shows that the "pedagogical industry" of depicting the war as a "family feud" began before the war was even over and was certainly not aimed exclusively at "young Americans." He also makes it clear that scenes of domesticity were important in creating a "reassuring" interpretation of a

conflict that cost more American lives than any other war in the nation's history.

- 7 Half of the articles in this collection deal with twentieth-century tensions and conflicts in Europe. Cornelius Crowley's study, "How to Do Things with Words, and Deeds, and Blood," focuses on the Easter Rising and the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, events that occurred amidst the great nationalistic struggles that characterized the First World War. Crowley offers a probing interrogation of just what the "authority of history" means in the context of nationalistic movements and shows how Irish leaders of the independence movement tried to present a unified front during the struggle for independence, in part through a claim to be representing the spirit of Irish history.
- 8 Dana Martin and Olivia Salmon Monviola, in "Le poids du passé : une étude parallèle sur le travail de mémoire en Allemagne et en Espagne," offer an interesting and innovative comparative study of how two European countries, Spain and Germany, that went through difficult periods dominated by authoritarian or totalitarian states, have dealt with the memories of those traumatic pasts in the years following the fall of Franco and the collapse of Nazi Germany. As they show, the strategies adopted by these two, or, for a time, three, countries (for many years after World War II Germany was, of course, divided into the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic), as to how to deal with the past varied considerably, notably in relation to their attitudes towards memory and forgetting. And in both the Spanish and German contexts, questions concerning evolving stances towards their painful pasts remain important today.
- 9 Conflicts that came into focus during the 1930s and 1940s in France are the focus of Hervé Bismuth's article "Aragon résistant : la construction d'un discours national." Bismuth challenges Anderson's assertion that Marxism was unable to accommodate itself to nationalist sentiment, that Communism, in fact, was finally overpowered, so to speak, by nationalism, whose appeal, according to Anderson, was always somehow greater, or more profound, than that of Communism's internationalism. In response, Bismuth demonstrates how the French Communist poet and novelist, Louis Aragon, helped elaborate a French national myth in an effort that can be traced back to the

1930s. It was in part due to the work of Aragon, in fact, that the Communist party in France became the French Communist Party amidst the second great conflict of the twentieth century, World War II. Indeed, after having been branded a dangerous pariah during the 1930s and early 1940s, Aragon, as Bismuth shows, was transformed into a champion of the Resistance and a pillar of the French nation.

- 10 The last article, Olivier Mahéo's "Histoire et mémoire du mouvement des droits civiques, terrain privilégié du fratricide rassurant," returns to the United States, here to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As Mahéo makes clear, if the "master narrative" of this movement proffered by the "liberal consensus" tends to portray a unified group of leaders promoting a primarily non-violent approach to the struggle for increased civil rights for blacks, the reality behind that façade is much less simple. Indeed, there were numerous tensions within the movement, which have often been covered up in the interest of national unity. And Mahéo's article helps reveal a more accurate and more complex picture of the American Civil Rights Movement, a major and widespread attack on the status quo in the United States that has become an integral part of American national history.
- 11 All of the articles in this issue of *Textes et Contextes* provide valuable contributions to the historiography of the specific nations they deal with while, at the same time, helping to both widen and deepen our understanding of the ways in which history is rewritten. They offer valuable insights into how internal struggles and turmoil can later become, in one way or another, presented as part of a unified national history, as examples, in fact, of the "reassurance of fratricide." These rewritings of history do not, of course, erase the past, but they often help solidify nations through a particular way of remembering that past. Time—and the reshaping of national stories—does not "heal all wounds," but both time and newly invented narratives do, in many cases, contribute to a sort of "cure" that enables national communities to imagine themselves as less "wounded" and as more unified than would otherwise be the case.

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1 My translations. It's certainly no coincidence that Renan expressed these ideas during the period of the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine (1871-1918).

2 My translation.

3 Earlier versions of some of the following articles were presented at a research day, also entitled "Time Heals All Wounds: Resisting the Authority of History in the Concepts of Nation and Nationalism" / "Le Temps guérit toutes les blessures : La Résistance à l'autorité de l'Histoire dans les concepts de nation et de nationalisme," held at the Université de Bourgogne in Dijon in May 2013. Other articles were submitted for publication consideration in response to a call for contributions for this issue of *Textes et Contextes*.

4 The first tetralogy includes the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. The second is made up of *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. The eight plays were written in the period from 1589 to 1599.

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