Critical Dialogue

Symbols of Defeat in the Construction of National Identity. By Steven J. Mock. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 297p. $29.99 paper.
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— Bernard Yack, *Brandeis University*

Steven Mock's title is accurate but overly modest. *Symbols of Defeat in the Construction of National Identity* does indeed survey the fascinating ways in which national communities commemorate their lowest moments, and does so very well. But it also constructs a powerful theory of nations and nationalism in order to account for the surprising inclination of nations to celebrate their own defeats. In other words, Mock seeks to change the way we understand national identity itself, not just one of its more potent symbols. He does so by focusing on the role of sacrificial violence in communal life, a subject often invoked in discussions of nationalism but rarely pursued with this degree of breadth and clarity.

Mock's starting point is the extraordinary wealth of examples of nations that monumentalize their worst defeats. Israelis and Masada, Serbs and Kossovo's field of blackbirds, Greeks and the fall of Constantinople are some of the most familiar instances. Dig a little deeper, however, and you find similar stories being told by nationalists in almost every era, continent, and religious community. Scholars have examined many of these examples in some detail, usually as the expression of an idiosyncrasy—or pathology—of the national community in question. But given such a wide range of cases, Mock wonders whether it is a norm, rather than exceptions to the norm, that needs explanation here. Indeed, he devotes his later chapter on "exceptions" to "imperial nations," like China, Russia, and the United States, that seem to have no place for the celebration of defeats in their national culture.

Why, then, do most nations "elevate symbols signifying their own defeat to the center of their national mythology?" Mock argues that this practice is one of the most important things that distinguish nations and nationalism "as a modern ideology and form of social organization," for it helps the nation "successfully resolve basic human psychological dilemmas of the sort that any social system must in some way address" (p. 7). The celebration or sacralization of defeat, he suggests, fills an abiding need in the construction of communities, one that used to be met in the premodern era by religious ritual. Far from a peculiarity of wayward nations, it is a basic building block of national identity and a vital clue in solving the mystery of why nations have become so prominent a mode of social organization in the modern era.

The theory of nations and nationalism that Mock builds in order to answer his question is unapologetically functionalist in character—though he seems well aware of and well prepared to address the problems that plague functionalist theories. Drawing heavily on Emile Durkheim and Freud, he argues that stable human societies require "the channeling and control of human violence through the reification and sacralization of social order." Religious "myths and rituals of violent sacrifice" helped manage that function in the pre-modern world; the celebration of national defeats "perform the sacrificial function in a manner particularly suitable to the context of a modern national society" (p. 51).

This theory rests on a familiar assumption that Mock derives from Durkheim and Freud: "[H]umanity's pre-social, animal nature," with its disposition toward "unrestrained individual fulfillment," poses an obstacle to organization of any stable human society (p. 60). Human drives have to be disciplined and rechanneled away from their natural objects, which often dispose us to exercising violence against our neighbors, if we are to achieve any kind of social stability. But this disciplining has to be hidden or repressed if it is to be acceptable in the long run. Primitive societies achieved this goal by erecting sacred objects, totems, which embodied the collective identity of the community and made acceptable the harsh constraints that human society imposes on our selfish natures. Modern societies achieve a similar end by making the nation the totem to which we sacrifice our individual drives. "The nation," Mock suggests, "amounts to the sum total of myth and ritual used to enable and then repress the violent function at the core of modern society" (p. 93). Ritual celebrations of national defeats are especially effective means for enabling and then repressing this form of discipline. They monumentalize the demise of our predecessors in a way that makes their sacrifice an object for emulation, but safely puts their authority over us on the other side of a dividing line that separates the lost golden

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age of autonomy from the current struggle for national self-determination.

Mock finds evidence for his theory in the remarkably consistent "script" that different nations seem to follow in monumentalizing their memory of catastrophic defeats (p. 95). Symbolic representatives of the nation are portrayed as choosing defeat and martyrdom. They put up a valiant fight, despite being betrayed by some members of their own community, but eventually fall to the forces of the "other" community. And the story invariably concludes with a hint of the future redemption of the lost heroes, suggesting the persistence in us of their commitment to the national cause. Inspired by this script, Mock takes us on a remarkable tour of different cultures of national defeat. Some of the territory he covers will be familiar to many readers; much of it will not. But wherever he takes us on this tour, he proves to be a reliable and insightful guide.

Nevertheless, I have some reservations about Mock's explanation for the prominence that nations give to accounts of their worst defeats. One concern is the number and prominence of the exceptions to his theory. It is admirable of the author to draw attention to these exceptions himself. But it seems an awfully large gap in the evidence to fill if it is large enough to include Russia, China, the United States, and England or Great Britain, among other nations. (And it is an even larger gap, if you include nations like France among the exceptions. Mock does not, arguing that the attention lavished by the French on Joan of Arc makes France a paradigmatic case for his theory. But it seems to me that the French celebrate Joan's martyrdom as a harbinger of victory—like Thermopylae or the Alamo—rather than as a symbol of national defeat.) With so many prominent exceptions, one wonders whether one can continue to treat the reliance on memories of traumatic setbacks as the norm in the construction of national identities—especially when one of these exceptions seems to drain national defeat of all of its trauma by embracing its "conqueror," William, as something like its founder. Mock, it seems to me, has a surprisingly broad and varied pattern to explain, rather than anything like a norm of nation building.

My more serious reservation with the author's theory, however, concerns the central assumption that drives it: that stable human societies can only be established and maintained by violently repressing and then redirecting their self-seeking drives. Mock shares this assumption with Durkheim and Freud, as well as a whole host of influential thinkers who believe that the calculation of self-interest is too unstable a foundation for lasting social structures. But I do not see how we can continue to endorse this assumption in the light of what we now know about human nature and moral psychology. Nothing that we now know about hunter-gatherer bands—nor of the primate societies that preceded them—suggests that we would end up with Freud's "primordial horde" or Durkheim's unrestrained self-seekers "if our basic animal natures were left to their own devices" (pp. 60–62). On the contrary, we seem to be social animals all the way down. Our genes may be entirely selfish in their quest to reproduce themselves, but the creatures that they help construct are not. We seem to possess other-regarding dispositions toward reciprocity and social friendship that are no less natural than our more selfish dispositions toward self-preservation. If that is the case—and I do not see how it can be denied without challenging the findings of evolutionary psychology and social anthropology—human drives do not have to be violently repressed and redirected in order to establish lasting forms of social cooperation. The nation, with its tendency to monumentalize the violent sacrifice of our ancestors, does not fill "the role in the modern context that what we now call 'religion' filled in the premodern one" (p. 80) for a very simple reason: we do not need this role to be filled.

Nationalism's students have been slow to acknowledge and adjust to the untenability of this assumption about human moral psychology, most likely because the alternative seems to be an even more untenable assumption about our "primordial" drive to form national communities. Most, therefore, try to explain the rise of nationalism by identifying either the counterintuitive ways in which it actually serves our interests or, like Mock, the forces that counter our naturally selfish drives. The former unmask nationalism as a kind of masquerade, showing that it does not really require the acts of self-sacrifice that it regularly demands. The latter, in contrast, show that these demands are even greater and more traumatic than they appear on the surface, because they cut against our nature in ways that we have to hide from ourselves. But if social cooperation has roots in our moral psychology just as deep as self-seeking, then we do not need to choose between treating the rise of nationalism as either an expression or a traumatic repudiation of our selfish natures. The question, instead, is why this particular form of social cooperation, with its emphasis on intergenerational ties and cultural heritage, has supplanted other forms in an age that claims to place little value on inherited ties and obligations. Mock answers the question by suggesting that the nation has a distinct advantage in this competition: its capacity to satisfy our abiding need for a kind of social discipline that religious ritual can no longer deliver in modern circumstances. If, however, we have never had such a need, then we will need to look for answers to this question elsewhere.

Needless to say, my focus on the more theoretical parts of *Symbols of Defeat in the Construction of National Identity* in this review expresses my own interests as a moral and political theorist. But it also reflects one of the book's most striking virtues. Mock's tour of different national cultures of defeat is well worth the price of admission to his book.

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So it has much to offer even to those readers who have little interest in the kind of theory of nationalism that it constructs. But it is the combination of empirical breadth and sustained theorizing that makes this work unusual. Typically, studies that survey so broad a swath of national culture offer little more than a cursory—and quickly forgotten—introductory chapter on nationalist theory; while studies that offer more sustained theoretical arguments tend to cherry-pick the examples most useful to them. Here, in contrast, theory and evidence are treated with equal and admirable seriousness. You may, like myself, remain somewhat skeptical in the end about some of Mock's conclusions about the role played by the celebration of defeat in the making of national community. But you cannot help but be impressed and enlightened by the combination of argument and empirical evidence that he marshals in their defense.

Response to Bernard Yack's review of *Symbols of Defeat in the Construction of National Identity*

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— Steven J. Mock

Many thanks to Bernard Yack for his insightful and encouraging review. I'll get right to the juicy bits.

Freud and Durkheim were good at formulating innovative and tantalizing hypotheses, and these hypotheses provide a conveniently accessible language for framing my own. I acknowledge that they were less effective at proving their hypotheses to any rigorous standard, and in that respect Yack's critique of the theoretical foundations of my argument hits the mark. But I don't think these hypotheses have been so much disproven as superseded by subsequent developments in psychology and anthropology. Some of them – such as the powerful ambivalence felt toward signifiers of community and social authority—I would still hold to be largely true, though unacknowledged by most who presume nationalism to reflect an unambiguous positivity toward symbols of community and authority that in real life tends to exist only in the margins or in caricature. Admittedly, I have little more than intuition and anecdote to back that claim for now, but the development of new techniques in the cognitive and social sciences may bring us closer to verifying, falsifying and refining such hypotheses in the near future.

That said, it ultimately doesn't concern me that Freud and Durkheim were wrong about the asocial nature of humanity's primordial state, because I don't posit the origins of the religious impulse in any event in the primordial past. It lies in our species' present capacity for abstract representational thought, and the unique ability this gives us to construct images of our communities and their foundations. The forces that counter our selfish drives may be as natural to us as those drives themselves; all the more reason why self-aware creatures need a consistent narrative to reconcile them. Even if our sociability evolved in tandem with our self-seeking behaviour, the former now requires confidence in intersubjective knowledge to function properly whereas the latter does not. The only reason I am able to, for example, lecture to a group of students without being terrified of what any of them might do next is because I know that they know that I know that they know the rules according to which we are supposed to interact. A lecture hall full of chimpanzees would be an entirely different scene.

That we perceive so much of our emotional and material security and wellbeing to depend on so seemingly dubious and ephemeral a foundation requires us to constantly reinforce that foundation through shared symbols, myths and rituals great and small. That, along with another gift granted us by our capacity for abstract representational thought—the ability to conceptualize our own demise, and the consequent need to imagine ourselves at least part of something greater and more durable than our own mortality—explains the universality of the religious impulse. It is therefore also, I believe, where the best psychological explanation for the civic and ethnic nation (respectively), as well as for the passions both constructive and destructive (in no particular order) that the nation evokes, is likely to be found.

Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community.

By Bernard Yack. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 344p. $75.00
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— Steven J. Mock, *Balsillie School of International Affairs*

The study of nationalism is addicted to dichotomies: civic versus ethnic, lateral versus demotic, political versus cultural, voluntaristic versus organic, and so forth. It is understandable. Considering a multifaceted phenomenon with so many diverse manifestations, managing the data by categorization is a natural human response. And, to be fair, it can yield insight into ways that certain dominant types emerge and diverge. Yet too often it serves to explain away, rather than explain, the complexity of the subject. Having placed the types in their categories, we assume the problem solved and absolve ourselves of the harder task of understanding how they come to be bundled in the first place. Categorization also carries a none-too-subtle hint of normative judgment, as we discover creative ways to distance our rational, tolerant, and progressive patriotism from their emotional, narrow, and backward tribalism.

Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community by Bernard Yack should be adopted as one of the steps needed to cure us of this addiction. The argument of this book is basically right, and as I was reading it I was continually

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struck by its essential rightness. The emotions that bind intergenerational communities around shared cultural heritage cannot be separated from the rational construction of voluntary political institutions. Our moral judgments of nationalism, and our ability to effectively counter its more negative manifestations, are hampered by the widespread myth that they can, or even that they should be separated.

Too many disparate points of clarity are raised to illustrate this argument and its implications for me to effectively cover them all in this space. So if you want any further explanation as to why it is right, I suggest you read the book. I could end my review there, but the Critical Dialogue format encourages me to not just critique the work but engage the argument, which I am eager to do. And though my engagement may appear to start from a tired refrain, bear with me; I realize that an argument this sophisticated deserves more in response than a rehashing of the primordialist–modernist debate.

If nations are indeed communities built on bonds of social friendship stemming from shared cultural heritage, then no doubt such communities have existed for as long our species has been capable of social behavior, and will exist as long as we continue to be so. Thus, it is sensible to suggest that there is little of substance to distinguish modern nations from their premodern counterparts. Yet I would propose that a thing that is the same in its internal structure nonetheless becomes a different thing when placed in a radically different ecology. A community of social solidarity built around shared cultural heritage functions so differently in a global environment suffused with the notion of popular sovereignty that it becomes something substantially different.

That difference lies in the very phenomenon that Yack so effectively exposes from the outset of his argument: the myth of the civic nation. That the civic nation is a myth is one of the things fundamentally right about this book. One cannot build a nation on voluntary political principles alone as these offer no prepolitical test to determine where the boundaries of the nation and its values begin and end. Popular sovereignty cannot function without some prior understanding of who "the people" are. Indeed, if I would quibble with this thesis, it would be over the less controversial counterimplication that there remains an ethnic myth parallel to the civic one. The contingencies of birth determinative of social identity are by definition objects of fact that precede cognition, and the need for some manner of shared cultural heritage, broadly defined, to cement intergenerational loyalty is itself no myth, simply the reality with which the civic myth must contend. If anything, I would go further and say that Yack is too quick to discount the importance of at least some actual cultural traits (p. 74)—common language, values, basic skills and/or shared totemic symbols—in addition to a notional shared cultural heritage, to the effective functioning of a modern society and economy.

So I do not dispute that the civic nation is a myth. My point, rather, is who are we—nationalism theorists, of all people—to downplay the importance of myth. Myths have power, often more power than the material realities with which they contend. The civic myth is more than just a conceit of academics or "liberal wishful thinking" (p. 131), but a force that has transformed the logic of community and political behavior on a fundamental level. The principle that all individuals are of equal moral worth, once considered controversial, if not absurd, is now universal (p. 268), along with the related ideal that individuals should have equal share and voice in the institutions of governance. These principles become tests against which the values that structure and motivate collective behavior are measured. One does not see actions taken in the interest of universal political principles justified by modern states with the language of ethnic group interest, in the way that actions in the service of ethnic group interest are nearly always framed—however implausibly—in the rhetoric of universal political principle. The last political movement I can think of that even attempted to do so was Nazism, and even that could arguably be classed as an isolated outlier of the post-Enlightenment era. The nation may be a community of social solidarity built around contingent signifiers of cultural heritage. But the fact that it *wants to be* a community based wholly on voluntary political principle is no less crucial to its nature. Indeed, the nation could well be conceived as the narrative that bridges this impossible ideal with that uncomfortable reality.

The question of "when is the nation" is ultimately a dispute between those who are interested in the forces that have remained continuous throughout human history and those more interested in the depth of social change brought about by modernity. Both lines of inquiry can yield insights of value. But my insistence that it is not just nationalism but the nation itself that has changed through its engagement with the civic myth is not without significance. If modernity provides a substantially changed cognitive framework in which the nation is now situated, then unpacking exactly why and how such a narrative forms and maintains coherence in such a context—how the irresistible force of the modern civic myth is reconciled to the immovable object of contingent ethnic reality, both in general and in particular cases—is the next step we are challenged to take to carry these ideas further.

For while this book presents a novel theory of nationalism, comprehensively grounded between moral philosophy and the social construction of community, there is another word in the title that receives relatively less attention: psychology. What conflicting drives within the human mind make the cognitive pathways that constitute national narratives plausible as ways to reconcile the principles of popular sovereignty and national loyalty in the modern world? This is the question that

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must be answered if we are to translate these ideas into practical tools for solving the problems that nationalism creates, while preserving our commitment to the Enlightenment values from which it emerged.

To that end, Yack does us something of a disservice in introducing his distinction between a people and a nation—with the former as the population subject to particular institutions of popular sovereignty, and the latter as the intergenerational community of social solidarity, even while recognizing that it is the merger of these concepts that has generated nationalism as we understand it. Not just because, as he acknowledges (p. 97), the terms as he deploys them are counterintuitive to common usage: The People is usually understood as an organic community, whereas "nation" connotes at least some quintessentially modern elements such as a common economy and common rights and duties for all members (to borrow from Anthony Smith's earlier formulations).

More to the point, while this distinction highlights a contradiction vital for understanding the internal dynamics of nationalism, the act of making it compromises at least some of the good work Yack has done toward curing us of our tendency to compartmentalize. It is certainly true that a community in which the principle of popular sovereignty is exercised and a community of social friendship stemming from shared cultural heritage are different in any number of ways—in origin, in structure, in function, and in mechanisms of legitimation. But what is therefore most interesting—and what we must understand and respect if we are to have any hope of ameliorating nationalism's darker effects—is how the intense intermingling of these concepts alters the meaning of both, to the point at which it is now so natural for the human mind to conflate them that we require 344 pages of rational argument to disentangle them.

Indeed, the power of myth is such that we often remain helpless even in the face of such argument. As I read this book and wrote this review, Israel has been bombing Gaza to devastating effect, while Hamas indiscriminately fires rockets at Israeli population centers. And I watch my friends—rational people, including scholars of various aspects of political behavior, all of whom I deeply respect—taking sides on social media, posting and reposting comments that desperately and fervently seek explanation for the suffering in some idiosyncratic concept or belief—evil or dysfunctional, genocidal or paranoid—inherent to either Zionist or Palestinian identity and ideology. At a time like this, reading Chapter 9 on the moral problem of nationalism was positively soothing, offering an explanation not just for what was going on in the Middle East but in my own virtual community as well.

The cause of suffering during such conflicts is not to be found in religion, or even in nationalism's dark gods, though it makes us feel better to look for it there, distancing it, as it does, from our rational, liberal selves. It is rather to be found in a convergence of depressingly modern and progressive principles, all of which the best of us would be loath to abandon. Certainly there is individual self-interest involved: When you or your family are threatened with violence, you expect the institutions to which you are subject to shield you and feel helpless if they do not. There is also community solidarity, when those with whom you feel bound by ties of social friendship are threatened by those with whom you do not.

Unrestrained cycles of violence, however, occur only when the other is seen as violating universal principles of justice as well, becoming not just a threat to be countered or an enemy to defeat but a wrongdoer to be punished for failure to respect the principles of human equality and popular sovereignty that the unlimited exercise of your national self-determination embodies. The forces of friendship, justice, and self-interest—which usually balance one another to maintain an equilibrium of empathy and moderation—instead converge against a common other, pushing us across a tipping point on a descent into dehumanization.

The sub-heading (in chapter 9), that one need not be a fanatic to act like one, ought to be the new mantra of anyone seeking rational explanations for ethno-nationalist conflict, as the search for dark gods as agents of conflict and suffering only feeds the beast. Seeking a solution to conflict in some reason why any one community's exercise of control over its own political fate deserves to be constrained merely adds you to an expanding pool of wrongdoers, intensifying the sense of fear and violation and the aggressive response. But getting nations to recognize sensible limits to their exercise of self-determination seems no more likely, at least until we have better means of understanding and appreciating exactly how the particular network of rights and wrongs that make up a national narrative functions to resolve the conflicting drives that underlie the need for both popular sovereignty and intergenerational solidarity in modern societies.

Response to Steven J. Mock's review of *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community*

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— Bernard Yack

Those of us who set out to analyze political passions always run the risk of appearing rather unworldly, like pedants who comprehend everything about what makes a joke funny but the need to laugh. I agree then, with Steven Mock, that we students of nationalism should be the last people to ignore or "downplay the importance of myth" in political life. And I share his skepticism about the prospects for any attempt to separate the two images of community, the sovereign people and the intergenerational nation, whose interconnections explain the distinctive character of

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nationalism as a social force, according to my book. Why, indeed, should we expect to pry apart in practice something that took more than 300 "pages of rational argument"—not to mention 20 years of my life—to disentangle? That is why the last chapter of my book is titled learning to "live with" nationalism rather than "getting beyond" its influence on our lives. Identifying the sources of nationalism's hold over us does little, in itself, to diminish its power.

My goals in working out this distinction between nation and people are therefore primarily historical and analytic. On the one hand, I want to show that the new understanding of the people as constituent sovereign is the catalyst that turns a relatively old form of community, the nation, into the new force that we call nationalism. On the other hand, I want to show that it is the combination and mutual reinforcement of two distinctive motives, beliefs about political justice inspired by this conception of popular sovereignty and feelings of mutual concern and loyalty inspired by membership in national communities, that make nationalism such a powerful and durable force. I do not deny that my disentangling of nation and people serves practical or normative goals as well. But these goals are far more modest than providing us with something like a universal solvent of nationalist passions. They concern how, rather than whether, we engage in nationalist conflict and competition.

For example, it might help moderate the intensity of nationalist conflicts if we could get social and political theorists to recognize that it is only the conflation of the nation with the sovereign people that has made the idea of a general right to national self-determination seem plausible. For while nationalists hardly wait for cues from theorists before making exorbitant demands, the language in which they make these demands often reflects the modes of justification that the latter refine and make popular. Rights are what nationalists are always ready to claim. But the invocation of a general right of nations to have the final say over what goes in "their" territory, a way of talking that deepens and intensifies the demands that they make on others, draws on concepts introduced and maintained by theorists—most often, liberal theorists. Of course, persuading political theorists to change the way that they talk about something of such importance may seem no less quixotic an aim than disentangling the way in which we use nation and people in ordinary political speech. But the very fact that we continue to invest our time in producing hundreds of pages of rational argument suggests that we believe that such goals are not completely beyond our reach.

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