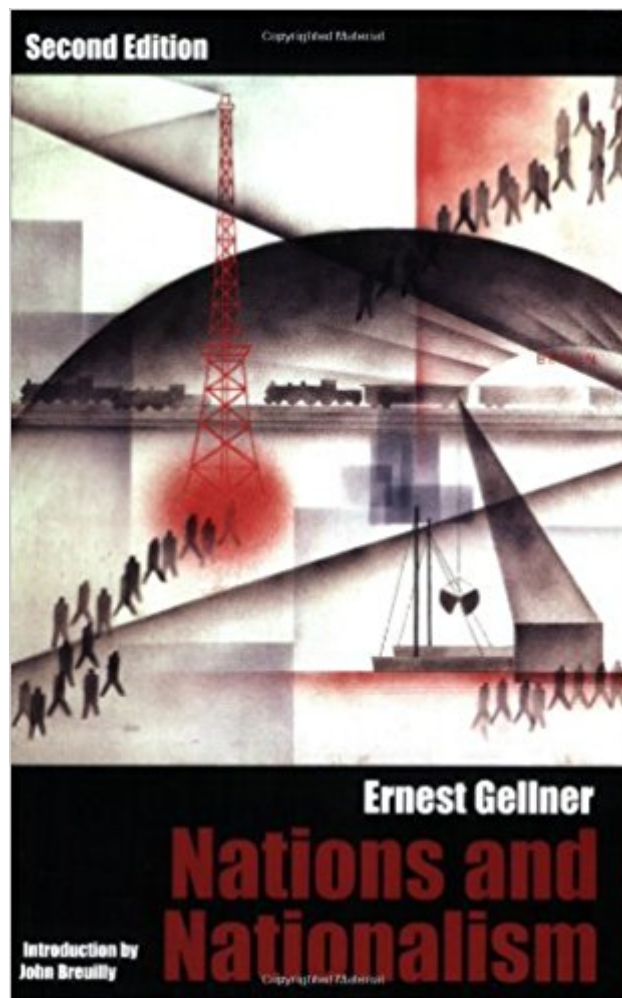




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# Nations And Nationalism, Second Edition (New Perspectives On The Past)



## Synopsis

From reviews of the first edition: "Brilliant, provocative . . . a great book." — *New Statesman*  
"An important book . . . It is a new starting line from which all subsequent discussions of nationalism will have to begin." — *New Society*  
"A better explanation than anyone has yet offered of why nationalism is such a prominent principle of political legitimacy today. This is a terse and forceful work . . . the product of great intellectual energy and an impressive range of knowledge." — *Times Literary Supplement*  
"Periodically, an important book emerges that makes us, through the uniqueness of its theory, perceive history as we have not seen it before. Ernest Gellner has written such a volume. Students of nationalism will have to come to grips with his interpretation of the causes for the emergence of nationalism, since he has declared that most of the previous explanations are largely mythical." — *American Historical Review*  
First published in 1983, *Nations and Nationalism* remains one of the most influential explanations of the emergence of nationalism ever written. This updated edition of Ernest Gellner's now-canonical work includes a new introductory essay from John Breuilly, tracing the way the field has evolved over the past two decades, and a bibliography of important work on nationalism since 1983.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Breuilly's new introduction provides an excellent critical overview of Gellner's writings on nationalism, judiciously evaluating his ideas while also providing insights into their place and

continuing significance within the wider historiography of nationalism studies."--Paul Lawrence, Open University

"Breuilly's new introduction provides an excellent critical overview of Gellner's writings on nationalism, judiciously evaluating his ideas while also providing insights into their place and continuing significance within the wider historiography of nationalism studies."--Paul Lawrence, Open University

This book has about 10 chapters1)Definitions2)Culture in the Agrarian Society3)Industrial society4)The transition to an age of Nationalism5) What is a nation?6)Social Entropy and Equality in Industrial Society7) A typology of nationalisms8)The Future of Nationalism9)Nationalism and Ideology10) ConclusionIn short ch 1-2 is a bit redundant, nothing too new here, only ch 3-5 might be worthy of reading since 6-10 is all a bit repetitive. This book doesn't need to be 100+ pages, all the ideas could fit in 50 pages. At parts the book is dry and goes on and on and moves away from the conclusion.

Gellner is very smart and his book on nations and nationalism is a fascinating read. Would recommend to people who want to read about the development and emergence of nations alongside industrialism.

Very interesting book.

Excellent version of a major set of ideas dealing with what nation states are and why it is sometimes so hard to create such political systems.

Good book

Nationalism is something that has interested me recently, especially as I see it as a major stumbling-block in improving the course of mankind in the world. Nations and flags are something you hold onto instead of opening up your arms and hands to the idea of a better world. That said, I have read little in the subject, the most pertinent being Hobsbawm's essays in the collection \_The Invention of Tradition\_. I am just opening up the hermeneutic circle in hopes of someday closing it. I do have several critiques of the book, and many of them are answered or at least brought up in the

introduction to this edition. The primary critique is that the book is overly generalized. To illustrate his concept of nationalism only arising after industrialization, Gellner uses a hypothetical country to make his point. While I understand he is trying to construct a general model of nationalism, his experiences and theories naturally have to be based off of real situations to be a working model. All nations and nationalistic movements will differ in specifics from the model he creates. Does this show the strength of his model, or its weaknesses. A secondary critique is that the models he uses are entirely too Eurocentric. The book could be titled European Nations and Nationalism quite easily. The post-colonial struggles for a definition of nationalistic identity all over the formerly colonized worlds are given short shrift, and I think this is because they do not fit as easily into the model he argues for in this book. The idea that the European culture imposed on the developing world is too strong to be subverted by one of the native folk cultures seems to me rather patronizing in a cultural aspect. That many of the colonial borders still exist should be reason to reexamine the model, not look for reasons why the cultures do not fit the model working in it. A final, more personal critique is Gellner's dismissal of the Marxist view of history. While the Marxist view can be open to some of the critiques I have against Gellner, I feel that the burden lies to Gellner to show more particularly how his model is superior to one that has been studied and refined through academic discourse over the past century and a half. I recognize that this book is long in print, so I am sure some Marxist historian has taken up Gellner and his glib dismissal of the Marxist system. I respect the cultural model drawn by Gellner, but I doubt the prevalence of the influence on a large scale of the socio-linguistic system he uses as the center of his theory. To me, class still seems like a larger division, even if Gellner disagrees. I still find this work interesting and illuminating, so I will not dismiss it despite my critiques. I have to read more on the subject.

At first I thought this was going to be an enjoyable, positive reading exercise since Chapter 1 was clear and thought provoking. But by the sixth chapter I literally wanted to tear the book to pieces. Gellner's book is considered "a classic" in the literature on nationalism, but I contend that its weaknesses equal or outweigh its contributions. I found Gellner's theory extremely Euro-centric and remarkably exasperating. Moreover, Gellner's style of writing was excessively repetitive, "tedious and pedantic" (something he claimed in his conclusion to have avoided), besides being overly assertive. Gellner's typology, in my opinion, is based on the faulty idea that there are only two types of societies: agrarian and industrial, and that the modern state is omnipotent vis a vis the society. While agrarian Europe was stagnating, other areas of the world had flourishing cultures based on trade \*and\* agriculture \*and\* small-scale industry. Some even had local identities (early ersatz

nationalisms) that set them apart from the other localities with which they had regular contact through trade, diplomacy, wars and exploration. And while modern European societies are fully industrialized, with omnipotent states, many modern "third-world" societies are mixed agrarian/industrial, and the state vies with other groups in society for loyalty. I do agree with Gellner's appraisal that nationalism and nationalities are not inevitable aspects of the human condition. But I disagree with his theory that industrial society led to the homogenization of cultures and appearance of nationalism. Much of my disagreement lies in his a priori assumption that the state is "only too conspicuously present" and that power is highly centralized in the state of the industrial era. In fact, Gellner went so far as to claim that having no state is not an "option". Certainly, having a state is the norm in the modern world, but it is by no means impossible that a state can fail, leaving a society essentially 'stateless'. Moreover, presence of a state does not necessarily indicate that the state is able to control the society over which it nominally has authority. Gellner's use of the term of culture is very ambiguous. Rather than rely on an anthropological definition of culture as a "system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating" Gellner claims it is better to focus on "what culture does". But, his explanation of what culture does is inadequate. According to Gellner, culture in agrarian society favored "horizontal" cleavages, whereas industrial society is more egalitarian and favors "vertical" cultural cleavages. In other words, cultural differences led to regionally cross-cutting societal hierarchies in agrarian society but in industrial society, cultural differences led to national divisions and culturally homogenous groups - which, according to Gellner, industrial society required for survival. Do societies \*need\* to be homogenous or do individuals themselves \*want\* to assimilate in order to get ahead? And does assimilation necessarily mean the fading away of sub-cultures? These are the types of questions that came to mind as I read Gellner's theory, and his rejection of Elie Kedourie's theory that nationalism forces homogenization. Certainly, a common means of communication becomes crucial in a highly specialized industrial society. But Gellner's theory does not explain why people would die or kill to promote or protect their culture. His theory also implies that people can belong to only one culture. Gellner, if alive today, would probably agree with Francis Fukuyama's and Ron Unz's assessment that the survival of the United States relies on the continued supremacy of Anglo-Saxon culture and the end of bilingualism and multi-culturalism. But I whole-heartedly disagree that a mono-culture is an "inescapable imperative" of industrial society. Especially in today's 'global village', education should support awareness of other cultures and the skills needed to interact confidently with those other cultures. That, in my opinion, includes a strong basis in one's own sub-culture, the "national" culture and international cultures. I also disagree that traditional,

kin-based groupings have no place in our modern society. In fact, I believe that educational systems in developing states should make use of traditional forms of education. This would require rejecting the industrial -age mode of education that Gellner described - unspecialized and suffering from "Diploma Disease" in favor of a return to the specialized training of the 'agrarian era' that Gellner says it is impossible to return to. Let's hope he is wrong about that too!

Gellner researched the origin of the nations and their sentiment and movement, the nationalism. The author's dialogue with Max Weber and his idea of the State as the "monopoly of violence", to propose that the nation grows up in the same process.

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