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Review of: Joep Leerssen (ed.), Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018

Sophia Matthaiou

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Joep Leerssen (ed.),
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ROMANTIC NATIONALISM IN EUROPE,
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018, 2 vols, 1,489 pages.

These two aesthetically pleasing volumes are the product of an immense, ambitious project, conceived and successfully carried out by the comparatist and cultural historian Joep Leerssen, Professor of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam, in association with a small circle of collaborators. Leerssen has produced an extensive body of work in the field of comparative literature and, in recent years, his research has also taken the phenomenon of nationalism into consideration.¹ Two grants – one,

the Spinoza Premium, awarded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research in 2008, and the other from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2010, provided the financial support necessary to publish the work. The aim of the project was, first, to create an electronic database, which, fully available for a year now (<http://ernie.uva.nl>), has been enriched with more images. The print edition followed.

Researchers from all over Europe contributed entries to the work, creating an academic communication network focused on the programme's twofold objective: firstly, "to document and analyze how cultural production and cultural mobilization affected and reflected the consciousness-raising of emerging national movements", and secondly "to document and analyze the extent to which these processes were transnational in their communicative spread" (p. 4).

The project's objective is served through three distinct thematic sections: "Survey Articles", "Thematic Articles" and "Individuals". The first volume comprises an extensive introduction, the

Characters: A Critical Survey, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007; *Nationalisme*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015.

“Survey Articles” and the “Individuals”. In the introduction (pp. 17–44), Leerssen analyses the main concept of the programme that balances, as we shall see, between the classic theories on nationalism and comparative literature. The survey articles (pp. 45–158) attempt a synthetic presentation of the thematic sections of the encyclopaedia, based on both the pre-existing literature and the content of the encyclopaedia. Although mostly Leerssen’s work, the articles include texts that the following scholars either contributed or co-wrote with him: Marjet Derkx, Terry Gunnell, Eric Storm, Krisztina Lajosi, Javier Gimeno Martinez, Carmen Popescu, Ann Rigney, Monika Baár, Jan Rock and Nanne van der Linden. The “Individuals” section that follows consists of alphabetical entries on persons.

The “Thematic Articles”, included in the second volume, are presented according to cultural community (see below), again in alphabetical order. Each national chapter begins with an introduction, entitled “Background Notes”, which provides the historical and political context of the community under examination. An adjective rather than a noun serves as the title (for example, Greek instead of Greece), since the cultural communities analysed do not necessarily correspond to the borders of the countries of post-1918 Europe. The cross-referencing system used in all sections of the encyclopaedia is particularly helpful for the reader, as are the analytical name index and index of contributors.

The work focuses on the cultural manifestations of nationalism, contending that the cultural and intellectual history of nationalism has been neglected. Naturally,

it does not overlook the socio-political context at the centre of the research conducted on nationalism thus far. It constitutes the foundation since, unlike the cultural context that has several facets with a transnational dimension, it differs considerably from country to country.

Leerssen takes into account all the literature on nationalism, summarising the explanatory models of the researchers who dealt with the subject, while he focuses on the issue of the cultural manifestations of the phenomenon (Hans Kohn, Isaiah Berlin, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, John Breuilly, Miroslav Hroch, Benedict Anderson). His interpretation is based mainly on Hroch’s model, which, although it does not treat cultural phenomena as reflections or corollaries of social or political processes, maintains that they anticipate them. Leerssen develops the three-phase schema Hroch identified (1. Emergence of manifestations; 2. Social demands based on these manifestations; and 3. Activism on the part of the protagonists), positing another that is more complex; in this system, cultural phenomena appear in all phases of the manifestation of nationalism, even after the national movements’ political objectives have been achieved.

Critically combining the definitions periodically given to the term, Leerssen defines culture as “a deliberate praxis with both its own inner dynamics and its responses to historically changing circumstances” (p. 20). He considers the basic, overlapping fields of culture to be the following: Language discourse, material culture, performative immaterial culture, social ambience and institutional infrastructure. More specifically, he identifies

the following thematic sections: Cultural production (artistic, knowledge, critical reflection); cultural reception (dissemination, mobilisation); cultural instrumentalisation, that is, agents, institutions and persons (artists, scholars, journalists, activists) undivided by class, region or religion; people with a variety of attributes and activities. The focus is “the agency of cultural praxis in articulating the nation, bringing it into being [...] the way in which nation-states were culturally invented” (p. 26), something associated with nineteenth-century Europe and the climate of Romanticism. Thus, he links the phenomenon to the methodology of comparative literature.

He determines that the early manifestations of the agents of cultural nationalism are territorially a-specific, as he defines them. He, therefore, chooses the term “romantic nationalism” instead of “cultural nationalism” because the former reflects the international dimension of the phenomenon. Romantic nationalism is defined as “the celebration of the nation (defined in its language, history and cultural production); and dissemination and instrumentalization of that production in political consciousness-raising” (p. 36). Or, otherwise: “National consciousness-raising on cultural grounds” (p. 53).

Certain characteristic changes and transformations in the early nineteenth century allow us to comprehend the relationship between Romanticism and nationalism, such as, for example, the shift to the spoken language, the role of poetry as a nation-building instrument, the birth of *Volksgeist* philological historicism in Germany, etc. The term also reflects the networks and mutual influences of the agents of cultural communities.

Instead of the term “nations”, Leerssen employs the term “cultural communities”, which he describes as “a group of people sharing a cultural ambience and sharing a joint awareness of their common cultural ambience” (p. 54) or, otherwise, “any culturally defined group that articulated a national consciousness or national aspirations between 1780 and 1920” (p. 11). Accordingly, he does not include separate entries for certain groups, such as the Saami, Roma, Vlachs and Rusyns, although he does incorporate smaller language communities that participated in the general romantic cultivation at a subsidiary-regionalist level, incorporating them into larger units (for example, Walloons in Belgium). The timeframe of the project covers the entire nineteenth century and extends to the end of World War I. The introduction also discusses the subsequent occasional resurgence of Romanticism, looking at how it has been, in a way, received in subsequent periods.

Leerssen uses the assumption that “nationalism was a worldwide phenomenon; Romanticism was not” to justify the fact that the encyclopaedia focuses on Europe and does not expand its scope to cover the other continents where cultural interrelationships with Europe existed during the period and many nationalities were in the process of nation-building (as occurred in Latin America). Some such cases can be found under the title “Trans-European” (pp. 1470–1475).

Having, therefore, a clear vision of the objective of the project, the basic prerequisite for the implementation of such an extensive programme, Leerssen drew up a list of topics, common to all the cultural communities, and of the persons he considered essential to

each community, putting out a call for interested researchers from all over Europe.

The specific modules he selected are: “Language interest”, “Traditions: immaterial and traditional culture (oral literature, folk music, manners and customs, sports, pastimes, ethnography and ethnicity)”, “Sight and sound: musical and visual culture (national-classical music, visual arts, dress, design, architecture)”, “Text and stories: literary and historical culture (patriotic poetry and verse, history novel, Bible/classics translations, history writing, antiquarianism, archeology, critical writing, publishing ventures/periodicals)”, and “Society (sports associations, choral societies, national drama and national theatre, festivals and commemorations, education, publishing, book clubs and reading societies, national museums)”.

These modules serve as the titles of the “Thematic Articles”. Each of these modules is not always covered in all cultural communities, while variations or additions, decreed by the particularities of the countries, also emerge. Moreover, the manifestations of nationalism took various forms depending on the historical circumstances of each country, something summarised in the background notes of each entry in the encyclopaedia.

On the initiative of its then director, Paschalis M. Kitromilides, the NHRF’s Institute for Neohellenic Research undertook to deliver the Greek national chapter (pp. 1022–1048). The entries were written from 2010 to 2015 by institute researchers as well as by external subject-matter experts under Kitromilides’ supervision.

This type of publication, which, it should be noted, is a trend in contemporary research, is determined by certain characteristics. The scope of information in an encyclopaedia is, by definition, limited. On the one hand, this overview of themes and individuals does provide an almost “complete” picture in a few words. On the other, it does not permit the deeper understanding that only a detailed presentation would offer. While it facilitates – the electronic availability of its content is another factor – a rather casual and superficial approach to the topics, it also aids a comparative approach to issues, a factor extremely useful for research. Moreover, the content adheres to the central concept of each edition. However, it is not always easy to study the phenomena in question as they had unfolded in “peripheral” countries because many European researchers lack the language skills necessary to access the literature in the languages of these countries; this was taken into account when the “Individuals” were selected (in the case of Greece, for example, the selection relied, more or less, on what was available on Greek issues in these languages). Nevertheless, precisely because the edition is in English, having researchers from every country participate in authoring the entries allows the European scholarly audience to become familiar with how researchers in every European country currently approach these issues. The fact that the “Survey Articles” are dominated primarily by the example of Germany (and secondarily of France) seems natural and is due both to the leading role these two countries played in Europe

as regards these phenomena and to their fundamental influence on corresponding phenomena in the rest of Europe. Yet, it is also due, judging from the example of Greece, to the research gaps every country presents in this field.

In summary, we can conclude that this encyclopaedia constitutes a valuable research tool not only for anyone dealing

with the specific phenomenon of romantic nationalism throughout the whole of Europe but also, generally, for anyone researching modern European history.

Sophia Matthaiou

Institute for Historical Research / NHRF

