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Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership

Roger M. Smith

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, xii + 236pp.

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This book offers a refreshing, exploratory approach to the conceptualization and evaluation of political community. Smith's premise is that political scientists have not paid adequate attention to how political memberships and identities are generated. To help correct this, he articulates a highly variable and encompassing concept of 'political people'. These political peoples can be associated with anything from a nation-state making strong and comprehensive claims to citizens' allegiance, to campaigning organizations with highly specific goals and more limited ideological demands on members. Between these extremes lies a panoply of 'peoples' committed to stateless nations, cities, religious sects, intentional communities, and so on. For Smith what these diverse modes of political belonging have in common is that they are constituted through 'stories of peoplehood', which cultivate feelings of collective worth and trust among members. He argues that such stories are necessary for political life, not diversionary fabrications, thus the final pages become concerned with their normative assessment.

These stories must cultivate trust and worth both among co-members and between leaders and followers, for whom they will have divergent meanings, and they cannot remain at odds with reality for too long. Smith defines three main types of 'stories', focusing on the third. 'Economic stories' promise material security and prosperity, attesting to leaders' abilities to deliver the goods. 'Political power' stories argue that the power and self-determination of the people will be enhanced by a particular mode of political constitution and/or allegiance to those who rule. 'Ethically constitutive stories' define a people

as carriers of certain ultimate values, transmitted across generations. Here, senses of worth and trust arise not out of hopes for economic or political success, but out of commitment to intrinsic goods, more immune to the vagaries of political life. Such stories 'are more likely to be religious or quasi-religious, kinship-like, and gendered than economic or political power stories' (p. 69), providing particularly enduring bases to collective identities. However, all three types of story are basic, and normally found woven together. The special importance of ethically constitutive stories is that they express the uniqueness of a people in specifically moral terms. Economic and political power stories are more generic and ethically ambiguous (e.g. liberalism, communism), thus less compelling. Moreover, ethical stories get fore-grounded when economic and political power stories are faltering or manifestly morally questionable, needing compensatory legitimation, or when the ideas, institutions and practices that sustain them are threatened.

Towards the end of the book, Smith offers a sympathetic critique of various liberal, republican and radical democratic justifications of political community, especially the neo-Kantian approaches of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, finding these ill-equipped to conceptualize (and thus evaluate) the normative claims to unique worth advanced by particular peoples. In a 'Madisonian spirit' (p. 158) he argues that far from excluding stories not grounded in universalizable principles, we should encourage the open expression of, and contestation among, ethically constitutive stories. He is optimistic that eventually more secular and humanistic stories will displace those based on supernatural beliefs and ethnic and biological essentialisms, and sees an arena of contending stories as offering a valuable check on the potential for totalizing commitments to the state. He also allows for the development of universalistic ethically constitutive stories, within which more acceptable particularistic stories might embed themselves. Smith suggests that we can tell a story about our species as one successfully evolving and adapting to various challenges, and confronted by new and shared global challenges (pp. 166–167). The final chapter examines the concrete example of American peoplehood, advocating a secular and historical approach to constructing American identity. Smith criticizes ideologically conservative attempts to do just this by Dinesh D'Souza, William Bennett and Walter Berns, arguing that these use history to essentialize an unchanging American people, by idealizing the 'founding fathers'. In their stead, he advocates an admittedly prescriptive story of Americans as a 'pioneering people' disposed toward political experimentation and adaptation, thus inclined toward progressive reformism in politics.

This book speaks to many literatures, but especially those concerned with theorizations of nationalism, identity, and narrative. While Smith's category of 'political peoples' is broad, most of his attention is on nations and ethnic groups. Here his intervention is especially welcome because it pushes our

thinking beyond sterile dichotomies between civic/universalistic and ethnic/particularistic national identities. The problematic of 'stories of peoplehood' helpfully mediates these conceptual extremes. Moreover, his emphasis on trust, worth, and the ethical dimension grapples more deeply with problems of identity than those approaches that simply stress the binding force of shared symbols, or the tendency of identities to be constructed through symbolic oppositions. Although he does not really engage the literature on narrativity, Smith provides a valuable counterweight to those approaches that become overly formalistic in their application of literary genres to the complexities of social life. His looser concept of 'stories' helps us to appreciate how senses of collective worth and trust are cultivated through historical imaginings.

This book puts its trust in humanistic reason — if all stories are allowed to speak, the best will prevail. But history might be more cunning than this, and the interplay of stories may have unintended consequences not foreseen by any particular story. Finally, Smith deliberately sets questions of force in politics to one side (p. 43), to focus his attention on the persuasive power of these stories. But power takes other forms besides force and persuasion — manipulation; legitimization; coercion; inducement — forms that may be highly relevant to how these stories do their work. One wishes at points for a more rounded engagement with the power of stories in this book. Nonetheless, it is thought-provoking and breathes a bit of life into some rather fusty theoretical debates, and is most welcome for that.

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Modern Social Imaginaries

Charles Taylor

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In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor traces the development of the modern Western social imaginary. A social imaginary consists of 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (p. 23). Taylor's aim in the book is to reveal both the similarities and differences in the multiple forms of modernity present in the contemporary