

Book Review

- Florian Bieber, *Debating Nationalism: The Global Spread of Nations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. viii + 256. Bibliography and Index. \$24.95 (paper).
- Nicola Miller, *Republics of Knowledge: Nations of the Future in Latin America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. vii + 304. Bibliography and Index. \$39.95 (hardcover).

Florian Bieber's *Debating Nationalism* is part of the Debates in World History series that is marketed for classroom adoption and provides concise overviews of major issues of historical, social, and political interest. And while few issues are timelier in our age of rising xenophobia and populist authoritarianism than a contextualized and historicized understanding of nationalism, the book's claim that it "uses an inclusive perspective that goes beyond a Western European focus" belies its largely Eurocentric (though still worthwhile) approach to theorizing and exploring nationalism and nation-states in practice. Nicola Miller's *Republics of Knowledge*, on the other hand, deftly explores the many and often innovative ways—from how everyday people conceived of the purpose of national library collections to how native-born engineers engaged in major infrastructure projects—in which (primarily) South American countries created separate nations and nationalisms after their split with the Spanish empire. Taken together these two works provide a good overview of where nationalism studies (and the study of state formation) have been as well as promising new directions available for future study.

Bieber begins by establishing baseline definitions of terms, deftly separating what we mean by nations and what we mean by states, noting that there are plenty of peoples in the modern world who have nations—he mentions the Kurds, and I would add to the list many indigenous groups—but lack a state of their own. He argues that nationalism is not, *prima facie*, bad and does not necessarily equate to isolationism even if nationalism in the West is tied historically to the rise of fascist and authoritarian governments, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Perhaps most importantly, nationalism and national belonging are socially constructed and mutually imagined. The social construction of a national identity, one that assumes that those who belong to the same nation share a common culture, does not happen by chance. The promotion of nationalism "requires media, political, social, and cultural elites" and can happen through a mix of coercion, education, and (sometimes) outright force (11). The acculturation of peoples in a state so that they view themselves as

part of a single unified nation usually occurs in an environment where there are multiple, competing versions of nationalism and the nation. After establishing these baseline definitions and concepts—and I have only touched on a few of them here—Bieber moves to a mostly historical approach as he covers the eighteenth century to the present.

The first major chapter examines the rise of modern nations and nationalism, noting quite rightly that the stories nation-states tell about their national origins are mostly myths based on a constructed history, albeit myths based at least in part on real local or tribal identities later transferred to larger groups. These founding myths (along with invented traditions that were later claimed to have been practiced since time immemorial) provide the important service of granting legitimacy to the nation even as they cement peoples' loyalties and often help them to prioritize their national belonging over other often equally compelling identities (such as social class). The standardization of a common language often served as a key tool for unifying disparate peoples within a single nation. And while Bieber is right that "The idea that members of a common nation . . . should be governed by themselves and for themselves" are a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century development, his definition of nations and nationalism is too narrow, leading him to argue that modern nations initially only came into being in Europe (24). His approach denies, to provide just one set of compelling examples, the much longer claims of nation and nationhood made by indigenous peoples in the Americas as demonstrated by Maurice Crandall, *These People Have Always Been a Republic: Indigenous Electorates in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1598–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Jeffrey Schulze, *Are We Not Foreigners Here?: Indigenous Nationalism in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) and *Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). His argument also rejects China as an early example of a nation-state, arguing that a nation-state "is a distinctly European concept that does not apply to China" because China predates the rise of global nationalism (34).

Bieber does a good job of exploring how ideas of biological race (and racism) was and is intimately combined with the idea and practice of nationalism, providing space for a wide range of beliefs and movements: anti-Semitism, Zionism, decolonization, anti-immigrant populism, and ethnic violence and civil war. In terms of decolonization, he argues that elites in Asia, Africa, and the Americas were "often shaped and educated in the colonial centers and adopted ideas of nationhood that were grounded in the European experience" even as they used this knowledge to oppose colonizers (78).

Miller's book explores what the decolonization process of nation-building looked like in Argentina, Chile, and Peru based on the idea that "these nations—and possibly all modern nations—are best understood as communities of shared knowledge rather than as imagined communities" (9). She divides her book into two main sections, one focused on Landscapes of Knowledge that moves beyond the study of what public intellectuals

knew to that of everyday people, and the other focused on Knowledge for Nation-Making that interrogates the ways in which that knowledge “mattered . . . in the formation of collective identities” (9). Miller acknowledges, noting that her work is suggestive rather than complete, that indigenous peoples have their own Landscapes of Knowledge and their own collective identities but has left that work for other scholars who have the necessary language and ethnographic training to take it up. This is an important caveat and an area ripe for further research and exploration.

The Landscapes of Knowledge portion of the book explores national public libraries, repertoires of knowledge (Latin America as a natural laboratory, a focus on the ways in which Latin America reflected Ancient Greece and Rome, and common rhetorical practices), the expansion of print culture that included the dissemination of visual images and an ever widening reading (and listening to other people read) public that was much larger than those with formal educations, the centrality of the history of drawing and the teaching of drawing which played a unique role in Latin America, and finally, and most importantly, a major shift in who wrote what and for what audiences. Miller deftly argues that the landscapes of knowledge in newly independent Latin America moved from being a thing produced by elites for the consumption of elites to a process “characterised as something to be locally created and publicly circulated” (108). The shift was important not only because who was conceived of as being capable of creating knowledge expanded to include everyday people but also because those who were creating knowledge adjusted how they communicated in order to better reach larger audiences and, in the process, helped to create a sense of belonging and identity to newly emerging nation-states. This did not mean that Eurocentric ideas did find root in the fertile soils of the Americas, but rather that local Latin American thinkers purposely examined them in light of local conditions to see in which ways they were applicable, resulting in the production of new locally generated knowledge and understandings. Given that knowledge was produced and understood through local and regional lenses, it was these interactions and this iterative process that created distinct nations of shared knowledge out of the remnants of the Spanish empire in the Americas.

Some of the first ways that different parts of Latin America became distinct nations of shared knowledge was through the struggle over whether or not regional variations of Spanish should be recognized as acceptable forms of Spanish or if Latin America should stick with an unadulterated version of “pure” Spanish . . . the latter of which was a red herring that failed to take into account regional variations within the mother country itself let alone the fight, for example, of Catalonians to speak Catalan. This debate over regional versions of Spanish, which won out in the end, was interesting in its own right given that the prevalence of indigenous languages in many Latin American countries, including the adoption of Guaraní by elites in Paraguay (even if it was not adopted as an official language along with Spanish until 1992). Another area of shared knowledge was the popular interest in regional geography and natural history. Not only did new nation builders need

to create commissions to establish national boundaries so that they were more than lines on a map, they also needed to catalog the uniqueness of a wide range of natural environments and peoples within their borders. Everyday people found such appeals compelling and transformative in terms of their identification with newly created nation-states. Miller even makes a compelling case that economic nationalism, which would in the 1950s result in a full-fledged school of economics under Raúl Prebisch, also reinforced the creation and sustainment of new ideas of nationalism by advancing a “raft of policies to promote industrialization and reduce reliance on imports” from Europe even as it undermined Adam Smith and David Ricardo’s idea of comparative advantage (164). The beauty of this economic move was that it recognized the ability of local inhabitants—in her study, the focus is on engineers - to best understand the sorts of infrastructure best able to promote the well-being of everyday people in the Americas even as it necessitated a robust national government to tackle these projects.

Bieber’s *Debating Nationalism* and Miller’s *Republics of Knowledge* are quite different works aimed at quite different audiences but, in spite of their different aims, are in conversation with each other. Bieber’s work provides a good, if narrow, overview of the field of nationalism studies with a heavy focus on how we can use it to understand current issues surrounding ethnic conflict, the politics of migration and diversity, and the rise of authoritarian populism. Miller’s work, on the other hand, is an in depth set of comparative case studies focusing on the ways in which everyday people created and shared knowledge and how nation-builders used this knowledge to create new nation-states out of a former European colonial empire. Miller’s concept of nations as communities of shared knowledge instead of imagined communities is an inspiring one and helps to put everyday people at the center of nation-building. Communities of shared knowledge also opens up the possibility of conceptualizing indigenous nations as modern nations, a topic that Miller sets aside for others to explore and that Bieber rejects out of hand.

Teacher-Scholars and students in advanced high school social studies classes or lower division undergraduate classes will find Bieber’s book to be useful as a guide. I have my reservations as noted above, but he really does a good job of covering a wide range of concepts and materials. Miller’s book is a *tour de force* in helping us to rethink what we know about nation-states, but when taught in conjunction with other works that explore indigenous nations as nations it will be a welcome addition to upper undergraduate division and graduate level classes.

Andrae M. Marak is a professor of history and political science and the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences & Graduate Studies at Governors State University in the Chicago area. He received his Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico and has taught courses on world, Latin American, United States, and Chinese History and Politics. He can be reached at amarak@govst.edu.