

Anthony D Smith

1. Anthony D. Smith was a notable British historical sociologist known for his impactful research on nations, ethnicity, and nationalism. He is closely associated with ethnosymbolism, a viewpoint that combines elements of primordialist and modernist theories of nationalism. As a professor of nationalism and ethnicity at the London School of Economics, he helped develop nationalism studies as an independent interdisciplinary field.
2. Smith's main question was "Why do nations create such strong and enduring emotional bonds?" He believed that solely political or economic reasons can't fully explain nationalism. To understand why people feel a close connection to their nations, scholars need to look into historical memories, myths, symbols, traditions, ethnic identities, and territorial attachments. This approach resulted in his key concept, such as ethno-symbolism.
3. Ethno-symbolism suggests that, while nationalism as an ideology and political movement is quite modern, it is rooted in traditional ethnic symbols. Smith therefore rejected two extremes, such as -
 - Primordialism claims that nations are ancient or natural communities, and Smith's stance is too inflexible. Modernism, on the other hand, sees nations as primarily modern inventions, underestimating historical continuity, which Smith's view also underappreciates. Ethno-symbolism suggests that modern nations often evolve from older ethnic and cultural resources, aligning more with Smith's perspective. Therefore, Smith's theory is best seen as a historically aware alternative or correction to strict modernist views.

4. Smith's concept of the *ethnie*, or ethnic community, emphasises that it is not merely a biological or racial group but a culturally constructed community shaped by history. Members of an *ethnie* share a collective identity through elements such as a common name, myths of shared ancestry, historical memories, cultural practices, a connection to a homeland, and a sense of solidarity. Smith points out that many modern nations originate from older ethnic cores, where the *ethnie* transitions into a nation. He clarifies that not every *ethnie* automatically becomes a nation; instead, a pre-modern *ethnie* often undergoes a process of preserving or reinterpreting memories and symbols, leading to nationalism and potentially a modern nation, which differentiates his view from strict modernist perspectives.
5. According to Smith, nations endure not just because governments establish institutions, but because populations share a common symbolic world. This includes myths such as stories about origins, ancestors, heroic ages, and collective destiny. It also encompasses memories of victories, defeats, suffering, migration, liberation, or golden ages. Symbols like flags, monuments, sacred sites, national heroes, ceremonies, and other markers of collective identity are crucial. Additionally, inherited cultural traditions create continuity across generations, giving nationalism emotional depth and historical legitimacy. Therefore, nationalism is most effective when political movements link themselves to existing cultural memories.
6. Territory holds a special significance in Smith's theory, where a nation is more than just a population within borders. It often embodies a historic or sacred homeland. Features such as mountains, rivers, battlefields, monuments, ancient cities, and religious sites contribute to national memory. This connection transforms territory into part of historical memory, which fosters emotional attachment and strengthens national identity, making the homeland a key element of the collective imagination of the nation.
7. Smith viewed nations as communities shaped by history rather than merely artificial political constructs. He stated that "National Identity is sustained through combinations of territory, historical memory, common myths, public culture, shared institutions, and practices." He also emphasised that while national identity is collective, it can exist alongside other identities like regional, religious, class, ethnic, or familial. His notable book, **National Identity**, was released in 1991.

8. Smith saw nationalism as an ideological movement dedicated to maintaining the autonomy, unity, and identity of a group viewed by its members as a nation. These three ideas are particularly important.
 - Autonomy means a nation having meaningful control over its collective affairs. Unity, seen in nationalism, promotes solidarity among members, while identity involves members recognising their connection to a distinct historical and cultural community. Thus, Smith states that “Nationalism equals Autonomy + Unity + Identity,” considering these as the main objectives of nationalist movements within his framework.
9. The comparison between Smith and Gellner is most significant. Gellner associated nationalism closely with modernisation and industrial society, arguing that modern industrial nations require standardised education, communication, and culture, and that nationalism fosters this cultural uniformity. Conversely, Smith believed this view underestimated the importance of pre-modern ethnicity, culture, and the idea that modern nationalism cannot simply invent any national identity it desires. Instead, national identities often draw on existing myths, memories, traditions, ethnic identities, and historical territories. The key distinction is that Gellner explains why nationalism becomes essential in modernity, while Smith emphasises the historical cultural materials shaping nations, a debate that gained prominence during the Warwick Debate on nationalism in 1995.
10. Benedict Anderson is widely known for describing nations as “imagined communities,” and Smith acknowledged that national communities involve imagination and representation. However, Smith opposed interpretations that suggest nations can be entirely invented from nothing. For Smith, national imagination typically builds upon existing historical and cultural resources. Therefore, Anderson understands how a national community is imagined, while Smith focuses on the historical and cultural resources that make the national community meaningful.
11. Eric Hobsbawm highlighted how invested traditions influence the development of modern nations. Smith concurred that traditions can be reconstructed, selected, or reinvented, yet nationalist elites face historical constraints: symbols work best when they align with existing memories, myths, and traditions that already hold meaning

for the people. Thus, nationalism involves both creation and historical continuity, rather than being solely inventive.

12. A key later insight in Smith's work pertains to the link between nationalism and the sacred. He noted that national communities frequently create sacred aspects like territories, heroic ancestors, martyrs, collective sacrifices, national myths, remembrance events, and shared destiny ideas. These aspects can assume religious-like qualities by giving people a powerful sense of collective purpose and historical destiny. This concept is especially evident in his book "Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity" (2003).

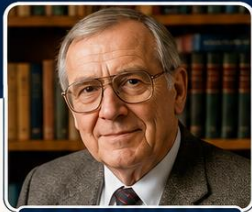
13. Major works encompass -

- Smith developed a significant body of research on nationalism and ethnicity, including several key works.
- Theories of Nationalism (1971), such as the comprehensive examination of extremist nationalism theories.
- The Ethnic Revival (1981) discusses the revival and persistence of ethnic identities.
- The book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986) serves as a foundational statement of his approach.
- National Identity (1991) discusses the nature and formation of national identity.
- Nations and nationalism in a global era (1995), including topics like nationalism under globalisation.
- Nationalism and Modernism (1998) offers a major critique and evaluation of modernist theories.
- Myths and Memories of the Nation (1999) discuss the significance of collective memory.
- Chosen Peoples (2003), such as Sacred, serve as the foundation of national identity.
- The book 'The Cultural Foundations of Nations' (2008) explores the cultural patterns underlying nations.
- The book 'Ethno – Symbolism' and Nationalism' (2009) presents a mature statement of ethno-symbolist theory.

1. Smith's key contribution was challenging the idea that nations are solely products of modern capitalism, industrialisation, states, or political elites. He showed that culture and historical memory are also crucial to nationalism. His approach explains why nationalism has emotional power, often because it resonates with inherited memories and identities. Additionally, he clarified why nationalist movements tend to look backward, invoking ancestors, golden ages, historic territories, and collective suffering. Furthermore, he explained why elites cannot fully control nation-building, as successful nationalists often need cultural resonance with their populations. Smith also played a vital role in establishing nationalism studies, co-founding the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN) with his doctoral students and serving as the founding editor of *Nations and Nationalism*.
2. The primary critique is that Smith may focus too much on the idea of continuous ethnic history. Critics argue that ethnic memories can be reconstructed, and that elites and governments have the ability to significantly alter traditions. Not every nation has a clear ancient ethnic core or well-established political institutions, and sometimes capitalism and state authority can be more influential than cultural heritage. Nevertheless, ethno-symbolism continues to be important as it connects contemporary political nationalism with deep-rooted historical culture.
3. Anthony D Smith's Ethno-symbolism characterises modern nationalism as a powerful blend of current political objectives with traditional ethnic memories, myths, symbols, customs, and links to a historic homeland.

ANTHONY D. SMITH (1939–2016)

Anthony D. Smith was a British historical sociologist and one of the most influential scholars of nations, ethnicity and nationalism. He is best known for developing the theory of **Ethno-symbolism**, which explains modern nationalism through the cultural and historical foundations of ethnic communities.



Anthony D. Smith

1. CENTRAL IDEA

 Smith asked: *Why do nations evoke such powerful and lasting attachments?*

He argued that nationalism cannot be explained only by modern political, economic or institutional factors. To understand nationalism, we must examine history, memories, myths, symbols, traditions, ethnic identities and attachment to homeland.

2. ETHNO-SYMBOLISM

Modern nations are built from modern ideas and institutions, but they draw upon pre-modern ethnic and cultural resources.

Ethnic Communities

+

Myths & Memories

+

Symbols & Traditions

+

Territory (Homeland)

↓

FOUNDATIONS FOR MODERN NATIONS

Smith stands between two extremes:

Primordialism	Modernism	Ethno-symbolism
Nations are ancient or natural communities.	Nations are products of modernity.	Modern nations arise from older ethnic-cultural foundations.
Too rigid	Too narrow	Smith's approach

3. THE CONCEPT OF 'ETHNIE'

An *ethnie* is a historically formed ethnic community with a sense of shared identity.

Key elements:

- A collective name
- Myths of common ancestry
- Shared historical memories
- Common elements of culture
- Association with a homeland
- Sense of solidarity



Ethnie → preservation and reinterpretation of memories and symbols → nationalism → possible formation of nation

4. MYTHS, MEMORIES AND SYMBOLS

 **Myths** – stories about common origins, ancestors, heroic ages and destiny.

 **Memories** – recollections of victories, defeats, suffering, liberation or golden ages.

 **Symbols** – flags, heroes, monuments, sacred sites, ceremonies.

 **Traditions** – inherited cultural practices that create continuity.

These give nationalism emotional depth, historical legitimacy and collective meaning.



5. HOMELAND AND TERRITORY



Territory is not just a physical space but a **historic and sometimes sacred homeland**.

- Mountains, rivers, battlefields, ancient cities and sacred sites become part of national memory.
- Homeland → memory → emotional attachment → national identity.

6. NATIONALISM: THREE CORE GOALS

 **AUTONOMY**

A nation seeks meaningful control over its collective affairs.

 **UNITY**

Nationalism creates solidarity among members of the nation.

 **IDENTITY**

Members develop consciousness of belonging to a distinct community.

Nationalism = Autonomy + Unity + Identity

7. COMPARISONS

Smith vs Gellner	Gellner: Nationalism is a product of modernization and industrial society. Smith: Modern nationalism draws on pre-existing ethnic identities, myths and memories.
Smith vs Anderson	Anderson: Nations are "imagined communities". Smith: Imagination works with historical-cultural resources, not from nothing.
Smith vs Hobsbawm	Hobsbawm: Emphasized "invented traditions". Smith: Invention is important, but it succeeds only when it resonates with existing memories and traditions.

8. SACRED DIMENSIONS OF NATIONALISM



Nationalism often has **qualities similar to religion**: sacred territories, heroic ancestors, martyrs, collective sacrifices, myths of national election, ceremonies of remembrance and ideas of collective destiny.

This gives people a **deep sense of meaning and historical destiny**.

9. MAJOR WORKS

1971	1981	1986	1991	2003	2009
					
Theories of Nationalism	The Ethnic Revival	The Ethnic Origins of Nations	National Identity	Chosen Peoples	Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism

10. LEGACY AND IMPORTANCE

- Connected modern political nationalism with long-term historical culture.
- Explains the emotional power and persistence of nationalism.
- Helped establish nationalism studies as an academic field (co-founder of ASEN and founding editor of Nations and Nationalism).

KEY TERMS

Ethno-symbolism, Ethnie, Ethnic core, Myths, Memories, Symbols, Traditions, Historic homeland, National identity, Autonomy, Unity, Identity, Critique of strict Modernism

ONE-LINE CONCLUSION

Anthony D. Smith's Ethno-symbolism explains modern nationalism as a powerful fusion of modern political aspirations with older ethnic memories, myths, symbols, traditions and attachments to a historic homeland.

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