Chapter 25

Freemasonry and Nationalism

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Introduction

The theoretical debate on nations, national identities and nationalism of the last decades (for a comprehensive overview, see Smith 2001) has evidenced a long struggle between a modernist or ‘constructivist’ approach (nations and national sentiment as recent creation) against older ‘primordialist’ or ‘perennialist’ interpretations (nations and national sentiment as natural, age-old configurations), with a set of newer, perhaps more subtle approaches trying to go beyond the classical axes of that first antinomy. Despite the constructivist approach eventually gaining the upper hand over the perennialist approach, and certain highly important new insights emerging, not every problem has been solved. One might even ask if, at a given moment, a new orthodoxy has not sought to install itself. The basic issue with the constructivist stance, i.e. that national identities are more or less invented from scratch, presenting national identities and nationalist discourse as a set of signifiers without firm grounds in historical reality, does pose a series of empirical historical problems. Are national identities really constructed out of thin air? Ethnosymbolism by contrast stressed the importance of pre-modern ‘ethnic’ pasts out of which modern nationalism could extract myths and memories and dig for different cultural particles by which a tradition could be reinvented. That was a significant new insight, but a number of problems of interpretation and fact still remained, as ethnosymbolism more in particular did not give sufficient attention to the multifaceted nature of nations and nationalism, something which is to be related mainly to its cultural focus and prima facie non-political line of analysis.

Definitely, the debate must move away from this presumed homogeneity of nations and nationalisms. No doubt, one can detect the existence of state-sponsored nationalism, of nation-states keen on crushing local identifiers, other languages, or whatever cultural marker that does not fit their overall project (see de Certeau, Julia and Revel 2002), but this is by no means the only form one can observe. Indeed, too strong a focus on this first variety would neglect the nationalism of dominated groups, the nationalism of the onesMontserrat Guibernau qualifies as ‘nations without states’ (Guibernau 1999),
a nationalism which stands for different forms of cultural and social emancipation, even if it is definitely so that this last variety of nations and nationalism is constituted by social spheres where ‘construction’ of identities, ‘invention’ or ‘reinvention’ of tradition takes place as well. Consequently, there will be a good deal of ‘artificialness’ to be detected here too, but again, that does not imply that everything is merely a discursive construct, that the identities in question are just products of conspiring elites, let alone that they are nothing more than particularistic anachronisms. That ‘artificialness’ does not at all lessen the importance of invented traditions.

In a 2006 conference paper, historian Andrew Prescott refers to that same invented tradition in Freemasonry and to the famous volume edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). If it is often narrowly read, their research project did go beyond the scope of mere nation-construction or relatively recent epochs. If that project was not really applied by these authors to the case of Freemasonry—which is merely looked upon as a recent invented tradition—the pre-history of the masonic lodges indeed shows fairly old examples of the invention of tradition that were meant to legitimate social, economical and political objectives. Referring to results of recent mediaeval studies which seem to support a number of ethnosymbolist approaches, Prescott also proposes Freemasonry as a kind of ‘laboratory’ (a rather ideal one, as the documentary richness allows precise reconstruction of complex contexts) for the long term study of invented tradition in an explicitly cross-national perspective: “In investigating the role of Freemasonry in the invention of tradition, we can start to appreciate that nations, while constructed, are nevertheless the product of complex cross-connections and transformations over very long time periods” (Prescott 2006).

This view connects well to Guibernau’s perspective, which goes beyond a limited conception of nation and nationalism that refers basically to just one particular variety: it rejects an a-historic, de-contextualized view of nations and nationalism and opts in stead for an analytical cluster where nation, state and nationalism appear, not as fixed categories, but as clearly distinct social phenomena whose respective definitions are made through their interrelatedness and the tensions which characterize that interrelatedness, whose definitions are thus changing in time and space.

How does Freemasonry fit into this global picture? It is certainly tempting for a specific strand of analysis to show Freemasonry exactly as an instrument in the hands of elites for the construction of these national identities as a means of domination. That would give a quite remarkable resonance to an older tendency in the interpretation of the social role of Masonry, i.e. to represent it again as an instrument of the ruling classes to weaken class struggles,