

To restore the farm economy to health, concludes Yates, Mexican politicians must begin by facing the changed reality in the countryside. The *ejido* must be reorganized as a Scandinavian-style cooperative for marketing and for bulk purchases of equipment, seeds, and fertilizers, but it should not own land. Instead, *ejido* members should receive legal title so they can lease or sell plots to their neighbors. If this shift can be combined with greater emphasis on mixed farming—crops and livestock—Mexico may once again have a fully productive agricultural sector, and efficient family farms will have a more secure future.

—James Lang ('78)

NATIONS BEFORE NATIONALISM

by John A. Armstrong
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411 pp. \$30

One surprise of the past 20 years—a surprise both to scholars and to national leaders—has been the resurgence of ethnicity as a powerful political force. "Modernization," many previously believed, was dissolving ethnic identities and drawing all peoples into a single global community. Or, according to the Marxist variation on this theme, the workers and farmers of the world would forget ethnicity as

soon as they discovered their common class identity. Little wonder, then, that Soviet leaders, like those of Spain, Great Britain, and Yugoslavia, have been alarmed by rising, potentially divisive ethnic consciousness within their borders. Throughout the world, ethnic passions continue to flare up, spurring some minorities to rebel—and some scholars to reconsider.

Among such reconsiderations, one of the best is by John Armstrong, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin. Like the French historian Fernand Braudel, Armstrong believes we can best see inside human culture if we look back over the *longue durée*—in this case at least 2,000 years. Armstrong's geographic scope is also large, his narrative reaching into the Islamic world, into Russia and Eastern Europe, and to Germany, France, and Spain.

Where, Armstrong asks, do such intense feelings of group identity, persisting over centuries, come from? Not necessarily, he finds, from language or from simple residence on a patch of land (indeed, in the nomadic Middle East, territoriality matters very little). Armstrong believes that ethnicity originates in the mind, the spirit. It is the human psyche, he observes, which "for better or worse [shapes] its own fate." Drawing mostly from religion and then from a shared history and a sense of group meaning and purpose (expressed in such resonant cultural symbols as poetry, dance, myths, historic documents), groups of people form and cling tenaciously to a conviction of common identity.

Boundaries, argues Armstrong, are of great importance to ethnic self-definition. Each ethnic group guards its borders, which are sometimes territorial and linguistic but are always a way of living, believing, looking, and feeling. To an elite falls the responsibility of recording and guarding the cul-

tural boundaries, which have as their essential condition an "other," an enemy, a vast community of aliens—sometimes forming the majority culture of a given nation—who must be excluded.

Nothing, in fact, is more important to ethnic self-consciousness than exclusion. Ethnic groups define themselves as much by what they are *not* as by what they *are*. Armstrong dwells at great length on how Western Christendom and the Islamic world forged their respective identities largely by asserting (particularly between the ninth and 13th centuries) their differences from each other. He shows also how, as each of these great (and almost "supraethnic") civilizations fragmented, more specific and localized ethnic identities developed, particularly in those tense regions that were once the borders between the two worlds—the Ottoman Empire and Spanish Castile, for example.

As the title of his book suggests, Armstrong is interested in how ethnicity influenced the rise of modern nation-states. Why, for example, did certain ethnic groups emerge as the national leaders? He finds that the city was instrumental in this process, particularly in the "sedentary" West, in Byzantium, and even in Russia. Groups associated with great urban centers (Paris, Moscow, Vienna) helped shape the modern nations, and imposed their language and laws on the less powerful ethnic groups. In the Islamic world, by contrast, cities mattered less; capitals frequently moved from one location to another. Consequently, Moslem polities, with multiethnic administrations, were characterized less by a specific group identity than by a "common core of Islamic values."

But even in the West, minority ethnic groups did not simply surrender to the dominant national identity. Indeed, as recent history shows—in Wales or in the Basque region of Spain—the intensity of ethnic allegiance waxes and wanes with the fortunes of the larger nation. Ethnicity is an inconstant force.

Inconstant but far from extinct. Although it is only one of many identities people make use of (occupation and class being two of the others), ethnicity has a staying power that will confound those who deny or ignore it.

—Robert Kelley
