Assignment 4 – Julia Yao Roig

Berger’s analysis of nationalism is one in which the nation is constantly being constructed. He claims that historians were used for that purpose. This perspective therefore presupposes that the nation is constructed. Berger adopts the thesis that in circumstances where either the nation or state were absent, history was used to create them. An example is Poland and the poles, who used history to advocate for a state in the post-World War One order.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition emerging nation-states were more likely to institutionalize history.[[2]](#footnote-2) Berger’s constructivist approach also factors in the *Other* when nation-building.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, he takes caution to distance himself from methodological nationalism, focusing on a variety of different countries and experiences. Berger relies on the high aspects of politics and culture for nation-state construction.

The book adopts a mostly high politics approach. His analysis examines state action, particularly its impact in the development of history as a field. Berger’s conceptualization of the state as an internal political apparatus pays little attention to specific figures, laws or wars. The origin of the field, as well as professionalization, was incentivized by the needs of the state. Major turns within history are also discussed within political contexts, such as the influence of historiographical nationalism in both world wars.[[4]](#footnote-4) This approach advances the perspective that historians as a field have been political from the very beginning, with historians using history to create master narratives which legitimize regimes,[[5]](#footnote-5) territorial claims,[[6]](#footnote-6) etc.

Berger’s analysis focuses on high culture and its impact on both nations and historians. He asserts that historians were deeply influenced by the intellectual thoughts at the time, viewing the Enlightenment as essential to the professionalization of the field.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition, Berger looks at the importance of literature, paintings, linguistics, etc.[[8]](#footnote-8) In nations, which lacked statehood, culture made up the demos.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Transnational analysis in Berger is not at the forefront; there is no discussion of countries outside of Europe. His analysis however does discuss the mobility of scholars, especially during the Enlightenment.[[10]](#footnote-10) The discussion of scientificity and its spread in various educational institutions adopts a transnational approach, looking at Germany as the origins but addressing its dissemination. However, Berger disregards material aspects of transnationalism, such as goods, technologies or warfare.

The biggest shortcoming of the book is its absence of other continents apart from Europe. Berger’s central thesis asserts that the development of the history goes hand in hand with state development. However, an analysis of countries with different state structures would have made the thesis stronger. In addition, Berger largely ignores major military developments such as wars, only mentioning them briefly. Discussing military developments would have helped him add a more transnational approach.

Sources

Berger, Stefan, and Christoph Conrad. 2015. *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe*. 1st ed. Writing the Nation. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

# Feeback

This is a report that contains a lot of good elements. Sometimes the analysis could have been more detailed and a part on comparison is missing, unfortunately.

Do you claim that states/politicians are the main drivers of change and that historians merely execute what they are told? You rightfully argue that B is a constructivist when dealing with nations. But is he also a modernist? And what role does he give the Other? B clearly focuses on high politics, but are low political elements entirely absent. Could they have received more attention? And the same applies to high culture. Are forms of culture totally ignored?

A specific analysis of comparisons is missing and the part on transnationalism could be more detailed. When and how does he pay attention to transnational movements. What functions do they have in the narrative. The suggestion to pay more attention to material aspects is interesting, but it is not very clear what role wars have on the writing of history (he discusses the reaction of historians to the end of WWI, what more should he do)? You end with a good critical remark: he ignores the non-European parts. But how could he have integrated that without spending 10 more years on research, writing a 2000 page book?

1. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 250) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 156) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See (Berger and Conrad 2015, 8) and (Berger and Conrad 2015, 61) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 228) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 52) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 189) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 76) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 92) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Berger and Conrad 2015, 44) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)