Introduction

Cynthia Herrup

All communities are, to some extent, imaginary.[1] However effective the institutional matrices of family, village, and state that seem to articulate "natural" boundaries for us, there is very little truly natural about them. The rearrangement of both Central and Eastern Europe over the last two years should disabuse us about the organicity of such constructions. These political changes have reminded us starkly of the fragility of statehood, a fact long accepted in the non-European states created to suit the needs of nineteenth-century imperialism, but one largely unacknowledged (despite the efforts of European separatist and devolutionist movements) until recently in the West. Yet at the same time the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe have been exchanging older unions for newer equally artificial ones, the members of the European Economic Community have been planning a new configuration of their own.

Because its apparent roots in geography, language, and ethnicity seemed to offer the best hope for stability, nationhood has historically been the preferred foundation for statehood. But the stresses of migration, the triumphs of international consumerism, and the insights of postmodernism have reemphasized that nationhood as well as statehood is a status created from practices, values, and memories often newer, more partial, and more exclusionary than once believed. Nationhood, it seems, is an artifice more about reassuring ourselves about who we think we are not than about any expression of who we innately are. In both East and West, recent changes suggest the possibilities of

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[1] This idea is drawn from Benedict R. O'G. Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983; revised and expanded ed., London: Verso, 1991). See also Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

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relegitimating statehood on a federated rather than on a nationalist basis.

These reconsiderations are especially pertinent to England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland as they struggle to define themselves within the context of European Union. In the pages below, four historians, each from a different point of view, consider the effect of "Europeanization" on the British Isles. Despite the distinctiveness of their approaches, certain common threads run through the essays. All of them note the enormous cultural influence of economic needs and changes, an influence pervasive enough to obfuscate conventional distinctions between economic and other sorts of history. All point to the critical, indeed the defining, importance within "nations" of those excluded from national mythologies. All acknowledge the part that media of all sorts have played and do play in both reinforcing and undermining national identities. And last, all recognize the contingency of those identities, the real work of creating and maintaining them, and the impossibility of doing so within a vacuum. Identity, these authors imply, is fundamentally relational and frequently oppositional. What, Linda Colley asks, will it mean to be European when the historical root of Britishness has been its non-Europeanness? Can Europe, Merfyn Jones asks, follow the serendipitous path of Wales and, by inverting traditional expectations, create nations out of administrative states? Will historiographies closely tied to ideas of sovereignty, J. G. A. Pocock asks, survive, not simply the ending of autonomy, but the failure implicit in that ending? And how, Geoff Eley asks, will the various conflicting notions of "Europe" be resolved in the practicalities of union?

These challenges are not only for specialists in contemporary issues. If history is the story through which we know ourselves—as Pocock puts it, "the memory of the state"—then the shifting sands of identity pose a problem and an opportunity for historians as well as for other intellectuals. And if this is, as Eley argues here, a "constitution-making" era comparable to 1789 or 1945, then historians as well as other intellectuals should be a part of that remaking. The year 1992 offers the opportunity to reconsider the meaning of such terms as "state," "nation," "Britain," and "Europe." Ideally, this opportunity will inspire us to explore our own assumptions (whether or not we think of ourselves as Europeans), not only about who belongs and who does not, but also about how identity shapes and is shaped by history, economy and politics. This year is a moment to look hard at all the communities that we imagine.

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