

National Parks & National Pride

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The national park is not only a space dedicated to walks, recreation, and even wondrous contemplation, it is also a tool used by the Nation. Guillaume Blanc analyses this overlap between environment and politics through the cases of France, Canada, and Ethiopia.

Reviewed: Guillaume Blanc, *Histoire environnementale comparée de la nation. Regards croisés sur les parcs nationaux du Canada, d'Éthiopie et de France*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015, 319 p., 25€.

National parks immediately bring to mind images of vast natural spaces where flora and fauna flourish, sheltered from human activities. It is precisely because the term is so closely associated with this imaginary of 'wild nature' that the title of Guillaume Blanc's book is so striking: linking national parks with the question of the nation seems paradoxical at first glance. And yet this is precisely what the author does, comparing three experiences in Canada, Ethiopia, and France. His aim is to show that, above and beyond their vocation for nature conservation, parks are also used by States as instruments for constructing and reinforcing nationalism. According to this reading, 'doing' nature is, in short, a political activity aimed at creating a sense of belonging to a national community. This book takes an original topic of study – the national park — and addresses a key political question: how a nation is forged, with 'nation' understood as an 'ideal community that is imagined, limited, and sovereign, and whose durability rests on the State's ability to demarcate [...] its physical and symbolic boundaries' (p. 280).

The Park as Political Instrument

The national park's ability to inspire a sense of national belonging is mainly due to the emotions that the experience of nature can generate. In an ever-changing world, where things are moving faster and faster, nature is reassuring because it lasts. According to the author, attachment to nature, and therefore to the territory on which it is found, comes from an awareness of how fragile it is: 'nature sprouts from [...] the seeds of its own imminent disappearance' (p. 129) and this gives rise to nostalgia. Emotion appears to be the main driving force behind the process that creates heritage, or, in other words, the process through which a group's identity is rooted in a particular space. A certain discourse on landscape paves the way for this process; in other words, a specific approach to land-use planning that bolsters feelings of collective belonging and serves as a medium through which to convey a national narrative. The nature offered by parks is not 'natural' and should be considered instead as a cultural artefact, shaped by administrators according to the elements they have decided to protect. Guillaume Blanc begins with the principle that nature is not a biological given but is socially constructed. This social and political construction of nature serves a national narrative that defines both collective identity and the process through which heritage is constructed.

Highlighting the national narratives that convey and produce collective identities therefore implies deconstructing the state of nature in order to read land use in political terms. Guillaume Blanc does this through a comparative analysis of three national parks: the Cévennes National Park in France, the Forillon National Park in Quebec, Canada, and the Simien Mountains National Park in Ethiopia. The choice of this trio is highly relevant for the research issue at stake, as it links a country from the South (Ethiopia) with two countries from the North (France and Canada). The latter also differ greatly from one another in terms of their national construction, with the old centralized tradition of the French State on the one hand, and the multinational federalism of the young Canadian State, on the other. The author conducts a historical sociology based on analysis of the legislation, activity reports, and both archival and tourist documentation produced by the parks' administrators since the end of the 1960s.

Landscape as a Medium Conveying a National Narrative

The book analyses park spaces as political landscapes that convey national narratives. In France, the Cévennes National Park is part of a backward-looking strategy for promoting the rural world, the common denominator of a nation that was mainly agricultural in the early 20th century but went on to see profound changes after the Second World War. Through the Cévennes Park, the French administration aims to give a further lease of life to the rural world disappearing elsewhere, thus legitimising the nation through its past. In practice, this narrative of the 'nation as memory' translates into a strategy for protecting rural life more than for protecting nature itself: it is traditional Cevennes culture that seems to be steeped in nature. Here, nature is considered in its anthropic dimension and mankind is integrated as a natural element. In terms of land-use planning, the park administrators valorise local folklore, whether by restoring traditional peasant homes or providing support to agricultural and pastoral practices.

In the case of the Forillon National Park in the Quebec Province, the discourse on landscape is based instead on nature being both timeless and dehumanised. In order to compensate for its lack of past, the Canadian nation has tended to perceive itself as born from its natural territory. Nature is timeless insofar as it was there before the first colonisers and has outlasted them. This 'naturalisation of the nation' offers a way of transcending cultural divisions within the Canadian nation, which formed through a process of adapting to wild nature. For Guillaume Blanc, the Canadian administration aims to 'influence how Canadians perceive their country by making empty, unspoiled nature a feature that is just as deeply rooted as a European's attachment to his or her hamlet or valley' (p. 118). In terms of land organisation, this national narrative can be seen in planning decisions aimed at providing visitors with a sensory experience of nature, through trails, observation posts, or camping areas in the heart of that nature. The intention is to show nature as wild and sublime, preserved from modern human activities. The only traces of anthropisation tolerated by the park administrators are those from the nineteenth century, a period when local populations supposedly lived in harmony with their environment.

The case of the Simien Mountains National Park in Ethiopia is slightly different, insofar as the park serves less to tell a national narrative than to legitimise national authorities in a State still in construction on the international stage. For the Ethiopian State, the park shows that it is capable of protecting the vanishing 'natural Eden of Africa' that is considered by the international community as 'world heritage'. The origin of the park's visitors testifies to this 'inter-nationalisation' of Ethiopian natural heritage: the vast majority are Western

visitors who come to the park to admire – or even classify – its large mammals. The Simien Park is therefore not so much a space for national collective experimentation in landscaping but rather the medium for an international narrative of heritage. Nonetheless, the park does also serve a domestic political function, as an instrument of control over the national territory, with central power affirming its political authority by controlling the activities of local populations.

As a political landscape, the national park aims to convey a sense of national belonging. While it seems to clearly fulfil this role in the French and Canadian cases, this is less self-evident in the Ethiopian case where the park was created largely to gain legitimacy on the international stage. Moreover, the process of attachment to heritage grounded in the emotions created by nature is less obvious for the Ethiopian population where the majority of people still live in rural areas and are therefore not lacking in nature. It seems a shame that the author does not focus more on the issue that first sparked his research question: the link between nationalism and nation. While he argues against the hypothesis that an interdependent world heralds the end of the Nation-State, the theoretical contributions of his research to the debate about the definition of nationalism need to be developed further.

Nature at the Intersection of the Global and the Local

Beyond deciphering national narratives through the lens of park landscaping, the great value of this book is that it shows the conflict between the aims of conservation and those of local economic development, as well as the difference between the interests of local populations and those of external populations likely to visit the parks. National parks are also part of a movement towards tourist consumption of nature: a local space is conserved and then ‘consumed’ by the national or even international community. In order to construct this space, anthropic activities are necessarily limited so as to give the illusion that nature continues outside contemporary time. In this way, even in the case of the Cévennes Park where the human footprint is integrated as a natural element, it is clearly traditional rural life that is being valorised. However, stopping time in its tracks in this way also inflicts violence on local populations. This violence can be concrete – for example, in the case of the Forillon Park or the Simien Mountains Park, where populations were expelled/displaced – but it can also be symbolic, insofar as local populations internalise the ‘presupposition that it is in their interests, or that it is at least their duty, to free nature from their presence’ (p. 233).

This analysis of the conflict between economic development and conservation and between local and external interests is fully inline with the concerns of political ecology. This field of research emerged in the 1970s and analyses the stakes inherent in access to and use of the environment, as well as the conflicts that result from these issues. Guillaume Blanc’s book therefore leads us to question the very possibility of sustainable development, understood as reconciling economic, social, and environmental aims. The ‘win-win’ argument put forward by sustainable development is considerably undermined by this inherent contradiction between economic development and conservation and between local and national/global interests. Moreover, the book encourages discussion of certain concepts that derive from the paradigm of sustainable development, for example the notion of ‘world heritage’. The Simien Mountains Park and its natural resources are considered as heritage by the international community (represented by UNESCO) and by its (largely Western) visitors, rather than by the populations that actually inhabit it. The notion of world heritage therefore hides a subjective conception of what should be conserved (because it is in fact a cultural conception).

Through its original topic of study and the various points of reflection it encourages, Guillaume Blanc's book is extremely stimulating. Due to its academic style, it mainly targets social science researchers but it will be of interest to a variety of research communities, from those working on nature conservation to those looking at the processes through which Nation-States are formed.

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