

Anne-Marie Thiesse (ed.), *La culture des nations*. Special issue of *La matière et l'esprit*, no. 16 (Mons: Université de Mons, 2010) 72 pp., ill., ISBN 9782872828012.

Review by **Geneviève Warland**

The interdisciplinary review *La matière et l'esprit*, edited by the University of Mons, asks a number of different specialists to provide the intellectual contribution for each edition. In this edition, Anne-Marie Thiesse, directeur de recherches at the CNRS, well known for her work *La création des identités nationales. Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris, Le Seuil, Points Histoire, 2001), invited other specialists to give a short insight from the perspective of their main research topic (around eight pages). It resulted in a very persuasive collection of texts showing how nationalism was and still is constructed in different European countries. The sample includes France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Republic of Macedonia and Moldavia. The main concern relates to nationalism as a voluntary construction by a cultural or political group coming to a great part from the transfer of ideas, ideologies and symbolic figures, borrowed from other countries. In her introduction, Thiesse stresses the fact that all academics share now the constructivist view on nationalism, recognising the fact that all nation states are based, since the eighteenth century, on political grounds as well as on cultural elements. Moreover, she insists on the impact of cultural transfers on national cultures in Europe over the last two centuries. Michel Espagne, with Michael Werner one of the 'fathers' of the concept of cultural transfer, illustrates the transformations of cultural goods from one culture to another implied by the transfers in order to adjust social needs (for instance, the reception of Kantian moral philosophy as a basis for French republican pedagogy and instruction). He also insists on the fact that the same structure is at odds in European and in colonial contexts: the transfers operate often with reciprocal influences (the French and Vietnamese literatures serve as an example).

National culture has to do with political identity. The cases of Macedonia, Moldavia and also Padania in the North of Italy best illustrate their intertwinements and their social and political implications. As far as Padania (the region of the Po valley) is concerned (article by Martina Avanza), the promoters of this regional identity are well aware that they tend to construct a new identity by manipulating old traditions. They also know that adopting purely economic justifications to sustain the political demands of their party, the Lega Nord, would be insufficient. Therefore, the cultural reference to a forgotten nation, which has to resurge, is part of the political agenda.

Established in 1991 as an independent Republic, Macedonia struggles with both Greece and Bulgaria on cultural matters (article by Tchavdar Marinov). First, its name is contested by Greece, which considers it to belong to the region of Thessaloniki. Second, Bulgaria sees Macedonia as one of its provinces, which was the heart of Bulgarian nationalism. Third, Bulgaria suggests that the building of a national identity in Macedonia is related to Serbian nationalists' manipulation, arguing that Macedonia is at the centre of the Serbian medieval territory. In this context, the reference to culture is a highly controversial one: on the one side, Greeks do not want Macedonians seeing themselves as heirs of Philippe II and Alexander the Great; on the other side, controversies still exist between Bulgarians and Macedonians on the national belonging of a group of nineteenth-century intellectuals, having been either nationalist Bulgarians or Macedonians striving for independence.

Moldavia's case is no less difficult (article by Petru Negură): under the Soviet regime, the region, inhabited by several populations divided in upper and lower classes, had to adjust to communist ideals. It resulted in the creation of the Moldavian language, based on a local dialect derived from the Romanian. Depending on the political strategies with regard to neighbouring Romania, numerous language reforms followed, like the use of either the Cyrillic, either the Latin alphabet. Nowadays, the country is still divided between the Romanian identity and the Moldavian one. It has a political impact, the political right putting forward the first one while the political left favours the second one.

The different cases briefly sketched here show that many cultural references are shared, translated and opposed when it comes to identity building. They also illustrate that nationalism is still alive even if the European Union seeks to propose an alternative political model. All the historical contributions in this edition indicate that we cannot escape history if we wish to better understand the present. A lively and helpful little book!