

Sergej Flere

University of Maribor, Slovenia

sflere6@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1000-1413>

Anthony D. Smith and the Serbs

Abstract: This article examines Anthony D. Smith's treatment of the Serbian case and argues that his analysis oscillates between ethnosymbolist and modernist positions in a manner that remains theoretically unresolved. Smith repeatedly presents the Serbs as an "old" nation, grounded in medieval statehood, religious tradition, and collective memory—most prominently the Kosovo narrative—yet elsewhere classifies them among nations formed in the nineteenth century through war, treaties, and elite mobilization.

By confronting Smith's claims with the historical record of Serbian nation-building, the article shows that the core constitutive elements of modern Serbian nationhood—state institutions, political mobilization, linguistic standardization, and mass cultural integration—emerged overwhelmingly in the nineteenth century. Earlier cultural materials, including epic poetry and religious traditions, existed in fragmented, sometimes marginal, and geographically uneven forms and did not amount to a continuous ethnic capable of generating nationhood independently of modern political processes.

Keywords: Anthony D. Smith, Serbs, nation building, ethnosymbolism, modernism

Introduction

The antiquity of nations may easily extend additional legitimacy to contemporary nation states, particularly when they are in a state of insecurity and crisis, as the Serbs are, with the Kosovo crisis unresolved (2026). Hence, it is not surprising that the national television broadcaster (RTS), has aired a lengthy series on the Nemanjić dynasty, the principal medieval Serbian dynasty, in a second attempt to present this history in a romanticised fashion. Similarly, the government has moved to take over the publication of all "national" textbooks, particularly those on history ("Od državnih udžbenika do nacionalnih čitanki", *Politika*, 26 January 2023) although in scholarship there have already been biting criticisms of the nationalist romanticism that pervades presentations of national history (Stojanović 2021). The current focus is on state intervention into the earlier layers of history, imposing a golden age narrative (Malešević 2019). Scholarly grounding of such positions would be welcome.

The study of nationalism comprises competing paradigms that seek to explain the origins, persistence, and transformation of national identities. Among these paradigms, Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolism occupies a distinct position, arguing that modern nations are deeply rooted in premodern ethnies, cultural symbols, and historical memories (Smith 1986, 1998). In contrast, modernist theories emphasize the constructed and contingent nature of nations, often linking their emergence to processes such as industrialization, state-building, and the spread of literacy (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1983). This paper critically examines Smith's approach by evaluating his treatment of Serbian national identity, a case that presents both early historical narratives and clear markers of modern nation-building.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Anthony D. Smith conceptualize Serbian national identity within his ethnosymbolist framework?
2. To what extent does historical evidence of Serbian nation-building support or challenge Smith's claims?
3. What inconsistencies, if any, emerge in Smith's treatment of the Serbian case, and what do they reveal about the broader ethnosymbolist paradigm?

By addressing these questions, this paper is to contribute to the ongoing debate between ethnosymbolism and modernism in nationalism studies. While Smith's work has been praised for integrating cultural and historical depth into the study of nationalism, critics argue that his framework lacks precision and can be selectively applied to fit different cases (Malešević 2004; Özkırımli 2017). It also has been criticized for conflating nation and state (Guibernau 2004). This paper evaluates Smith's treatment of Serbia as a test case for ethnosymbolism's explanatory power. Specifically, it examines whether the Serbian experience aligns with Smith's notion of a continuous ethnie or whether it fits more neatly into modernist theories that emphasize discontinuity and the nature of modernization-driven nationalization.

As to methodology, the literature by Smith, on Smith, and on the issues of relevance for Serbian nation building historical record are substantively analyzed.

The theoretical framework of this study is structured as follows. First, it outlines Smith's ethnosymbolist approach, highlighting its emphasis on myths and symbols. Second, the paper considers alternative explanations for Serbian nationhood, drawing on historical evidence from the 19th century national revival, linguistic standardization, and political movements. Third, in the discussion both the Serb national constitution and Smith's contentions on Serbia are rendered a final judgment.

This study also engages with historiographical debates on Serbian national identity. While some Serbian scholars, such as Ković (2023), support Smith's

depiction of Serbia as an ancient ethnies with deep historical roots as decisive, others emphasize the constructed nature of Serbian nationalism in the 19th century (Sundhaussen 2009; Malešević 2019; Stojanović 2021). Among those who hold that there were ancient roots of nationhood, but not nationhood itself, Bakić establishes that the ethnonym Serb existed as early as the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, but was restricted only to the royal family of the Nemanjićs (2025). Although restricted to the dynasty, it was at that time used on a par with ethnonyms such as Bulgarians and Greeks.

By examining how Smith's narrative aligns or conflicts with historical realities, this paper studies the applicability of ethnosymbolism and contributes to a broader understanding of nationalism's historical and ideological dimensions.

Smith's theory contends that most nations contain cultural cores originating in early history, being long-lasting and enduring, able to exist through various types of social change, and persisting through structural transformations of society. Modern nations are predominantly seen as closely related to these previous communities he calls ethnies. These ethnies already contain cultural material: myths, "memories", and particular interpretations of ethnic histories, prone to lasting and making a strong imprint. Many of these myths and memories are related to religion, particularly to more local religious sagas rather than directly to the core teachings of the world religions (although the logic of the latter, such as a covenant, may be replicated). They may contain reinterpretations of these cores in the context of a particular people's history. Malešević writes that Smith's understanding of the ethnies is tainted by determinism, fatalism, and finalism (2004). Ozkirimli adds that Smith "unproblematically accepts folk concepts" (2017, 174).

The major opposing theory, modernism, posits that nations are creations of modern, post-feudal times and that they do not have, or do not necessarily have, an organic or causal relationship with previous ethnic groups; modern nations do not necessarily "grow out" of previous identities, although modernists sometimes allow for proto-nationalism, which is not understood as a necessary evolutionary precursor (Hobsbawm 1990). The ways in which nations are constituted in modernity are viewed differently by authors like Gellner, Hobsbawm (1983), Anderson (1983), Brubaker (2004), and Malešević (2006), although all write of large-scale social processes. But, they all entangle nations and nationalism within the processes of modernization, closely related to superseding traditional, pre-industrial, and mostly illiterate society, containing a different dynamic and "high culture" associated with general schooling and mass media.

Smith on Serbs

In his works, Smith refers to the Serbs dozens of times. In this paper it will be considered how his references and contentions fit the historical record of Serbs and how consistent was his treatment. Hence, the focus will be one whether his

work assists us in understanding the national constitution of Serbs and to what extent. Possibly, his work on Serbs will also shed some light on his work as a whole. One must be aware, however, that in his later works, for example in *Nationalism and Modernism* (1998) onwards, he allowed for some nations being a product of modern times.

The Serbian case thus exposes tensions within ethnosymbolism concerning continuity, transmission, and the relationship between premodern cultural cores and modern nationhood.

By confronting Smith's claims with the historical record of Serbian nation-building, the article shows that the core constitutive elements of modern Serbian nationhood – state institutions, political mobilization, linguistic standardization, and mass cultural integration –emerged overwhelmingly in the nineteenth century. Earlier cultural materials, including epic poetry and religious traditions, existed in fragmented and geographically uneven forms and did not amount to a continuous ethnic capable of generating nationhood independently of modern political processes.

While Smith's framework illuminates the symbolic resources later mobilized by Serbian nationalism, it provides an insufficient explanation of how, when, and under what conditions these resources acquired national significance.

The article is guided by three questions. First, how does Smith conceptualize Serbian national identity across his writings? Second, to what extent does the historical record of Serbian nation-building support or challenge these conceptualizations? Third, what does the Serbian case reveal about the explanatory limits of ethnosymbolism as a general theory of nationalism?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to debates between ethnosymbolist and modernist approaches to nationalism. It argues that while Serbian nationalism successfully mobilized selected historical symbols, these symbols did not constitute a continuous ethnic capable of sustaining nationhood prior to modern political transformation. Rather, Serbian nationhood emerged primarily through nineteenth-century processes of state formation, elite mobilization, linguistic standardization, institutional expansion, and geopolitical change, even as it retrospectively reinterpreted earlier cultural materials as evidence of deep historical continuity.

Theoretical Framework: Ethnosymbolism and Modernism

The study of nationalism comprises competing paradigms that seek to explain the origins, persistence, and transformation of nations and national identities. Among these, Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolist approach occupies a position between primordialist and modernist theories. While rejecting biological or timeless understandings of nations, ethnosymbolism maintains that modern nations are deeply rooted in premodern ethnies, understood as named human

populations with shared myths, memories, symbols, and attachments to a historic territory.

In contrast, modernist theories emphasise the historically contingent and constructed nature of nations, locating their emergence primarily in the social transformations of modernity. These include industrialization, bureaucratic state-building, mass education, standardized high culture, and the spread of print capitalism. For modernists, nations are not inherited from the past but actively produced through political, economic, and cultural processes characteristic of the modern era.

Smith's ethnosymbolism challenges modernism by insisting on the *longue durée* of cultural materials. According to Smith, many modern nations draw upon premodern ethnies whose myths, historical memories, religious traditions, and symbols provide cultural continuity across epochs of social change. These cultural cores are said to persist through transformations from agrarian to industrial society and to supply the emotional and moral foundations of modern national solidarity.

At the same time, Smith explicitly rejects being labelled a primordialist. Nations, in his view, are not natural or inevitable entities, nor do they exist unchanged across history. Rather, they are modern formations whose cultural raw materials often predate modernity. This dual position, affirming both modern nationhood and premodern cultural continuity, constitutes the distinctive promise of ethnosymbolism.

However, this theoretical balancing act also generates ambiguities. Smith's definitions of *ethnie* vary across his works, and the mechanisms by which premodern cultural materials are transmitted, transformed, and activated in modern contexts remain under-specified. As critics have noted, it is often unclear when an ethnie constitutes a sufficient basis for nationhood and when modern political intervention becomes decisive.

Smith emphasizes myths of origin, golden ages, heroic defeats, martyrdom, and sacred missions as especially powerful elements of ethnic memory. He assigns particular importance to religious symbolism, arguing that sacred narratives and ritual practices provide especially durable foundations for collective identity. In this respect, ethnosymbolism departs from Enlightenment-inspired sociological traditions that locate social integration primarily in functional differentiation or rational institutions.

Yet, Smith's relationship to classical sociological theory is complex. His emphasis on collective representations, moral integration, and symbolic continuity has been interpreted as neo-Durkheimian. At the same time, his attention to elite agency, historical contingency, and the role of intellectuals aligns parts of his work with Weberian sensibilities. This theoretical hybridity contributes both to the appeal and to the internal tensions of ethnosymbolism.

A further complication arises from Smith's acknowledgment that ethnies need not encompass entire populations. In some cases, he allows that ethnies may initially be confined to elites or dominant strata, later expanding through processes of cultural selection, reinterpretation, and institutional diffusion. This concession weakens any strict evolutionary account of nationhood and opens ethnosymbolism to interpretations that verge on elite-driven construction.

Modernist critics have seized upon these ambiguities. They argue that ethnosymbolism tends to conflate the retrospective use of historical symbols with actual historical continuity and risks reifying cultural materials whose national significance was only established in modern contexts. From this perspective, myths and memories do not transmit themselves across centuries but acquire political relevance only when mobilized by modern institutions, elites, and states.

Serbs as an old nation

Smith frequently refers to Serbs as having a strong ancient foundation. Already in his seminal work *The Ethnic Origins*, Smith refers to Serbs as a people who "relied for their sense of solidarity and continuity upon a real or alleged tie with an ancestral homeland and memories of a glorious past on its soil" (1986, 44).

In *Myths and Memories*, Smith goes on to note Serbs for keeping the memory of Kosovo, the place where the 1389 battle with Ottomans took place, where "martyrs ... virtue and self-sacrifice sanctified the land of '[their] ancestors'" (1999, 138).

In yet another book he holds, the location of Serbs is along with England, France and Russia, particularly for having "retained memories of having belonged to a lasting political community, usually a medieval kingdom, land, and church" (2000, 65), alluding to the Serb medieval state and Serbs' memories of it.

In *Chosen Peoples* he ponders on the ethnosymbolic meaning of defeat as more important symbol and memory than victory. Smith: "Not only heroes, but battles, too, were commemorated ... defeats more than victories... the defeat of King Lazar by the Ottoman armies on the field of Kosovo Polje in 1389. As Renan remarked, defeats and ... exile impose obligations more than victories. As important, they provide models for the interpretation of later defeats and persecutions" (2003, 222).

He made another compliment to Serbia in *Cultural Foundations*, although it is less than clear: "...we find hierarchical and covenantal elements often intertwined with republican nationalism to this day. ... it can also be seen in national states ranging from Ireland and Poland to Serbia.... Here, the covenantal ideals of ethnic election and mission continue to animate segments of their population" (2008, 181).

Thus, it would pursue that Serbs are definitely an “old” nation, remembering “martyrs”, “self-sacrifice”, even more important “defeats”, cherishing “covenantal ideals” and even holding “ethnic election”, being a chosen people with “a mission”. Smith, thus far, does not mention these processes entangling fraction of a nation, but always speaks of the entirety.

Smith seems to elaborate a more nuanced position in *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, adding yet another element of Serbian alleged ethnic comprising only some Serbs: “Even where there existed a relatively cohesive core ethnic community around which to base the nation-to-be, as in Poland, Serbia, Iran and Burma... it did require careful selection of popular ethnic traditions, symbols and memories, and the elevation of some of them to the exclusion of others... There was also the question of how to reach ‘the people’... This is where the intelligentsia played an important part...” (2009, 72). Thus, he writes of a core community from which the Serbian nation would spring, putting them in the group with Poles who were, in his view, definitely to have grown out of their upper social stratum, and are an example counter to a demotic ethnic. Hence, here he allows for Serbs to be a lateral ethnic, without specifying the period or other details.

Possibly the most explicit and substantive, in this category, was his statement in *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism*, one of his systematic oeuvres, where Smith elaborates on Serbs under heading “Great Nations”: “And, in the case of the Serbs, it was the tradition of an early state that served modern Serb nationalism, for the memory of the ‘old kingdom defeated by the Turks was preserved in song and heroic story, and perhaps more to the point, in the daily liturgy of the Serbian church which had canonised most of its kings” (2009, 98).

Serbs as a modern nation

Smith, however, also presents Serbs in a completely different light: as a product of modernity, the 19th century to be precise. Namely, upon criticism, Smith decided to allow the possibility of some nations arising in modern times, but only after a system of nations, at least in Europe already existed (1998). Such a different statement is to be found in *Myths and Memories*, where Smith refers to Serbs “among new nations” where “national consciousness succeeded the spread of nationalism and was largely its product”, (1999, 39). Smith invokes the authority of his teacher H. Seton-Watson and of Charles Tilly, who was to have been the first to write of “nations by design”. As for our case, “outcome of treaties” would relate to the fact that the Serbian state was internationally recognized by the Berlin Congress in 1878, but there were other circumstances in Serbian nation-building, as will be presented.

The most direct and far-reaching Smith's modernist statement on Serbs' nature is the one mentioning Serbs among "nations of design" in *Nation in History*: "Such deliberately and often swiftly created nations are usually the outcome of treaties consequent upon periods of protracted warfare, like the Napoleonic wars and the First World War." This is in contrast to "[t]he old, continuous nations" [which] could trace their origins back to the Middle Ages (2000, 139). This latter group was to have been produced by modern nationalism, in contrast to the original group produced through a *longue durée* process, but much earlier (2000, 68-70).

However, Smith somewhat complicates the story by adding: "[These nations] were the products of the imaginations of the intelligentsia and later of the state elites that took power in these newly formed communities. Yet, this is only part of the story. Orthodoxy did not simply wither away to be replaced by secular Greek, Bulgar, or Serb nationalisms. Rather, the latter coexisted with and drew upon the myths, symbols, and traditions of the former; indeed, the creation of separate ethnic exarchates and the influence of the Orthodox liturgies and priesthoods marked crucial stages in the evolution of these nationalisms" (2000, 108). It seems he does not deny they were new, but that they nevertheless retained some older cultural strata (Smith 1998; 2000; 2009).

In quoting Kitromilides, Smith also finds a definite modernist streak: "Kitromilides attempts to demonstrate the total novelty of the late-eighteenth-and early-nineteenth-century conception of secular Greek, Serb, Bulgarian, and Rumanian nations, which replaced the former large-scale Byzantine Orthodox ecumene. These newly imagined communities marked a complete break with older identities, however much they sought to link themselves with older traditions in the area. They were the products of the imaginations of the intelligentsia and later of the state elites" (2000, 104.).

Another such statement is to be found in his book *Nationalism and Modernism*, where he posits that "under the influence of Herder"..."cultural nationalism" [wa]s to be found among Serbs also, although not a linguistic, but one related to "religious memories and institutions" (1998, 178). This should fit Serbs among modern nations, with possible roots in previous epochs. The whole statement is somewhat unusual, as Herder has been related only with linguistically established nations and not with religion ("Herder identified the source of national belonging with sharing a common language...", Barnard 2003, 38). The historical process was to have been in the 19th century.

Hence, a number of times we have traced for such instances, Smith fits Serbs among modern nations not constituted prior to the 19th century. In fact, he renders contexts and explanations for such a situation except in the first, most radical case noted above, where he considers Serbs a nation "by design".

Upon presentation of Smith's contentions, it is an occasion to further the analysis of modernism versus the ancient roots of Serbian nationhood. Serbi-

an national constitution record will be presented, followed by a discussion on Smith's thoughts on it.

Serbian National Constitution

The nineteenth century represents the decisive period in the formation of modern Serbian nationhood. This section examines key political, institutional, and social developments in order to assess whether Serbian national constitution is better explained through ethnosymbolist continuity or modernist transformation.

Political fragmentation and early conditions

Following the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans in the late medieval period, Serbs were incorporated into imperial structures that did not recognize national distinctions. Political authority, education, and religious hierarchy were organized within the Ottoman system and, in Habsburg lands, under imperial administration. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Serbs were politically fragmented between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, with markedly different institutional experiences.

A major demographic rupture occurred during the late seventeenth century, when large numbers of Serbs migrated northward from Kosovo and southern regions into Habsburg territory. These migrants received limited religious and educational privileges, including ecclesiastical autonomy and schooling, conditions absent in Ottoman Serbia proper. As a result, Serbs under Habsburg rule developed stronger clerical, educational, and proto-bureaucratic structures than those remaining under direct Ottoman administration.

In contrast, Serbia proper entered the nineteenth century with extremely low literacy, minimal institutional development, and no autonomous political authority. Formal schooling in Serbia Proper (Belgrade Pashalik) scarcely existed, administrative capacity was rudimentary, and social organization remained overwhelmingly agrarian (Roudometof 2001, 49; Ekmečić 1991, 333). These conditions sharply limited the possibility of sustained national integration prior to political transformation.

From uprising to state formation

The First Serbian Uprising of 1804 initially articulated demands within the framework of Ottoman legitimacy rather than nationalist secession. Early objectives centred on restoring lawful imperial order and removing local abuses, not on establishing a sovereign national state (Roudometof 24; Stokes 1976;

Paxton 1972). However, those present at the call for uprising swore allegiance to a Serbian Orthodox priest (Djokić 2023, 216). Only gradually did the movement acquire nationalist characteristics, shaped by military conflict, diplomatic negotiation, and elite political learning.

The emergence of an autonomous Serbian polity under Miloš Obrenović after 1815 marked a qualitative shift. Territorial autonomy created the institutional nucleus necessary for modern nation-building: administrative organs, a standing military, fiscal capacity, and diplomatic representation. Political authority became territorially anchored, enabling the consolidation of a national centre for subsequent mobilization (Roudometof; Djokić).

Throughout the nineteenth century, state institutions expanded rapidly despite extremely modest initial conditions. Administrative structures, policing, military organization, and infrastructure developed alongside manufacturing and trade. This institutional growth preceded mass national consciousness and provided the framework within which nationalism could later be disseminated.

Elite mobilization and national programmes

By the mid-nineteenth century, nationalism became increasingly articulated by political elites rather than the rural majority. A key expression of this was the formulation of long-term national programmes envisioning territorial expansion into regions identified as historically Serbian. These programmes drew selectively on medieval statehood and symbolic geography to legitimise contemporary political aims (Malešević 2019; Roudometof 2001; Sundhaussen 2009, 218-242).

Such elite nationalism was not merely rhetorical but operational as schools, cultural societies, and informal organizations extended Serbian influence beyond its borders. The state actively supported information gathering, cultural dissemination, and political agitation in contested regions, demonstrating the instrumental role of modern politics.

At the same time, popular participation in nationalism remained limited for much of the century. Low literacy, local economic concerns, and the persistence of village-centred identities constrained mass mobilization. National consciousness spread unevenly and gained broader social traction only in the later decades of the century, particularly during periods of war, crisis, and territorial expansion.

International recognition and consolidation

The international recognition of Serbia in 1878 (Berlin Congress, at the end of the 2nd Serbo-Ottoman War) represented a decisive moment in national consolidation. Statehood was no longer merely autonomous but fully sovereign, en-

abling intensified institution-building, expanded education, and greater symbolic projection of national identity. The distinction between “liberation” and “conquest” blurred as territorial expansion was reframed as historical restoration.

The late nineteenth century witnessed the integration of nationalism into state education, military service, and public ritual. These mechanisms transformed elite narratives into widely shared national frameworks. Only at this stage did nationalism acquire mass resonance, confirming the modernist claim that national integration depends on institutional mediation rather than inherited cultural continuity.

Assessment

The nineteenth-century political record aligns strongly with modernist interpretations of nation-building. Serbian nationhood emerged through state formation, elite mobilization, geopolitical opportunity, and institutional expansion, rather than through the uninterrupted transmission of a premodern ethnic. While historical symbols and memories were mobilized extensively, their national significance was constructed retrospectively and operationalized through modern political structures.

This does not deny the existence of earlier Serbian cultural or religious identities. Rather, it underscores that these identities lacked the institutional reach, social integration, and political articulation necessary to constitute a nation prior to the nineteenth century. Serbian national constitution was therefore a contingent outcome of modern transformation, not the organic unfolding of an ancient ethnic.

Language

The standardization of the Serbian language constitutes a central pillar of modern Serbian nation-building and provides one of the clearest points of alignment with modernist theories of nationalism. While multiple dialects were considered legitimate among the elites, a vernacular existed among ordinary Serbs prior to the nineteenth century, and there was no codified, standardized, or institutionally enforced national language capable of sustaining large-scale cultural integration.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, three linguistic registers coexisted among Serbs. The first was Russo-Slavonic, used primarily in ecclesiastical contexts, particularly within the Serbian Orthodox Church in Habsburg lands. This language was inaccessible to the broader population and functioned as a clerical and liturgical idiom rather than a national medium. The second was Slavo-Serbian, an artificial hybrid influenced by Russian and Church Slavonic, employed mainly by educated urban elites but largely unintelligible to the peas-

antry. The third was the spoken vernacular of the rural population, fragmented into regional dialects and lacking codification or prestige.

The absence of a unified written language meant that Serbian society entered the nineteenth century without a key instrument of national integration. Literacy was extremely low, and linguistic practice reinforced social and regional divisions rather than overcoming them (besides the language of the ordinary people, two would-be languages had semi-official status: Russo-Slav and Slav-Serb, in vogue in the Church in Austria and among the upper strata in Austria; Ivić 1998, 169). In this context, language could not function as a carrier of national consciousness in the ethnosymbolist sense.

The decisive transformation occurred through the work of Vuk Karadžić. His linguistic reform did not merely refine an existing standard but fundamentally created one. Drawing on the spoken vernacular, particularly the Eastern Herzegovinian dialect, Karadžić codified grammar, simplified orthography, compiled dictionaries, collected epic poetry, and translated religious texts. This process aligned Serbian linguistic reform with broader European Romantic and Herderian currents, which valorized popular speech as the authentic foundation of national culture.

Karadžić's project encountered strong resistance, particularly from ecclesiastical authorities in Habsburg lands. Opposition was motivated both by fears of cultural degradation and by concerns that linguistic reform would undermine religious authority or facilitate Catholic influence. The prolonged conflict over language standardization demonstrates that the national language was not an inherited cultural given, but rather a contested modern project.

The eventual victory of Karadžić's reform marked a turning point in Serbian national integration. Once institutionalized through education and publishing, the reformed language enabled the dissemination of nationalist narratives to broader audiences. Nevertheless, this linguistic unification occurred at a time when the majority of the population remained illiterate, underscoring the elite-driven nature of early national culture.

From a theoretical perspective, the Serbian linguistic case fits squarely within the modernist framework. A vernacular existed prior to modernity, but its elevation to national status required conscious codification, institutional enforcement, and political support. Language did not transmit Serbian nationhood across centuries; it was transformed into a national medium through nineteenth-century reform, conflict, and state-backed dissemination.

Travelogues

Nineteenth-century Serbian nationalism developed a distinctive cultural instrument in the form of travelogues describing regions defined as "Old" or "True"

Serbia. These texts played a specific role in elite mobilization by transforming contested territories into symbolic national space (see, Atanasovski 2017).

As literacy remained low among the general population, travelogues were addressed primarily to educated circles, including bureaucrats, clergy, teachers, and political activists. Their function was not descriptive neutrality but ideological integration, presenting territories beyond the borders of the Serbian state as historically Serbian and morally entitled to incorporation.

The geographic scope of “Old Serbia” was fluid and expandable, typically encompassing Kosovo, Raška/Sandžak, and large parts of Macedonia. Even leading intellectuals revised these designations over time, reflecting the evolving needs of nationalist discourse rather than fixed historical criteria.

Travel narratives typically emphasised danger, disorder, and foreign domination, portraying Ottoman rule as oppressive and Muslim populations as either recent arrivals or converts from an original Serbian stock. This narrative strategy delegitimised existing inhabitants while legitimising Serbian claims as acts of restoration rather than conquest.

Authors frequently presented themselves not merely as observers but as courageous national witnesses, often travelling under armed escort and highlighting personal risk. The act of travel itself became a symbolic performance of national commitment.

Among the most influential figures was Miloš Milojević, whose writings combined travel reportage with expansive historical claims. While some of his assertions were immediately criticised as unscientific, his broader impact lay in popularizing the idea of Serbian primordial presence and moral entitlement. Even where factual accuracy was dubious, the political efficacy of such narratives was considerable.

Other travelogue writers employed more restrained language, but shared core assumptions including linguistic criteria for national belonging, confessional interpretations of identity, and civilizational hierarchies. Differences among Orthodox Serbs, Muslims, and Albanians were routinely framed as deviations from an original Serbian norm.

These travelogues did not shape mass consciousness directly, given low literacy, but they powerfully influenced elite discourse, education, and political planning. They transformed geography into national destiny, preparing ideological ground for later territorial expansion.

From a theoretical perspective, the travelogue phenomenon exemplifies modern nationalist construction rather than ethnosymbolic continuity. The symbolic geography of “Old Serbia” was not transmitted organically across centuries, but was produced through nineteenth-century intellectual labour, state support, and political ambition.

Epic Poetry

Epic poetry occupies a central place in discussions of Serbian national identity and is often cited as evidence of deep ethnosymbolic continuity. Yet, closer examination reveals a far more complex and historically contingent trajectory.

Serbian epic poetry, particularly the one centred on the Kosovo Battle of 1389, contains a rich symbolic repertoire: martyrdom, heroic sacrifice, betrayal, moral choice, and divine judgement. These themes later became foundational to Serbian nationalist ideology, lending apparent support to ethnosymbolist interpretations.

However, the social reach and historical continuity of this epic tradition were limited. During Ottoman rule, Kosovo-centred epics were largely absent from Serbia proper and survived primarily on the margins of the Serbian ethnic space, especially in regions under Habsburg or Venetian authority, where anti-Ottoman themes were politically tolerable. In Ottoman territories, epic performance was constrained and selective.

The figure of Prince Marko dominated popular epic tradition, depicted as a folkloric hero rather than a moral-national symbol. The Kosovo-centred moral cosmology emerged gradually and unevenly, shaped by clerical reinterpretation and later by nineteenth-century collectors.

The decisive transformation occurred with Vuk Karadžić's collection and publication of epic poetry. By selecting, editing, and canonising specific poems, Karadžić converted a dispersed oral tradition into a national literary corpus. His editorial choices privileged Kosovo-centred narratives and moralized heroism while excluding large bodies of popular material dealing with recent banditry or local conflict.

Once institutionalized through education, epic poetry became a powerful instrument of national socialization. School primers and textbooks disseminated Kosovo narratives widely, embedding them in the moral imagination of new generations. At this stage, epic poetry acquired national integrative capacity it had not previously possessed.

The Kosovo myth thus represents a retrospective nationalization of cultural material, not an uninterrupted transmission of national consciousness. Defeat was reinterpreted as transcendental victory, sacrifice as moral election, and loss as historical mission. These meanings were not inherent but constructed through modern ideological labour.

From a theoretical standpoint, Serbian epic poetry illustrates both the strengths and the limits of ethnosymbolism. While premodern cultural materials undeniably existed, their national significance was contingent on nineteenth-century political, educational, and institutional mediation. Epic poetry did not produce Serbian nationhood; it was transformed into national capital once modern nation-building was already under way.

Epic poetry occupies a central place in discussions of Serbian national identity and has often been treated, by ethnosymbolist scholarship in particular, as evidence of deep cultural continuity. In the Serbian case, however, the historical trajectory, social reach, and institutionalization of epic poetry complicate any straightforward reading of it as a continuously transmitted national tradition.

The corpus most closely associated with Serbian national identity is the cycle of poems centred on the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. These poems articulate a dense moral cosmology structured around sacrifice, martyrdom, betrayal, loyalty, and divine judgement. The central narrative opposition, between the earthly and the heavenly kingdom, later became foundational for nationalist interpretations of Serbian history and destiny.

Yet, the historical circulation of this material was geographically and socially uneven. During Ottoman rule, Kosovo-centred epics were largely absent from Serbia proper, where political conditions constrained the performance of openly anti-Ottoman material. Instead, such poems survived primarily on the margins of the Serbian ethnic space, especially in Habsburg and Venetian territories, where imperial authorities tolerated or even encouraged anti-Ottoman sentiment.

Regional differentiation is therefore crucial. In areas such as Srem, parts of Dalmatia, and the Military Frontier, epic singing was more visible and socially accepted. In Montenegro and parts of Herzegovina, epic poetry functioned within a distinct political culture characterized by armed autonomy and clan organization, producing a different relationship between poetry, authority, and identity. These regional traditions cannot be conflated into a single, homogeneous Serbian epic culture.

Within Ottoman territories, the most widely known epic figure was Prince Marko. Unlike the Kosovo heroes, Marko was depicted less as a moral-national symbol than as a folkloric strongman, ambiguous in virtue and often closer to trickster figures than to martyrs. This suggests that the moralized Kosovo narrative was not the dominant popular epic framework across all Serbian lands prior to the nineteenth century (Pavlović and Atanasovski 2016).

The decisive transformation of epic poetry occurred in the early nineteenth century through the work of Vuk Karadžić. By collecting, editing, and publishing oral poems, primarily from blind singers, Karadžić converted a fragmented oral tradition into a national literary canon. His editorial intervention was not neutral. He privileged poems that emphasised Kosovo, sacrifice, and moral choice, while excluding large bodies of material dealing with more recent events, local violence, or banditry.

This act of selection was foundational. It transformed epic poetry from a dispersed oral practice into a textualized, standardized, and portable national resource. The poems could now circulate beyond their original performance con-

texts, entering schools, print culture, and elite discourse. Only at this stage did epic poetry acquire the capacity to function as a national integrative medium.

The institutionalization of epic poetry through education was especially decisive. Once incorporated into school primers and curricula, Kosovo narratives reached audiences previously untouched by oral performance. Children encountered epic poetry not as folklore but as authoritative national history, stripped of regional variability and presented as collective heritage. This process fundamentally altered the social function of epic poetry.

From this point onward, the Kosovo narrative was no longer merely remembered; it was taught. Defeat was reinterpreted as transcendental victory, sacrifice as moral election, and loss as historical mission. These meanings were not inherent in the poems themselves but produced through modern pedagogical framing.

This transformation poses a challenge to ethnosymbolist interpretations. While ethnosymbolism correctly emphasises the emotional and symbolic power of epic poetry, it tends to treat this power as evidence of long-term continuity. The Serbian case demonstrates instead that symbolic intensity can be the product of modern institutional amplification and not only of ancient transmission.

Epic poetry did not sustain Serbian nationhood through centuries of political rupture. Rather, it was nationalized once modern state structures, linguistic standardisation, and educational institutions were already in place. Its later centrality reflects successful mobilization, not uninterrupted inheritance.

This does not mean that epic poetry was invented in the nineteenth century. It means that its national meaning was. The distinction is analytically crucial. Premodern cultural materials existed, but they did not operate as national frameworks until modern actors made them do so.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Serbian epic tradition illustrates both the strengths and limits of ethnosymbolism. Ethnosymbolism captures why epic poetry proved such a potent resource once mobilized, but it overstates its capacity to transmit nationhood across historical ruptures in the absence of modern institutional mediation.

Discussion

The Serbian case reveals a complex interaction between premodern cultural materials and modern processes of nation-building. While elements of Serbian identity existed prior to the nineteenth century, they lacked the scope, institutional integration, and social penetration required to sustain nationhood independently of modern political transformation. This finding has direct implications for evaluating Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolist framework.

Smith's treatment of Serbia oscillates between portraying the Serbs as an ancient nation rooted in medieval continuity and classifying them as a modern nation formed through war, treaties, and elite mobilization. This oscillation is not resolved simply by distinguishing between ethnic and nation, a distinction Smith explicitly endorses. The difficulty lies instead in demonstrating that Serbian premodern cultural elements constituted a cohesive ethnic capable of bridging centuries of political fragmentation, low literacy, and weak institutional continuity.

The historical record indicates that Serbian national integration depended decisively on nineteenth-century developments: state formation, bureaucratic expansion, military organisation, linguistic standardization, mass schooling, and the mobilization of symbolic resources through education and public ritual. Without these modern mechanisms, earlier cultural materials remained localized, socially marginal, and politically inert.

Epic poetry, religious memory, and medieval symbolism played an important role in Serbian nationalism, but their national significance was constructed retrospectively. They were selected, edited, moralized, and disseminated through modern institutions. Rather than transmitting nationhood across time, these materials were transformed into national capital once the institutional framework of the modern state was already in place.

This does not imply that Serbian nationalism was invented *ex nihilo*. Historical symbols mattered profoundly, but they mattered because modern political actors made them matter. The Serbian case thus supports modernist arguments that nationalism is not the expression of an ancient identity but a modern project that reinterprets the past to serve present political needs.

At the same time, the Serbian case does not fully vindicate the strongest versions of modernism. Nationalist mobilization was facilitated by the availability of culturally resonant symbols, particularly those associated with religion and sacrifice. Ethnosymbolism correctly draws attention to the emotional and moral power of such materials, but it overestimates their autonomous integrative capacity across historical ruptures.

Conclusion

This article has examined Anthony D. Smith's treatment of the Serbian case as a critical test of ethnosymbolist theory. By systematically comparing Smith's claims with the historical record of Serbian nation-building, it has shown that his analysis remains internally inconsistent and empirically under-specified.

Smith alternately depicts the Serbs as an ancient nation sustained by medieval statehood, sacred memory, and religious continuity, and as a modern

nation formed through nineteenth-century political transformation. While ethnosymbolism allows for such duality in principle, Smith does not provide clear criteria for determining when premodern cultural continuity constitutes a sufficient basis for nationhood and when modern political construction becomes decisive.

The Serbian experience suggests that modern nationhood emerged not from the organic unfolding of a premodern ethnic but from contingent political, institutional, and geopolitical processes. Premodern cultural materials existed and were later mobilized with great symbolic force, but they did not independently generate national integration. Their transformation into national symbols depended on modern state structures, elite agency, and mass education.

The Serbian case therefore exposes the limits of ethnosymbolism as a general explanatory framework. While it captures important symbolic dimensions of nationalism, it risks conflating retrospective cultural appropriation with historical continuity. A historically grounded analysis must distinguish between the existence of cultural materials and their nationalization through modern political action.

In broader terms, this study reinforces the need for a nuanced synthesis in nationalism studies. Nations are neither timeless entities nor purely arbitrary inventions. They are modern formations that draw selectively on the past, transforming inherited cultural elements into instruments of political mobilization. The Serbian case demonstrates that without modern institutions, these elements remain fragmented and socially bounded, incapable of producing nationhood on their own.

References

- Atanasovski, Srđan. 2017. "Producing old Serbia: In the footsteps of travel writers, on the path of folklore". In *Rethinking Serbian-Albanian relations*, edited by Aleksandar Pavlović, Gazela Pudar Draško and Rigels Halili, 22–38. London: Routledge.
- Bakić, Jovo. 2025. "How Old Is the Serbian Nation? Conceptual Analysis of Ethno-National Terms in the Works of the First Serbian Writers 1199–1235". *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.70003>,
- Barnard, F.M. 2003. *Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Bataković, Dušan T. 1988. *Savremenici o Kosovu i Metohiji. 1851–1912*. Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga.
- Brubaker, Rogers. 2004. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, CH: Harvard University Press.
- Čolović, Ivan. 2017. *Smrt na Kosovu polju: Istorija kosovskog mita*. Beograd: XX vek.
- Damjanović, Nebojša and Vladimir Merenik. 2004. *The First Serbian Uprising and the Restoration of the Serbian State*. Beograd: Historical Museum of Serbia.

- Djordjević, Dimitrije. 1985. "The Serbian Peasant Revolt". In *Insurrections, Wars in the Eastern Crisis in 1870s*, edited by Bela Kiraly and Gale Stokes. Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs.
- Djordjević, Dimitrije. 2017. *Istorija moderne Srbije: 1800–1914*. Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike.
- Druga čitanka za osnovne škole*. 1895. Sarajevo: Zemaljska vlada.
- Ekmečić, Milorad. 1991. "The emergence of St. Vitus as central national holiday of the Serbs". In *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle*, edited by Wayne S. Vucinich and Thommas A. Emmert, 331-342. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. London: Blackwell.
- Guibernau, Montserrat. 2004. "Anthony D. Smith on national identity". *Nations and Nationalism*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00159.x>
- Ivić, Pavle. 1998. *Pregled istorije srpkog jezika*. Sremski Karlovci: Knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića.
- Janković, Milovan. 1862. *Bukvar za staro i mlado*. Beograd: Državna štamparija.
- Karadžić, Vuk. 1818. *Srpski rječnik istolkovan latinskim i njemačkim riječima*. Vijena.
- Karadžić, Vuk. 1849. *Kovčević za jezik, istoriju, i običaje Srba sva tri zakona*. Vijena: Jermenski manastir.
- Karadžić, Vuk. 1852. *Srpski rječnik istumačen latinskim i njemačkim riječima*.
- Karadžić, Vuk. 1975. *Sabrana dela Vuka Karadžića*. Vol. 4, uredio Vladan Nedić. Beograd: Prosveta.
- Ković, Miloš. 2023. "The Kosovo Covenant And The Serbs' National Identity". *Synaxa* 12-13: 15-40.
- Malešević, Siniša. 2004. "Divine *ethnies* " and "sacred nations": Anthony D. Smith and the neo-Durkheimian theory of nationalism. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*. DOI: 10.1080/13537110490900331
- Malešević, Siniša. 2019. *Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marković, Svetozar. 1872/1946. *Srbija na istoku*. Beograd: Prosveta.
- Maxwell, Alexander. 2020. "Primordialism for Scholars Who Ought to Know Better: Anthony D. Smith's Critique of Modernization Theory". *Nationalities Papers*, 1–17 doi:10.1017/nps.2019.93
- Milojević, Miloš. 1866. *Putopis dela prave – stare Srbije*. Beograd: Državna štamparija.
- Milojević, Miloš. 1881. *Narodopisni in zemljopisni pregled Prave (stare) Srbije*. Beograd: Zadruga štamparskih radenika.
- Milutinović, Kosta. 1988. *Miloš. S. Milutinović i Ilarion Ruvarac*. Novi Sad: Matica Srpska.
- Murko, Matija. 1990. "The singers and their epic songs". *Oral Tradition* 5: 107-130.
- Novaković, Stojan. 1892. *S Morave na Vardar. Putne beleške*. Beograd: Srpska kraljevska državna štamparija.
- Ozkirimli, Umut. 2017. *Theories of Nationalism. Critical Introduction*. Third edition. London: Palgrave.
- Pavlović, Aleksandar and Srđan Atanasovski. 2016. "From myth to territory: Vuk Karadžić, Kosovo Epics and the role of nineteenth century intellectuals in establishing national narratives." *Hungarian Historical Review* 5 (2): 357–376.

- Pavlowitch, Stevan K. 2004. *Srbija – istorija iza imena*. Beograd: Clio.
- Paxton, Robert V. 1972. "Nationalism and Revolution: A reexamination of the origins of the First Serbian Uprising." *East European Quarterly* 6 (3): 337-362.
- Slijepečević, Đoko. 2002. *Istorija Srpske pravoslavne crkve*, II. Beograd: Catena Mundi.
- Smith, Anthony D. 2003. *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Anthony D. 1986. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith, Anthony D. 1998. *Nationalism and Modernism. A critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*. London: Routledge
- Smith, Anthony D. 1999. *Myths and Memories of a Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, Anthony D. 2000. *Nation in History. Historiographical Debates about History and Nationalism*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press.
- Smith, Anthony D. 2008. *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- Smith, Anthony D. 2009. *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Anthony D. and Matthew Riley. 2016. *Nations and Classical Music. From Handel to Copland*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Stoianovich, Traian. 1994. *The Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe*. New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Stojanović, Dubravka. 2021. *Prošlost dolazi. Promene u tumačenju prošlosti u srpskim udžbenicima istorije 1913-2021*. Beograd: XX vek.
- Stokes, Gale. 1976. "The absence of nationalism in Serbian politics before 1840". *Canadian Review in Studies on Nationalism* 4 (1): 77-90.
- Sundhaussen, Holm. 2009. *Istorija Srbije od 19. do 21. veka*. Beograd: Clio.

Sergej Flere

Univerzitet u Mariboru, Slovenija
sflere6@gmail.com

Entoni Smit i Srbi

Ovaj članak ispituje pristup Antonija D. Smita (Anthony D. Smith) slučaju Srbije i utvrđuje da njegova analiza oscilira između etnosimboliističkih i modernističkih pozicija na način koji ostaje teorijski nerešen. Smit Srbe višestruko prikazuje kao „stari“ narod, utemeljen u srednjovekovnoj državnosti, verskoj tradiciji i kolektivnom pamćenju — najviše kroz kosovski narativ — dok ih na drugim mestima svrstava među narode koji su se formirali u devetnaestom veku kroz ratove, ugovore i mobilizaciju elite.

Konfrontirajući Smitove tvrdnje sa istorijskim podacima o izgradnji srpske nacije, članak pokazuje da su ključni konstitutivni elementi moderne srpske

nacije — državne institucije, politička mobilizacija, jezička standardizacija i masovna kulturna integracija — pretežno nastali u devetnaestom veku. Raniji kulturni materijali, uključujući epsku poeziju i verske tradicije, postojali su u fragmentiranim, ponekad marginalnim i geografski neujednačenim oblicima i nisu činili kontinualnu etničku zajednicu sposobnu da samostalno stvori naciju nezavisno od modernih političkih procesa.

Ključne reči: Entoni D. Smit, Srbi, izgradnja nacije, etnosimbolizam, modernizam

Primljeno / Received: 11.11.2025.

Prihvaćeno / Accepted for publication: 5.02.2026.