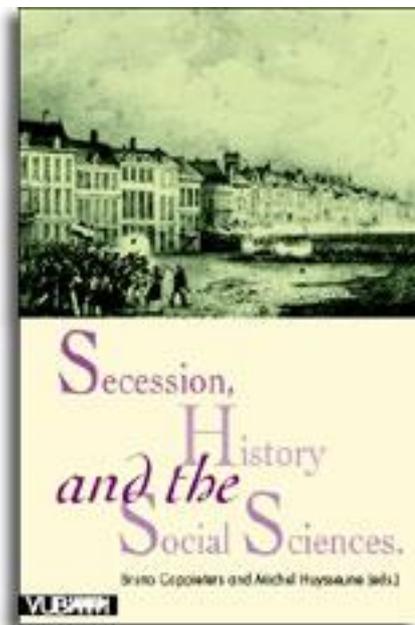


# Secession, History *and the* Social Sciences.



## Secession, History and the Social Sciences

Bruno Coppieters & Michel Huysseune (eds.) [2002]

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The term 'secession' has a strong emotional connotation. Secessionist crises are highly dramatic events in a state's history, entailing as they do the risk of a total disruption of the existing political and social order. Unilateral declarations of secession are often accompanied by the use of military force, but even a peaceful referendum on sovereignty puts a heavy strain on social cohesion. A secessionist process has particular consequences for the practice of history and the social sciences. The dramatic nature of secession challenges the virtues traditionally expected of scholars, once they are actively involved in a public debate on its legitimacy: when they analyse the issues at stake, scientists' traditional perception of themselves as being rational, dispassionate and unprejudiced is called into question. This self-image of the scholar has already been challenged by the generally accepted fact that the nation, as an imagined community, is largely a product of the social activities of intellectuals. It has been well established that intellectuals play a decisive role in the elaboration of national identities and the creation of national 'myths'. Historical research on the development of national movements has also revealed the political role of intellectuals in paving the way for effective political mobilization. Generally speaking, historians and social

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scientists seem to be more deeply involved than most other citizens in political disputes on the future of their nation. Imagining the nation, working out its identity and creating fertile ground for nationalist mobilization are activities that do not conform to the traditional view of scientific rationality. Despite all the knowledge at our disposal on the role of intellectuals in shaping the nation, however, there is still good reason to believe that the prescription that quality research should mean a dispassionate attitude towards the object of enquiry does in fact also apply to the study of nations and secession.

The following volume purports to analyse, on a comparative basis, the complex relations between scientific knowledge and political action in secessionist processes. This analysis is not confined to the intellectual passions aroused by the national question, nor to the specific meaning that objectivity may have in studies on the nation. It compares the multiple relations that exist between the political discourses to be found in particular countries among movements for and against secession with discourses in history and the social sciences. Secessionist crises, in which opposing concepts of nation-building and divergent interpretations of society and history clash with one another, reveal the significance of the idea of a nation for intellectuals. In addition, they show the importance scholars attach to ideals such as objectivity, truthfulness and moral responsibility. From these various perspectives, the contributions to this volume analyse the intellectual responses given to the question of secession in different national contexts. The introduction outlines the key questions on which this volume will focus. The first field of enquiry concerns the relation between scholars and political practitioners. The institutional setting in which scientific research is carried out may either force researchers to depend on the state or favour their autonomy. Dependence may lead to an instrumental relationship between the political objectives of the state and academic activities. Alternatively, scholars may play an important political role through their contribution to the construction of oppositional identities. Both of these types of involvement may be decisive for the development of secessionist movements and for the outcome of secessionist crises. The second field of enquiry concerns the respective contributions of various scientific disciplines to

debates on secession: scientific knowledge may highlight identities rooted in the past, support present grievances or develop blueprints for the future. The third question has to do with the criteria of scientific objectivity and truthfulness as used in discourses for, against and on secession. The way in which historians and social scientists deal with the 'myth-making' aspect - characteristic of nation-building processes - is highly relevant in this context.

Half of the case-studies in this volume concern processes of secession in former communist countries. Four of them are located in the former Soviet Union. Ivan Myhul presents a broad historical overview of the contribution made by Ukrainian intellectuals in producing social knowledge about their nation, and discusses the position of the social sciences in Ukraine during the tsarist and Soviet regimes and after independence. Moshe Gammer studies the role of Chechen historiography in re-moulding the Chechen national identity, and analyses how their historical narratives are related to the present struggle for independence. Alexei Zverev gives an overview of the role of Tatar intellectuals in the three periods of the Tatar national revival in the last century, and discusses the shifting attitudes of Tatar intellectuals towards Tatarstan's place in Russia. Bruno Coppieters discusses the role of intellectuals in exacerbating the conflict between the Georgian and Abkhaz communities, which led to the 1992-93 war and to the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia. In his analysis of the disintegration of the Yugoslav scientific community, Robert Stallaerts connects the emergence of nationalism among intellectuals with the institutional context of scientific research in Yugoslavia, especially its organization at the level of the republics.

The cases from outside the former communist bloc exemplify the wide variety of secessionist processes, and their context-bound political and intellectual agendas. Ronald Rudin parallels the emergence of the Parti Québécois and its struggle for the sovereignty of Quebec with the evolution of history-writing in Quebec. Louis Vos describes how the construction of a Belgian national identity through historiography has been challenged by the emergence of Flemish nationalism and its alternative interpretations of the past. Michel Huyseune describes how the creation of

an 'imagined Padanian community' by the secessionist movement Lega Nord can be related to interpretations of the Italian North-South divide by historians and social scientists. In her analysis of the Taiwan independence movement, Xiaokun Song discusses the place of history, international law and the social sciences in its intellectual discourse. She retraces the role of intellectuals in creating a new national identity for Taiwan, and analyses the shifting meanings ascribed to that identity. Raphael Njoku describes how public debates in Nigeria remain marked by the trauma of the Biafran civil war. He highlights how, in the context of a central state as yet lacking full legitimacy, Nigerian intellectuals are deeply concerned to find peaceful alternatives to secessionist threats. Finally, the conclusion by the editors outlines, from a comparative perspective, how the cases presented in the book offer answers to the three research questions raised in the introduction.

The contributions to this volume were first discussed at a conference which took place in Brussels on 27 and 28 November 1998. The conference was organized by the Department of Political Science of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in co-operation with the Institute for European Policy of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. We would like to thank the Flemish Community, which has given financial support for a research programme on secession, history and the social sciences. The publication of this book is one of the results of this project. Additional financial resources have been provided by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Our personal gratitude also goes to Frank Delmartino from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, who co-organized the Brussels conference, and to Veronica Kelly for her meticulous language correction of the texts. Finally, we would like to thank Kris van Scharen of VUB Brussels University Press and the two anonymous readers who looked upon our volume with favour.