

Review of the book:

Ndhlovu, Finex. (2018). *Language, Vernacular Discourse and Nationalisms: Uncovering the myths of transnational worlds*. Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-319-76134-3, €96.29.

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This is a passionately written book which raises vitally important questions. The “book addresses key issues and cross-cutting themes around the evolution of discursive practices, identity narratives and vocabularies of race, culture, ethnicity and belonging that tend to be framed in ways that contradict popular assumptions about the existence of a transnational world. It brings to the limelight the social construction of national identity, which is often seen as a product of political processes. The argument is that the focus on the political has led to the marginalisation of the social side of national identity construction” (px-xi).

The book can be summarised as follows:

“collectively, all nine chapters in this book demonstrate that instead of diminishing the appetite for mobilising the nation-state as rallying point for identity narratives, social cohesion and collective sensibilities as projected by twentieth-century pessimists, contemporary forces of globalisation and transnationalism have, in fact, reinvigorated the resolve to safeguard nation-state authority, national sovereignty and national interest. Nation-states are increasingly seeking to square national autonomy with deep involvement in regional alliances, trading networks and international organisations—while at the same time doing so in a manner and language that betrays the centrality of the interests of individual countries over those of a perceived transnational community” (p.343).

There are 5 parts to the book. Part 1 (setting the scene) has 2 chapters: ‘introduction: theories, concepts, debates’; and ‘emergent political languages, nation building, social cohesion’. In part 2 (Language, Vernacular Discourse, Narrow Nationalisms) there are 2 chapters: ‘language policy, vernacular discourse, empire building’; and ‘language, mobility, people’. Part 3 (Citizenship, Indigeneity, Economic Empowerment) has 2 chapters: ‘Chimurengas, Indigenisation, Black Economic Empowerment’; and ‘Alternative language of development and economic empowerment’. Part 4 has 2 chapters: ‘Migration, Integration Discourse, Exclusion’; and ‘Australia’s Operation Sovereign Borders – a world without others?’ Part 5 is made up of a conclusion – ‘Transnationalism or resurgent narrow nationalisms?’

The author is well-placed to write the book. He has a distinguished academic career in several countries (including universities in Africa, Australia, US and elsewhere). He focuses on policies and wider social and political developments which in relation to language are establishing particular perspectives. He focuses in particular on vernacular discourse. He explains this to mean: “Vernacular discourses are conceived here as every day or mundane ‘...texts or forms of speech and conversations that emerge from discussions between members of self-identified smaller communities within the larger civic community’ (Ono & Sloop, 2012, p. 13)”. The argument is played out by reference to various cases studies which include “the language of land reform, nationalisation and indigenisation of the economy in Zimbabwe; language policy making and citizenship in Zimbabwe; the language of black economic empowerment, land reform, social transformation and concomitant discourses of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in South Africa; and the language of migrant integration and border protection policies in Australia” (p. 28).



There is a strong argument about the role of culture and language: “Multiculturalism policies have produced what can be termed multiple monoculturalisms, multiple monolingualisms and multiple monolithic identities that exist side by side in a shared geopolitical space known as the nation-state.” (p.108). He suggests there are: “high-sounding neoliberal promises of redress, equity and social justice. Yet, beneath this powerful sense of social romanticism lies an illusion of equality in a highly asymmetrical world. In fact, the neoliberal language of indigenisation and economic empowerment joins the litany of other so-called progressive and liberal frameworks—modernity, emancipation, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and globalisation—that reinforce social class and privilege by masking endemic inequalities, narrow forms of ethno-nationalisms and xenophobia” (p.198).

In light of these injustices he suggests a way forward. “A much broader understanding of the notion of language is proposed—one that covers any or all of the following: dialect continua, cultural practices and identities, discursive practices, electronic mediated communication practices, traditions, customs, social relationships, connections to the land and nature, religion, spirituality, worldviews and philosophies, proverbial lore and so on. In other words, the concept of language should be seen as not always referring to a noun; it can be an action word or even a describing word.” (p.125).

The book is both academically coherent and the argument is very assertive. I confess that I welcome the relatively little space given over in this book to technical language issues. There is a very wide ranging argument with critiques of some of the interpretations of the work of established academics such as Soysal and Giddens. Brexit, Trump - and much else - comes in for sharp critique. There are one or two slips (e.g., the UK politician who has recently resigned as foreign secretary is Boris not Nigel Johnson; there is some repetition).

This is not a tightly focused empirical study with judgments hiding behind endlessly qualified phrasing. It will not be to everyone’s taste. But it presents an argument that is worth reading. I recommend the book.