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Green Nationalism: The Case for Integrating Ethnosymbolism

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Received: 10 April 2026 | **Revised:** 23 July 2026 | **Accepted:** 8 September 2026

Keywords: Anthony D. Smith | Ernest Gellner | ethnosymbolism | green nationalism | modernisation theory | Plaid Cymru | Wales

ABSTRACT

This article makes the case for integrating elements of ethnosymbolism from Anthony D. Smith in the study of green nationalism. It presents a Smithian critique of Ernest Gellner's theory while accounting for criticisms of ethnosymbolism, partially grounding it in modernist foundations. Gellner's theoretical perspective is undoubtedly valuable, but this article argues that there are benefits in engaging with ethnosymbolism without abandoning modernisation theory entirely. Ethnosymbolism contributes to a more transformative account of green nationalism beyond the pure-modernist narrative that inextricably links nationalism to environmentally destructive industry. In dissociating green nationalism from industrialisation, ethnosymbolism opens the analytical space for it to be a restorative force that can marshal climate action through *longue durée* symbolism and mass participation.

1 | Introduction

The dominant framing in existing scholarship on the relationship between nationalism and environmentalism derives from Ernest Gellner's modernisation theory (e.g., Conversi and Hau 2021, 1090). While Gellner provided important insights into the rise and functions of nationalism, his framework has a limitation for the purpose of neutrally adjudicating green nationalism: It views nationalism as a wholly modern phenomenon associated with industrialisation, occluding forms of nationalism that challenge aspects of modernity—that is, the environmental impact of industrialisation—and reflect a continuity of pre-modern culture and tradition. Thus, while research informed by Gellnerian assumptions has been important in clarifying the tensions between nationalism and environmentalism, it often concludes that green nationalism is a contradiction or anomaly (Žuk et al. 2024, 6–11), due to its subordination to economic interests (Karkour 2023), or political and nationalist ends (Kerr 2024, 676–677; Ridanpää 2022, 431; Richards 2025, 111–112).

This article argues that the theoretical lens for the study of green nationalism would benefit from widening its scope to include elements of Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism. In particular, the article presents a Smithian critique of Gellner's theory as applied to green nationalism while accounting for critiques of ethnosymbolism and partially grounding it in modernist foundations.¹ Gellner's theoretical perspective is undoubtedly valuable, but this article argues that there are benefits in engaging with Smith even if one is broadly sympathetic to modernisation theory. One important benefit of this approach is helping to account for literature on green nationalism that does not view nationalism and environmentalism as contradictory phenomena. Examples of such literature include Posocco and Watson (2022) differentiating 'exclusionary' and 'reflexive' forms of green nationalism, Hudson et al. (2025) finding historical environmental discourses impact Japan's contemporary education system and Yücel et al. (2025) highlighting the positive transformative potential of green nationalism. In dissociating green nationalism from industrialisation, the Smithian lens accounts for such examples by opening the analytical space for green nationalism

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as a restorative force that can marshal climate action through *longue durée* symbolism and mass participation.

The article is structured as follows. First, it outlines ethnosymbolism and its relevance to existing studies of green nationalism. Second, it addresses theoretical critiques against Smith, arguing that ethnosymbolism offers insights that are complementary to the modernist framework. Finally, it uses Wales as an illustrative case to demonstrate how the Smithian lens accounts for mass participation and historical factors affecting green nationalism.

2 | Ethnosymbolism and Green Nationalism

This section outlines Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism and explains its relevance to the study of green nationalism. Ethnosymbolism, the section argues, helps explain how green nationalism can marshal climate action through *longue durée* symbolism and mass participation.

Departing from Gellner, Anthony D. Smith offers a compelling alternative explanation of nationalism that is less wedded to modernist presuppositions. While agreeing that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism argues that nationalism is an evolution from pre-modern *ethnies* (Smith 1998, 45–46; Smith 2015, 404–405). An *ethnie* is 'a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites' (Smith 2000, 113). Smith does not equate modern nations and *ethnies*, but *ethnies* provide the symbolic raw materials from which nations *can* be formed. These *ethnies* are defined, defended and shaped by myth-symbol complexes and *la longue durée* (Smith 2004, 199).

As a historiographical approach, *la longue durée* emphasises the slow, structural evolution of historical processes through social means (Burguière 2009, 64–75). By embracing it, ethnosymbolism eschews the historical materialism of Hobsbawm to Gellner that emphasises elite control and the tide of economic necessity over more grass roots and cultural factors (Gellner 1983, 47–49; Hobsbawm 1992, 89–96). Instead, ethnosymbolism makes room for the myth-symbol complexes that are interlinked sets of memories, traditions, values and symbols shared in common among an *ethnie* (Smith 1998, 181–183). These complexes include golden ages, founding heroes, languages, flags, costumes, mutual understanding of both traumatic and positive past events, festivals, folk practices and religion (Smith 1991, 77). Collectively, a sense of distinctiveness, emotional resonance and continuity define the *ethnie* relationally and can later be reinterpreted or reawakened over *la longue durée* as they transition to nationalism in the modern era. By definition, *ethnies* are distinct from one another, and it follows that the shape of any resultant national movements will differ accordingly.

Industrialisation and modernisation remain important catalysts within Smith's theory of ethnosymbolism, as it acknowledges that the proliferation of print media, standardisation of language, spread of state-controlled education and faster communication links allowed for the mass dissemination of identity based on existing myth-symbol complexes (Smith 1991, 52). This

is similar to Anderson's (2006, 22–31) concept of homogenisation through print media, but distinct because Smith views the nation as being a repackaging of older cultural materials rather than a wholly modern and even synthetic 'imagined community' (Smith 1986, 105–114). These cultural materials permit elite–mass linkage, which is an important distinction as it lends a degree of agency to the 'masses' that other theories are more hesitant to permit (Smith 1986, 16–18). Smith argues that *ethnies* can be split into a binary of 'vertical' and 'lateral'. Lateral *ethnies* were largely top-down and elite-driven from the outset, with clergy often playing a major role—such as in the case of the Normans. Meanwhile, for vertical *ethnies*, 'the ethnic culture tended to be diffused to other social strata and classes'—such as in the case of the Irish (Smith 1991, 52–53). Along with the focus on *la longue durée*, this elite–mass linkage accounts for the less stratified instances of green nationalism.

To date, Hudson et al. (2025) offer the clearest application of the Smithian ethnosymbolist lens to green nationalism. The authors argue that the Japanese education system harnesses resonant historical narratives to promote environmental consciousness. Crucially, Hudson et al. (2025) note that modernisation theory alone cannot adequately account for these narratives because of its wholly modern, structural focus. Hudson et al. (2025) thus explicitly employ ethnosymbolism in their case study of Japanese green nationalism, pointing to five key discourses and five key figures to trace the evolution of the Japanese self-conception as relating to the environment since the mid-18th century. The result is a compelling analysis that sets out key 'nationalist eco-narratives' from the *Tokugawa* period about 'the people', 'enemies of the people', 'nature-nation', 'vision of decline' and 'vision of salvation'—showing how they contribute to historical, environmentally conscious behaviours and have, to a limited extent, permeated the Japanese education system (Hudson et al. 2025, 8–9).

While other green nationalism scholarship may not explicitly use ethnosymbolism or reference Smith, there are sometimes still acknowledgements of the seemingly bottom-up nature of green nationalism within case studies that operate in conjunction with elites playing an active role. Arantes (2024) examines the emergence of green nationalism in China, where environmental protection has been woven into the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through the doctrine of 'ecological civilisation'. In this framing, nationalism and environmentalism are not only co-articulated by the CCP but also enforced through bottom-up initiatives (Arantes 2024, 75–80). Arantes' example illustrates an elite–mass linkage and how the symbolic feeds into national identity. Yücel et al. (2025, 10) contribute the useful concept of 'green acculturation' which they define as 'aim[ing] to transform environmental policies in line with each nation's own green memories, sociological dynamics and priorities shaped by their specific geographies or national habitats in the face of global ecological threats'. Of note here are the ideas of 'green memories' as well as the contextually and sociologically dependent nature of nationalism that the Smithian lens captures.

On this topic of personal identification with environmentalism as related to the nation, the most noteworthy evidence for this in practice is the Scandinavian nations of Norway, Sweden

and Denmark. While remaining sceptical as to the global efficacy of such measures, Conversi and Posocco (2022, 5) note the cognisance of the threat of climate change as an issue and that the importance of actively fighting for environmentalism was spread by youth and protest movements in the latter half of the 20th century. Additionally, particular historical concepts and discourses are recognised as important to the Scandinavian environmentalist self-conception, such as *friluftsliv*—which emphasises a lifestyle in accordance with nature (Conversi and Posocco 2022, 5). While these discourses have evidently not permeated to the extent that these countries have abandoned carbon-intensive lifestyles, a Smithian ethnosymbolist perspective could equip these case studies with the vocabulary to more systematically analyse these factors of history and the resonance of ideas within mass movements to more precisely home in on their impact. Similarly, Conversi and Hau (2021, 1090, 1093), while broadly adopting a Gellnerian perspective, acknowledge that ‘it is useful to stress that a certain continuity exists between early twentieth-century conservationism, environmentalism, ecologism and contemporary climate action—all of which have different historical relationships with the territory, the concept of land and nationalism itself’. An ethnosymbolist lens can help account for this historical continuity.

In sum, the examples from the literature on green nationalism that highlight the importance of *longue durée* symbolism and mass participation are far from exhaustive. However, they demonstrate the limitations of the Gellnerian framework in the study of green nationalism and the need to include the Smithian lens on ethnosymbolism. The next section will address some of the criticisms levied against ethnosymbolism.

3 | Critiques of Ethnosymbolism

This section engages with the criticisms that other scholars have raised against ethnosymbolism.² It argues that ethnosymbolism can reasonably account for these criticisms and offer insights that are complementary to the modernist framework for the purpose of analysing green nationalism.

Connor (1994, chapter 4) argues that there is a conceptual confusion in Smith’s work around the terms *ethnie*, ethnic and nation. This criticism neglects critical distinctions that Smith makes. Rather than Smith retroactively labelling premodern communities as nations, he emphasises the symbolic resources these communities provide to later nationalist movements over *la longue durée* (Smith 1998, 196). Others criticise Smith for his lack of analytical rigour in explaining which *ethnies* prevail (Breuilly 2005, 15–19; Laitin 2001, 178–179), for underestimating the difference between modern nations and *ethnies* (Connor 2004, 40–42; Gorski 2006, 150–151) and for not accounting for the impossibility of speaking of nations and nationalisms in premodern eras (Calhoun 1997, 49–50; Goetz 2003, 598). These latter criticisms misunderstand Smith’s central point. Smith does not dismiss modernisation as unimportant. Indeed, he asserts that ‘the modernists are surely right to insist on the modernity of many nations, as well as of “nationalism-in-general” (the ideology and theory)’ (Smith 1998, 226). Furthermore, he does not argue that *ethnies* and modern nations share absolute continuity, since ‘collective cultural communities in antiquity and the early Middle

Ages do not, on the whole, approximate to the ideal type of the nation, nor do their ideals and sentiments typically express the ideas and beliefs that we associate with nationalism in more recent periods’ (Smith 1991, 52). Smith’s point, instead, is that nations do not come into being *ex nihilo* and that modern structural forces operated upon pre-existing cultural frameworks with ‘a greater continuity... than modernists of all kinds have been prepared to concede’ (Smith 1991, 52). This relative continuity is crucial as it is what permits for variability between contexts of green nationalism in a way that is less categorical than a modernist approach. Some instances of green nationalism may be counterproductive or driven by electioneering but within an ethnosymbolist frame these examples do not occlude the existence of other cases of green nationalism that may be restorative.

Smith highlights the prevalence of relational social categorisation throughout history in Chapter 1 of *National Identity* (1991) with regard to both immediate bonds and also more abstract cultural roles such as a hero, slave or belonging to a certain location within ancient Theban plays (Smith 1991, 3–4). Adopting a sociological lens, Smith underscores the cultural mutability of these social identities—including gender, ethnicity, religion and language—and how they compose a wider ‘self’ that can, in turn, form the basis of a collective identity. Smith emphasises that ‘[p]olitically, there was no “nation” in ancient Greece ... Culturally, however, there existed an ancient Greek community, *Hellas*, that could be invoked, for example by Pericles, in the political realm ... In other words, we can speak of a Greek cultural and ethnic community but not of an ancient Greek “nation”’ (Smith 1991, 8). Understanding this distinction is vital for fairly assessing the overall argument Smith is making, which is one that does not intend to overstate continuity or argue that nationalism existed before modernity. Smith’s account is not fundamentally incongruent with other sociological accounts. For instance, Craig Calhoun’s primary critique of Smith specifically concerns the mechanism of *how* given *ethnies* develop into nations over others (Calhoun 1997, 49–50). This article therefore argues that it is possible to integrate insights from Smith to complement a broader modernist lens.

In *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism*, Daniele Conversi (2006, 23–26) identifies two further weaknesses of ethnosymbolism. First, he questions the conceptual clarity of ethnosymbolism, particularly Smith’s definition of the nation as a population sharing myths, memories, culture and common rights and duties. Conversi argues that the inclusion of formal ‘rights’ risks conflating the nation with the state, since such rights are contingent on political structures that may be absent or incomplete. However, historical examples such as the Euskadi *fue-ros* (Shih 1998, 45–47) and Catalunya’s civil codes (Lamarca i Marqués 2015) demonstrate that *ethnies* can persist—and even catalyse nationalist sentiment—despite the erosion or suppression of such rights. This suggests that while pre-existing ethnic frameworks are indispensable to understanding the cultural foundations of nationalism, they are insufficient on their own to explain its contextual emergence, which can occur in reaction to state centralisation or coercion. Second, Conversi highlights ethnosymbolism’s limited engagement with the variability of nationalist movements and its relative neglect of contemporary mechanisms through which they are mobilised. In his view, contemporary era political elites and

media infrastructures possess an unprecedented capacity to manipulate, reframe and distort ethnic myths. The Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s serve as an illustrative case, where state-controlled media reinterpreted historical symbols to produce an aggressive, exclusionary nationalism (Conversi 2006, 25). For Conversi, such developments expose a gap in ethnosymbolism's explanatory power concerning *how* myths are mediated, politicised and weaponised under contemporary conditions. This article finds Conversi's critique compelling and something that ought to be accounted for in the application of ethnosymbolism, particularly in how elites repurpose historical discourses in a way that is resonant with a contemporary understanding of environmental issues in the context of green nationalism.

On the topic of communications technology, a considerable proportion of foundational nationalism theorists wrote prior to the explosion of social media in the mid-late 2000s—yet it is undoubtedly a mode of communication that holds great sway over contemporary politics. To supplement ethnosymbolism to account for Conversi's critique of Smith's mechanism of myth mediation, insights can be gleaned from the field of political communication, such as the work of Rhys Crilley on Popular Culture and World Politics (e.g., Crilley et al. 2019; Saunders et al. 2022). This body of literature provides a comprehensive method—primarily using discourse analysis—for the examination of textual data from television and the Internet regarding political persuasion and elite narrativisation (see Crilley 2021). This lens adds a good deal of mechanical specificity as to the *how* of 'specific cultural artefacts being wielded for political ends' and so would aid in ethnosymbolist efforts to scrutinise contemporary nationalism. Therefore, this article accepts Conversi's critique here but argues that it is not a fundamental flaw as it can be reasonably accounted for.

It is important to emphasise that Conversi has not wholesale rejected green nationalism (Conversi and Hau 2021, 1093–1101; Conversi and Posocco 2022), and Gellner himself appears somewhat open to the mutability of nationalism despite its structural causes. In an article discussing E. H. Carr (1945), Gellner explicitly recognises nationalism's mutability and capacity for re-interpretation across different historical contexts (Gellner 1992, 290–291). His partial endorsement of Carr's historical realism shows that he does not treat nationalism as a wholly monolithic force, but as an enduring principle of political legitimacy—while its content, form and intensity vary with changing material and institutional conditions (Gellner 1992, 292–293). Therefore, it would be misleading to caricature Gellner as ignoring history or culture; rather, his account identifies the structural transformations that make certain kinds of national consciousness possible. Additionally, while Conversi accepts Gellner's linkage between industrialisation and nationalism, he asserts that this account overlooks the formative role of militarisation and war in driving cultural homogenisation. He argues that such homogenising forces are not merely integrative by-products of modernity, but often coercive and subtractive processes that erase cultural difference (Conversi 2007). The delineation Conversi is making here is broadly convincing and demonstrates that, even within a modernist framework, he allows for additional nuances that this article argues explicitly integrating ethnosymbolist insights can capture more fully.

Conversi (2004, 269–384) raises additional critiques against ethnosymbolism as part of his cautioning against several 'isms'. He acknowledges Smith's contribution to defining and warning of 'primordialism', but Conversi also suggests that ethnosymbolism risks sliding into what he calls 'historical determinism'—the belief that the past holds an inescapable grip on the present. For Conversi, this tendency to overemphasise continuity may reify ethnic persistence and obscure the transformative effects of institutions, elites and globalisation. In his view, Smith has been instrumental in restoring attention to cultural depth and *longue durée* processes, but ethnosymbolism's stress on endurance can inadvertently lend itself to the very essentialisms it seeks to avoid (Conversi 2004, 275–277). Accordingly, Conversi convincingly advocates for a more reflexive approach that maintains sensitivity to historical legacies while foregrounding the agency of modern actors and structures—particularly media systems and state institutions—in mediating, and sometimes distorting, what Smith would describe as inherited myth-symbol complexes (Conversi 2004, 280–284). This is applicable to nationalist discourses pertaining to the climate crisis because the information absorbed by the public is mediated by and filtered through the media and state institutions.

While these criticisms from Conversi are useful, they do not necessarily undermine the use of ethnosymbolism within a wider framework but rather invite its refinement and careful application. For ethnosymbolism recognises the dynamic interaction between historical continuity and political agency: Myths and symbols are living resources continually reinterpreted by elites and communities alike rather than static relics (Smith 2000, 130–132). Far from being invalidated by elite manipulation, the endurance of these myth-symbol complexes is what grants such rearticulation its plausibility and emotional force (Smith 2000, 124–126). Furthermore, this article concurs with Conversi's prioritisation of elite rhetoric and argues that it is possible to incorporate ethnosymbolism's focus on historical depth and context into an overall instrumentalist or rationalist perspective. Elites and media may act as mediators in the rearticulation of collective identity, but they remain dependent on the pre-existing symbolic repertoires that confer authenticity and legitimacy (Smith 1986, 207–208; Smith 2000, 125). In this sense, ethnosymbolism helps in understanding modern variants of nationalism—including green nationalism—as historically embedded yet contemporarily mediated phenomena where environmental and territorial symbols are reimagined within political discourses surrounding specific movements (Smith 1991, 170). Conversi's insights serve as important reminders in ensuring the extent to which historical artefacts have been reimagined or repurposed, by whom and to what ends are properly accounted for. This article argues that most of these pitfalls can be avoided if one is careful not to overstate ethnosymbolist claims, maintains a sufficiently narrow scope and integrates the discussed insights from political communication (Crilley 2021).

There is room for debate here; but the extent of that disagreement—and indeed the theoretical distance between these perspectives—should not be overstated. While certain tensions may be irreconcilable, particularly the rigidity of some Marxist perspectives such as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983, 2–4), most differences explored in this section concern questions of emphasis rather than fundamental incongruence: the weight placed on

historicity versus structural determinism, or on elite manipulation versus the endurance of genuine cultural memory. This article does not seek to reject any of these dimensions outright in arguing for a mixed framework that acknowledges the importance of industrialisation and elite messaging while also foregrounding long-term, situated processes and bottom-up efforts. This article will next examine how this lens can be applied in practice by analysing Wales and Plaid Cymru as an illustrative example.

4 | Wales and Green Nationalism

This section illustrates the relevance of ethnosymbolism in the study of green nationalism in Wales. In particular, it illustrates the relevance of *longue durée* symbolism and mass participation in evaluating Plaid Cymru's green nationalism.

Within a broader overview of green-left nationalist movements, Conversi et al. (2026, 9) assert that '... Wales has increasingly consolidated itself as a nation with both strong nationalist and sustainability-focused discourses, which recent evidence shows are growingly interconnected'. Further, while remaining sceptical of more authoritarian or centrally backed instances of green nationalism, Conversi et al. (2026, 9) posit that for sub-state nationalist movements like Wales, 'green nationalism has often emerged as a meaningful, grounded, and politically coherent response to climate change ... embedded within broader struggles for autonomy ... [as a] response to the climate crisis'. This is the clearest articulation to date of the potential positives of green nationalism in Wales, demonstrating that this is a positive, largely unexplored, avenue for further study about the extent to which a reimagining of national identity to one of environmental stewardship is feasible (Conversi et al. 2026, 9). While ultimately more of an illustrative example, this section will now build upon Conversi et al.'s (2026) comments on Wales to demonstrate how the lens this article is proposing can be applied in practice.

Wales has a wealth of cultural memory that has accrued over the centuries, contributing to a unique sense of Welshness and defining how both the Welsh understand themselves and how they see others. Welsh identity and culture have persisted for centuries after Wales' annexation by England, and then through industrialisation as part of what Michael Hechter (2017) calls the 'Celtic Fringe'—reshaping Welshness instead of erasing it. Examples of Welsh cultural memories accrued over *la longue durée* include medieval and early modern folk culture, idealised rural life, bardic tradition and the continued legacies of political subjugation (Wyn Jones 2024, 28–32). Rather than being replaced, these memories were transformed by the new context the Welsh found themselves in through the process of industrialisation and education standardisation that Gellner (1983, 27) highlights.

The Welsh *ethnie* in this context fits into Smith's 'vertical' category, alongside their Celtic neighbour Ireland (Smith 1991, 66–67, 73). The sense of outside threat from the English necessitated a shared sense of identity across social classes (Smith 1991, 126–31), with a strong oral tradition and some regional variation—such as Morris-Jones' (1913) four dialect areas—within broadly defined borders (Dąbrowska 2017, 132–140). This

framing adds a further layer of nuance to the ethnosymbolist account and problematises the more black-and-white analysis of elite power à la Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, chapter 1), as the myth-symbol complexes that are later drawn upon by elites during the formation of nationalism can come from *ethnies* where non-elites participated in cultural formation. In this sense, the angle elites can pursue is constrained by what has already become resonant over *la longue durée*, even if they are the primary actors on the rhetorical side of nationalist construction. Indeed, the Welsh post-industrial revival broadly fits into the Smithian account of 'popular participation' (Smith 1991, 35–37) through the likes of the Eisteddfod festival, grassroots protest and Welsh language revivals through non-conformist churches (White 2025; Williams 1985, 264–265; Yates 1984).

Wales's lack of autonomy well into the modern era necessitated that the form of nationalism that *did* emerge drew on the distant past as a form of legitimacy as its purpose was to overturn the *status quo* rather than to reinforce contemporary power structures through the economic boon offered by industrialisation. This is because Wales itself was not in control of its extractive and uneven process of modernisation, and Welsh nationalism emerged partially as a reaction against this (Smith 1998, 58; Wyn Jones 2024, 31). Due to the negative effects of industrialisation and British nationalism, including disruption of rural life, destruction of landscapes, pollution, suppression of language and culture and poor living and working conditions—all brought about by decisions made in England (Wyn Jones 2024, 31)—the 19th-century assertion of Welsh identity became a political act of resistance. Wales of this era saw a reassertion of cultural identity, with the 12th-century Eisteddfod festival being resurrected, the spread of nonconformist Welsh-language churches and Sunday schools that later led to the disestablishment of Anglicanism and the increased accessibility and popularity of local print media (Williams 1985, 264–265; Yates 1984). Industrialisation had a profound and highly visible impact on pollution (Newell and Watts 1996) and the landscape itself (Armstrong-Twigg 2021) that would have been impossible to ignore in Wales of this era. However, despite pressing environmental concerns, the dire living and working conditions for many at the time felt like far more immediate issues—which were adeptly harnessed by socialist movements and later the Labour Party (Jones and Gibbard 2021, 93–96). After 103 years, Welsh Labour's 'longest winning streak of any party in the world' (Davies 2022) came to an end in 2026 with nationalists Plaid Cymru winning the Senedd election (Deans 2026).

La longue durée historical context of Welsh national consciousness and its myth-symbol complexes are relevant to how contemporary green nationalism takes its specific form within Plaid Cymru. Wyn Jones emphasises the importance of myths and history in Plaid Cymru's early years, with leader Gwynfor Evans harnessing a narrative of progressively increasing English imposition on Welsh life since the Middle Ages to argue for a modern assertion of Welsh independence (Plaid Cymru 2024, 76–82). This is in turn tapped into by the contemporary party on the issue of natural resources, where Plaid Cymru argues that in the face of 'increased investment in Crown Estate energy projects in Wales's waters', 'the people of Wales should have full control over all our natural resources, our waters and our lands ... so that we can achieve a fair green transition on our own terms'

(Plaid Cymru 2024, 36). It is a subtle example, but strategic employment of 'Crown Estate' (investment) rather than mentioning individual companies or just 'England' evokes the cultural memory of the English monarch annexing Wales. The specific wording of 'Wales's waters' serves to almost anthropomorphise Wales as a living entity being acted against, and 'our' highlights Plaid's conception of the Welsh people as stewards of this living Wales placed in an implicit binary against the Crown Estate.

The 'idealised rural life' is an important myth-symbol complex within Plaid Cymru's nationalism that romanticises the pre-industrial, pre-Anglicised, past of Wales—including its landscape. The party's 1945–1981 leader Gwynfor Evans asserted that Wales' 'traditional culture depends upon the rural areas' and that preserving agriculture is therefore as much a social issue as it is an economic one in response to 'industrialism[s]... unhealthy' advance (Evans 1972). Rural life remains resonant in the Welsh imagination, with agricultural events like the annual Royal Welsh Show—the largest of its kind in Europe—continuing to draw hundreds of thousands of visitors, 39% of whom have no direct connection to agriculture (Thomas 2016, 430), while acting as a nexus of elite production (Heley et al. 2024). As of June 2025, 2.9% of those employed in Wales are farmers (Welsh Government 2025a, 2025b). While not insignificant, farmers do not possess the aggregate voting power to dictate national elections. It is thus more so the symbolic resonance of rural life that drives Plaid Cymru's actions here rather than winning votes from the farmers themselves.

Plaid Cymru's 2026 Manifesto highlights the importance of a 'just green transition' that 'strengthen[s] our rural communities' and 'increase[s] eco-literacy' in cooperation with third sector bodies and wider civil society (Plaid Cymru 2026, 43). The stated intention of working harmoniously across strata of society is of note here from an ethnosymbolist perspective, and this is especially evident in Plaid Cymru's efforts to thread the needle of satisfying the interests of 'our' farmers while remaining committed to curbing pollution (Messenger 2026; Plaid Cymru 2026, 45). If the Welsh *ethnie* is indeed 'vertical' and 'popular participation' was central to its revival, this provides insight into why Plaid Cymru is taking this stance as opposed to a more top-down, targets-focused approach—particularly within the context of the symbolic importance of rural life within Wales.

The questions of sincerity, electioneering (Kerr 2024, 676–677), and the primacy of economic interests (Karkour 2023) are important, and this article does not claim to conclusively dismiss them in the case of Plaid Cymru's green nationalism. However, Plaid Cymru's environmental messaging has been consistent for some time, owing to the reimagining and operationalisation of pre-modern Welsh myth-symbol complexes around rural life. A resolution passed at the party's 1990 conference outlined the interlinkedness of 'principles of economic, social and environmental policies', 'a sustainable economy', 'security and livelihood', 'decentralisation' and 'identity' (Plaid Cymru 1990, 10–13). The resolution highlighted the 'inequality' that is central to the climate crisis and the related competition for increasingly scarce resources (Plaid Cymru 1990, 10–11). It also emphasised that '[l]ong-term security is totally dependent on the successful transition to a sustainable economy' and that such a shift towards sustainable energy practices will 'enhance the quality of life in

stable communities with a better environment' in Wales (Plaid Cymru 1990, 11). This outward-facing stance fits into Posocco and Watson's (2022) 'Reflexive Green Nationalism' model, reinforced by Plaid Cymru's use of phrases such as 'long-term hope to humankind' and 'tackling the major problems facing the world' (Plaid Cymru 1990, 12–13). Such reflexivity is due to the Welsh *ethnie*'s relatively diffused origins, its mass participatory revival, the emancipatory self-conception of Welsh nationalists and, as will now be discussed, the integration of climate discourses into identity.

The 1990 resolution's section on 'identity' states that the party's 'ultimate concern ... is to safeguard our people, develop the identity of Wales and sustain all the irreplaceable treasures of our inheritance' (Plaid Cymru 1990, 12). Here, there is a clear link drawn between identity, situatedness and history—and this is placed in opposition to 'super-industrial developments' and 'mass consumerism', which 'tend to destroy both the environment and local identity, and all that distinguishes Wales from England or one district from another' (Plaid Cymru 1990, 12). 'The defence of the natural environment of Wales' the resolution states, 'is also the defence of her communities, and ... the defence of community is the defence of our distinctive way of life and the Welsh language' (Plaid Cymru 1990, 12). It is therefore evident that maintaining a distinctive Welsh national character over the long term is important to Plaid Cymru's green nationalism. As part of this distinctive national character are symbolically resonant historical themes of idealised rural life and landscape, which Plaid Cymru merges with contemporary climate action. While a recent development, this is a logical progression of the symbolic importance afforded to protecting rural life and landscape already extant.

Plaid Cymru's green nationalism—with its relative scepticism of industrialisation, its communal and outward-facing nature and the direct connection it places between preservation of historical identity and the environment—does not neatly map onto a wholly modernist narrative. However, if one adopts a Smithian lens that recognises the importance of long-term development of a people in a place then the picture becomes clearer as such apparent anomalies begin to make sense owing to the more greatly captured context. The contents of the 1990 resolution and the other examples discussed in this section can be understood if one considers the historical context of how Wales became industrialised, the diffused nature of the Welsh *ethnie* and the emphasis placed by it upon rural life and the Welsh landscape. The primary benefits of adopting this Smithian framework are that symbolic, historical and cultural factors that affect the specific shape green nationalism takes can be better accounted for. Ethnosymbolism can also help in more fully capturing the more diffused, cross class, elements of some instances of green nationalism as discussed elsewhere regarding tree planting in China (Arantes 2024) and here with Plaid Cymru's multi-sectoral approach.

5 | Conclusion

The Gellnerian model of modernisation theory has become the most dominant framework for making sense of green nationalism, most notably through the work of Daniele Conversi

(Conversi and Hau 2021, 1090). Despite offering valuable observations of the historical connection between nationalism and environmentally damaging facets of modernity, adopting Gellner's theory in full precludes the very possibility of an effective green nationalism from existing without fatal anomalies. Similarly, in focusing so strongly on industrialisation, adopting Gellner's modernism means other facets influencing the formation and mobilisation of nationalism are not adequately accounted for, including symbolic, traditional and cultural resources with roots in the past that nationalist movements harness, particularly in culturally and linguistically distinct sub-state contexts like Wales.

This article turned towards Smith's ethnosymbolism to propose an alternative framework for approaching green nationalism. Ethnosymbolism addresses the weaknesses within rigidly modernist frameworks by emphasising the continuity and persistence of collective memories, cultural myths, relationships between a people and a place and historic ethnic identities that the modern phenomenon of nationalism selectively narrativises and reinterprets (rather than inventing whole cloth). Such a theoretical shift allows for approaching green nationalism in a way that avoids viewing it as an inherent contradiction and instead as a potential reinterpretation or re-articulation of historical sentiment that is newly expressed in environmentalist terms by virtue of the changing context nationalists find themselves in. Ethnosymbolism disassociates green nationalism and industrialisation and therefore does not occlude the possibility of it being a productive force in the advancement of climate action. The main benefits of this approach are that it enables the analysis of symbolic and *longue durée* historical factors as well as mass environmental movements in contemporary green nationalism. The case study of Wales illustrates the usefulness of this approach by providing insight into how and why Welsh green nationalism manifests in the way that it does. This is not to say that nationalism scholars ought to jump ship and divest from modernisation theory entirely—only that widening one's theoretical lens to encompass elements of ethnosymbolism expands the horizons of what is possible within the context of a climate crisis where proposed solutions ought to be evaluated.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Haro Karkour, for encouraging me to submit this article to *Nations and Nationalism* and mentoring me throughout the process of revision. I also thank the James Pantyfedwen Foundation for their grant in support of my doctoral studies.

Funding

This work was supported by James Pantyfedwen Foundation.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ The theories of Eric Hobsbawm and Tom Nairn suffer the same fate as Gellner's, due to their emphasis on nationalism as a modern phenomenon created for capital accumulation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983)

and/or associated with industrialisation (Nairn 1981, 1997). Given the centrality of Gellner's theory in discussions of environmentalism and green nationalism, this article confines its engagement to Gellner's work.

² Umut Özkirimli (2017, 168–75) helpfully collates an overview of these criticisms.

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