

Exploring the Complexities of National Identity Through Theories of Nationalism

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate realm of literature dedicated to exploring the concepts of nation and nationalism. Within this discourse, two dominant paradigms, primordialism and modernism, serve as the focal points of analysis. Primordialism portrays nations as age-old structures inherent in human nature, with scholars like Geertz and Van den Berghe offering insights into the enduring power of ethnicity and cultural identity. This perspective is rooted in the belief that nations are intrinsic facets of the human experience, connected by bonds of language, race, religion, and customs.

In contrast, modernism challenges the antiquity of nations, portraying them as recent constructs forged by nationalist movements. Figures such as Hobsbawm, Anderson, and Gellner frame nations as “imagined communities” and cultural artifacts closely tied to industrialization, standardization, and elite manipulation.

Throughout the discourse, the pivotal role of elites in shaping nationalist ideologies emerges as a common thread, transcending the boundaries of primordialism and modernism. Whether viewed as custodians of ancient traditions or architects of contemporary national identities, elites wield significant influence in the formation of nations.

This study concludes by highlighting the complexity of the subject, emphasizing that nations are products of their time, shaped by historical events, socio-cultural changes, and the agency of individuals and elites. It underscores the enduring debate surrounding the nature and origins of nations, inviting ongoing inquiry and discussion in the ever-evolving path of human civilization.

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1. Introduction

In the routine course of life, many individuals tend to take their nation for granted, largely influenced by the teachings of our educational systems, be it within our families or schools. The question of whether nations are inherent or human constructs has been a subject of intense debate for decades. Over this time, a multitude of perspectives, including primordialism, modernism, constructivism, ethnosymbolism, and contextualism, have emerged to address this discourse.

In the intricate realm of literature delving into the notions of nation and nationalism, a profound complexity shrouds the very definition of a nation. The concept of a nation, as it is examined in this discourse, is subject to diverse interpretations, each yielding unique perspectives. Whether seen through the prism of primordialism, where nations are regarded as intrinsic facets of human existence, or the modernist lens, where nations are seen as inventions manipulated by elites, the evolution of nations remains a compelling enigma. Within this intellectual landscape, this text tries to unravel the multifaceted character of nations, encompassing the perspectives of renowned theorists such as Anderson, Hobsbawm, Renan, Seton-Watson, Geertz, Van den Berghe, Connor, and more.

Primordialism, rooted in the belief that nations are age-old structures deeply embedded in human nature, finds support in the enduring power of ethnicity and cultural identities. Scholars like Geertz underscore the significance of primordial bonds, woven from elements such as language, race, religion, and customs, fostering a sense of loyalty to cultural identities. Van den Berghe takes primordialism further by positing a biological foundation, arguing that nepotism and ethnocentrism are innate traits that drive group formation.

In contrast, modernism perceives nations as relatively recent constructs brought into being by nationalist movements. Hobsbawm identifies 1780 as a pivotal year in the formation of nations, viewing them as invented traditions. Anderson's "imagined communities" framework explores the emotional legitimacy of nationalism, emphasizing that nations are cultural artifacts. Gellner connects the emergence of nations with industrialization and the standardization of culture. Elite manipulation plays a crucial role in both primordialist and modernist narratives, as elites often shape nationalist ideologies. However, modernist perspectives suggest that nations are products of specific socio-historical processes, evolving gradually through wars, religious divisions, literature, propaganda, and administrative pressures. In this exploration, we'll navigate the intricate interplay between

primordialism and modernism, shedding light on the complex evolution of nations and the forces that have shaped them.

This study aims to provide a thoughtful reflection on the complexities of the debate between primordialism and modernism regarding the nature and origins of nations. It emphasizes the need to consider the socio-historical context and acknowledges the dynamic and evolving nature of nations and their cultural entities. This study will delve into the concept of nationhood through exploring various viewpoints. It will commence with an examination of the diverse definitions of a nation put forth by various authors. Subsequently, the primordialist perspective, shedding light on the innate aspects of nations will be discussed. Then, modernism and its associated notions of invention, imagination, and elite manipulation will be explained through illustrative examples.

2.Perspectives on Primordialism and Modernism

Within the realm of literature exploring the concepts of nation and nationalism, a definitive consensus regarding the definition of a nation remains elusive. The notion of a nation is subject to diverse interpretations from various theorists, each offering unique perspectives. Over time, whether approached from a primordial or modern standpoint, the meaning of a nation has undergone significant evolution. One widely cited perspective, articulated by Renan, characterises nation as a spiritual principle, with its essence forged by a fusion of the past and present. In this context, the past represents a treasury of collective memories, while the present signifies the shared desire and conscious choice of individuals to coexist (Renan, 1882). Similarly, Seton-Watson associates the concept of a nation with a profound sense of solidarity, a collective national consciousness, and the presence of a shared culture. In his view, a nation comes into being when its people collectively perceive themselves as constituents of a distinct national identity (Alter, 1989:8).

Seton-Watson categorizes nations into two distinct groups drawing a clear distinction between “old” and “new” nations in the context of nationalism’s historical development (Seton-Watson, 1977:134). In his classification, old nations are those that had established their national identity before the advent of modern nationalism. Conversely, new nations owe their formation to the impetus of national movements and the deliberate cultivation of national consciousness by societal elites. This categorization hints at the ongoing debate between primordialism and modernism regarding the origins of nations, underscoring the question of whether nations are inherently

embedded in human existence or are more recent constructs. Primordialists, at the heart of this discourse, perceive nations as innate components of human nature, regarding them as age-old structures. They posit that national identity is an inherent and intrinsic facet of human beings. Notably, scholars such as Geertz lend support to the primordialist perspective by emphasizing the significance of primordial bonds, which are relative and multifaceted across individuals, historical epochs, and societies (Geertz, 1963:31). These primordial ties draw their foundations from elements like language, race, religion, customs, and other cultural fundamentals. These cultural realities express the continuing power of ethnicity and the sense of the loyalty to cultural identities (Smith, 1998: 147).

Van den Berghe contributes to the primordialist argument by presenting a biological foundation for it. For him, individuals hold nepotism in their nature which in turn uses the physical differences between individuals to constitute a group formation (Hale, 2004:461). He argues that institutionalized norms of nepotism and ethnocentrism confer a distinct advantage upon societies that adhere to these norms (Van den Berghe, 1978:99). In a similar vein, Connor aligns with other primordialists in asserting the self-sustaining nature of nationalism and the enduring presence of nations throughout history. He underscores the formidable influence of nationalism in shaping the world, often surpassing the impact of economics or social classes (Kellas, 1998:55).

These perspectives are commonly regarded as the more radical aspects of primordialism. A more measured facet of this approach is perennialism, which views nations as historical constructs that have evolved over centuries while retaining their intrinsic characteristics (Özkırmılı, 2000:68). Perennialism bears resemblance to Smith's argument of Ethnoscymbolism, which serves as a synthesis between constructivism and primordialism. This will be discussed later after the modernist approach.

While nations hold different meanings for primordialists and modernists, the former considering them as ancient and natural phenomena while the latter view them as inventions manipulated by elites, this discourse reveals intriguing insights into the evolution of nations. Kedourie, for instance, argues that nationalism is a constructed doctrine that implies the naturalness of nations. He contends that the concept of a nation was endowed with a significance that was previously absent before the late eighteenth century, subsequently becoming a potent political tool in the Western world (Kedourie, 1960:9). Similarly, Breuilly perceives a nation as a modern ideological and political construct, closely tied to the emergence of the

modern sovereign state (Breuilly, 2001:32). Modernists, in general, relate the rise of nations to the era of modernity, exemplified by Hobsbawm, who identifies 1780 as a pivotal year in the formation of nations, considering nations as invented traditions (Hobsbawm, 1990:10). In this framework, traditions that claim to be ancient are often recent or manufactured. These traditions, as Hobsbawm describes, consist of “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm, 1992:1). Symbols like national flags, anthems and emblems were used by the elites to give nationalist ideas form and power, to make the people come together show solidarity of the nation (Breuilly, 1993:64). The invention of traditions became a means for ruling elites to manage the challenge posed by mass democracy, with 1780 marking the onset of mass democracy, accompanied by the invention of public ceremonies, the proliferation of primary education, and the mass production of public monuments (Özkırmı, 2000:117).

Hobsbawm’s assertion, “nations do not make states but the other way round,” becomes evident when examining the historical example of Albanians, who did not identify themselves as such during that period, making it impossible to determine the number of Albanians who migrated to the United States (Hobsbawm, 1990:53). Gellner offers a perspective wherein “nationalism is primarily a political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent” (Gellner, 1983:1). According to Gellner, discussions about nations are only relevant within the age of nationalism, as pre-modern political entities did not take the form of nations, and the emergence of nations is intertwined with industrialization. During the industrialization process, common culture waned among the masses due to its fluidity across social classes. Thus, nationalism emerged as a means to standardize culture and promote solidarity through a shared high culture (Özkırmı, 2000:131).

Anderson’s “imagined communities” framework treats nations and nationalism as cultural artifacts, exploring the emotional legitimacy of nationalism for individuals within specific communities (Özkırmı, 2000:123). He emphasizes that nations are “imagined” because even the smallest nation’s members will never personally know most of their fellow members, yet they carry within them the image of their collective identity (Anderson, 2006:6). Gillis further contends that people who have never met or seen each other still share a national memory and consider themselves

part of a collective history. Transformations in the foundations of nations create a sense of distance, making it challenging for people to recall life in the past (Özkırıklı, 2005:45). Anderson connects the rise of imagined communities to the decline of religion and dynastic realms. He posits that nationalism emerged as a secular concept to fill the void left by diminishing religious influence and the erosion of Latin's dominance. Consequently, print capitalism and the spread of vernacular languages significantly contributed to the creation of national consciousness (Anderson, 2006:11).

Similarly, Calhoun highlights the significance of collective identity and social solidarity in shaping and acknowledging nationalist claims, as well as fostering self-understanding among individuals. However, it's worth noting that collective identity and solidarity can manifest in various groups, such as families and corporations. To elucidate the additional elements that constitute a nation, Calhoun introduces the concept of discursive formation, which encompasses the recognition of nationalist claims by others (Calhoun, 1997:4).

It's notable that all modernists share the perspective that nations are relatively recent constructs brought about by nationalist movements. It becomes apparent that the process of modernization intertwines with nation-building. Kedourie, for instance, describes nation-building and nationalism as intertwined processes, emphasizing them as methods for instilling a sense of collective determination (Alter, 1989:14). In this context, a shared history, deep-rooted cultural and linguistic connections not only facilitate communication among members within a civil society but also contribute to the perception of equality among them. This perception of equality plays a pivotal role in the nation-building process (Hroch, 1993:61). In the eighteenth century, for example, seemingly new cultural artifacts like Scottish kilts and Coronation rituals were introduced but were presented as age-old traditions (Billig, 1995:25). It becomes evident that political solidarity within a national state does not automatically guarantee the existence of a nation, thus necessitating the undertaking of nation-building projects. For instance, in Italy, D'Azeglio aptly stated, "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians" (Alter, 1989:15).

Nation-building, therefore, entails the cultivation of a shared sense of belonging, the promotion of a common language, and the facilitation of equal access to social institutions (Kymlicka, 1997:57). In the nineteenth century, for instance, many spoken dialects underwent transformation, attaining the status of distinct languages. This transformation was facilitated through the introduction of dictionaries and grammar guides aimed at delineating the

differences between these languages and their related counterparts (Moore, 2001, 42).

Take Italy, for example, where Dante famously claimed to have synthesized a language from various dialects. Dante's efforts contributed to the association of the Italian nation with this language (Breuille, 1993:3). Similarly, in France, as of 1789, half of the French population did not speak French (Hobsbawm, 1990:60). Members from diverse language groups often adapted their linguistic practices to gain access to education and employment opportunities (Brass, 1979:84). To address these language-related challenges, modern school systems were established to standardize language usage, sometimes employing extreme measures such as punishing children caught speaking their native languages. As Hobsbawm aptly observed, "Languages multiply with states; not the other way around" (Hobsbawm, 1990:63).

Elite manipulation constitutes a significant dimension of modernism. While their motivations may vary, elites play a pivotal role in the nation-building process. Elites may emerge either to address the demands of the masses or to legitimize state actions, but they invariably contribute to the early stages of ethnic transformation through the use of nationalism (Özkırmı, 2000:113). Seton-Watson, for instance, posits that educated elites tend to arise in social and political contexts where power is concentrated within a group that differs religiously or linguistically from the majority (Seton-Watson, 1977:137). Similarly, Hastings emphasizes the vital role of elites in nation-building, asserting that complete consciousness among all members is not a prerequisite for the existence of a nation. A nation may exist even if only some individuals within the ruling class acknowledge it (Özkırmı, 2005:41).

3.A Critical Respond

Modernism has faced criticism on various fronts, prompting scholars like Smith to propose a theory known as ethnosymbolism, which seeks to bridge the gap between primordialism and modernism. Smith's theory originates from his critique of modernism. While he acknowledges that the concept of a nation is a product of modernity, he contends that nations draw inspiration from pre-modern eras. Smith finds it challenging to envision a nation with a distinct identity devoid of symbols and mythology (Smith, 1989:124). Furthermore, he acknowledges the existence of certain nations before the age of nationalism, such as the French or English (Smith, 1991:115). Smith also concedes that the modern concept of nationalism emerged in the

eighteenth century and played a role in shaping nations. However, he argues that “nations and nationalism are no more ‘invented’ than other forms of culture, social organization, or ideology” (Smith, 1991:71). In this context, if nationalism is considered a reflection of the spirit of the age, it should have been influenced by earlier cultural motifs (Smith, 1991:71). Consequently, it does not specify which segments of the population are suitable to become nations but rather plays a significant role in determining when and where nations will form (Smith, 1991:99).

Motyl asserts that creations cannot arise out of nothing, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging pre-existing characteristics. In this context, the term “remembrance” may be more appropriate, as both invention and creation rely on the presence of pre-existing elements (Motyl, 1999:59). As previously mentioned, items like the ‘ancient’ Highland kilt and the Coronation mug may be viewed as modern inventions, yet they commemorate much older traditions—the Highland clan system and the English Coronation oath, respectively. It is essential to recognize that neither of these items was entirely invented, especially during the era of state formation (Billig, 1995:26).

In the realm of elite manipulation, as argued by Moore, the concept falls short of explaining the willingness of individuals to embrace a particular identity constructed by elites (Moore, 2001:12). Consequently, the mere expression of national sentiments by elites does not suffice to cultivate national consciousness capable of influencing the values and beliefs of the masses (Connor, 1994:212). While elites may have the capacity to invent nationalism, the same cannot be said for traditions (Motyl, 1999:69).

For Smith, it is crucial to understand that nations and nationalism do not result from the romantic visions of poets but rather from highly specific socio-historical processes (Smith, 1971:119). Similarly, Hastings articulates that nations evolve from ethnicities, emerge amidst wars and religious divisions, take shape through the development of literature, nationalist propaganda, and administrative pressures. These processes occur gradually, making it difficult at any given point in time to definitively declare what constitutes a nation and what does not (Hastings, 1997:26). Despite the differences in their essential origins from the linear narratives of nationalist myths, the creation of nations is a product of a long prehistory (Balibar, 1991:133). As Guibernau aptly puts it, the nation serves as the socio-historical context in which culture is deeply embedded. It acts as the conduit through which culture is produced, transmitted, and received (Guibernau, 1996:79). In this context, it can be posited that had the course of history taken a different

path, Serbs and Croats might have considered themselves to be Yugoslavs or even identified solely as Serbs or Croats (Moore, 2001:12).

4. Conclusion

The exploration of the concepts of nation and nationalism within the rich spectrum of literature reveals a complex and multifaceted landscape. The various perspectives presented in this text, ranging from primordialism to modernism, highlight the ongoing debate surrounding the origins and nature of nations.

Primordialism, with its emphasis on nations as innate components of human nature, draws attention to the enduring power of ethnicity, cultural bonds, and identity. Scholars such as Geertz and Van den Berghe provide biological and cultural foundations for this perspective, underscoring the deep-seated roots of national identity. On the other hand, modernism challenges the notion of nations as ancient and natural phenomena, portraying them as relatively recent constructs influenced by specific historical and socio-economic processes. Figures like Hobsbawm, Anderson, and Gellner propose that nations are “imagined communities” and cultural artifacts intertwined with the forces of industrialization, standardization, and elite manipulation. Throughout this exploration, we have witnessed how elites play a pivotal role in shaping nationalist ideologies, whether in the context of primordialism or modernism. They have the power to harness symbols, traditions, and sentiments to foster a sense of collective identity and solidarity among the people.

In this intricate interplay between primordialism and modernism, it becomes evident that the evolution of nations is not a straightforward narrative. Nations are products of their time, shaped by historical events, socio-cultural changes, and the agency of individuals and elites. They are both ancient and modern, with roots in pre-existing elements and adaptations to the demands of evolving societies. Ultimately, the definition and understanding of nations remain elusive and multifaceted, as different scholars and schools of thought offer unique perspectives. The discourse presented here serves as a testament to the enduring complexity of the subject, inviting ongoing inquiry and debate into the nature and origins of nations in the ever-evolving landscape of human civilization.

In a broader context, it becomes apparent that industrialization, the proliferation of print capitalism, core-periphery dynamics, and various other factors have served as potent tools in the hands of societal elites for the purpose of nation-building. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to

disregard the pre-existing substrates inherently woven into the fabric of a nation.

Nationalism, as a force, selectively harnesses cultural elements to foster a shared sense of cohesion. However, these very cultural entities are not immune to transformation, potentially evolving into markedly distinct forms. Consequently, the assertion of an unaltered historical lineage for nations becomes an illusion. Like traditions, nations exhibit fluidity, adapting to the ever-shifting social and historical contexts they inhabit. The emergence of nations across various regions of the world demands an in-depth examination within the overarching framework of long-term historical development, transcending the binary debate of whether they are products of invention or not.

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