

Are National Identities Artificial?

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the debate over the artificiality of national identities by attempting to explore questions such as: What are national identities? How are they created? And, who is involved in creating them? If they are modern creations then why do their adherents insist they are ancient? If they are created what are the goals of their creators. This debate is increasingly relevant in the context of migration and integration; a phenomenon that primarily seems to affect the Global North.

KEY WORDS: custom, ethnicity, identity, nationalism, tradition

The central image used in defining globalization was oriented toward a descriptive model which pointed to “a process, a condition, a system, a force and an age,”¹ that affected not only the social, economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions of humanity, but also national identities. Triggered by conflict as well as by economic hardship, the current transnational migration will most likely resurrect the lingering debates over identity, particularly as numerous migrants become resistant to being integrated into the host nation.

Artificiality of National Identities: The Debate

The need for a debate over the artificiality of national identities was apparently enunciated in 1969 by Fredrik Barth, in his introduction

to a multi-authored collection of essays titled, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Yet, the real debate erupted only after the publication of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, by Benedict Anderson, in 1983.

At his time, Fredrik Barth did not see nationalism as an artificially created identity, but as a persistent cultural trait which can't be subjected to development. To his credit, he was able to challenge the common tendency expressed by the sociologists who associated nationalism with modernization, and saw it as a trait of the political culture, and not as something embedded into the cultural psyche.

In his call to challenge this status quo, Fredrik Barth stated that, "the constitution of ethnic groups, and the nature of boundaries between them, has not been correspondingly investigated."² On this same occasion he emphasized that while boundaries between ethnic groups can disappear, identities do not. His argument was based on three approaches such as:

- 1) the contention that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves;
- 2) the existence of a clear process in generating and maintaining ethnic groups; and
- 3) the focus on ethnic boundaries and boundary maintenance.³

Nevertheless, the debate over the artificiality of national identities gained serious impetus with Benedict Anderson's provocative book *Imagined Communities*, published in 1983. Unlike, with the contemporary waves of cultural primordialism advocated by political scientists such as Samuel Huntington (who considers identity as a given),⁴ Benedict Anderson is a constructivist *par excellence*, considering identity as a learned, mutable concept. In defining the artificiality of national identity, Anderson contends that this is

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.⁵

Because of this imagined community, people create imaginary bounds of commonalities with other people, whom they neither met nor will they ever, but treat them, in their minds, as extended family.

During the past three decades, numerous scholars such as Walker Connor, Loring Danforth, Michael Hechter, Donald Howowitz, David Laitin, Amílcar Antonio Barreto, Mila Dragojević, and others have produced seminal works on various aspects of nationalism that either expanded Anderson's typology or looked into adjacent issues. This demonstrates that Anderson's ideas are still widely accepted in defining nationalism as an imagined political community, sovereign and inherently limited, which took shape with the deconstruction of the belief in a divinely-ordained ruling class. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that nationalism took shape in the post-Westphalian context, which created a shift of focus of sacredness from a universal (often religious) language (e.g. Latin), to an indigenous language spoken and understood by all. This development was ignited by the idea of simultaneity generated by the development of the 18th century's print media (novel and newspaper), which created virtual bonds amongst people. Thus, the script language infused the concept of sacredness to a national language, while the idea of a centripetal center of authority infused the ideas of sovereignty and self-determination.

The development of the print-languages had several consequences, as it created new unified fields of communication, gave fixity to a language through the creation of grammar and dictionary, and infused a nation's historicity. Certain dialects dominated the fixity of language, endorsing a sense of group superiority that stays at the basis of nation-state.

Benedict Anderson's work offered new paradigms which have clarified numerous ambiguities of self-identification. Moreover, Anderson offered new tools that became the basic guidelines in the development of surveys related to people's self-identifications and self-attachment to imagined communities.

As the debate over the artificiality of national identities erupted, a new volume of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger was published under the title *The Invention of Tradition*, challenging the claim of tradition's "ancientness" as a

marker of identity. As expected, this new volume fueled the debate over the artificiality of national identities, as it challenged the claim of ancientness of certain British customs used as instruments in reclaiming the royalty's vanishing glory. The strongest debate surrounded the issue of *custom* versus *tradition*. A *custom* was defined as a local habit emergent from resource availability and with no real historical backing, whereas *tradition* was defined as a cultural continuity of beliefs, principles and social attitudes, of unknown precise historical origins. This controversy erupted over an inferred British claim of uncontested historicity of certain customs, when, in fact, these were invented no earlier than the nineteenth century. This included the use of the quilt, the creation of new Indian princes, and the use of the parades.

A Scottish invention, the quilt became representative of the British army then soon turned into a symbol of loyalty. As one would argue, this is but one example of a "law of unanticipated consequences," whereby a Scottish folkloric tradition is transplanted and turned into a symbol of loyalty.

In distinguishing between tradition and custom, Hobsbawm writes that tradition

must be distinguished clearly from 'custom' which dominates so-called 'traditional' societies. The object and characteristic of 'traditions,' including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer, imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. 'Custom' in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it.⁶

While Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger challenged the 19th century British construction of symbolic and ceremonial traditions, Patrick Geary, in his book *The Myth of Nations*, attempted to deconstruct the nationalist myths of the European nations. He added to the debate the existence of three stages in the creation of imagined communities in Central and Eastern Europe such as:

- 1) the study of language, culture and history;
- 2) interpretation and promotion of 'national' writings by patriots; and
- 3) the apogee, whereby a national movement reaches its peak.⁷

These aspects have, in fact, been the key basis the nationalist doctrine and of national identity.

National Identity: Its Creation, Its Actors and Their Goal

The concept of nation (and national identity) was based on the myth of a common descent and on the idea of a shared identity linking the elite and the masses. Historically, the promoters of the concepts of *nation* and *nationalism* were the members of the middle class elites, such as intelligentsia, merchants, landlords, and various types of professionals including lawyers, military men, local and provincial functionaries.⁸

The intellectuals were professionals with access both to the ruling class and to the peasants. This status quo had enabled the intellectuals to comprehend both classes well enough to be able to communicate and generate new ideologies about identity. As the intellectuals claimed to be the legitimate representatives of the peasants—or “the dominant group’s deputies” in Gramsci’s words⁹—the intellectuals placed their efforts in the creation of a hegemonic belief which was to become dominant. Once a new ideology was transformed into a societal consciousness of identity, and thus turned hegemonic, this new ideology became a dominant concept of identity, which was in a permanent need of being restated, reassured, and defended by the intellectuals against any possible detractors; thus securing their control over political power.

Viewed differently, the members of the middle class were the only ones who had enough confidence to challenge the legitimacy of the ruling class, and also able to understand and maintain ties with the lower class. Therefore, in order to usurp the authority of the ruling class, the intellectuals invented artificial bounds so as to create a sense of community that would easily respond to certain

incentives and unite against an oppressive ruling class. Another element that is defended by the elite was their strategic association with traditional values and with pre-existing folk beliefs that were already hegemonic. This was rather a utilitarian strategic use by the intelligentsia, yet endowed with great outcome.

As Benedict Anderson explains, in Central and South America, nationalism was ignited not by the Indians, but by the Europeans immigrants who wanted to break away from Europe. More to the point, in the case of 19th century Puerto Rico, as Amílcar Barreto explains, the “*criollo* elites began constructing a new identity that glorified local customs and accentuated the *jíbaro*—the island’s mountain peasant—as the paradigmatic Puerto Rican.”¹⁰ Once being the lower class of European society, the new immigrants seeking a better life in America, soon became empowered by what the New World had to offer, turning themselves into a strong middle class elite, and manifesting strong tendencies of self-sufficiency.

As Hobsbawm and Ranger explain, the creators of British nationalism were the London inhabitants of Welsh origins who, once financially accomplished in the new place, turned nostalgic about their origins. Nevertheless, the intelligentsia made use of tradition not only as nostalgia but also as a self-defense mechanism directed against modernity. Consequently, the local legends, symbols and songs, bearing the slightest community-related theme, were often redefined and retransmitted, this time with a heavy impetus of a glorious past. As in the British case, the dragon became the symbol of Wales, while the song writers expressed real opposition to modernity, often invoking Druidic elements.

Moreover, the British cooptation and even “invention” of new Indian princes, was used as a symbolic act to create new ties between India and the British Empire. Towards this goal, the British invented new ceremonies that were neither Indian nor British, yet crafted for the purpose of creating a new national identity.

As Hobsbawm himself surveys the development of mass traditions in Europe up to the First World War, he finds that the strongest symbolic elements in creating national identities are festivals, holidays, monuments, stamps, sports and schools associated with nationalism, the labor movement, and the rising middle classes.

Additionally, as Anderson points out, national identity is created also through symbols that the members of a community could identify with, such as the symbol of the *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, meant to respect the heroism of an imagined community.

As the first national identity was credited to the French revolution, this was promoted and advanced through the Napoleon's Wars. Quoting from Etienne Bonnot de Condillac—who is credited for having argued that 'each language expresses the character of the people who speak it'—Patrick Geary makes strong efforts to demonstrate that the objectification of language was the backbone of creating national identity; thus acknowledging the strong contribution made by the German linguists.¹¹ Furthermore, Geary holds the ethno-archaeology accountable for creating a false sense of historicity.

In the case of the 1995 debate over the 50 anniversary of WWII, which raised the question of displaying the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*—the airplane which dropped the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—heated debates surrounded the issue of American national identity. This unfortunate debate, which emerged into a political rage detonated at that time by the ultraconservative House Speaker, Newt Gingrich, demonstrated that the invention of the American nation is still an open-ended experiment.¹² This is so because—as Amílcar Barreto explains—in the US the “dominant social groups have emphasized some cultural traits over others.”¹³

Another goal of the nationalists is the creation of cultural boundaries as a way of safeguarding identity, as well as an ideological sense of protecting one's kin. These boundaries are acclaimed to be both physical and ideological. As language is an obvious factor of identity, this has often fueled claims for boundaries, as in the case of the Quebecoise nationalist ideology.¹⁴

Modernity and Why History

Nationalism is a modern phenomenon that uses history more as an ideological tool, and less as a narrative of past events. Nationalists often link their identity to a glorious legendary past, which in

numerous instances, this either did not exist, or if it did so, it existed for a short period of time. Because of this ideology, nationalists often dream of the “greater” country. Often, nationalist elites claim symbolic identities, which their ancestors never had, as in the case of the European elite in Mexico using Aztec symbols. Yet, it is important to specify that these Aztec symbols were romanticized and appropriated only after the real threat of the Aztecs has been completely eliminated.

As Eric Hobsbawm writes,

[m]ore interesting, from our point of view, is the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes. A large store of such materials is accumulated in the past of any society, and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available. Sometimes new traditions could be readily grafted on old ones, sometimes they could be devised by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouse of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation - religion and princely pomp, folklore and freemasonry (itself an earlier invented tradition of great symbolic force).¹⁵

Derivative of ancient myths, Patrick Geary tries to demonstrate that modern nations which link their past to ancient myths are purely wrong, since the elites borrow ancient myths to gain popularity and political support to advance their political interests. In other words, the elites act mainly as primordialists by appropriating existing narratives.

As the debate over the artificiality of national identities went beyond Anderson’s theoretical backdrop, new case studies made serious attempts to demonstrate this theory.

One tendency was not just to deconstruct, but rather to question the so called claims for “ancientness” of customs and traditions that were once considered taboos. This is a case not only raised by Hobsbawm and Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition*, but also a case strongly argued by Patrick Geary’s recent book *The Myth of Nations*. The authors of the essays contend that many so called “traditional” practices—particularly those related to public ceremonial—are

in fact quite recent inventions, often deliberately constructed to instrumentalize particular ideologies. As Eric Hobsbawm writes in the introduction of the volume, “[n]othing appears more ancient and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations.”¹⁶

In conclusion a nation is an imagined political community, created by the elites through a unified language and myths of common ancestry; both used for objective and utilitarian reasons so as to foster a shift of power from the ruling class to the intelligentsia.

NOTES

¹ Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

² Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1969), 9.

³ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 10.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1981), 15.

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

⁷ Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17-18.

⁸ Cf. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 51, as well as Amílcar Barreto, *Language, Elites, and the State: Nationalism in Puerto Rico and Quebec* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 23, and Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 131.

⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 12.

¹⁰ Barreto, *Language, Elites, and the State*, 22.

¹¹ Geary, *The Myth of Nations*, 25-34.

¹² T. Fujitani, Geoffrey M. White, Lisa Yoneyama (Eds.) *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)*

(Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2001), 324.

¹³ Barreto, *Language, Elites, and the State*, 23.

¹⁴ Richard Handler, *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 58.

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.