

NATION AND NATIONALISM – A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Nationalism has seen resurgence in the past decades. An ideology which has been derided as intellectually shallow by many commentators has shown itself to be capable of arousing passions and inspiring movements which took the post Cold War era by surprise. Nation and nationalism are what W. B. Gallie referred to as essentially contested concepts i.e. nation and therefore nationalism mean different things to different people. In the contemporary world there has been a considerable controversy on meaning and nature of nation and nationalism. In this paper it is our aim to analyze the various theoretical perspectives associated with nation and nationalism from its origin to the present day. This survey of the ideological perspectives on nationalism has been undertaken to better understand the phenomena of nationalism.

Key Words: Nation, Nationalism, identity, primordialism, structuralism, constructivism,

Nationalism is the most successful political ideology in human history. In the two centuries since its first formulation in the writings of European philosophers, it has caused the political map of the world to be completely redrawn, with the entire land surface (apart from Antarctica) now divided between nation-states.

Anthony Birch, Nationalism and National Integration (1989)

Nationalism has often been neglected as an ideology has sometimes even been dismissed as intellectually shallow. Its impact however as Birch points out has been considerable. This neglect might be due to the considerable theoretical ambiguity about it. Perhaps it is due to the fact as Benedict Anderson has pointed out that, 'Unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes or Webers'. The words nation and nationalism through their use in literature, journalism, politics and lay discourse have joined the company of words whose meaning is incredibly hard to pin-point as they come to have different meanings or different folks in different circumstances. This confusion is aided by the fact that real world implication of what comes to be understood as nation and nationalism to the extent that we have competing visions of nationalism asserted by competing ideological eco-systems. We however will look at nationalism in purely academic sense as an idea of enlightenment parentage that people are constituted into communities called nations and these nations have the right to self determination. Kedourie neatly summarizes this proposition in the definition that 'that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government' Kedourie (1969, p.9) cited in Birch 1989, this definition is a satisfactory starting point. It contains three propositions which are the basis of the ideology of nationalism:

- (a) That people are divided into communities called nations;
- (b) That this community, 'nation' is based on certain characteristics which can be determined;
- (c) That the boundaries of a legitimate political community ought to coincide with the boundaries of this entity the nation i.e. that nations have a right to self-determination.

The last proposition is the most radical among the propositions of nationalism. It was this which was in direct opposition to multi ethnic empires like the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire which straddled Europe and were seen as oppressive imposition on 'nations' which were the natural units of self government. This meant that in the early part of the nineteenth century nationalists were often liberals who talked of self-determination and demanded the extinction of such

Imperial behemoths which they saw as unnatural and illegitimate as forms of government. This was the era of national awakenings of Garibaldi, Mazzini, Kossuth and Palacky who framed their struggles for freedom of their 'nations' in nationalist terms.

The definition not only clarifies the concept of nationalism it also introduces us to the reasons why nationalism is open to multiple interpretations. The cause of ambiguity lies in the second proposition that this community or social unit – 'the nation' can be distinguished from other nations on the basis of certain characteristics. What should be the basis of nationhood? What characteristic constitutes a people into a nation? The diversity of opinions on this issue has produced wide debate on nature of nation and nationalism. What sort of group is the nation? The following is a list of group concepts (from Birch, 1989):

Sociological Concepts: Kinship group, Tribe, Ethnic Group, Community, Society

Cultural Concepts: Language, Literature, Religion, Culture, Civilization

Institutional Concepts: Municipality, County, Province, Empire, State

According to Birch the characteristics which make a nation are spread all over these group concepts, some nations emphasize institutional concepts like a constitution, while others base their concept of nationhood on concepts like language and culture like France and Germany, or ethnicity like Japan. This difficulty has led to some thinkers like Ernest Renan to take a purely subjectivist position, people who believe themselves to be a nation constitute a nation, the nation being a daily referendum.

This problem is further exacerbated by the writings on nationalism by nationalists who through their writings wanted to promote their particular national cause. So Fichte bases his ideas on his peculiar understanding of what it means to be a nation in the particular case of the then disunited Germany by basing it on German culture and language while Garibaldi framed his nationalism in the terms of the lost glory of Rome and post independence Indian nationalism has been defined by the legacy of struggle against British Colonial rule. Students of nationalism have to be careful to study nationalism as an ideology in universalist terms and not how it was framed by protagonists of a political program in their particular struggle.

National Integration

The increased participation of the populace in the activities of governance with the rise of democracy i.e. the importance of the consent or at least the appearance of consent on the part of the governed necessitated on the part of the political elite to integrate people living in the territory governed by their state into their program of centrally promoted nationalism. This inculcation of loyalty, of development of a feeling among the people within a nation state that they are stakeholders in the nation has been a high priority on the part of all governments in the modern era. This is what has been referred to as the process of national integration.

Birch lists the essential steps in national integration

- Creation of symbols of national identity
- Establishment of national political institutions to bring all the people under the nation state under the same laws
- Creation of an educational system which promotes the sense of national identity
- Development of national pride

The process of national integration encounters the stumble block of the presence of cultural minorities for there are few nation states that are homogenous i.e. which do not have linguistic, religious, cultural minorities. Cultural minorities are bound to have different conception of the process involved in national integration which for them may entail cultural loss without equivalent benefit. This may pose a challenge to the above program of a national government. What is to stop a cultural minority from not

developing a view that it constitutes a nation in itself and thus deserves self rule. The process of integration in a national society of cultural minority involves both unconscious and deliberate steps. A minority is anyway partially integrated in the majority society by social and economic interactions with the majority society. Deliberate steps taken by government like promotion of a national language through the education system or a national broadcasting system. French was spoken by a minority of people of what today is France at the onset of the French Revolution. It was through the deliberate attempts of the French government through the education system that languages like Occitan, Breton, Franco-Provencal were declared *patois* or dialects and French initially spoken around the region of Paris became the national language of France. A similar process was adopted in the promotion of Castilian Spanish in Spain at the expense of Basque, Catalan, Galician and others. This question proved to be a controversial one in many countries as people are not keen to give up their mother tongues so easily. Language in particular has been a hotly contested issue in the process of national integration pursued by governments across the world. National governments have adopted various attitudes of confrontation like Francoist Spain which for a period banned even publication in languages like Basque, Catalan and Galician and initial policies of the Sinhalese government in Sri Lanka with respect to Tamil; to one of conciliation like the language policy of Belgium with regard to Flemish and French; and Canada with respect to Quebecois French. Different strategies adopted to address these concerns from bilingualism to multiculturalism. Theoretically these attempts at centrally sponsored integration have been framed in terms of

- Modernization; the inevitable but in the long run beneficial homogenization which is part and parcel of moving towards modernity, the cultural loss as a small price in the process of greater benefits from integration
- Internal Colonialism; where assimilative and integrative process has been seen as the metropolitan elite's attempts harmonize effective exploitation of resources of peripheral areas with the cost of culture loss of integration far greater than the benefit accrued to the minority
- Atomization; of replacement of organic and real local community with an 'imagined' national community which is artificial and induced as opposed to natural.

It is these concerns which make national integration a controversial process which is nevertheless pursued by governments as it is seen as highly beneficial in the process of governing a nation due to its obvious impact on real and perceived legitimacy of the government of the nation state.

Origins of Nationalism

Political philosophy has long attempted to answer the questions related to human association and its implications. What is the best form of political community has been one of the major questions in the history of political thought. The idea that the boundaries of political community should coincide with the society of related (by some characteristic usually culture) individuals is the basis of the doctrine of nationalism.

It was first suggested by **Jean Jacques Rousseau** in his **Discourse on the Origin of Inequality** (cited in Birch, 1989). Rousseau puts forward the idea that societies in which people of similar culture who feel some bond towards each other can be naturally organized into political communities. He also posits the adoption of a civic religion and an education system geared towards the needs of national community which is quite opposite to the prescriptions of universalists of the Enlightenment era.

Johann Gottfried Herder who gave us the term **Nationalisms** (Berlin cited in Birch 1989) is often associated with the foundation of nationalism as a political doctrine. A Historicist and a Romanticist in his thought he was opposed to the French Enlightenment ideals of Universalism and Cosmopolitanism. He saw the world as composed of **Volk** or communities which were according to him the ideal basis of political community. Each *volk* had certain characteristics which were distinguishable and each *volk's* language contained the genius of its people. Each *volk* contributed in some way to the richness of the world. His particular concerns were for Germany then divided to numerous principalities which were in opposition to the more natural political communities based on *volk*. He opposed the multi-ethnic empires of his time as artificial. In his ideas inspired the unification of Germany and Italy; and the anti imperial struggles of the would-be nations of Central and Southern Europe.

Johan Gottlieb Fichte in his **Addresses to the German Nation** suggested that language was the proper basis of nationhood. Language according to Fichte was intimately related to culture and attainment. His particular concern was Germany and his belief in German exceptionalism was related to his plan for Germany as a nation.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and his praise of nation state as a form of political organization was in forwarded the Germanic contribution to development of nationalism as a doctrine. The fact that Germany was the most fertile ground for development nationalism as Germany of the period was politically disunited. Later contributions to nationalistic thought by **Giuseppe Mazzini** in Italy, **Lajos Kossuth** in Hungary and **Frantisek Palacky** in what is today the Czech Republic were uniquely tied to their particular circumstances but had the common refrain, that their respective societies whether Italian, Hungarian or Czech constituted 'nations' and were thus entitled to self rule and non domination by foreign empires. The English on the other hand had a conception and institution of nation state since the middle ages and thus felt no need for articulation of a theory of nationalism thus we find the thinkers in English usually silent on the question. Even United States of America which distinguished themselves from the English on institutional disagreements and not culture as such led to the development of the unique American Civic Nationalism which emphasized institutional concepts like the constitution, democracy, republic as the basis of their nationalism. Thus United States of America was characterized not as the land of Americans as Germany was the land of Germans but 'land of the free and the home of the brave'.

From its inception the development of Nationalism in various countries was shaped by their interaction with the cultural minorities in their territory. Canadian nation with its assimilative approach towards the Native Americans or the First Nations and the Quebecois French earlier confrontational but later conciliatory led to development of Multiculturalism with **Pierre Trudeau** being one of its first proponents, Australia's nationalism was shaped by its history of contact with Aboriginal peoples like that of New Zealand with the Maori.

With the dismantling of the Colonial Empires we see the development of nationalism framed in anti-colonial terms in the formerly colonized countries. Many of these nations were not what could be called natural entities. Most were the result of colonial scramble for Africa which often disregarded the existence of geographical, cultural and tribal boundaries instead based on colonial deals between rival empires. Thus the nationalism which sprung up in these countries was based on a call of expulsion of imperial powers from these countries rather on particularistic appeals based on cultural grounds. Their nationalism was informed by their struggles against the colonial powers. Even after independence when leaders of the independence movements found themselves in power they were inclined to consolidate their power through national integration the ethnic patchwork they found in their countries promoted the development of a Nationalism based on Institutional bases and not cultural bases, the anti-imperialist struggle which seemed to have united the country together was a powerful basis for development of nationalism in these countries. Independence leaders like **Joseph Nyerere** in Tanzania, **Kwame Nkrumah** in Ghana, **Patrice Lumumba** in Congo and **Jomo Kenyatta** in Kenya framed their nationalism in terms of their anti-imperial struggles.

Early Critiques of Nationalism

Some students of ideology have dismissed nationalism as a shallow in intellectual terms. Marxist ideologues often denigrated it as a species of 'bourgeois ideology'. According to the **marxist critique** of nationalism was a type of false consciousness which diverted the attention of the proletariat. It prevented them from becoming a class 'for itself'. The world was not divided into nations but classes. The proletariat across the world was united by the fact of their exploitation by the capitalist class.

Nationalism in its initial phase was also criticized by imperialists for it was rightly seen as dangerous to the multi-ethnic empires. An example of the **imperialist critique** of nationalism is **Lord Acton's** essay 'Nationality' (Acton, 1862 cited in Birch, 1989). He decried nationalism as a 'retrograde step in history'. He viewed nationalism and its proposition of political loyalty based on ethnic ties as animal loyalty and below human dignity. Protection of individual liberty and maintenance of civilization

and progress were hindered by such tribal loyalties. Multi-ethnic empires and states were beneficial to the 'inferior races' and 'decaying nations' living with the advanced nations. Minorities in a nation state would be subjected to oppression in a nation state. This is essentially an imperialist defense of multinational empires of the day against the burgeoning nationalism.

Theories of Nationalism

Contemporary theories on nationalism which purport to explain this political phenomenon adopt diverging first principles which can lead more to confusion than conceptual clarity. This may be due to the fact that nationalism is not only a category of analysis but a category of practice as well. For simplification we utilize David Brown's categorization of the various theoretical standpoints on nationalism into three streams;

- Primordialist
- Structuralist
- Constructivist.

Primordial standpoint, according to Brown, sees nationalism as a political assertion of the primordial community, the emphasis is on *instinct*. It sees it as arising from the "natural" in group preference (Pierre van Der Berghe,1995). Political socialization into pre-existing ethnic and national groups (Walker Connor,1994; David Horowitz,1985) leads to formation of these bonds which are not amenable to rational explanation (Geertz,1973).

These include what **Anthony Smith** has termed as "perennialist explanations". Smith agrees with the assessment that nationalism is an essentially modern phenomenon but asserts that it is constructed on pre existing ties which he terms as 'ethnie'.

Adrian Hastings too explains nationalism in primordialist terms and sees latter day nationalism as awakening what was already; solidly there (Hastings,1997). This approach indeed goes back to the romantic nationalism associated with Herder and Fichte.

Conflict is said to arise when existent political boundaries mismatch with the primordial ethnic community. Minority has the chance to assimilate and associate itself to claims of common inheritance a task which is promoted by the state in its state building exercises, but the weakening of the state apparatus in post cold war era has decreased the cohesive ability of the centre thus we have seen the assertion of the periphery.

Structural standpoint, According to Brown the structuralist standpoint sees nationalism as a response to changing structure of the global economy, the emphasis is on *interest*. It relies on the liberal argument of individual pursuit of self-interest. For the realization of self-interest individuals resort to forming groups or functional aggregations (Don Ronen,1979). Motives often arise from similarity of interests because common culture leads to similar responses ('beneficial and equal interactions with others are likely to lead individuals to identify with the interactive community') but these are not as primordialists suggest unamenable to rational analysis but can be understood and are open to manipulation by elites. Unequal interactions between such groups united around common interests lead to manufacture of the 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. The group affinity which appears to individuals as the most utilitarian is the one which is emphasized the most. Modern nations arose because they made good economic sense.

Ernest Gellner in his **Nations and Nationalism** set out to examine the rise of nation state and the phenomenon of nationalism. Gellner avers that, 'nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent'. It is essentially a modern phenomenon which arose with industrialization as it created a need for a culturally homogenous society. Industrialization and the need of society for a standardized labor force was the engine behind the rise of nationalism. In pre-modern times there was little incentive for cultural standardization on the ruling class of society, such 'agro-literate societies could manage with cultural variety.

The basic theme of Gellner's thesis is that there was a congruent rise of industrialization and nationalism; industrialization offers an incentive for cultural standardization, and nationalism is helpful towards this end. (Gellner,1983),

Eric Hobsbawm saw nation as a requirement of capitalist development (Hobsbawm,1992) and **Benedict Anderson's** correlation of modern nationalism with the cultural homogeneity promoted by "print capitalism" which facilitated the rise of the 'imagined community' of the nation state rely on the structuralist explanation (Anderson,1991).

Spread of Industrialization via colonialism and reaction to it led to spread of nationalism from its homeland in Europe. According to **Michael Hechter**; unequal industrialization within nation states and accompanying "cultural division of labour" lead to development of peripheral nationalisms; asserting themselves against the metropole's exploitation of the periphery's resources (Hechter,2000).

The contemporary surge of nationalism is thus a reaction to contemporary restructuring of the world economy and the growing obsolescence of established nation state as capable economic unit in the context of globalization and emerging responses to it like the regionalization experiments like the European Union.

constructivist standpoint, nationalism as the new myth of certainty to counteract the insecurities and anxieties generated by modernity and globalization, emphasis on *psychological ideology*.

It sees the function of nationalism as the provision of a stable identity to individuals in a world fraught with instability. It is a ready-made template which solves problems of individual's isolation by allowing him membership to a defined and distinct community. It confers a readymade vision of the world, problems it faces and its solutions (Kedourie 1994).

Ellie Kedourie's critique of nationalism on the bases on which nationalism is based Nationalism thus serves a psychological function for individuals. It may be harnessed by the elites for their benefit but the emotional response it engenders among ordinary people is an indication of the emotional function it fulfills, which is often manipulated by some to further their aims.

The fragility of the sense of self or ego is well served by the prescription of fixities nationalism provides i.e. it aids self-labelling and self-construction. (Frosh,1991)

The assertion of common ancestry and existence of national community, a kinship implicit in nationalism is a "regressive narcissism" the longing for the sense of security one feels in one's dependence on ones parents in infancy, a security which the feeling of kinship with one's nation creates in one. Common ancestry is family writ large and emphasizes oneness and is a convenient construction to solve the anxiety of loss of one's parents and escape from complexities and ambiguities of the real. (Fromm, 1955)

Whenever nationalism promotes the myth of sameness and the myth of permanence more effectively than other forms of identity it becomes more salient politically and socially.

What Baumann (2003) has called the fluidity of modernity and its social disruptive nature has decreased the stability in life extensively; globalization and the time-space warp it creates have indeed reduced the few fixities men clung to.

In political terms it provides a powerful formula for the elite dispossessed to regain political salience and masses a sense of community which they observe as decaying.

This is a brief survey of the multiple viewpoints on Nationalism which are prevalent within the discipline and is by no means an exhaustive one.

Conclusion

The recent resurgence in nationalism around the world has brought the need to understand nationalism and analyze the nature of contemporary Nationalism as an ideology at theoretical level i.e. as a **category of analysis** but also at the level of action i.e. as a **category of practice**. Nationalism has indeed shown far greater durability in the real world than many other 'isms' which claim a greater intellectual pedigree. As an 'essentially contested concept' nationalism cannot be fully understood until we take into consideration the multiple viewpoints on nationalism.

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