

Historical and National Narratives

Lloyd Kramer, NATIONALISM

The vast, expanding literature on nationalism may well defy every generalization except a familiar, general theme of intellectual history: texts about nationalism have always drawn their perspectives and passions from the evolving political and cultural contexts in which their authors have lived. Modern accounts of nationalism show the unmistakable traces of political, military, and cultural conflicts in every decade of the twentieth century—from the era of nationalist rivalries before World War I to the redefinitions of gender, literature, and history that have emerged in contemporary postmodernism, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism.

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Nationalist ideas are thus a distinctive form of modern thought that shapes the political actions and cultural identities of individuals as well as groups. The meanings of nationalism and national identity typically depend on various dichotomies that define the nation in terms of its differences from other places or people—the dynamic process of identity formation that has received wide attention in contemporary cultural studies. My own view of the “oppositional” structures in nationalist thinking coincides with the concise description by Peter Sahlins: “National Identity is a socially constructed and continuous process of defining ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’.... National identities ... do not depend on the existence of any objective linguistic or cultural differentiation but on the subjective experience of difference.”² Sahlins thus assumes that something called national identity is “there,” but he also insists that national consciousness is a “constructed” identity. Nationalism, in short, does not express or reflect a natural, primordial reality.

According to Anderson, this remarkable redefinition of identities resulted from cultural transformations that evolved along with new technologies for distributing information in the early modern era. The emerging European state system and colonial empires (Anderson emphasizes the early national identities of creole functionaries in America) created legal and educational institutions that fostered identification with large territories, but nationalism for Anderson depended above all on the “convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language.” New technologies disseminated new cultural narratives in newspapers and novels, all of which “created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.”⁷ Reading the stories of their nations in schools, literature and newspapers, individuals came to identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local worlds in which they lived their daily lives.

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The economic origins of nationalism (and modernity). Other analysts have gone beyond Anderson in stressing the economic transformations that shaped nationalist cultures. Although the economic origins of nationalism are a familiar theme in Marxist historiography, the most influential recent advocate of this interpretation, Ernest Gellner, develops his argument with explicitly anti-Marxist perspectives. The general flight from Marxism in the 1980s, however, did not eliminate all Marxist perspectives from the study of nationalism, and the work of Eric Hobsbawm shows how such theories can still offer important insights into nationalism's complex connection to modern economic forces. Despite their theoretical differences, Gellner and Hobsbawm both insist that the history of nationalism is embedded in the history of industrialization and capitalism.

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Gellner views the transition from agrarian society to industrial society as the fundamental characteristic of modern history. This economic reality has affected all aspects of modern societies, including the rationalizing economic and political institutions that dominate the nation-state. Drawing on the perspectives of post-World War II social science, Gellner describes nationalism as a kind of instrumental ideology that both facilitates and reflects the development of modern economies. Industrial societies require complex divisions of labor, educated work forces, mobile populations, and workers who can communicate across long distances. No modern economy can exist without large numbers of people who read the same language, follow the same regulations, and manipulate the same technologies.

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The assumption that nationalisms are historical rather than natural phenomena shapes most of the scholarly literature, so that the study of nationalism leads to historical analysis rather than to biology or physical geography. Although there have been countless historical studies of nationalism in different periods, cultures, and conflicts,³ my discussion will refer to a small number of narratives that have made especially significant theoretical claims about the nature of nationalism. There is of course no way to analyze such theories without exclusions and generalizations, which I shall provide by focusing mostly on works about Europe and dividing the patterns of historical analysis into the

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on works about Europe and dividing the patterns of historical analysis into the following broad categories: (1) the description of nationalism as a central component of modernization, reflecting and also shaping intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and political transitions from premodern to modern history; (2) the claim that nationalisms are modern religious movements, related to but also displacing earlier religions; (3) the argument that nationalism is a linguistic, literary construction that depends on new forms of communication, intellectuals, and narratives; (4) the description of nationalism as a discourse of gender and ethnicity that shapes individual identities and also expresses anxieties about sexuality, culture, and respectability; and (5) the argument that nationalisms can be divided into categories (good/bad, Western/Eastern, politi-

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National identity

- National identity persists in a globalising world, and perhaps the nation remains the pre-eminent entity around which identity is shaped.
- Dominant theories of the nation are concerned with political economy and history, and the national cultural elements they refer to are either in the realm of high culture, are the 'invented traditions' and ceremonies concocted many years ago, or are versions of folk culture.
- These are reified notions of culture, which, while certainly still relevant, are only a small part of the cultural matrix which surrounds the nation. (Edensor 2002: vii)

National Identity in the Global Cultural Matrix

- Theories concerned with accounting for the changing conditions generated by **globalisation**, or those heralding a postmodern epoch, have focused on the decentring of identity, in contradistinction to previously bounded, coherent **modern identities** – like **national identity** – which are being superseded.
- Greater social and actual mobility, the fragmentation of classes, the growing importance of consumption and the rise of 'identity politics' have increasingly influenced identity formation.
- Moreover, supposedly mobile identities increasingly move across various sites, amongst different people, and in diverse cultural contexts.

- Castells (1996) has put forward the notion of a 'network society' emerging from processes of globalisation, comprising economic, political and technological flows;
- Appadurai (1990) has offered a highly influential scheme which suggests that globalisation is characterised by disjunctive flows of people ('ethnoscapes'), technology ('technoscapes'), information ('mediascapes'), ideas and ideologies ('ideoscapes') and money ('financescapes') which undercut nationally organised modes of distribution and control.
- Such ideas challenge bounded notions of society, since a host of interconnected flows and pathways impact in uneven ways in varied contexts.

NATIONAL IDENTITY

Globalisation promotes the mutation of national identity resulting from 'the imposition of the conceptual grid of nationality on exchanges and interactions in the global arena' (Cubitt, 1998: 14)

- **Identity is always in process**, is always being reconstituted in a process of becoming and by virtue of location in social, material, temporal and spatial contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

- Like other identities, **nationhood** is 'constituted through powerful and intersecting temporal regimes and modes of dwelling and travelling' (Urry, 2000: 18).
- For instance, as national and local territories become increasingly permeable, so **iconic representations** are peddled across the world as markers of **national identity**.
- What may be useful as **marketing** shorthand for tourists, entrepreneurs and television audiences may also be re-enchanted back home, repatriated to serve national(ist) interests.
- *National identity* has become decentred but has also been recentred, and is continually being redistributed in matrices which extend from the local to the global. And