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Constructing Identity: Nation, Culture, Language and Media

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The concept of the nation as a distinct group affording identity to its members is one that has been dissected and argued over by a number of theorists from many different perspectives. The word nation comes from the Latin 'natio', meaning to be born, which could mean one of two things or both simultaneously. It can relate to the birth of the concept and idea of a national being or identity, to the birth of nations as identifying forces, and to the individual being born into a nation, as a citizen by birth in a particular national group. This short paper will briefly discuss the forces involved in an individual's identity construction and formulation, particularly the national, social, cultural, and linguistic relationships that impact upon identity, and how these structures, although contested and never static, are mostly already in place prior to our arrival in this world.

Discussions of nations and when they were in fact born generally fall into three camps, although these approaches do overlap. The three approaches are generally classed into differentiated, yet overlapping, categories: primordialists, represented by Anthony Smith (1991); ethnicists, represented by John Hutchinson (1994); and modernists, represented by Ernest Gellner (1983) and Benedict Anderson (1991). Primordialists see human societies as having always exhibited some degree of national identity, although perhaps not adhering to our modern understanding of the concept. The ethnicists focus on the *ethnie*, or ethnic community with its accompanying cultural and linguistic components as a precursor in many ways to our modern conception of the nation, and the modernists connect the concept of the nation with the process of state-building. There is little point in demarcating the opposing

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arguments in detail for they have more in common than they have differences, and it is their commonalities that are of most interest. The most important commonality between the approaches and theories is the definition of a nation, with the real main difference between the approaches being one of timing as to the construction and development of such a concept in the minds and hearts of the group members, the sense of self-awareness of group membership. The primordialists and ethnicists develop the argument that such awareness has always existed in human societies, albeit on a smaller clan or tribe-based scale, while the modernists date the birth of the nation as a post-industrial construction aided by the rise of states and bureaucracies, a purposeful, imagined construction to support the development of modern power structures.

Benedict Anderson refers to modern nations and their states as imagined political communities, 'imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). For Anderson, the modern conditions necessary for the rise of nations were not limited solely to the apparatus of the state, but also to the development of technology, in particular mass communication technologies which allowed members of cultural groups to connect with other members, to understand that they were members of a larger group, most of whom they would never meet, yet who shared certain beliefs and practices. These same technologies allowed the state to purposefully create and reinforce bonding memories and myths to legitimate its control over a group of people. As Calhoun states:

What now seem settled, almost natural national identities are the results of symbolic struggles and both cultural and very material violence. Not only violence, to be sure: national identity and common histories are also the result of cultural creativity – the writing of novels that millions want to read, the shared exposure to television programmes. (Calhoun, 1997, p. 85)

Benedict Anderson's understanding of the importance of the media in the development of national identities is important, as the media continues this

process of reinforcing identity constructions through the use of national narratives and discourse. Media, literature, history, and myth, all play significant roles in the imagining of national identity, in helping to bring together people with varied backgrounds and unite them into an autonomous, separate group, distinct from others around them linguistically and culturally, and particularly in the case of Japan, territorially, with geography and borders playing important roles in the reimagining of history and myth-making. As Morris-Suzuki puts it in a discussion of memories, nationalism and history:

Knowledge of and pride in the national past are seen as a glue which binds the nation together, saving it from "disintegration" in the face of external threats or internal insecurities. History is expected to serve as a primer of morals, whose inspiring lessons will temper the character of the next generation of citizens. But it is also understood as collective memory: the greater narrative of national society into which the smaller narratives of individual, family or local memory must fit like pieces of a jigsaw. (Morris-Suzuki, 1998, p. 9)

The connections made by the state with the national group must by necessity be rebuilt continuously across generations as the nation changes and develops, and it is this process of nation building that is referred to as nationalism (see Pettman, 2000, p.116), literally the creation of national identity. Nations are formed from shared cultures, languages, and histories, and state-makers, administrators, politicians and media controllers, all use these shared attributes to give legitimacy to the functions of the state, to build support for the concept and the functioning powers of the state.

Smith (1991) and Calhoun (1997), in particular, discuss the complex layers and levels of identification and relationship that modern nation-states can utilise and appeal to in their attempts at legitimization. These layers can be seen as working in the same way as Stephen Daedalus' nets that were holding him back, controlling and attempting to fix his identity, in James Joyce's original, 1916 classic tale of one individual's search for identity, *A Portrait of*

the Artist as a Young Man (2000). In the case of national identity, these nets which give the group members identity, and work as layers for the state to appeal to for legitimization, include myths, public culture, religion, legal rights, economic hierarchies and class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and language, to mention a few, but in particular, a shared sense of history, whether real or imagined, whether recent, or spanning centuries.

All modern states, including Japan, have two major tools at their disposal for reproducing national identity and culture across generations - education systems and media systems, two very powerful tools. State control over education in Japan has a long history of working to build and rebuild certain narratives and certain beliefs in citizens through dedicated and conscious selection and exclusion policies regarding readings of history and subjects studied. Education in Japan is as much, if not more, about constructing Japanese citizens, and particularly recently, Japanese citizens with a love of their 'beautiful country' (Abe, 2006), of their nation, as it is about knowledge-based learning. As Gellner argues, 'the state does take over quality control in this most important of industries, the manufacture of viable and usable human beings' (Gellner, 1983, p. 37). The other important tool for identity construction is the media, in all its forms, but most particularly through television. In the case of Japan, with television having almost 100% spread in homes across the country and its very high level of daily contact hours, this medium is also equally important in reproducing national identity, by bringing the selected images, myths, histories and beliefs into each individual citizen's home on a daily basis, by screening the selected cultural identities and narratives for citizens to identify with.

National identity construction involves belief, creation, and imagination, the making real of the very unreal. As Calhoun (1997) tells us, 'nations have multiple sources, including the discourse of nationalism itself' (p. 23). Homi Bhabha (2006) also focuses on discourse and narrative as key components in the imagining of identity, defining the nation as a 'form of narrative - textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, sub-texts and figurative stratagems' (2006, p. 2). Anderson (1991) gives as an example of this process of narrative

imagination, the creation of something from nothing, the filling of the void with imagined identity through nationalism and national belief, the cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers that many nations have built. The tombs contain no real remains but stand as symbols, as national symbols of both the identity of the nation and the duty to protect this identity from other identities, to hold it sacrosanct as the true, natural form of one's identity beyond all other possibilities. Anderson points to the mostly unnoticed irony where national identity is symbolised by emptiness, by empty tombs, the form and content which they represent needing to be imagined, and it is this imagining of identity and the belief in commonality with the other imaginers, this belief that one is connected to others within defined boundaries, cultural or geographical, that drives the construction of national identity.

Zizek (1993) refers to this filling of the emptiness with shared beliefs, the contents of national identity construction, as the 'Nation-Thing'. He takes a psychoanalytic, Lacanian approach to the process of national identification, where each group or community is separated from the 'other', is inaccessible to the 'other', and is also under constant threat from the 'other', and this threat helps to sustain their identity. For Zizek, the 'nation-thing' relates to a community's lifestyle, values, traditions, customs, language, myths, and social relations, in much the way that most writers center on these cultural artefacts as the foundations of national identity. Zizek, like Anderson and others, also points to the way that belief in the 'nation-thing' and the belief that others share in it, is something that perpetuates it, with Zizek going on to offer 'enjoyment' in the Lacanian sense of 'jouissance', as helping to sustain this system, the enjoyment of the group members in identification, the desire to believe, the desire for identification and the joy it brings, and the belief that the 'other' is not sharing in that particular enjoyment. As Zizek states, 'a nation exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure those practices' (Zizek, 1993, p. 202).

The discourse of nationalism may be one of the strongest building blocks in the construction of identity, yet it is not the only element involved, and is itself

dependent upon other narrative structures and formations, such as language and cultural systems and discourses other than those of nationalism.

Cultural Narratives

All individuals are born into cultures that are exploding with meanings, definitions, values and identity constructs. Cultures have been formulated across multiple generations and movements of people, things, and ideas, geographically and socially. These movements gradually build up the cultural and identity resources available to the members who are sharing in the imagining and re-imagining of such cultural identities, and at the same time offer frameworks for understanding and interpreting the world and other identities, for constructing meaning/s. As Etienne Balibar puts it,

Every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary, that is to say, it is based on the projection of individual existence into the web of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name and on traditions lived as the trace of an immemorial past (even when they have been fabricated and inculcated in the recent past.)
(Balibar, 1996, p. 138)

Balibar is saying that identities, especially cultural and national identities supposedly based on historical traditions, are fictive and imaginary, and as such, individual identities developed upon such fictional narrative constructs must therefore also be highly imagined. All our individual identities are constructed within and through these narrative imaginings, through cultural and social values and belief structures, through the historical and modern narratives available to us, through the legal, political and economic frameworks we find ourselves in, and most significantly, at the core of all these narratives, through the language structures we have inherited and use.

The most basic building block of identity, and the foundation or construct that we also use to think about, conceptualize, and communicate about identity, is language, most importantly, the language structures, formations

and patterns that we are born into. As Lacan (1977, p. 65) put it, 'it is the world of words that creates the world of things.' All discussions, ideas and thoughts are to be found in language, to be restricted and determined by the parameters of the language being used to form the narrative constructions. All words and meanings are essentially arbitrary and dependent, dependent upon the systems they exist within and define, and dependent upon relationships to other words and meanings. Saussure (1974) described language as a system of conventions, indeed of completely arbitrary conventions in regard to the relationships between signifiers and signified, and that each element or component can only find definition or meaning in relation to other elements in the system of signs, or to the lack of other elements, or the differences between the elements.

Relational Constructs in Identity Formation: Self and 'Other'

So too is individual identity often described in similar terms, by a range of theorists from Lacan to Derrida to Foucault, Kristeva and Žižek, to mention but a few. Individual identity is seen as a construct that can only be understood through the 'other', in the case of identity, through the other members or units of a social system. Identity cannot exist without the 'other', as it is the relationship between the individual and others, the interactions, changing power relationships, narrative structures and discourses, that we draw definitions from, that defines identity in an ongoing, endless process of definition-forming. Homi Bhabha manages to bring this idea of identity formation through the 'other', identity as definable only in relation to and through something/somebody else, down to a very simple level of understanding:

have our fables of identity ever been unmediated by another; have they ever been more (or less) than a detour through the word of God, or the writ of Law, or the Name of the Father; the totem, the fetish, the telephone, the superego, the voice of the analyst, the closed ritual of the weekly confessional or the ever open ear of the monthly coiffeuse?

(Bhaba, 1994, p. 57)

Identity, like language, is a relational, dependent construct. It is a process, an interpretation of self and others based in social and psychological space, but perhaps most importantly, a situating force in perpetual motion. As identity is continually shifting and being forged anew, depending upon the narratives and discourses one finds oneself in, it is difficult to speak of identity in concrete terms or definitions, but rather it should be remembered that it exists in and between constructs of culture, language, and power struggles, and most importantly, identity is something that is constantly developed in relationship to others. Just as identity in its national guise is one of the most powerful forces for defining communities, here at the individual level, the major national narratives and constructs, from language to law, can be found hard at work in a continual pirouette of defining and delimiting individual identity, while at the same time such forces of definition and the boundaries involved are constantly threatened, renewed, re-imagined and recreated.

Lacan (1977) categorized identity into three realms: the Imaginary, corresponding to the infant/developmental stage; the Real; and the Symbolic, with the Symbolic being the world of language, culture and social communication, and the Real being everything else inaccessible to both the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but which however impacts upon them both. For Lacan, as with many identity theorists, identity is forged through the Symbolic order, by entry into a world of language, culture and social communication. It is through the Symbolic, through the world of language and others, through the 'gaze', Lacan's development of the Freudian notion of scopophilia, where we seek and find ourselves in the gaze of others, that individual identity is developed and contested.

Although this social environment, the world of language and others, may be the fertile environment upon and within which identity develops, it can often be a battlefield, a contested environment which is constantly changing, just as languages and societies develop over time, and often in quite sudden upheavals. Within these social, linguistic environments there are contestations

against the dominant narratives and structures. For certain sectors of Japan, for example the Ainu, the Okinawan population, and Zainichi Koreans amongst others¹, 'identity as a Japanese citizen equated to erasure of personal identity through the most intimate identity marker of all: their own language' (Gottlieb, 2005, p. 45). Most colonising forces throughout history have understood the power of language in determining identity and tried to control the language structures available to individuals, and especially those available to new members of a cultural community, usually by forced language assimilation policies, by forced identity constructions and restrictions.

Kearney and Adachi (2011), in discussing Lacan's theory of identity, take the discussion to the point where an individual's identity only comes into being with the individual's epiphany of understanding that they are actually a separate entity to the world and others around them, tying such a realization of identity to the Lacanian notion of the Mirror Stage, Lacan's discussion of the infant in front of the mirror. They go even further to state that:

a human entity comes into being; she/he possesses the brain tissues, neural pathways, synapses, neurotransmitters, and electrical activity, the physical aspects or somatic properties necessary to house identity; however, prior to the point of the Mirror Stage, these have not been programmed so as to manifest an individual identity. (Kearney & Adachi, 2011, p. 7)

Such a discussion of the power of social programming and language/cultural constructs in the development of identity doesn't perhaps sufficiently deal with genetic research into identity development and the influence of inherited structures, and whether some of these identity traits are already in place upon conception, well before Lacan's Mirror Stage plays its part in the construction of identity. The main point of their discussion however, following on from

1 Zainichi Koreans refers to Koreans settled permanently in Japan as a result of Japanese colonisation of the Korean peninsular. The word Zainichi literally means 'staying in Japan'.

Lacan, is one that is not in dispute, and that is that in any discussion of identity, cultural constructs and language systems provide many of the building blocks for housing and interpreting identity.

Language and Identity Formation

Language is the base of every discourse and narrative available to an individual, just as personalities are described and encased in words. Speaking, communicating, describing, interacting, thinking, dreaming, all take place within the world of language, within the confines of the language structures available to us, whether it be one language or several - we live in our world of language. Culture, language, and thinking styles are all intimately connected, with studies in bilingualism and multilingualism showing that the language we speak influences the way we think and vice-versa. An interesting report by Boroditsky (2011) discusses just how strong the connection is between language and thought, showing how any interference in language access ability affects cognition and ability to complete mental tasks, coming to the conclusion that 'there may not be a lot of adult human thinking where language does not play a role' (p. 65). The same report discusses the concepts of past and future in the English language as being behind and ahead and unconscious body movements in the corresponding direction when thinking about these concepts, whereas in Aymara, a language native to the Andes area, these concepts and spatial connections and movements are inverted, with the past ahead and the future behind the speaker. The report by Boroditsky succinctly details the connections between languages, cultures, cognition and worldviews, concluding that each of the world's diverse languages

provides its own cognitive toolkit and encapsulates the knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a culture. Each contains a way of perceiving, categorizing and making meaning in the world. (Boroditsky, 2011, p. 65)

These language toolkits have always been organic, expanding and

developing as needed and especially in response to contact with other toolkits and worldviews, something that is happening increasingly more frequently with modern communication technologies and the globalization of people, products, and desires.

Global Consumption, Mediaspace and Identity

The media, the world of television, and in particular advertising, is playing a powerful, leading role in the development of a changing world, in the widening of audiences for the discourses of consumption and identity. Lash (1999), when discussing the arrival of the new, globalized world order, the 'multimediated cultural space', writes that we have gone beyond the national to a global information culture, 'a swirling vortex of microbes, genes, desire, death, onco-mice, semiconductors, holograms, semen, digitized images, electronic money and hyperspaces in a general economy of indifference' (Lash, 1999, p. 344). Although a greater movement of goods and people is responsible for an increased movement of cultural memes as well, and perhaps an increased flexibility in and expansion of the repertoire of stories and models available, it is a little premature to talk of the end of the national as a force in identity construction. Part of this move towards a GLOBALIZED order includes some very real and strong death-throes of nationalism, with national ideologies permeating the digital images and mediaspaces, resurgent discourses and forces identified with strong national sentiment. Visions of identity constructs becoming more globalized, open-access, and interconnected, the discourses that the founding of the European Union advanced, have taken something of a beating recently. This has allowed and even promulgated a return to the familiar, to nation and culture and language. In times of uncertainty it is common to see such movements towards what is perceived to be safe ground in the realm of identity constructs, and it is the media that is increasingly used to promote a return to national discourse identities. Today, as media conglomerates pursue global consumer identities, they also promote a return to the foundations of nation, language, and culture within very defined parameters, however shifting the foundations of these

identity discourses may eventually prove to be.

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