The Origin of Nationalism
A Review of the Literature

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The conventional view: the European origin of nationalism

No one is more categorical about the origin of nationalism than Elie Kedourie: 'Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. [...] These ideas have become firmly naturalized in the political rhetoric of the West which has been taken over for the use of the whole world.'[1] This encapsulates the conventional view of the origin and spread of nationalism: nationalism which supplies 'a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organization of a society of states', the cornerstone of the modern political system, was born in Europe and it is now shared across the globe.[2] Nationalism, in the conventional view, is intrinsically western. Consequently, nationalism found in the rest of the world is an adapted/acculturated version of the original at best, if not a mindless act of copying the western model.

This understanding of the origin of nationalism is widely shared among scholars of nationalism, which has, most likely, stemmed from the perceived affinity between nationalism and modernisation. Regardless of whether nationalism is a cause or product of modernisation, it is clear there is a consensus that nationalism is part and parcel of a wider phenomenon of becoming modern.[3] As seen above, for Kedourie,

nationalism is a product of modernisation in the sphere of political ideas, which started off with the Enlightenment, a major catalyst of which was Immanuel Kant's insistence on the centrality of self-determination.[4] For Ernest Gellner, whose contribution to the development of theories of nationalism is seen to be second to none, nationalism is a societal response to the shift towards industrial society.[5] Gellner's theory of nationalism has been labelled 'functionalist' by Charles Taylor because of its focus on the relationship between modern societies as economies and the modern state, which indicates that Gellner's theorisation took place within the broader context of theorising modernisation in the second half of the twentieth century.[6] It is important to note at this stage that the theorisation of modernity and modernisation is seen as Euro- or western-centric in that these theories assume European/western experiences of social change constitute the global standard to which the rest of the world should converge.

That the intrinsically European/western nature of nationalism is taken for granted can be seen in other scholars' works. Eric Hobsbawm, a Marxist historian, shares with Gellner the functionalist and materialist angle to nationalism. Just as Gellner, Hobsbawm takes the view that nationalism engenders nations and emphasises that nations are a function of a modern territorial state. He further places nationalism 'in the context of a particular stage of technological and economic development'.[7] This 'particular stage', the rise of bourgeoisies, was of course observed in Europe, not elsewhere. Some scholars associate the rise of nationalism with the rise of the modern state and also regard nationalism as a function of the modern state.[8] Anthony Smith has associated nationalism with the rise of the *scientific state*, a novel, interventionist state which seeks to homogenise the population within its border for the sake of efficiency.[9] This, according to Smith, would lead to the crisis of traditional forms of authority based on shared understanding of a certain cosmology, and the intelligentsia of the newly independent states would face the problem of *dual legitimation*, an answer to which could be ethnic nationalism. The

modern state (or the *scientific state*, according to Smith) in question is invariably what is widely known as the Westphalian state, a form of political organisation which evolved in north western Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, to reach the stage described by Max Weber: 'The state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory'.[10] This type of organisation has evolved shaped by the framework provided by the Peace of Westphalia (1648), a particular arrangement about rule, which was articulated at a particular point of time in a particular place. In other words, the Westphalian state is fundamentally European/western, and if nationalism is a function of an essentially European/western form of organisation, then, it has to be intrinsically European/western, too.

Even in the 'imagined community' thesis by Benedict Anderson, which holds that nationalism as a political model was developed in the Americas, the forces behind the emergence of new consciousness were of a European origin: the collapse of holy cosmology and the rise of print capitalism, which catapulted the vernacular to become a means of imagining a nation.[11] The first nationalist movements were indeed observed in the Americas, a colonial periphery located outside Europe, but they were nonetheless conditioned by factors that were essentially European, including the rise of the modern, administrative state, which pushed many Creole officials to pilgrimage to far-flung corners of their land to give shape to the idea of their shared community. Likewise, the American founding fathers were firmly embedded in the economic structure and history of thought of the Old Continent, even if they were intent of building a new society.

The conventional view: nationalism spreads by diffusion

If nationalism is essentially conceived as intrinsically European/western, it follows that nationalism found elsewhere in the world is a consequence of diffusion – a diffusion of various aspects of modernisation. If nationalism is a functional requirement of industrialisation as Gellner has suggested, then when industrialisation reaches somewhere, nationalism will follow. If nationalism is associated with the development of capitalist economy as seen in Hobsbawm's work, then, nationalism will emerge when that part of the world is incorporated in a worldwide capitalist economy and starts to follow the well-trodden path. If nationalism is a function of the modern state as suggested by Smith, John Breuilly and Anthony Giddens, then nationalism will arrive when the Westphalian state is adopted by the non-European part of the world.

It is again Kedourie who has proposed a classical theory of diffusion of nationalism. In examining nationalism in Asia and Africa, he suggests that nationalism in these areas is a reaction against European domination.[12] Unlike Marxists or guilt-ridden liberal intellectuals in the aftermath of World War II, however, Kedourie is not convinced that nationalism in Asia and Africa was caused by imperialism, but connects it to the humiliation non-western intellectuals suffered in the age of European/western hegemony. Even those areas of the world which did not come under European rule have produced nationalism; it is because nationalism is a consequence of the general diffusion of a European/western system of beliefs shaped by the likes of Kant and René Descartes, in which 'the individual, far from finding fulfilment in the traditional ties of social dependence, will not be content until by his own efforts he achieves intellectual, moral, and economic independence'.[13] The new belief system has provided an alternative worldview for intellectuals in places that came under European/western hegemony, and many of them embraced the new belief system; however, more often than not, they faced humiliation of not being treated equally as Europeans in imperial administrative structure,

and the sense of resentment thus resulted has turned to fuel nationalist movements in various parts of the colonial world.

Anderson has suggested an under-explored idea of the 'modular' nature of nationalism in regard to the diffusion of nationalism. Having defined nationalism (or nationality or nation-ness) as 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind', he proceeds to suggest:

> The creation of these artefacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but […] once created, they become 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellation.[14]

Imagined communities touches on the modularity of nations and nationalism a few more times: the 'nation' has become something that is conducive to 'pirating by widely different, and sometimes unexpected, hands' and that 'twentieth-century nationalisms have […] a profoundly modular character. They can, and do, draw on more than a century and a half of human experience and three earlier models of nationalism'.[15] An image of neatly packaged artefacts, an abstract object, being transplanted to flourish in different socio-historical contexts emerges from these lines.

Objections to the diffusionist approach

Anderson's thesis of 'the universal diffusion of nationalist discourse' has been both supported and challenged.[16] Many scholars agree that nations in Asia have been formed with reference to American and European models, but they often argue this does not fully capture the forms of nations found in Asia.[17] Most famously, Partha Chatterjee has objected: 'If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from

certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?'[18] The charge here is that the diffusionist discourse does not acknowledge people in the colonised parts of the world as true subjects of history. Still, in so far as nationalism is understood as a form of politics, i.e. the building of the modern state, Chaterjee agrees that Anderson is correct to suggest that the post-colonial experience has been an emulation of the European/western models.[19] However, this is not the entire story. What the Indian political scientist proposes is to take the 'private' sphere into account, a sphere of life which has been free from intervention by the colonising Europeans, in which the nation has always been sovereign: the idea of India in the private sphere predates colonialism, which suggests that the Indians possess subjectivity.[20]

In exploring various forms of nations in Asia, Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv propose an idea of 'civilisational nations' in order to capture what they call 'a conspicuous difference between the state systems of Asia and Europe'.[21] Roughly following Samuel Huntington, Tønnesson and Antlöv note that while Western Europe, divided into some thirty states, does not have a civilisational nation, Confucian and Japanese civilisations are divided in fewer states and thereby suggest a comparison between 'Europe' as a whole on the one hand and India and China on the other could lead to a new theorisation of nations and nationalism, which is free from the diffusionist determinism.[22]

While Tønnesson and Antlöv's idea of 'civilisation nations' has not been explored in detail, Prasenjit Duara has provided more promising material to challenge the diffusionist position and the taken-for-granted European origin of nationalism.[23] Duara is suspicious of Anderson's claim that nationalism is a radically different mode of consciousness. Aligning nationalism to totalising representations and narratives of a community, Duara argues that the culturalism of China, when conceived as 'Chinese culturalism', provided a model of unified political community long before the novel doctrine of nationalism was diffused to China.[24] Chinese

culturalism, a hybrid of high culturalism of the literati based on universalistic beliefs in civilising effects of culture found in Confucianism and a sense of ethnically defined community of the Han Chinese, enabled peoples of China to imagine their community as a totalising one using culture as a defining criterion.[25] In other words, representations, narratives and, indeed, imaginations, of a community as being total and unified existed in China before western-born nationalism reached China in the nineteenth century.

Duara is categorical that these pre-modern identity movements are not the same as the modern nationalist movements, in that 'they were not accompanied by the goal of creating an unmediated relationship between state and individual (the citizenship model) and, perhaps most importantly, they were not underpinned by the ideological complex which included notions of popular sovereignty, historical progress and economic competition.'[26] Still, as a form of imagining a political community, Duara suggests that pre-modern China provides an example of such imagining which is not triggered by the diffusion of an idea from Europe/the West but as something that has endogenously grown, thereby questioning the dominant view of the European origin of nationalism.

Since the definition of nationalism is deeply entangled with social theories of modernity and modernisation, recent attempts to question mainstream modernisation theory have relevance to the question of the origin of nationalism. One of such attempts is the theory of multiple modernities, most vocally put forward by Shmuel Eisenstadt.[27] The theory of multiple modernities does not deal with nationalism *per se* but nationalism can be seen as one of cultural programmes, a modern form of human self-reflexivity with the nation at the centre of societal self-understanding (Ichijo 2013).[28] If nationalism can be recast as a form of societal self-understanding, many forms of such understanding become possible, which suggests that the orthodoxy of the inherent European/western nature of nationalism can be challenged. This is one area in nationalism studies that still awaits further development.

This review is part of
The State of Nationalism (SoN), a comprehensive guide
to the study of nationalism.
As such it is also published on the SoN website,
where it is combined with an annotated bibliography
and where it will be regularly updated.

SoN is jointly supported by two institutes:
NISE and the University of East London (UEL).
Dr Eric Taylor Woods and Dr Robert Schertzer
are responsible for overall management
and co-editors-in-chief.

https://stateofnationalism.eu/article/the-origin-of-nationalism/

Endnotes

[1] E. Kedourie, *Nationalism* (4th edition: Oxford, 1993) 1.

[2] Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 1.

[3] A related, vexed question as to whether the nation comes first or nationalism comes first is out of the scope of this short piece.

[4] Kedourie, *Nationalism*.

[5] E. Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford, 1993); J. Hall (ed.), *The state of the nation. Ernest Geller and the theory of nationalism* (Cambridge, 1998); S. Malešević & M. Haugaard (eds.), *Ernest Geller and contemporary social thought* (Cambridge, 2007).

[6] C. Taylor, 'Nationalism and modernity', in: Hall, *The state of the nation*, 191-218.

[7] E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge, 1990) 10.

[8] J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the state* (Manchester, 1982); A. Giddens, *The nation-state and violence* (A contemporary critique of historical materialism, 2) (Oxford, 1985).

[9] A.D. Smith, *Theories of nationalism* (2nd edition: New York, 1983).

[10] M. Weber, *The vocation lectures* (Indiana, 2004) 33.

[11] B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (revised edition: London, 1991).

[12] E. Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (London, 1970) 1.

[13] Kedourie, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 25.

[14] Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 4.

[15] Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 67, 135.

[16] M. Goswami, 'Rethinking the modular nation form: toward a sociohistorical conception of nationalism', in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 44/4 (2002) 770-799.

[17] S. Tønnesson & H.A. Antlöv (eds.), *Asian forms of the nation* (Richmond, 1996).

[18] P. Chaterjee, *The nation and its fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories* (Princeton, 1993) 5.

[19] Chaterjee, *The nation*, 5-6.

[20] Chaterjee, *The nation*, 6, 26.

[21] Tønnesson & Antlöv, *Asian forms*, 26-29.

[22] S. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', in: *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3 (1993) 22-49.

[23] P. Duara, *Rescuing history from the nation. Questioning narratives of modern China* (Chicago, 1995).

[24] Duara, *Rescuing history*, 55.

[25] Duara, *Rescuing history*, 58.

[26] P. Duara, 'Nationalism in East Asia', in: *History Compass*, 4/3 (2006) 407-427 (408).

[27] S. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple modernities', in: *Daedalus*, 129/1 (2006) 1-29.

[28] A. Ichijo, *Nationalism and multiple modernities. Europe and beyond* (London, 2013).