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Paradigms in the Study of Nationalism: Self-Other and Centre-Periphery Relations

Introduction

National identity represents a key issue for theories of nationalism. The bases on which people regard themselves as members of the same group – the nation – has been the subject of much debate, among nationalists and scholars of nationalism equally. Conceptually, the construction of national identity has generally been analysed using approaches based on binary oppositions¹. Whether these dualisms are deliberately value-charged (and look at nationalisms in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’) or seek to stay clear of such judgements, they can raise more problems than solutions for the understanding of nationalism.

This paper looks at two dualistic paradigms with a view to evaluate their usefulness in identifying patterns in the process of national identity formation. The first one focuses on the interplay between ‘self’ and ‘other’ as categories used in order to create markers that identify the members of the nation as similar and that simultaneously differentiate them from other groups. The second one deals with the way distinctions are made between forms of nationalism in terms of centre-periphery relations. It explores claims that certain nations and nationalisms exhibit characteristics that make them dominant in comparison to others that are dependent on the former as models.

Ultimately, this paper aims to point out that these paradigms raise significant problems of definition and applicability, and that their limited usefulness is highly questionable, especially in the context of contemporary political, economic and social developments.

1. ‘Self’ and ‘otherness’ as border markers for national identity

The discourse of nationalism has much in common with those of race, class or gender: they are categorical identities as they “appeal to cohesion based more on the similarity of individuals than on their concrete webs of relationships” (Calhoun, 1997, 43). This is to say – he argues – that the members of the group (the nation) are identified on the basis of common cultural attributes such as language, religion, customs, names and others, categories that take primacy over common descent or kinship (Calhoun, 1997, 44). However, his statement implies that common descent or kinship are in some way clearly different from the notion of common culture, whereas it could be argued that all these could operate together, as synonymous categories. They are indeed perceived attributes that create the possibility for a number of individuals, otherwise unrelated, to imagine themselves as one single group. In other words, Calhoun is right to suggest that national identity is not based

¹ For a list of such dualisms see Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 96-97.

on material relationship networks, but on the similarity between individuals, except that there is little to show that this connection is otherwise than constructed.

Conceptions of national identity deal with the group as not only similar on the basis of a set of common characteristics, but also as an internally homogeneous unit and, equally importantly, different from any others, on the same grounds (Calhoun, 1997, 7). National identity, like any other identity, requires simultaneously both a positive evaluation – who/what ‘we’ are – and a negative one – who/what ‘we’ are not. Thus, it is constituted in relation to others, in as much as the very idea of the nation brings about the idea that there exist other nations, or other peoples who are not members of the nation (Eriksen, 1993, 111). Nationalism is as much about sameness as it is about difference; it is a first person plural ideology which tells ‘us’ who ‘we’ are as well as a third person one, because it divides the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Billig, 1995, 78, Özkirimli, 2005, 32, Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 58).

The fact that the national ‘self’ is defined in terms of what it is *not*, raises another issue: that of boundaries. The nation as a community can only be imagined by also imagining other communities of foreigners, which in turn become specific categories rather than random ‘others’ (Billig, 1995, 79). The image of the ‘self’ is constructed by identifying and demarcating symbolic boundaries in order to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, between nationals and non-nationals. Thus, national identity is a product of a negation process, which creates a coherent self through denials and exclusions of groups deemed not to belong (Evans, 1996, 33). Myths can play an important role as mechanisms for self-definition and the creation of boundaries as well as for reinforcing them on the basis of the community’s distinctiveness from other groups (Schöpflin, 2000, 83). The problem with these boundaries is – as Eriksen suggests – their fuzziness. As he shows, national identity is characterised by anomalies and ambiguous criteria for belongingness. This vagueness goes against one of the most important claims made by nationalism, which is that the boundaries that enclose the national community are clear-cut, and congruent with spatial and political limits (Eriksen, 1993, 113-114).

Consequently, the idea of a fixed national community is highly problematic. As it is defined by reference to a necessary ‘other’, the process of constructing national identity is one of ongoing negotiation between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’; it is fluid and fragmented (Özkirimli, 2005, 55). Identity in this case is open to variation and change, which are determined by contexts and situations that might influence the dynamic relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’; it is “an arena of contest between competing groups and institutions within society” (Evans, 1996, 34). Despite this volatility of national identity, the ideology of nationalism states not only the distinctiveness of the nation but a sense of timelessness. National values appear as natural, are taken for granted and are turned into absolute values. National identity becomes reified, unalterable, while the processes through which it is socially constructed become blurred (Billig, 1995, 10; Jenkins and Sofos, 1996, 11; Özkirimli, 2005, 33; Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 61). It is the shifting nature of national identity itself that leads to its reification, in an attempt to pin down the identity of the ‘self’ through the process of ‘othering’. The price exacted for this

process is the fact that “the possibility of studying the *multidimensionality* of identity formation is [...] sacrificed” (Neumann, 1999, 34).

Calhoun suggests that the perceived internally homogeneous and fixed character of national identity is a feature that “can easily turn oppressive, and indeed it figures in both ‘ethnic cleansing’ and the project of encouraging ‘correct’ culture and behaviour among those who are deemed parts of the nation” (Calhoun, 1997, 7). Nationalism’s tendency to conceive the world in terms of ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ means that the perception of national identity can become value-laden and consequently promotion of one nation’s identity can denigrate – implicitly or explicitly – another’s (Özkirimli, 2005, 32, Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 59).

If in theory the opposing categories of ‘self’ and ‘otherness’ seem clearly established, the examination of the process of national identity construction brings up some practical questions. How does nationalism establish and consider the notion of ‘otherness’? How do “we constitute people as national or as other” (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001, 62)? There has to be some process of selection, by which a certain ‘them’ is deemed to be more significant, more representative for reflecting the ‘us’ from a multitude of other possibilities. If one is to consider Todorov’s (1994, 173) opinion that there are three axes in which the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’ operates, then the epistemic dimension which reflects the degree in which the identity of the other is known determines the selection of the other in one respect: if the ‘self’ is established through the ‘other’, then there has to exist a state of knowledge about that ‘other’.

A second criterion of selection is given by the axiological dimension, which reflects a value judgement: the ‘other’ is either good or bad, either inferior or not. The last criterion has to do with the fact that national identity is a historically specific phenomenon (Jenkins and Sofos, 1996, 11). Therefore, various contexts and conditions may influence the selection of an ‘other’ which is relevant and significant for the process of self-definition. Thus the selection of a ‘significant other’ – as Triandafyllidou argues – is necessary because in order “for the nation to exist there must be some outgroup against which the unity and homogeneity of the ingroup is tested” (1998, 598). Identity is thus constructed in interaction, which means that out of a whole host of potential identity features, those features become salient which permit a differentiation of the ‘self’ from the significant ‘other’, which is understood as “another nation or ethnic group that is territorially close to, or indeed within, the national community and threatens, or rather is perceived to threaten, its ethnic and/or cultural purity and/or its independence”. The significant ‘other’ can exist either as internal other (belonging to the same polity as the in-group) or as external (those that from a different political unit) (Triandafyllidou, 1998, 598-600)².

One last consequence of this process of selection of the significant ‘other’ gives the focus of this paper. As national identity is socially constructed and subjected to variation and change depending on historical, social and political contexts, then the significant ‘other’ is, itself, dependent on these same aspects, and

² For a more detailed classification of the internal and external others, see Triandafyllidou, 1998, 600-603.

the conflict between the in-group and the out-group is open to transformations (Triandafyllidou, 1998, 600).

Nationalism, however, regards identity as fixed and homogeneous, which, in turn, should suggest that both the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ are eternal values, not open to alterations. What this means is that the conflict between the fact that the nation is experienced (fixed) and that it is socially constructed (subject to change) is ‘resolved’ by nationalism in terms of the ‘other’, by incorporating new ‘others’ as reference points for defining the ‘us’. As a result, within the same nationalist discourse, there might exist several groups, which are simultaneously perceived as significant others. The importance of one group or more for the process of self-definition at any one time can increase or decrease depending on social, political, economic circumstances, etc. A significant ‘other’ that loses its importance for a period of time could still exist latently, and can be revived if there is a change in conditions that require its presence, or could be permanently discarded. The inherent inconsistencies of the nationalist discourse in terms of ‘self’ and ‘otherness’ do not pose problems for the ideology itself, as the claims of homogeneity and timelessness of national identity have axiomatic values. The volatility of these categories, however, casts doubts over their empirical utility. For example, Triandafyllidou’s claim that there can be only a single significant ‘other’ at any one time assumes implicitly that national identity has a homogenous character. Instead, different internal groups can act as ‘others’ and exert equal pressures for different segments of the nation. Who constitutes the ‘them’ can vary according to factors such as those groups’ localised density in geographical areas within the national territory. Equally, external ‘others’ can co-exist simultaneously. It is conceivable that equally important criteria in the process of differentiation from other groups (and of concomitant self-definition) can point to different others.

2. Dominant and dominated: nationalism and centre-periphery relations

In the analysis of national identity formation, the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’ point to an equally contentious paradigm: that of centre/core and margin/periphery relations, which examines “relations between an economically developed, politically powerful, and cultural self-confident core and a less developed, politically weaker and culturally fragmented periphery” (Wellhofer, 1988, 281).

Much of the writing on nationalism refers to such an uneven relationship in the formation of nations and nationalism. A common way of classifying European nationalism is to divide it along politico-historical lines, into East European and West European nationalism, starting from the premise that nationalism in these two areas developed differently in content and time (Kohn, 1945; Sugar and Lederer, 1969). Even in classifications that move away from the implicit geographic overtones of the West/East dichotomy (such as Political/Cultural, Civic/Ethnic, Liberal/Illiberal etc.), there is the general assumption of a Western European dominance of national identity construction, in which Eastern European nationalism emulated the Western model, albeit with significant changes. Anthony D. Smith sees the birth of nationalism in Eastern Europe as a reaction to the Western pattern, which was based

on civic rights and political understanding of membership in the nation. The newly created model “challenged the dominance of the Western model and added significant new elements, more attuned to the very different circumstances and trajectories of non-Western communities” (Smith, 1991, p.11).

Such a differentiation between Western Europe and Eastern Europe in terms of the emergence of national identity and in terms of the features it acquired emphasises a “set of value-laden assumptions that underpin the use of the concepts of backwardness (Plamenatz), inferiority (Kohn) and incompleteness (Gellner)” (Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 98). The portrayal of the West as a dominant, advanced centre that propagates new ideas to backward, inferior and marginal (in terms of political power and homogeneity of culture if not geographically) areas of Europe and the world denotes a “profoundly ethnocentric sense of Western superiority” (Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 98).

The centre-margin paradigm, in which the Western vs. Eastern nationalism dichotomy fits, is not a new mode for expressing the ‘self’ in relation to an external ‘other’. It stems from the “Roman and Greek hostility towards the barbarian others from the East, to the schism in Christianity between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism, to Christianity’s struggle with Islam, and to the contempt of some Enlightenment thinkers for the East” (Davies 1997, in Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 98). From Roman superiority against barbarian savagery to that of historic nations (state-framed) against inferior non-historic (stateless) according to Hegel (a dichotomy taken up by Marx and Engels later on), the centre-margin paradigm is deeply embedded in Western scholarship in relations that were established long ago. The “so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe’s contact and self-comparison with other, non-western, societies (the Rest)” (Hall, 1992, 278).

Adopting an approach focusing on categories such as ‘centre’ and ‘margin’ is problematic in many respects. First, it assumes implicitly orientalist³ overtones, as it reflects the core’s perception and construction of reality, using the framework of a self-centred system of reference: the centre “embodies the sacred values, beliefs and symbols through which the social order is constructed” while the periphery “receives constructs from the centre and acts accordingly” (Avraham and First, 2006, 72). This type of orientalist discourse also implies a strange overlapping of categories: the self-centred framework constructs the centre as ‘self’ and the periphery as ‘other’. The two paradigms (self/other and centre/margin) are related, and the dynamic relationship between them reflects varying degrees of interdependence, but one does not replace the other. The ‘self’ can be constructed either as the centre or as the margin, and its ‘other’ is very much dependent on the position of the ‘self’. Even if one considers the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ as fixed categories, processes of self-identification and othering occur both in the case of the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’. One can go as far as to say that national identity in

³ See *Orientalism*, Edward Said’s study on the difference between East/Orient as a geographical, historical and cultural reality, and Orientalism which reflects the Western perception and construction of this reality, as an absolute ‘other’, imagined using the framework of a self-centred system of reference.

Eastern Europe has developed as a result of modelling upon Western revolutionary ideas imported and popularised by and between an enlightened nobility, relatively small in number (Berend, 2003, 33), or of *ressentiment*, which entails a “transformation of the value scale in a way which denigrates the originally supreme values [while] the new system of values that emerges is necessarily influenced by the one to which it is the reaction” (Greenfeld, 1992, 16). Although the West in this case functions as the core that exports values to the periphery (Eastern Europe), the self-other paradigm operates separately in this context. In constructing and reinforcing national identity, Western Europe and Eastern Europe are constructed as ‘self’ and ‘other’ respectively, depending on what the reference point is (Western Europe or Eastern Europe).

The second issue has to do with the reification of the categories. Economic, political or cultural backwardness of the margin in comparison to the centre forms the basis of the centre-periphery relations. However, as in the case of the self/other paradigm, the relationship between centre and margin is historically contingent, and thus, subject to variations.

Deriving from this potential for endless variation of the relationship between cores and peripheries is the claim that cores and peripheries operate under rather blurry boundaries. In analysing the role of media in constructing periphery as the ‘other’, Avraham and First acknowledge the fact that because of the very ambiguous nature of boundaries, there is a tendency in current research to question the value of dichotomous categories such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ by emphasising their hybrid nature. Nevertheless, the authors maintain that the paradigm is useful in order to examine representations of ‘otherness’, as long as boundaries are clearly defined (Avraham and First, 2006, 73).

However, whereas the differences between core and periphery are more or less clearly outlined, there is less certainty on how cores and peripheries are to be delimited. Cores are generally represented as advantaged, while peripheries are disadvantaged. Other features of the two are usually grouped in opposed pairs: high technology, cultural domination, political power for cores and low technology, cultural marginality, lack of distinctive institutions, parochialism for peripheries (Wellhofer, 1988, 283-284). The problem lies in the fact that cores and peripheries are conceptualised as homogenous, distinct and limited entities engaged in a relationship, and mutually defining and assessing themselves on the basis of that relationship. There is an assumption here of homogeneity and unity which is hardly reflected by reality, as Hall observes in the case of the idea of ‘the West’, which contains internal differences as well as attitudes towards external others (Hall, 1992, 279).

By way of conclusion

The debates surrounding the self/other and centre/periphery paradigms, point ultimately to the following question: are they still useful as analytical categories in contemporary world?

Nationalist discourse is still formulated in terms of similarity with/difference from and dominance of/dependence to referential points. It could be argued that,

despite being problematic, the two paradigms could help to locate – in a case study approach – patterns of framing and re-framing of national identity discourse, as long as one has clearly in mind the fact that these categories are subjectively constructed, historically conditional, and subject to change. Otherwise there is always the danger of reification and of falling into the trap of an orientalising type of discourse.

Still, even this limited use can be further questioned by developments in world politics, economy and culture. There is a vast literature on globalization, which reinforces the idea that people not only have multiple identities in the contemporary world, but that they have a mixture of identities which are fluid, variable and changeable. The reality of globalization is multifaceted, and – as Robertson (1995, 27) points out – interpretations should transcend the debate about homogeneity versus heterogeneity and should focus on analysing ways in which universalistic and particularistic tendencies are mutually implicative. There is a great interplay between the global and the local, with evidence of both homogenization of communication and various aspects of consumption as well as a quest for local authenticity⁴ (Spencer and Wollman, 2002, 162).

As a result of these linked processes, the relationship between what the central/mainstream and the margin/peripheral/fringe has transformed dramatically, so that the borders between the two and between who is the ‘in-group’ and who is the ‘out-group’ have been rendered meaningless⁵. As for the future of these categories, one can summarise their usefulness in Appadurai’s words: “The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models” (1999, 221).

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⁴ As an illustration of the symbiotic relationship between global and local, Spencer and Wollman (2002, 162) quoting Robert Holton, point to the ubiquity of McDonalds on the one hand, and on the local variability of McDonalds food (with salads in France and with regulations to ensure kosher food in Israel).

⁵ Contemporary art, for example, illustrates quite well the transgression of boundaries that makes notions such as ‘mainstream’ and ‘fringe’ completely void of content: what is generally considered vandalism – graffiti – has now moved comfortably into the realm of mainstream art, as the case of the so-called ‘art terrorist’ Banksy demonstrates. The fact that the works of an elusive ‘guerrilla artist’ have been sold by the prestigious auction house Sotheby’s for over £100,000, shows that the differences between what is regarded as vandalism and as art are more than hazy. Ironically, the process of boundary transgression between ‘vandalism’ and ‘art’ has gone full circle: as recently as 2007, two men were convicted of criminal damage in Brighton for painting over one of Banksy’s pieces of graffiti depicting two kissing policemen (Argus, Friday January 12, 2007).

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Résumé

Les écrits traitant du nationalisme sont à la fois variés et contradictoires. Cependant, un trait commun ressort de la plupart des études, à savoir une tendance à aborder les questions de l'émergence et du développement du nationalisme et de l'identité nationale d'une manière dichotomique qui explique ces choses-là en termes de catégories opposées. Cette étude se concentre sur deux exemples de ce genre: l'un qui explore l'établissement des identités nationales en faisant appel au paradigme du soi et de l'autre ; et, par contre, l'autre qui évalue les relations entre différents nationalismes et groupes nationaux ayant recours au paradigme du centre et de la périphérie. Le but est d'étudier comment ces paradigmes sont construits, de s'interroger sur les questions de définition et d'usage qu'ils soulèvent, et de juger leur pertinence dans le contexte des transformations subies par la politique mondiale d'aujourd'hui.