CANADIAN DIVERSITY CANADIENNE

Deconstructing and accommodating national identities

National identity is a difficult object of analysis for the social sciences. Since the 1980s a number of prominent theorists have attempted to deconstruct this object. They have argued that we need to understand nations as "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) and that "it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round." (Gellner 1983) More recently, some have criticized "methodological nationalism" in the social sciences. This shows in the tendency to take nationally bounded societies "as the naturally given entities to study" (Glick-Schiller and Wimmer 2003), or in hidden assumptions that ethnic and national categories correspond to "internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis." (Brubaker 2002) Trapped in the pitfalls of essentialism, reification and 'groupism', even critical social science may unintentionally reinforce nationalist ideology. Instead of studying national identity as a stable property of individuals or groups, we should focus on 'nationness' as a contingent event, something that happens in moments of political mobilization, but that may also subside thereafter.

These are important warning signs and they ought to be taken seriously by anybody who wants to analyze rather than promote national identities. Most contributions in this magazine are written in this spirit. A few focus explicitly on debunking certain national identity myths, for example by arguing that in order to explain the trend towards more inclusive citizenship regimes in western democracies we must abandon the idea that such regimes express different kinds of national identity (Joppke). Other authors highlight the fluidity of minority identities and the role of political elites in defining the identities of groups they then claim to represent.

Yet deconstructing the concept of national identity is not sufficient, since it is not a mere chimera but a powerful tool for constructing political communities and rallying individuals behind political banners. In order to understand how national identities operate and why they are so pervasive in contemporary societies, we need to raise four different questions. The first one is about structural causes that emerge from general features of modern societies, rather than from particular constellations of forces in a certain country and historical period. Among these causes we can list: an industrial division of labour, a modern state bureaucracy, the international state system, and the legitimation of political rule through popular sovereignty rather than superior force or divine grace. The second question is about specific incentives and resources for the formation of cultural and political elites who are capable of launching a nation-building project and about the building materials available to them (homeland territories, ethnic identities, historical narratives). The third question is about political action. We need to study strategies used by such elites in order to promote the identification of potential constituents with a national project and the result of their efforts. The final question concerns the entrenchment of national identities in public institutions. These include public education systems and official state symbols, but also less visible ways in which governments structure social life so that national identities are taken for granted as an ever-present background even when they are not mobilized. Most importantly, the boundaries of nearly all modern states – their territorial borders and distinctions between citizens and aliens – have historically been associated with particular nation-building projects and (as Richard Day points out) the international state system itself perpetuates national identities by dividing humanity into relatively stable compartments.

It is important to be aware that nation-building projects can fail in many different ways. First, the general causes and conditions listed above create obstacles for forging national identities among territorially dispersed groups and aboriginal peoples, or among linguistically heterogeneous groups united by a religious creed. Second, some potential projects may never materialize because the group is so marginalized that it can't produce a nation-building elite, or, inversely, because a minority intelligentsia accepts assimilation as the price for cooptation into a dominant elite. Third, in case of successful mobilization, political actions may backfire or lead to lasting defeat that leaves minorities with assimilation or mass emigration as the only options. Finally, even fully institutionalized national identities are exposed to challenge and change. Since the 1960s Canada and several Western European states have witnessed a resurgence of minority nationalism. This has transformed nation-states into multinational ones that recognize distinct linguistic groups as constitutive political communities within a larger polity.

This brings me to a second response to the sociological critique of national identity. After deconstructing the concept and reconstructing how particular national identities have been forged, we are still left with the practical question how to deal with them politically. This question arises sharply whenever there is a mismatch between established political boundaries and politically mobilized national identities. There are three challenges of this kind that call for quite different political answers.

The first challenge is that of cultural diversity raised by minorities that experience discrimination because of their

skin colour, language, religious practices, cultural traditions, sexual orientation, or ways of life. Claims raised on behalf of such minorities vary widely. Certain religious groups desire a social space for themselves where they can exist as separate communities with little contact with the wider society. Most cultural minorities, however, demand some form of recognition or support from the wider society through antidiscrimination policies, special exemptions for religious practices (such as *kosher* and *halal* slaughtering that conflicts with animal protection laws), public support for minority languages, or symbolic recognition in public speeches, celebrations and educational curricula. All of these demands are directed against overt or hidden bias in the construction of a homogeneous national identity that ignores diversity in the society. In most cases, this is a challenge that comes from within. It is a call for transforming a given national identity rather than a battle between rival projects of nation-building.

This battle is at the core of demands for self-determination or political autonomy raised on behalf of stateless nations, national minorities, and indigenous peoples. Such claims may be triggered by persistent socio-economic discrimination, political oppression or cultural disadvantage, but the primary goal of mobilization is not to remove obstacles for freedom and equality within a shared national identity. Instead, this second challenge concerns the boundaries of the political community itself. It aims at redrawing international or internal state borders so that the group in question can set up its own independent state, join a neighbouring kin-state, or achieve self-government within a distinct part of the present state territory. It is important to understand the genuinely political nature of such projects. If the goal of nationalist struggle were merely to protect a distinct language or culture, then a generous public recognition of such diversity, e.g. through official multilingualism in public institutions combined with regional education systems in the minority language, might suffice to demobilize a national identity. However, in nationalist mobilizations, cultural preservation serves more often as a means for marking the boundaries of a national territory and population, whereas political power exercised through autonomous institutions of government is the ultimate goal.

There is a third rubric under which we can group together a range of different phenomena that challenge national boundaries from outside or above rather than from inside. These include supranational political integration in the European Union, where every move to shift core elements of sovereignty towards European institutions triggers political mobilizations of dominant national identities in the member states. Another relevant phenomenon is political transnationalism among migrants who engage themselves actively in their sending countries' political developments, or mobilize a diaspora dispersed across several countries in support for a homeland cause (Lorenzkowski). Even those who are not politically active often combine significant social ties and legal rights in two countries. An increasing number also hold multiple citizenships. Finally, there is the case of native minorities that are not of recent immigrant origin, but whose history links them to external kin-states that may provide cultural support, admit them freely to their territory and citizenship, or mobilize them politically in their homeland. This latter constellation is frequently found in Central and Eastern Europe.

All three challenges raise difficult questions when minority claims conflict with basic norms of liberal democracy, e.g. how to reconcile religious toleration with gender equality, or how to defend the territorial integrity of multinational democracies faced with a threat of secession. But they also raise the question whether these states have already done enough to accommodate justified minority demands for equal opportunities, cultural recognition, political autonomy or transnational citizenship. This is not only a moral question, but also a political one: how can democratic majorities be persuaded to endorse minority rights?

The essays in this magazine show a mixed record. Canada is in many ways a model case whose official multiculturalism has provided a framework for addressing nearly all the issues raised above. Yet, as Bernier, Bowlby, Tolley and Rummens argue, this model is still contested and evolving, and, as Li and Teo demonstrate, it may not yet have succeeded in overcoming a racialized framework that blocks upward mobility for some groups. Collins' somber portrait of the recent Australian backlash against asylum seekers and multiculturalism in general illustrates the dangers of reversal. Pfaff-Czarnecka and Martiniello show the difficulties of fitting the new diversity emerging from immigration into complex models of accommodating traditional cleavages in Western European societies. And Guzina's Balkan model of nation-building illustrates how demands for political autonomy meet fierce opposition in contexts where minorities are perceived as threats to national unity and security.

In spite of all these sceptical voices, there is reason for cautious optimism. The general trend in democratic states may not yet be towards a postnational constellation where national identities are no longer politically relevant, but towards 'multicultural nationhood' (Oberoi) – a transformation of national identities in response to the challenges of diversity.

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