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Two Theories of Nationalism

Introduction

Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* have long provided the theoretical foundations upon which scholars could draw to challenge the primordialist explanations of the rise of nation-states and nationalism. Indeed, the challenge has largely been a successful one—many have come to accept the nation as a strictly modern phenomenon, whereas few would dare to question the claim that the nation has a fictive character. However, the attention accorded to these theoretical implications, which both Gellner and Anderson arrive at in their analyses, has done much to overshadow key differences in their approaches. These differences, no matter how subtle, deserve to be examined in order to yield a deeper, and perhaps a more precise, understanding of the factors which contribute to the emergence and dominance of nation-states and nationalism. In this paper, I identify three crucial differences between Gellner and Anderson which are located in their understanding of (i) the forces which hinder the historical formation of nationalism, (ii) the mechanisms of change and (iii) the role of the state, all of which are interrelated. For Gellner, nationalism is a byproduct of specific transformations in the division of labor which not only mark a decisive structural shift from agricultural to industrial society but also, for the first time in history, requires the state to take an active role in creating a universal culture through institutions of socialization. For Anderson, on the other hand, nationalism emerges through the development of print capitalism—which disrupts the dominance of religious, dynastic and cosmological conceptions of the world—and spreads through a whole host of technological apparatuses and innovations over which the state does not always exercise complete control. These analytical differences are consequential for how we, as scholars, understand their theories and, by extension, how we apply these theories to explaining

the changes, variations and continuities of nationalism in other contexts beyond those covered in their works.

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I begin by examining what Gellner and Anderson perceive to be the forces which precluded the emergence of nationalism prior to the modern era. I then proceed to examining Gellner's analysis of industrialism in relation to Anderson's analysis of print capitalism as the engine which, according to the two scholars, ushers in an era of nationalism. Finally, I highlight the ways in which the state enters into their analyses of nationalism. Specifically, I argue that Anderson's framework offers greater analytical leverages because it accounts for how nations and nationalism may develop in response to technological change as well as for how it may be transmitted as models through conscious borrowing. This enables Anderson to adapt his explanatory framework to a great variety of cases of nationalism without a loss of theoretical coherence. On the other hand, I argue that Gellner's failure to treat forces behind nationalism as analytically separate from the state renders his framework less useful for understanding how nationalism may be subverted or perpetuated by purposeful human actors or social groups situated outside the state.

What Hinders Nationalism?

The objective of this paper, as highlighted above, is to uncover crucial analytical differences between the frameworks offered by Gellner and Anderson in order to draw explicit and insightful comparisons conducive for understanding how nationalism operates. This is not to deny, of course, that there are significant overlaps between their theories, for instance in their treatment of the nation as a social construction. The argument being advanced in this paper is simply that such overlaps often conceal important contradictions. It is critical that we examine

these contradictions in detail if our aim is to paint a more accurate picture of how Gellner and Anderson, in their original intentions, theorize the rise of nation-states and nationalism. This would not only enable us to assess the validity of their theories in relation to each other but also contribute to a more complete understanding of how and when their theories apply or do not apply.

Perhaps, the most obvious overlap between the two seminal thinkers lies in their assertion that the nation is a relatively modern phenomenon. Gellner and Anderson would likely agree that in premodern societies certain conditions were not in place or not yet ripe for the emergence of nationalism. However, they have very different ideas in mind as to what these 'conditions' were. For Gellner, nationalism, which he defines as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent," could not have developed in agrarian society because the division of labor in such society does not, in fact cannot, generate the conditions which are necessary for such congruence (1). First, agrarian society is marked by "a great stress on cultural differentiation rather than on homogeneity" which, according to Gellner, serves to provide much stability to the system, because "the more differentiated in style of all kinds other various strata are, the less friction and ambiguity there will be between them" (10). Second, such differentiation, Gellner argues, "furthers the interests of the privileged and the power-holders" and constitutes an arrangement which is "feasible, and indeed easy" to implement (11). In other words, neither the cultural nor power configurations in an agrarian society is conducive to the development of "a universalized clerisy and a homogenized culture with centrally imposed norms, fortified by writing," which Gellner sees as central to nationalism (17). These configurations needed a radical transformation which, for Gellner, eventually arrived in the form of industrialization.

Anderson, on the other hand, takes a very different approach in his attempt to make sense of why pre-modern societies may not provide the seeds of nationalism. Having defined the nation

as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign," Anderson is clearly concerned with developing an explanation for the absence of such imagining prior to the modern era (6). Rather than attending to the changing configurations of culture and power as implied by the form and structure of the polity and its division of labor, as Gellner does, Anderson directs his attention to the specific ways in which prior cultural systems—religious, dynastic and cosmological conceptions of the world—declined and "lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds," paving the way for national imaginings (36). First, religious conceptions, according to Anderson, perpetuated the idea that "ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth language" (14). Second, dynastic conceptions produced a worldview in which sovereignty is derived not from the population but from kingship which "organizes everything around a high centre" (19). Both of these conceptions thus tend to promote deeply "centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal" understanding of the world which Anderson associates with nationalism. Third, cosmological conceptions prevented the development of "homogeneous, empty time" which is crucial for historical, perhaps "calendrical" ways in which human beings inhabit time. In other words, it is the very subjective experience of temporality that needs to be altered before nationalism or any acts of national imagining could emerge:

> The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

For Anderson, therefore, religious, dynastic, and cosmological conceptions were the forces which hinder or altogether prevented nationalism from taking shape. This provides a sharp contrast with Gellner who identifies the structure of agricultural polity and its division of labor as the culprit.

This analytical distinction is important because they tell us about what Anderson and Gellner perceive to be the nature and scope of the factors that prevented nationalism from blooming. Gellner's structural-functionalist framework stresses an "internal" narrative in which internal factors within a bounded system—cultural and power configurations conceived in a domestic sense—impeded the development of nationalism. On other hand, Anderson's framework assumes freely floating religious, dynastic and cosmological conceptions, internal as well as external to societies. These forces are not fully bounded by the structure of the polity, yet they ran counter to the development of national imaginings. This distinction, I argue, gives rise to radically different formulations of the actual mechanisms of change.

Mechanisms of Change: Industrialism versus Print Capitalism

The second analytical difference, related to the first, lies in what Gellner and Anderson identify as the essential ingredient to the emergence of nationalism. For Gellner, this ingredient is unique to the transition from agarian to industrial society: industrialism. Industrialization generates an ever-growing, ever-changing society to the extent that previous stratifications and inequalities could not be stabilized by rigidly demarcated social and cultural boundaries. According to Gellner, this world of perpetual growth is qualitatively different from its previous incarnation:

> The conception of the world as homogeneous, subject to systematic, indiscriminate laws, and as open to interminable exploration offered endless possibilities of new combinations of means with no firm prior expectations and limits: no possibilities would be barred, and in the end nothing but evidence would decide how things were, and how they could be combined to secure desired effects. This was a totally new vision. The old worlds were, on the one hand, each of then, a cosmos: purposive, hierarchical, 'meaningful'; and on the other hand, not quite unified, consisting of subworlds each with its own idiom and logic, not subsumable under a single overall orderliness. The new world was on the one hand morally inert, and on the other, unitary. (23)

Gellner's vision is strikingly consistent with Anderson's discussion of homogenous and empty time, yet the steps he takes to arrive at this vision is also strikingly different. These steps, logically

deduced perhaps, can be summarized as follows: industrialization necessitates not only an increasingly complex division of labor but also one that can change continuously to adapt to new, productive activities. This division of labor requires "generic training" which is the "least specialized" yet also "the most universally standardized" (27). It is through this process of training that a universal high culture and "written, impersonal, context-free, to-whom-it-may-concern type" language, which Gellner associates with nationalism, can emerge (35). In other words, "the kind of cultural homogeneity demanded by nationalism" (39) has emerged out of the process of industrialization itself. Notice that Gellner's emphasis on language, print language to be precise, is also shared by Anderson. For Anderson, however, what language contributes to is not cultural homogeneity per se, as he makes it clear that cultural differences are not swept away but perhaps are "serialized", "reclassified" or "categorized" according to some replicable, standardized criteria (on serialization as a concept, see p. 184). What print language does, for Anderson, is rather to enable the collective act of imagining the nation and this process is, to clarify the distinction between Anderson and Gellner, largely independent of the division of labor except the kind that gives rise to print capitalism.

To imagine oneself to be part of a community that is limited and sovereign is constitutive of nationalism, that is, in Anderson's perspective. This was not feasible, however, until the rise of print capitalism which Anderson perceives to be decisive in shaping human consciousness in ways that permit and authorize a particular ontological state, namely a secular, horizontal and historical mode of being. Print capitalism, according to Anderson, created a mass readership and endowed people who have never met one another the capacity to become aware of one another: "these fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (44). Print capitalism also

produces history by giving "a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (44). Lastly, print capitalism imbues print language with a particular cultural significance which serves to subjugate other languages or to create a hierarchy among them. Print language was, in other words, "elevated to a new politico-cultural eminence" (45). Print capitalism thus plays a critical role as the driver of nationalism in Anderson's theoretical formulation.

It is, at this point, necessary to discuss how the theoretical distinction between industrialism and print capitalism matter for our understanding of the causes of nationalism. Industrialism, on the one hand, become important in Gellner's analysis because it demands generic training and the development of modern education system which are seen to be crucial for the universalization of high culture. Print capitalism, on the other hand, is significant for Anderson in that it produces a mass readership with the ability to engage in the collective ritual of imagining the nation. It is clear that the two theorized engines of nationalism may have complementary effects. Industrialism spurs growth in education, making mass literacy possible. Print capitalism increases the distribution and circulation of books, making mass education possible. Notice, however, that the causal chain involving industrialism operates primarily through the state, whereas the causal chain involving print capitalism rely primarily on the market. In other words, in Gellner's formulation, the state necessarily precedes the development of nationalism. In fact, Gellner makes this clear:

> nationalism emerges only in milieux in which the existence of the state is already very much taken for granted. The existence of politically centralized units, and of a moral-political climate in which such centralized units are taken for granted and are treated as normative, is a necessary though by no means a sufficient condition of nationalism (4).

This is less clear for Anderson, however, who relies on a technological rather than a statist understanding of the mechanisms that could potentially give rise to nationalism. The salience of print capitalism may be reinforced or regulated through interventions of the state in the markets,

but print capitalism itself does not necessarily have to originate from the state. The same logic applies to other technologies capable of evoking collective and national consciousness such as logos, maps, census and the museum, although one could argue that these technologies are more likely to be manipulated by state elites and less likely to constitute a "popular" basis for imagining the nation. For Anderson, then, the type of nationalism that Gellner envisions in his analysis appears to be merely one form of nationalism among others—that of official nationalism.

The Role of the State

As our discussion above shows, Gellner and Anderson differ not only in their understanding of what impedes and what drives nationalism but also in their assumptions and assertions about the role that the state plays vis-à-vis nationalism. For Gellner, the state is the only organizational entity capable of carrying out the universalization of high culture through the means of education. Gellner writes,

> Exo-socialization, the production and reproduction of men outside the local intimate unit, is now the norm, and must be so. The imperative of exo-socialization is the main clue to why state and culture must now be linked, whereas in the past their connection was thin, fortuitous, varied, loose, and often minimal. (38)

The state, one peculiar to industrial society, is therefore an indispensable element in Gellner's theory. Without the state, there can be no supply-side of the equation, that is, no means of instituting generic and standardized training on a large scale. Achieving "the monopoly of legitimate education" thus becomes the prerequisite to the emergence of nationalism (34). This theoretical formulation is flawed for many reasons. First, it fails to account for the formation of nationalism in societies in which the state capacity to carry out mass education is lacking or absent altogether. This theoretical shortcoming, perhaps, led Gellner to trace the historical origin of nationalism to the European context, where the disciplinary, socialization and education functions of the state were already in place, overlooking creole states which Anderson perceives to be the

original sites of nationalism. Worse still, Gellner's theory may in addition fail to account for the rise of nationalism in societies in which large segments of the population belong to what Gellner calls agrarian society. Positing not only the state but also industrialism as necessary for the rise of nationalism leaves Gellner's theoretical formulation vulnerable to such critiques. Anderson's theoretical formulation, on the other hand, rests on a different foundation and is therefore less susceptible to the same critique.

Lastly, it may be difficult to explain any convergence or congruence in the form of nations and nationalism from Gellner's standpoint since he offers no analytical tool for developing such explanations—if nationalism in two contexts happen to look alike, it must be because they share essentially the same state form and division of labor. Indeed, Gellner refrains from making such explanations because he is primarily concerned with the original instance of nationalism. He is convinced that "we can never repeat the original event, which was perpetrated by men who knew not what they did, an unawareness which was of the very essence of the event" (19). This contrasts with Anderson who concentrates not only on "the original event" but also on the ways in which this "original event" gives rise to other possible imitations of nationalism, that is, the spread of nationalism. "Once there," Anderson writes, "they could become formal models to be imitated, and, where expedient, consciously exploited in a Machiavellian spirit" (45). Elsewhere, he writes,

> once it had occurred it entered the accumulating memory of print…Like a vast shapeless rock worn to a rounder boulder by countless drops of water, the experience was shaped by millions of printed words into a concept on the printed page, and in due course, into a model (80).

Anderson thus understands not only that nationalism could be imitated but also that it may take on a life of its own after the original moment. In other words, nationalism becomes free to diverge from its original blueprint in the sense that it can be manifested through other technologies beyond print. However, nationalism still follows the same blueprint in the sense that it can only operate

through the participation of human actors in the collective act of conjuring the image of the nation—what changes case by case are the technologies, not the involvement of purposeful actors which is always required by nationalism. The state, as such, enters into Anderson's analysis precisely at this juncture; it can radically alter the blueprint of nationalism under the banner of "official nationalism" to preserve the legitimacy of kingship or to perpetuate existing class, racial, ethnic or cultural differences in society in deeply problematic ways. Or, in the case of "popular nationalism", non-state actors may be heavily involved in such process, relying on technological resources which, far from being monopolized by the state, provide opportunities for mobilizing national symbols on a large scale. In this way, Anderson leaves room for the agency of social actors whereas Gellner insists on the state as the only actor in the rise of nationalism. This difference in their understanding of human agency, perhaps, led Anderson to formulate the following critique: "Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and creation'" (6).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have highlighted three important distinctions between Gellner and Anderson with regards to their theoretical explanations of nationalism: the factors which impeded the emergence of nationalism, the driver of nationalism and the role of the state. These divergences make clear that Gellner and Anderson have taken fundamentally different analytical steps in order to explain nationalism as a phenomenon. They also reveal, in quite striking ways, that one theory has greater analytical leverages than the other: Anderson's theory, without resorting to structural-functionalist explanations based on the form of division of labor and the state, is more suitable to

analyzing a wider range of cases of nationalism. It is also better equipped to address questions pertaining to how nationalism can change, vary and persist as well as how purposeful actors, state or non-state, can take part in such processes. It remains a puzzle, however, as to why Gellner and Anderson developed diverging theoretical explanations for the same phenomenon. One simple answer is that they were not looking at the same phenomenon to begin with, though such answer may not be entirely satisfactory given the palpable overlaps between the two theories.

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