



# **NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL THEORY**

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*Gerard Delanty and Patrick O'Mahony*

# Nationalism and Social Theory

Modernity and the Recalcitrance  
of the Nation

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# Nationalism and Social Theory

**BSA***New Horizons in Sociology*

The British Sociological Association is publishing a series of books to review the state of the discipline at the beginning of the millennium. *New Horizons in Sociology* also seeks to locate the contribution of British scholarship to the wider development of sociology. Sociology is taught in all the major institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom as well as throughout North America and the Europe of the former western bloc. Sociology is now establishing itself in the former eastern bloc. But it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that sociology moved from the fringes of UK academic life into the mainstream. British sociology has also provided a home for movements that have renewed and challenged the discipline; the revival of academic Marxism, the renaissance in feminist theory, the rise of cultural studies, for example. Some of these developments have become sub-disciplines whilst yet others have challenged the very basis of the sociological enterprise. Each has left their mark. Now therefore is a good time both to take stock and to scan the horizon, looking back and looking forward.

Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels

*Samuel Johnson [1775]*

A nation is a group of persons united by a common error about their ancestry and a common dislike of their neighbours

*Karl Deutsch [1969]*

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## introduction

It has often been repeated in recent scholarship that the study of nationalism had been neglected in the social sciences until the last 20 years or so. This viewpoint is coupled with the contention that the social sciences as theoretically oriented and practically applied to that point in time were not really equipped for the task of analysing nationalism. Perhaps, even more fundamentally, given their focus on other dimensions of social life assumed to have greater centrality to the study of social order, such as the differentiation of institutions or the interplay of social classes, it began to look in the eyes of many critics that the social sciences were not even equipped to notice such phenomena.

On the surface, this does indeed seem an extraordinary state of affairs. It could hardly be denied that the other objects of theory and research that social and political theorists did consider after World War Two were profoundly influenced by their embedding in national institutional orders and that these very orders themselves were susceptible to immense turbulence affecting every aspect of social life. A mere glance backwards at what were then very recent events, when the world was destroyed and reshaped by nationalism would have seemed to offer incontrovertible evidence of its centrality to social and political life.

Even though the circumstances of the First World War did make Emile Durkheim and Max Weber adopt patriotic stances on particular issues, they never incorporated nationalism into their respective theories of modernity. In the case of Weber, his concern with disenchantment as the central logic in European modernity led him to give only limited attention to forms of enchantment, like nationalism, that modernity itself creates. Aside from charisma there is little enchantment in the modern rationalization of life conduct. Durkheim, who was attentive to the powerful role of collective representations in modern society, did not address nationalism, believing that a civic morality based on citizenship would eventually become the dominant form of solidarity in modernity. He believed that the cosmopolitanism of Europe would override any narrow forms of collective identity, and that something like a European identity would emerge. To an extent, Parsons gave greater recognition to nationalism in the making of modernity. However, given the presuppositions of structural functionalism, he failed to recognize the tendency of nationalism to cause disintegration, seeing it as largely integrative and subordinate to what he called the

'societal community'. It remained a fundamental assumption of Parsonian structural functionalism that societal differentiation was held in check by integrative structures, such as culture. That culture might be anarchic rather than a force of stability was rarely questioned in modern social and political thought from Matthew Arnold through Durkheim and Weber to Parsons.

It would take a full length study in itself to understand how it was that social and political theory did not take its departure pessimistically from the twentieth-century experience of war but instead proceeded optimistically, at least in the mainstream version of modernization theory, from the apparent stability of the post-war order.<sup>1</sup> Without doubt this owed much to the fact that while the world wars of the twentieth century had been traumatic for all participants, and convulsed the entire world, there were, in the end, victors and losers. Not simply were there victors and losers but unprecedented moral blame could be attached to the losers for their actions of genocide. The victors, as theorized by modernization theory, saw the results of war as the triumph of their tolerant liberal and democratic civilization. This civilization was also organized into nations but these nations stood for greater civilizational values than those of nationality itself. The nation form could be seen as contingent, the values that some nations carried as enduring and fated to succeed on a global stage. The assumption, thus, was that nationalism was subordinated to the universalistic normative order of western civilization.

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This standpoint was clearly reflected in the research programmes that came to prominence in the post-war United States, which in this period took over a certain leadership in social and political theory. These research programmes, whether in the form of research on political culture, research on media effects or in the progressive contribution of institutional differentiation, embodied a profound confidence in the values and social practices present in the civil society of the United States and other English-speaking countries. In the tradition of political culture research, for example, the values found to be present in the 'civic cultures' of the United States and other English-speaking countries were considered to account for the survival of democracy in those countries, in contrast to the findings from those countries in which liberal democracy had either failed or had not yet been instituted. In pivotal aspects of the social transitions created by the dislocations of war, structural disadvantage and revolution, the prescriptions of this optimistic reading of the cultural achievements of civil society and the structural differentiation which it supported could be applied. Examples include the post-war transitions to democracy in Germany, Italy and Japan, the modernization of the underdeveloped world and, most recently, the 'catching-up' processes unleashed by the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe.



In seeking to understand these developments, it may well be important that the theoretical frameworks and research programmes of this period ‘solved’ certain problem complexes of the social sciences in ways that were consistent with the professional aspiration of social scientists in the United States and, increasingly, in Europe. These frameworks and programmes were built, firstly, on the separation of the enduring organizational principles of a civilized society from the contingency of historical dynamics. The social sciences were concerned with the results of historical processes that could be teleologically reconstructed to tell the dominant western narrative of institutional differentiation, and the corresponding intermeshing of cultures and roles, within the framework of democratic regulation by the people. The social sciences could proceed to refine this standard, which was viewed as the historically confirmed outcome of modernization processes.

They were built, second, on the idea that the social sciences were not acting normatively, in the sense of partisans in arguments, but only normatively in the sense of demonstrating the ‘functional’ necessity of what had to be the case if all societies were to become both modern and democratic. Although this was a very strong normative – almost ideological – programme indeed, as its critics never ceased to point out, modernization theory could still convince itself that such a normative stance was not inconsistent with the aspiration to value neutrality by the social sciences. It could do this ultimately by recourse to an evolutionary account of modernization as the single correct way to get the desired result of a civilized society. The legitimacy of the modernization account of structural-functional theory was not attributed by its theorists to a normatively held conviction about the good life; it claimed to rest rather on the capacity to identify evolutionary trends and to explore their ramifications for social systems. Such a functionally cloaked normative stance attributed a role to culture as the binding glue of institutional stability rather than the contradictory, dynamic and malleable medium of conceptualizing change. This had the effect of inhibiting the exploration of cultural dynamics. Frameworks such as Parsons’s pattern variables, documenting the transition from traditional to modern society, or Merton’s fourfold account of the culture of modern science, appear as extremely strong idealizations that document a normatively desirable state of affairs rather than provide an account of actual practices. Even though such frameworks did contain substantial truth and orienting value, they normatively pre-decided issues that remained empirically open.

Finally, the frameworks and programmes of modernization theory that had diminished the significance of historical process, and normatively short-circuited culture, almost inevitably also diminished the potential of agency as a transforming or creative capacity. In functionalist theory, agency is on the whole reduced to the fulfillment of roles

within a formal-rational institutional order. The institutional theoretic accomplishment of functionalism was used to delineate an almost stationary state theory of social order in which certain populations carry just those values and competencies required to maintain a complex and highly adapted institutional system that in turn incorporates just those preferences such a population would require. The assumptions about the stability of such a society render the question of action within systems of far greater relevance than actions that are intentionally or unintentionally oriented to changing them.

The chief academic rival of structural-functionalism from the late 1960s through to the early 1980s was a revitalized Marxism. In certain respects, the manifold theoretical currents of this academic movement did pose questions that lay beyond the framework of its rival. Its conception of class domination arising from control of the dominant form of structural differentiation, the division of labour, emphasized how the projects of collective actors mattered historically. The reciprocal concept of proletarian praxis also emphasized how system-transforming collective agency was possible and even explored how it worked or should work. Through its exploration of the relationship between ideology and social power, Marxism viewed norm building as a process of generalized deception and explored resistance to such assumed deception. In its theorization of historical change, the theory of the succession of modes of production, Marxism explored the dynamics of historical change, an exploration that could not assume some putative state of the 'end of history' since further transformation was required to reach the desired end state of a just, socialist order.

However much such Marxist theorizing normatively disagreed with the system-confirming assumptions of structural-functionalism, it shared with the latter theory tradition a set of assumptions that were highly restricting. Although it accorded more attention to the reciprocal dynamics of history and evolution, its account of historical processes could ultimately be led back to a theory of structural adaptation through the mode of production. Individual and collective agency were correspondingly subsumed within the functional roles required by this motor of historical development. The functional rendering of the categories of collective action – bourgeois elites and their proletarian opponents were alike derived from their position in the mode of production – did not lead, despite the dialectical ontology of Marxism, to an account of agency as a creative process.

The western Marxist tradition inherited the assumption of the 'withering away of the state', and this undertheorization of the state inevitably led to a neglect of national identity as well as of nationalism as a movement. For Marx, nationalism was the natural ally of socialism.<sup>2</sup> The events of the first half of the twentieth century were to show

that nationalism was by no means a secondary force. The national question often overshadowed the social question, the rights of the nation, social rights and historical justice, and social justice. Although figures such as Lukacs and the Frankfurt School writers responded to the reification of class consciousness by national consciousness with a cultural critique of ideology, a theory of nationalism was not the result. Instead the focus for critical theory shifted to the study of political authoritarianism and fascism. With the emergence of new social movements in the 1970s and the subsequent redirection of critical theory by Habermas in this period, nationalism did not receive much attention.

The result of all this was that nationalism tended to be a marginal part of mainstream sociological theory and political science.<sup>3</sup> As we have noted, Marxist sociology proved unable to offer a convincing account, and within mainstream sociology there were few signs of the recognition of nationalism as a potent force. In this, Raymond Aron, writing in 1968, was an exception: ‘During the final third of the 20th century, ethnic conflicts over social, political, or racial dominance – in turn or simultaneously – appear to be more likely than the continuation of the class struggle in the Marxist sense’ (Aron, 1968, p. 46). It is true, of course, that a significant body of literature in social and political science was written on nationalism by such authors as Ernst Gellner, Eugene Kamenka, Hans Kohn, Kenneth Minogue, Elie Kedourie, George Mosse, Hugh Seton-Watson and Anthony Smith, but nationalism was never central to the conception of modernity in social and political theory.<sup>4</sup> As is best reflected in the seminal work of Ernst Gellner, the theory of nationalism was, at most, part of a broader theory of liberal modernity, but one that did not call into question some of the central assumptions of modernization theory that made nationalism appear derivative.

Thus when nationalism became a major international issue in the wake of the fall of communism from 1989 onwards, the dominant theoretical approaches were redundant. In any case, a whole range of new theoretical movements had arisen in the course of the 1980s, ranging from postmodernism, to globalization theory, new social movement theory, rational choice, systems theory, constructivism, postcolonialism and feminism. The result of these theoretical innovations – which were broadly products of a new cultural and historical turn in the social sciences – was a revitalization of social theory, which was not dominated by a narrow sociological theory but embraced wider theoretical developments in the social sciences, history and philosophy. It is in this tradition of the social theory of modernity that this book is written. However, it was apparent that most of the major social theories of the 1980s and 1990s did not fully address nationalism. Despite the salience of the topic, very few of the major works on modernity have given much

attention to it, despite the relatively large literature on the subject. This may be in part explained by the fact that in classical social theory, nationalism was of secondary importance. Another explanation is that much of recent social and political theory has been heavily influenced by new social movement theory and does not address other anti-systemic movements. Nationalist movements have not been central to new social movement theory, which has mostly focused on the 'new' movements in western societies, such as the peace movements, civil society movements, the environmental and feminist movement. Nationalism, if it figured at all, tended to be regarded as a residue of the old regional nationalism.<sup>5</sup>

xiv As we argue in Chapter 1, neither classical nor modern social theory paid a great deal of attention to the role of violence in modernity. Aside from the theory of fascism in the early Frankfurt School, most of the major social theorists saw modernity in terms of the progressive institutionalization of modern structures of consciousness. Even though Parsons gave attention to German fascism and was actively involved in trying to get the United States into the war, it was never central to his sociological edifice. Of course, the violence of World War Two figured in the work of such figures as C.W. Mills and Alvin Gouldner, but never became central to post-war sociological theory which moved to different concerns. Habermas's theory of modernity in his major work, published in 1981, *Theory of Communicative Action*, while making some interesting suggestions about the formation of nationalism as a 'second generation ideology' of bourgeois society, clearly saw nationalism as subordinate and irrelevant to the new cosmopolitanism of such movements as feminism and the environmental movement (Habermas, 1987a, pp. 353–4). A theory of nationalism did not fit easily into a view of rosy modernity as a progressive unfolding of communicative rationalities. The central conflict in modernity was on the whole seen as one between instrumentalism and the defence of the life-world conducted by modern social movements. Nationalism thus did not figure in this construction of modernity, which tended not to question the nation-state as the geopolitical reference for the project of modernity.<sup>6</sup> It is of course clear that Habermas has modified his neglect of nationalism in recent works, such as the *Postnational Constellation* and the essays from the late 1980s on the historians' debate in Germany (Habermas, 1989c, 1994, 2001).

Anthony Giddens's writing on the nation-state and violence should also be mentioned in this context in an attempt to re-orientate sociology away from an exclusive concern with class power towards a focus on such issues as violence, militarism and surveillance in modernity (Giddens, 1985). However, Giddens's concern was more with the nation-state than with nationalism as such and cultural conceptions of nationhood did not figure. Nationalism in the more destructive sense of authoritarian

communitarianism has also become more central to the later work of Alain Touraine (Touraine, 1995). It is the merit of S.N. Eisenstadt and Johann Arnason that they have attempted to redirect the study of nationalism as part of a wider and globally oriented conception of modernity (Arnason, 1990; Eisenstadt, 1999b).<sup>7</sup>

The analysis offered in this book follows Arnason and Eisenstadt's lead in theorizing nationalism as central to modernity, and not as an aberrant, inexplicable force. In many ways nationalism expressed some of the most powerful forces within the modern project, in particular it was an expression of the preoccupation with radical freedom in modernity. This received its most powerful expression in the Jacobin idea that modernity can endlessly transform itself through the actions of political elites, but it was also present in the republican vision of the self-determination of civil society. In one way or another these concepts of politics shaped the political project of modern nationalism in all its faces, liberal, romanticist and authoritarian. But the triumph of nationalism was ultimately not secured by the force of radical freedom and the triumph of the political, but by the ability of nationalism to combine the political and the cultural project of modernity in everyday life. Nationalism was the most successful major political discourse in modernity in this regard. Liberalism and other political ideologies – with the exception of communism – never set out to change the nature of everyday life. No modern political ideology has succeeded, to the extent nationalism has, in bringing the projects of political elites into everyday life, an expression of the intimate relationship between the appeal of nationalist ideology and the legitimation of political power in modernity.

Although nationalism has played a major role in modernity and has to be counted as one of the dominant forms of realizing collective identity, the idea of national identity is sometimes overextended. The identity marker of nationality is used to distinguish who should enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to a particular state. But the existential centrality of nationality in this fundamental sense does not mean, as is often suggested, that nationality is automatically the overarching identity of civil society. In this book we do not see national identity as the fundamental collective identity of modern society and therefore we disagree with the positions of writers on nationalism, such as Liah Greenfeld (1992) and Anthony Smith (1995). Neither do we see nationalism as a coherent ideology that has persisted because of its persuasive appeal. Nationalism is rather to be conceived as a semantic space, that expresses through manifold discourses the many kinds of projects, identities, interests and ideologies that make it up.<sup>8</sup> In fact the history of nationalism can be viewed as one of the constant recombination of ever-shifting modalities of thinking and feeling about society. What has made it a recalcitrant force in modernity is the persistence of certain key problems. The most enduring of these are those of

conflicting expressions of nationhood and statehood. On the one side, the idea of the nation gave expression to the ideas of self-determination and of radical freedom while, on the other side, of the institutional reality of statehood frequently conflicted with the mobilizing thrust of nationhood. The first of these might be conceptualized in terms of Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of the 'radical imaginary' and the second in terms of the 'institutional imaginary', as outlined in his famous book, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Castoriadis, 1987). Nationhood gave expression to the open and radical idea of a society based on radical self-determination, while the institutional reality of the modern nation-state fostered a 'conservative' identification with the status quo. As a quintessentially modern form of dual collective identity based on radical and institutionalized imaginaries, we can thus see nationalism as having continued mobilizing appeal in the expression of nationhood as it also has institutional significance for statehood. This is an expression, continuing to the present day, of the most fundamental tension in modernity: the tension between the mobilizing power of collective agency and the quest for freedom and autonomy on the one side and, on the other, the institutional structures that modernity has created in which radical agency is tamed, although in the case of the recalcitrant phenomenon of nationalism, never entirely.

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There are four aims in this book. Our most general aim is to situate nationalism in the context of the social transformations of modernity. Our second aim is to address nationalism from a comparative perspective. To achieve this the theorization of modernity must be capable of taking account of multiple modernities. Our third aim is to offer a critical synthesis of the existing literature on nationalism. The fourth aim is to relate nationalism to recent debates about cosmopolitanism. In this context, we ask the question whether nations without nationalism are possible. In Chapter 1 the basic ideas of a working social theory of modernity are presented. The argument is that modernity can be best understood in terms of four dynamics, which we term: state formation, democratization, capitalism and the rationalization of culture. In Chapter 2, beginning from the logic of differentiation and integration contained in these four dynamics, we present nationalism as a form of dual collective identity, mobilizing and institutional. In the following three Chapters (3, 4 and 5), drawing from key texts on nationalism, structural, interpretive and mobilization theory, traditions and research are examined. In this exercise, the recalcitrance of nationalism as both a mobilizing and institutional force will be situated in the wider context of other movements and forces in modernity. In Chapter 6, a typology of nationalism is developed that leads into an account of the dominant eras of nationalism over the last two centuries. Chapter 7 deals with the rise of the new radical nationalisms, ranging from the new radical right in Western Europe and radical ethnic nationalisms in the former communist countries, to

radical religious nationalism in Asia. Chapter 8 looks at the limits and possibilities of cosmopolitanism as a viable alternative. In this context the question of nations without nationalism is discussed.

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NOTES

1 The recent work of Hans Joas marks a move in this direction (see Joas, 2000). See the special issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* on war and social theory (Delanty et al., 2001).

2 For a critical account of nationalism Marxism and classical sociology, see James (1996).

3 The rise of postcolonial theory, which to an extent put nationalism back on the agenda, tended to confine the discussion of nationalism to cultural studies, having only a marginal impact on social science.

4 An interesting exception is Tiryakian and Nevitte (1985).

5 See, for an example, Johnston (1994) who takes this view, but Melucci and Diani (1983) for whom new social movement theory is applied to the new regionalist nationalism. In the work of Manuel Castells (1997), nationalism has become much more emphasized (see Chapter 8).

6 In recent times there is more questioning of nationally specific disciplinary traditions (Delanty, 2001a); Levine, 1996).

7 See also Chapter 5 of Poole (1995).

8 See Wodak et al. (1999) for a similar conception of nationalism as discursively constructed.

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# one

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## modernity, nationalism and social theory: a general outline

The aim of this chapter is to provide a working theory of modernity which will serve as a framework for locating nationalism in the modern world. For present purposes, a general conception of nationalism is used and the concept will be treated in a more differentiated manner in the following chapters. As noted in the introduction, despite the huge recent interest in both nationalism and modernity, the respective bodies of literature have not been brought together. The social theory of modernity has, on the whole, been blind to one of the most significant forces in modernity.

The idea of modernity has become one of the most discussed concepts in social and political theory over the last two decades, and it would appear to continue to have more contemporary relevance than post-modernism (which is now no longer seen as a major rupture but a moment within modernity).<sup>1</sup> While this has led to some important new insights about social change, in many accounts this has been at the cost of a loss in the explanatory power of theoretical analysis for social science, due perhaps in part to overtheorization resulting from the combination of sociology, philosophy and political theory that has been characteristic of social theory. The theory of modernity may be said to be one of the central debates in social theory in the specific sense of a combination of these three areas.<sup>2</sup> In our view this historically informed social theory of modernity can offer an important contribution to the analysis of some of the key features of modern society, such as nationalism.

The theory of modernity has been inspired by the historical and cultural turn in the social sciences over the last two decades. Modernity thus has a historical dimension to it but one that is conceived in terms of a 'history of the present'. Combining insights from philosophy, political theory and sociology, the social theory of modernity can be seen as an attempt to theorize the current situation in light of long-term social transformations. Such questions as the significance of globalization, postmodernity, multiple modernities and new social