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Rethinking Nationhood: Nation as institutionalized form, practical category, contingent event

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Most discussions of nationhood are discussions of *nations*. Nations are understood as real entities, as communities, as substantial, enduring collectivities. *That* they exist is taken for granted, although *how* they exist – and how they came to exist – is much disputed.

A similar realism of the group long prevailed in many areas of sociology and kindred disciplines. Yet in the last decade or so, at least four developments in social theory have combined to undermine the treatment of groups as real, substantial entities. The first is the growing interest in network forms, the flourishing of network theory, and the increasing use of network as an overall orienting image or metaphor in social theory. Second, there is the challenge posed by theories of rational action, with their relentless methodological individualism, to realist understandings of groupness.¹ The third development is a shift from broadly structuralist to a variety of more “constructivist” theoretical stances; while the former envisioned groups as enduring components of social structure, the latter see groupness as constructed, contingent, and fluctuating. Finally, an emergent postmodernist theoretical sensibility emphasizes the fragmentary, the ephemeral, and the erosion of fixed forms and clear boundaries. These developments are disparate, even contradictory. But they have converged in problematizing groupness, and in undermining axioms of stable group being.

Yet this movement away from the realism of the group has been uneven. It has been striking, to take just one example, in the study of class, especially in the study of the working class – a term that is hard to use today without quotation marks or some other distancing device. Indeed *the* working class – understood as a real entity or substantial community – has largely dissolved as an object of analysis. It has been challenged both by theoretical statements and by detailed empirical research in social history, labor history, and the history of popular discourse and mobilization.² The

¹ In this tradition, the collective action literature, from Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) through Michael Hechter’s *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), has been particularly important in challenging common-sense understandings of groupness and group-formation.

² The great book of E. P. Thompson on *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963) marked the beginning of this process. While stressing on the one hand that class is not a thing, that “it [i.e. class understood as a thing] does not exist,” that class is

study of class as a cultural and political idiom, as a mode of conflict, and as an underlying abstract dimension of economic structure remains vital; but it is no longer encumbered by an understanding of *classes* as real, enduring entities.

At the same time, an understanding of *nations* as real entities continues to inform the study of nationhood and nationalism. This realist, substantialist understanding of nations is shared by those who hold otherwise widely diverging views of nationhood and nationalism.

At one pole, it informs the view of nationalism held by nationalists themselves and by nationally minded scholars. On this view, nationalism presupposes the existence of nations, and expresses their strivings for autonomy and independence. Nations are conceived as collective individuals, capable of coherent, purposeful collective action. Nationalism is a drama in which nations are the key actors. One might think that this sociologically naive view has no place in recent scholarship. But it has in fact flourished in recent years in interpretations of the national uprisings in the former Soviet Union.³

But the realist ontology of nations informs more sober and less celebratory scholarship as well. Consider just one indicator of this. Countless discussions of nationhood and nationalism begin with the question: what is a nation? This question is not as theoretically innocent as it seems: the very terms in which it is framed presuppose the existence of the entity that is to be defined. The question itself reflects the realist, substantialist belief that “a nation” is a real entity of some kind, though perhaps one that is elusive and difficult to define.

The treatment of nations as real entities and substantial collectivities is not confined to so-called primordialists, meaning those who emphasize the deep roots, ancient origins, and emotive power of national attachments.⁴ This view is also held by

rather “something. . . which happens,” a “fluency,” a “relationship” (pp. 9-11), Thompson nonetheless ends up treating the working class as a real entity, a community, an historical individual, characterizing his book as a “biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood,” and summing up his findings as follows: “When every caution has been made, the outstanding fact of the period from 1790 to 1830 is the formation of the working class” (pp. 9-11, 194).

³ It mars even the work of so eminent a specialist on Soviet nationality affairs as Helène Carrère d’Encausse. See *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of the Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁴ I stress that I am not simply criticizing primordialism – a long-dead horse that writers on ethnicity and nationalism continue to flog. No serious scholar today holds the view that is routinely attributed to primordialists in straw-man setups, namely that nations or ethnic groups are primordial, unchanging entities. Everyone agrees that nations are historically formed constructs, although there is disagreement about the relative weight of premodern traditions and modern transformations, of ancient memories and recent mobilizations, of “authentic” and “artificial” group feeling. What I am criticizing is not the straw man of primordialism, but the more pervasive substantialist, realist cast of mind that attributes real, enduring existence to nations as collectivities, however those collectivities are conceived.

many “modernists” and “constructivists,” who see nations as shaped by such forces as industrialization, uneven development, the growth of communication and transportation networks, and the powerfully integrative and homogenizing forces of the modern state. Nor is the substantialist approach confined to those who define nations “objectively,” that is in terms of shared objective characteristics such as language, religion, etc.; it is equally characteristic of those who emphasize subjective factors such as shared myths, memories, or self-understandings.

Paradoxically, the realist and substantialist approach informs even accounts that seek to debunk and demystify nationalism by denying the real existence of nations. On this view, if the nation is an illusory or spurious community, an ideological smokescreen, then nationalism must be a case of false consciousness, of mistaken identity. This approach reduces the question of the reality or real efficacy of nationhood or nationness to the question of the reality of nations as concrete communities or collectivities, thereby foreclosing alternative and more theoretically promising ways of conceiving nationhood and nationness. The problem with this substantialist treatment of nations as real entities is that it adopts *categories of practice as categories of analysis*. It takes a conception inherent in the *practice* of nationalism and in the workings of the modern state and state-system – namely the realist, reifying conception of nations as real communities – and it makes this conception central to the *theory* of nationalism. Reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice. As such, it is central to the phenomenon of nationalism, as we have seen all too clearly in the last few years.⁵ As analysts of nationalism, we should certainly try to *account* for this social process of reification – this process through which the political fiction of the nation becomes momentarily yet powerfully realized in practice. This may be one of the most important tasks of the theory of nationalism. But we should avoid unintentionally *reproducing* or *reinforcing* this reification of nations in practice with a reification of nations in theory.

To argue against the realist and substantialist way of thinking about nations is not to dispute the reality of nationhood.⁶ It is rather to reconceptualize that reality. It is to

⁵ As Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the symbolic dimensions of group-making suggests, reification is central to the quasi-performative discourse of nationalist politicians which, at certain moments, can succeed in creating what it seems to presuppose – namely, the existence of nations as real, mobilized or mobilizable groups. Bourdieu has not written specifically on nationalism, but this theme is developed in his essay on regionalism, “L’identité et la représentation: éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l’idée de région,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 35 (November 1980), part of which is reprinted in Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 220-8; see also the conclusion to “Social Space and the Genesis of Classes” in that same collection (pp. 248-51).

⁶ Here I differ from those who, finding “nation” inadequate or hopelessly muddled as a designator of a putative real entity or collectivity, avoid engaging the phenomenon of nationhood or nationness altogether. This was the case notably for the influential work of

decouple the study of nationhood and nationness from the study of nations as substantial entities, collectivities, or communities. It is to focus on nationness as a conceptual variable, to adopt J. P. Nettl’s phrase,⁷ not on nations as real collectivities. It is to treat nation not as substance but as institutionalized form; not as collectivity but as practical category; not as entity but as contingent event. Only in this way can we capture the reality of nationhood and the real power of nationalism without invoking in our theories the very “political fiction” of “the nation” whose potency in practice we wish to explain.⁸

We should not ask “what is a nation” but rather: how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? How does nation work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? What makes the use of that category by or against states more or less resonant or effective? What makes the nation-evoking, nation-invoking efforts of political entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?⁹

This might seem an unpropitious moment for such an argument. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the national conflicts in the successor states, the ethnonational wars in Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus, the carnage in the former Yugoslavia: doesn’t all this – it might be asked – vividly demonstrate the reality and power of nations? Doesn’t it show that nations could survive as solidary groups, as foci of identity and loyalty and bases of collective action, despite the efforts of the Soviet and Yugoslav states to crush them?

In a context of rampant ethnonationalism, the temptation to adopt a nation-centered perspective is understandable. But the temptation should be resisted. Nationalism is not engendered by nations. It is produced – or better, it is induced –

Charles Tilly and his collaborators, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). As Tilly wrote in the introductory essay to that volume, “nation remains one of the most puzzling and tendentious items in the political lexicon” (p. 6). Tilly shifted the focus of analysis from nation to state, marking a deliberate break with the older literature on nation-building. The adjective “national” appears throughout the book; yet it is strictly a term of scale and scope, meaning essentially “state-wide”; it has nothing to do with the phenomenon of nationhood or nationness.

⁷ See J. P. Nettl, “The State as a Conceptual Variable,” *World Politics* 20 (1968).

⁸ On nation as political fiction, see Louis Pinto, “Une fiction politique: la nation,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 64 (1986), a Bourdieuan appreciation of the studies of nationalism carried out by the eminent Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs.

⁹ For suggestive recent discussions of nationalism that avoid treating “the nation” as a real entity, see Richard Handler, “Is ‘Identity’ a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?,” in John Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Katherine Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?,” *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (1993), and Craig Calhoun, “Nationalism and Ethnicity,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993).

by *political fields* of particular kinds.¹⁰ Its dynamics are governed by the properties of political fields, not by the properties of collectivities.¹¹

Take for example the case of Soviet and post-Soviet nationalisms. To see these as the struggles of nations, of real, solidary groups who somehow survived despite Soviet attempts to crush them – to suggest that nations and nationalism flourish today *despite* the Soviet regime’s ruthlessly antinational policies – is to get things exactly backwards. Nationhood and nationalism flourish today largely *because of* the regime’s policies. Although antinationalist, those policies were anything but *anti-national*. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized it. The regime repressed *nationalism*, of course; but at the same time, as I argue in detail in Chapter 2, it went further than any other state before or since in institutionalizing territorial *nationhood* and ethnic *nationality* as fundamental social categories. In doing so it inadvertently created a political field supremely conducive to nationalism.

The regime did this in two ways. On the one hand, it carved up the Soviet state into more than fifty national territories, each expressly defined as the homeland of and for a particular ethnonational group. The top-level national territories – those that are today the independent successor states – were defined as quasi-nation states, complete with their own territories, names, constitutions, legislatures, administrative staffs, cultural and scientific institutions, and so on.

On the other hand, the regime divided the citizenry into a set of exhaustive and mutually exclusive ethnic nationalities, over a hundred in all. Thus codified, ethnic nationality served not only as a *statistical category*, a fundamental unit of social accounting, but also, and more distinctively, as an *obligatory ascribed status*. It was assigned by the state at birth on the basis of descent. It was registered in personal identity documents. It was recorded in almost all bureaucratic encounters and official transactions. And it was used to control access to higher education and to certain desirable jobs, restricting the opportunities of some nationalities, especially Jews, and promoting others through preferential treatment policies for so-called “titular” nationalities in “their own” republics.

Long before Gorbachev, then, territorial nationhood and ethnic nationality were pervasively institutionalized social and cultural forms. These forms were by no means empty. They were scorned by Sovietologists – no doubt because the regime consistently and effectively repressed all signs of overt political nationalism, and

¹⁰ Not only political fields but economic and cultural fields too can generate nationalism. See for example Katherine Verdery, “Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-Socialist Romania,” *Slavic Review* 52 (1993) for an argument about the nationalism-generating power of post-socialist economic restructuring.

¹¹ I develop this line of analysis in detail in Chapter 3, using “field” in a sense broadly akin to that developed by Pierre Bourdieu. For a particularly clear exposition of the concept, see Pierre Bourdieu, and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 94ff.

sometimes even cultural nationalism. Yet the repression of nationalism went hand in hand with the establishment and consolidation of nationhood and nationality as fundamental cognitive and social forms. Under glasnost, these already pervasively institutionalized forms were readily politicized. They constituted elementary forms of political understanding, political rhetoric, political interest, and political identity. In the terms of Max Weber’s “switchman” metaphor, they determined the tracks, the cognitive frame, along which action was pushed by the dynamic of material and ideal interests. In so doing, they contributed powerfully to the breakup of the Soviet Union and to the structuring of nationalist politics in its aftermath.

I have argued that we should think about nation not as substance but as institutionalized form, not as collectivity but as practical category, not as entity but as contingent event. Having talked about nationhood as institutionalized form, and as cognitive and sociopolitical category, I want to say a few words in conclusion about nationness as event. Here my remarks will be even more sketchy and programmatic. I want simply to point to a gap in the literature, and to suggest one potentially fruitful line of work.

In speaking of nationness as event, I signal a double contrast. The first is between nation as entity and nationness as a variable property of groups, of relationships, and of what Margaret Somers has recently called “relational settings.”¹² The second contrast is between thinking of nationhood or nationness as something that *develops*, and thinking of it as something that *happens*. Here I want to focus on this second contrast, between developmentalist and eventful perspectives. I borrow the latter term from a recent paper by William Sewell, Jr.¹³

We have a large and mature developmentalist literature on nationhood and nationalism. This literature traces the long-term political, economic, and cultural changes that led, over centuries, to the gradual emergence of nations or, as I would prefer to put it, of nationness. The major works of the last decade on nationhood and nationalism – notably by Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, and Eric Hobsbawm¹⁴ – are all developmentalist in this sense.

¹² Margaret R. Somers, “Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation,” *Social Science History* 16 (1992), 608ff. For an anthropological approach to the study of nationness as something produced and reproduced in everyday relationships, see John Borneman, *Belonging in the Two Berlins* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); see also Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?,” 41.

¹³ William Sewell, Jr., “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology,” forthcoming in Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

¹⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, revised edn, 1991); Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of*

By contrast, we lack theoretically sophisticated eventful analyses of nationness and nationalism. There are of course many studies of particular nationalisms geared to much shorter time spans than the decades or centuries characteristic of the developmentalist literature. But those conducted by sociologists and political scientists have tended to abstract from events in their search for generalized structural or cultural explanations, while historians, taking for granted the significance of contingent events, have not been inclined to theorize them.¹⁵

I know of no sustained analytical discussions of nationness as an event, as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture. Yet a strong theoretical case can be made for an eventful approach to nationness. As Craig Calhoun has recently argued, in a paper on the Chinese student protest movement of 1989, identity should be understood as a “changeable product of collective action,” not as its stable underlying cause.¹⁶ Much the same thing could be said about nationness.

A theoretically sophisticated eventful perspective on nationness and nationalism is today urgently needed. To make sense of the Soviet and Yugoslav collapse and their aftermaths, we need – among other things – to think theoretically about relatively sudden fluctuations in the “nationness” of groups and relational settings. We need to think theoretically about the process of being “overcome by nationhood,” to use the poignant phrase of the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic. Drakulic was characterizing her own situation. Like many of her postwar generation, she was largely indifferent to nationality. Yet she came – against her will – to be defined by her nationality alone, imprisoned by an all-too-successfully reified category.¹⁷ As predicaments go, in the

Nations (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Sewell, “Three Temporalities”; cf. Marshall Sahlins, “The Return of the Event, Again: With Reflections on the Beginnings of the Great Fijian War of 1843 to 1855 between the Kingdoms of Bau and Rewa,” in Aletta Biersack, ed., *Clio in Oceania: Toward a Historical Anthropology* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 38.

¹⁶ Craig Calhoun, “The Problem of Identity in Collective Action,” in Joan Huber, ed., *Macro-Micro Linkages in Sociology* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991), p. 59.

¹⁷ “Being Croat has become my destiny. . . I am defined by my nationality, and by it alone. . . Along with millions of other Croats, I was pinned to the wall of nationhood – not only by outside pressure from Serbia and the Federal Army but by national homogenization within Croatia itself. That is what the war is doing to us, reducing us to one dimension: the Nation. The trouble with this nationhood, however, is that whereas before, I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character – and, yes, my nationality too – now I feel stripped of all that. I am nobody because I am not a person any more. I am one of 4.5 million Croats. . . I am not in a position to choose any longer. Nor, I think, is anyone else. . . something people cherished as a part of their cultural identity – an alternative to the all-embracing communism. . . – has become their political identity and turned into something

former Yugoslavia, this one is not especially grave. But it illustrates in personal terms a more general and fateful occurrence – the relatively sudden and pervasive “nationalization” of public and even private life. This has involved the nationalization of narrative and interpretative frames, of perception and evaluation, of thinking and feeling. It has involved the silencing or marginalization of alternative, non-nationalist political languages. It has involved the nullification of complex identities by the terrible categorical simplicity of ascribed nationality. It has involved essentialist, demonizing characterizations of the national “other,” characterizations that transform Serbs into Chetniks, Croats into Ustashas, Muslims into Fundamentalists.

We know well from a variety of appalling testimony *that* this has happened; but we know too little about *how* it happened. This is where we need an eventful perspective. Following the lead of such thinkers as Marshall Sahlins, Andrew Abbott, and William Sewell, Jr., we must give serious theoretical attention to contingent events and to their trans-formative consequences.¹⁸ Only in this way can we hope to understand the processual dynamics of nationalism. And it is the close study of such processual dynamics, I think, that will yield the most original and significant work on nationalism in the coming years, work that promises theoretical advances as well as a richer understanding of particular cases.¹⁹

I began with the question: how should we think about nationhood and nationness, and how are they implicated in nationalism? Reduced to a formula, my argument is that we should focus on nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening, and refrain from using the analytically dubious notion of “nations” as substantial, enduring collectivities. A recent book by Julia Kristeva bears the English

like an ill-fitting shirt. You may feel the sleeves are too short, the collar too tight. You might not like the colour, and the cloth might itch. But there is no escape; there is nothing else to wear. One doesn’t have to succumb voluntarily to this ideology of the nation – one is sucked into it. So right now, in the new state of Croatia, no one is allowed not to be a Croat” (Slavenka Drakulic, *The Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1993], pp. 50-2).

¹⁸ Sahlins, “The Return of the Event, Again”; Andrew Abbott, “From Causes to Events: Notes on Narrative Positivism,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 20 (1992); Sewell, “Three Temporalities.”

¹⁹ Here the study of nationalism might fruitfully draw on the recent literature on revolution, with its attention to transformative events and processual dynamics. See for example the debate in *Contention* between Nikki Keddie, “Can Revolutions be Predicted? Can their Causes be Understood?” (1, no. 2 [1992]) and Jack Goldstone, “Predicting Revolutions: Why We Could (and Should) have Foreseen the Revolutions of 1989-1991 in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe” (2, no. 2 [1993]). Although Keddie and Goldstone disagree about the predictability of revolution, they agree about the importance of transformative events, complex interactions, and rapid changes in ideas, stances, and behavior.

title *Nations without Nationalism*; but the analytical task at hand, I submit, is to think about nationalism without nations.

Ours is not, as is often asserted, even by as sophisticated a thinker as Anthony Smith, “a world of nations.”²⁰ It is a world in which nationhood is pervasively institutionalized in the practice of states and the workings of the state system. It is a world in which nation is widely, if unevenly, available and resonant as a category of social vision and division. It is a world in which nationness may suddenly, and powerfully, “happen.”

But none of this implies a world of nations – of substantial, enduring collectivities.

To understand the power of nationalism, we do not need to invoke nations. Nor should we, at the other extreme, dismiss nationhood altogether. We need, rather, to de couple categories of analysis from categories of practice, retaining as analytically indispensable the notions of nation as practical category, nationhood as institutionalized form, and nationness as event, but leaving “the nation” as enduring community to nationalists.

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²⁰ Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 176