New Approaches to Nationalism

lecture notes by Denis Bašić
based on Özkırımlı’s “Theories of Nationalism”
chapter 6
Commonalities of the new theories

• Despite the fact that each post-1980 study on nationalism highlights a different problem with earlier theories, they all

  • question the fundamental assumptions of their predecessors, and

  • seek to go beyond the classical debate by exploring the issues neglected or ignored by the latter and by proposing new ways of thinking about national phenomena.
Influence of the “Cultural Turn”

• New approaches have been influenced by the 'cultural turn' in social sciences, precipitated by the rise of new social movements in the last quarter of the twentieth century which challenged the purported homogeneity of national cultures and identities in the West.

• In this context, the static notion of 'culture' as a coherent, harmonious whole is replaced by more fluid and dynamic interpretations which treat culture as a deeply contested concept whose meaning is continually negotiated, revised and reinterpreted by successive generations and by various groups that are presumed to make up the ‘national’ society.

• In this view, culture is not divorced from social fragmentation and discrimination on the basis of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, place in the life cycle, hence from hierarchies of power; it is more often not what people share, but what they choose to fight over.
Interdisciplinary Approach

• In the post-1980s period we see a renewed emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature of nationalism as a subject of academic investigation.

• Thus the studies in question open up the field to the contributions of new methods of analysis such as critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, rhetorical theory, psychoanalysis, and new epistemological perspectives such as feminism, post-colonialism and post-modernism.

• They also stress the need to rectify the elitism of mainstream theories by bringing macro-level and micro-level analyses together, that is by considering the view from below (the 'masses', 'ordinary people') in addition to the view from above (the 'elites', 'intellectuals' or 'state bureaucrats').
Substantial Changes in Approach

- On a more substantive level, new approaches argue that the classical debate has become unnecessarily polarized around certain issues, such as dating the origins of nations, at the expense of others, and criticize the gender-blind.

- Eurocentric character of the mainstream literature.

- They also turn their back on 'grand narratives' or 'meta-theories' designed to explain 'nationalism in general'.

- This enables them to focus on nationalist practices and representations and the previously neglected aspects of nationalism, such as the gendered and sexualized character of nationalist projects, the reproduction of nationalism through popular culture and in everyday life, the dilemmas of 'nation building' in post-colonial societies, among others, with an increased sensitivity to the experiences of previously marginalized groups in each case.
Michael Billig & his “Banal Nationalism”

Michael Billig’s approach is based on a critique of orthodox theorizations which tend to associate nationalism with 'those who struggle to create new states or with extreme right-wing politics'. According to this view, nationalism is the property of 'others', the peripheral states which have yet to complete their nation-building processes, and not 'ours', the established 'nation-states' of the West. Nationalism is a temporary mood in the West, only manifesting itself under certain 'extraordinary' conditions, that is, in times of crises - and vanishing once normal conditions are restored.
• Billig rejects this simplistic, even naive, picture, arguing that the crises depend upon existing ideological foundations. They do not create nation-states as nation-states: 'In between times the United States of America, France, the United Kingdom and so on continue to exist. Daily, they are reproduced as nations and their citizenry as nationals'. However, this reminding is so familiar that it is not consciously registered as reminding.

• Billig introduces the term *banal nationalism* to cover 'the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced': 'The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion: it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building'.
National Histories & Stereotypes

- **National histories** tell us the story of a people traveling across time - 'our' people, with ‘our’ ways of life. On the other hand, national **community** cannot be **imagined** without also imagining communities of foreigners which make 'our' culture unique. There can be no 'us' without a 'them'.

- It is at this stage that stereotyped judgements come in. **Stereotypes** become means of distinguishing 'them' from 'us'; 'we' represent the standard, the normal, against which 'their' deviations appear notable.

- This **unique community of culture** is also associated with a **particular territory**, a hounded geographical space which is 'our' homeland. Indeed, the whole world is composed of communities of culture like ours, each tied to a specific piece of land. For Billig, this international consciousness is integral to the modern discourse of nationalism.
Why don’t the people from established nations forget their national identity?

• **For Billig**, the answer is simple: 'we' are constantly reminded that 'we' live in nations. Routinely familiar habits of language' play an important role in this process of reminding.

'Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases' make our national identity unforgettable. To explore such matters, we should not only pay attention to words like 'people' or ‘society’, but also become 'linguistically microscopic' since the secret of banal nationalism lies in tiny words such as 'we', 'this' and 'here'. As might be expected, these words are most commonly used by politicians.
“Patriotic card” & Politicians

• What politicians say and how they say it is of utmost importance. The 'patriotic card' is played by almost all politicians.

• More importantly, however, politicians claim to speak for the nation.

• Evoking the whole nation as their audience, they rhetorically present themselves as representing the national interest. By using a complex deixis of homeland, they invoke the national 'we' and place 'us' within 'our' homeland. When the homeland-making phrases are used regularly, 'we' are reminded who 'we' are and where 'we' are. Moreover, what is 'ours' is presented as the objective world; the homeland is made unnoticeable by being presented as the context.
• Politicians are not the only actors contributing to **the daily reproduction of nationhood**. Their rhetorical forms and deixis are taken up by the newspapers. Like politicians, **newspapers** claim to stand in the eye of the nation. The opinion and editorial columns evoke a national 'we', including both readers and writers (as well as a universal audience). What unites the reader and the writer, what makes them ‘we’, is **the national identity**. The newspapers also contribute to the process of imagining a national 'we' by their internal organization and the structure of presentation of the news. 'Home' news is separated from 'foreign' news; and “Home” indicates more than the contents of the particular page: it flags the home of the newspaper and of the assumed, addressed readers. We, the readers, follow the directing signs and find our way around the familiar territory of the newspaper: ‘As we do so, we are habitually at home in a textual structure, which uses the homeland's national boundaries, dividing the world into "homeland" and "foreign".'
Social Scientists & Nationalism

• According to Billig, scholars contribute to this process by:

  • **Projecting nationalism.** Most social scientific approaches define nationalism in a very restricted way, as an extreme/surplus phenomenon, thereby confining it to nationalist movements induced by irrational emotions. In this way, nationalism is projected on to 'others'; ' "ours" is overlooked, forgotten, even theoretically denied'.

  • **Naturalizing nationalism.** Some theorists reduce nationalism to a psychological need by arguing that contemporary loyalties to nation-states are instances of something general, or endemic to the human condition. As such, ' "banal nationalism" not only ceases to be nationalism, but it ceases to be a problem for investigation'.
Feminist Approach to Nationalism
Nira Yuval Davis & Feminist Approaches

- **Nira Yuval Davis** has converted from Zionism (Israeli nationalist ideology) to anti-Zionism. In her writings, she stresses the Otto Bauerian emphasis on "common destiny" rather than just the Anthony Smithian "common origin" as crucial aspects of nationalist discourse, but at the same time she is also able to evaluate critically the non-nationalist nationalist discourse prevalent in the West. Most importantly, starting from her work on Israel and then more generally, she was able to analyze nations and nationalist discourses in an intersectional way, pointing out that sexual, ethnic, class and other social divisions construct a differential, as well as multi-layered forms of belonging to national collectivities - hence *Gender and Nation* (1997), and *Politics of Belonging* (2012).
Nationalism & Women

- It has been generally recognized that nationalist movements draw upon different constituencies, in uneven ways, and there has been a large body of work analysing various aspects of nationalist movements, such as their class compositions, the levels of education of their participants and so on. However, this body of work has not engaged with the differential integration of women and men into national projects in a systematic way.

- Of course women were - and are - never absent from the nationalist discourse, figuring as 'conquerors' mistresses, wartime rape victims, military prostitutes, cinematic soldier-heroes, pin-up models on patriotic calendars' and as workers, wives, girlfriends and daughters waiting dutifully at home.

- Yet despite their centrality to nationalist discourse, it has been noted, most mainstream theorizations about nations and nationalism, sometimes even those written by women (for example Greenfeld 1992), have ignored gender relations as irrelevant.

- Nationalism has been generally regarded as a male phenomenon, springing from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.
The famous English writer Virginia Woolf declared her neutrality in the face of the unfolding Second World War, urging women to join her fictional 'Outsiders Society':

'Our country' ... throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions ... Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood ... that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share. For ... in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.
Anthias and Yuval-Davis suggest five major ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes:

- (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
  - 'According to different national projects, under specific historical circumstances, some or all women of child-bearing age groups would be called on, sometimes bribed, and sometimes even forced, to have more, or fewer, children'.

- **The Eugenics** were concerned not with the size of the nation, but with its ‘quality’. This has given rise to various policies aimed at limiting the physical numbers of members of 'undesirable' groups. (Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany)

- The Malthusians see the reduction of the number of children as the way to prevent a future national disaster. This discourse is most visible in developing countries, where a number of policies aimed at reducing the overall rate of growth are adopted. (China)
Anthias and Yuval-Davis suggest five major ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes:

- (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
  - Women are not allowed to have sexual relations with men of other groups (as until recently in South Africa). This is particularly the case for women belonging to the dominant ethnic group. Legal marriage is generally a precondition for the child to be recognized as a member of the group. (Israel and the right to remarry)

- (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
  - Women are usually seen as the 'cultural carriers' of the ethnic/national group. They are the main socializers of small children, and thus they are often required to transmit the rich heritage of ethnic symbols, traditions and values to the young members of the group. Yuval-Davis stresses the need to treat 'culture' not as a reified fixed category, but rather 'as a dynamic process, continuously changing, full of internal contradictions which different social and political agents, differentially positioned, use in different ways.'
Five Major Ways in Which Women Have Participated in Ethnic & National Processes

• Anthias and Yuval-Davis suggest five major ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes:

  • (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences - as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories; and

  • Women do not only transmit the cultural heritage of ethnic and national groups, but they also 'symbolize' it. The nation is often imagined as a loved woman in danger or as a mother who lost her sons in battle. This 'burden of representation' has brought about the construction of women as the bearers of the collectivity's honour.

  • (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

  • While women did not always participate directly in the fighting (although it was not uncommon for them to do so), they always had specific roles in the combat, 'whether it was to take care of the dead and wounded or to become the embodied possession of the victorious.'