Primordialism

lecture notes by Denis Bašić
based on Özkırımlı’s “Theories of Nationalism”
chapter 3
What is Primordialism?

'Primordialism' is an umbrella term used to describe the belief that nationality is a 'natural' part of human beings, as natural as speech, sight or smell, and that nations have existed from time immemorial. This is the view of nationalists themselves, and was for some time the dominant paradigm among social scientists, notably the historians. Primordialism also constitutes the laymen’s view of nations and nationalism.

The term comes from the adjective 'primordial' which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'of, relating to, or existing from the very beginning of time; earliest in time; primeval, primitive; (more generally) ancient, distant in time' and 'that constitutes the origin or starting point from which something else is derived or developed, or on which something else depends; fundamental, basic; elemental.'
Approaches in Primordialism

- Nationalist Primordialism
- Sociobiological Primordialism
- Culturalist Primordialism
- Perennialist Primordialism
Nationalist Primordialism
All Nationalist believe that ...

- **nationality** is an inherent attribute of the human condition. 'A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears'.

- **humanity** is divided into **distinct, objectively identifiable nations**.

- **human beings** can only fulfill themselves and flourish if they belong to a national community, the membership of which overrides all other forms of belonging.

- **the nation** is the sole depository of **sovereignty** and the only source of political power and legitimacy. This comes with a host of temporal and spatial claims - to a **unique history and destiny**, and a historic 'homeland'.
Nationalist Thesis...

- promulgated by the political elites.
- shaped the developing fields of history, folklore and literature which acquired a veritable nation-building mission in the course of the 19th century.
- was, in return, promulgated by historians, folklorists, & writers of nationalist orientation.
- was particularly strengthened by ‘historians who busied themselves with excavating the 'evidence' that would establish beyond doubt the eternal character of their nation.
Reoccurring Themes in Nationalist Narratives

- The Theme of the Antiquity of the (Particular) Nation
- The Theme of the Golden Age
- The Theme of the Superiority of the National Culture
- The Theme of the Periods of Recess and Somnolence
- The Theme of the National Hero
The Theme of the Antiquity of the Particular Nation

According to Tekin Alp (aka Moise Cohen), who was reporting the proceedings of the Turkish History Congress of 1932, it was time:

“to make the whole world, and to begin with the Turks themselves, understand that Turkish history does not begin with Osman’s tribe, but in fact twelve thousand years before Jesus Christ. It is not the history of a tribe of four hundred tents, but that of a great nation, composed of hundreds of millions of souls. The exploits of the Osmanli Turks constitute merely one episode in the history of the Turkish nation which has founded several other empires. (Kedourie 1971: 210)
The Theme of the Golden Age

There is the theme of golden age. For the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop, the 'modern pharoah' of African studies:

“it was first the Ethiopians and then the Egyptians who created and developed to an extraordinary degree all the elements of civilization at a time when all other peoples - and the Eurasians in particular - were plunged into barbarism ... It is impossible to exaggerate what the whole world - and in particular the Hellenic world - owes to the Egyptian world.”

(Ibid.: 275)
The Theme of the Superiority of the National Culture

There is the theme of the superiority of the national culture. Choudhary Rahmat Ali, the founder of the Pakistan national movement, claims that:

“Pakistan is one of the most ancient and illustrious countries of the Orient. Not only that. It is the only country in the world which, in the antiquity of its legend and lore as in the character of its history and hopes, compares with Iraq and Egypt - the countries which are known as the cradle of the achievement of mankind ... Pakistan was the birthplace of human culture and civilization ... it is the first and the strongest citadel of Islam in the Continent of Dinia and its Dependencies. (Ibid.: 245-6)
The Theme of the Periods of Recess and Somnolence

There is the theme of periods of recess or 'somnolence', from which the nation is destined to 'awaken'. This is what Adamantios Korais (1748-1833), the foremost figure of the Neohellenic Enlightenment, has to say of the Greeks of his time:

“In the middle of the last century, the Greeks constituted a miserable nation who suffered the most horrible oppression and experienced the nefarious effects of a long period of slavery ... Following these two developments [the opening of new channels for trade and the military defeat of the Ottomans (1821-1832 - The Greek War of Independence)] the Greeks ... raise their heads in proportion as their oppressors' arrogance abates ... This is the veritable period of Greek awakening ... For the first time the nation surveys the hideous spectacle of its ignorance and trembles in measuring with the eye the distance separating it from its ancestors' glory.” (Ibid.: 183-4)
Finally, there is the theme of the national hero, who comes and awakens the nation, ending this accidental period of decadence:

“He [Kemal Ataturk] could not tolerate therefore this false conception of Turkish history which was current among some of the Turkish intellectuals ... He has therefore taken it into his head to eliminate it by means of a revolutionary outburst which would subject it to the same fate as the other misconceptions from which the Turkish people have suffered for centuries. (Ibid.: 211 )
Commonalities of Nationalist Narratives

- Nationalists share a common language and a common frame of reference to express their claims.
- What remains constant and central in all these narratives is the belief in, and representation of, the nation as
  - a mystical,
  - a-temporal,
  - even transcendental entity.
- Survival of the nation is more important than the survival of its individual members at any given time.
Sociobiological Primordialism
'The sociobiological theory of ethnicity, race and nationalism', writes van den Berghe, the most outspoken proponent of this approach in the field of nationalism studies, 'holds that there is indeed an objective, external basis to the existence of such groups' without denying that these groups are also socially constructed and changeable. 'In simplest terms, the sociobiological view of these groups is that they are fundamentally defined by common descent and maintained by endogamy. Ethnicity, thus, is simply kinship writ large.'

*Endogamy = the custom of marrying only within the limits of a local community, clan, or tribe.*
According to Pierre van den Berghe, the answer to this question was long intuitively known: *animals are social to the extent that cooperation is mutually beneficial*. What sociobiology does, van den Berghe argues, is to supply the main genetic mechanism for animal sociality, namely *kin selection* to increase inclusive fitness. It basically implies that:

“an animal can duplicate its genes directly through its own reproduction, or indirectly through the reproduction of relatives with which it shares specific proportions of genes. Animals, therefore, can be expected to behave cooperatively, and thereby enhance each other's fitness to the extent that they are genetically related. This is what is meant by *kin selection.*” (1978: 402)
Ethnicities, Races, & Nations as Extensions of Kinship

- Ethnic groups, races and nations 'are super-families of (distant) relatives, real or putative, who tend to intermarry, and who are knit together by vertical ties of descent reinforced by horizontal ties of marriage' (2001b: 274). That the extended kinship is sometimes putative rather than real is not important. Just as in the smaller kin units, the kinship is often real enough 'to become the basis of these powerful sentiments we call nationalism, tribalism, racism, and ethnocentrism'.

- If that is the case, then how do we recognize our 'kin'? According to van den Berghe, 'only a few of the world's societies use primarily morphological phenotypes to define themselves'. It follows that cultural criteria of group membership are more salient than physical ones, if the latter is used at all. In a way, this is inevitable because neighbouring populations resemble each other in terms of their genetic composition. The criteria for identifying kinsmen, on the other hand, should discriminate more reliably between groups than within groups. In other words, 'the criterion chosen must show more intergroup than intra-group variance'. Cultural criteria, like differences of accent, body adornment and the like, meet this requirement far more reliably than physical ones. Language is particularly useful in this respect because, van den Berghe maintains, 'ethnic affiliation can be quickly ascertained through speech and is not easily faked.'
Reciprocity & Coercion as explanations for Human Sociality

- Noting that kin selection does not explain all of human sociality, van den Berghe identifies two additional mechanisms: **reciprocity** and **coercion**.

- **Reciprocity** is cooperation for mutual benefit, and with expectation of return, and it can operate between kin or between non-kin.

- **Coercion** is the use of force for one-sided benefit.

- All human societies continue to be organized on the basis of all three principles of sociality. But, van den Berghe adds, 'the larger and the more complex a society becomes, the greater the importance of reciprocity'. Moreover, while **kin selection**, real or putative, is more dominant in intra-group relations, **coercion** becomes the rule in interethnic (or interracial) relationships.

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Van den Berghe states that:

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How would you challenge this postulate based on Sociobiological Primordialism itself?

Didn’t van den Berghe himself state that “animals are social to the extent that cooperation is mutually beneficial”?

If the latter is true, then shouldn’t we assume that human societies would be more often than not cooperative, rather than antagonistic, if their interaction is mutually beneficial.

Hence, the problem is not in human relations but in the type of interactions which is a subject of choice.
Van den Berghe concedes that ethnic groups appear and disappear, coalesce or break up. But, he also adds that all this construction, deconstruction and reconstruction remains firmly anchored in the reality of 'socially perceived, biological descent'.

This structure, 'the biology of human mating and reproduction', is prior: 'Ethnies have existed since the dawn of history'.

We may speak of nationalism, when a sense of belonging to an ethnie is transformed into a demand for political autonomy or independence.

A nation, in this sense, is simply 'a politically conscious ethnie'.
Culturalist
Primordialism
Edward Shils & Clifford Geertz: Cultural Primordialists themselves or just its researchers?

The culturalist primordialist approach is generally associated with the works of Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz. However, while some scholars (like Eller and Coughlan) ascribe the primordialist views to Shils and Geertz themselves, others (like Smith and Tilley) state that Shils and Geertz did not state themselves that nation is primordial, but rather that people perceive it so.

Özkırımlı states that the latter group seems to be right. Shils indeed argues that the attachment family members feel for each other stems from 'significant relational' qualities which can only be described as 'primordial'. It is not just a function of interaction; 'it is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood.' (Hence, people attribute it. Shils doesn’t necessarily think it’s true.)
Edward Shils & Clifford Geertz:
Cultural Primordialists themselves or just its researchers?

Equally, Clifford Geertz cites the congruities of blood, language, religion and particular social practices among the objects of primordial attachments. However, like Shils, he also never suggests that these objects are themselves 'given' or primordial; rather, they are 'assumed' to be given by individuals. Geertz:

“One is bound to one’s kinsman, one’s neighbour, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the tie itself. The general strength of such primordial bonds ... differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time. But for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural ... affinity than from social interaction.”

However, Geertz does talk of “natural affinity” though he uses the verb “seem to,” not being sure. Do insecure postulates make for a strong theory?
Criticism of Shils’ and Geertz’s views

In the light of the previous misunderstanding, the culturalist approach may be more properly described as one that focuses on the role of 'perceptions' in understanding ethnic and national attachments, or in the words of Geertz, on the webs of meaning spun.

Regardless whether Shils and Geertz themselves attribute that “ineffable significance” (Shils) and “natural affinity” (Geertz) to the “primordial” attachment or whether they are just stating what people imbued with nationalism are doing, we are still left with the questions of

- why people attribute that “ineffable significance” and “natural affinity” to the “primordial” attachment?
- if it’s a matter of misperception, what is causing it?
- in whose interest is it to maintain the “misperception”?  
- are we talking here about a misperception or a manipulation?
Perennialist
Primordialism
Who are Perennialists?

- Anthony Smith introduces the term 'perennialists' to refer to
  - those who believe in the historical antiquity of the 'nation', its immemorial and perennial character.
- The perennialists
  - do not treat the nation as a 'fact of nature';
  - but they see it as a constant and fundamental feature of human life throughout recorded history.
Two types of Perennialism

- **Continuous perennialism** sees the roots of modern nations stretching back several centuries - even millennia in a few cases (the Persians, the Greeks, the Jews). This version stresses 'continuity' pointing to cultural continuities and identities over long time spans, which link medieval or ancient nations to their modern counterparts.

- **Recurrent perennialism** refers to those who regard the nation as 'a category of human association that can be found everywhere throughout history. Particular nations may come and go, but the nation itself is ubiquitous and, as a form of association and collective identity, recurrent.
Continuous vs. Recurrent Perennialism

✦ According to Anthony Smith, the lines separating these two versions are not clear. Still, he continues, recurrent perennialists, such as the medieval historians Adrian Hastings, John Gillingham, Colette Beaune and Bernard Guenee, are more 'careful' and 'nuanced' in their analyses than continuous perennialists.

✦ Recurrent perennialists argue that there are sufficient documents and chronicles which prove the existence of 'nations' and 'national sentiment' in Western Europe from the later medieval epoch, but not of 'nationalism' as an ideology.

✦ We can better understand the perennialist position by considering the writings of the late Adrian Hastings, probably the most commonly cited exponent of perennialist views in studies of nationalism.
Adrian Hastings (1929-2001)

Hastings defines *ethnicity* as 'a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language'.

The *nation* is a far more self-conscious community than ethnicity; formed from one or more ethnicities and identified with a *literature* of its own,' it possesses or claims the right to *political identity* and *autonomy* as a people, together with the control of specific territory'.

*Nationalism*, on the other hand, can be defined in two ways:

- As a *political theory*, it claims that each nation should have its own state, and dates only from the nineteenth century.

- In practice, however, it derives from the *belief* that one’s own national tradition is particularly valuable and needs to be defended at all costs through the establishment or expansion of its own state. In that 'practical' sense, it existed as a powerful reality in some places long before the nineteenth century.
According to Hastings, modern nations can only grow out of certain ethnicities, under the impact of the development of a vernacular and the pressures of the state. It is true that every ethnicity did not become a nation, but many have done so.

The defining origin of the nation, Hastings argues, like that of every other great reality of modern Western experience, needs to be located in an age a good deal further back than most modernist historians feel safe to handle, that of the shaping of medieval society.

Hastings contends that ethnicities naturally turn into nations at the point when their specific vernacular moves from an oral to written usage to the extent that it is being regularly employed for the production of a literature, and particularly for the translation of the Bible.
England: the oldest nation-state according to Hastings

According to Hastings suggests that England presents the prototype of both the nation and the nation-state in its fullest sense. Its national development precedes every other:

“Despite the, often exaggerated, counter-action of the Norman Conquest, an English nation-state survived 1066, grew fairly steadily in the strength of its national consciousness through the later 12th and 13th centuries, but emerged still more vociferously with its vernacular literary renaissance and the pressures of the Hundred Years Wars by the end of the 14th. Nevertheless the greatest intensity of its nationalist experience ... must undoubtedly be located in and after the late 16th century.”

The evidence for this can be found in the history of the word "nation' itself. After a brief excursus into various historical documents and chronicles, Hastings concludes: "The frequency and consistency in usage of the word [nation] from the early 14th century onward strongly suggest a basis in experience: Englishmen felt themselves to be a nation.'
The Role of Religion in English Nationalism per Hastings

- What makes the English case so important, per Hastings, is the role of religion in the birth of English nationalism, and the precise impact of the latter on its neighbours and colonies.

- Religion is in fact an integral part of nationalism; "the Bible provided, for the Christian world at least, the original model of the nation’, writes Hastings. Without it and its Christian interpretation, nations and nationalism, as we know them, could have never existed.
General Criticism of Primordialism
One common denominator of the primordialists, with the exception of culturalists, is their tendency to take ethnic and national identities as "given", or as facts of nature. They are transmitted from one generation to the next with their "essential" characteristics unchanged; nations are thus fixed, or static. This view has been undermined in the last couple of decades by an ever-growing number of studies which stress the 'socially constructed' nature of ethnic and national identities, pointing to the role of individual choices, tactical decisions, political opportunity structures and various contingencies in their construction. Far from being fixed, nations’ boundaries and contents are continuously negotiated and redefined in each generation as groups react or adapt to changing circumstances.
The Origins of Ethnic & National Ties

- If ethnic and national attachments are 'given', then they are also 'underived', prior to all social interaction, and 'ineffable', that is 'incapable of being expressed in words' - thus unanalyzable.

- This leads several commentators to dismiss primordialism, especially its nationalist and sociobiological versions, as unscientific and teleological.

- Unscientific, because primordialism tends to see the identification of primordial attachments as the successful end of analysis. Teleological, because primordialists treat the history of modern nations as an inexorable process which tends towards a predetermined outcome - starting from their rudimentary beginnings in the ancient or medieval epochs to present-day nation-states.
The Date of Emergence of Nations

- What primordialism does recognize is that, despite changes in their structural form, 'there have always been primordial attachments'. This is the central idea behind perennialist interpretations which can be considered as a milder version of primordialism, for they reject the nationalist belief in the 'naturalness of nations,' while retaining a belief in their antiquity.

- According to Hastings, we can even talk about a 'historiographical schism' between modernist social scientists and medieval historians who reject the 'modernist' orthodoxy. This picture is not entirely accurate, however, since for every medieval historian who argues for the antiquity of nations, there are others who emphasize their novel and constructed nature.
The most important contribution of primordialist approaches to our understanding of nations and nationalism is their uncovering of 'the intensity and passion that ethnicity and nationalism so often evoke, and which modernists, even when they condemn it, so often fail to address.'

Eller and Coughlan, while recognizing the important role emotions play in human social life, object to their mystification. They argue that the mystification of the primordial has led to a fallacy, namely the desocializing of the phenomenon. It is suggested that these emotional ties are not born in social interaction, but are just there, 'implicit in the relationship (kin or ethnic) itself'. According to Eller and Coughlan, the source of this fallacy 'is the failure of sociology and anthropology to deal intelligibly with emotion'.