



Modernist approaches to nations and nationalism

Dr. Vibha Tiwari Dikshit

Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science

Christ Church College, Kanpur

Email: dikshitvibha@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper focuses on the ongoing debates on nation, nationalism, and identity, which have become pertinent because of significant shifts in the global ecosystem. The making of the nation state has been itself a puzzling occurrence. Moreover, the challenges in the present times have made it timely to explore and revisit some of the dominating paradigms. The scholarship under the modernist paradigm of nation and nationalism provides a general theory for understanding the nation-state phenomenon. The scholars argue that their modernist sociological paradigm of nationalism can be applied to all societies and hence has a universal appeal. My submission is that the complex phenomena of nations and nationalism cannot be explained and interpreted by any single theoretical paradigm that can be applied equally to all the existing nation-states of the world. The phenomena of nations and nationalism must be understood in the context, time, and space specifics.*

Key Words: *Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Modernist, State.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

The concepts of nations, nationalism and nation-state have gained a new impetus in the contemporary social sciences discourses. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the departure of ideological debates of capitalism vs. communism, the emergence of ethnocultural nationalism, and the globalizing world, have brought the discussions of nations and nationalism to the center stage of the discourses.

The genuine conceptualization of nationalism has not been uniform throughout the history of social theory. In the classical writings of social theory from about 1800 to 1920 (even in writings after), much attention was not given to the problems of nations or nationalism. So, there was a very limited set of definitions. Wherever any serious work has been identified, it was limited in its appeal and direction. It was generally looked at with suspicion and disdain during and after the Second World War. Nationalism was alleged to have been responsible for the onset of the deadly War in 1939. It was consciously ignored during the national self-determination of states and especially during the division of Germany or Korea. It was only in the 1980s that the intellectual attention was being diverted to the nuances of nationalism just before the break-up of the Eurasian Empires. The eventual break-up of the Soviet Union brought back the debates of identity and nationalism to the forefront of intellectual activity.

At the very outset, in trying to understand the concepts of nations and nationalism, one stumbles upon the fact that the nations and nationalism have been one of the fuzziest and elephantine concepts which do not belong strictly to any specific social discipline. The boundaries of the study of nationalism have always been very porous, which often overlap with different fields such as sociology of modernization, modern political theories, economics, and political anthropology. Even the authors writing on nationalism significantly differ in their understanding of the concept. Ernst B. Hass, in his review of four theorists on nationalism, finds four different perspectives on nationalism. He informs that Dudley Seers defines nationalism as some kind of economic policy, while Benedict Anderson addresses the term as a kind of manufactured linguistic identity. Anthony Smith refers to nationalism as a particular ideology of solidarity based on preindustrial roots.

In contrast, Ernest Gellner believes it to be the result of industrialization leading to a social and political organization (Haas, 1986)¹. Many theorists like Connors, Seton-Watson, and Tilly have bemoaned the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding nations and nationalism (Croucher, 2003)². Instead of entangling in the puzzles of varying definitions of nations and nationalism, some scholars have endeavored to provide a general paradigm for understanding nations and nationalism and their typologies. However, the definitional dilemma remains intact until the present day.



The scholarship under the modernist paradigm of nations and nationalism claims to have provided a general theory for understanding the nation-state phenomenon. The scholars argue that their modernist sociological paradigm of nationalism can be applied to all societies and hence has a universal appeal. My submission is that the complex phenomena of nations and nationalism cannot be explained and interpreted by any single theoretical paradigm that can be applied equally to all the existing nation-states of the world. The phenomena of nations and nationalism must be understood in the context, time, and space specifics. All the existing languages of nationalism - primordial, situationist (modernists), and constructivists – overlap in some respects and contribute, in varying degrees, to the understanding of the emergence of the nation-state phenomenon. The present essay will attempt to map out some of the theoretical underpinnings of modernist approaches to nations and nationalism and examine the validity of its assertion of generating a general theory of understanding the phenomena of nations and nationalism.

2. Mapping Modernists Concepts :

The modernist approaches to nationalism reject the traditional theories of nations as preexisting organic entities and define them as the products and aspects of modern epochs. They assert that nations and nationalism are distinctly modern phenomena. The context and the conditions of modernity demand and facilitate the emergence of nation-states. Modernity denotes the process of modernization itself and the development of industrialization, urbanization, increased literacy, and social mobility in socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. The scholars of the modernist paradigm reject nations as an organic and natural entities and adopt a situational-constructivist language, which refers that the elites socially create the nations in pursuit of political and economic goals. Hence, they all engage with the questions of the emergence and formation of nationalism and nation-states.

Ernest Gellner, the chief proponent of the modernization theory of nationalism, maintains that nationalism is not the awakening of an old, latent, dominant force. It is the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high cultures, each protected by its own state" (Gellner, 1983:48)³. It did not emerge before industrialization because of the non-conducive conditions during the agrarian stage of human history. Modernization demands social mobility and a degree of socio-cultural homogenization, which can be provided only by the agency of the state-controlled standardized universal education system and the means of communications, which were non-existent in the pre-modern period. The pre-modern societies have been highly stratified societies of elites and peasants where extreme forms of heterogeneity in culture and language were preserved. Modern society is based on progress, affluence, consumption, and meliorism. Its distinctive technological and productive base creates a literate, technically skillful, occupationally mobile, and homogenous society. Gellner further adds that these pools of homogenous liquid, within which fish of the same kind can move without cultural net or hindrance, are precisely what the ideal of nationalism requires. Gellner's nationalism is mainly contingent on two elements - state and nations. Gellner views the state as a centralized order-enforcing agency, capable of sustaining a high culture and ensuring its diffusion through an entire population.

For this reason, his ideal of nationalism is not a result of any inherent or universal appeal; it is essentially a consequence of the basic organizational principles of modern society. For Gellner, nationalism engenders nations and not the other way round. Gellner's nationalism is based on modern capitalist society's economic and functional demands.

The Marxists and neo-Marxists proponents of the modernist paradigm have engaged with even more economic explanations of the nation-state's emergence. From Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives, scholars have argued that the nation-states are primarily the consequences of the rise of capitalism. Benner writes that nations are, in part, the arena of capitalist development within which class contention occurs. For him, nationalism is a prescriptive ideology employed by all social classes 'as the building blocks with which [they] must work to preserve or redesign existing communities' (qtd. in Brown, 2000)⁴. Immanuel Wallerstein describes nations as the creation of structures of the modern economy. The state, for him, is an essential political formation necessary for the free movement of economic goods and the regulation and maintenance of a market economy. States have problems with cohesion and need uniformity delivered by nations and nationalism (Croucher, 2003)². The Marxist and the neo-Marxist paradigms of nationalism establish the nation-state as a superstructure that legitimates and reproduces a particular form of capitalist development.

Some scholars further develop the modernist arguments under the umbrella of the "uneven development paradigm." They hold that the regional disparities between the economic center and the economic periphery, engendered by industrialization, lead to the racial or cultural division of labor and develop reactive national consciousness among peripheral communities. This process explains how internal colonialism engenders ethno-regional nationalism against the existing state nationalism (Nairn, 1977)⁵; and how imperialism engendered anti-colonial nationalism in the third world (Blaut, 1987)⁶. Nairn examines the emergence of nationalism in underdeveloped societies and concludes that the elites of



these societies employ nationalism - a form of shared language and culture - to mobilize the masses around the goals of political and economic development. The rise of Scottish nationalism vis-a-vis English dominance testifies to Nairn's thesis.

Giddens (1985)⁶ and Tilly (1975)⁷ have adopted the modernist perspective for interpreting the emergence of nations and nationalism. For them, modernity represents development in administration, bureaucratization, communication, and state consolidation. Giddens argues that "the state is the pre-eminent power container of the modern era," and nations are the necessary accompanying form of human association - a distinct property of the modern state which Appadurai later termed as "the ideological alibi of the state" (qtd. in Croucher, 2003:10)².

One of the voices of the modernist paradigm that is more tilted towards cultural diffusion is Benedict Anderson and his thesis of the nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1991:6)⁸. He comprehensively analyzes the when, why, and how the nation's phenomenon and its proliferation are the universally salient cultural and political formulation of the modern era. For him, nations are cultural artifacts created in the eighteenth century due to "the spontaneous distillation of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces" (Anderson, 1991:4)⁸. The discrete forces include the decline of religious communities held together by sacred language, the collapse of the dynastic realm, and fundamental changes in the apprehension of time. These factors provided the context for imagining nations. At the same time, print-capitalism, state functionaries, maps, museums, and the census have provided the mechanisms that facilitated such imaginings (Croucher, 2003)².

After mapping out the development of modernist approaches, the conclusion emerges that they primarily depend upon the relationship between modernization and nationalism and hence overlook the role of other possible facilitators for the emergence of nations and nationalism.

3. Modernist Approaches: an analysis

The analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the modernist project points to some of its internal inconsistencies that challenge the validity of its assertion of centrality and universality of its perspectives.

One of the inconsistencies most modernist approaches to nationalism suffer from is its over-dependence on the functional paradigm. Most modernist scholars explain nationalism in terms of its beneficial consequences (functionality) for modern society. The functionalist paradigm itself in social theory has been under attack for having teleological inconsistencies when any cultural usage is readily attributed to its function. After going through their arguments, one is confused about what causes what and why. One can discern overwhelming dependence on functionalism in Gellner's thesis when he writes:

"So the economy needs both the new type of central culture and the central state; the culture needs the state, and the state probably needs the homogenous cultural branding of its flock.... In brief, the mutual relationship of modern culture and state is something quite new and springs, inevitably, from the requirements of modern society" (Gellner, 1983, 140).³

Leary comments that Gellner's arguments display the vices of functionalist reasoning in which events and processes occur wholly beyond human agents, in which consequence precede causes ('O'Leary, 1997, 191).⁹

Modernist approaches to nationalism have also been charged for being too reductionist, one-sided, and simplistic in treating the complex phenomena of nationalism and nation-states. They are highly apolitical and rest primarily on cultural and materialist premises. The ideas about nations, nationalism, and states based on economic determinism, the selection process of countries because of endogenous factors, qualification of possession of high culture, and transforming low culture into high for the formation of nations, is highly reductionist in approaches to understanding the complexities of nations and nationalism. The selection process of cultures becoming nations or nations constituting states is often determined by exogenous factors. Power politics play a more significant role than socio-economic modernization, and great powers have always been decisive arbitrators of nation or statehood. Leary argues that nations and states are formed 'by permission' rather than as a by-product of the strength of indigenous mobilization for nationhood. French helped the birth of the American nation, the Allies decided the fate of nations at the Versailles, and the departing colonial powers shaped the frontiers of new nations, which they left behind ('O'Leary, 1997, 212).⁹ Power politics and power resources provide an alternative selection mechanism for determining nationhood that most modernist concepts completely ignore.

Suppose the modernist approaches are adopted as central tools for interpreting nationalism and the emergence of nation-states. They fail to account for the first emergence of nationalism in eighteenth-century Britain and France and the nationalist movements in Western and Eastern Europe. There are very few instances where industrialization has indirectly



influenced nation formation. By exchanging goods with the industrialized (primarily German-speaking) areas of Bohemia and Moravia, the Czech-speaking rural population in agrarian regions had strong market relations. The national integration of Belgium was provisionally impacted by the industrialization of its southern, Francophone part. The modernist thesis is contradicted by the instance of South Wales, where industrialization influenced the disintegration of the Welsh nationalist movement. Industrialization can be regarded as one of many preconditions of successful nation formations and, indeed, not the starting point for spreading nationalism.

Smith (1978)¹⁰ strongly criticizes the claims of modernist approaches for being a general theory of nationalism and asserts that it has a notorious vagueness of definition as well as of assuming that all the processes subsumed under the elastic phrase, 'the social concomitants of industrialization,' hang indissolubly together (qtd. in Smith, 1978).¹⁰ He argues further that one observes more than one process at work in any area experiencing the transformation brought by the Western impact. However, the paradoxes of modernist approaches do not discredit their significance in understanding the phenomena of nations and nationalism. One can conclude that amongst the many factors that mediate the formation of nations and nationalism, the modernist approaches are variants that supplement the understanding of the emergence and prevalence of nations and nationalism.

REFERENCES :

1. Hass, B. E. (1986): What is nationalism and why should we study it? *International Organization*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 707-744.
2. Croucher, S.L. (2003): Perpetual Imagining; Nationhood in a Global Era. *International Studies Review*, 5, pp.1-24.
3. Gellner, Ernest (1983): *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
4. Brown, D. (2000): *Contemporary Nationalism Civic Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics*, London, and New York: Routledge.
5. Nairn, T. (1977): *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*. London: New Left Books.
6. Giddens, A. (1985): *The Nation-State and Violence*. Cambridge: Polity.
7. Tilly, C. (1975): *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
8. Anderson, B (1991): *Imagined Communities*. Revised edition, London: Verso.
9. 'O' Leary, Brendan (1997): On the Nature of Nationalism: An Appraisal of Ernest Gellner's Writings on Nationalism. *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 27, pp. 191-222.
10. Smith, A.D. (1978): 'The Diffusion of Nationalism: Some Historical and Sociological Perspectives, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 234-248.