***Nations and nationalism – A conceptual Understanding***

Aim:

* What is a nation?
* What is nationalism?
* Where does national identity come from?
* How does this apply to our case studies?

One phenomenon that has played a crucial role in the political history of the last two centuries is nationalism. It has inspired numerous political movements and led to countless wars that have broken up empires and created many sovereign states. It has also paved the way for the construction of collective identities and has inspired and mobilized millions of people. National assertions have resulted in the formation of the nation-state which, even now, is seen as the ideal political institution that embodies the aspirations of the people. And today, the nation-state has become the principal political institution of the world, and national identity, is often one's primary, if not the only identity.

One feature of nationalism is ·its enormous mobilizing power. Nationalism inspires and unites unknown millions into a single unit. The nation and its symbols arouse passion. Its triumphs, failures and sorrows are ardently shared by the masses. Even in our globalizing world, nationalism continues to be an inspiring force. Such a survival of nationalism is, contrary to the expectations of nineteenth century scholars, both liberals and Marxists, who saw it as a passing phenomenon giving way to universalism. Nationalism, however, has not only survived but has become one of the most influential factors in world politics. And, as observed by Hobsbawm, the history of the last two centuries IS incomprehensible without having some understanding of the nation and the terms derived from it?

The emergence of nationalism is generally viewed in association with the French Revolution. The revolution acknowledged and incorporated in the *Rights of Man as Citizen,* perhaps for the first time in history, the nation as the source of political authority. Since then nationalism has immensely influenced political developments all over the world. In Europe, during the nineteenth century, a series of national movements emerged which had, at their core, the hopes for liberation and unification of many oppressed or fragmented people.

In the twentieth century national aspirations and national movements continued to be a very powerful political force. This century also witnessed the universalisation of the phenomenon. In the first half of the century Europe remained the center of national assertions. However, in the second half, colonial peoples raised the slogan of nationalism resulting in the emancipation of a large number of Afro-Asian states from colonial rule. Later, in the last quarter the century, a new wave of nationalism, what is generally referred as ethnic or ethno- nationalism, appeared on the political landscape.

In spite of being a prominent political phenomenon for a long period, there is a lot of confusion about the exact nature of nationalism. This is because scholars on nationalism hold divergent views. They see it as a political doctrine, a sentiment, a movement or as an instrument to capture power. Thus, without producing a lucid understanding, academic discussions engage us in diverse positions and debates. Even an accomplished scholar like Anderson observes that the nation and nationalism is notoriously difficult to define

The fact remains that there is no clear definition of nationalism – lots of debate amongst scholars as to its meaning.

Nationalism is about two widely accepted things;

* The nation and control over territory – specifically the perceived ‘Homeland’
* It has been a maker and destroyer of states in the past two hundred years
* Although it is an elite driven phenomenon it has attracted the masses who have enthusiastically followed nationalist leaders.

A nation is not a state (primary political unit) or country (territorial unit) e.g. Nigeria is a state and a country but not a nation.

It is not related to ethnicity. A nation can emerge from an ethnic group but it is more than that.

***What is a nation?***

The most significant divisions amongst nationalist scholars is between Subjective and objective ideas of national identity.

*Subjective concept*

The nation is based on the notion that nations are constructed around ideas, and the key to national identity is that the people have come to believe that they are a nation. That nationalism is a feeling and a belief that they belong together as a nation.

*Objective Factors*

Objective definition of the nation focus on a list of observable, concrete characteristics, some or all of which all nations share. There is no set defined list of characteristics that can be used to define nations. However, it is important that there are certain characteristics that have a tendency to be used to link members of the nation together. A nation cannot exist without shared cultural features, such as common myths, values and customs, and a prevailing single language is found in most nations.

*A combination?*

To say that nations are groups that consider themselves nations, without considering the kinds of things that make people feel that they are nations, is not a fruitful approach to defining the term.

*Self – determination*

Shared cultural features are a necessary part of national identity. But there is more to being a nation that mutual features. Members of a nation are also linked by a belief in the right of the group to territorial self-determination.

*So……..*

Nation is a collective of people

*So what makes them different to other groups in society?*

What makes nations different from other groups is that they are groups of people linked by unifying cultural characteristics and the desire to control a territory that is thought of as the groups’ rightful homeland. “culture” is a range of traits and beliefs, the particular ones stressed by one nation may differ from those stressed by another. Likewise, while the belief in the right to territorial control is common in all nations, the particular type of territory and even the degree of control will vary from case to case.

Both of these elements – culture and the belief in territorial control play powerful unifying roles in national identity. But the belief in territorial self-determination in key to understanding the difference between nations and other social collectives. Many groups have shared myths, values and symbols (Religious groups, ethnic groups or even professional associations). But nations are not just unified by culture; they are also unified by a particular – and particularly powerful – sense of purpose: controlling the territory that the members of the group believe belongs to them.

It should now be clear why the term nation cannot be used to describe purely ethnic groups. Nations differ from ethnic groups because of a nations’ belief in its right to territorial control. Nations need not even be based on a certain ethnic identity. Ethnicity dos not necessarily determine national identity. Nations who have shared cultural features can be multiethnic in their makeup.

***What is nationalism?***

Nationalism is not………

*Patriotism* – just as nation is a group of people not a state – nationalism is about the nation and not an existing state. It is not loyalty to an existing state – whilst pride in or loyalty to ones state is a definition of patriotism, it is a bad definition of nationalism. Likewise, pride in or loyalty to one’s nation is not patriotism.

*Ethnic politics* – a political mobilization of people based on ethnicity – can be a starting point for something that becomes nationalism, but alone is not nationalism.

*Ethnic conflict* – emerge over many things (affirmative action policies, language laws etc.). National conflicts must involve disputes over territory to be truly ‘national’.

*Belief versus movement*

Finding a broadly acceptable definition of nationalism is not an easy task and there are many perspectives. The main divide between scholars is whether nationalism is a belief or a movement.

One set of approaches to the definition of nationalism considers it be a belief, idea, concept or principle. An idea or state of mind or a political ideology.

Another approach to defining nationalism takes it to be a process or movement. It is thought of as the creation of the unifying features of the nation or the actions that result from the beliefs of the group.

Nationalism defined as an organized endeavor to control the national homeland is common.

One way to bridge the divide between the belief v movement debate is to consider nationalism both an ideology and a movement. Bringing these visions together, nationalism is defined as the pursuit – through argument or other activity – of a set of rights and privileges for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or independence.

All nationalisms therefore share two important ideas about boundaries of the nation (1) they define, at least roughly, the territorial boundaries that the nation has a right to control, and (2) they define the membership boundaries of the population that makes up the nation – the group that deserves this territorial control and that is entitled to the supreme loyalty of other members of the collective.

Put simply ideas of nationalism answer two questions;

1. Who is the nation?
2. What territory does the nation have a right to control?

Membership boundaries are set by members of the nation themselves, usually by an intellectual or political elite, though they may be based on ideas of surrounding groups as well. They establish the ‘*we’* that possess the right to control the homeland (and as a result the *they* that does not share this right). This does not mean that the boundaries are set easily. The development of successful claims over boundaries may involve struggles with another group, serious struggles within the nation over competing definitions of the territorial and membership boundaries and difficulty in transmitting the ideas of national membership boundaries to the masses.

One set of answers to the two questions of nationalism wins and at the time of independence one set of ideas about the nation and its homeland is likely to be dominant. But because of the controversial nature of the nationalism questions, rival ideas of the nation and national homeland may exist long after independence.

***Where does national identity come from?***

There are generally three rival perspectives

*Primordial approach* – national identity is natural, based on deep seated features such as race, language, religion and other cultural features. Such features lead national boundaries to form naturally. Common with the media and governments this approach is widely criticized by scholars today. It does have some support in the community, particularly Anthony Smith who has argued that nations have “ethnic cores”.

*Constructivism approach* – argues that national identity – like other group identities, is a social construction. Comaroff points to several strands of constructivism (cultural, political etc.) but argues that they are all based on the same idea: that social identities “are products of human agency”.

*Instrumentalism approach* - national identity is seen as instrumental and manipulated by elites.

Maybe a more combined approach is more suitable – Cultural features and arguments regarding territorial control are constructed by elites they are not constructed out of thin air. Things such as language, religion and historical events provide the tools to create nations.

Elites are important in the development and triggering of national identity one must not overlook the importance of existing features of the population, historical events and current happenings in the shaping of the actions of the elites.

***Leadership***

No matter how much elites believe in their views of the nation, its homeland and its claim to independence, nationalism will die out without the support of the masses. Thus, nationalist elites must transmit their ideas to the masses and make certain that the masses are inspired and willing to act on these idea. But as mentioned earlier, while a nationalist elite must mobilize the masses for nationalism to be successful the transmission of nationalism to the masses can involve a battle between competing nationalist elites with competing visions of the nation and of territorial control

**India -** [**http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/rise-of-nationalism-in-india-indian-history/648**](http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/rise-of-nationalism-in-india-indian-history/648)

[**http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/growth-of-indian-nationalism-10-factors/3184**](http://www.historydiscussion.net/history-of-india/growth-of-indian-nationalism-10-factors/3184)

**Views and perspectives**

**Nation**

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| **Stalin** who defines the nation as a "historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture." | **Hutchinson and Smith** - “perhaps the central difficulty In the study of nations and nationalism has been the problem of finding adequate and agreed definitions of the key concepts, nation and nationalism”. |
| **Tamir** – a nation is a “community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and continuous genealogy”. | **Hobsbawm** believes “as an initial working assumption, any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a ‘nation’ will be treated as such.” |
| **Emerson** – Claims the most basic thing that can be said about a nation “is that it is a body of people who feel they are a nation” | **Nodia** – “a nation is a community of people organized around the idea of self-determination”. |
| **Renan** – claims that an nation ‘is a grand solidarity constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again. It supposes a past, it renews itself especially in the present by a tangible deed: the approval, the desire, clearly expressed, to continue the communal life. The existence of a nation is an everyday plebiscite; it is. Like the very existence of the individual, a perpetual affirmation of life”. | **Haas** defines the nation as a “socially mobilized body of individuals, believing themselves to be united by some set of characteristics that differentiate them (in their own minds) from outsiders, striving to create or maintain their own state”. |
| **Barrington** - Nations are “collectives united by shared cultural features (such as language, myths and values) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination”. |  |

**Nationalism**

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| **Dan Smith** – claims that the nation “is a political idea and nationalism is a political movement”. | **Gellner’s** definition – “a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent (in harmony)” |
| **Haas** – defines nationalism as “a belief held by a group of people that they ought to constitute a nation, or that they already are one”. | **Armstrong** – labelled nationalism as a “political doctrine”. |
| **Kohn** - sees it as an “idea” or a “state of mind”. | **Brass** – states that nationalism “ is a political movement by definition”. |
| **Ignatieff** – sees nationalism “as a notion that combines the political idea of territorial self-determination, the cultural idea of the nation as one’s primary identity and a moral idea of justification of action to protect the rights of the nation against the ‘other’”. | **Van Evra** – “I define nationalism as a political movement having two characteristics (1) individual members give their primary loyalty to their own ethnic or national community; this loyalty supersedes their loyalty to other groups, for example, those based on common kinship or political ideology; and (2) these ethnic or national communities desire their own independent state.” |
| **Melor** – defines nationalism as “the political expression of the nation’s aspirations”, including control over territory that members of the nation “perceive as their homeland by right”. | **Hutchinson and Smith** claim nationalism “as an ideology and movement, nationalism exerted a strong influence in the American and French Revolutions.” Nationalism is an “ideological movement” |