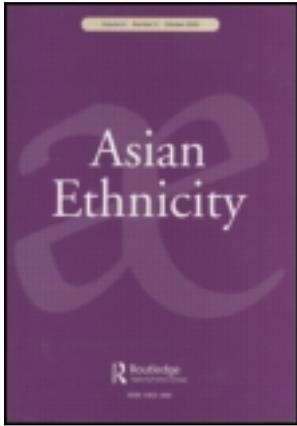


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REVIEW ARTICLE

Synthesising Gellner, Smith, and Barth: building a preliminary analytical framework for exploring the relationships between ethnic groups, nations, and nationalism

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This review article synthesises Gellner's, Smith's, and Barth's ideas about ethnic groups and nations. It redefines the concepts of the ethnic group, nation, and nationalism. An ethnic group can be defined as a group of people who are self-differentiated from other groups. A nation can be defined as an ethnic group or groups politically mobilised by elite-made nationalism. Furthermore, nationalism can be defined as an ideology which demands that an ethnic group or groups should have their own state. In effect, a conceptual framework is formulated, although how useful the framework can be is subject to further empirical research.

Keywords: Ernest Gellner; Anthony Smith; Frederick Barth; ethnic groups; nations; nationalism

Introduction

This review article attempts to synthesise Ernest Gellner's view on nations, Anthony Smith's theory about both nations and ethnic groups, and Frederick Barth's definition of ethnic groups.¹ Rather than providing a detailed review of each book written by these three prominent authors, this review article focuses on their general arguments. It weaves together the three authors' concepts and theories by arguing that their ideas are more complementary to each other than they appear to be. This review article suggests that a nation can be defined as an ethnic group or groups that are mobilised by elite-made nationalism. Moreover, an ethnic group can be defined as a group of people who are self-differentiated from other groups of people. Furthermore, nationalism can be defined as an ideology that claims an ethnic group or groups should have their own state. Through this ideology, the ethnic group or groups are transformed into a nation. Nationalism thus becomes the linkage.

The definitions provided above can be a useful set of analytical framework for evaluating issues of ethnicity, national identity, and national integration policy. Certainly, the utility of the concepts redefined by this review article is subject to further empirical research. Nevertheless, an eclectic approach to the three authors (who are usually regarded as scholars belonging to different and mutually incompatible schools) can generate novel and useful insights into the relations

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between ethnic groups and nations. The next section, therefore, deals with Gellner's theory of nationalism. The third section of this article discusses Smith's ethno-symbolism, and the fourth section interprets Barth's boundary approach.²

Gellner's theory of nationalism

This section outlines **Gellner's view on nations and nationalism and emphasises that nations and nationalism are created by elites and intelligentsias.**³ This section also suggests that the incentives for creating nationalism and the ingredients of such a creation are **generated in the process of modernisation.**

As Gellner convincingly argues, the emergence of nationalism is closely related to modernisation.⁴ The process of modernisation is closely linked to the promotion of education and literacy. **Education and literacy provide the state with essential infrastructure to extend its administrative reach over its territory.** In other words, **education and literacy help the state strengthen its penetrative and extractive capacity over the territory that it dominates.** Thus, the state has a material incentive to promote education and literacy. This is similar to what Giddens has rightfully argued.⁵ In the processes of modern European state formation, the increasing level of education and literacy of society boosted the states' capacity of storing administrative information. This capacity, in turn, enhanced the administrative reach of the states.

Gellner also clearly points out that in order to deliver education and promote literacy up to the level at which the state's administrative reach can be fortified,⁶ **the education programmes have to be effective enough to generate the positive impact on the state's capacity of penetration and extraction.** But for the programmes to be effective, a plenty of resources, which very often can be afforded only by the state, are necessary in order to sustain a sufficient number of specialists, teachers, and intellectuals.

Additionally, education and literacy provided by the state need to be delivered in a certain language form, and it is more practical and useful to develop the ability of the ruled to read the literature of their own vernacular. In Gellner's own words,

it is a great help if the language in which he is literate is identical with, or at least fairly close to, the vernacular in which he was reared in the family context. Continuity between the idioms of home and school facilitate the task of education.⁷

The similarity and proximity between the written language of education delivered by the state and vernacular spoken language used at home can be conducive to a sense of community.

The above argument implies a problem for modernising empires. As Gellner points out,⁸ the language used at the centre of the empires normally becomes the official language for governing, industrial, and educational use. **However, when this official language and its written form are imposed on the areas in which the local vernacular is not compatible with the official language, the effectiveness of deriving loyalty from these areas by imposing the official language may not live up to the expectation, especially when industrialisation and modernisation in the empire proceed in an uneven manner.**

Indeed, 'industrialisation and modernisation notoriously proceed in an uneven manner'.⁹ Sharp social stratification can be generated by the unevenly disseminated industrialisation and economic growth. That is to say, **the uneven industrialisation**

and economic growth can create groups of people who are excluded from or less favoured by the process of modernisation. Thus, the stratification, in turn, may offer incentives and opportunities for rebellious movements. The leaders and intelligentsias who emerge from these groups can be discontent and disgruntled, especially in the cases in which the geographical origins of these groups belong to the areas where the imposed official language is incompatible with the local vernaculars.

The leaders and intelligentsias of the underprivileged may advocate secessions and claim that secessions can resolve the problems of unevenly spread modernisation.¹⁰ In other words, these leaders, intelligentsias, and elites believe that successful secession can bring in a more prosperous future and development. Therefore, influenced by such a discourse, the underprivileged natives can support their leaders' ideologies and seek secession, even though history has shown that there tend to be only disillusion and irremovable hardship that can be shared with the natives (particularly the local proletariats) after secession.

The crucial idea implied in Gellner's argument presented above is that nationalism produces nations although nationalism requires pre-existing social factors to work on.¹¹ Based on this observation, Gellner defines nationalism as 'a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent'.¹² Moreover, nationalist sentiment can be understood as 'the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment'. And, thus, a nationalist movement 'is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind'.¹³

Having briefly discussed Gellner's viewpoints on nations and nationalism, this review article echoes his argument with the following ideas. First, Gellner has stressed the elitist aspect of nations and nationalism. Second, national identity can be viewed as a nationalist sentiment or a sense of community. Third, nationalism is an elite-made ideology that functions as a provocative device mobilising the national identity of the masses.

Smith's ethno-symbolism

The previous section acknowledges the view that nations are created, and nationalism is an elite-made ideology. And this section identifies that the formation of nations and nationalism require ethnic elements. It is worth noting that Smith labelled Gellner as a modernist.¹⁴ The so-called modernists view the emergence of nations as a relative novel, modern phenomenon. The modernist arguments can be summarised by Smith's words below.¹⁵

It was then that the ideal of the sovereignty of the people was fused with the drive to cultural homogeneity, to forge self-determining nations of co-cultural citizens. Hence, nations as well as nationalism are purely modern phenomena, without roots in the past.

The modernists have been criticised by Smith,¹⁶ because of their lack of account for the ethnic foundations of nationalism and national identity. The modernists are deemed overly deterministic and functional in the sense that national identity has been employed to serve the states' and elites' interests. This modernist view cannot explain the emotional forces of nationalism and national identity. Furthermore, the modernists are 'too dismissive of the legacies of pre-modern ethnic and cultural ties'.¹⁷ By criticising the modernists, Smith develops his own approach: ethno-

symbolism.¹⁸ This approach identifies that the memories, myths, symbols, and traditions are ethnic roots of a nation. These ethnic roots provide the nationalist elites with the materials and foundations to build up nationalism.

In order to single out the critical role played by ethnic elements in the process of national formation, ethno-symbolism explores several crucial themes. The first theme is to discover the 'origins and formation of nations, as well as their possible future course, over a long period of time' through historical methods.¹⁹ The purpose of such an exploration is to detach the emergence of nations from the process of modernisation and to examine a nation's 'recurrence, continuity, and reappropriation' of its ethnic roots.²⁰

Although the modern nations emerged mainly after the period of French and American Revolutions, there are still several nations that predate the process of modernisation in the West.²¹ Nations are not solely constructed for their contemporary political demands. Nations are continuously linked with their ethnic roots. In the process of national formation, there is a tendency to rediscover and reappropriate the nation's ethnic past.²² For Smith, a nation is 'a named human population sharing an historical territory, a mass, public, culture, a common economy, and common legal rights and duties for all members'.²³ Although this review article does not follow the above definition, this article agrees with Smith's idea that there are ethnical elements and materials used in the creation of a nation.

The second theme of ethno-symbolism is to distinguish the *ethnie* (or as this review article calls, the ethnic group) from the nation. Smith defines an ethnic group as

a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.²⁴

Comparing the above definition of the ethnic group with that of the nation is useful for pointing out two crucial differences between these two entities. First, a nation must have its own state (or would-be state), which controls (or would control) certain territory, whereas an ethnic group needs not. Ethnic groups may enjoy a linkage with their homeland (imagined or materialised), but they are by and large cultural and emotional entities. Second, a nation can integrate an ethnic group or groups with its civil elements, such as common economic practices and legal rights and duties. In other words, nations and nationalism are a special consequence of the political development of ethnic groups.

The third theme of ethno-symbolism is the myth, memories, and symbols of an ethnic group. Ethno-symbolism examines how these factors affect the formation of a nation and their influences on the emotional forces of the nation and nationalism.

The fourth theme is the routes through which a nation is created. The first route is lateral (and synchronic) bureaucratic incorporation. Through this route, the dominant ethnic group is the core, whereas the 'lower strata and outlying regions were gradually incorporated in the state, which was grounded upon a dominant ethnic core'.²⁵ The second is a vertical (and diachronic) route, or the rediscovery of the ethnic past. Through this route, indigenous intelligentsias and elites rediscover, authenticate, and appropriate the ethnic common ground of the lower strata in order to rouse them to political actions so as to create ethnic nations.²⁶

Notably, elites still play a crucial role in above two routes. Indeed, the ethnic roots and ingredients that prevail among the masses and are utilised for the creation of nations have been highlighted by the ethno-symbolic approach. Nonetheless, the

above two routes, in effect, are consistent with Gellner's view on the role of elites and intelligentsias in the nation building and the formulation of nationalism.²⁷

The final theme is the role of nationalism. For the ethno-symbolic approach, nationalism serves as an ideological device. But to be more specific, nationalism, observed through the lens of ethno-symbolism, usually declares three ideals: national autonomy, national unity, and national identity.²⁸ Nationalism stimulates the aspiration of nations and would-be nations for national emancipation.

Above all, not only does ethno-symbolism indicate the ethnic roots of a nation and the possibility of tracing the nation back to the pre-modern era, but also recognises the importance of elite-made nationalism and the myths, memories, and symbols of an ethnic group or groups used for the creation of nationalism and the nation. Paying attention to the ethnic group and acknowledging the role of nationalism at the same time are tantamount to striking a balance between examining the elitist creation of the nation and exploring the pre-existing ethnic elements of the masses.

Nevertheless, no matter how useful this ethno-symbolic approach is, an ethnic group is treated as a given, fixed, and objective unit, even though the approach has emphasised the importance of studying the contents of the ethnic group. Furthermore, too much attention paid to the continuity between an ethnic group and a nation can cause a misleading impression that a certain ethnic group necessarily constitutes a corresponding nation. The above deficiency of ethno-symbolism originates from its failure to recognise the fluidity and plasticity of ethnic identity, or ethnicity.

Barth's boundary approach

The ethno-symbolic approach pays due respect to the ethnic components that are used as ingredients for the creation of a nation. But Barth convincingly suggests that the studies of ethnic groups, including ethno-symbolism, only pay attention to the overt cultural contents of the ethnic groups.²⁹ These studies imply that each ethnic group is isolated from others and developing their own culture independently, and they see 'a race = a culture = a language and that a society = a unit which rejects or discriminates against each others'.³⁰ That is, ethnic groups are viewed as fixed, concrete culture-bearing units in these studies. These students imply that there is a one-to-one relationship between a culture and an ethnic group.

On the contrary, Barth persuasively argues that an ethnic group should be viewed as 'a form of social organisation'.³¹ For him, there is no one-to-one relationship between an ethnic group and a set of cultural boundaries. Crucially, it is the ethnic group themselves who make cultural proximities and dissimilarities significant. In other words, cultural boundaries can be manipulated. People can employ the dissimilarities to create a boundary between themselves and others. So long as the boundary is erected in order to categorise 'us' and 'them', the existence of the boundary depends on continuous expression and validation of the cultural difference. Ethnic groups 'only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behaviour'.³²

Thus, the cultural contents are important ingredients for the creation of nations, and how people manipulate cultural proximities and dissimilarities to see themselves different than others is critical for the construction of ethnic groups, which in turn under the influence of nationalism, can be converted into a nation (or nations).

It is useful to summarise the Barthian characterisation of an ethnic group below. First, ethnic groups are concerned with cultural differentiation. Second, an ethnic group is founded on the consequences of socio-cultural interactions between groups. Third, an ethnic group is not a fixed cultural unit. It is rather produced and reproduced in socio-cultural interactions and transactions. Last, but by no means least, a certain ethnic identity is an identity at both individual and collective levels, reified in socio-cultural interactions and transactions, and perceived and accepted in self-identification.³³

Conclusion

Having discussed Gellner's, Smith's, and Barth's ideas,³⁴ it is high time that this review article should synthesise the arguments and attempt to redefine the critical concepts of the ethnic group, nation, and nationalism. **Gellner rightfully argues that a nation is primarily created by elites with nationalism**, whereas Smith supplements (though in the form of severe criticisms) **Gellner's proposition with ethno-symbolism, which persuasively suggests that elites (including intelligentsias) reappropriate, reconstruct, and transform the ethnic roots of nations: myths, memories, symbols, and traditions.**³⁵ That is to say, **elites do not create a nation as they wish but construct the nation with materials derived from its ethnic contents.** However, ethnic groups and ethnic identities are more complex than ethno-symbolism can explicate. Ethnic groups, as Barth indicates,³⁶ can be properly defined only by cultural boundaries. An ethnic group is not a fixed culture-bearing unit. **Ethnic identities are generated by socio-cultural differentiation.**

Therefore, this review article redefines the following essential concepts. An ethnic group can be defined as a group of people who are self-differentiated from other groups of people. Further, **a nation can be defined as an ethnic group or groups politically mobilised by elite-made nationalism.** Politics and the state are involved in the building of a nation. Furthermore, nationalism can be defined as an ideology that demands that an ethnic group or groups should have their own political community (or the state). This nationalistic ideology transforms an ethnic group or groups into a nation. Nonetheless, **a national identity cannot be confused with nationalism, for the former is nationalistic sentiment.**

Another crucial point worth noting is that the relationship between ethnic groups and nations is not a one-to-one relationship. Conceptually speaking, an ethnic group can be split into two or more nations, because the members of these nations may regard themselves as the same ethnic group while politically mobilised for supporting different states (or would-be states) and political causes. Above all, it can be argued that the above definitions offered by this review article form a preliminary analytical framework for clarifying and exploring the relationships between ethnic groups, nations, and nationalism in further empirical research.

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Notes

1. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Smith, *Ethno-symbolism*; Barth, *Ethnic Groups*.

2. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*; and Barth, *Ethnic Groups*.
3. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; "Nationalism and Modernisation."
4. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.
5. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique*.
6. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; "Nationalism and Modernisation."
7. Gellner, "Nationalism and Modernisation," 57.
8. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; "Nationalism and Modernisation."
9. Gellner, "Nationalism and Modernisation," 60.
10. Gellner, "Nationalism and Modernisation."
11. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; "Nationalism and Modernisation."
12. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1.
13. Ibid.
14. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*.
15. Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 6.
16. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*; *Myths and Memories*; *The Nation in History*.
17. Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 7.
18. Smith, *Myths and Memories*.
19. Ibid., 10.
20. Ibid, 11.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid; and Smith, *Ethno-symbolism*.
23. Smith, *Myths and Memories*, 11.
24. Smith, *The Nation in History*, 65.
25. Smith, "The Origins of Nations," 148.
26. Smith, *The Nation in History*.
27. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.
28. Smith, *The Nation in History*, 73.
29. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*.
30. Ibid., 11.
31. Ibid., 13.
32. Ibid., 15.
33. Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity*.
34. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*; and Barth, *Ethnic Groups*.
35. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*.
36. Barth, *Ethnic Groups*.

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