

Reflections On (Of) Nationalism

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This project attempts to define the epistemological structure of nationalism and to suggest a theoretical model through which this can be done. I would argue that this theorization will apply to nationalism *per se*; however, my own training and experience predicate that my examples will be drawn from a specifically Irish context. I would argue that it is only through an understanding of the epistemological status of nationalism that any real attempt can be made to offer it to critique.

Lacan and the construction of the ego: The Mirror Stage

Jacques Lacan's 'mirror stage,' wherein the construction of the ego is seen in terms of reflection in a mirror, would seem to be a valid theoretical model of the nationalist epistemology. Lacan posits an identification between the child and the reflection; the ego is seen as created out of the desire to completely identify with the reflection. To the inchoate child, the reflection is fixed, stable and coherent. Lacan sees the genesis of the ego as fictive, constantly attempting to identify with this image.

Nationalism and the Lacanian Imaginary

Lacan calls this process the mirror stage, and sees it as part of the Imaginary order of identification the image of a subject being captated by a reflection, which is both idealized and at the same time frozen is a paradigm for the identificatory processes of nationalism. The captation of the child by his reflection is an analogue of the captation of a people by their nationalist mirror-image. The dual nature of the scopic field between an *ethnie* and the projection of their identity is central to nationalism; that there is no third party in this scopic bijection is another cogent factor as the identification is mutually fulfilling, there is no room for anything or anyone else.

Nationalism and linguistic misrecognitions

For Lacan, the ego image is always a *m. conaissance*, a misrecognition. The reflection seems to be far in advance of the individual, while at the same time a two dimensional projection of a three dimensional entity. This two-dimensionality is inherent in the nationalist *weltanschauung* as anything that attempts to interfere in the scopic field of a people and their nationalistic reflection is seen as dangerous. In Lacanian terms, such misrecognition takes place in the scopic field, the visual plane. In this theoretical application of Lacanian theory, the misrecognition takes place linguistically, with language being used to cement the relationship between a people and their idealized image: literature, song, rhetoric, music all combine, as cultural nationalism to create the nationalistic Imaginary.

Identification, misrecognitions and aggressivity

The connection, in the mirror stage, between narcissism and aggressivity is another important aspect of this theory. Imaginary relationships are dominated by ambivalent emotions, by a desire to become the image in the mirror, and on realizing the futility of this desire, by

aggressivity. This image can become a source of hatred, as it can never be internalized, hence aggressivity also occurs when the specular dyad is interrupted. In terms of nationalism, anything that intervenes in the specular relationship between the *ethnie* and its idealized reflection can be subject to aggression.

Nationalism and essentialism

Etymologically, the root '*nasci*' -- '*to be born*' defines the essentialist tenor of nationalism. Anthony Smith uses the term '*ethnie*' to focus on the biologism and ethnocentrism that lie at the core of the term. With its monocultural, monological and monotheistic view of the world there is little room for plurality or hybridity so many religious and cultural laws are predicated on the notion of singularity and purity -- the *volk*.

Aesthetic ideology: race and place

The definition of a nation often centres on the trope of home, or homeland, actual or notional. Place has a teleological significance which is signified through language; the aestheticization of place as a performative of possession is part of all nationalist movements. A specific genre in Irish literature, *dinnseanchas*, the poetry of place, claims a sacred relationship between a people, a language and a place. Place can function as a mirror, reflecting a vision of the nation. Identifications that include language, place, and culture by definition set borders; to be a people is to know that others don't belong. Signifiers of belonging and identity are Janus-faced in that they also signify exclusion and otherness. In terms of named places, which are part of a nation's mythical homeland, aggressivity is sanctioned by the *ethnie*, with the resultant addition to the English language of the euphemism '*ethnic cleansing*', a descendent of the Nazi term '*relocation*' and '*resettlement*', as people who don't share the beliefs and the reading of history, often seen as teleological in its unveiling of the nationalist spirit, should not have access to the homeland.

Nationalism and cultural nationalism

The two are mutually dependent. Nationalism needs culture and myth to create the history that gives rise to nationalistic ideology. Narrative is seminal to constitution of nationalism as myth allows for the elision of troublesome historical facts. A people becomes identified as a people through shared cultural and mythological narratives; group definition is located in such cultural and literary similarity. A national literature embodies traits that both define '*our*' race and distinguish it from others; a politics based on such a necessarily fictive *weltanschauung* must treat others outside the *ethnie*, or the *volk*, as different and perhaps inferior in some way, and this leads to the violence that is endemic to nationalist movements.

Literature as constitutive of nationalist ideology

Poems, songs and stories can serve to create the identificatory misrecognitions that are seminal to nationalism. William Butler Yeats's role as one of the major artificers of the notion of Celtic Ireland is well known. In works such as *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* he set out the parameters of a nationalistic ethos, which had political consequences: one thinks of the resonant lines:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?

One also thinks of the numerous *Aisling* poems in the Irish language, a genre where Ireland, personified in the form of a beautiful young woman, comes in a vision to the sleeping poet, and urges him to support the Stuart cause. The writings of Irish nationalists from Mangan, through Padraic Pearse to Bobby Sands and Gerry Adams are a potent force in the ongoing reinforcement of the homogenous Irish Catholic nationalist identity. Similarly, teleological readings of Irish history as a narrative of the coming into being of a chosen people with their historic homeland, and of a nation-wide anti-British position, have the same reinforcing effect.

Rhetorical readings: personification, anthropomorphism and prosopopeia

These three master tropes of nationalism are the means by which eudaemonic notions of pleasure and pain are transferred into the political sphere. Through the giving of face or the personalising of a country, the adherents of a nationalist cause seem to have some form of personal relationship with the country, a relationship that transcends the political and ideological. Yeats's play, *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* is a *locus classicus* of this genre, with Ireland, personified as a poor old woman, being transformed by the end of a play into a young queen, renewed by the sacrifice of her people.

Politics and ideology

The past can also be used to bind this imaginary relationship, as witnessed by the rhetoric of the imaginary that is to be found in the *Green Book*, the training manual of the Provisional IRA. Here, the imaginary relationship that is constitutive of nationalism is obvious:

Commitment to the Republican Movement is the firm belief that its struggle both military and political is morally justified, that war is morally justified and that the Army is the direct representatives [sic] of the 1918 D il *ireann parliament, and that as such they are the legal and lawful government of the Irish Republic, which has the moral right to pass laws for, and claim jurisdiction over, the whole geographical fragment of Ireland ... and all of its people regardless of creed or loyalty.

This is the discourse of nationalism, embodying its imaginary epistemology. Time is frozen in a specular identification with the 'D il of 1918'. All subsequent elections and democratic expressions of will are null and void. They do not correspond with the totalising image, and must therefore be destroyed. All territory and people, 'regardless of loyalty or creed' are claimed as part of the nationalist imaginary. The chilling question of exactly what is to be done with those whose loyalty is not to the D il of 1918, is left unspoken and unanswered.

Literature, reading and the critique of nationalism

Theoretical reading of nationalist texts allows for a deconstruction of pretensions towards universality and democratic pluralism that are often made. The credo of the Provisional IRA '*tiocfaidh r l*', for example translates as '*our day/time will come*'. However, a closer reading of this would question who is included in the pronoun 'r' and what will happen to those who are not part of '*us*', given that this participation is grounded on being born into such a grouping. Here, a theoretically grounded reading practice will allow a process of demystification to undo a lot of the claims towards fairness and equality that accompany much under-examined nationalistic rhetoric.

The Lacanian Symbolic and the critique of nationalism

The Symbolic order is that which is concerned, according to Lacan, with all symbolic systems. This is the order which introduces the post-mirror stage infant into the world of language, and the laws of society. Language, as system, wherein desire is created but never fully satisfied, is seen as the opposite to Imaginary identifications. In terms of nationalistic discourse, the Symbolic order, deconstructs the specular fullness of identification, and allows for the entrance of others into the mother-child dyad of the Imaginary order. Lacan sees that identifications alone will not allow for societal and linguistic growth in the child. Identifications with the self and the mother are a stage beyond which the child must develop. In terms of the nationalist Imaginary, to remain captated by this mirror stage is to deny a society any sense of growth or development; to fix the meaning of history, literature and race in Imaginary misrecognitions of fullness is to reduce three-dimensional life and growth to a two-dimensional image.

Saussure: arbitrariness of relationships between signifier and signified

With respect to the essentialist epistemology of nationalism, the Saussurean view of language as arbitrary in terms of the relationship between sound and meaning is relevant. Saussure's revision of diachronic linguistic practices in terms of synchronic linguistics has reshaped our view of communication, and especially the nature of the relationship between signifier, signified and referent. In terms of ethnic identification between race and place through language, Saussure's ideas provide material for a powerful critique of the linguistic misrecognitions that are central to the epistemology of nationalism.

Derrida and the critique of binary oppositions and logocentrism

Jacques Derrida, in his deconstructive readings of texts, has critiqued any drive towards essentialism and full, self-present meaning. His key terms, *différance* and *dissemination* stress the impossibility of locating a single, logocentric source of meaning. His ongoing critique of foundationalism is especially applicable to the ideology of nationalism, given the essentialist aetiology already discussed.