

# From 'Ethnie' to Nation: Theoretical Reflections on Nationalism

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# FROM *ETHNIE* TO NATION: THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS ON NATIONALISM

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'Do nations have navels?' This was the title Ernest Gellner gave to what became his very last lecture.<sup>1</sup> The lecture was given as a reply to Anthony Smith's opening statement on 'nations and their pasts' in a series of debates about nationalism.<sup>2</sup> There has been a long controversy as to whether nations (in the contemporary social scientific sense) are an exclusively modern phenomenon or whether they have deep roots in history or 'navels'. In this essay, I would like to examine the relevance of theoretical debates to the understanding of Japan's nationalism and, conversely, the contribution the study of Japan could make to these theoretical issues.

## 'Historicism' and 'Modernism' in Theories of Nation

### *First-generation historicists*

Although many students of nationalism today take it for granted that nations are products of modernity, this should by no means be an unchallenged assumption. If one reviews the literature on nationalism, it becomes clear that the modernist standpoint is only a recent academic development. Before the 1960s, most literature on nationalism considered nations as existing well before the modern era. In fact, 'historicist' assumptions have long dominated the study of nations and nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

John Hutchinson makes an illuminating point about the study of history and nationalism. He argues that the distortion of the study of nationalism has been caused by 'the close relationship between the rise of modern historiography in the nineteenth century and the emergence of nationalism'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, historians normally play a prominent role in nationalism by recovering and narrating the

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1 Ernest Gellner, 'Do nations have navels?', a lecture given at Warwick University, 24 October 1995, published in *Nations and Nationalism*, vol.2, no.3, 1996 as 'Reply: Do nations have navels?'.

2 Published in *Nations and Nationalism*, vol.2, no.3, 1996 as 'Opening statement: nations and their pasts'.

3 The term 'modernism' in theories of nationalism was first used by Anthony Smith ('Ethnic persistence and national transformation', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.35, 1984, pp.452-61). The term 'historicism' is used in diverse ways with various connotations. I use this term to mean the view that social and cultural phenomena are best understood in the context of historical process.

4 John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism*, London: Fontana, 1994, p.3.

'history' of the 'nation' for its members to rediscover a supposedly authentic purpose. A sense of having a common and distinctive ancestral 'history' and culture not only provides a feeling of communal uniqueness but unites past and present generations. For this reason, nationalist historians explore, articulate or invent a nation's ancestral myth and 'historical' culture. This is the site of fusion of nationalism and history. This style of historical narration is evident in the work of Palacky of the Czechs, Hrushevsky of the Ukrainians, Iorga of the Romanians and many other nationalist historians. Banerjea, the Indian nationalist, highlights the relationship between history and nationalist aspirations by remarking that it is 'the study of the history' that 'furnishes the strongest incentive to the history of our own country'.<sup>5</sup>

This view of the history of nations is evident in more recent studies as well. Many leading historians including Johan Huizinga and Marc Bloch traced the formation of a sense of nationality in Europe in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Even in the 1970s, Hugh Seton-Watson, a renowned historian and scholar of nationalism wrote about the course of development of national consciousness from antiquity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even after history developed as a scientific discipline — and the overtly nationalistic view of the past became increasingly questioned — earlier historicist modes of thinking remained in the understanding of nations and nationalism.

### *Modernists*

As early as 1966 Karl Deutsch provided an explanation of nationalism, which later turned into a more elaborate modernist theory. He explained the rise of nationality in terms of cultural assimilation (typically, linguistic homogenisation) that occurs as a result of increasing social communication and economic exchange in modern society. The process of 'social mobilisation' and the uprooting of villagers and small townsmen results in cultural assimilation of smaller ethnic communities into a central or dominant region, which becomes a nation.<sup>8</sup> Although Deutsch was a pioneer in this mode of thinking, he himself was not explicit about theoretical implications of his ideas and did not emphasise the *modernity* of nations and nationalism. When he was writing in the 1960s, there were studies of specific cases, but nationalism was not yet a subject for theoretical thinking.

Theoretical debates did not occur until the 1980s, when an open

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5 Surendra Nath Banerjea 1880, compiled in Elie Kedourie (ed.), *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, London: Weidenfeld, & Nicolson, 1971, p.235.

6 Walker Conner, 'From tribe to nation?', *History of European Ideas*, vol.13, no.1/2, 1991, p.5.

7 Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States*, London: Methuen, 1977.

8 Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, 2nd edn, New York: MIT Press, 1966.

confrontation between modernist Ernest Gellner and historicist Anthony Smith developed. Provocative modernist theories by Anderson and Hobsbawm, which gained extreme popularity among students, further stimulated Smith's historicist orientation.

Ernest Gellner is perhaps the most explicit proponent of the modernist position. As Gellner puts it: 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist'.<sup>9</sup> The communications approach first proposed by Deutsch is elaborated here with an emphasis of structural characteristics of modern industrial society. Gellner sees the emergence of nations as inseparable from industrialisation. Modern industry requires a mobile, literate and homogeneous population. Uprooted from traditional social units such as kinship and village communities, the mobile population extends over a wider area, and this is where a new type of social integration based on language and culture becomes both possible and necessary. Since mobility is limited to a particular region with a particular language and culture, nationalism tends to arise as the integrative force for that particular linguistic-cultural region. By contrast, in the pre-industrial, agrarian world, there is no room for the emergence of nations because of the internal cultural division that exists between elites and masses. The integrative ideology of nationalism has no place in the pre-industrial world.<sup>10</sup>

Other versions of the modernist theory include those of Anderson and Hobsbawm. Benedict Anderson's well-known theory focuses on another essential feature of modern society: the extensive use of the printed word under the new technology of 'print capitalism'.<sup>11</sup> The 'invention' approach by Hobsbawm and others is, of course, another important variety of modernism. As Hobsbawm remarks, 'the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the "invention of tradition", since these modern concepts of 'France' and 'the French' must include an 'invented' component.<sup>12</sup>

It is in the sense that they ignore pre-modern ethnic ties and their impact on the development of nations and nationalism that Gellner, Anderson and Hobsbawm are classified as 'modernists'.

9 Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p.164.

10 Ernest Gellner, 'Scale and nation', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol.3, 1973, p.1-17; *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

11 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

12 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Inventing traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.14.

*Second-generation historians*

Are nations, the basic constituents of the modern international system, attributable to the process of industrialisation and modernisation? Or are they deeply rooted in human history preceding modernity? In contrast to modernists, who regard the emergence of nations as deriving from the very make-up of modern industrial society, historicists view nations as being rooted in a long, continuous historical process antedating the modern era.

Unlike those before the 1960s, historicists here are more theoretically oriented and some like Anthony Smith are consciously opposed to the modernist position. Even before Smith appeared on the theoretical scene, there were historians such as Charles Tilly, Gianfranco Poggi and John Breuilly who showed an interest in pre-modern developments.<sup>13</sup> These scholars regarded the development of a competitive state system in Europe from the Middle Ages as a critical causal factor in the analysis of the formation of national communities. From about the thirteenth century, according to this perspective, rulers began to establish their independent sovereignty vis-à-vis both the Church and Emperor by consolidating their own territory, centralising authority and endeavouring to standardise culture within this territory. As this historical process unfolded, the state began to take on a 'national' character; and in parallel with the spread of the idea of popular sovereignty in the eighteenth century, modern nationalism came to birth at the hands of political and secular rulers as an ideology legitimating their triumph over the dynastic state.

Smith also argues that the emergence of national consciousness in the early modern era in northern and western, and also in parts of eastern Europe, was induced by the recurrence of interstate wars. From the thirteenth century onwards, what he calls 'ethnicism' developed in Europe as the rivalry for power among the various kingdoms intensified.<sup>14</sup> Smith advances this line of analysis into a more comprehensive theory of nationalism by incorporating the notion of *ethnie*. Central to his argument is that modern nations, or to be more precise, the first nations of Europe and several other leading states such as Russia, Japan, China, Burma, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Ethiopia were reconstructed from the earlier ethnic identities and communities (which he calls *ethnie*).<sup>15</sup> In analysing the historical depth of nations, Smith lays special emphasis on myths and argues that one has

13 Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of Nation State in Western Europe*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975; Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1978; John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982.

14 The Tudor dynasty, for example, made use of the growing sense of an English national identity in the resistance against Spain.

15 Here, Smith has in mind the first nations of Europe and several other nations such as Russia, Japan, Egypt, Turkey, Burma, Iran and Ethiopia. (A.D. Smith, 'The myth of the "modern nation" and the myths of nations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol.11, no.1, 1988.)

to look for the special qualities and durability of *ethnie* in 'the nature (forms and content) of their myths and symbols, their historical memories and central values...[in] the mechanisms of their diffusion (or lack of it) through a given population, and their transmission to future generations'.<sup>16</sup>

### The Modernist / Historicist Debate and the Japanese Case<sup>17</sup>

I would now like to examine historicist and modernist perspectives in light of the Japanese case. Although Japan became a full-fledged nation sometime in the Meiji period, it is important to investigate, as Smith points out, 'how far its themes and forms were pre-figured in earlier periods and how far a connection with earlier ethnic ties and sentiments can be established'.<sup>18</sup> When applying these questions to the Japanese case, two issues are especially relevant. The first is the question of self-identity: when and how did a sense of Japanese self-identity emerge? The second has to do with the formation of the national state: in what ways did the process of building of the national state evolve in the Japanese archipelago?

#### *From ethnic identity to national identity*

It is impossible to pinpoint exactly when Japanese self-identity emerged. Nonetheless, we can say that, prior to the beginning of the Meiji era in the late nineteenth century, large sections of the population inhabiting the central and southern parts of the Japanese archipelago had already possessed an 'ethnic' identity in relation to 'others'. There is some evidence to suggest that many residents of the archipelago perceived themselves as culturally different from those living in China and the Korean Peninsula. We may provide several examples, though sketchy, for the purpose of illustration.<sup>19</sup>

*Kokugaku* is an important prototype of Japan's cultural nationalist ideology in that it highlighted the perceived presence of *yamoto gokoro vis-à-vis kara gokoro*. Although *kokugaku* was largely an academic affair, historical evidence suggests that village leaders held meetings to study *kokugaku* texts.<sup>20</sup> This shows that a sense of the identity of the Japanese as opposed to the Chinese was not simply confined to intellectuals but diffused to wider sections of the population. Chikamatsu Monzaemon's play 'Kokusen'ya kassen' (The Battles of Coxinga) is

16 Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p.15.

17 An earlier version of the discussion of the Japanese case appeared in my *Bunka Nashonarizumu no Shakaigaku: Gendai Nihon no Aidentiti no Yukue* (A Sociology of Cultural Nationalism), Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 1997, chap.2.

18 Smith, op.cit. (1986), p.13.

19 I am grateful for Kate Nakai for her useful comments on these examples.

20 See, for example, Itō Tazaburō, *Sōmōno Kokugaku*, Meicho Shuppan, 1982 (originally published in 1945).

another example of showing the place of Japan in relation to 'others'. The play was first staged at Osaka's Takemotoza in 1715. It not only ran for seventeen months there but was also performed the following year as a Kabuki play. Merchants in Osaka who went to see the play probably had a glimpse of the world which consisted at least of both Japan and China. Moreover, The twelve Korean embassies (*Chōsen tsūshinshi*) beginning in the 17th century and ending in 1811 is yet another example that is expected to have promoted a sense of 'we'-ness. The Korean embassies, dressed in what, to the 'Japanese' eye, was exotic clothing, would travel along the Tōkaidō Highway towards Edo arriving finally at Edo Castle. This provided an opportunity for those living along the Highway and those in Edo to see the procession and experience themselves through an experience of the 'other' culture.<sup>21</sup> Thus, we may speculate that ethnic sentiment was already generated around that time.

Although, as can be seen above, there was some type of ethnic identity based on a sense of cultural distinctiveness in pre-modern Japan, it was restricted by class and geographical area. It is during the decade leading to around 1895 that we find the type of collective sentiment that may properly be called modern nationalism. Japanese society for the first three decades following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 came gradually to be closely tied together by greater political, administrative and educational centralisation, economic growth and the development of printed mass media.

Gellner is, therefore, quite correct in arguing that the state and mass media play a large role in creating and diffusing 'national culture' as a means of socially integrating a newly mobile population uprooted from the villages in the midst of urbanisation and the break-down of village communities. Anderson's view that 'imagined' communities have replaced 'real' communities with the decline of religion and the rise and extensive use of the printed word in the modern period is also useful. It is impossible to understand the imagination that the Japanese comprise a 'community' sharing a uniquely Japanese cultural ethos without taking into consideration the mediating role of printed matter. Those who inhabit the Japanese archipelago comprise diverse groups and cannot see for themselves how people in social groups and regions other than their own feel, think and behave. Extensive printed works on Japanese uniqueness that have periodically appeared in the modern era have been a key factor promoting such imagination among 'the Japanese', or at least educated Japanese.<sup>22</sup> There is little question that the

21 For an analysis of symbolic meanings in paintings of the procession of the Korean Embassies, see Ronald P. Toby, 'Carnivals of the aliens: Korean embassies in Edo-period art and popular culture', *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol.41, no.4, 1986, pp.415-56.

22 See Kosaku Yoshino, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992 (hbk), 1995 (pbk).

diffusion of standardised education, national newspapers and radio helped create the ‘imagined community’ of Japan. Also, as Hobsbawm and others have argued, it is, for the most part, cultural and political elites including state rulers in the modern era who invented ‘tradition’ and culture for the purpose of social integration on a large scale. (The *tennōsei* is one good example of this.) These theories attempt to explain the *origins* of nation and nationalism but do not take into account pre-modern developments.

The modernist theories of Gellner, Anderson and Hobsbawm stress the importance of manipulation of the masses from above. They, like many others, point to the prominent role of the state in the formative process of nation-building. However, these theories do not adequately explain the formation of the ‘national’ state as the ultimate source of power. Exploring the development of the ‘ethnic state’ in the pre-modern period is one way to correct these inadequacies.

#### *From ethnic state to nation-state*

According to Smith’s historicist theory, the pre-modern ethnic state, formed through stages of centralisation, eventually evolved into the nation-state. Smith challenges Gellner’s argument that centralisation is the result of ideology of nationalism which strives to equate the boundaries of culture with those of the state. Smith argues that centralising attempts in the pre-modern era were not ‘motivated by nationalism, or by ideas of cultural autonomy’ but rather originated in the internal political dynamics of the middle ages and the early modern eras.<sup>23</sup>

The pre-modern history of the Japanese archipelago can be described as a process whereby an ethnic state was formed through a series of the attempts by *daimyo* (feudal lords) to increase and consolidate their power. In particular, the Age of Civil Wars from the sixteenth century witnessed a great many regional warlords fighting one another for the aggrandisement of their fiefs, with the most ambitious of them harbouring the ultimate aim of ruling the whole country. The civil warfare created alliances, thereby concentrating power in the hands of a small number of *daimyō*. Feudal Japan of this period saw increasing attempts to establish a degree of central administration. After decades of strife, reunification and the establishment of a lasting military hegemony was carried out by Oda Nobunaga (1534-82), who gained control of most of the central provinces of Japan, and by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98), who succeeded in extending control to most of the southern island of Kyushu and other strategically

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23 Smith, op.cit. (1986), p.91.



important regions of the country, and finally by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), who established the Tokugawa shogunate that controlled Japan from 1600 to 1867. What concerned Hideyoshi and the early Tokugawa shoguns most was to achieve military hegemony over other *daimyō* and to effectively control other sections of the population. Success in these endeavours resulted in political and economic unification.<sup>24</sup> Once firmly in power, the subsequent Tokugawa government imposed Confucian principles of social order on much of the archipelago as a means of consolidating the political unification ideologically. Furthermore, the early Tokugawa shoguns carried out various measures designed to weaken the military, economic and political power of the *daimyo* (feudal lords), thereby eliminating any lingering threats to their own power.

In his book *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Smith explains the origins of nations in England, Sweden, Russia, Spain and Japan by focusing his analysis on the formation of ethnic states in the late-medieval and early-modern periods:

They [ethnic states] stemmed from the needs of rulers and factions of the ruling classes to preserve their positions against rivals ... Yet as a by-product of these concerns, the growth of definite ethnic polities is evident, that is, polities whose majority is formed by a single *ethnic*, one that to varying degrees incorporates some of the lower and dependent strata into the culture and symbolism of the dominant elites.... In this way, they [administrative and religious elements of these elites] help to stabilize the polity, and enable it to weld the population together in a manner that favours the territorial integrity of the state. It was from this base that nations and nationalism emerged.<sup>25</sup>

Smith's historicist standpoint is especially relevant to the Japanese experience of nation and nationalism. It shows that explanations of origins of the Japanese nation cannot be reduced solely to modern nationalism but should include an analysis of pre-modern developments.

## Concluding remarks

The preceding discussions reveal that both modernist and historicist perspectives are not complete in themselves but may be treated as complementary guides to help understand different historical aspects of nations and nationalism.

Current discussions of nationalism, especially those stimulated by fashion-

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24 Hideyoshi carried out a number of measures such as a monopoly on mining, minting of coins, the standardisation of weights and measures, abolition of customs barriers, a land survey, and so on.

25 Smith, op.cit. (1986), p.91.

able cultural studies, promote the assumption of nation as the product of modernity. However, as this essay shows, pre-modern developments should be incorporated in the study of nations and nationalism. This does not mean, of course, that continuities between modern nation and its alleged prototype, pre-modern *ethnic*, should simply be assumed. In fact, many modern nations are quite distinct entities from their alleged historical prototypes, as Walker Connor points out. For example, Greeks as a modern nation is not a continuation of the ancient Hellenes but rather descended from Slavs who migrated to the present Greece from the sixth century.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Hutchinson argues that 'claims of ancestral affinity with earlier political units are ... fictive' because modern nations are founded on the unique principle that ethnic and political boundaries should coincide.<sup>27</sup> He draws attention to the valuable work of McNeill who pointed out that polyethnicity was the norm in political units before the eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Also relevant in this regard is the point raised by Hobsbawm, who suggests that the usages of term 'nation' in European languages are so different before and after the nineteenth century that arguments relying on linguistic continuities are not convincing.<sup>29</sup> Despite various traps of historical enquiries, theories of nationalism can only develop further when the now unchallenged modernist assumption is re-examined. The history of the Japanese archipelago provides a good case against which to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of modernist and historicist arguments.

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26 Connor, *op.cit.*, p.9.

27 Hutchinson, *op.cit.*, p.5.

28 W.H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1986.

29 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp.14-45.