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CHAPTER 5

Identity and the Nation

Introduction

Historical geographers have long been concerned with matters of identity. Contexts from colonialism to capitalism have been variously examined, with studies spanning a range of issues, including class, power and resistance. Elsewhere in this volume, questions of identity are engaged around these and other axes of historical inquiry such as heritage, race and gender. This chapter, however, takes a particular focus on the historical geographies of *nationhood*, and using various examples explores how tropes of *national identity* were over time constructed and reproduced spatially. It examines too the theoretical concepts of sameness and difference upon which all national identities have been forged, and in outlining how diverse senses of identity networked in myriad historical geographical contexts the chapter complicates the notion of national identity by demonstrating how essentialist narratives or models of the nation limit our understanding of the complexities of the worlds of the past.

Constructing the nation

Even the world's oldest nations do not have long histories as states. While the exact origins of the phenomenon of nationalism are contested, a common misconception is that sovereign nations extend back to ancient times (Hastings, 1997). Most states, however, date to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when nations across the world were embroiled in prolonged nationalist struggles against the main imperial powers. Others only gained independence more recently, as seen with the break-up of the

Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s. And although most nations today could be argued to be in some respects post-nationalist and globalized, such a contention must be tempered with the reality of ongoing fights for independent statehood in various regions of the world that claim historical nationhood, from the Basque Country to Kosovo, from Chechnya to Kurdistan. Nationalism, in other words, still matters (Castells, 1997).

If most states are relatively new, how have they been constructed and how can historical geographers interrogate the process of nation-building? To begin with, a key concept in identity studies more generally is that all identities are *socially constructed*. As Cindi Katz (2003: 262) argues, senses of identity do not rest ‘upon some sort of biological essence or any sort of “natural” distinction’; rather they are constructed and reproduced socially by a variety of actors, foremost of which is the state. Eric Hobsbawm (1992) reflects that people do not so much *remember* but are *reminded*. They are reminded of who they are by the selective prioritization of their heritage and identity, through various mediums – from the classroom to public space. Teaching history and geography, coding the built environment, celebrating national holidays, playing national anthems at sports events; national identity has been fostered in multiple ways, and geography has played a central role.

Territory, spatiality and geographical imagination have historically been essential elements in any nation or state’s self-identification (Gruffudd, 1995; Graham, 1997, 2000). As James Martin (2005: 98) observes, spatiality is ‘widely recognised as a key dimension in the formation of social identities’, with national identity involving

citizens' 'perception of the importance of territorial location and history in the formation of elements that make up their common identity'. To this end, representative landscape ideals often became metaphors for the nation and served to strengthen senses of national identity. For the Irish, such a representative landscape was embodied by the West of Ireland (Nash, 1993); for the English, the Cotswolds emerged as a prominent national landscape imaginary (Brace, 1999); and as John Agnew (1998) argues by using the example of Italy, the absence of a national landscape ideal often coincided with the emergence of a weaker national identity. In other crucial ways, too, geography played a key role in the construction of national identity. A country's public space is a vital canvass through which to narrate and perform the nation. Cityscapes, townscapes and major historical sites became typically adorned with flags, monuments and statuary in the aftermath of independence, and newly-designated national spaces became perennially (re)invested with meaning by political and cultural performances of memorialization (see also the 'Place and Meaning' section). Yvonne Whelan (2002), for instance, has shown how the iconography of Dublin's public space was recoded in the early 1920s after Ireland's War of Independence against Britain. Of course, in Ireland as elsewhere, long before independence, public space was utilized in the assertion of burgeoning national identity and defiance against colonial rule, through public rallies and marches, raising banners and flying flags (see also the 'Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism' chapter).

Geographically, any newly-independent nation's capital city invariably became a central focus of national identity in the siting, building and symbolizing of various

national institutions, such as museums and the national parliament (Atkinson and Cosgrove, 1998; Lorimer, 2002). For the United States of America, the national mall in its capital, Washington, emerged as the pivotal site of the nation. Stretching from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial, leading historical figures and past presidents are celebrated and the fallen in past wars are remembered (see figure 5.1). Sharing space with centres of power such as the White House and the Houses of Congress reinforces authority and agency, and collectively the various memorials and museums dotted along the mall are all key sites in the narration of American national identity. Any state, through its capital cityscape, possesses the power and forums to elevate narratives of national identity by investing meaning in purposeful politico-ideological and cultural (re)productions. However, it is important to bear in mind that in many regions throughout the world government attempts to culturally and ideologically order public space have been transcended by those that seek to disrupt the prioritized norm. Societies characterized by disparate historical, religious and cultural identifications and aggrievements, for example, frequently have a contested public space. This can be seen in the opposing wall murals of Belfast, Northern Ireland, or in the cityscape of Mostar, Herzegovina, where, in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, a rebuilt and over-sized Franciscan clock tower and giant Christian cross towering on the hilltop (figure 5.2) have come to dominate the west bank of the Neretva river, while rebuilt Muslim minarets command the skyline on the other side.



Figure 5.1 Vietnam War Memorial, Washington DC, USA. Photo: J. Morrissey, Feb. 2006



Figure 5.2 Franciscan clock tower and Christian cross, Mostar, Herzegovina.
Photo: J. Morrissey, Aug. 2005.

Narrating the nation

A *national metanarrative*, re-telling a version of the past that connects people from across the nation, whether in triumph, loss or shared values, is vital to the construction of all national identities (Bhabha, 1990). Prioritized versions of national culture and identity are advanced in primary and secondary education, where senses of history are commonly essentialist (Morrissey, 2006); they are reproduced in the tourism and heritage industries by the celebration of specific artifacts and historical events (Kneafsey, 1998; Johnson, 1999); and they are reinforced in public space by representing and performing the most important elements of the past in the built environment (Hetherington, 1998; Atkinson et al., 1999). The state has the power to reify a selective historical metanarrative in its (re)production of national identity and, to this end, key state mechanisms include national education, national institutions, national media and national iconography. All collectively contribute to what Michael Billig has outlined as the ubiquitous power of *banal nationalism* in our everyday lives: the ‘continual “flagging”, or reminding, of nationhood’ (Billig, 1995: 8; see also Paasi, 1991). The raising of a national flag and exaltation of a past leader in public space, such as Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square (figure 5.3), are part of what Billig means by banal nationalism. But there are of course other ways in which figures, events and stories from the past are connected to the present. Museums, for instance, typically elevate the most celebrated moments from a nation’s past, while selecting out those that are inglorious or simply do not fit the nationalist self-image (Forty and Kuchier, 2001; Morrissey, 2005). In the *Vojni Muzej* (War Museum) in Belgrade (figure 5.4), for example, the story of the 1990s is told as one of defiance against NATO, in which words like *genocide* or *Srebrenica* do not feature.



Figure 5.3 Hoisting the national flag, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China. Photo: J. Morrissey, Apr. 2004



Figure 5.4 *Vojni Muzej*, Belgrade, Serbia. Photo: J. Morrissey, Aug. 2005

The construction of any national identity is underscored by selective memory and inaccuracy. As Ernst Renan famously declared at his Sorbonne lecture in Paris in 1882, '[f]orgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation' (Renan, 1990: 11). The most cursory examination of any nation on earth would bear out Renan's contention (see, for instance, Morgan, 1984, Chapman, 1992 and Harvey, 2003). Peter Taylor and Colin Flint (2007) use the case in point of Scotland and the Scottish kilt, one of the most widely known European national dresses, to highlight how senses of tradition and national identity can be effectively invented. They note that 'the tartan originates from the Netherlands, that kilts come from England, and that there were no "clan tartans" before 1844'; the kilt, they argue, is 'a tradition that has been invented as part of a fabricated Scottish history' (Taylor and Flint, 2007: 165). Other elements of Scotland's retrospective invention of tradition have also been documented (see Trevor-Roper, 1984, Pittock, 1991 and Broun et al., 1998).

Invented traditions have played an important role in the historical social construction of identity throughout the world (Hobsbawm, 1984). This has continued to the present. Benito Giordano (2000, 2001), for example, has shown how the separatist political party in contemporary northern Italy, *Lega Nord* (Northern League), has attempted to gain independence via the most fundamental methods of historical nation-building: fostering geographical imagination and forging banal nationalism. Since the mid-1990s, Lega Nord has invented a region they call *Padania* (see figure 5.5) and have posited it as an historic geographic area with an ancient Celtic ethos. The idea of Padania has been used to reclaim this alleged history and geography and,

in so doing, to legitimize and lend an air of antiquity to the territorial and political claims of Lega Nord (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001). To this end, various techniques of banal nationalism have been used at different sites of representation and performance to normalize the idea of the new geographical imaginary – from flags, symbols, associations and festivals to newspapers, radio, television and the internet. Lega Nord and their construct of Padania provide us with an excellent example of the manner in which senses of identity (in this case, aspiring national identity) can be historically identified and imagined and then reinforced in banal social and cultural geographies. As Giordano (2001: 36) notes, the ‘invention of “Padania” shows that such identities do not necessarily have to be inherited from primordial roots but can actually be created almost from scratch in contemporary society’.



Figure 5.5 The geographical imaginary of Padania, northern Italy.

The notion of invented traditions ties in closely with Benedict Anderson's idea of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991). In his reflection on the origins and spread of nationalism, he argues that most people in any given nation will never meet the vast majority of their fellow citizens, yet still maintain an allegiance to them. For Anderson, senses of national, communal identity are largely *imagined*. Although Anderson does acknowledge the import of print cultures such as maps (which are, of course, material and real), he has been charged with placing 'too much emphasis on the idea of the nation rather than on the historical geographies of nationhood' (Katz,

2003: 251). In other words, his thesis is problematic in that he does not allow for the tangible *geographies* of nationalism that (re)produce communal identity in *real* ways (for further discussion on the geographical (re)productions of nationalism, see Jones and Fowler, 2007). Political, social and cultural (re)productions of the state may be selective and in some cases erroneous, as outlined above, but their spatial and material consequences are no less effective in the inculcation and maintenance of national identity. It is important to remember, too, that the state, as a typically centralized apparatus, commands the power and resources to build senses of unity around fundamental administrative and institutional frameworks that have often been in place since colonial and earlier periods.

National identity is also advanced in very real ways outside of the sphere of the state, via collective religious worship, for example, or the communal networking of music, song and oral history. In the end, of course, it is real people and their traditions that enact senses of national identity. In the former Soviet state of Belarus, the first thing that newlyweds do immediately after the wedding ceremony is to go with their families and friends to the nearby World War II memorial to honour fallen loved ones from the local community. Millions of Belarusians died repelling the German advance on Moscow in World War II and this unprecedented national loss is remembered from the capital, Minsk, to little villages across the nation (see figure 5.6). These now sacred geographical spaces are active nodes in maintaining and networking senses of communal national identity that foster strong ties to the land and the fallen of the past that defended it.



Figure 5.6 World War II memorial, Goradiche, southern Belarus. Photo: J. Morrissey, July 2002

Remembering communal loss, trauma and tragedy is a key element in the maintenance of national identities. The millions of Irish-Americans who have marched on St Patrick's Day every year for more than two centuries – in towns and cities across America, from Boston to San Francisco, from New Orleans to Chicago – have been variously connecting to an Irish *emigrant* experience that is commonly envisioned via a tragic Irish history of famine and loss. This metanarrative (like all others) is, of course, partly imagined and essentialist, and, in losing sight of the myriad intricate human geographies and histories of the emigrants themselves, it also frequently reduces them to victims. In the similar Scottish-American context, Paul Basu (2007) notes how the dominant, loss-centred memory or *victim narrative* of the Great Highland Clearances serves to disallow the complexities of the Scottish Highland diasporic experience and to deny the agency of the emigrants in their own lives.

Notwithstanding these important points, our pasts, however, tend to become mythologized as stories that work, that connect people, that support. And loss matters. The Great Irish Famine of the late 1840s, which saw over a million people die of starvation and even more emigrate to the United States and elsewhere, is remembered in numerous ways in Irish America, from pub songs and popular culture to public monuments. The opening of the Irish Hunger Memorial in downtown Manhattan (see figure 5.7) in 2002 by New York Governor, George Pataki, and the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, demonstrates the continued importance of historical geographies in the present in (re)producing and networking senses of communal identity (in this case, diasporic Irish identity). The memorial, which is situated on a

quarter-acre of prime real estate, adjacent to the World Trade Centre site, features a carefully relocated famine cottage from County Mayo in northwestern Ireland (symbolically with soil, flora and rocks from each of the other thirty-one counties of Ireland). As you enter the site, the aural narration of aspects of Ireland's *Gorta Mór* (Great Hunger) in the nineteenth century connects too in solidarity with all regions in the contemporary world experiencing the horrors of famine. Finally, of course, for other nations, too, remembering loss is a crucial element of national identity. For Israelis and Jews throughout the world, for example, the former Nazi concentration camps of World War II, such as Auschwitz in southern Poland (figure 5.8), are sacred spaces in which to communally pray for the millions murdered in the holocaust and to remember the terror of biopolitical control.



Figure 5.7 Irish Hunger Memorial, New York City, USA. Photo: J. Morrissey, Oct. 2007



Figure 5.8 Auschwitz II-Birkenau Concentration Camp, Oswiecim, Poland.
Photograph: J. Morrissey, Aug. 2005 (published courtesy of Auschwitz Memorial)

Sameness, difference and the complexities of identity networks

A key requirement of all national identities is the dual identification of sameness and difference, or the *Self* and the *Other*. As Cindi Katz (2003: 249) observes, identities are ‘relational’, with the Self ‘always defined in terms of what it is not’, the Other. In early modern Protestant England, for example, the emerging English nationalism was defined by a fearful anti-Catholicism against what it was not – Catholic Irish, Scottish or French (Marotti, 1997; Colley, 2005). Otherness was historically produced and disseminated in a variety of ways in the colonial past, as outlined in the opening two chapters in discussions around the work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Said’s critique of colonial discourse and cultural ascription and Bhabha’s writing on in-between space and hybridity can also be applied, however, in the related context of nationalism, where the historical discursive championing of specific tropes of national identity simultaneously obscured cultural complexities and marginalized senses of difference (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

National identities were typically produced through a variety of asymmetrical relations; their interrogation, therefore, necessarily involves consideration of the exclusionary practices, discrimination and violence in the social spaces of the past (Maalouf, 2001; Sen, 2006). Historical geographers have explored the social exclusion and conflict inherent in senses of national identity in multiple political, economic and cultural contexts (see the ‘Historical Hierarchies’ section). In examining historical geographies of racism, for instance, many geographers have been particularly concerned with the spatial mechanisms of political rule through which social power and cultural hegemony were underpinned. In exploring issues of

resistance, historical geographers have also highlighted the counter-hegemonic strategies and practices in which ‘uneven power relations’ were ‘interrupted, compromised and undone on spatial as well as social and political grounds’ (Katz, 2003: 260; see also Morrissey, 2003).

Despite the power of the state, multiple identity networks on various scales have historically disrupted prioritized senses of national identity across the world. Since the unification of Italy, for example, in the late nineteenth century, the Italian state’s attempts to construct Italian national identity have taken place in the shadow of much older and stronger regional and local identifications throughout the country. Understanding Italian national identity and its historical development is impossible without consideration of the complicated intersections of other scalar identities. Linear models of national identity also negate other cultural complexities within historical societies. Different identity types – based on gender, age, sexuality, class and so on – co-existed, networked and transmuted each other in multifaceted ways, both within and beyond the nation, and historical geographers have been particularly concerned with sifting out these intricacies and narrating more nuanced accounts of the past (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Mulligan, 2002). To this end, the notion of *hybridity* has been especially useful in contesting simplified models of national identity. It has served, for example, as ‘a potent concept of resistance’ to ‘essentialising narratives of nation and race’, and as a ‘trenchant critique of modernist binaries and normative assumptions based on age-old notions of separation and linearity’ (Mitchell, 2005: 192).

Conclusion

Geography has played a central role in the historical construction, performance and reproduction of national identity throughout the world. Using different examples, this chapter has sought to outline the role of geographical imagination, territoriality, spatiality and public space in the historical process of nation-building. It has been concerned too with problematizing reductive nationalist representations of historical societies that mask key nuances from the geographical worlds of the past, including cultural complexity, hybridity and co-existing scalar identities. In stressing how essentialist models of national identity promulgated Otherness, attention has also been drawn to the spatial mechanisms that facilitated exclusionary social practices and political and cultural hegemony. Finally, in underlining the historical social construction of all national identities, emphasis has been placed on the selectivity of prioritized national metanarratives of heritage and culture. Recognizing the historical relativism of all forms of national identity is one of the most effective ways of challenging the emergence in the modern world of absolute senses of identity whose endgame is so frequently racism, discrimination and conflict.

Summary

- Geographical imagination, territoriality and spatiality have been essential elements in the historical construction of national identity.
- In the process of nation-building, a nation's public space is a vital canvass through which to narrate and perform prioritized and selective metanarratives of identity.
- Historical political and socio-cultural constructs of the nation may be selective and in some cases erroneous, but tangible geographies of nationalism have

(re)produced communal identity in real ways, in which communal trauma and loss have been key elements.

- The historical discursive championing of essentialist tropes of national identity has simultaneously promulgated Otherness and elite cultural hegemony.
- National identities have been typically produced through a variety of asymmetrical social relations and their interrogation necessarily involves historical examination of exclusionary practices, discrimination and violence.
- Nationalist representations of historical societies mask key nuances from the geographical worlds of the past, including cultural complexity, hybridity and different scalar identities co-existing both within and beyond the nation.

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