

CAN THERE BE A POSTMODERN NATIONALISM?

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NAMES

My race began as the sea began,
with no nouns, and with no horizon,
with pebbles under my tongue,
with a different fix on the stars.
But now my race is here,
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,
in the flags of Indian fields.
I began with no memory,
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.
I have never found that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon--
for the goldsmith from Bentaress,
the stone-cutter from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory.
Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
the bronzesmith from Benin.

A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry,
that terrible vowel,
that I!
. . . this stick

to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

And when they named these bays bays,
was it nostalgia or irony? . . .

Where were the courts of Castile?
Versailles' colonnades
supplanted by cabbage palms
with Corinthian crests,
belittling diminutives,
then, little Versailles
meant plans for the pigsty,
names for the sour apples
and green grapes
of their exile. . . .

Being men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of everything to be a noun
The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them.

Derek Walcott

Abstract

In this paper I consider whether postmodern critique of the modern nation can furnish a normative theory about what to do in light of pre-existing national ties. I use Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities as a measure of shared identity and I engage with Zygmunt Bauman's critique of modernity and the adiaphorization of values. I answer Anthony Smith's objections to the postmodern critique of the nation and conclude by extrapolating a postmodern approach to national ties.

Introduction

The postmodern critique of the modern nation is thoroughgoing. If Zygmunt Bauman and Homi Bhabha—the postmodernists discussed in this essay—are both right about nationalism as a tool of control to alienate people from their free choice, then we would be hard pressed to justify national ties, static national identities, or perhaps any action in the name of “nations.” As a critique of nationalism, postmodernism offers reasons for scepticism about nations in themselves. I think we are legitimate in asking postmodernists, “what ought we to do now?” What do we do about the seemingly legitimate claims that national ties make on us? Affects of patriotism and religion seem to be constitutive features of selves living in nations that are not easily changeable, as affects tend to be. How can postmodernism be brought to the living reality of nations without dismantling them in theory at the outset? I propose that this is indeed possible. The postmodern values of questioning social structures, promoting “true” individuality, taking responsibility for our moral selves, and engaging in cultural praxis that aims to “de-slime” strangers introduces a preliminary theory of the nation and subsequent national identities. In order to do this, we must assume a conception of the nation that would be both plausible and attractive to postmodernist. For this I turn to Benedict Anderson. This paper is not a defense of postmodernism nor the postmodern nationalism that it attempts to construct. Rather, its goal is to attempt to fold the postmodern critique into a concept of a nation that would be both recognizable and useful.

In order to sketch a notion of the nation that accounts for postmodern hesitations, I begin by analyzing the conceptual ambivalence that postmodernists argue constitutively signifies national identities. I tie this to Benedict Ander-

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son's view of the nation as a collective imagining to strengthen the postmodernist's case. In section two, I unearth the conceptual underpinnings of the postmodern critique to make the postmodern critique speak for itself. I focus on Zygmunt Bauman because his postmodernism produces thick normative concepts that extend beyond critique. I argue against the objection that postmodernism is apolitical. I show that Bauman's characterization of modernity outputs a theory of solidarity with strangers meant to counteract a climate of fear and privatization of values. I also sift through modernity's effects on individuality and thus the ethical obligations that individuality implies. Bauman argues that our moral universe has shrunk in response to capitalism's pressure to perform; he asks that we revisit our ethical potential. Postmodern nationalism presents a tension between new paradigms of humanity that focus on "living liquid in a modern world;" I thus turn to Anderson's work on language as a model for nationality that could be amenable to the postmodern critique of the nation. In the following three subsections, I look at the postmodern critique of modernity, the resultant ethics, and new paradigms of humanity that postmodernists bring to the problem of nationalism. I conclude that while Bauman in particular produces interesting concepts for thinking about the nation, his views need further expansion to account for nations and national identities.

I. "Qu'est ce qu'une nation?"

Perhaps we cannot exactly answer Ernest Renan's question in this paper, but it is important to interrogate what we mean by a nation.¹ National borders are porous, and the internet and cheap modes of travel have added new transnational dimensions to everyday experience as daily contact can be made with people across national boundaries. It seems apt, then, to understand the nation as Anderson does, as an imagined community. As Anderson describes it, "an imagined community [is] both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1983, 6). One can imagine herself as part of a group, but only to a certain point; the group imagined is thought to possess autonomy to make independent decisions. I think this feature of imaging oneself as part of a community provides the bridge between Anderson and postmodernism.

Anderson's explanation of how imagining a community became possible is historical. First, modelled after how religions gained a monopoly of access to

¹ The title refers to Ernest Renan's (1832–92) influential lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 where he posits a "civic" nationalism as opposed to an ethnic nationalism. His meditation on what constitutes a nation has been highly influential in French and other occidental nations.

sacred languages, a specific conception and access to the ontological “truth” of a people was managed by governmental bodies entrusted with the authority to engender the ontological “truth” of a nation performatively through various institutional powers. Second, a concomitant belief held by the members of the community emerges that assigns the ability to define a nation as outside of one’s self—that the truth of their nation comes from without. Lastly, with the advancement of novels and newspapers a certain conception of time led people to imagine the lives of others as steady, anonymous, and simultaneous (Anderson 1983, 14, 22, 26, 36). Anderson’s historical account is perhaps dated in that centralized national definitional power oriented to reveal the “truth” of its people is now increasingly complex, but his technique remains pertinent—we ought to look to media, social media, politicians, public relations, and the structures of local and international governments to produce the complicated sites of authority that define Western nationhood.

Despite these complexities, participation in national activities rarely involves questioning the authorities that dispense the ontology of a nation’s truth. Moreover, while participatory democracy is encouraged, there is a sense that one’s nation is “above” one’s personal definition of what it means to be of one’s particular nationality. Much has changed since the invention of the printing press. However, the idea that who we imagine ourselves to be is governed by the techniques of media that allow us to think through the lives of others and how those lives are connected to ours constitute communal experience. Imaginaries and narratives defining nationhood are unstable, dense, and contestable. Nonetheless, citizens make sense of themselves in negotiation with a notion of citizenship deployed normatively to produce the ontological and moral “truth” of a nation. Contestation of the nation is, according to Homi Bhabha, guaranteed by the conceptual ambivalence of nationhood.

The internet and other forms of digital communication create possibilities for thinking of the nation as ambivalent. There are new awarenesses of how lives are lived in other places and this makes the project of self-imagining a tricky enterprise. In response, more is needed to define ourselves and secure recognition in this state of deep conceptual instability. Bhabha asks, “if the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on the narratives and discourses that signify a sense of ‘nationness’?” (1990, 2) Anderson, according to Bhabha, fails to “read the profound ambivalence” inherent in the idea of the nation. The ambivalence in national

narrations that is important for this paper is the splitting of the subject who both narrates themselves as well as functions as the object of other narrations (Bhabha 1990, 301, 311).

Bhabha underlines the ambivalent experience of living within a nation. He writes that “the narrative of national cohesion can no longer be signified, in Anderson’s words, as a ‘sociological solidity’ fixed in a ‘succession of plurals’—hospitals, prisons, remote villages—where the social space is clearly bounded by such repeated objects that represent a naturalistic, national horizon” (Bhabha 1990, 304-5). Furthermore, the nation is generally ambivalent; persons are both subject to national orthodoxy, and as well as constitute that orthodoxy. Even as, for example, the Occupy Wall Street movement occupies Wall Street, it affirms the existence and so recognizes the profound importance of the institutions it desires to dismantle. The nation is also ambivalent in its temporality: “there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative,” Bhabha states this is the difficulty in theorizing the time of the nation—is it a present re-citation of its past self in discontinuous moments, or is the nation an accumulation of its past events that necessarily strike out to bring a determined future into existence (manifest destiny) (Bauman 1990, 297)? The nation is ambivalent in its narratives; nations contain both narratives and counter-narratives that “continually evoke and erase [the nation’s] totalizing boundaries” (Bhabha 1990, 300). The subject herself is not ambivalent but split nonetheless: even if subjects are able to narrate themselves in some areas of their lives they still remain the objects of other narrations. These ambivalences need careful attention when theorizing the nation and nationalist narratives.

The postmodern critique of the nation as an ambivalent signifier works with a conception of the nation as an imagined community. Anderson’s view is of a piece with postmodernism because treating the nation as an imagined thing—or collection of narrations—supports postmodernism’s main themes of textuality, excess, uncertainty, and ambivalence. Bhabha writes that “the address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the ‘irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic’” (Bhabha 1983, 301). This is the idea that the formal properties of language have no choice but to signify that the semantic leaves a void or gap between the underlying syntax and surface semantics. This gap or void ends up signifying a semantic “quasi-void” (Gashé 1989, 13). Applying this Derridian idea to the nation, then, we see that the nation can

be an imagining or set of imaginings, a narrative or set of narratives that share the feature of undecidability. There is no one and only narrative or imagining that will define, say, “Germanness” or “Canadianness,” but there will be a collection of national narratives told about each noun that tries to signify itself. Citizens, too, are left to make meaning out of these areas of quasi-void and semantic excess, thereby adding semantic agency to citizens who narrate themselves into a national project.

An important place of agreement between Anderson and the postmodernist is the idea that the nation does not tap a deep-seated or ontological desire for a national identity (*pace* primordialism), nor does it provide an outlet for otherwise frustrated (and perhaps sublimated) naturally existing emotional ties to nation, country, or society writ large informed by the historical continuity nations have through time (*pace* perennialism). The nation is a construct belonging to the territory of, at least, the imagination. According to the postmodern critique, the particular content of the imagining is, however, not as straightforward as Anderson writes. How can the ambivalence of the nation identified by the postmodernists be amenable to a theory of the nation?

II. Asking the Postmodern Critique to “Speak for Itself”

In the following three sub-sections, I ask the postmodern critique to “speak for itself.” This means laying bare both the background assumptions informing the critique of modernity that make the postmodern “post” and its implicit prescriptive dimensions that map a preliminary picture of a postmodern nation. An immediate objection to this strategy would be that *prime facie* a postmodern nation is either paradoxical or contradictory. For example, Anthony D. Smith argues against the postmodern critique by saying that it undermines the basic assumptions of modernism so fervently that it must disbelieve in the “sociological reality of nations, and the power of nationalist ideologies” (Smith 1998, 202). Turning the postmodernist into a caricature of Cartesian scepticism about nations is not a charge that a postmodernist should have to answer. However, if we try to tease apart the tension between the postmodern framework and a modern view of nations, we may find an objection worth countering. I see two objections to a postmodern nationalism; one in general, and one in particular. In general, it is impertinent to ask a critique to also have an implicit constructive view about future actions and responses to the nation. In particular, the postmodern agenda is only concerned with testing the limits and de-centering concepts that were once

taken for granted, and in principle, it does not aim to replace these categories. My modest goal is to show that these objections are merely tensions and not devastating criticisms. In this section, I would like to argue that the postmodern critique implies a backdrop of assumptions that create an analytically usable idea of the nation and national identities. I make this argument on two grounds: first, just because the nation is ambivalent and uncertain does not mean that it is non-existent or of no moral or political import (if at least because Derrida writes that at least at first it is a condition of possibility for thinking concepts that we theorize “as if” the conceptual indeterminacy is not fatal to our theorizing), and second, the postmodernist’s backdrop of critique implies central concepts that can be both illuminated and useful in constructing a view about nations, and in prescribing a response to current nations and national identities, especially that of Zygmunt Bauman. I thus mainly focus on his approach to postmodernism.

Bhabha writes, “if the problematic ‘closure’ of textuality questions the ‘totalization’ of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life” (Bhabha 1990, 5). Here, “national life” is treated as an existing thing worthy of inquiry despite or perhaps because of the kind of “closure” and “totalization” that is effected. By Bauman’s lights, a prescriptive dimension for the nation involves at least three positive values; the right of each person to a “truer” individuality, embracement of the uncertainty “embodied” by society’s “strangers,” and in general the de-polarization of conceptual space that has heretofore theorized the nation. Specific explanations of these concepts will take place in the remaining three sub-sections of section II of this essay, but for now preliminary plausibility of the inquiry is demonstrated by highlighting the prescriptive and conceptual importance placed on theorizing the nation and national identities provided by the postmodern critique.

As Clare Hemmings (2011) argues, defining postmodernism (broadly construed) in feminist theory as apolitical relies on a certain conception of political temporality. Indeed, the “post” in “postmodern” itself gives us an idea of the temporality of movements or politics that imbue the present with a kind of theoretical teleology as though we are going beyond our wrong-headed past, figured in this case as an attachment to modernism. Hemmings argues that feminist theorists tell stories about their own past that rob it of its complex history. For example, “decade-fixing” is a way of partitioning certain views into blocks of time and as time passes, the ideas become out of date in

the rush to remain current (Hemmings 2011, 48).² Feminist flirtations with postmodernism have resulted in the charge of being apolitical, getting too involved in the academy, in abstractions, and in general losing connection to the everyday experiences of women. Hemmings identifies this as a “loss” narrative, as in “we have lost the good old days of doing real politics.” These narratives construct an affect of loss against the postmodernist. Hemmings (2011, 83) writes:

Subjects of progress and loss narratives insist on their absolute separation from one another, missing the ways in which they utilize and instantiate a common historiography, missing the ways in which that historiography grounds post-, quasi-, or antifeminist claims as well.

Postmodernism as the name for a cluster of theorists cannot be implicated in this temporality of progress. Indeed, postmodern theory is attempting to disrupt theories of linear time, including that of progress beyond modernism. The supposed temporal fixing in the name of “postmodernism” can lead to straw person analyses like that of Smith’s “Beyond Modernism?” in which it is presumed that the postmodernist is failing her own project should she not be fully “beyond” any trace of nations or modernism. It is no wonder that he charges postmodernists with having no sense of history (Smith 1998, 199, 218).

In a last thrust against this charge, I offer Allan Hutchinson’s response to the terse but succinct: “Can postmodernism deliver the political goods?” In struggling against the objection that the overly theoretical character of postmodernism breeds political quietism and acquiescence, he writes:

While postmodernism rejects the metaphysical privileging of grand

² A prime example of the history-erasing effects of “decade fixing” can be found in Anthony Smith; “Early feminist analyses did not seek to address the issues of ethnicity and nationalism, but from the mid-1980’s there has been a growing literature in this area” (Smith 1998, 205). These claims are patently false (Harriet Taylor Mill, Mary Wolstencraft, Emma Goldman, Charolette Perkins Gilman, Simone de Beauvoir just to name the glaring erasures) and erase a history of cross-racial collaboration and involvement between anti-racist and feminist struggles. This also leads to a disavowal of other feminist work that predates the 1980’s as racist and decontextualized, and not properly political (Audre Lorde, Mary Daly, Shumalith Firestone, Betty Friedan, Angela Davis, and Germaine Greer, just to name the glaring counterexamples). Smith’s gloss on feminist history buys into a progress narrative where with new information, feminist theorizing has come to better understand issues of “ethnicity and nationalism” in the present than they did in the past. This teleology of theory belies the complicated interconnectedness of different ideas that came to be in feminist history and effects an erasure of the internal tensions and disagreements that make feminist theory such a productive site of critique.

theory, it most certainly does not deny the worth of social, historical or political theorizing. Provided that it is suitably provisional, revisable, and contextual, such theorizing is at the heart of a transformative political praxis. In rejecting History, it does not ignore the lessons of history, and in rejecting Telos, it does not eschew the value of criticism. As all claims are located within a dynamic set of social practices, postmodernism insists that all theorizing pay attention to the structural circumstances of that social milieu and, in particular, to theorizing its own embeddedness in such historical contexts. Critical insight is a prelude to transformative action (Hutchinson 1992, 779).

In occupying conceptual space as a tool of critique, postmodernism is already in dialogue with conceptions of the nation, and can then imply a conceptual reformulation of the nation.

III. Modernity

If postmodern is not “post” or “beyond” modernity temporally, but rather is philosophically opposed to modernity, then what features of modernity are at issue? While Bhabha is the quintessential postmodern theorist of the nation, I look to Bauman on modernity because his critique is most fruitfully value-laden and postmodern, thus suited to construct a postmodern nationalism. Bauman locates the genesis of modernity in the human urge for “order-building.” No particular order is thus ingrained as primordial or necessary; only *that* we want to build order is guaranteed. This denial of a necessary or determinate social structure that humanity aims at in order-building motivates Bauman’s critique of modernity. Detractors would lament that these order-building projects are what bring progress. However, Bauman disagrees. He writes:

It was the State that knew what order should look like, and which had enough strength and arrogance not only to proclaim all other states of affairs to be disorder and chaos, but also force them to live down to such a condition. This was, in other words, the modern state – one which legislated order into existence and defined order as the clarity of binding divisions, classifications, allocations and boundaries (Smith 1997, 18)

This goes against Anthony Smith’s claim that postmodernists have no sense of how the modern nation was developed (Smith 1998, 219). Senses of how

the modern nation was developed emerged due to a desire to make sense of the world by categorizing our experiences. Much like in Walcott's poem "to trace our names on the sand / which the sea erased again, to our indifference," we see that the logic of order building is that which wants to break up and partition the original or pre-linguistic states of nature. A direct line is drawn between order-building, colonization and the modern nation in Walcott's work.

Bauman argues that the effects of "order-building" are paradoxical in that they reveal the "permanent and irreducible" conditions of uncertainty that underlie the nation because no amount of order-building can guarantee personal security (Bauman 1997, 21). In legislating behaviour according to the logic and order of the modern nation, people have not flourished. Instead of increasing freedom, these "powers" have eroded human ties and made us "live down" to its categories of failure. Not only does order-building not create the safety that is its expressed purpose, but it creates the disorder that underwrites the feelings of uncertainty that come from uncontrollable social realities.

As a reaction to the modern legislation of order, the current conditions of uncertainty are contingent on this particular historical moment of modernity. Here, certainty is signified by the identities that adhere to the logic of sense; the businessman, his beautiful wife and cisgender children. In considering context, the postmodernist criticizes modernity where it stands—as profoundly capitalist, deregulated, and individualistic (I would add neoliberal, postfeminist, and post-racial). Concentrating on this approach to modernity, Bauman argues that the free, natural, human desire to build order gets frustrated and transmutes into an atmosphere of ambient fear (Bauman 1997, 22).

Bauman explains the fear by pointing to many factors. Since the so-called "Second World" has disintegrated and the "Third World" is challenging "First World" conceptions of happiness and progress, the psychological effects of *laissez-faire* capitalism leads to fear of market guarantees for future jobs through market supremacy, rather than talent, skill or hard work.³ Nevertheless, the ideology of the self-made man as a reaction formation against

3 It is definitely possible to challenge Bauman on this point. Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) are nearing if not already achieving Second-World status. Further to the point of market security, Meme Roth, an anti-obesity advocate has said in an interview with Bill O'Reilly, "If I'm China and I'm India, and I'm looking out economically at this country, I'd say, 'You know what? Keep your processed foods. You American, you get fatter, you get sicker, and we're on the way'" (*The O'Reilly Factory, March 11, 2007*).

proletarian critique is alive and well. While running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, Herman Cain said in an interview, “if you do not have a job and you aren’t rich, blame yourself.”⁴ In this post-Reagan neoliberal environment, the social safety nets that local relationships and collectivities previously provided waned in response to the availability of resources through the free-market because local others do not work together to meet the needs of the collective. Additionally, the rise of “episodic time” assures us that we are only a “channel change” away from a new self—memory, like video tapes, may be wiped clean—we can abruptly change identity as quickly as we can imagine new possibilities (Bauman 1997, 22–25). Or, with the rise of websites like ashleymadison.com, you are only one click away from being cheated on (tagline: “Life’s short. Have an affair.”). How can we trust when connections are episodic and marked by fear? Further, under the spectre of uncertainty, strangers are no longer clear, definable, and hence, “eradicable,” but rather, they are here, with us and within us. Identity building, which used to be a gradual and steady process (read: as belonging to “repetitive societies” per Marx’s analysis) is now “poorly founded...erratic and volatile” (Bauman 1997, 25). Indeed, if you have a solid, definable, and persistent identity in contemporary neoliberal capitalism it is a liability and not an asset (Bauman 1997, 27). Since there is no all-encompassing social structure or theory that can account for humanity there are gaps in which the order-building tendency of modernity excludes or suppresses any person or group that represents this fundamental flaw in their reasoning. The interstitial members of communities, in Bauman’s words the “slimy strangers,” symbolize the arbitrary and incomplete nature of modernity’s order-building logic.

Certain people are strangers because they have a tendency “to befog and eclipse boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen” (Bauman 1997, 25). Bauman draws this concept from Sartrean existential psychoanalysis, wherein the stranger comes to symbolize powerlessness:

If I dive into the water, if I plunge into it, if I let myself sink into it, I experience no discomfort, for I do not have any fear whatsoever that I may dissolve in it; I remain a solid in its liquidity. If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it...To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess. (Sartre 1956, 777)

4 <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/herman-cain-occupy-wall-street-protesters-rich-blame-article-1.961517>

Encountering the slimy is coming to realize that we are not in ultimate control of who we are and what other people may be. The fact that I cannot swim inconsequentially through the slime shows me the great power of the slime: “[We] react in a wild, rabid, distraught and flustered fashion, as one reacts to the incapacitating pulling/dissolving power of the slimy. The sliminess of strangers, let us repeat, is the reflection of their own powerlessness. It is their own lack of power that crystallizes in their eyes as the awesome might of the strangers” (Bauman 1997, 29). How can a powerlessness be also an “awesome might?” A concrete example of this would be the “strange sliminess” of feminists that want to “corrupt” women’s “natural” role as mothers and wives. Organizations like “Ladies Against Feminism” try to coax women back into traditional roles with an emphasis on the naturalness of these roles. But, if they did not believe that the “sliminess” of feminists would “stick to them” they wouldn’t have to struggle so hard against this “deviant” force. Anti-feminist groups know or at least implicitly demonstrate that the alterity of the other constitutes a kind of threat; it highlights their own lack of freedom and hence the freedom of the other.

How should we respond to the “slimy” and the “strange?” One response will be a kind of humanism that will be further explored in the next section, but preliminarily we need to re-think “the human” that informs our humanism. Traditional humanism is too “fraternal” (overemphasizing sameness) and a postmodern humanism would focus on actively either “de-sliming” strangers or embracing strangeness and difference or some combination of both. As we shall see, this is not merely the liberal value of tolerance, but it goes further than that: Tolerance is acknowledging the strangeness within ourselves and in others (Tester 2004). Bauman advocates that ethics needs transformation from tolerance to solidarity: “whereas tolerance is a fate (since it is a reflection of the endemic ambivalence of postmodernity), solidarity is a destiny because it has to be chosen responsibly” (Bauman 1997, 148). The de-sliming of strangers is not just something I do for others, but it is part of my destiny also. According to Bauman we must join the fight for recognition of everyone’s difference, not merely tolerating each other in quietism, thus changing the way we approach national ties (Bauman 1997, 147).

This characterization of modernity can be disputed: indeed, it is difficult to know if this captures every person’s experience in even the most typical of “modern” nations. We might also ask after Bauman’s characterization of groups and societies that are resisting this trend. However, in keeping with the project of this paper let us assume that this characterization is mostly right—

that is, that the modern nation embodies uncertainty despite its attempts to hold onto logic, order, and nationalistic affect for compelling obedience from its citizens.⁵ This characterization is necessary in order to set into motion the response that the postmodernist prescribes for us in our interactions with each other, and importantly, with nations and national identities. So far we have learned that the postmodern critique of modernity implies that, as a reaction to modernity we both try to respect that order-building cannot and should not be legislated on a mass scale, and that we ought to take on solidarity with the other in order to de-slime strangers.

IV. Individuality and Ethics

How do we understand ourselves within a nation? Especially with social media, the concept of the individual is changing and so is the nation. An important postmodern theme, or value, is individual choice, however, the concept of the individual and the ethics it makes possible needs to be folded into the postmodern nation being sketched here. How individuals relate ethically is a touchstone of national identities and must be considered by a postmodern nationalism.⁶ Bauman gives the familiar criticism of modern individualism, namely that it is characterized by the “individualization” of persons as atomistic and solitary. This interpellation is effected within a dreaming collective. The only way to support individualization of this kind is with ideology, or following Walter Benjamin, Bauman argues that:

The collective was “dreaming” because “it was unconscious of itself, composed of atomized individuals, consumers who imagined their commodity-dreams to be uniquely personal (despite all objective evidence to the contrary), and who experienced their membership in the collectivity only in an isolated, alienating sense, as an anonymous component of the crowd.” To put this in a nutshell – The collective was ‘dreaming’ because it made the individuals who composed it unaware of the collective origins of their individual qualities and experiences and of the collective nature of their troubles (Bauman 2000, 86).

5 It does not go unnoticed that the characterization of modernity may in fact be missing out on the post-colonial resistance inherent in, for example, Partha Chatterjee’s response to totalizing descriptions of modernity. His point is that characterizing society in such broad structural strokes misses the “internal” dimension of persons’ experiences, especially of the colonized; “nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain...The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the ‘inner’ domain of national culture” (Chatterjee 1997, 217).

6 In David Miller’s *On Nationality* (1995) he argues that national identities are justified because they are a vehicle for ethical claims that can promote liberal tolerance, diversity, and human rights.

Ironically, the more we channel our moral energy into self-protection and our own personal well-being, the more that our moral universe shrinks. An example of the privatization of values is the prevalence of gated communities in modern capitalist society. Inversely, public society becomes a space of anonymity:

This new medium of living is, like other media, a message—and the particular message which this medium conveys is that ‘values and morals’ are for domestic use only and that the sole way to preserve them and practice is to separate, to disengage, to exclude and to withdraw. (Bauman 2000, 84)

The effects of this ethical withdrawal takes many forms; we shy away from social/communal arrangements, dependency is transvaluated into a bad thing (we rebuke the “too clingy” or the “too touchy-feely”), and the subject, in her individualization, is separated from the social conditions that make choice possible. Bauman says that it is a misreading of modernity to argue that these vehicles of separation increase available choices. We are dreaming that freedom lies in a new and improved consumer product. The effect is rather that we have a more limited ability to question, resist, and shape the structures to which we are systematically subject (Bauman 2000, 89).

Bauman furthers his case by arguing that individualization is inversely proportionate to the retreat of God. Banished further than Romeo from Verona, is the soul from the conceptual landscape of contemporary sociology. The disappearance of “soul” stands for the retreat of ethicality and then so for indifference. By Bauman’s lights “indifference” comes:

In the wake of the decision to exclude certain areas of life, and above all the beings who populate such areas, from the set of legitimate reasons to be concerned and to take sides. ‘Indifference’ stands for an active rejection of engagement, for ethical un-concern. It is the attitude taken towards the objects, also (above all) such as happen to be human subjects, which have been first banished from the universe of moral obligation. (Bauman 2000, 92)

In short, the indifferent avoid responsibility and subsequently human bonds wilt and fade. A shrinking of the moral universe, an atrophy or attenuation of morality is achieved through what Bauman names a process of “adia-

phorization.” This process is covert and tacit, its effects seen in “staving off the very possibility of [a] certain category of others appearing as targets of ethically meaningful action” (Bauman 2000, 92). As the amount of action not amenable to moral judgment increases we find a desert landscape in its place: we are left to fashion new concepts, new behaviours, and new institutions that attempt to fill this void. Two stages follow: first the panoptic, bureaucratic order-building forces of modernity and then the more dubious power relations of seduction and precariousness (Bauman 2000, 93). It is the latter river in which we now swim. We become seduced by “managerial wisdom” that “washes its hands” of personal, ethical engagement with employees under the rubric of freeing people to tap the heretofore untapped resources of “human talents, initiative and ingenuity” (Bauman 2000, 94). Precariousness takes the shape of being a disposable worker or lover, working either a McJob (say, at Starbucks), or not being able to “handle a relationship right now.”

What are the results of this shrinking of the moral universe? The Other and I become similarly situated in a universe where we owe little to each other: “Refusing responsibility for the Other is a wise and noble thing to do; and I should be grateful to all the others who reciprocate in the same manner” (Bauman 2000 95). Human interactions are increasingly included in the amoral, external, non-reciprocal relationships (i.e., “I’m not here to make friends”). Donald Trump is famous for saying, “it’s nothing personal, it’s just business.” This sentiment echoes closely Bauman’s point that when you dissolve the collectivity (with added value that this will be good for you), you render possible networks of dependency and support seemingly inaccessible.

The logical question to then ask this critique is what we do now. What does ethical action look like and how ought we to struggle against modernity’s adiphorization of our moral universe? We get a clue about this from Bauman’s 1995 work *Life in Fragments: Postmodernity and Morality in which he draws a distinction between ethics and morality*. In modernity, ethics is externally imposed, universally founded, requirements of law that are likened to the biblical Moses’ tablets of stone taken down from the mountain with inscribed unconditional commandments (Tester 2004, 141). These universals give people confidence in their lives and in the rightness of their choices. By contrast, postmodern morality does not guarantee this same certainty: A postmodern morality does not need “codes or rules, reason or knowledge, argument or conviction” (Tester 2004, 143) What should inform ethical action is both guiding and sustaining inter-human togetherness, which obtains in a context of irreducible

ambivalence and uncertainty—a difficult and embodied experience of openness to the other and openness to the new and slimy. The laws that forcefully impose ethical duties are the “solids” of modernity that melt away our pre-existing ethical responsibility with the other will hopefully flourish and bind us together. The exciting reversal effected is that the laws that are supposed to command ethical relationship preclude them.

With this analysis, we can make sense of Bauman’s claim that taking responsibility for the ethicality of our selves is the “birth-act” of morality. Contra the Kantian and neo-Kantian intuition (for example) of ethics that use principles of reason to constrain action in order to output ethicality, our beings are already permeated with ethicality. As a reference, we have thought it useful to write down these rules to externalize our knowledge and supposedly better regulate ethicality. However, this “rulebook” approach to ethics simply alienates us from our primordial ethical knowledge of our connectedness with others. Nonetheless, it is not enough to be made aware of our existential connection to the other. We must also move from the level of “being-with” to a “being-for”, which will prove difficult in the face of the awesome might of strangers—the slimy other. He writes, “taking up responsibility for the Other is the birth-act of morality. It is not, though, a one-of [sic] event. The birth act is re-enacted repeatedly in the life of the moral self... Once born, its survival is never assured” (Bauman 2000, 82). Bauman’s claim is that when we recognize our ontological responsibility our moral responsibility increases.

According to the postmodern critique, modernity over-individualizes, which causes ethical adiaphorization and emotional climate of suspicion and fear. The faith entrusted in the ethical norms of society has dwindled and the worry is that possibilities for a safe and secure life are foreclosed. This next section explores how to respond to the Other in light of these changes to ethics.

V. A New Paradigm of National Identities

Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings – yet precisely for that reason it is the swift and painless endings, without which new beginnings would be unthinkable, that tend to be its most challenging moments and most upsetting headaches. (Bauman 2007, 107)

How do we apply this exposition of modern ethics to a view of identities—and national identities in particular? A view of national identities needs to

be responsive to a new paradigm of humanity. Bauman writes; “[We should focus] on the right to choose one’s identity as the sole universality of the citizen/human, on the ultimate, inalienable individual responsibility for the choice ... The chance of human togetherness depends on the rights of the stranger, not on the question who—the state or the tribe—is entitled to decide who the strangers are” (Bauman 1997, 33). This focus on the rights of the stranger to be strange asks society to begin to define ourselves positively instead of negatively. A legacy of modernity (that at least, Jean-Paul Sartre would argue is necessary) is that we feel threatened and scared of the other—especially the strange or “slimy” other.⁷ According to the postmodernist, however, we must work to embrace difference, ambivalence, and uncertainty in national identities. We are responsible for fighting in solidarity for the rights of each other to self-identify, rather than using statehood to define identity. If my neighbor chooses to identify with a resistance group near or far, I should I should be standing-with and being-for her choice. National identities are a paradigm example of things we may find slimy or strange because they color our accents, compartments, desires, families, and traditions. Bauman suggests that we respond with solidarity and tolerance and resist legislation that favors modern “order-building” techniques. We should value difference among national identities and narratives—or at least those that also preserve inter-human togetherness by looking for what binds us together.

Some concepts for the postmodernist are determinate; we are charged with the task of creating and challenging social structures and also with the task of embracing strangeness in others and ourselves. Bauman is clear that leaving the individual to create her own culture from cultural praxis changes focus from structures to structuring. The nation, according to this view, is not a clear, definable mega-structure with determinate rules for national identities. Rather, the focus turns to taking a cultural stance in which one challenges and eclipses prefabricated (national) identities and boundaries (Marotta, 38–39).

7 In his work, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that what takes place in confronting another consciousness is that you are made object for another subject. He writes: “Thus for the Other I have stripped myself of transcendence... This is accomplished, not by any distortion ... but by [the Other’s] very being.” Even if it is not necessarily conflictual, it seems apparent that being-made-object (stripped of transcendence) by the other is tied strongly to being ashamed of oneself. I mention this side-note to show that it appears plausible that there are limits to Bauman’s prescription to de-slime the stranger (Sartre 1966, 353).

VI. The Twisted Road to a Postmodern Nation

Is this a nationalism? Bauman worries that “one needs, after all, only to drive a few miles to refill the empty tank of nationalism with racist fuel” (Bauman 2007, 29). While Bauman is suspicious of nationalistic ties, Anderson emphasizes how national ties are akin to familial love (because they are not chosen) but are also an unconditional disinterested love (Bauman 2007,144). This provides a qualitative difference between identities:

Dying for one’s country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International cannot rival, for these are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will. (Bauman 2007, 184)

Anderson draws a distinction between the gravity implied in a national identity and the affability involved in the choice of other kinds of identity. Why this grandeur? Why are national identities different than any other? Anderson believes that beyond qualities that were traditionally associated with a nation (race, religion, and so on) the common factor is language. Language is both primordial and able to be adopted by others. He writes; “For it shows that from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community” (Anderson 1983, 144). Common language connects us both affectively with the dead and temporally with other speakers in a contemporaneous community. This begins to appear as a threshold for blending in the postmodern critique. Anderson continues, “seen as both a historical fatality and as a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed” (Anderson 1983, 146). Would the postmodernist accept the amount that identities are also “closed” in Anderson’s terms? An imagined community is open because one can learn a language (albeit with her own accent) and become part of an imagined community. The community is also limited by capacity and time—one can only learn so many languages in a lifetime and it takes time to learn a language. This explanation of national identities puts limits on what imagined community one can claim to inhabit. Would postmodernists accept this criterion on imagined communities?

Smith argues against the postmodernist on this point. He accuses them of vying for “voluntary-ethnicity” which is not a proper option because people are restricted by ethnic history and political geography (Smith 1998, 205). Using the examples of “you can’t just choose to be Chinese or Turkish,” Smith

has stacked the deck in his favor by only picking confirming examples. He says that voluntary ethnicity has not worked in the past, but that is but proof that the postmodern critique needs to further work to shift understandings of identities so that they can include room for voluntary adoption and less “slimy” strangers. Moreover, we do not need to read Bauman’s claim as strongly supporting “voluntary ethnicity” because it can be a call for the recognition of the right of someone to identify herself within a nation in the way that she wants, not that she can create an identity by fiat. At the same time, Smith has stacked the deck in his favor by choosing particular examples that are least amenable to a voluntarist approach to identity, which turns his view of national identity into death-by-counter example. This is because, unlike the postmodernist, he is trying to find necessary and sufficient conditions for a national identity. If instead we looked at national identities as having a family resemblance with each other; some appear more voluntarist, some less so, some have overlapping ethnicities, some do not but they all constitute national identities that are recognized within the usage of the term, then we can better explain why some of his points work better with reference to what he terms “immigrant nations” like Canada and Australia (which should really be labelled colonial nations) and that do not work well with other national identities.⁸

If our sole right is to choose identity, then we appear to have a substantial tension between postmodernism and nationalism. Anderson has national identities as both closed and open, malleable and fixed. However, the postmodernist does not provide us with criterion for understanding affiliation with one identity over another. As a result, we might be forced to support everyone’s choices, so long as they do not promote a view of an other that turns them into slimy strangers. The concreteness of national identities is more akin to the primordialness yet adaptability of our ability to have and adopt languages. Barring physical and physiological barriers, the postmodern ideal of allowing, promoting, and preserving difference, choice, and change may be made consonant with Anderson’s view of national identities as closely tied

⁸ Voluntary identification in Canada, for example, seems to have its own unique marriage-like character much like a hyphenated last name; one is French-Canadian, Irish-Canadian, Western-Canadian, Métis-Canadian, and interestingly the shift away from Native Canadian to Indigenous or Aboriginal is a divorce from Canada, a new assertion of national identity under colonial rule. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation host Rex Murphy recently gaffed during a call-in show by asking someone if they were Muslim-Canadian or Canadian-Canadian. This redoubling shows the family resemblance quality of national identities and while Smith wants to call this fragmentation, understanding identities in terms of family resemblance can deal with the complexity of individual identities and yet the overlapping qualities that constitute national ties.

to languages and unchosen factors in one's life. However, this would only be if postmodernists have overshot their own goal. In order to promote the values they hold—questioning social structures, promoting local order-building, and solidarity—they need not have a notion of persons as free and malleable. Anderson's view might give the liquid self a container to hold what it can also allow to be fluid and free. This tension arises from both having an ideal of unlimited free choice and not blending in a concrete notion of how it would apply to our daily lives—a shortcoming of the postmodern view.

VI. Further Questions for the Postmodernist

“Does this constitute any kind of nationalism we would want?” is the real question. Would, for example, Canadians be willing to stop mulling the question of what it means to be Canadian and be satisfied with the language model offered in this paper (this is especially tricky given that Canada has two official languages)? The promise of new individuality that focuses on taking back the moral world from adiaphorization might be motivating for the members of a pre-existing nation to adopt a postmodern stance toward their nation, but I am skeptical of putting trust in the promise of inter-human togetherness grounded upon ontologically connected moral selves, especially since collective imaginings are inherently limited and sovereign. This asks at least two separate questions; first, is this theory something that would function at the practical level? Is it attractive at the theoretical level? A cost-benefit analysis between accurate ontological foundations (the claim that real human connectedness is of this sort rather than that and we ought to promote this foundational claim) and immediate practical concerns (what to do with existing nations, national identities, and claims of exclusionary sovereignty?) needs to be done at another time.

How far can we push the dichotomy between the “logic of modernity” which strives for order-building at a large scale and the “local” order-building that Bauman advocates? Is there a significant “in-between” yet to be explored? The answers to these questions have consequences for the specifically nationalistic worry about state sovereignty and what kind of legislation the postmodernist would accept. The tension between local and macro order-building is again difficult to because for Anderson, imagined communities are inherently limited—we cannot imagine all people who simultaneously live under all narratives—and so will have to limit our imaginings. But what does this do for the seemingly global claims that the postmodernist makes? It is my suspicion that we are going to rely on something more foundational like language—

as Anderson writes—and then it is clear that the postmodernist’s critique of modernity as a constructive view of nations leaves us unsatisfied. Though the tensions between nationalism and postmodernism are not devastating, Bauman—the most normatively robust postmodernist—needs to explain what he wants of nations: what constitutes a stranger, how does one deslime the stranger, how is that different than liberal tolerance and how do we manage being ethically connected to each other when our imagined communities are inherently limited and sovereign? Though Bauman gives us the tools to understand the beginning of a postmodern nation, even coupling his view with Anderson’s imagined communities still leaves us wanting for a robust view of nations amenable to lived experience of national identities.

There is no returning to that moment before language and, by extension, before national ties. To return to the opening poem of this essay, we live in a time after the sea-eagle cried out from the rock and gave a first division of our selves into an “I.” In the same way as the colonial forces that brought their dividing nouns to the colonized, there is no going back to an unnamed bay, a name in the sand wiped away by the tide. What we can do now is repeat and change the existing languages that we have inherited, and to repeat and change our national ties so that they include the possibility of changing not only our national understandings but ourselves in our encounters with others.

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