The Imagi-Nation

Nation as a cultural category & national visualities

Research Methodologies in European Cultures and Societies

Maria José Canelo

16.11.2026

“The idea of a man (sic) without a nation seems to impose a [great] strain on the modern imagination. A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears.”

(Ernest Gellner, 1983: 6).

“All this seems obvious, though, alas, it is not true. But that it should have come to seem so very obviously true is indeed an aspect, perhaps the very core, of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent atribute of humanity, but it has now come to appear as such.”

(Ernest Gellner, 1983: 6).

Following cultural studies concerns:

- in how far is the nation involved in power relations?
- how does national identity and individual identity relate?
- how do identity references circulate to teach one's *ways of seeing/looking* at the nation?

Visual culture studies (Module session 1)

VISUAL STUDIES:
Seeing should be understood as the point of intersection between what we know, what we perceive and what we feel, using all of our senses. In opposition to the traditional visual perspective which was based on one sense, seeing is a collective way of seeing, visualizing and imagining. (Mirzoeff, 2017)

Focal point: how do the social processes of the image and the look (production, circulation and reception/consumption) guide the meanings atributed to them by the observer/viewer?

- images are socially produced
- images are forms of REPRESENTATION
- ways of seeing are also socially produced
- The modes and conventions, as the circuits, also define the object

NATION as a category of BELONGING

The country – the State – **the nation**

Territory e nationality – citizenship –

– cultural identity

NATIONAL identity is a ***cultural*** construction

→ questions of MEANING

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983)

- Why do people answer the national appeal?
- How do they identify with the nation?
- Why do they believe they are a particular nation?
- Why are people willing to die for the nation?

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities:*

- **The nation is a MODERN SECULAR ARTIFACT**
- **It replaced declining discourses, e.g. religion (the soldier as the modern martyr)**
- **It benefitted from print capitalism (the time of simultaneity)**
- **The rise of the national framework - democracies replacing monarchies - demanded new forms of authority (e.g. the power of the people)**

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities:*

The NATION is:

"an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (6)

B. Anderson:

Nations are not false; they are *artificial* in the sense that they are malleable – they reinvent themselves through new or resignified meanings, according to different contexts, needs, and aspirations:

". . . it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as *a deep, horizontal comradeship.*

Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such *limited imaginings."* (7; my emphasis)

Popular metaphors: the family, the blood, the sacred land, …

Social construction theory (*v.* primordialism):

→ Dismantling the essentialism of the nation:

The nation offers itself as a master NARRATIVE that assigns MEANING and ORDER to the experience of a particular people, understood as a homogeneous community

|

Homogeneity is forged in the discourses of literature, culture [myths of origin, legends, symbols], language, history, politics, religion, 'race', …

The nation is therefore a SYMBOLIC entity

National(ist) discourse casts the autonomy, authenticity, and identity of the national community through

REPRESENTATIONS and SYMBOLS of national UNITY and PRIDE

What's in a nation-state?

→ *The nation as a source of **BELONGING***

- people/community (ethnicity, kinship)
- A location – a territory
- Sovereignty – a political entity (borders)
- Language; religion; attitudes, behaviors, values & beliefs
- Memory; history; a legacy/past & a future - tradition + mission projected onto the future
- Figures of heroes and martyrs
- ?

The role of symbols

The hymn or the flag (mostly invented during the RISE of the NATIONAL FRAMEWORK, late 18th-early 19th cent.)

National types or heroes that can **represent** and appeal to what the people have IN COMMON (myth)





→ All of these reinforce the *imagining* of the community as ONE and UNIQUE

The time of the nation

- The new *temporality* of the nation (B.Anderson) relies heavily on the understanding and use of the time of TRADITION:

Traditions create spaces or moments of *imobility*: when ***the present connects directly with the past***

Through *repetition*, the past is reenacted as if it were the present, and thereby re-authenticated (e.g. the celebration of national holidays; the cult of national heroes; particular practices of folk culture; …)

E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*

TIME - TRADITION – MEMORY

"a set of **practices**, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of *a* ***ritual or symbolic*** nature [v. pragmatic], which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by ***repetition***, which automatically implies continuity with the past."

"For all invented traditions, so far as possible, **use history** as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion."

Shared forms of belonging

- **Collective memory** → organizes in institutions (e.g. museums and monuments)
- |

  'Invented traditions'

  → The past is mobilized in the present to provide a sense of continuity (legitimacy; nostalgia)

Memory as commodity

A board game based on the Portuguese navigations, titled “Caravels”

Players are invited to embark in an adventure through ‘unnavigated seas’ and recreate the experience of the construction of the Portuguese empire

The goals are commercial gain and success, always emphasizing the glory of these endeavours.

(SpielPortugal online)



Memorialization

- Whose memory? *Exclusive* processes (establish official historical records – master narratives)

(Edward Colston statue, Bristol)



Memorialization

- Whose memory?
  Inclusive processes of memorialization



Traces of the Berlin Wall, Berlin

Nationhood expresses in everyday life and the most commonsensical gestures

Banal Nationalism, Michael Billig (1995)

Exercise 1

1. Does national identity still matter?

   Yes/no – why?

2. Are there other forms of identification that may matter more?

3. Where does national identity still get its strength from?

4. Why are people willing to die for their nation?

5. What are the gains and downsides of attachment to a nation?

6. If you could change your nationality, which one would you adopt instead?

Exercise 2

GROUP WORK:

picture analysis and comment: **identify aspects of banal nationalism**















Fig. 2

Fig.4



- Group 1 – Olympics
- Group 2 – Eurovision
- Group 3 – Brexit
- Group 4 – Cartoon

1. Medal-winning athletes on the podium singing to their national anthems

2. The Portuguese President (former; Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa) poses for a 'selfie' with the Portuguese female football team

3. Recent picks of the Eurovision Song Contest

4. Brexit street celebrations

5.A kindergarten visit to a monument in Coimbra, 'Portugal for the Little Ones' (Portugal dos Pequenitos)

6. Cartoon on "9/11"

Bridge to Session 3

- If the nation is typically attached to the idea of a fixed, material, territory, where the origins of the community can be found and therefore its roots as well,

  MIGRATIONS have posed the biggest challenges to that **idealization** of the place of origin and a corresponding homogeneous people

Stuart Hall on cultural identity:

The concept of DIASPORA allows us to reconfigure 'identity' as a category in process, a constellation of reference points, provisory or strategic positionings (Hall, 225)

Hall's proposal:

"the diaspora experience . . . is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of *a necessary heterogeneity and diversity;* by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." (235)

Bibliographical references:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism.* Verso, 2006. [1983].

- Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism.* Sage, 1995.

- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge UP,* 1983.

- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism.* U of Cornell P, 1983.

- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora*". Identity, Community, Culture, Difference.* Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222.237.