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16. STRATEGIC “LINGUISTIC COMMUNITIES”

The Political Struggle for Nationalism in School

The main dangers lie in the “unknown knowns”—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values. —Slavjo Zizek (2004)

School curricula are contested spaces of nationalism that socialize students into society and teach a certain set of morals, ethics, and history. But what version of the nation is articulated in school? More importantly, whose version is it? These questions are at the heart of the relationship between the project of mass schooling and the formation of nationalism in state governing apparatuses.¹ In an attempt to break down this relationship for a deeper understanding of each concept (“school” and the “nation”), I critique the work of three scholars of nationalism—John Breuilly, Benedict Anderson, and Etienne Balibar—by relating some of their ideas to the empirical evidence from four previous chapters that detail experiences of education from five countries (Israel, Cambodia, Guatemala, the United States of America, and Canada). My main contention here is that the idea of the nation is constructed through political struggles between many (and increasingly trans) national actors, and that this contested process can be illuminated in the language used in textbooks by what is said and what is not despite the memory and competing versions of history by the very community members serviced by the school. As will be seen, the political struggle to create nationalism through the project of mass schooling often means textbooks must take seemingly obvious historical memories and languages (particularly of recent violent histories or “active pasts,” as Yogeve wrote) and hide them (or “selective forgetting” in Bellino’s terms) in the official narrative of the official curriculum in order to further the political project of nationalism through “the present state.” In a sense, the “unknown knowns” of consciousness are partly constructed inside the official curriculum. Schools can be seen, therefore, as mechanisms that strategically construct linguistic communities in an effort to unify a nation. The exact modes of this construction depend on the local circumstances in “the present state.”

Nations are typically thought of as spatial demarcations of geography (a territorial conception) and an imagination of identity (an ethnic conception). These two notions are not dichotomist but rather relational: within the formation of state governments, the idea of a nation is used to create borders between “nation-states” as well as mythologize and historicize their foundations, creating borders between members and nonmembers. It is debated whether nations are formed because of

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some inherent national identity of a particular ethnicity, sociocultural processes that bind certain types of people together, or a political struggle that unifies, willingly or not, certain groups within a territory. There is also a debate about whether racism (i.e., exclusion) is a necessary outcome of nationalism or if the project of nationalism can actually be universally inclusive, leaving racism as a manifestation of other phenomena like class formation or social antagonisms. Both of these debates are profoundly important when understanding the role of mass schooling inside a nation-state, and the three theorists under investigation here provide fertile ground for exploration.

The cultural theories of nationalism popularized by Benedict Anderson (1991) have been widely used in the literature of comparative education. Anderson argued that cultural formations precede the nation and, therefore, ultimately construct national identity. Nation-ness is formed, in Anderson's theories, through "cultural artefacts" like the school curriculum or national anthems, by which an "imagined political community" is developed among a group of people. This community has a "profound emotional legitimacy" through these artifacts, allowing some people to fight and die for a nation.

Anderson's claims are "concerned primarily with social change and different forms of consciousness." He saw the foundations of the nation "conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community" (p. 145). Moreover, by analyzing "characteristically racist" epithets during and after French and American colonialism in Southeast Asia, Anderson suggested that nationalism "thinks in terms of historical destinies" and racism "dreams of eternal contaminations ... outside history" (p. 149). For Anderson, racism falls outside of nationalism altogether and in fact has an "origin in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation" (p. 149). Nations are thus groups of people who speak the same language and—if all people can have national self-determination—would consequently eliminate racism. Schooling is simply a tool used by states to socialize youth into a particular conception of national identity and can be used to foster inclusion.

These general claims—nations derive from culture and exclusion does not emanate from nationalism—are points of departure for Balibar (2002) and Breuilly (1994). Although Balibar shared Anderson's belief that nations are imagined and derive from culture, he nevertheless saw exclusion as a socially necessary outcome of a national community of citizens and emphasized the power of the state in forging national identities. For Balibar, educational systems act as a "key structure" (p. 163) of hegemony (along with the family and the judiciary), fostering national ideologies and "symbolic patterns of normality and responsibility in everyday life" (p. 163).

Schools as a "key structure" of hegemony—that is, "the deep structures of 'hegemonic' reason" (p. 163)—are clearly found in the Israeli curriculum Esther Yogeve described:

Textbooks are not ideologically transparent. They produce an apparently normal narrative, pursuing an approach in line with Gramsci's concept of

“hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 25–43) or Bourdieu’s concept of “doxa.” (Bourdieu, 1990)

Faden found similar evidence in America and Canada and claimed “historical narratives have political implications, as they are used in the classroom to develop students’ understanding of the nation and its history.” Often, “structures of hegemonic reason” include simplistic stories of a nation and its members—in Faden’s terms, America is a “reluctant hegemon” and Canada must always prove “itself on the world stage”—while at the same time negatively objectifying nonmembers.

It is the construction of normality through national narratives taught in schools that constructs the necessary “other” of nationalism. Nationalism is the construction of subjectivity defined as consciousness, and since subjects must have objects, Balibar suggested that those who are not normal must be “segregated or repressed or excluded” from society. Subjects are formed, in other words, by their ability to objectify others. School is a tool whereby governments create subjectivity in youth by objectifying nonmembers of the community. In Israel, for example, Yogeve showed that textbooks demonize “the image of the Arab as a persecuting enemy.”

Exclusion is an outcome of nationalism and is taught and practiced within schools. Balibar suggested this occurs through the very language used in schools to construct normalcy. In some cases, schools discipline how people think of historical events. In the case of postconflict Guatemala, the *Conflicto Armado* was not identified as genocide in the textbooks despite many people’s belief to the contrary. The instrument of the textbook disciplined people’s beliefs by limiting the language used to talk about the event. Such disciplining comes with fear of disobedience: As one teacher stated in Bellino’s research, “Since you don’t know who is in the [class]room, the textbook is safe.”

Thus, the school is used to form a “linguistic community” in order to construct boundaries not of geographic space but of subjective consciousness. The very process of creating a community through a common lingua taught and practiced in school leads to the exclusion of certain people. If the Guatemalan teacher used the word “genocide” to discuss the *Conflicto Armado*, then his very language would place him outside of the textbook. In other words, to create community requires the exclusion of nonmembers. It is for this reason that Balibar saw racism (or exclusion) as a necessary outcome of nationalism.

Despite the linguistic strategies used to create a sense of community and a regime of exclusion in schools, the key structures of hegemony (schools, family, and the judiciary) are not always in sync. Often opposing narratives exist within the different structures. Whereas schools may articulate one version of reality (e.g., the *Conflicto Armado* was not genocide), families may instill a completely different version (e.g., the *Conflicto Armado* was genocide). One Guatemalan parent interviewed by Bellino suggested teachers teach the “state’s version of the history in schools ... [but that] is very different from the story I tell [at home].” This was also found in Canada and the United States, where Faden found evidence

that teachers sometimes held opposing viewpoints from the national curriculum but nevertheless continued to teach according to the curriculum.

These competing narratives—multiple linguistic communities, in a sense—complicate the notion that nationalism derives from culture. When there are different ways to think about recent history within a territorial border such as in the case of Guatemala and Cambodia, what then of nationalism? There seem to be competing versions of nationalism despite the version purported by the government through public institutions like schools. This is precisely where John Breuilly faulted notions of culture as the defining element of nationalism.

Breuilly rejected that nationalism emanates from some notion of national identity within a community, imagined or not. Although particular instances of nationalism can be attributed to linguistic-cultural (as well as economic and social) factors, as described by Anderson and Balibar, they cannot be abstracted to form a general theory of nationalism. Similar to Karl Marx's inability to articulate a general theory of the state (see Jessop, 1982), Breuilly suggested that a cultural theory of nationalism can only be particular, never general. Instead, Breuilly contended that "nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and that politics is about power" (p. 1). He thus developed a general theory of nationalism based on the political struggle for state power between opposition movements. The struggle for state power will eventually leave a winning group, who will then go on to justify the conflict in nationalist terms inside public institutions like schools. Once a political entity is in state power, then "rapid shifts in the balance of doctrines and languages employed in a nationalist movement" begin (p. 13). Thus, for Breuilly, schooling is a strategic institution for indoctrination along nationalist lines but only forms after a particular state comes into power.

Through the ideas of Breuilly, we begin to see the "linguistic communities" and "imagined political communities" as multiple and in competition for state power. Thus, the linguistic-cultural factors that supposedly create nationalism are no more than the modes of politics in the construction and struggle over who can speak for a nation. In other words, the processes of forming a linguistic or imagined community through schools are in fact the politics of nationalism. In such competitive environments, exclusion is a necessary political mechanism when multiple actors vie for power, and the school can help achieve these ends.

This leads then to the understanding that political movements construct nationalism using the national curriculum in the fight to retain state power. Therefore, Yogeve is incorrect in stating, "*Problems arise whenever there is a mismatch between historical truth and national identity.*" Historical "truth" is created and then taught in schools to form the national identity. National identity does not derive from some external, cultural phenomenon. Problems arise, in fact, when opposition movements attempt to reclaim and restate historical "truth" in attempts to construct a different national identity. This can be clearly seen in postconflict countries that still have multiple opposition groups vying for power, such as Guatemala or Cambodia after the 1993 elections.

When the outcome of state control is not clear and violence continues, as in the case of Guatemala and Cambodia, governments take a more active role in con-

structuring or withholding particular histories from school. This is to say, schools articulate a version of nationalism supported by the government that takes a particular understanding of historical “truths.” In Guatemala, some schools have been “waiting for the revised curriculum [on the *Conflicto Armado*] for over a decade.” In Cambodia, the history on the Khmer Rouge had line-edits by the ministry itself, detailing down to the date when the “execution of the Democratic Kampuchea” ceased. In these delicate cases where the fight over state power is fresh in the minds of citizens, controlling the language is essential. Such control was found in Israel, where Yogev did not find much change in the portrayal of the 1967 war in textbooks over 30 years. In cases with more stable linguistic communities like the United States, Faden found that teachers continue to teach the national curriculum even when they disagree with it.

Although the ideas of Breuilly, Balibar, and Anderson seem to be discontinuous in terms of the fundamental drivers of nationalism (culture or politics?) and the outcomes of nationalism (racism or not?), a combination of some of their ideas in relation to particular instances suggests that the modes of national construction in schools are deployed strategically by the state. “The present state” articulates nationalism depending on its political needs. For instance, Breuilly’s emphasis on nationalism as politics opens space for the understanding of Balibar’s insistence that schools are meant to form a “linguistic community,” not as an institution that uses and teaches one language instead of another but as a community that articulates the past, present, and future in particular ways. The exact contours of the “linguistic community”—that is, the words and metaphors used to speak of a nation—are contested and depend on which nationalist opposition movement controls the power of the state. These messages can be found in textbooks and were, in Yogev’s analysis, “overt and covert” in Israel.

Likewise, the community-exclusion dialectic within nationalism that Anderson and Balibar debated can coincide in “the present state” depending on the political environment. In other words, “the present state” can emphasize community or exclusion to different degrees within schools depending on the circumstances. Thus, by starting with Breuilly’s conception that nationalism is politics, we begin to see schools as constructing strategic imagined communities or strategic linguistic communities, excluding and including various groups as is necessary to maintain power or when state power changes hands.

Breuilly, Balibar, and Anderson did not address, however, the contemporary transnational actors who influence mass schooling. No longer are the politics of nationalism only being fought among opposition movements to the state; now they include actors such as nongovernmental organizations, development partners (the United Nations, World Bank, etc.), and a mobilized civil society that focuses at times on nonformal education. For example, in Israel, nongovernmental organizations wrote a textbook that provides competing versions of history side by side. Freelance publishers even printed it. Although the ministries of education ultimately banned the Israel-Palestine joint textbook, it nevertheless is available to the public as an alternative historical “truth.” That it was banned in Israel and Palestine should not be a surprise because such a historical understanding runs

counter to the linguistic narrative constructed to support the ruling party of each state. Nevertheless, the very “linguistic community” that schools construct thus faces the opposition of alternative linguistic communities from nonstate actors in nonstate institutions such as the family. Moreover, the political recalculations in Israel and Cambodia, for instance, often have to consider the international community. In the case of the 1967 war, most textbooks continued to construct the narrative in similar ways from the 1990s until the late 2000s. One book, however, was able to make students “aware of the choices that faced the government after the war and of its decision not to decide” by the late 2000s. This was seen as a major concession because it changed the language used to construct the history of the 1967 war from an inevitable war Israel was pulled into to one where the government had choices about how to act and react. The question to ask is: What changed inside the state government of Israel to allow for such a change to occur?

Schools are an important tool in the construction of nationalism. Exactly what is taught is a political process directed by the state in order to maintain power. Nationalism is not constructed in schools, but it is maintained by excluding particular words, people, and histories from a linguistic community. This often includes removing certain historical memories and privileging others in an attempt to construct a historical “truth” that is most valuable to the state at a given time. Thus, when Faden used the work of Patton to suggest that qualitative research has three roles—“making the obvious obvious, making the obvious dubious, and making the hidden obvious”—she missed, among others, the pairing of “making the obvious hidden.” It is precisely the practice by governments to exclude particular conceptions of truth in textbooks that is crucial to our analysis of (re)imagining the nation, particularly after war. Who “knows” and can envision nationalism after war and what is not said? In the language of Žižek, what “known” becomes unknown?

Schools are therefore mechanisms of state power, and when state power changes hands, so too does the historical “truth” taught in schools. This political struggle is apparent in countries that have undergone recent violent histories and have not yet settled on a particular constellation of state power. In such instances, the linguistic communities constructed by schools constantly change and are contested by opposition state and nonstate movements. In a sense, a combination of the ideas of Anderson, Balibar, and Breuilly creates what can be called a “strategic linguistic community” whereby actors who want to articulate different versions of the nation strategically use schools to limit the language available to speak of and about a community, excluding and including certain people. Reimagining a nation inside schools is, therefore, a political struggle between different conceptions of the linguistic community.

NOTE

- ⁱ My use of the term “state governing apparatuses” denotes the many different formations a state can take. Indeed, the countries under investigation here range in formation from republican in the United States to democratic-authoritarian in Cambodia. Like Karl Marx’s understanding of the impossibility

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of generalizing the “present state” across national boundaries, I too see the modern state as a “fiction” generally because it develops according to local context and cannot be conceptualized into a general theory of the state; however, there are *some* general characteristics and institutions of modern states, one being mass schooling. Thus, my focus here is the use of mass schooling and nationalism within the modern state, whereby the state is not an abstraction of all states generally but rather “the present state” within each geographic location.

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