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## Is the Nation Really a Horizontal Community of Direct Access?

Jaroslaw Kiliias

Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as a political "imagined community" is well known. He defined it as an entity imagined in a categorial way, as a community of compatriots who, as members of the community, possessed basically equal status. According to the British anthropologist, it is conceived as one community among many other, similar ones, and it serves as a main source of a political identity of its members.<sup>1</sup> Anderson's concept has achieved unprecedented popularity among scholars. Here I would like to explore certain paradoxical consequences deriving from the notion of the "imagined community." Some scholars seem to suggest that the nation is not only based on the vision of a horizontal community of a direct access, but actually is one. Is the nation only imagined as such or could it really be one? I think, the word "imagined" is crucial, because this kind of community probably cannot exist in the world of social phenomena. The very notion of an "imagined community" contains an internal contradiction: the existence of such an entity seems to be impossible simply because of its macro-social character. However, I do not suggest (as would a Marxist), that I would label the very concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson *Die Erfahrung der Nation. Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts* (Frankfurt - New York: Campus Verlag, 1988): 15-17.

an “imagined community” as being merely form of false consciousness. The matter is much too complicated to be solved in this simplistic way.

In order to demonstrate the basic problem connected with the concept, I propose to use concepts derived from the sociology of knowledge. I realize, that most of my argument is a dull sociological banality – however, there is some banality that nevertheless deserves to be repeated. In my argument I am going to use concepts originally presented by Alfred Schütz, and later developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. They perceived society basically as an amount of shared knowledge about social institutions and practices. Their main interest was the question in how this knowledge operate within the society and of a social division of knowledge. I do not need to discuss their concept here – I simply need it to draw your attention to an important cleavage between different types (or levels) of the reality we live in, and to show how this cleavage influences the function of any macro-social phenomena, including the nation.

The mentioned authors made use of the concept of multiple realities: different areas of human experience, perceived in different ways and composed of various types of knowledge. They proclaimed the world of everyday life to be most important.<sup>2</sup> We spend most of our life there, and other realities (like dreams, but also worlds of literary fiction, pure theory – including social theory, etc.) are only ephemeral compared with everyday life: these other realities we only visit only to return to our “normal” everyday reality. Any phenomena experienced in the other realities are usually translated into the more familiar reality of everyday experience. Everyday life is a reality we share with other human beings, supposing that they also share our own view of it. It is also important to remember that reality of everyday life is always a social – not an individual construct – and that it emanates from a network of social relations of its bearer. Another crucial characteristic of everyday reality everyday life is its practicalness. It is the world of purely practical concern, not one of theory. If we analyze the knowledge of an individual, we find out that in most cases she knows just enough to be able to perform her everyday routines. It would be unrealistic to expect her to be truly familiar with any institutions except those few ones in which she (or people she meets) participates during her life.

Although the sociology of knowledge of Schütz, Berger and Luckman is without any doubt over-intellectualized, showing only marginal interest in the practical op-

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Schütz, *The Dimensions of the Social World* in: *Collected Papers*, vol. II *Studies in Social Theory*, ed. by A. Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1964): 23-37; Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann *Social Construction of Reality*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973): 33-61.

eration of knowledge (introducing a fictitious, purely theoretical, genetic model of the construction of reality instead), it still provides us with some useful intuitions. The most important one is that the sphere of the everyday life is limited, and its borders seem to be identical with the limits of direct individual access. Most of the life-worlds are beyond our direct and unmediated experience, and one cannot visit them by following her everyday routine and using only the practical information gathered by herself (or by people she knows personally). To go outside everyday life, one needs different sources of information. There are some typical “extensions” of personal experience, like mass-media (or books about the pure theory), but they all function outside the network of everyday, routine social relations, and are all managed entirely by specialists. Moreover, the borders of everyday life seem to be parallel to the line dividing two different levels of the social reality: micro- and macro-scale phenomena. If we limit our scope to the phenomena effectively perceived by society members themselves, we can also identify it with the borderline between communities based on actual social ties between individuals, and “imagined communities” created in a categorial way. Any interactionist description of the general society is thus impossible simply because the very existence of this borderline: societies (=nation-states) are by no means extensions of personal interactions!<sup>3</sup>

Considering the nation, it is important to remember, that it is not only a macro-social phenomenon, but a symbolic one, created of abstract symbols.

What consequences for the theory of nation has the existence of a gap between micro- and macro-phenomena? In order to demonstrate them, I propose to look at Charles Taylor’s text, entitled “Nationalismus und Moderne”. The Canadian philosopher adopted somewhat modified version of Gellner’s constructivist model to analyze new nationalisms and to examine the role of nationalism as the main source of the political legitimacy of the modern state. I should probably stress that I do not want to criticize it entirely. I am only interested in the way he uses the concept of the nation as a horizontal, political community of direct access. Since there is no need to reconstruct the whole argument, I have decided to quote some interesting parts of the article instead:

“Zwei Hauptmerkmale der modernen Imagination lassen sich am besten durch ihren Kontrast zu dem kennzeichnen, was ihnen in der europäischen Geschichte vorausging.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barry Barnes *The Nature of Power* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 152-164.

Erstens lösten horizontale Gesellschaften die hierarchischen ab. In letzten gingen Hierarchie und ‘mittelbare Zugehörigkeit’ Hand in Hand. Eine Ständegesellschaft wie im Frankreich des. 17. Jahrhunderts war offenkundig hierarchisch gegliedert, was bedeutet, daß man ihr stets über eine ihrer Komponenten angehörte. Bauern waren an Fürsten gebunden, die wiederum vom Königen abhingen. (...) Demgegenüber ist die moderne Idee der Staatsbürgerschaft durch Unmittelbarkeit bestimmt. Wie vielfältig ich auch durch vermittelnde Organisationen mit der übrigen Gesellschaft verbunden sein mag: eine Staatsangehörigkeit begreife ich als grundsätzlich von derlei unabhängig. Ebenso wie alle andere Bürger bin ich direkt auf den Staat bezogen, dem wir gemeinsam dienen.”

“Moralisch aufgefaßt bedeutet der moderne Individualismus (...) daß man sich immer weiteren, anonymen Gebilden zuordnet: einem Staat, einem Bündnis, der Menschheit. Es ist derselbe Schritt – nur aus anderer Perspektive gesehen –, den ich oben mit den Worten Craig Calhouns beschrieben habe: von ‘Netzwerken’ zu einer ‘kategorialen’ Identität.”

“Das zweite Hauptmerkmal der modernen sozialen Imagination ist, daß sie größere überörtliche Gebilde in nichts anderem, nichts Höherem mehr verwurzelt sieht als dem gemeinsamen Handeln in der profanen, weltlichen Zeit.”

“Horizontale Gesellschaften mit unmittelbarer Zugehörigkeit, die sich durch einen Akt der Bürger politisch formieren, bilden den Hintergrund für die Legitimation des Staates im Namen des Volkes.”

“Der moderne, demokratische Staat verlangt demnach ein gesundes Maß an Patriotismus, eine kräftige Identifikation mit dem Gemeinwesen und die Bereitschaft, ihm etwas zu opfern. Deshalb mußte sich der Identitätsschwerpunkt des modernen Bürgers zunehmend von der Familie (...) oder (vielleicht besonders) der Religion auf die Staatszugehörigkeit verlagern.”

“Der moderne Staat muß somit, um überleben zu können, neben eine homogene Identität und Zugehörigkeit fördern.”

“Von Nationalismus kann die Rede sein, wenn die übliche politische Loyalität unabhängig vom Staatswesen ethnisch, sprachlich, kulturell oder religiös begründet ist.”<sup>4</sup>

To sum-up, Taylor’s arguments are:

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor “Nationalismus und Moderne”, *Transit* 9 (1995): 181-186.

i) Typical forms of modern social life are not only described by social theorists as “imagined communities,” but because they are perceived in this way, they also function as imagined communities as well.

ii) The modern nation is a social and political unit that differs from earlier forms of social life because it is a horizontal, not vertical nor hierarchical structure. National membership is direct and non-mediated. Membership in pre-modern polities was always mediated by variety of institutions, which were organized hierarchically. The political loyalty of the subject was thus ordered accordingly. In modern societies, all loyalty has been relocated to the polity, to the nation-state itself.

iii) Modern forms of social life require much more actual involvement. They not only need a tacit acceptance, they also require a relatively high level of active participation, otherwise they could not function. The way to assure this kind of an involvement is by a nationalism that locates the individual’s loyalty in the body of the nation, and in the state (when the state is a national one). So, citizens should probably possess a national identity identical to the collective national (and state) identity.

I suggest, that the whole concept is based on an unrealistic view of social reality and on an illusionary, over-individualistic idea of the social actor. It derives from the conflation of an intellectual concept with the actual operation of a social entity that consist of the bearers of this concept.

We can easily check this hypothesis by remembering our observations concerning the limits of everyday life and by correlating it with our own experience. How can we apprehend our own nation-ness in everyday life? The nation is present in our everyday experience, that is a fact. But this presence is not a direct one and, as a social body, it always remains beyond our reach. We can see how it operates by watching TV and observing the representatives of our government signing international treaties. Perhaps we are also able to experience it by looking at military parades organized on national holidays. Occasionally, if our nation-state is a democratic one, we can also enjoy it by taking part in the popular celebration surrounding the general election. Consequently, the nation is a fact, one we know from the TV-screen and one we are taught by teachers in schools. Naturally, we can go abroad, but to perceive the difference between everyday habits here and there as being a national one, we need some additional markers: flags, different colors of shields on government’s buildings, or just the police-control on the state border. Or maybe it is enough, when an authorized person have instructed us, that the difference we may perceive is a national one? Nevertheless, the nation itself is always out of reach, its borderlines are not parts of our direct everyday experience and thus we need

someone competent to mark it for us. Therefore, its presence is always mediated by authorized personnel: politicians, state officials, teachers and so forth. Even if someone decided to enlist, to fight, and maybe even to die for her country (if we invoke one of the favorite Benedict Anderson's arguments<sup>5</sup>), in fact she would do so not because her nation's glory expected her to do it, but simply on her squad commander's order!

Does it mean that the nation cannot really exist as a community of direct access? No, it only means that the nation can be only in a sense a community of direct access, with its directness somewhat non-direct and mediated. Furthermore, it cannot function only with the appropriate structure of social imagination itself, as well as with massive institutional support.

Anderson himself suggested that one of the most important factors in the nation-building process had been the development of modern media, of which print seemed to be most important. We should not overlook the impact of technological change – it was necessary indeed – but we must not underestimate the importance of actual, organized human activity. “Imagined community” always requires a community of supporters – people who actually “imagine it” (or, using more usual words, continuously form, rethink and evoke its identity). They are intellectuals, whose role in nation-building process is already acknowledged (and sometimes even overestimated) by social theory. But the practical administrators of symbolical goods, such as teachers, priests and army-sergeants are no less important. This activity is always organized and must be carried out within institutional frame holding some real administrative power.

Now we can go back to the historical constructivist model of the nation-building evoked by Charles Taylor: it is usually seen as a process that started on the top and went to the bottom of a social strata. In the beginning, only few people were nationally conscious and mobilized, then the national identity began to broaden, and national consciousness became popular: everyone was nationally self-identified and mobilized. Having finished this process, a horizontal community of a direct access, the nation, is formed. Now its members are ready to support, or even to die for the country, and to fulfill all other tasks prescribed them by Taylor (and others writers).

But there are some serious problems with this argument. What happens to the very character of the everyday reality, and especially to the border between the world within the reach and other, more distant forms of the life? Has it ceased to

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<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson *op.cit.*: 18.

exist? Have they been integrated? Is it really possible? The answer is naturally negative. This concept overlooks some important characteristics of the social life. It is by no means possible for an “imagined community” to be directly perceived in everyday life. Neither is realistic to believe that individuals are able to gather together and mobilize spontaneously in order to realize their (supposed) national identity. I suggest that the perspective proposed by Taylor (and some others) is based on an illusory view on social life and on unrealistic premises concerning the human being. Last, but not least, it is hopelessly over-individualistic, for neither the human individual nor even the community of her neighbors and relatives is able to maintain any imaginary identity. The very information required to do so remains beyond the reach of any person, hence identity must be always imposed by authorized social institutions. Consequently, neither the premise expressed in statement i) nor the opinion ii) is true. The nation may be imagined as horizontal, but to in order to function as such, it also requires an elaborate and inevitably vertical institutional structure of a social support – and not only during the process of nation-formation, but always. It may serve as a direct, ultimate object of political loyalty, but it is possible only when the very concept of the nation is constantly supported by specialized social actors, who in fact mediate between the members and the community itself. In other words, although the nation is usually imagined as a horizontal community of direct access, it cannot function entirely as such, just owing to its imaginarity, because it is a macro-, not micro-social phenomenon. Perhaps one might ask, if the social imagery is the only important difference between the modern and premodern societies? I do not think it is true, not because of the supposed directness and horizontalness of modern societies, but rather because of their higher social mobility. One is not able to touch the nation’s body, just as subjects were not able (nor allowed) to touch the kingdom’s (or the king’s) body, but she still has at least the theoretical possibility of becoming its political leader. Although she has no direct access to the nation itself, she can easily join institutions that impose and maintain the national identity.

Any realistic view of the nation, identity, modern state and its legitimacy should realize that social reality is not homogenous, but always multi-level. No abstract entity such as nation or state can exist without the continuous support of specialized personnel. The consequences of this fact are important not only for the theory of the nation – but let go back to Charles Taylor. What is wrong with the iii), probably the most important point in his reasoning? Taylor’s argument concerning the legitimacy of the modern state reflects popular opinion among specialists, but I am not quite sure, if one can really confirm it. Is this kind of an argument based on any

observation of nationalism supporting the state, or only on a false interpretation of some persuasive examples of a purely negative, delegitimizing force of organized nationalist movements? Are average citizens of nation-states nationally mobilized? And are national states really more efficient than empires used to be? I am not able to develop my argument any further but, in my opinion, it is possible to see the political collapses of states (from the Habsburg Empire to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia – it does not matter if they were national or not) not as a result of the rise of any identity-based nationalism, but rather as a failure of state administration. In most cases, they were not simply victories of a social imaginary, and thus it is probably more useful to analyze them as resulting from the internal collapse of the state administrative apparatus, which normally mediated between citizens and the imagined reality of a polity. Accordingly, maybe the whole question of the legitimacy deserves to be reversed? Perhaps we should not assert the hypothetical need of the modern state to be legitimized, but rather analyze practical ways and techniques used by its personnel to avoid an active delegitimation? On the other side, the latter is possible only when organized groups are able to mobilize people. This is the case of identity used as a political weapon, as Taylor himself already showed in his article: it appears as the result of an activity of authorized people situated in particular social structures.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, the best way to avoid its victory is to impose the state's identity continuously. Nevertheless, for a social scientist it is still more practical to look for the identity in a body of experts than in a citizen's mind.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor "Nationalismus und Moderne", *Transit* 9 (1995): 192-197.