Community is a Social Construct:

How a Nation is an Imagined Community Built Upon Theories of Social Contracts and the Need

for Belonging in a Community

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For thousands of years, political philosophers have been theorizing on the ideas of nation-building, nationalism, and the nation as an imagined community. From Socrates' deference to the law in respect for his national identity, even in the face of his death, to Thomas Hobbes' theory on the social contract, and more recently Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community, the will of the public to belong has been critical to the strength of the nation and the creation of a national identity. With the social construction of national identities, comes the construction of nationalism, used to promote the greatness of the nation, building off the shared social and historical narratives to create a sense of communal identity. With the foundation of thousands of years of theories on social contracts as the basis of all nations as imagined and constructed communities, nations can formulate and promote a national identity and community for their citizens to subscribe to.

Theorists of nationalism who belong to the modern school of thought, such as Benedict Anderson, tend to identify the ideas of the nation and nationalism as developing alongside the modernization and industrialization of society (Croucher 2003, p. 8). This idea seems to confuse the concepts of nations and states, while only assessing them from a contemporary perspective, without consideration for historical trends. At its core, a nation is simply a community that came together through an association of common culture, myths, and history (Reynolds 2005, p. 63). To take part in any community, and identify with its values is a choice, and in this case, one that requires agreeing to a social contract, one that can be built upon for the state and its government, but at its most basic is the decision to be a part of a nation. Despite the views of modern nationalist theorists, this is something that has been occurring for thousands of years, though nations have evolved to be vastly different from ancient Athens to contemporary European states.

As early as Plato's Socratic dialogues, the idea of a social contract where members of the nation are to abide by the laws of the state in exchange for the right to belong was discussed and argued as a defining factor of nationhood and national pride. In Plato's dialogue Crito, Socrates is found laying out his arguments as to why he has refused to escape Athens, even facing the day of his execution. For Socrates, the choice he made to remain in Athens, though given many opportunities to explore other cities and societies, meant he was bound to abide by its laws and decisions, no matter the cost (Plato 1999). Socrates' idea of the social contract involves the exchange of obedience and sacrifice of certain absolute freedoms in exchange for an identity and the support of the nation that comes with that identity. It is from these arguments that the idea of choosing to belong originates and can be applied to the beginning ideas of nationalism as the concept of needing to belong, and the nation as a community.

Almost two thousand years later, Niccolò Machiavelli set out his ideas on state unity, strength, and stability, specifically focused on cases of imperialism and conquest. Machiavelli's The Prince focuses on methods leaders and conquerors could use to implement nationalist agendas in their conquered lands, emphasizing the role the aristocracy and elites of society play in establishing those ideas of nationalism. Such kingdoms were meant to both belong to kings, as well as the collective groups of its inhabitants, where the elite bore responsibility while accounting for the will of the community (Reynolds 2005, pp. 56-57). Machiavelli believes state stability and prosperity would be best supported through the creation of national unity, and throughout The Prince, he lays out the methods and programs a leader would need to implement to achieve those goals, such as the practice of othering to strengthen the national sense of community (Machiavelli 2019, pp. 28-30). While Machiavelli's theories primarily focus on

providing a guideline for imperialist leaders on how to integrate conquered states, several of his suggestions do also support the idea of a social contract, though more totalitarian leaning when compared to other eminent theorists, they can in turn be applied to the process of constructing national belonging.

Thomas Hobbes, one of the most prominent theorists on the social contract, gave the first modern detailed and articulated theory of the social contract in his Leviathan. Hobbes argues that the inherent and natural state of individuals is one of chaos and anarchy, and only by coming together, ceding certain freedoms to join together as a community, can a state be formed in which individuals can find a sense of belonging and protection from the otherwise inevitably of conflict (Hobbes 2018, p. 134). To Hobbes, however, the organization of states results in a move from individual conflict to state conflict, as each state fights for its own self-interests and power, an idea that plays out in nationalist struggles for power both in times of war and times of peace (Hobbes 2018, p. 129). Hobbes' theories on the social contract and the natural state of individuals and nations suggest that it is the social contract that constructs the community individuals can subscribe to and follow, as seen in modern nation-states' use of nationalistic values to pursue the interests of the nation.

Following Hobbes' theory, John Locke authored his own, building upon Hobbes' fundamental idea of the state of nature enticing individuals to come together under a nation. While Hobbes holds the idea that individuals join a state to put an end to the chaos, Locke puts forward that individuals join under a central government for protection and security (Locke 2004, p. 112). Locke's theory provides more individual rights to those under the nation than

Hobbes' near absolute authority but does concede that to join and be a part of the nation, individuals must sacrifice their absolute right to violence for the safety the nation could provide (Locke 2004, p. 112). Locke's theory, like Hobbes, suggests that individuals cede their right to violence for state control of violence to be enacted as the nation sees fit, an idea that is echoed in modern nationalist messages as the national identity and values are used to defend actions of state-sanctioned violence committed on the behalf of the nation.

When Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his theories in On the Social Contract, he took a different perspective on the foundations of a nation. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau views the nation as formed through the general will. For Rousseau, the social contract and the national society are formed only when "each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Rousseau 1987, p. 148). Rousseau agrees with Socrates' argument on abiding by laws, that if an individual chooses to reject the laws and structures of their community, they must stand before the general will and accept the consequences dealt out by the will under those laws. For Rousseau, as with Socrates, by choosing to be a part of the general will, and the nation, individuals knowingly lose their rights to individual will and complete freedom. Rousseau sees this idea of the general will as a strength of society, which in contemporary considerations means the nation and its decisions are being made by members of the nation in favor of their community, encouraging the nationalist belief that the nation's interest be put before everything else.

Like many of the classical political theorists, Benedict Anderson formulated his theory on the nation as an imagined community by taking an individual-focused appeal. Anderson's theory depicts nations as socially constructed communities, imagined by individuals who perceive themselves as part of a group. For him, a national community must be viewed as "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" (Anderson 2006, p. 6). He investigates the psychological need of people to belong and feel connections to others. Even though members will not know most of the other members of their community, there are methods, according to Anderson, of knowing the connection is there regardless, such as print media and national consciousness (Anderson 2006, p. 46). While the community is imagined, there remains a choice for individuals to take part in that community, a choice that is encouraged by political leaders and intellectuals with invented traditions based on stories, myths, and practices that determine shared values, while appealing to that need for a sense of belonging (Croucher 2003, p. 15). Without that ability for individuals to choose, a nation could not be created as a community, as it is the sense of belonging that makes the nation a community imagined through the perceptions of connections.

Though Anderson was a theorist of the school of modernism, believing nations and nationalism were a result of a modernizing world (Croucher 2003, p. 8), one very different from those of Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, those classic theories on belonging and the construction of society still hold true in Anderson's idea of imagined communities. Without the social contracts and exchange of individual freedom for a national identity, no nation could be constructed, as people would not be imagining themselves as part of a group, while the

very nature of these contracts as social inventions makes that community an imagined one. Certainly, the methods of community building have changed over time, as has the structure of nations and governments, due to the socioeconomic, political, and cultural developments of modernization (Croucher 2003, p. 8), such as the growth of capitalism, industrialization, secularism, and the rise of bureaucracy. Despite those changes, even in the times of those theorists, communities and constructed societies were as influential as they were for Anderson. The positions of nations as imagined communities and the individual commitments to the community, where individuals are willing to die in the name of the nation, are due to state monopoly on the legitimate use of force. A shared national identity makes people less likely to begin conflict amongst each other, placing the burden on the state to raise conflict against other states, a characteristic of nations made possible through adherence to the social contract.

Anderson may view nations and nationalism as a modern invention, and it may be as it appears in contemporary society, but looking at the classical political theorists, there appears to have been some form of allegiance to one's nation dating back to Plato. If Socrates was willing to die under the will of the community, as he accepted that he chose to live in Athens and as such his connection to his nation meant he was to abide by its laws, it cannot be said that he was not discussing his own form of nationalism in his debate, one that was later developed under Rousseau and Anderson. Even if they cannot be called nations as they are now understood, there have been a form of nations as political and social communities throughout history (Reynolds 2005, p. 63) and understanding that makes it easier to understand what makes a nation a community.

Furthermore, on its own, Anderson's idea of nations as imagined communities is slightly flawed in its limitations in defining what makes a nation, as he focuses more on establishing how the imagined community can influence nationalism. Under his definition, any group large enough for people to not know everyone, and where individuals can establish perceived connections that can be used to defend their pride and willingness to wage war, whether literal or metaphorical, for the community, constitute a nation. That definition, however, is vague enough to apply to many communities of varying sizes – cities, religious denominations, and cultural groups, for example. This unclearness means his definition could be applied to many groups throughout history, such as ancient Athens or medieval Europe. With this vagueness, to use Anderson's definition, other considerations need to be incorporated, such as the psychological need to belong and the design of the social contract, as well as the perception of "communities of descent, culture, and politics" (Reynolds 2005, p. 59), which help narrow down the definition of a nation, as individuals choose to cede certain individual rights to the nation in order to belong and feel protected, and from there the nation can manage those convictions to foster nationalism.

Communities allow their members to feel a place of belonging, whether that be defined as one's town community, the queer community, a sports community, or the community of the nation. Members of the community can proudly say they are a member and feel connections based on other people's shared membership in the community. Though a community of sports fans, for example, is a much smaller group than a nation, the feeling of pride over a sports team could be comparable to national pride, as members are elated over victories, and devastated over losses. As in the example of sports fans, nations become communities by fostering the sense of

shared histories and values, giving its members something to cling to and identify with, and in exchange are given the support and loyalty of their members.

In a world of increasing globalization, the idea of choice and the imagined community is increasingly important as global mobilization becomes commonplace. With the mass mobilization of people across the globe, whether due to conflict, economic advancement, or even personal choice, the ability of individuals to choose and accept the perceived conceptions of national belonging, irrespective of ethnic origins, is crucial for the integration of multicultural identities while maintaining a sense of national identity. This is where the modern idea of nations and national communities becomes useful. In classical considerations, nations could be viewed as perceived communities with shared customs, descent, culture, and political values (Reynolds 2005, p. 55), but with increased globalization, people can become members of a community regardless of descent and culture, based now on the decision to adhere to the customs and political values instead.

Contemporary nations and states look very different from those of ancient Greece, Renaissance Europe, and even the Industrialization period when nations and nationalism were thought to have originated by modernist theorists. Limitations of membership, expectations of involvement, and provisions of the nations have changed drastically, but at its heart, the idea of the nation as a perceived community has stayed the same. Nation building has never set out to explicitly create a community, but in the process of bringing a group together based on shared values and customs, a community is built and is an imagined one due to its nature as a social construction. While modern ideas on nations and nationalism are important to study and

understand, it is also crucial to acknowledge that those ideas are biased, not looking at the

thousands of years of nations that, while different from today's, were still communities in their

own right.

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