

# *Discussion on the Modernist Paradigm of Nationalism*

Ning Zhang  
Southwest Minzu University  
Chengdu, China

**Abstract**—The research paradigm of nationalism can be basically divided into four paradigms: modernism, perennialism, primordialism, and ethnic symbolism, of which Modernism has become the mainstream paradigm that emphasizes the recentness of nationalism in time and innovation in content. Within the modernist paradigm, its followers interpret nationalist theories from different perspectives, which can be divided into economic, cultural, political, ideological, and constructivist perspectives. This paper attempts to briefly interpret the theories of modernist paradigm and establish its internal theoretical logic sequence.

**Keywords**—nationalism, modernism, ideology, politics, economy

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the paradigms of nationalism, the modernist paradigm has become the mainstream with its diversity of viewpoints. It understands the richness of nationalism from the perspectives of economy, politics and culture, and observes the newness of nationalism from a historical perspective. Become the mainstream approach and perspective for studying nationalism. This article will summarize the main viewpoints of the nationalist modernism paradigm and present its theoretical context for understanding nationalism.

## II. NATION AND NATIONALISM

Generally speaking, there are two views on the concept of the nation. One is the definition of the nation in Europe. It is believed that nation originated after the bourgeois revolution and spread throughout the world after the French Revolution and the North American War of Independence. Smith holds that “the nation is an integrated group with fixed territory in vertical and horizontal connection, which is characterized by common civil and one or more common feelings” [1]. The other is Stalin's definition of nation, which holds that nation is a stable community formed in history with common language, common region, common economic life and common psychological quality. Since then, although the concept has been modified, it has only given a clearer definition of national identity. Comparing the European concept of nationality with Stalin's definition of nationality, the difference between them is obvious. The European concept of nationality focuses more on democracy, freedom, citizenship and the national concept of modern countries, while Stalin's cognition of the nation is more inclined to trace and identify the historical and cultural community. The European concept of nationality focuses on

Fund Project: The Phased Objectives of Innovative Scientific Research Project for postgraduates of Southwest Minzu University in 2018, “Policies of Liu Wenhui’s Administration to Kham Areas from the Perspective of Political Game” (CX2018BS07).

subjective identity, while Stalin's definition focuses on other people's identification of nationality by characteristics. “nationalism created the nation” seems to have become a consensus in academic circles, but like the concept of nationality, scholars cannot reach a unified point of view on the understanding of the concept of nationalism. Throughout the discussion of nationalism, the differences between many cognitions of nationalism are so distinct, which forms a huge contrast with the similar ambiguity that shown by scholars when defining the concept of nationality. It also makes us realize that if we want to have a clear understanding of the concept of nationalism only relying on the definition of nationalism is not enough, but to understand the lengthy history of the nationalist movement. Haas once mentioned that nationalism was an elephant, the researchers were blind, and each researcher only touched a part of the “nationalist” elephant. Nationalism was interpreted as a political doctrine and emotion, which is the most powerful ideology in the world by far in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science*. [2]

## III. THE PARADIGM OF NATIONALISM

Primordialism holds that human beings belong to a certain ethnic community with primitiveness and fixity, and identify ethnic groups as the product of the expansion of blood groups. On this basis, the primordialism equates the nation with the ethnic group and believes that the two have a linear development relationship. Perennialism holds that a nation exists in a certain period of its history, and that the modern nation is only a reproduction of the ancient nation. There is nothing new about the modern nation except the era in which it emerged and the technology and tools controlled by its management and military elite. So the perennialism holds that there is no great difference between the modern nation and the nation in history. Ethnic symbolism holds that the formation of a nation is neither a construction nor an invention, but a rebuilding of the existing cultural theme of the city and the previous ethnic relations and emotions, that is, the modern nation emerged in the context of collective cultural identity in the past and pre-modern times. For ethno-symbolism, the existence of ethnic groups must be based on ethnic groups, and the absence of ethnic groups will directly lead to the absence of ethnic groups [3]. The paradigm of modernism holds that nationalism is the product of modernization rather than anything else. It advocates that nationalism is a newly emerged phenomenon in time and emphasizes the innovative nature of nationalism in content. Nationalism creates the viewpoints of

the nation, so all the derivatives of nationalism are the products of modern times. Some scholars compared the four paradigms and thought that modernism valued theory and ignored history, perennialism was on the contrary, primordialism had neither history nor theory, and ethnic symbolism proposed new methods without the basis of theory. In the author's opinion, that is not the case. In the paradigm of modernism, the history of the nation cannot be traced back to the British bourgeois revolution, or even the French Revolution. There is no so-called ethnic history at all. Ethnic groups are more the result of political development. If we follow the linear historical development of ethnic groups, there may be no European nation or nationalism at all. Therefore the modernist paradigm tends to a political, economic and cultural perspective or is no need of history than having no history.

#### IV. DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES OF MODERNIST PARADIGM

The followers of modernist paradigm interpret nationalist theories from different perspectives, which can be divided into economic, cultural, political, ideological, and constructivist perspectives.

Scholars who observe nationalism from an economic perspective believe that nation and nationalism originate from new economic and social forms, such as inequality in the development of capitalism, class conflicts, etc. In *The Split of Britain*, Tom Nairn insists that unbalanced development is the basic promoter of nationalism. It only focuses on the imbalance of capitalism rather than industrialism. It believed that the bourgeoisie of the sovereign state relied on the powers of the military and the government to exploit the colonies. The elites in the colonized areas do not have the technological advantages to fight the colonists, but they have the weapon - the people. The elites introduced the "public affection" of the "people" into the national resistance movement. There is no doubt that Nairn's argument has a large market, but there are two questions need to be answered: Is nationalism really a dependent variable of geopolitics? Are the colonial elites sure that there are no other options to fight the big powers? Perhaps Nairn's point of view needs to set some preconditions for nationalism.

The scholars who discuss nationalism from the perspective of culture are represented by Gellner, who takes "industrialism", "high culture" and "low culture" as the key words of his theory. Gellner believed that nationalism is the inevitable result in the process of modernity transformation, which has the inevitability of sociology. Modernization is the concomitant of industrialization and its society and culture. Compared with the pre-modern society, the greatest change that modernization brings to society is to break the system structure based on blood relationship that human beings can gather together. In modern society, "culture has replaced this structure". Language and culture have become the foggy coagulant to integrate society. Modern society is based on untraditional individuals, who have lost their roots. These individuals must be integrated into the industrialized machinery, and the words and citizenship are the only acceptable recognition of these people. Gellner also argues that the vertical stratification and horizontal linguistic and cultural groups in pre-modern society make nations meaningless.

Finally, Gellner explains the cultural types of industrial society by using the term "high culture" to describe the culture of industrial society as a non-elitist culture. It is just a literate and standardized "park" culture supported by experts or public education. The "low" culture, as a symbol of the pre-modern society, cannot survive in the modern society and must be changed to a higher culture or it will be perish. Gellner's most straightforward view of the nationalist culture in the modernist paradigm is that he believes that although nationalism may use the cultural factors of pre-modern society, which in fact are not needed at all. Looking at the process of modern world history, we will find that nationalism is full of it, which is also confirming Gellner's theory. Every region in the world will be influenced by nationalism, whether native or imitative, hostile or benign, expansionist or defensive. Although the forms are different, it has the common feature that they emerge from the modern society.

The nationalists who examine nationalism from the perspective of politics include Anthony Giddens and John Breuilly. In Anthony Giddens's view, the modern state with centralization, specialization and territorialization has transformed nationalism by magic and created cultural sensitivity of sovereignty, which is the concomitant of reconciling administrative power in the border nation-state [4]. Giddens believed that nationalism as the strategy chosen by its main body of action was inevitably influenced by social structural factors, two of which are citizenship and sovereignty. He also holds that there is a certain relationship between nationalism and citizenship and sovereignty, and their development direction depends on the guiding ideas of citizenship and sovereignty. The tension between the two guiding ideas is manifested in the enlightenment and aggression of nationalism. Enlightened nationalism is a kind of benign nationalism. Good political, economic and legal environment enlarges civil rights and accelerates the development of democratic politics. Aggressive nationalism is a vicious nationalism. At the international level, the nationalist guiding concept of sovereignty believes that national sovereignty is the basis of the world, so safeguarding national sovereignty becomes the fundamental task of a country. Nationalism will rally patriotic forces and arouse strong patriotic sentiments to defend the state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Chinese nation. But on the other hand, Giddens also emphasizes that nationalism tends to show exclusiveness when the country is in an environment of massive invasion and competition or when the state is preparing for war, which may result in the weak or limitation of the citizenship rights.

Elie Kedourie examined the ideological factors in nationalism, emphasized the European origin of nationalist ideology and its modernity, and believed that nationalism had the power similar to religion, and that it played a role in dividing empires and creating nationalities where there were no nationalities [5]. He traced the nationalist ideology back to the Enlightenment and Kant's concept of self-determination, and believed that nationalism was a principle of will, and that nationalist ideal had power by the virtue of its own title. There is no doubt that Kedourie's views pay too much attention to the role of ideas and movements, which is completely opposed to

Gellner's view that nationalism is the cultural form brought about by industrialism.

Constructivism also belongs to the branch of modernist paradigm. Although it is one of the modern viewpoints along with industrialism, ideological determinism, and political and cultural viewpoints, it stresses the social constructivism of nationalism. The representative figures are Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson. Constructivism focuses on social engineering and technological innovation, artifacts and versions of culture, and the new forms created with skills and imagination. According to this theory, the nation can be constructed, then the nation can also be melted, and the narration and imagination of the nation can stop as well. Benedict Anderson believes that nationalism is a form of discourse, a kind of narrative type that imagines the political community as a limited, sovereign and peaceful cross-border [6]. Based on the public that read prints in its native language, nations are formed in the destiny of the ever-changing global languages and in the course of pursuing immortal fame. Anderson also raised the central issue of passion and attachment to the nation. He thinks that although the nation is often compared to the family, it is not because the purity and selflessness of the family and the nation that will lead to the sacrifices to them. On the contrary, it is precisely because we feel that our identity, our interests, our survival are connected with and dependent on the "our" family and our "our" nation that we feel we should devote ourselves to them and be prepared to make great sacrifices. This makes the nation be a group of emotion and will as well as a group of imagination and understanding.

Hobsbawm is also one of the advocates of constructivism. He refused to admit that the "prototypical national" community in the pre-modern society was the ancestor or predecessor of the nation, because they are not necessarily connected to entities such as territorial political organizations in the past or at present, which are precisely the criteria for us to understand what "nation" is today. And he argues that the history of most of the countries that have sustained the historical memory of the political community to the present and have provide the basic case for later nationalism is falsified. Because it does not

operate within what Hobsbawm calls "the history of validity", the validity here is also the objective historical authenticity. Thus, both Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson deny or at least lack attention to the collective will and emotional characteristics of their discourse on nationalism. Moreover, although Hobsbawm realized the importance of historical continuity to nationalism, his view that nationalist narrative was falsified ignored the influence of the acceptability of narrative by the public on nationalist sentiment.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted by the many scholars that nationalism creates the nation. The notion of a nation in western countries needs to be interpreted in the process of understanding nationalism, and nationalism is the thought of a "nation". It is necessary to understand its historical development trajectory. In many paradigms of nationalism, modernism has become the mainstream paradigm, which identifies the nation or nationalism from the perspectives of economy, politics, culture, ideology and constructivism. The discussion and analysis of these theories can set up a theoretical framework for understanding the development of nationalism, which is of theoretical necessity.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Anthony D, Smith: Theories of Nationalism [J]. *Minzu Yicong*,1986 (5).(In Chinese).
- [2] The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science [Z]. Beijing: China University of Politic Science and Law Press, 2002:530-531.(In Chinese).
- [3] Anthony D, Smith. Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History [M]. Translated by Ye Jiang, Century Publishing Group, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2011. (In Chinese).
- [4] Anthony, Giddens. The Nation-State and Violence [M]. Translated by Hu Zongze and Zhao Litao, Beijing: San Lian Press, 1998. (In Chinese).
- [5] Elie, Kedourie. Nationalism[M]. Translated by Zhang Mingming. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2002. (In Chinese).
- [6] Benedict, Anderson. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism [M].Translated by Wu Ruiren, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House,2003.(In Chinese).