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NATIONALISM AS AN ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPT

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the notion of a state that contains a specific nation is relatively new, most societies tend to perceive their national origins as an indisputable historical fact. This paper tries to understand the reasons that make rational individuals and groups of people believe in the irrational claims of national identities and national pride. As political discourse is the main source of these claims, this paper analyses the nature of that discourse and the way it manages to coin essentially contested concepts that are acceptable by the public. Subsequently, the paper delves into the mechanisms in which the human cognitive apparatus interprets discourse, and the reasons that make it vulnerable to deception. Additionally, the paper revisits notions like nations and states to prove the fact that there is no direct relationship between belonging to a state and feeling national pride. Eventually, the paper tackles the main psychological attributes that interfere to make rational individuals and groups abandon their rationality to believe in purely sentimental political notions.

Keywords: Nation, state, political discourse, nationalism

INTRODUCTION

The fact that political discourse is innately deceptive is more than a subjective claim made by conspiracy theorists or anti-government activists. For many scholars of politics and political discourse, the deception of political discourse can be one of the

strongest state apparatuses. Lasswell (1935), for instance, argues that for the national or international elites to secure their positions and possessions, they need the cultural elites to forge ideologies, symbols and notions in which the public should believe so that the elites' interests can remain safe. In this sense, he gave the example of the notion of "nationalism" that was coined by the French "orators, journalists, poets, novelists, essayists, and systematists" to secure the interests of the bourgeoisie and as "a means of nullifying proletarian challenges from within" (Lasswell 1935, 48-49). Therefore, Lasswell believes that, besides coercion and intimidation, the strength of autocracies and democracies lies in their ability to misinform the public and to convince them that they live in the best possible situation.

This means that besides the suppression or intimidation of the public that can exhaust the elite or threaten their existence on the long term, skillfully coined political concepts can control those publics and eliminate their threat without considerable efforts. In this sense, publics, which believe that living under the authority of a certain state is a matter of choice and a source of pride instead of an imposed exploitation, serve their governments while believing they are serving themselves. Therefore, entrenching a concept like nationalism in the psyche of a state's subjects can be one of the most influential tools of dominance.

Instead of discussing the obvious causes that make states and politicians resort to notions like nationalism, this paper questions the causes that make the public believe or adopt those notions. To answer this question, the first part of this paper mainly reviews the definitions of politics and political discourse and the way they both operate to govern or control publics. The second part delves into the notion of essentially contested concepts and tries to unravel the way these concepts' deceptive nature suits the selective nature of the human cognitive system almost perfectly. Subsequently, the paper delves into the contradictory nature of the concept 'nationalism' before it moves to the discussion of the psychological reasons that make publics refuse facts and accept deceptions.

POLITICS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

As essentially contested concepts are mainly political concepts, this section aims at exploring the concepts of politics and political discourse and the way the latter affects individuals and publics. In this sense, politics will be defined as the way governments interfere with and control the lives of the public while political discourse will be defined as one of the most important means of government.

Politics

The first step towards an appropriate definition of political discourse is the definition of the word politics itself. According to the "*Dictionary of Politics and Government*", politics is "the theory and practice of governing a country's local politics or national politics" and "the practice of governing a local area, or of governing a country" (Collin 2004, 183). This definition resonates with the general view of politics as the process of theorization about or involvement with the organized government of the interests of a group of people who share a common territorial belonging. Therefore, whether it is a tribe, a city, a state, a country, or even the agglomeration of many countries, politics is the government of the affairs of these territorial entities and the people who inhabit them.

In this sense, John Hoffman believes that the role that politics plays in the government of certain territorial entities is mainly "the resolution of conflict" (Hoffman 2007, 143). In fact, Hoffman tries to differentiate states from politics by claiming that states can resort either to armed conflicts or to peaceful solutions, while politics never involves the use of force. Therefore, for him, politics "must involve compromise, negotiation and arbitration" while the use of force means the end of politics (Hoffman 2007, 144).

Not everyone shares a clear definition of politics or a clear understanding of where it starts and where it ends. For Paul Chilton and Christina Schäffner, it is hard to attribute politics to certain activities at the expense of others, and the definition of the term can only be a political one that "varies according to one's situation and purposes" (Chilton and Schäffner 2002, 04). In broad terms, politics can be seen as "a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it"; while at a micro-level, it can be seen "as the practices and institutions a society has for resolving clashes of interest" (Chilton and Schäffner 2002, 05). Consequently, politics is either the struggle for power itself, or the tools and practices that are involved in that struggle and that can range from state institutions to the act of political discourse.

Political discourse

As the word politics is too broad to be contained by a single definition, political discourse cannot be expected to be less problematic. The perplexing aspect of the definition of political discourse can be primarily related to the lack of a definite delimitation of political actors themselves. According to Teun Van Dijk, it is not accurate to limit political actors to "the group of people who are being paid for their (political) activities, and who are being elected or appointed (or self-designated) as the central players in the polity" (Van Dijk 1997, 13). The logic behind his argument is that they are

not the only people who affect and are affected by what happens in the political arena. Therefore, the "political activity and the political process also involve people as citizens and voters, people as members of pressure and issue groups, demonstrators and dissidents, and so on" (Van Dijk 1997, 13).

The problematic side of this assumption is in the fact that though political activity includes all these actors, the assumption that all their discourses are political is not very accurate. In other words, although most citizens and all government officials might be considered political actors, they are not always talking about political issues, and their discourse cannot always be referred to as a political discourse. Hence, they can be considered "participants of political discourse only when acting as political actors" (Van Dijk 1997, 14).

In brief, political discourse can be defined as any discourse that is uttered by political actors while they perform a political activity. In this sense, political discourse is "the use of language to do the business of politics and it includes persuasive rhetoric, the use of implied meanings, the use of euphemisms, the exclusion of references to undesirable reality and the use of language to arouse political emotions" (Chilton 2008, 226). This definition captures the mainstream understanding of political discourse as the use of language to arouse certain feelings that might or might not be compatible with reality as it is. As such, the current article focuses on this, rather subjective, definition of political discourse to illustrate the way in which the term nationalism is no more than an elaborate use of language to raise certain feelings that have no logical foundations in reality.

George Orwell, who stresses the deceptive nature of political discourse and the way it is used to mislead the public, provides a more subjective definition. He argues that political language is "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind" (Orwell 1946, 139). The apparent pessimism through which Orwell perceives political language does not undermine the fact that political discourse can actually be used to justify all forms of states' violence, corruption and human rights violation. The act of killing other people or invading their countries, for instance, is an unjustifiable act; yet, elaborate political discourse can normalize it simply by calling it: 'the elimination of a potential threat, the spread of democracy, or the war on terror'. In brief, it may not be completely subjective to see political discourse as a tool of deception and power assertion.

ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPTS

This section mainly aims at illustrating the ways in which essentially contested concepts are framed and the way the human cognitive system approaches them. In other words, this section is about the way in which these concepts are almost perfectly designed to exploit the weaknesses in the human brains discourse interpretation mechanisms.

The deceptive nature of essentially contested concepts

Political discourse has evolved to the extent that it became capable of coining terms that can achieve mass-deception inherently. These essentially contested concepts are generally "appraisive, internally complex and at least initially ambiguous" (Doughty 2014, 06). They are appraisive in the sense that they usually sound like positive comments, no matter what event or reality they describe. And they are complex and ambiguous in the sense that their definitions are usually far from being clear. Concepts like democracy, freedom and justice are examples of essentially contested concept, as they appear positive and clear at first glance, while deeper analysis usually leads to conflicting interpretations. In brief, as Andrew Mason argues "they are concepts whose nature is to be open to endless dispute" (Mason 1993, 47).

These terms are specifically adequate for political discourse due to the fact that it would be a daunting process, for any human being, to reconsider all their possible interpretations whenever they are mentioned. In fact, such an endeavor would make communication itself impossible, as it would block every political discourse at the first uttered concept. In this sense, the only reasonable way in which a human being can process political discourse is a shallow processing, which only absorbs the superficial connotations of its concepts.

The selective nature of the human cognitive system

Thinking about essentially contested concepts would normally make individuals realize their deceptive nature. However, the human cognitive system is mainly wired in a way that prevents it from thinking, even briefly, about such concepts. Our brains:

> Are equipped with a single, general criterion for evaluating interpretations; and … this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but a single interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits that criterion, the viewer looks no further (Pinar Sanz 2013, 13).

When human beings look at pictures, or listen to speeches, they usually do not stop at every word or every detail to analyze it and reflect on it. If the human brain did that, it would have to take longer periods of time to interpret short speeches or even sentences. For this reason, the human brain processes the received data very quickly, trying to match every new piece of information with an already acquired understanding, and as soon as it succeeds in doing so it moves to the next item.

For this reason, the human brain almost never stops to process familiar concepts, which are usually considered irrelevant. According to the relevance theory, what matters to the human brain, in the process of listening for instance, is new information. In other words, the brain only stops to reflect upon concepts that improve the individual's knowledge of the world or concepts, which alter that knowledge, while the already known concepts are automatically deemed irrelevant (Chilton 2004, 21).

Relating this idea of irrelevance, or of shallow processing, to the fact that essentially contested concepts are both appraisive and confusing clarifies the reasons that make people fail to detect the deception of political discourse. Political concepts are made familiar to the public through repetition, which makes the brain automatically skip them or process them superficially. Furthermore, the confusion and the ambiguity of these terms leave the brain only with the option of selecting one interpretation and discarding all the related debates and discussions that a concept may trigger. Finally, the appraisive nature of these concepts makes the brain retain only the positive emotions or praise that covers the concept's surface, neglecting any embedded negativity.

NATIONALISM AS AN ESSENTIALLY CONTESTED CONCEPT

Nationalism is probably one of the most famous, influential and delusional political concepts ever coined. Unlike democracy, justice and freedom that are mainly appraisive, nationalism is based on a negative premise, or even on obviously contradictory foundations. The first problematic issue with nationalism is the definition of the concept itself. The online dictionary "Merriam Webster" will be used in the following three examples to show the striking similarity between what can be considered contradictions in the interpretation of some concepts. Nationalism is defined as "a feeling that people have of being loyal to and proud of their country, often with the belief that it is better and more important than other countries". From a political perspective, this definition is very appropriate and positive and even solicited in a good public and a good politician as well. However, if we consider the fact that Ethnocentrism is defined as "the attitude that one's own group is superior", and that chauvinism is defined as "the belief that your country, race, etc., is better than any other", we can clearly notice that these terms are similar.

This similarity could not stop politicians from using nationalism as an appraisive concept and from neglecting the fact that it means almost the same thing as chauvinism, ethnocentrism or even racism. However, a deeper consideration of the meaning of the concept may show the fact that it is based on what Orwell labeled "pure wind". It is common sense to believe that nationalism is related to a nation's sense of belonging or loyalty to a certain state. Nonetheless, the definition of the concepts nations and states may be its most concrete flaw.

Nation-states

According to Dankwart A. Rustaw, a nation is "a human group bound together by common solidarity —a group whose members place loyalty to the group as a whole over any conflicting loyalties" (Rustaw 1968, 07). This means that national loyalty should normally be related to the people themselves and not the geographical or political entity that governs them. However, the nation-state, which is politically depicted as the entity towards which loyalty should be directed, is idealistically defined as "the most important large-scale sociopolitical organization that could command the overriding loyalty of groups and individuals and provide the psychological satisfactions of identifying with and serving a common cause" (Handrieder 1968, 530). In this sense, nationalism is based on the premise that countries join the political entity of a state to the cultural entity of a nation in a way that justifies the psychological satisfaction of nationalism.

Despite the fact that this idea of a sovereign state that governs people who belong to the same cultural group seems compatible with the main premise of nationalism, reality proves that most states do not abide by this rule. In this sense, Houghton argues that in the real world "there is often no neat territorial coincidence between 'nations' and 'states'" (Houghton 2009, 168). This means that most states do not build their boundaries on the basis of the cultural affiliations of their citizens. The direct result is that most states either contain a multiplicity of ethnic and cultural affiliations, or force borders that divide some culturally bound collectivities.

Nations and states

The Kurdish nation in the Middle East can serve as one of the most obvious examples in which nationalism proves to be nothing but pure wind. The Kurds, who still believe in their nation's right to form a unified state, find themselves in four different or even conflicting countries. For them, keeping their loyalty within their states' borders means nothing, as those borders separate their nation, and placing their loyalty in their original social group can even be seen as an act of treason (Günes 2009).

Yugoslavia on the other hand is a country that was united under one flag before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Pesic 1996, 26-27). However, after the Union collapsed, the country was repeatedly divided into smaller countries obliging the people to change their loyalties with every new division. This means that those who were loyal to Yugoslavia, as a nation and as a land, before 1991, found themselves in different countries that expected their loyalty after that year. Yugoslavia was totally dissolved in 1993, while some of the newly formed countries kept expanding and decreasing territories until 2008 (Gligorov 2017, 557). This would oblige the inhabitants of every formed state, no matter how new it was, and no matter how long it might last, to be loyal to it and to be proud of their nationalism. The case of Yugoslavia can be one of the strongest proofs of the fact that neither people nor cultures are taken into consideration in the political drawing of borders. Therefore, the fact that loyalty is supposed to follow whatever divisions the politicians and the army leaders dictate shows the absurdity of the concept and its meaninglessness.

Another example of the extent to which nationalism should be described as pure wind, can be found in countries where even the national political leaders do not decide their countries' borders. A quick look at the map of the Middle East and North Africa shows that, unlike the curvy European borders, these countries' borders were drawn by the ruler of a colonizer, on a desk, somewhere away from the region itself. In fact, the main figures who participated in the division of the region were the British Mark Sykes and the French François Georges Picot, who drew the borders according to their countries' interests (Kramer 2016). The ironic side of this atrocity is that the people whose countries' borders were drawn by their enemies are also proud of their nationalities, are ready to fight for every inch of their borders and want to defend their nations from any lurking enemies, especially the neighboring ones.

As a result of the deceptive nature of a concept like nationalism, borders that were drawn by foreigners decades ago are perceived by the people as permanent historical realities that define them. The people who were divided by the colonizers' pens or pencils managed to see their superiority over the people on the other side of the borders, to see that here is more important than there, and to see the killing of those people to protect these people as a justifiable, if not a noble, act.

THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND NATIONALISM

The fact that people manage to ignore all these facts and fall for the rhetoric of political discourse is not simply because of the used language and the human cognitive system. The human psychology plays a major role in this kind of deception, especially when it comes to a concept like nationalism. In this sense, two major psychological traits

of the human psyche interfere in our tendency to overlook facts and to believe in nationalism, and they are both related to group conflicts.

Self-perception

It is common sense to believe that every human being has a tendency to perceive himself in a positive way. No matter what he does or who he is, the idea that he is, at least in one way, better than the others is almost omnipresent in the psyche of every human being. Nevertheless, this positive self-perception can be jeopardized, if the group to which one belongs is depicted negatively. Therefore, individuals tend to perceive the groups to which they belong positively.

In this sense, Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips argue that "in order to feel good about oneself, the individual has to feel good about the group" to which he belongs (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 101). This means, that the individual overlooks his group's negativities in the same way in which he overlooks his own negativity, to perceive only the positive. Every citizen, can be proud of his country's development at many levels, and will automatically associate himself with its achievements. However, that same individual will probably distance himself from his country's human rights violations, wars and crimes and will try to blame them on individual exceptions. Consequently, the individual will keep feeling good about his country and keep looking for discourses that boost his positive feelings simply to confirm his delusions about his country and about himself eventually.

Active hatred

A more negative side of this delusion is the exaggeration of the division between 'us' and 'them' to the extent that 'they' should be depicted negatively for 'us' to feel better. As mentioned earlier, feeling good about oneself may lead the individual to feel more important than the other, for different reasons. However, an extreme evolution of that feeling can lead to the emergence of the feeling of hatred towards that less important other. The other in this sense is usually different from the self, politically, culturally, economically, racially, or even geographically. Nonetheless, obvious difference is not always a requirement, as otherness can develop sometimes for the most trivial reasons.

David P. Houghton, for instance, argues that "active hatred can sometimes develop between two [Football] teams … despite the fact that they are not divided along any evident racial, socioeconomic, religious, or other category" (Houghton 2009, 171).

This proves that the individual may not need elaborate evidence to confirm his superiority or to hate the other, and that these feelings can be easily triggered. As a

result, political discourse may not even need to be elaborate or near elaborate to trigger feelings that the human being is probably always open to experiencing.

CONCLUSION

The main question that the current paper tries to answer is the reason or reasons that make the deception of an essentially contested concept like nationalism possible, despite all the evidence against its validity. On one hand, the first reason is related to the way our cognitive system works. To enable fluent communication, our brains tend to process information that we believe we know in a shallow way. The second reason is related to the nature of essentially contested concepts themselves. These concepts are almost designed specifically to exhaust our brains' capability of finding deep or real meanings, which makes the feasibility of communication achievable only through the superficial processing of political discourse. On the other hand, our public narcissism makes us vulnerable towards discourses that confirm our superiority, at the expense of rationality and facts. This means that, as narcissist creatures, we tend to accept discourses that confirm our narcissism even if that means neglecting all the obvious facts that challenge it. 

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