

Theories and Practices of Nationalism - Assignment 3

Zubair Abid, 20171076

Question: *Explain the concept of “invented traditions” in your own words. How does it link with nationalism and the nation-state? Use examples of invented traditions which have become a part of national cultures, and some invented traditions which have not.*

Word count: 1494

Introduction

This essay attempts to detail the concept of ‘invented traditions’, and how their *alterative nature* is a key feature in shaping nationalist movements as a way to gather mass support. It is primarily based on Hobsbawm and Ranger’s ‘The Invention of Tradition’ (1992). I focus entirely on Politically invented traditions, as social ones come about from the existing community of the nation, and not the prospective one.

What is Invented Tradition?

Invented traditions are traditions¹ that are perceived as, or claimed to be, ancient - but are in fact new(er than people assume them to be); often intentional political creations. British Royal Ceremonies, for instance. They may also arise naturally through regular practice or chance over time, such as the adoption of ‘chai’ in India due to inability to sell tea overseas during the First World War. It is unclear on the details of how invented traditions come into being due to a lack of a detailed study in the direction,² but generally speaking they can be created either through political directive, or just come into being due to regular practice of certain customs among people.³

A key point to take from the concept is that to the layperson, invented traditions are just traditions. And just as traditions enable an imagination of the past; invented traditions - accidental or otherwise - replace that with their own version of reality. This will be a central concept for understanding the links to nationalism, and we define it here as the *alterative nature* of invented traditions.

Invented traditions also differ from traditional ones by other metrics - they tend to be far more vague and unspecified as to the nature of the values they inculcate - ‘patriotism’, ‘loyalty’, ‘the school spirit’, and the like, while simultaneously being very strictly adhered to in practice, such as the requirement to stand up for the National Anthem. In addition, they seem to have only filled in the space of older traditions in people’s public spaces, and not their private ones.⁴

Hobsbawm observes three overlapping types of invented tradition:⁵

¹As for what is tradition? That is outside the scope of this essay, although we can refer to Shils (1981, 12–13) for a brief summary. Broadly, we use it here as “that which is handed down - includes ... beliefs about all sorts of things ...”. The idea is that tradition allows people a connection to the past so to speak, thus giving them a view of what the past would have been like as described by said tradition.

²See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 4)

³Customs are not the same as tradition. We elaborate on this soon.

⁴See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 10–11)

⁵See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 9)

- Those establishing/symbolizing social cohesion or group membership in real or artificial communities
- Those establishing/legitimizing institutions/status/relations of authority
- Those with the purpose of socialization, and the inculcation of beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour

The interplay of Tradition with Customs

Before we proceed, customs aren't traditions. They're linked, and the disappearance of customs changes long-standing traditions, but it isn't an equivalence. This is because we define custom as any regular behaviour brought about by invariant regular action. Unlike tradition their reason is practical, not ideological. They can change to maximise bureaucratic efficiency - consider how the relatively conservative army will change their uniform for practical benefit, but the tradition-dipped hunter will not change what they wear during hunting season.⁶ The distinction isn't arbitrary - customs, unlike traditions, are not assumed invariant. So custom becomes practice, and tradition legacy.

With that said, customs are often used to give the sanction of precedence and social continuity for demands of protection and defence of practices.⁷ A group of weavers can claim benefits to maintain their 'custom', which could be just the best practices that have come up amongst themselves to weave cloth, but backed with the authority of continuity. It is not difficult to draw a comparison from here to the role of Invented Tradition.

Invention of Tradition for Continuity

This section technically falls within the purview of describing invented tradition, but it is central to how invented tradition is useful for nationalism, so we will examine it as a transitional topic.

All invented traditions have a history, and can be used to establish continuity with the past, if suitable. This history does not need to be real; in fact it is often embellished.⁸ This allows agents of drastic social change to accord the status of 'symbols of invariance' to certain invented traditions of their choosing, that claim links to a distant, better past, to "soften the impact of novelty by dressing it up as antiquity"⁹¹⁰. Using the apparent continuity of tradition to legitimize change in the eyes of masses.

And all societies make use of invented traditions - even 'modern' ones. Using it isn't hard, per se - interested parties can simply co-opt existing traditions, or create new ones, or twist older ones to beyond recognition but with the same garb. Interestingly, even when there are explicit gaps in the continuity, the new tradition is espoused by all, often most vehemently by self-declared 'traditionalists'. The mass acceptance of new tradition under the garb of nominal continuity is not really rational, but as rulers in the 1870s learnt, 'irrational' elements were necessary for the maintenance of the social fabric.¹¹

⁶See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 3)

⁷See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 2)

⁸Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 7) mentions a few examples of embellished or straight-up falsified "histories" used to further national interests, such as the Czech medieval manuscripts

⁹We have already spoke of tradition as shaping views of the past. It is taken as justification for future actions. An invented tradition then, posits a synthetic reality of the past. This link to the past gives an action the sanction of precedence and legitimizes its acceptance. It allows revolutionaries to claim that their desired future was the default since time immemorial, usurped only in recent memory by the vile parasites currently in control - earning sympathy, and often support.

¹⁰As discussed in class

¹¹See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 268-69)

In Brief: The link between Invented Tradition and Nationalism

Hobsbawm's theory of nations aligned with that of Gellner - "Nationalism is a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (Gellner 1983, 1). It is this foundation that drives the rest of his theory.

His theory posits that national feelings develop unevenly across societal borders. Nationalists come first, and then the Nation, and then the masses are to be convinced that they are part of this Nation. So, the idea of a nation comes as a 'from above' approach that needs to be spread across to the sub-literary level to be effective. Essentially, the wants of the popular masses plays a large role - and the nationalists. Invented traditions come to the rescue here - as Nationalism gets "it's history wrong" in order to appeal to the masses and form the "history of the Nation" a posteriori.¹²

We can look at invented tradition in the realm of Nationalism as introducing *Gemeinschaft* in an Industrial society, to normalise such among the people.

Invented tradition was also used to further the cause of the nation and nationalists. We move on to some specific demonstrations across several Nations.

Demonstrating invented traditions of Nations

To properly demonstrate invented traditions for purposes of Nationalism, we will be looking at invented traditions in three countries, paying attention to different elements in each as the "challenges" the tradition had to overcome differed by nation. We will also bring in some Indian examples at times.

The French: Nationalism with minimal history with symbolism

The French are rather notable, in that their Invented tradition involves little history,¹³ and so the symbols utilised by them lend themselves to a more general meaning for piracy. They introduced three major inventions of tradition:

1. *Primary Education* as a secular substitute for the Church. The primary education provided by the State was also ripe in revolutionary and republican principles and content, so not only would the peasants become Frenchmen, but good Republicans too.
2. *Public Ceremonies* for an expression of state pomp and power for the citizen's pleasure.¹⁴
3. *Monuments* of some representation of France - be it Marianne, or whatever local bearded hero a district chose, constructed in all scales across the country.

Apart from these they provide a lot of the general imagery we associate with Nations today - a tricolour flag (inspiring most countries' flags, and raised in Calcutta in the 1800s), a motto, a symbol in the form of personification (think Bharat Mata).¹⁵

The Germans: Aggrandizing history

German tried to establish continuity from the First Reich to the Second, and stress on how Prussia was historically linked to Germany. But fitting the history would not work, German Roman-Catholic history didn't go in any mould. So, two "traditions" were created:

¹²It is more than just invented traditions enabling the functioning of a Nation smoothly. There are extensive politics involved, and you can check Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 269) as it is outside this scope

¹³There are several political reasons for this, including the centrist rule and appeasement of certain political classes. See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992, 269-71)

¹⁴Where the French only had one event, however, the Germans had as many as ten in the gap of seven months in a single year (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 277)

¹⁵There's other symbols/traditions too, like *Le Marseillaise* (although the concept of the National Anthem was first covered by Britain), the Republican Monogram.

1. Germany had emerged struggling against a secular enemy
2. The German nation scattered around Europe could claim the right to be united as a State.

The synthesis meant that there was always an enemy for the Germans, and this was reflected throughout the imagery. Consider the symbol of the country: *Deutsche Michel*. Meant to show the simplicity of the German people that was exploited by the foreigners.

Apart from Bismarckian unification, most Germans did not share any common identity, so compared to France, the definition of the German Nation was far more complicated, and much less precise. Germany the nation was better defined in terms of what it was against - including, often, internal enemies.

The United States: Identity in the face of mass immigration

The United States were faced with a unique problem: assimilating a heterogeneous mass of immigrants, how would they *make* Americans those who were outsiders?

It lead to what we see today as a mass of traditions, all considered “American”. Immigrants were encouraged to accept “American” rituals, like the Revolution and it’s founding fathers and the 4th of July, along with Protestant Anglo-Saxon Traditions like Thanksgiving Day. Likewise, Immigrant culture was absorbed - St. Patrick’s Day, Columbus Day. Other rituals grew, again, around the education system for political socialization. The Worship of the American flag, for instance.¹⁶

Invented Traditions that did not come under a Nationalist Banner

I will simply list them, as there is not much to say.

Traditions that have failed

- Defining King William I as the “father of Germany”

Traditions that aren’t Nationalist

- May Day
- Daughters of American Revolution
- Level of education as marker of class
- Greek Letter Fraternities as marker of elite among the mass
- Alumni Societies of Schools for the elite, and Fraternities
- Elite among colleges: playing sports

References

Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Cornell University Press.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. 1992. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

Shils, Edward. 1981. *Tradition*. University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶Like with Germany, there was an internal enemy here too - Immigrants, especially working class.