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# Deciphering the Modern Janus: Societal Multiplicity and Nation-Formation

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## Abstract

How to theorize the nation's Janus-like form, its simultaneous modernity and antiquity? This paper provides an original answer to this longstanding question. It argues that nations arise from the interaction of 'societal multiplicity' and the expansionist tendency of historical capitalism. The emergence of capitalism super-adds a modern inflection to the inherently relational process of collective identity formation by generating modern sovereignty as an abstract form of rule. Crucially however, just like its emergence, capitalism's expansion also refracts through societal multiplicity. Non-capitalist societies are therefore pressured into 'nationalist' projects of emulative self-preservation in which the nation's *political form* (i.e. the sovereign state) is forged before its *sociological content* (i.e. primitive accumulation). Thus, the original site of this process, France, produced the modular nation-form that unlike Britain's imperial nationhood could be globalised. The paper therefore shows that IR's premise of multiplicity may be the key to one of social sciences' most enduring puzzles.

## 1. Introduction

Nationalism is elemental to modernity.<sup>1</sup> As the ideology of the sovereign territorial state, the shaper of modern societies' identity, and a driving force of industrialisation it underpins the modern world's political geography, collective self-consciousness, and socio-economic structures. Nationalism has also been extremely resilient. As the phenomena of Trump and Brexit show, the growth of internationalism and globalisation have not only not weakened nationalism, as was commonly assumed and predicted (Gerrits 2016: 3), but in fact reproduced and reinforced it (Smith 1979: 184; Buchanan and Pahuja 2008: 271). Indeed, from Brazil to the US, the UK, Hungary, Russia, India, China and Japan everywhere nationalism is increasingly shaping both domestic and foreign policy. The 'return of toxic nationalism' (Kaplan 2012) has reached even Scandinavia (Henroth-Rothstein 2018). Nationalism's rise has appeared so unstoppable that even some otherwise liberal pundits have been formulating a 'case for nationalism' (O'Sullivan 2014).

What explains the extraordinary potency and resilience of nationalism? Answering this question requires answering the prior question of what 'the nation' is. After all, nationalism is essentially an ideological or doctrinal derivative of the nation, which asserts or seeks its political primacy. There is however no easy answer to this question. For the 'nation' is easier to recognise than to theorise (Waldron 1985: 416). Indeed, 'nation', as Charles Tilly poignantly observes, "is one of the most puzzling and tendentious items in the political lexicon" (Tilly 1975: 9). Yet, rather than confronting the puzzle head-on, Tilly and many other historical sociologists simply bypassed it by preferring 'state' over 'nation' (Waldron 1985: 416). This avoidance is reproduced in the field of International Relations (IR) where the two terms are often conflated or more commonly the 'nation' is subsumed under the 'state' (Morgenthau 1948: 73, 118; Doyle 1997: 252-258; Doyle 1997; Keohane 1984; Keohane & Nye 1977). More heterodox and critical IR approaches – constructivism, Marxism, poststructuralism,

postcolonialism and gender theories – have all tended to reproduce IR orthodoxy’s disengagement from the nation. For in their tendency to define their intellectual identity contra mainstream IR, they have strategically focused on historicising or deconstructing the ‘state’ (Wendt 1994; Cox 1987; Campbell 1998; Grovogui 1996: 24-25; Weber 2016). The statist bias of mainstream IR has therefore created an intellectual path-dependency for critical IR whose net result is the theoretical neglect of the nation. This is a peculiar outcome given that the nation’s interactive multiplicity is nothing less than IR’s formal subject matter: *international relations*.

There is perhaps an additional reason for the neglect of the nation’s modern genesis in gender and postcolonial theories. These theories’ anti-foundational epistemology focuses their deconstructive critique on the discursive and performative reproduction of nationalism by foregrounding its racial, masculine and patriarchal tropes and metonyms (e.g. Nagel 2003: 1-6, 1998: 243-244; Mulholland et. al. 2018) rather than on theorising the nation itself. Postcolonialism’s normative ambivalence towards nationalism reinforces this tendency, for this approach sees nationalism both as decolonisation’s driving force and yet also a major cause of its postcolonial frustration. It also considers nationalism as a ‘derivative discourse’ (Chatterjee 1993) beholden to the colonial worldview (Dirlik 2002). Consequently, a key theme in contemporary debates on nationalism within postcolonial studies has been ‘escaping the nation’ (Sajed & Seidel 2019) by responding to Fanon’s call for the cultivation of a ‘non-nationalist national consciousness’ as the site of a genuine decolonial freedom and internationalism (Fanon 2004: 179).<sup>2</sup> The net-result, however, has been an under-theorisation of the nature and genesis of the nation-form itself.

Meanwhile, the dedicated field of nationalism studies is beset by a different but related kind of problem. Here we find many sustained reflections on the nation. But these reflections tend to end in an intellectual impasse: how to theoretically digest the nation’s Janus-like character (Nairn 1975), i.e. its simultaneous modernity and antiquity (Anderson 2006: 5, 1996: 1; James 1996: 18; Smith 2000: 40). For modernist accounts of the nation within nationalism studies, which are the most influential (Smith 2000: 38) and the key interlocutor of this paper, the intellectual challenge of the nation’s ambiguity primarily presents itself through the theoretical intractability of the precise link between the nation and capitalism or industrialisation, as the sociological, or developmental, core of modernity (cf. Breuilly 1993: 407). This is so because in the overwhelming majority of cases the rise of nationalism has preceded coeval industrialisation or capitalist development (cf. Breuilly 1993: 413-414). That is to say, it has arisen in the *absence* of what are argued to be its fundamental causes.

This paper provides an original solution to this problem. It argues that the difficulties in conceptualising the nation’s historical ambiguity stem from social theory’s internalism: its tendency to explain social phenomena by exclusive reference to factors internal to a given society. This problem, which to various degrees marks different schools of nationalism studies, generates unilinear and singular conceptions of socio-historical change. The solution to the problem of internalism, the paper shows, lies in grounding social theory in a plural ontology, that is, the fact of societal multiplicity. This ontological re-grounding enables a conception of historical change as intrinsically interactive and multilinear (Rosenberg 2016). I substantiate this argument through a critical engagement with Benedict Anderson whose seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on Nations and Nationalism* is central to ‘the constructive consensus’ (Goode & Stroup 2015: 3) that has increasingly dominated modernist approaches to nations and nationalism within and beyond the field of nationalism studies. I show that there is a methodological tension between the contextual and substantive elements of Anderson’s

account: capitalism is central to the general historical environment of nations' emergence but perfunctory to their socio-political constitution. I trace this problem to the internalism of Anderson's implicit theoretical framework. I will show how the nation's Janus-like character can be more coherently explained in terms of the interaction of capitalism's 'abstract individual' and the transhistorical condition of societal multiplicity within and through which capitalism itself has emerged, developed, and expanded. This circumstance is captured through the idea of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD), which captures the consequences of societal multiplicity, i.e. interaction, combination, and dialectical change (Rosenberg 2016: 135-141). Crucially, I show that the uneven and combined nature of all developmental processes means that nation-formation does not necessarily require the empirical presence of capitalism at the level of individual social formations. Moreover, UCD also theoretically accounts for the secular tendency to adopt and adapt ancient, pre-existing cultures and ideologies of collective identity – constitutive of the anterior condition of societal multiplicity – as an integral part of all nation-formation processes.

The argument is developed in three main steps. First, I show that the failure of the modernist accounts of the nation lies in their internalism and argue that this problem can be solved through incorporating the ontological premise of societal multiplicity into social theory; an intellectual move that is at the heart of UCD. Second, I demonstrate the causal significance of capitalism for the nation and nationalism through a critical engagement with Anderson's famous definition of the nation. Third, I trace the root-cause of the problems with Anderson's theory too to its internalism. This reveals how the theoretical and methodological recognition of societal multiplicity through UCD can account for both the modern and ancient properties of nations, and how their formation can precede domestic processes of capitalist development. This theoretically resolves the nation's historical ambiguity, its Janus-like form.

## **2. The Nation's Ambiguity and Nationalism Studies' Internalism**

To the extent that capitalism is central to modernity it is theoretically incumbent upon modernist accounts of the nation to demonstrate some causal, and hence sequential, link between capitalism and nation-formation. This has, as I suggested above, proved a tall order for two main reasons. Almost all nations rely on ancient genealogies and properties, real or invented, and their formation has often preceded rather than followed capitalist development. In other words, there is a historical-materialist deficiency at the heart of modernist theories of nations and nationalism. I submit that this weakness is due to the problem of internalism in the field of nationalism studies. For this has led nationalism studies to search for capitalist causes of nation-formation processes inside given societies experiencing nation-formation. It is the failure of this intellectual mode that has undermined the modernist thesis.

However, the roots of internalism lie deeper, beyond nationalism studies itself, in the general social theories that inform it. The theoretical reliance of nationalism studies on social theory and sociology is logical, for nations and nationalism are ultimately particular social forms (Goswami 2002: 770-772). However, social theory and sociology have themselves been charged with 'methodological nationalism', i.e. the equation of 'society' with the 'nation-state' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Thus, as C. Wright Mills noted "the nation-state is the frame within which [social scientists] ... formulate the problems of smaller and of larger units" (Mills 2000: 135). Interestingly, the problem has not been lost on scholars of nationalism studies. Anthony Smith, a prominent figure within the field, noted nearly forty years ago that "the study of 'society' today is, almost without question, equated with the analysis of nation-states; the principle of "methodological nationalism" operates at every level ... . [The nation-state] has

become an enduring and stable component of our whole cognitive outlook ...” (Smith 1979: 191). Thus, in its deployment by scholars of nationalism studies, social theory has been a conceptual mirror rather than an explanatory lens. Nevertheless, scholars of nation(alism), including Smith himself, have not engaged in any sustained theoretical reflection on this problem and its implications for their intellectual endeavours. Such reflections could reveal that methodological nationalism is produced by ‘internalism’: an intellectual mode in which concept formation and substantive analysis are conducted by reference to phenomena, relations, and dynamics internal to a particular ‘society’ or human collectivity (Tenbruck 1994). Born into European nation-states and tasked with addressing their internal problems, e.g. ‘the social question’ (cf. Owens 2013), social theory and sociology formed their basic concepts and general categories by abstraction from the historical experience of European nation-states (Matin 2013b; cf. Mills 2000: 6). In short, methodological nationalism is a product of theoretical internalism.

Now, what is particularly pertinent to my argument here is that internalism generates unilinear conceptions of history. For it inevitably produces a methodological procedure whereby general and universal categories are constructed by reference to particular experiences that are internal to a given ‘society’. This procedure removes mutually constitutive relations and interactions between societies from the theoretical purview of social theory. Consequently, a particular ‘internal’ pattern of development is extrapolated as generally valid for all societies. Specific properties and features of that pattern are therefore regarded as universal. Importantly, internalism and the problems it generates are compounded by the comparative method, the main methodology of nationalism studies (e.g. Breuilly 1993), and social and political science more generally (Pennings, et al. 2006: Part 1; Weber 1978). For the comparative method must by logical necessity impute categorical similarity and internal coherence and autonomy to its objects of comparison (Matin 2013a: 7-10; cf. McMichael 2000). Comparative method therefore ‘freezes history’ (Burawoy 1989: 782) for it *a priori* rules out the theoretical and historical significance of interrelation and interaction between compared objects (Matin 2013a: 7-9). For example, following Hans Kohn (1944) many scholars of nationalism (e.g. Breuilly (1993: 10) explicitly separate the analysis of ‘Western’ (civic) and ‘Eastern’ (ethnic) forms of nationalism, even though historically, as I argue below, the Eastern variant is unthinkable without the influence of its Western predecessor, which was in turn co-produced through colonial and imperial encounters and interactions with non-Western societies.

Moreover, theoretical internalism and the comparative method also underpin the Eurocentric assumption in social theory that modernity involves an historical rupture. This assumption too is uncritically adopted by most modernist strands of nationalism studies, which have taken modernity to be terminating all “the structures and beliefs that flourished and upheld those earlier, long gone epochs” (Smith 2000: 30). Developmental rupture is of course incompatible with Janus-faced historical ambiguity, which as we saw is a *differentium specificum* of the nation as a social form.

The problem of internalism has not gone unchallenged. Social theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have directly addressed it in their critique of methodological nationalism but failed to resolve it (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Over the last decade or so, this task has been taken up by the Marxian strand of historical sociology within IR through sustained theoretical reflection on the fundamental significance of ‘the international’ for the rise and development of specific social orders. Here ‘the international’ refers to ‘that dimension of social reality that specifically arises from the existence within it of more than one society’ (Rosenberg 2006: 308). ‘The international’ has, in other words, the same referent as ‘societal

multiplicity'. Leon Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' (UCD) has emerged as the main intellectual idiom of this 'international historical sociology'<sup>3</sup>. For it captures the key consequences of societal multiplicity, i.e. coexistence, difference, interaction, combination, and dialectical change, which ramify into all aspects of social reality (Rosenberg 2016: 135-141).

There are three main reasons why societal multiplicity and its consequences – as captured and operationalised by UCD – can overcome the intellectual impasse of modernist accounts of the nation and nationalism. First, as a form of collective identity, the nation is an inherently relational phenomenon always (re-)constituted in interface with 'other', differentially constituted, forms of collective identity whether national or not. This basic circumstance of nation-formation escapes the internalist optic of social theory (and hence nationalism studies) but is fully captured by UCD in which relational, interactive reproduction is axiomatic. Second, 'combined development' – meaning the interactive amalgamation of foreign and native, modern and archaic features within a social formation – overcomes the problems involved in the idea of historical 'rupture'. In this regard, UCD represents a particularly versatile conception of the 'dialectic of continuity-in-discontinuity' (James 1996: 19, 2006: 370) in both synchronic and diachronic terms. It therefore incorporates the condition of 'the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' (Bloch and Ritter 1977) without this condition turning into a purely descriptive intellectual *dénouement* as is arguably the case in ethno-symbolic accounts of the nation (e.g. Smith 1979). Third, like historical materialism UCD is a social theoretical framework concerned with the totality of social reality across historical epochs. Thus, unlike nationalism studies, UCD can theoretically accommodate the rise of capitalism and the nation as processes that are interrelated by virtue of being part of a wider process of interactive reproduction that extends across multiple, interconnected temporalities (Braudel 1980; cf. Tomich 2011).

### **3. *Imagined Communities* and the Spectre of Capital**

At this point my reasoning I pause the explicit argumentation regarding the explanatory potential of societal multiplicity and focus on the strategic way in which capitalism is causally related to the nation through its constitution of modern sovereignty. I argue that modern capitalist sovereignty forms the historically specific mode of collective freedom and independence that distinguishes the nation from other imagined political communities. However, in a subsequent section I show that this circumstance has eluded nationalism studies due to its internalism but can be re-covered through the theoretical framework of uneven and combined development based on the ontological premise of societal multiplicity.

I develop my argument regarding the centrality of capitalist sovereignty to the nation through a critical engagement with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. The choice of Anderson is based on two main considerations: First, Anderson's account of nations and nationalism has had an unrivalled influence within nationalism studies, and the social sciences more broadly<sup>4</sup>. And second, the attempt to comprehend the hybrid character of the nation is also key to Anderson's argument, which, in his own words, marries 'Marxist modernism with post-modernism *avant la lettre*' (Anderson 2006: 227).

Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 2006: 6). The second part of Anderson's definition – 'limited and sovereign' – is crucial but generally overlooked. The limitation of nations refers to their spatial boundedness: no nation is "coterminous with mankind ... [beyond

every nation] lie other nations” (Anderson 2006: 7). Indeed, it is arguably due to this geographical delimitation that nations achieve dialectical self-awareness and concrete existence through relational self-identification. Thus, Anderson implicitly considers the fact of societal multiplicity as constitutive to the nation. However, lacking an ontologically plural social theory he fails to systematically register the consequences of this circumstance. This becomes clearer when we move to the final part of his definition, i.e. ‘sovereignty’. For by contrast to the spatial boundedness of the nation, the meaning of ‘sovereignty’ in Anderson’s definition of the nation is not obvious. For Anderson it primarily signifies the replacement of pre-modern, hierarchical forms of dynastic and divine rule with ‘national’ rule, represented and practiced by a *sovereign state*. ‘Nations’, Anderson argues, ‘dream of being free and ... the gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state’ (Anderson 2006: 7).<sup>5</sup> However, and this is crucial, Anderson also argues that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined ... [and therefore] communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 2006: 6). Thus, in Anderson’s account the distinctiveness of the ‘nation’ can only lie in the historically specific way in which it imagines itself free, i.e. sovereignty. But the argument is circular: nations imagine themselves as sovereign because they also imagine themselves as free, and national freedom is represented by sovereign state.

This circularity is obviated, and the modernity of nations is specified, only if there exists in Anderson’s argument a distinction between the meaning of sovereignty in its first and second uses, i.e. in the general sense of freedom, and in the sense of ‘sovereign state’ as the historically specific ‘style’ of imagining that freedom. And I suggest that there is indeed such a distinction. In its first use sovereignty has the generic meaning of an externally unencumbered collective existence, of collective freedom from other human collectivities. In its second use, i.e. in the couplet ‘sovereign state’, it refers to the specifically modern form of political independence as the nation-state. The distinction is vital for the internal coherence of Anderson’s definition, for otherwise large Greek city-states of antiquity or the biblical kingdom of Israel for example would also qualify as nations (Hirschi 2013: 25). This historical specificity of the sovereign aspect of nations is implicitly acknowledged by Anderson himself: he relates the nation’s self-imagination as sovereign to the fact that the concept of nation was born in an age when “Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (Anderson 2006: 7).

So, to return to the key question emerging from our critical anatomy of Anderson’s definition of the nation: what does constitute the modernity of modern sovereignty?

One answer is provided by Marxist historical sociology in its critique of mainstream IR’s unhistorical conception of the state. This answer is based on a socio-historical anatomy of governance in capitalist modernity. Accordingly, modern sovereignty is defined as the “social form of the state in a society where political power is divided between public and private spheres” (Rosenberg 1994: 129). This division itself is the product of the specifically capitalist mode of production: it rests on the institutional differentiation of the political and economic moments of social reproduction; a differentiation that is absent from all pre-capitalist (and pre-national) societies.<sup>6</sup> This differentiation takes place through the separation of the direct producers from the means of reproduction, an historical process that Marx discusses under the rubric of ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx 1990: 873-907). Primitive accumulation results in the displacement of the direct exercise of force, or the threat thereof, from the (now ‘private-economic’) sphere of wealth accumulation to the ‘public-political’ arena of the state (Wood 1981). Thus, Marx insists that the “abstract *political state* is a modern product” (Marx cited in

Sayer 1991: 72). It is this purely political redefinition of the state and sovereignty under capitalism that enables the juridical equality of substantively unequal individuals (domestically) and nation-states (internationally) in the modern world, i.e. the co-presence, indeed the co-constitution, of anarchy and hierarchy (Rosenberg 1994).

Crucially, Marx argues that primitive accumulation also reconstitutes the concrete subjects of precapitalist social relations as ‘abstract individuals’ through ripping up ‘ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. ... [Thus] individuals *seem* independent’ (Marx 1993: 163). But these independent and free individuals are also bereft of productive forces, ‘robbed ... of all real-life content, they have become *abstract individuals*, who are, however, by this very fact put in a position to enter into relation with one another as individuals’ (Marx and Engels 1999: 92). It is these ‘abstract individuals’, who by implication are subjects of modern sovereignty and nationhood, both of which are therefore products of the prior process of primitive accumulation.

There is also a subjective dimension to this process of social abstraction. By separating masses of direct producers from their more or less concrete web of social relations of reproduction – organised around and through various forms of ‘community’ – primitive accumulation also involves a subjective disfiguration of the persons it uproots and re-grounds. This results from the fact that primitive accumulation reconstitutes direct producers as ‘wage labourers’ whose reproduction now occurs in the capitalist market and mediated through the exchange of commodities. This mediation of social relations obscures their concrete inter-personal nature. Marx calls the phenomenon ‘commodity fetishism’ (Marx 1990: 165). Commodity fetishism involves an ontological crisis of identity in individuals whose social nature is increasingly negated by the abstract and mediated form of capitalist sociality on an experiential level. This circumstance is compounded by ‘alienation’, i.e. the self-externalisation resulting from the institution of private property in the means of production generated by primitive accumulation. Thus, ‘the more the worker externalises himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world that he treats opposite himself, the poorer he becomes himself in his inner life and the less he can call his own’ (Marx 1977: 78-79). Commodity fetishism and capitalist alienation therefore involve the disintegration of communal forms of self-reproduction and a concomitant crisis of sociality with political consequences. This is arguably what Benjamin Disraeli was referring to when he wrote in the mid-nineteenth century: ‘the peril of England lay not in laws or institutions, but in the decline of its character as a community. Without a powerful sense of community, even the best laws and institutions were a dead letter’ (cited in Sumption 2019). The rise of capitalism through primitive accumulation therefore means that pre-existing forms of collective identity lose their concrete and pre-given nature and must be re-constructed. It is thus unsurprising that ‘anomie’ (Durkheim 1952) is a condition peculiar to capitalist modernity.

Moreover, primitive accumulation and the resulting commodification of labour power generates a contractual, and formally consensual, form of exploitation. This circumstance is directly related to the decline of old religions and divinely ordained forms of rule, which is a key contextual factor in Anderson’s account of the nation. For as Samir Amin has argued, old religions were key ideological systems through which objectively hierarchical forms of rule and exploitation were justified to the masses (Amin 1989: 1-2). In other words, the unity of the producers and means of production in pre-capitalist forms of society meant that exploitation was based on an explicit, more or less legal, inequality between the exploiters and the exploited. By grounding this inequality in a supra-human, divine order, religions played a key role in supplying the legitimacy that these hierarchical social orders needed. The existential angst that



primitive accumulation entails is therefore intensified by the way in which old religions and their attendant conceptions of ‘just rule’ lose their pertinency thanks to the opaque, seemingly voluntary form of capitalist exploitation.

There is a further psycho-sociological dimension to the capitalist erosion of old belief systems. This has to do with the radical transformation that capitalist production visits upon ancient modes of knowledge production. The competitive nature of capitalist production – strategically based on ‘abstract labour-time’ and the accumulation of ‘surplus value’ – entails the systematic deployment of ‘science’ to decrease ‘socially necessary labour-time’. This process involves an epistemic revolution consisting of the instrumentalisation of rationality in the service of profit maximisation. This entails humans’ growing domination over nature (cf. Mann and Wainwright 2018). The upshot is a progressive ‘secularisation of the soteriological significance of human action’ (Carrol 2011: 120) through neutralisation of all ‘mysterious incalculable forces’. This in turn renders into common-sense the belief that humans can ‘in principle, master all things by calculation’. For Max Weber this involves the ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Weber 1970: 51; cf. Lyons 2014), which divests life and death of their previous meanings (Weber 1970: 143). The existential crisis involved in disenchantment calls forth responses of which the most potent has arguably been nation(alism) as a ‘secular form of consciousness’, a godless religion (Greenfeld 2012: 1-2). This circumstance is an implicit corollary of Anderson’s discussion of ‘empty, homogenous time’, an abstract form of time that is ‘transverse ... marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar’ (Anderson 2006: 24). And abstract time is a dimension of capitalism’s ‘socially necessary labour-time’, which is by definition abstract (Marx 1990: 129-130, 1019; cf. Khatib 2012).

In short, the objective and subjective disintegration that the rise of the capitalist mode of production visits upon the non-capitalist ‘community’ (*Gemeinschaft*) of concrete persons gives rise to the modern ‘society’ (*Gesellschaft*) of abstract individuals. The violent abstractions involved in this process generate both the possibility and the necessity of the nation, or rather its imagination by abstract-individuals, as a re-integrative *real* abstraction (Cemgil 2015); one that reenchants a disenchanted world by providing formal equality, collective identity, individual dignity, and common destiny (cf. Greenfeld 2012: 2). The public-political effects of these circumstances are embodied by the modern sovereign state, the historically distinct political form of the nation.

#### **4. Imagined Communities and the Spectre of the International**

The previous section provided a capital-centred definition of sovereignty as the socio-historical substratum of the nation as an abstract imagined community. But is this thesis not fatally contradicted by the numerous cases of potent nationalist movements and successful nation(-state) formation in countries with no, or very limited, levels of capitalist development; the same circumstance, which has, as I argued above, frustrated modernist attempts at theorising the historical link between nation(alism) and capitalism? Revolutionary France (Shilliam 2009: 30-58), the late Ottoman Empire (Duzgun 2018), late Qajar Iran (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016:12), Mandatory Iraq (Dawisha 2003) and pre-revolutionary China (Cooper 2015) are a few important cases in point.

The answer is of course ‘yes’, this is indeed the same problem – but only if our approach to nations and nationalism is embedded in an internalist social theory, i.e. a social theory whose basic categories and concepts are, as I argued above, formed by abstraction from the historical

evolution and developmental pattern of a single society and extrapolated *a posteriori*. To elaborate on this fundamental point, I return to Benedict Anderson's work, but this time consider his more substantive account of the nation. In the course of this engagement, the relevance of my earlier focus on the capitalist dimension of the nation should become clearer: for my claim is that the curious reversal in the chronological order of capitalist development and nation-formation within given societies is itself an effect of the uneven and combined development of English capitalism and its global, geopolitically mediated impact.

Anderson argues that 'nationalism' and 'nation-ness' emerged in late 18th century Latin America. They resulted from a combination of the effects of 'print-capitalism' with the subjective liminality of Creole colonial officials, engendered by their 'bureaucratic pilgrimage' (Anderson 2006: 114). The career profile of creole colonial functionaries was different from those of the white imperial officials. And this meant that their administrative training in the imperial metropole produced a centrifugal form of social mobility that systematically assigned them as bilingual functionaries to manage colonial states. The political upshot was that they increasingly saw their colonial states as 'national states' (Anderson 2006: 114-115). Formed in this manner in colonial Latin America, 'nationalism' and 'nation-ness', Anderson argues, subsequently became "modular", capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (Anderson 2006: 4).

This thesis beautifully blends objective and subjective factors and is highly attractive. However, it suffers from three major problems. First, Anderson's argument for the Latin American origins of nationalism has been empirically challenged even by scholars of and from that region (Miller 2006: 205; Doyle and Van Young 2013; Sanjinés 2013: 154; Lomnitz 2001).<sup>7</sup> Second, and relatedly, there is a sizable literature on the European origins of modern sovereignty (e.g. Bartelson 1996; Teschke 2003; cf. Sewell Jr. 2004.) more specifically the English/British origins of modern national consciousness and the nation (Beruilly 1993: 412; Colley 2014, 1986; Greenfeld 2012, 1992; Hobsbawm 1977: 5). Third, and arguably most importantly, Anderson provides no substantive link drawn between 'print-capitalism' and modern sovereignty which as we saw was, by Anderson's own implicit admission, the *differentium specificum* of the nation. Furthermore, even if we accept Anderson's argument regarding the causal significance of print-capitalism, the logically more likely place for the rise of the nation ought to have been Western Europe where the printing revolution took place in the late fifteenth century and played a key role in the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the scientific revolution – all of which are central to Anderson's contextual account (Anderson 2006: 36). The whole problem is of course compounded by the fact that print-capitalism clearly represents a concept subsidiary to a Marxist theory of capitalism. And yet the anterior significance of capitalism itself for the rise of the nation, discussed in the previous section, is under-represented in Anderson's account (Harootunian 1999: 140).

So how to explain the neglect of 'capitalism proper' – capitalism as a 'mode of life' (Marx and Engels 1999: 37) – in Anderson's theory of nationalism?

One reason was arguably Anderson's acute cognizance of the rising postcolonial intellectual sensibility partially generated by the problems of economic reductionism in materialist-objectivist theories of nationalism. However, there is, I would like to suggest, a deeper reason for his neglect of capitalism as a social-relational totality. Had Anderson followed through his argument regarding the centrality of modern sovereignty to the nation and placed capitalism at the centre of his argument, he would have had to start from England, the birthplace of

capitalism.<sup>8</sup> But English capitalism, as Perry Anderson (1964) and Tom Nairn (1977) once argued, involved a peculiar fusion of aristocratic, bourgeois, and monarchic traits that was idiosyncratically non-modular: it could not be copied. This problem obviously does not affect 'print-capitalism', which as a technological form can be imported into, and appropriated by, any society. Thus, the question is not whether capitalism was causal to the nation but rather why did the modern sovereign state ('the gage and emblem of [the nation's] freedom' in Anderson's account) generated by English capitalism take such a peculiar and unrepeatable form as to be disqualified from being the empirical referent for Anderson's general theoretical account of the nation?

The answer to this question, I argue, lies in the historical specificities of England's experience of capitalist modernity. There are vital clues for this argument in Tom Nairn's account of the peculiarities of the English bourgeois revolution. He argues that 'identity' is nationalism's *necessary* condition. But its *sufficient* condition, its catalyst, is the rise of 'the people' as an historical subject. However, the English bourgeois revolution was, according to Nairn, paradoxical in its effects, for it acted both as the original producer of 'the people' as subject through its 'political baptism of the masses', and the suppressor of its 'mythic side-effects' (Nairn 1977: 41, 246) through a bourgeois order that was simultaneously both representative *and* patrician. Thus, the institutional form of modern sovereignty that the English bourgeois revolution produced and the national integration it involved were distinct from those of revolutionary France, which itself emerged out of geopolitical rivalry with capitalist Britain. The French revolution established the paradigmatic form of republican state and issued a 'Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen' whose article 3 explicitly states, for the first time, that "The principle of any Sovereignty lies primarily in the Nation".<sup>9</sup> This is why in comparison to the French revolution the English bourgeois revolution appears as 'incomplete' or 'least pure' (Anderson 1964: 28-31).

The peculiarities of England's nationhood and its configuration of national sovereignty were the products of the wider process of uneven and combined development within and through which the English bourgeois revolution occurred. A key aspect of this process was the fact that capitalism's systematic development took place first in England. This resulted in a 'logic of priority' (Nairn 1977: 14) or what Linda Colley (1986: 97) calls the 'precocity of English national integration'. Crucially, this meant that a key imperative for subsequent nationalist projects, namely, mass mobilization of pre-capitalist human resources, i.e. 'the people', in response to geopolitical pressures did not arise for the English/British state (cf. Davidson 2000). The emergence of capitalism had already enabled the English, later British, state to possess an 'unrivaled capacity to raise men, levy taxes, conquer territory abroad and maintain stability at home' (Colley 1986: 106). The kind of ethnic nationalism that came to define the classical age of nationalism in the nineteenth century Europe was therefore not a structural necessity for Britain.

There was another reason why England's capitalist sovereignty didn't involve a coeval development of 'the people' into 'the nation'; namely, the imperial nature of the British state. The British Empire's plunder of the colonies, a key aspect of its combined development, constantly deferred the need for the economic and political completion of the bourgeois revolution at its metropolitan home. British capitalism 'faced practically no developmental problem until well into the twentieth century' (Nairn 1977: 42). Internal crises of accumulation and competitiveness were resolved in the colonies. Similarly, 'the immense, rationalizing "charge" of the English bourgeois revolution was detonated overseas. The decisive economic legacy of the Commonwealth was imperialism (Navigation Acts, Dutch and Spanish Wars,

seizure of Jamaica, etc.)' (Anderson 1964: 29). This mechanism remained operative even after the end of formal colonialism due to Britain's ability to create a global financial network and place itself at its centre (Nairn 1977: 32).

The imperial form of the British state shaped the non-modularity of its modern sovereignty, the political form of the nation, in an even more profound way. The British Empire consisted of both internal components (the colonization of Wales and Ireland and union with Scotland) and overseas ones (colonial conquests in the Western hemisphere and later India and East Asia) (Kumar 2000: 588). The ethno-culturally multiple character of this imperial polity at its metropolitan centre pre-empted the explicit articulation of English nationalism, or any form of unitary nationalism, for that would generate costly friction with other imperial constituents. Consequently, rather than a singular, ethnically defined nation, the initial referents of England's, and later Britain's, modern collective identity were even more abstract supra-national and extra-ethnic phenomena: the 'civilizing mission', the 'white man's burden' and 'loyalty to institutions, not a people' (Kumar 2000: 580, 591, 589). This 'missionary nationalism' or 'imperial nationalism' involved a form of national consciousness in which the dominant English developed a special sense of itself in which ethnic identity was downplayed while a supra-national political-developmental mission was emphasized (Kumar 2003: 30 and *passim*, 2000: 579-580).<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the rise of contemporary ethno-racial English nationalism culminating in Brexit can be seen as the cumulative result of Britain's protracted loss of industrial supremacy and empire.

It was therefore not just the institutional form of British sovereignty that was non-modular. So too was the articulation of its national identity and its mechanisms of national integration. All in all, it was therefore Britain's combination of chronological priority in the systematic development of capitalism with a composite imperial state that underlies the unique, non-modular configuration of Britain's capitalist sovereignty and non-ethnic national identity; a circumstance that escapes internalist modes of historical enquiry and concept formation (e.g. Kohn 1944) but can be theorised through uneven and combined development and its premise of societal multiplicity.

At the same time, however, Britain's *sui generis* and non-modular configuration of modern sovereignty and nationalism posed a mortal danger to the non-capitalist countries that coexisted with it. These countries lacked the qualitatively distinct sources of material power that industrial-imperial capitalism had given Britain. Consequently, they had to mobilise and regiment their pre-existing populations in a centralised and strategic manner to withstand the geopolitical pressure of the capitalist Britain. The *Levée en masse* and the *Code Civil* in revolutionary France are seminal instances of this circumstance. Thus, the rise of capitalism and its sociological unit of the abstract individual in England elicited in its non-capitalist geopolitical interlocutors, France in particular, 'impersonal collectives' of ethno-cultural nations as initial substitutes for processes of primitive accumulation, which were subsequently carried out from above (cf. Shilliam 2009: 30-58). German unification and the rise of nationalist movements across Europe during the nineteenth century, the Meiji restoration in Japan, constitutional reform and revolution in the late Ottoman empire and Qajar Iran, respectively, the Chinese revolution of 1911 and (Pan-)Arab nationalism: all these are different examples of this basic process of defensive nationalism and nation-state formation.

The developmental transformation involved in this process far exceeded the rationalising dynamics involved in Tilly's warfare-driven conception of state-formation (Tilly 1975). Its result was that *after the inceptive case of England, nationalism forged the nation without*

*capitalism*. At the level of individual societies, nationalism therefore over-determined capitalist development; but at the international level, this circumstance itself was overdetermined by English/British capitalism. ‘Late-comer’ societies could not enjoy England’s ‘logic of priority’ (in the systematic development of capitalism); consequently, they did not repeat the English sequence of capitalist development preceding nation-formation.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the first non-capitalist late-comer society that was locked in a geopolitical competition with capitalist Britain, i.e. France, produced the sovereign nation-state in the absence of domestic capitalism through a selective imitation of the institutional forms of Britain’s modern sovereignty. And precisely because this process filtered out the elements that were unique to Britain’s hybrid development, the resulting French template of the nation-state could be imitated in subsequent history (Nairn 1977: Ch.1).

This complex circumstance explains the ancient and unique traits of different nations: their sovereignty, actual or desired, is by definition modern and abstract and ultimately rooted in capitalism, which initially did not exist domestically but was present externally and experienced through geopolitical pressures and threats. The immediate collective subject of this sovereignty however was not capitalism’s abstract individuals but a singular, coercively constructed – and hence politically charged – imagined community based on a particular ethnicity or language which was naturally distinct in each case. In multi-cultural contexts (that is, most of the world) this by default meant the formation of subalternised ‘minorities’ which, unless granted substantive autonomy, launched their own mimetic autonomist or irredentist nationalist projects (cf. Hobsbawm 1977: 16-17). The essential precondition for this process was societal multiplicity and the combination of distinct developmental processes it involves.

## 5. Conclusion

Nationalism studies, and the social sciences more generally, have yet to adequately theorise the Janus-like character of the nation, its simultaneous modernity and antiquity. The root cause of this failure is a monadic social ontology that generates internalist modes of analysis and explanation, which are unable to capture the intrinsically interactive nature of nation-formation and nationalism. This article has shown a way out of this theoretical impasse through the ontological recognition of the fact of societal multiplicity and the operationalisation of its consequences – interaction, combination, and dialectical change – through the theory of ‘uneven and combined development’. On this basis, it has developed an alternative conceptualisation of the nation as an abstract community whose historical specificity lies in its political form of capitalist sovereignty. The nation thus understood has a double-life. It first emerged in England/Britain as a re-enchanting response to the disenchantment of imperial capitalism, but the occurrence and mediation of this very emergence within and through the condition of societal multiplicity precluded its modular replication elsewhere through reversing the key moments of its original formation. *Within* late-comer societies, that is, later than England/Britain, nationalism forges the nation before capitalism, which geopolitically overdetermines the process from *without*.

This means that the institutional framework of the sovereign nation was built in advance of the domestic development of capitalism, that is, in the absence of its sociological content of the abstract individual. Nationalism facilitated processes of centralisation and rationalisation which were vital means for regaining or maintaining the political independence of non-capitalist societies. These belated responses proceeded by selective adoption of the institutional forms of Britain’s modern sovereignty, which left out the peculiarities of its hybrid development. This resulted in a programmatic and abstract articulation of national sovereignty

that, unlike the English/British case, was modular and transplantable in varying contexts and by varying agents. Revolutionary France, the first country internally reorganised due to its geopolitical interaction with capitalist England, is the paradigmatic site of this process. The resulting French republic, through its Jacobin model, spread the nation(alist) blueprint across the world (cf. Duzgun 2018).

In short, in England the prior rise of capitalism meant that nation-formation consisted of the ideological unification of populations that were already broken down into abstract individuals through primitive accumulation. In non-capitalist societies that directly or indirectly experienced the pressure of capitalist England, nationalism, rather than capitalism, forged the nation as the political-ideological unification of still concrete individuals; a process for which the violent construction of a 'national' identity from a *particular* ethnicity or language was the most possible, and hence most common, route (cf. Dirlik 2002: 436; Soleimani & Mohammadpour 2019). Within societies experiencing this circumstance, e.g. France, China, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, there was initially a disjuncture between the nation's capitalist political-ideological articulation (sovereign statehood) and the non-capitalist socio-economic organisation of the country. But internationally there did exist the causal-constitutive link between nation-ness and capitalism. This circumstance underpins nations' formal identity (anarchy) and substantive difference (hierarchy). It also explains the potency and resilience of nationalism in the capitalist epoch. The key to the riddle of the nation's Janus-like character is therefore the fact that the nation is inherently interactive in its historical construction. The nation arises from the refraction of capitalist development through the consequences of societal multiplicity.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See also other contributions to the special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (Volume 21, Issue 5) entitled 'Escaping the Nation? Anti-colonial Imaginaries and Postcolonial Settlements'.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg (2013, 2006); Matin (2013a, 2007). For an extensive list of primary and secondary writings on UCD visit [www.unevenandcombined.com](http://www.unevenandcombined.com). For important critiques see *inter alia* Teschke (2014); Ashman (2006).

<sup>4</sup> *Imagined Communities* has sold more than half a million copies excluding the sale of translations available in more than thirty languages (Breuilly et. al. 2016: 626). I am grateful to Yavuz Tanyolcu for this reference.

<sup>5</sup> The centrality of sovereignty to nationhood is also underlined by other key thinkers, e.g. Breuilly (1993: 2); Gellner (1983: 1); Greenfeld (2012: 1-2); Hobsbawm (2000: 9-10).

<sup>6</sup> Here I use 'pre-capitalist' and 'pre-national' not in a linear-historical sense but in a relational-analytical sense.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Yavuz Tanyolcu for these sources.

<sup>8</sup> Capitalist sovereignty and the imperial form of the British state are central to my account of the nation, and since the political consolidation of English capitalism (the Revolution of 1688) roughly coincided with the Acts of Union of 1707, I use 'England' and 'Britain' interchangeably.

<sup>9</sup> The Avalon Project: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/rightsof.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/rightsof.asp) [accessed 23/09/2018].

<sup>10</sup> Similar circumstances also mark states emerging from Britain's settler-colonialism such as the United States where 'constitutional nationalism' and 'American exceptionalism' form the institutional and ideological forms of the nation.

<sup>11</sup> This circumstance also explains early nationalisms' tendency to seek 'viable' nation-states rather than the nation-state as such (Hobsbawm 1977: 5).

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