

**'Subject, Text, Nation: Situating Narrative Fiction in Nationalism Studies'**

Since the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, it has been taken for granted that literature in general, and narrative fiction in particular, has been instrumental in the formation of nations. In fact, Anderson's seminal book offered an initial bridge across a disciplinary divide which had seen nationalism as being an object of study for historians, sociologists and political theorists but decidedly *not* a suitable topic for literary critics. This exclusion was, perhaps, due in part to the blind-spot generated by the fact that 'Literature' as a discipline had itself come into being as part of the nationalist process, and was thereby organized – and 'naturalized' – into 'national' units. *Imagined Communities* allowed 'Literature' to conceptualize itself as part of this process and thereby offered a perspective by which the origins of national literatures could be dismantled and subjected to scrutiny. In this respect, Anderson's intervention has been highly enabling, and has provided the point of departure for almost all work in the English-speaking world involving literature and nation since its publication in 1983. However, such has been the force of Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' that the bridge that it offered literary critics to the field of study that can be called 'nationalism studies' – itself a burgeoning academic 'industry' in the past two decades – has for the most part been neglected. Taking Anderson as the final (or perhaps even the first) word in nationalism studies, most (though not all) work on literature and nation has tended to overlook the fact that Anderson's book itself occupied a specific position within that wider field of debate concerning the rise of nations. Some of the other positions in this field do, in fact, have certain distinct things to say about the role of culture – and by extension, literature – in the formation of nations and it is worth considering them both in order

to ascertain any pertinence to the study of literature and nationalism, and in order to delineate certain wider problems in the study of nationalism which affect both theorizations of nationalism, and those of narrative fiction's role in it.

## **Nation**

To begin, then, one must map out the field of nationalism studies as it currently stands. A large and contentious field, nationalism studies presents a complex range of divergent positions on a range of crucial issues, but the particular schism of relevance here is that which divides theorists between those who consider nationalism to be *primarily* a political phenomenon, and those who visualise it as *primarily* a cultural phenomenon. The former, who may be termed 'statists', and include among their number Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and John Breuilly, believe that the figure of the nation emerges as a solution to the socio-political problems faced at the end of the eighteenth century as a result of increasing modernization, and of transformations in the relationship between 'state' and 'society'.<sup>1</sup> Gellner points out that 'nationalism emerges only in milieux in which the existence of the state is already very much taken for granted,' and so the existence of 'politically centralized units' has a *definitive* impact upon the formation of nations.<sup>2</sup> In other words, nationhood could not have been conceived of without developments in the institutions and functions of the modern state, and it emerged as an answer to the problem of how to relate this 'state' to the emerging 'civil society'. As John Breuilly puts it,

a clear and distinct idea of the state as 'public' and the 'civil' society as 'private' was elaborated....the explicit idea of the state as the sole

source of political functions was associated with a modern idea of sovereignty....This also required a much clearer definition than hitherto of the boundaries of the state....The breakdown in corporate ties meant that within both state and civil society there was a new emphasis on people as individuals rather than members of groups. The main problem was how to make the state-society connection; how to maintain some harmony between the public interests of society and the private interests of selfish individuals.<sup>3</sup>

The 'nation' emerges on this account as a solution to specific political problems.

This has very significant implications for the statist position with regard to the role of culture in the formation of nations. In effect, the statist position is distinguished by the hierarchization of 'politics' over 'culture', which in turn implies a fundamental distinction between political practice and cultural production.

Literature, and all other cultural production, is thus relegated to a secondary order of importance in the process of creating nationhood. Breuilly suggests that,

To focus upon culture, ideology, identity, class, or modernisation is to neglect the fundamental point that nationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics and politics is about power....we need to examine closely how nationalism operates as politics and what it is about modern politics that makes nationalism so important. *Only then* should we go on to consider the contributions of culture, ideology, class and much else.<sup>4</sup>

The decisive factor, then, in the formation of nationhood are the instrumentalities of power by and through which political actors construct a given, territorially-defined and limited political field. Culture lags behind, a bit-part player in an essentially political drama, a backdrop which adds a little local colour and 'authentic' scenery. From this perspective, two particular inferences can be made about the role of culture and cultural products in the process: first, culture *supplements* nationalist politics when marshalled into an invented 'tradition' that provides a 'canon' of national landmarks which define the identity of the nation in question; secondly, in terms of

their substantive contribution, individual cultural products can only operate as rather passive 'reflectors' of those great changes in the social and political arenas that necessitate the rise of nations. The modern novel, for instance, is important only insofar as it testifies to the emergence of a civil society and the individual. The statist position would not allow it any importance in constructing that very civil society in the first place.

For the culturalists, on the other hand, among whom we find Anthony Smith, John Hutchinson and Miroslav Hroch, the nation can be defined as a cultural community that exists above and beyond any political organisation of it into a state; it is, therefore, 'pre-political'.<sup>5</sup> These cultural communities, which Smith calls *ethnies*, provide the basis for modern nations. They are more or less culturally homogeneous, a collectivity of meaning 'embedded in history' through common myths, symbols, narratives and other cultural forms.<sup>6</sup> The *ethnie* places a limit upon the transformations that distinguish modern nations from it. Thus, the nation could be seen to be the product of modernity only insofar as 'the era of nationalism succeeded in uniting the community on a new, political basis'.<sup>7</sup> Politics is important for the culturalists only because it *expresses* the prior existence of the *ethnie*. The culturalists argue that statisticians ignore the fact that nationalism is not just a politics, but is in fact a politics of 'identity'. Statisticians, they suggest, must necessarily fall back on a conception of identity in which belonging to a group is seen as 'a matter of attitudes, perceptions and sentiments that are necessarily fleeting and immutable' so that any identity can be manipulated 'instrumentally' to further individual or collective interests.<sup>8</sup> However, such instrumentalism ignores the degree to which new political identities must compete with existing identifications which are usually considerably stronger. The nation, therefore, is a result of political self-realization on the part of an existing

*ethnie* that allows for an identification between the new political interests and the existing cultural bases of identity. This is rendered necessary by the changing social dynamics of modernity. 'Culturalist' scholars assume, therefore, a high degree of prior cultural homogenization in the Middle Ages along broadly 'national' lines. Miroslav Hroch, for example, characteristically elides the term 'ethnicity' into categories which we now recognize as 'nations': 'A large number of medieval polities....lost their autonomy partly or completely, while their population generally retained their ethnicity....Czechs, Catalans, Norwegians, Croats, Bulgarians, Welsh, Irish, and others.'<sup>9</sup>

Again, we can infer a certain attitude towards culture implicit in the theoretical formulations of the 'culturalists'. Firstly, whilst the relationship between culture and politics may seem to be reversed, the role of culture in the formation of *modern nations* (as opposed to the pre-modern *ethnies*) is in fact curiously similar: it is the political organisation of *ethnies* in modernity that transforms it into a nation. The difference lies in their disagreement about the *origins* of nations.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, once again, politics and culture are treated as separate and distinct forms of social practice. Culture, in one sense, stops being 'productive' in the modern era and becomes purely 'reproductive' insofar as cultural practice in the age of nations tends towards the consolidation and further elaboration of the pre-existing 'myth-symbol complexes' that had defined the *ethnies* from which they had sprung. Looking carefully at John Hutchinson's work on nationalism, for instance, one notices certain assumptions governing his focus on 'revivalist' movements. His avowal of a 'distinct species of nationalism, called cultural nationalism' which is embodied by such movements actually depends on a rather static view of culture.<sup>11</sup> Drawing attention to the instrumentalist argument, he presents a dichotomy between the instrumentalist

theory of boundary maintenance which suggests an ethnic group defines itself from outsiders through a process in which 'its cultural content is incidental' against an opposing view – which Hutchinson endorses – that asks, 'is its history and culture the core of an ethnicity determining its relations with others and its trajectory through time?'<sup>12</sup> The lack of a middle ground here is significant for it suggests that Hutchinson cannot conceive of a process of boundary maintenance which involves *both* culture and political instrumentality. Rather, he suggests that culture is not very susceptible to instrumental manipulation because 'it', unlike boundaries in boundary maintenance theory, cannot change very easily. Taking this one step further, culture is conceived of as a 'thing', not a process. Notice the language here: 'the core...determining...its trajectory *through* time.' The slight difference of 'through' time from the phrase 'over time' indicates that, for Hutchinson, rather as an arrow might follow a trajectory through space, so a 'thing' called culture passes 'through' time. The phrase 'over time' on the other hand would suggest the effect of time upon culture, implying change. However, this would also mean that culture, by its very changeableness, *can* be manipulated instrumentally. Hutchinson, however, needs to maintain the distinction because without it the 'distinct species' of 'cultural nationalism' cannot exist.

As is generally the case, the theoretical direction often dictates the choice of subject and so the 'culturalists' are less concerned with modern cultural forms such as the novel. Conversely, their attention is directed towards those pre-modern cultural forms that they believe form the basis of *ethnies*: ballads, the folk tales, the oral narratives, and other 'folk' traditions and customs. When they do direct their attention to modern cultural forms, it is generally to detect – rather tendentiously – elements of

the *ethnie*'s 'myth-symbol complex', or to examine the deployment of them by self-consciously 'nationalist' writers.<sup>13</sup>

The strength of Anderson's intervention, in hindsight, probably lies in the fact that he not only transcended the differences between the 'statists' and 'culturalists' but he also opposed their implicit consensus on the separation of politics and culture. Thus, he shares with the statist their insistence on the fundamentally *modern* nature of the nation, whilst also advocating the importance of culture; but he also reminds us that the nation is not an 'imagined community' as such but an 'imagined *political* community'.<sup>14</sup> However, he seems to disagree with both in arguing for the *constitutive* role of cultural products in the *process* of creating the imagined community. Moreover, when he speaks of nations and nationalisms being 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind' he is referring specifically to modern cultural forms such as the newspaper and the novel.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that Anderson's argument is considerably more alluring to cultural critics for whom the arguments of both the 'statists' and the 'culturalists' might seem a little disabling. It is also for this very reason that Anderson's argument, and his particular theorization of the role of culture in nationalism, is seldom critiqued.

*Imagined Communities* inaugurates what may be termed the 'formalist' position in studies of nationalism and literature. This has become the most common theoretical position adduced to subsequent attempts to explain or delineate the relationship between literature (and the novel in particular) and nationalism. It frequently operates as a kind of theoretical 'preface' by which to justify the investigation of a seemingly political phenomena with recourse to literature – and it must be borne in mind that academic exclusions which demarcate nationalism studies

as the preserve of the disciplinary triumvirate of history, sociology and politics continue to operate.

The 'formalist' position, as first formulated by Anderson, privileges the newspaper and the novel in particular as the two most important cultural artefacts in the construction of nations. For Anderson, they demonstrate that a new consciousness about time and space was emerging that provided the perceptual correlates by which the nation was imagined into being. This perceptual shift he termed 'simultaneity'. The novel, Anderson writes, is 'a complex gloss upon the word "meanwhile".'<sup>16</sup> The *structure* of the old-fashioned novel, 'typical not only of the masterpieces of Balzac, but also of any contemporary dollar-dreadful' is what primarily interests him.<sup>17</sup> It enables 'the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside. This picaresque *tour d'horison*...is nonetheless not a *tour du monde*. The horizon is clearly bounded.'<sup>18</sup> That it is the structure or form of the novel that is important as opposed to the content of any given novel is clearly demonstrated by Anderson's mode of literary criticism. He is able to make his point just as effectively by illustrating it with a *synopsis* of one of the three novels he examines. The same is true of his analysis of the newspaper: again, what he is interested in is not so much any particular journalistic utterance, but rather with the *layout* and channels of dissemination of the newspaper as a formal entity. Therefore, what is culturally important for Anderson is, on the one hand, the rise of print-capitalism and, on the other, the transformation in human society's perceptions of time and space. For him, the novel and the newspaper both participate in the former and embody the latter. In other words, Anderson sees the rise of the novel as being very important, but not necessarily what is in those novels. What a particular novel might have to say about political authority or social justice, for

instance, is not considered as important as the way in which all novels organize time and space. To state it baldly, he is interested in 'the novel' not novels. Despite his ostensible antipathy to the existing consensus within nationalism studies which separates cultural and political practice, Anderson returns to the *primary* importance of broad sociological changes over and above the constitutive role of cultural practice.

The formalist position has been elaborated further by Tim Brennan in his well-known essay, 'The National Longing for Form'.<sup>19</sup> Again, like Anderson, Brennan privileges the novel, 'It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles.'<sup>20</sup> Brennan, in fact, goes further than Anderson. Whereas Anderson saw the formal importance of the novel as being its embodiment of changes in the perceptual correlates of modernity that were a necessary pre-requisite for the emergence of nations, Brennan sees the novel as being the formal equivalent of the nation itself. The tenor of Brennan's article is such that he attempts to define how the rise of the nation gave to the novel the form it has and how, in turn, the form of the novel expresses the form of the nation. That's fine as far as it goes but the problem lies in his attempt to illustrate how it was the *form* of the novel that was the crucial determinant in *creating* the space of the nation. Thus he writes, 'it was especially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in *defining* the nation as an "imagined community"' and again, a few pages later, '[The novel's] manner of presentation allowed people *to imagine* the special community that was the nation'.<sup>21</sup> It is in the theoretical leap between the rather passive sense in which the form of the novel expresses or 'objectifies' the nation to the rather more active sense of 'defining' or 'imagining' it that the problem with the formalist position lies.

In moving from the passive emphasis to the active sense, Brennan is guilty of what can only be described as a 'leap of faith' which mythologizes the novel's role in nationalism. Underlying his argument is an immanent equivalence between two formal categories, the novel and the nation, which substitutes for historical process. Thus, the form of the novel insinuates itself into consciousness thereby generating a consciousness of its formal equivalent: the nation...and *vice versa*. The process of imagining the nation is, therefore, emptied of political significance and drained of historical content because the argument is elevated to a level of abstract generality which overlooks the specific socio-political contexts in which nations came to be imagined. Is there any sense, for example, in proclaiming the novel as a privileged site of the nationalist imagination in societies which were, at the time of imagining, largely illiterate?

### **Subject**

I would argue that the place of narrative fiction in the imagining of nations is both a humbler and more complex one than is allowed for by any of the theorizations discussed. It is humbler because there is no privileged sense in which 'the novel' imagines – or, as it is more commonly phrased, 'narrates' – the nation. Whilst a plausible case could be made for insisting on the indispensability of 'narrative' or 'narration' to nationalism, this does not mean that the term 'narrative' can be substituted by the more specific term 'novel'. Moreover, we are on interesting and complex theoretical terrain here. Throughout this essay, I have used the term 'narrative fiction' to dethrone the novel and to open up a space for other narrative forms. However, merely substituting the more capacious term 'narrative fiction' for

'the novel' does not of itself address the main theoretical issue at stake, which is that if 'narration' and 'narrative' are indeed the key structuring principles underlying nationalist discourse, then these cannot be reduced to any specific cluster of narrative forms. Privileging 'the novel' or 'narrative fiction' simply reverses the original disciplinary exclusion of 'literature' from the field of study, thereby 'aestheticising' nationalism (*Nation and Narration* reads, at times, in precisely this way). And yet, as Hayden White and others have demonstrated, 'non-literary' discourses such as historiography possess many of the same narrative devices as 'literary' fictions.<sup>22</sup> This may mean that historiography can and should be classified under the 'narrative fiction', but where does this leave 'non-narrative' discursive modes – such as jurisprudence, cartography, or political economy – which functioned in the 'narration' of nations? The distinctions between the respective nuances of the terms 'narrative' and 'narration' must, at all times, be vigilantly observed. The production of a national narrative is a more complex and heterogeneous process than any kind of literary reductionism would allow. Indeed, this kind of 'aestheticisation' of politics ironically reinscribes the separation of cultural and political practice that has marked most theorizations of nationalism. But such a separation cannot be maintained. Nationalism is a politics in which what is at stake is the very concept of culture itself – its character, dimensions, and boundaries.

In the space between the terms 'nation' and 'narrative fiction' (which is, after all, the object of our discussion here) a third term can mediate the process by which each informs and inflects the other. This third term is 'discourse', and it allows us to fill the vacuum at the heart of the formalist position by attending to what the formalists so conspicuously ignore, namely 'content'. By turning to the concept of a nationalist discourse in which what is said (content), who said it (subject), and how it

is said (text) are all inextricably bound together, one can move away from the level of generality that characterises the formalist position towards particular processes of ideological contest and negotiation. Otherwise, one receives the impression that the animating principles generating both the nation and the novel are all to do with broad sociological and perceptual changes, and very little to do with the social agents who not only participated in such changes but also decisively shaped them. In this regard, one must do more than pay lip-service to the idea that men and women make their own history as much as they are made by it.

So, if narrative fiction's role in the formation of nations is less than privileged it must take its place amongst the other forms of discourse which, within the public sphere, helped shape the 'idea' of nationhood. Whilst macroscopic sociological and ideological transformations may have helped shape the broad parameters of nationalist discourse – its dualities of sacred and secular, its temporal doubling of the ancient with the modern etc. – it was nevertheless the specific imaginings of socially situated subjects engaged in a continual process of struggle and negotiation over the definition of 'the nation' across a broad range range of discursive forms that constituted the constellation of utterances which together made up the body of nationalist discourse. I am thinking of such discourses as the novel, the ballad, the newspaper, the essay, film, jurisprudence, political theory, political economy, cartography, historiography, to name but a few. Indeed, much of the appeal of nationalism lies in its scope. Nationalism occupies – or seeks to occupy – a discursive terrain that traverses the entire spectrum of social life, from the intimate and interiorized spaces of private practice (such as diet – as can be seen in the discourse of national 'cuisine') to the global spaces of a fully imagined international order, of

which the nation-state forms the basic unit. Nationalism's imaginative geography is, in this sense, universal even though, as a political ideology, it is not universalist.<sup>23</sup>

It is this continuous and broad imaginative investment which gave to nationalism its political dynamism and, in the long term, has given the concept the robust solidity that it enjoys today. Theorization of nationalism thus requires an historicizing of these struggles in order to trace the patterns of ideological contestation which took place, for it is through the collectivity of these struggles that the shape of any given imagined community emerged. It must, therefore, pay attention to the substantive content of these conflicts. One may note that Anderson's lofty dismissal of nationalism's 'philosophical poverty' encapsulates much of the formalist disregard for the content of nationalist ideology.<sup>24</sup> But without paying attention to what nationalists actually thought, how can we recover a sense of the kind of nation they imagined? Rejecting formalism, however, does not mean that one should lapse into the kind of relatively untheorized content analysis in which narrative fiction, for example, somehow 'reflects' or 'expresses' nationalist ideology in a straightforward manner. Indeed, the very commitment to theory here lies in the attempt to relate the text in both its structural and substantive dimensions to the *process* of constructing a nationalist discourse. It is this recovery of 'process' that theory should seek to illuminate, for in the very concept of 'process' lies the idea that nationalist discourses possess a history.

How, then, do we begin to theorize this process? What are the nature of the relations that bind the subject, the text, and the nation? That narrative literature performs a function in the creation of the idea of nationhood is accepted, but what has rarely been asked is how narrative literature functions in relation to other discursive forms which take part in this same process so as to constitute a nationalist discourse

which encompasses them all. In other words, what are the relations between different enunciations and articulations of the 'idea' of nationhood as performed in several discursive contexts? Not all discursive formations possess the same relation to the political field in which nationalism plays itself out, nor do they possess the same relation to the cultural field. Although nationalist discourse traverses the entire social field, its 'presence' in each field of social practice is not uniform. Nevertheless, whatever the specific discursive form, there must be, on the one hand, a fundamental relation to the political field since nationalism is a *political* idea; on the other hand, nationalism is simultaneously obsessed with culture. It represents, in fact, perhaps the first attempt in human history to make the cultural and political fields co-terminous. The interface of culture and politics, then, is where one must attempt to theorize nationalism.

It is at this point that another term, ideology, must be brought into the frame. Itself a notoriously ambiguous and polyvalent term, its relation to and distinction from 'discourse' is fraught with difficulty. Ideologies are, after all, discursive; and discourses always carry some ideological charge. It would be incorrect, however, to treat them as mutually synonymous. Discourse is a wider and more capacious term than ideology, and is capable of sustaining several ideological positions within it, which may be diametrically opposed but share the same discursive terrain. Both racists and anti-racists, for example, whilst being ideologically opposed to one another may in fact share the same discourse on race to articulate their respective positions.

Nationalism, I contend, must be seen as a discursive formation within which many competing ideological positions concerning the 'idea' of nationhood must polemically converge in order to attain a 'hegemonic' position. Any given

'enunciation' – whether a novel, or a political tract – must therefore be interpreted within this ideological context. The specific relation of a novel and a political tract to the political field may not be equal or uniform, but they are both nevertheless situated in the discursive terrain of nationalism and will thereby occupy particular ideological positions within it.

To insist on the 'ideological' is, of course, to reject Foucault's notion of 'discourse' in which an all-embracing 'power' regulates and disciplines thought and practice through a skein of veiled capillaries. This is perhaps too rigidly negative a formulation to encapsulate the 'relations of force' between social agents who are positioned differentially with respect to power. For Foucault, discourse displaces ideology – a term which he found unsatisfactory because of its epistemological implications.<sup>25</sup> In so doing, he mistakenly reduces contests *over* power to the operation of power itself. His concept of discourse is not only 'totalizing', but also monologic and homogenous. Whilst seeming to suggest that a vast array of different enunciations and 'statements' can exist within a discourse, this 'difference' is in fact assimilated into a single 'regime of truth' that regulates the discourse itself. Foucault's conception of discourse emphasizes the "political" by his insistence on power,' whilst denying 'politics' because he does not allow the 'relations of force' that must exist in order for politics to operate.<sup>26</sup> If there is only Power – everywhere and nowhere – then what need for politics? If all social beings are possessed by power but none possess it, what need is there to struggle over it?

Foucault's dismissal of politics is in fact part of his wider disavowal of modern epistemology and, in particular, the notion of 'the subject'. The substitution of the notion of 'ideology', which is 'interested', with a 'disinterested' notion of discourse is of a piece with his rejection of 'the subject' because the notion of an

'interest' admits of a subject of that 'interest'. Whilst critiques of 'the subject' by Foucault and other poststructuralists have been extremely useful in reassessing the underbelly of post-Enlightenment rationality, to reject the subject altogether is a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Indeed, to attempt to study nationalism as a cultural politics without some notion of 'subjectivity' is, I would argue, a retreat to a formalism similar to Brennan's in that it simultaneously exaggerates the importance of 'the text' and drains it of any historical content.<sup>27</sup> A subject *is* required in theorizations of nationalism, one that is situated in a particular social field and articulated by social discourses but is nevertheless capable of intervention – a subject, in other words, that is not *wholly* determined by prevailing social ideologies and so is capable of challenging, modifying, subverting or even rejecting them.

It need not be the case, therefore, that a text must be 'about' nationalism to be situated in nationalist discourse. Nationalism makes itself felt in a number of social activities which at first glance seem to be beyond the political field – sport and diet (especially cuisine), to name but two – but the history of each of these cannot be understood without placing them in relation to the ideological currents of nationalist discourse as a whole because nationalism is one of those 'totalizing' discourses – of the kind which Foucault is so concerned with – which charges the minutiae of lived experience with political significance. This is precisely why novels have, historically, played an important part in the process of constructing nationhood *beyond* the 'formal' mimicking of the shape of the nation. Put simply, novels are ideologically useful because they can articulate those very minutiae of social life with which nationalism is concerned. Indeed, there is perhaps no other discursive form which allows the writer to encompass such a wide range of social experience: from 'high' politics to intimate personal habits, the novel is ideologically suited to nationalists as

a vehicle *par excellence* for the transmission of the nationalist vision across the entire spectrum of social possibilities.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, a novel can not only perform an ideological function but can also throw in aesthetic and moral *pleasure* to boot.

Both the content of a novel, and the organization of it in an overall narrative structure is, in the context of nationalism, laden with political significance. But this significance is impossible to interpret unless related to the ideological oppositions current within the discourse. This requires a rigorous historical contextualization in which the specificity of the historical moment is not rendered obsolete by an appeal to formal generalities. The formalist position is, in a sense, literally meaningless as 'the novel' simply cannot discharge the burden of responsibility that is loaded upon it.

### **Text**

How, then, do we situate 'the text' within this polyvocal, heterogeneous and ideologically fractured nationalist discourse? If the text is the work of a socially situated and multiply articulated subject, then it is itself multiply articulated by the same social discourses that interpellate the subjectivity of its author. Since the subject is 'positioned' within the social field by these interpellations, the text too is 'positioned' ideologically by those same discourses. But, just as 'discourses' cannot so overwhelm the subject as to render it incapable of intervening in, re-evaluating and reshaping them, neither should the text be seen as merely the recapitulation or reproduction of ideology. Theorists of ideology and discourse, from Althusser and Macherey to Foucault, have been guilty of an emphasis on overdetermination so profoundly coercive as to deny the 'subject' any kind of historical agency whatsoever. Even Pierre Bourdieu – whose theorization of the 'social space' as a set of mutually

overlapping 'fields', 'which each have some relationship to each other and point of contact,' is in many respects so enabling in terms of social agency – is open to the criticism that his theory is 'static'.<sup>29</sup> Bourdieu explains the *reproduction* of power systems very well (every field of social activity is a structured system of power relations), but cannot explain *change*: how, for instance, do social practices develop and alter over time? Bourdieu, structuralist that he is, has been accused of being too 'synchronic'; the subject is automatically positioned within any given social field in terms of their homologous relation to their position in the field of power (which, for Bourdieu, is based on class).<sup>30</sup> The subject in effect has no room for manoeuvre in terms of adopting a different position within particular social contexts.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu's insistence that the entire social structure is a relational unity is potentially rewarding. For it suggests that discursive enunciation and, therefore, ideological production must always be conceived of relationally. That is, no ideological position – and no subject position – exists without some form of relation to other 'positions'. The enunciation of a 'subject' – the text – must therefore be seen more as a 'site' of intersecting social energies, and less as a formal category. The text is an ideological pressure point, a multiply articulated, socially located space on which the ideological currents of the social field are inscribed. The 'ideology' of the text, then, cannot be assumed to be singular: its identity is composed of the system of differences that, according to Saussure, relationally produce its 'meaning'.

However, as Derrida suggests, this relational identity is far from stable and coherent. Rather, it is constantly deferred as it passes along the chain of signification. Defined by its difference from others, the ideological sign of the text is never complete and present in itself. The 'other' signs are continuously present within it, fragmenting the ideological coherence of the text and irrupting its fabric with 'marks' of 'otherness' –

other ideological traces, other 'positions'. In other words, the ideology of the text is not monologic; it is, instead, dialogic and polyvalent. The text must be seen as a site of social and ideological struggle where, in the case of nationalist discourse, many conflicting ideas of nationhood converge.

Derrida's notion of *différance* suggests that any text, any ideological utterance, will generate an 'excess' of meaning which undermines its avowed self-sufficiency. Potentially, this 'excess' or 'supplement' is infinite. However, the endless 'play' of deconstruction must, in the politically urgent context of nationalism, be tempered by the knowledge of the historical interpenetration of nationalist ideologies, in which the analysis of the nationalist text must be situated in a relational field of other nationalist utterances. This means the critic must isolate at least *some* of the other spectral presences that might emerge from the shadows of the text – that the 'chain' of signification be halted, however temporarily, in order to image a heuristic representation of the relational totality of the ideological field. One might also add that these differences do not merely exist as a consequence of the operations of language. Rather, they are the result of an *active* intervention of the subject in the discourse of nationhood. In the process of addressing 'other' nationalist ideologies, these 'others' may be felt within the text, despite their conscious suppression or dismissal. Such presences render any analysis of the ideological 'position' of the text incomplete unless one makes the effort to understand and accommodate the relations current within a discursive field in a given social space.

To pursue this kind of historical excavation exhaustively may prove to be impossible; however, the work involved in recovering the nature of a given ideological field will, ultimately, accentuate any understanding of the processes of ideological development within specific nationalist discourses. This, in turn, may

illuminate both the complexities of these processes and the responses to them by nationalists. Nationalist texts may enrich our understanding of historical nationalisms by allowing us to glimpse the dense social and cultural processes involved in imagining nations.

Take, for example, a classic novel by the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand. Composed in 1934 and published the following year, *Untouchable* participates in the ideological controversies of the 1930s. Following the cessation of the Civil Disobedience movement, the novel rehearses some of the main ideological arguments within Indian nationalism during a period in which the ascendancy of the Gandhian ideology came to be challenged from both left and right. The rise of more 'secular' conceptions of Indian nationhood, ranging from the social-democratic, secular-liberalism of Jawaharlal Nehru to the overtly leftist positions espoused by the newly-emerging marxist and communist movements (articulated by such thinkers as M.N.Roy) was balanced on the other hand by the emergence of militant communal nationalisms, both Hindu and Muslim.

Anand was heavily influenced by the Indian left. *Untouchable*, like many of his other novels, combines both a critique of British imperialism and an insistent concern with the continuing social and economic problems within Indian society itself. Turning the nationalist gaze inward, Anand most vociferously articulated the newly emergent nationalist concern with social and economic inequality. Both the British and the upper classes of Indian society are the targets of his attack. But although his enthusiasm for Gandhi's political and religious views may have been tempered somewhat by this attraction to secular and left-wing ideas, he nevertheless maintained a respect and admiration for Gandhi and some of his ideas and methods. This ideological ambivalence is felt throughout the novel, particularly in the set-piece

finale which allows Anand to stage, in a more explicit manner, the ideological conflicts that overdetermine the novel as a whole.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Bakha, the protagonist, is offered three ideological choices. The first, which he finds attractive but also disorienting, is proposed by a missionary named Colonel Hutchinson. He urges Bakha to convert to Christianity for according to 'Yessuh Messih' (Jesus Messiah) there was 'no difference in his eyes between the rich and the poor, between the Brahmin and the Bhangi'.<sup>31</sup> Humiliated as he had been by a series of incidents during the course of which his status as an untouchable had been consistently reinforced, Bakha's instinctive attraction to these ideas are balanced on the other hand by total incomprehension of the finer points of Christian theology, and by boredom with the hymns that Colonel Hutchinson sings to himself in a language (English) that he cannot even understand. Eventually, he rejects the Colonel and runs away. Anand is making a nationalist point here. Whilst Christianity does indeed offer the possibility of addressing social inequality, it is rejected because of its external, and specifically British, provenance. By implication, the rejection also implies an ideological commitment to finding a solution for caste inequality from within the cultural frame of India itself.

This is precisely the second possibility that Bakha encounters. Running away from the Colonel, he finds himself surrounded by a crowd who carry him along with them to a *maidan* in which Gandhi is about to make a speech. This speech is specifically directed towards the problem of untouchability and, in a very significant historical reference, the dispute over the granting of separate electorates for the untouchables proposed in 1932. Although Bakha understands little of the finer points of the Mahatma's speech, he responds very favourably towards him as Gandhi

elucidates upon the 'sin' of untouchability, 'Bakha felt thrilled to the marrow of his bones. That the Mahatma should want to be born as an outcaste!' (148) However, his response is not altogether unqualified. Part of Gandhi's speech involves some criticism of the untouchables themselves for 'evil habits, like drinking liquor and eating carrion.' (ibid.) This Bakha finds somewhat unfair. Nevertheless, following a stirring conclusion to the speech, Bakha is spellbound by the Mahatma's message of equality.

This feeling is barely allowed to settle before Anand introduces a critique of Gandhi's ideological position in the form of an exchange between a highly Anglicized, slightly ridiculous *babu* who 'wore a monocle in his left eye' (150) and is 'clad in such fine clothes,' (151) and a poet with 'sparkling eyes and long black curly hair, dressed in flowing *Indian* robes.' (ibid. my emphasis) Whilst the *babu* loudly proclaims that 'Gandhi is a humbug....a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu,' (150) the poet takes a more considered view, admitting Gandhi's limits but nevertheless suggesting that he is 'by far the greatest liberating force of our age.' (151) It is clear that Anand, in his usual way, is forcibly directing the reader's sympathies towards the poet whilst mercilessly parodying the 'democrat' who is 'supercilious' towards his social inferiors and, according to the poet, 'a decadent Indian'. Nevertheless, his point about Gandhi's paradoxical position is well-made, and it is conceded by the poet when he talks of the Mahatma's limitations. This both demonstrates Anand's ambivalent distaste for westernised intellectuals – 'I have read Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, and John Stuart Mill' claims the pompous *babu* – and a certain suspicion concerning the indigenism espoused by Gandhi.

However, the stage is now set for the final word which is left to the poet. In a long 'harangue', he proclaims that 'It is India's genius to accept all things' (152) and then launches, in the language and style that would be deployed by Nehru to greatest effect ten years later in his *The Discovery of India*, upon a syncretic view of Indian civilization which was to be so closely identified with Nehruvian and other secular-liberal ideologies within Indian nationalist discourse of the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Like Nehru, the poet's account juxtaposes Indian achievements in spirituality, architecture and sculpture and a 'race consciousness six thousand years old' with historical progress, 'We will go the whole hog with regard to machines while they [the British] nervously fumble their way with the steam-engine.' With regard to untouchability, the poet proposes a socio-economic solution through industrial modernization, again in contradistinction to Gandhi's 'cultural' and 'moral' regeneration. Caste inequalities, he suggests, are governed in the modern age by 'profession' and the removal of the profession of latrine-sweeping by the introduction of the flush-system will automatically remove the inequalities that are generated by it.

Despite this accent on modernization, there is more than a little of Gandhi's own cultural revivalism in the presuppositions underlying his argument, most notably in his insistence that social equality was the norm in ancient India and that untouchability and caste were introduced as later 'accretions' by 'wily pundits'. At the same time, one also receives the impression that the poet's easy optimism is being gently mocked by Anand himself whose very staging of this explicitly ideological *denouement* to the novel indicates a certain need to work through the complex ideological currents that impacted upon him in that period. *Untouchable* dramatizes the complex interpenetration of adjacent nationalist 'positions' which overdetermine both the text and the subjectivity of its author.

This reading of the novel may be complicated even further by noting a distinct *absence* in the staging of this finale. As we have already seen, Anand rejects the possibility of conversion to Christianity as a potential solution to the problem of untouchability. This is because it is associated with British imperialism (there is a conspicuous silence on indigenous Christian communities) and would compromise his nationalist position. There is, however, no mention of the possibility of conversion to one of India's other religions. This is especially significant for two reasons. Firstly, conversion – mainly to Islam – has been, historically, the route out of untouchability for most Indians. Secondly, we are made aware that the finale to the novel occurs in the context of Gandhi's dispute with the granting of separate electorates to the Untouchables. This dispute between Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, leader of the Dalits and himself an untouchable, became increasingly acrimonious. The two differed most significantly over the roots of untouchability. This in turn affected their proposed solutions. In effect, Gandhi – like the poet in the novel – saw untouchability as an 'accretion' onto Hinduism which, when removed, would return Hinduism to the ideal form of social structure in which mutually complementary 'castes' would remain (the *varnasrama* system). In other words, caste itself was not seen as being in any way linked to the problem of untouchability. Ambedkar could not have been more forthright in his criticism of this view. As he stated in his refusal of a contribution to Gandhi's journal *Harijan*, 'nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system.'<sup>33</sup> Ambedkar proposed that the 'Dalits', as he called the untouchables, should leave the Hindu fold altogether and constitute a community in their own right, analogous to India's religious minorities. He himself converted to Buddhism later. This, however, was anathema to Gandhi.

The details of the dispute should not concern us here. What is significant is the lack of reference in the novel to a political situation which had an all-India resonance, and which took a dramatic turn, widely publicized, when Gandhi vowed he would fast unto death rather than accept separate electorates. To overlook conversion as a possibility indicates a certain affinity with Gandhi's position over and above Ambedkar's insofar as Hinduism is seen as a single, integrated and coherent community which has no intrinsic relationship to untouchability – the untouchability as 'accretion' position. Moreover, this places the entire range of social possibilities purely within the frame of Hinduism itself. In other words, the possibility of moving from one religious community to another is not sanctioned. Instead, a communally-oriented vision of composite nationhood is espoused in which each of India's religious communities constitute discrete communities. The boundaries of these communities constitute a limit which cannot be transcended or transgressed. The accompanying political language is that of majoritarian/ minoritarianism, itself the logic which underlay the ascendancy of the communal nationalisms such as the RSS and the Muslim League.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst this does not mean that Anand subscribed to this kind of nationalism, it does suggest that his 'secularism', like those of many others within the Indian nationalist movement, must be qualified. The tragedy of Indian nationalism's historic development has been precisely this axiomatic vocabulary of communal identity which, with its adjacency to almost all the ideological positions enunciated throughout the period of Indian nationalism's development, inflected the nationalist discourse to such an extent that there was, in hindsight, a kind of grim inevitability about the way that independence was finally achieved. One of the poisoned legacies

bequeathed to the subcontinent by nationalism in India has been that a 'secular' idea of India was, in Rushdie's words, 'insufficiently imagined'.

As the above discussion of Anand's novel has demonstrated, the move away from the empty generalisations of the formalist position, together with an understanding of the active ideological interventions of politicised subjects in specific historical circumstances, leads to a greater appreciation of the fragmentary, contradictory nature of nationalist ideologies. In turn this balances the theoretical perspective as agency and subjectivity are placed in their rightful position as complements to the 'vast impersonal forces' which generate massive social, political and ideological change. To keep this double-optic is difficult but rewarding for it allows us to recover the 'imagination' as an active force in the construction of 'imagined communities'.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> John Breuilly, 'Approaches to nationalism' in Balakrishnan (ed.), *Mapping the Nation*, (London: Verso, 1996), p.165.

<sup>4</sup> John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, pp.1-2 (my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971); *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991); *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1999); John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism* (London: Fontana, 1994); *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Miroslav Hroch, 'From National Movement to the Fully Formed Nation: The Nation-Building Process in Europe' in Gopal Balakrishnan (ed.) *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1995) pp.78-97, orig. published in *New Left Review*, 198, March/April 1993, pp.3-20.

<sup>6</sup> John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism*, p.xiii.

<sup>7</sup> A.D.Smith, *National Identity*, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Hroch, 'From National Movement to the Fully Formed Nation', p.83.

<sup>10</sup> The other main schism within nationalism studies, which is almost but not quite isomorphic to the culturalist-statist one, is between those who can be classified as 'ethnicists' and those who are known as 'modernists'. The dual axes of the schism – modernist/statist versus ethnicist/culturalist – revolve around complexities and ambiguities in terminology, and especially those concerning the distinction between 'nation', 'nationalism' and 'nation-state'. For a fuller discussion of this field of debate see

Anshuman Mondal, 'Nationalism, Literature and Ideology in Colonial India and Occupied Egypt' (PhD. Diss., SOAS, University of London) pp.11-45.

<sup>11</sup> John Hutchinson, *Modern Nationalism*, p.40.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.28.

<sup>13</sup> 'But, if it is through the historian one recovers the national destiny, it is the artist who dramatizes the *rediscovered myths and legends*, projecting them to a wider audience....the great artists are those who create out of the collective experience of the people *as preserved in its historical legends* and who *reshape* their lessons for the present.' *ibid.* p.45.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Verso, 1991) p.6.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.4.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.25.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.30.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form' in Homi Bhabha (ed.) *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) pp.44-70.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* pp.49-50.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.48; p.50.

<sup>22</sup> See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.6.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p.5; Ernest Gellner also states that the nationalists' 'precise doctrines are hardly worth analysing', *Nations and Nationalism*, p.124.

<sup>25</sup> There is, in fact, an underlying assumption about the term 'ideology' that underlies Foucault's rejection of it. Taking his cue from the Marxist notion of a 'false consciousness', his rejection is premised on the 'negative' concept of ideology which draws an epistemological distinction between 'true' and 'false' knowledge. Holding this distinction to be false, he accordingly rejects the term 'ideology' altogether. However, as many have pointed out, the negative concept of ideology is not the only one. There are also 'neutral' and even 'positive' concepts of ideology. It will be apparent that the negative concept of ideology is rejected here in favour of a more positive concept. For a fuller discussion of the term 'ideology', see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: an Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991); Terry Eagleton (ed.) *Ideology* (London: Longman, 1994); David Hawkes, *Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jorge Larraín, *The Concept of Ideology* (London: Hutchinson, 1979); J.B.Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation' (Interview with Stuart Hall), in D. Morley and K.H. Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall, Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996) p.136.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu accuses Foucault of just such a formalism, 'Pursuing a logic that is entirely characteristic of symbolic structuralism, but realizing that no cultural product exists by itself...Michel Foucault gives the name 'field of strategic possibilities' to the regulated system of differences and dispersions within which each individual work defines itself [ie. the field of strategic possibilities within a discourse]. But...he refuses to look outside the 'field of discourse' for the principle that would cast light on each of the discourses within it.' 'The Field of Cultural Production or the Economic World Reversed' in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993) p.32.

<sup>28</sup> This, however, should not be taken to imply support for Frederic Jameson's argument that novels – in his case, 'Third World texts' – 'necessarily' perform 'national allegories'. Indeed, Jameson's insistence on allegorization is antithetical to the theoretical position I am arguing for insofar as it is itself formalist. Rather, as can be seen below, what I am suggesting is that a novel's particular deployment of tropes that have acquired a symbolic presence within nationalist discourse objectifies an ideological position within the discourse – it does not, however, allegorically signify the totality of the field of power as Jameson seems to suggest.

<sup>29</sup> R.Harker, C.Mahar and C.Wilkes (eds.) *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Macmillan, 1990) p.9; C.Calhoun, E.LiPuma, M.Postone (eds.) *Bourdieu: critical perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993) p.20.

<sup>30</sup> C. Calhoun *et al.*, *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (London: Penguin, 1940), p.129; all subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Phrases such as 'Life is still an adventure for us' resonate directly with Nehruvian connotations. See for example, certain passages from *The Discovery of India*: 'the ceaseless adventure of man' (p.31); the emphasis on science and progress also finds echoes in Nehru's central work, 'the way of observation

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and precise knowledge and deliberate reasoning, according to the method of science, must be followed' (p.31). Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Madras: Macmillan, 1983), p.329.

<sup>34</sup> On the political language of majoritarianism and minoritarianism see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism: Religion, Modernization and Secularization* (London: Verso, 1997).