

THE KEY ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE FORMATION OF NATIONS

F. Ghender

Flavius GHENDER

PhD, assistant professor

Aurel Vlaicu University, Arad

Abstract:In this paper I focused on the role of school and education in the process of nation formation and the development of nationalism as political ideology. Nations and nationalism are products of modernity: even if the nationalist ideology describes the nation as a natural frame for human existence, nations are born at the crossroads of industrial and political revolutions of 19th century and religious reform. Profound economical and political transformations changed social relations and created new forms of identity. Nations are best described as imagined communities, constructed by nationalist intellectuals. In this complex transformation process, the educational system played a key role.

Key words: nationalism, nation, education, school, ethnic groups

Introduction

Nations and nationalism are products of modernity. The 19th century made ethnic and cultural diversity the main affiliation criterion for the people: in the nationalities century, state and nation became each other's project. Nationality became the main identity criterion and history has been revised and interpreted from a nationalist point of view. The perception of the nation as natural frame of human life was facilitated by profound cultural and social life transformations, under the impact of three revolutions: religious reform and secularization, industrial revolution, and political revolution. Promoted by culture, education, institutions, the idea of nation was projected back in immemorial times, considered to be immortal. In this paper, I will focus on the key role of

school and education for the birth and evolution of nations and for development of nationalism.

For the romantic historian Jules Michelet, the national conscience represented already the main reference system. Without nation, confessed the French mentor of Romanians revolutionists from 1848, he won't be himself anymore and he would lose his reason of existence. The generation of European intellectuals brightly represented by Michelet had a tremendous effort for disseminating education, for developing the educational system, for writing and re-writing history from a nationalist point of view, they were strongly interested in shaping national identities. In the momentum of rethinking history, Michelet wrote about what some characters "really meant" and "really wanted", even if those characters "didn't understand" at the moment their own mission. It wasn't a singular case, rather a typical one. Benedict Anderson observed that starting with romantic intellectuals from 19th century, "the silence of the dead was no obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires" (Anderson 2006: 198). The subjective approach of intellectuals like Michelet is common to those who, under the influence of Romanticism and late Enlightenment (the case of intellectuals from Eastern Europe) worked to shape the national identity of their communities and tried to mobilize people in that way. The school, especially educational system monopolized by the State, played a key role in the nation's construction and development of nationalism.

In the second half of the 19th century, the German historian Heinrich von Treitschke observed the close relationship between the State and nationalism, the State's tendencies to create a homogeneous society, to realize a national language and national habits, instead of local dialects and regional habits (Lawrence 2006: 20). For Ernest Renan, the nation is not a natural form of solidarity, inherent to human nature. In his well-known conference "What is a nation?", he defined the nation as "*a soul, a spiritual principle*". Renan enounced two fundamental conditions for the formation of a nation: to have glorious moments in common in the past, especially heroic memories, and the will to live together. One of the revelatory ideas of Renan anticipated the thoughts of Benedict Anderson: the forgetfulness, even historical error, is important, same like memories, in the nation's consolidation process. Even if Ernest Renan didn't mention in particular school as key-element for the construction of a nation, the educational system played a crucial role in organizing the shared collective memory, as well as in forgetting facts and events. The well-known Renan's definition of the nation is that of a vast solidarity that relies on the will to live together, but he admits the importance of

past memories, especially a common view on national history, the importance of agreed discourse on the past events.

In interwar period, researchers emphasised the modernity of nationalism and underlined the intellectual's effort to spread nationalism through mass educational system and through mass-media. But the systematic study of nations and nationalism began after de Second World War.

The most important approach in the study of nations and nationalism is the group of theories named generic "modernism" or "classic modernism". The modernist theory relies on three ideas: nationalist ideologies and the system of national states are modern; nations and national identities are also modern; nations and nationalism are products of modern age and modernity.

The modernist theories benefitted from the excellent researches of Karl Deutsch. Communication theorist, he described nation as "community of social communication". Karl Deutsch related nationalism with growing social communication fluxes. The nation is "built" on urbanization, social mobility, the rate of literacy growth, media exposure and vote participation, all of them products of modern age (Smith 2009: 4). He argued that the ability to communicate with some men rather than with others by language and cultural affinities is the main characteristic of nationalism. In that extent, nation and nationalism can not be dissociated from the evolution of educational system and State organized education.

Probably the main theoretician of classic modernism is Ernest Gellner, who deconstructed old theories on nation and nationalism. He clearly asserted that nationalism created the nation, not otherwise (Gellner 1997: 88). He considered nations and nationalism social constructions, cultural creations of modernity.

Ernest Gellner analyzed the mechanisms of the transition to modernity. In feudal age, the people's culture was local and contextual. The language and cultural differences were not that important. The modernization and the industrialization generated a degree of social mobility which broke the old stability. The social relations became fluid, the individuals identities relied strongly on culture. New conditions asked for a new type of citizen, with new skills, produced by a new educational system. The modern state pretended and imposed the coincidence of cultural and political borders. For Gellner, it is essential the way that industrial society generalized and standardized education. In the modern age, nobody can organize his own educational system. Society needed mobile, dynamic population, open to new professions, objective attained by a new level of education, general and generalized. Education became

important not only as instrument, education conferred identity. The modern man, considered Gellner, is not loyal to a king, to a country or to a faith, the modern man is loyal to a culture (Gellner 1997: 59).

Gellner focused on the role of education in obtaining “cultural standardisation”. He asserted that the major part of training in industrial society is generic, not highly specialized. The new education is universally standardized, that is why it contributes heavily to cultural standardization – essential feature of nationalism.

New technology asked for learning. New conditions asked for a framework of communication at large scale. Ernest Gellner transformed Max Weber’s definition of state and asserted that the monopoly of legitimate education is now more important than the monopoly of legitimate violence (Gellner 1997: 57). He insisted that in modern age only the State can guarantee and maintain a high and alphabetized culture, through the monopoly on educational system.

Ernest Gellner thinks that nationalism use historical legacy, but it uses it selectively, it transforms it sometimes radically, sometimes traditions are simply invented. In some cases, a foreign and high culture is imposed to a people with low culture. If a nationalist movement turn over in this case, it eliminates the foreign and high culture, but the substitute is not the old and low local culture – nationalism gives birth or invents another high culture, alphabetized and taught by specialists, even if the new high culture reclaims the authenticity of old low culture. That way, Gellner explains the formation of new national cultures under the empires of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Romanians from Transylvania. In those areas, intellectuals had a great effort to create in the same time a culture and a nation – some would say a cultural nation – and claimed a state for it in the name of popular culture.

The British historian Eric Hobsbawm considered nationalism a product of political and industrial revolutions. In *The Age of Revolution*, he said that main supporters of nationalism were middle class and low class professionals, administrative apparatus and intellectuals, the educated men. He observed that “*the progress of schools and universities measures that of nationalism, just as schools and especially universities became its most conscious champions*” (Hobsbawm 1977: 167).

Hobsbawm believes that the rate of literacy growth and elite's nationalism in Eastern Europe and colonies were not enough, before 1848, for the large spread of solidarity commitment asked by modern nationalism. In those regions, the Western ideology of nationalism was imitated. But the agents of imitation were the intellectuals who studied in Western Europe. Indeed, in Romania, the modernity agents were young boyars who studied in France and Germany. They returned home with

new ideas about society and politics, especially with the strong idea that the world is divided in nations, that the idea of nation is strong related to progress and democracy. Eugen Lovinescu in his book *The history of modern Romanian civilization*, brightly argued that Romanian modernity is related to the imitation of political and social European ideas.

Eric Hobsbawm accentuated the artificial, invented features of nations. Historically, nationalism is prior to the nation (Hobsbawm 2004: 10). He thinks that some traditions which appear to be old are in fact new, sometimes ~~are~~ simply invented. The invention of tradition is described as “*a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of ritual or symbolic nature, which to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past*” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). Moreover, even the historical continuity was invented, to attend a certain level of social stability. In the process of consolidation of invented traditions, school and education played a key role.

Benedict Anderson in his influential book *Imagined Communities* underlined the importance of culture in the formation of nations. The nations are “*cultural artifacts of a particular kind*” created by “*spontaneous distillation of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces.*” “*Once created, they 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 constellation*” (Anderson 2006: 4).

In that way, it is possible the modern imagination of the nation: “*the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through the homogeneous, empty time is precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history*” (Anderson 2006: 26). The history was marked in this point by three forces: the invention of print, the development of capitalism and fatal diversity of human languages. The print and literacy made possible large scale spread of information and the reader consciousness to be a part of a great community of thousands of individuals who don't know each other.

For Benedict Anderson, decisive for the birth of the nations is the alliance between Protestantism and what he called print-capitalism – writings and cheap prints, available in vernacular languages. The slow consolidation of vernacular languages as administrative tools contributed to the decline of Christian imagined communities. The languages became standardized with the spread of novels and newspapers within the national state, but also due to the educational system standardization. The

language gets a new “fixity” that helped, paradoxically, to the consolidation of idea that languages, like nations, are very old. Print-capitalism created languages-of-power, imposed dialects similar to the language used by print-capitalism (Anderson 2006: 42-43).

For Anderson, the transformation of temporal perception that made possible the imagination of nation is revealed by the large spread of newspapers and novels. The newspaper is an extreme form of the novel, sold at huge scale, which presented a sum of events apparently without any connection. Newspapers, as one day best-seller, created a mass ceremony: newspapers were simultaneously consumed as fiction. Every reader knew that thousands or millions of persons were sharing the same experience in the same time. In that way, the imagined world became a part of everyday life, strengthening the idea of nation as imagined community.

Education produced a knowledgeable and literate population. Moreover, Anderson pointed that the centralised educational system, especially universities, brings together different individuals from different places. All the young students knew that they read the same books, share the same values (Anderson 2006: 122), consolidating the “imagined community” of nation. The common training contributed to the feeling of communality and loyalty. Travelling and learning together contributed to standardisation of society. The students shared the same ideas on national history.

The French historian Guy Hermet asserted that education had a privileged role in nation-building process. Nationalism, he thought, fulfils under the impact of three political initiatives: the recognition of effective citizenship by universal vote, the development of public educational system and compulsory military service (Hermet 1997: 99-100).

The modernist theories about nation and nationalism have been criticized by some intellectuals who called themselves ethno-symbolists. They agreed with modernists that nation and nationalism are born in modern age, but they focused on the importance of symbols, myths, values and traditions in the formation and persistence of the modern national state. Inspired by Annales School and the idea of the *longue durée* in the study of history, they stressed the importance of ethnic identity for the formation of nations. They considered that traditions are not simply invented and scholars should study the ethnic and national groups during the centuries. Nationalism builds on pre-existing kinship, religious, and belief systems. Anthony Smith classified the important ideas of nationalism, as autonomy, unity, identity and authenticity. Identity and authenticity are close related to formal education and the

spread of knowledge, values, theories, myth, interpretation on past and history through educational system (Smith 2009).

Conclusions

Most researchers consider that the birth of nations and the spread of nationalism are modern phenomenon. Education, especially the State's monopoly on educational system, is a key factors in modernization and implicitly in the process of nation-formation. Without the development of state educational system, the growth of literacy rate, vernacular languages standardization, we can not conceive the vast imagined community of the nation as Benedict Anderson best described it. As Eric Hobsbawm rightfully asserted, the progress of schools and universities measures that of nationalism.

The creation of nations as imagined communities is the work of militant intellectuals, which called for solidarity the people Ț until then excluded from political life. The main agents of nationalism were, not by chance, intellectuals, professionals of writing, journalists, novelists, poets, schoolteachers. The nation, once imagined in industrialized Western countries, made the model available for other communities. The identity construction of Romanian nation, for example, was inspired by intellectuals with strong connections to the European educational system: The Transylvanian School and later on young men who studied in Hungary or Germany, in the case of Transylvania, young boyars who studied in France or Germany, in Wallachia and Moldavia.

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