

## **A Critical Analysis of the Concepts of Identity, Nation, Nationalism in Museum Studies**

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### **Abstract**

National identity is a complex and contested issue, and it is often debated in the fields of social and cultural studies. Museum collections, and the way they are presented and interpreted, are closely linked to national identity. National museums, as symbols of national unity, can manipulate perceptions about dominant ideologies and the individual's place in society. This article aims to deepen our understanding of how national museums negotiate and construct national identity by critically analyzing the theories and concepts of nation, nationalism, and national identity.

**Keywords:** Identity, Nation, Nationalism, Museum Studies, Education

**DOI:** 10.29329/epasr.2023.600.1

**Submitted:** 05 February 2023

**Accepted:** 03 June 2023

**Published:** 30 September 2023

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## **Introduction**

History is not something in the past. Scholars argue that there is no single, definitive way to tell history, and that different people and groups may have different perspectives on the past. This can lead to conflict, as different groups may try to impose their own version of history on others (Featherstone, 1995; Trofanenko, 2008). Museums can provide a space for people to discuss different perspectives on history. This can help to promote understanding and tolerance, and can also help to challenge the dominant narrative of history. By presenting multiple perspectives, museums can help to "tackle the wrinkles" in the construction of national identity.

National identity is a complex and contested concept, and its relationship to museum collections is a matter of ongoing debate. Some scholars argue that museums play a vital role in shaping national identity by collecting, preserving, and interpreting objects that represent the nation's history and culture. Others argue that museums can also be used to promote a particular vision of national identity, or to exclude certain groups from the national narrative.

This article seeks to deepen our understanding of the ways in which national museums negotiate and construct meanings of national identity. It does this by critically analyzing the theories and concepts of nation, nationalism, and national identity. The article argues that museums are not neutral arbiters of national identity, but rather active participants in its construction. The way in which museums collect, preserve, and interpret objects can have a profound impact on how people understand their national identity.

### **The Concept of the Nation**

The widespread use of the term "national museum" and the establishment of such institutions around the world may suggest that there is a common understanding of and agreement on the definitions of both "museum" and "nation," as well as their combined meaning. However, in reality, all terms related to national museums are problematic: national history, national identity, the nation-state concept, minority culture, and even the idea of the museum itself. This is because these terms involve complex issues of collection, selection, conservation, classification, representation, cultural appropriation, and epistemological authority, all of which have contested meanings.

Therefore, this section will analyze the much-discussed concept of the museum and the implications of the term "national." In doing so, it will touch on various key ideas of nation, nationalism, and national identity that require further explanation.

The concept of nation is closely linked to theories of nationalism. Smith (1999, 2000, 2004) provides an extensive overview of the different approaches to explaining nationalism. He argues that there are four main categories of theories of nationalism, each of which can have an impact on the conceptualization, establishment, assumed function, and exhibition mission of a museum and its

interpretation. Therefore, it is important to understand the differences between these theories and how they are reflected in museum exhibits.

Smith's first category of theories of nationalism, primordialism, argues that nations are natural, organic, universal, and primary to the human species. However, there are different variations of this theory.

- Popular primordialism assumes that nations are part of the divine plan or inevitable and enduring elements of nature, albeit temporarily buried under the contingent passage of history.
- Sociobiological primordialism holds that nations are extensions of kinship and thus genetic connections. From this perspective, cultural features like language and religion are collectively chosen signifiers of biological affinity.
- Cultural primordialism stresses that such shared cultural elements as language, religion, and territory are givens of human existence to which humans attribute symbolic power and which strengthen over time.

Smith's second category of theories of nationalism, perennialism, also sees nations as historical phenomena, but they are seen as having existed for centuries, millennia, or from time immemorial. In other words, perennialists believe that nations have always existed, even if they have not always been politically or culturally unified.

Both primordialism and perennialism are based on the idea that nations are natural and inevitable. However, they differ in their understanding of how nations come into being and how they change over time.

The modernist paradigm is the dominant approach to understanding nationalism in contemporary scholarship. It rejects the idea that nations are natural or inevitable, arguing instead that they are recent inventions that emerged in the 19th century.

The modernist paradigm is based on the following key assumptions:

- Nations are not natural or inevitable, but are instead social constructs.
- Nations are the product of modern social, political, and economic forces, such as the rise of the nation-state, the industrial revolution, and the spread of literacy.
- Nations are not based on shared biological or cultural characteristics, but are instead based on shared political and cultural beliefs.
- Nations are not permanent but can change or even disappear over time.

There are a variety of different theories within the modernist paradigm, but they all share the basic assumption that nations are recent inventions. Some of the most influential modernist theories include:

- Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism argues that nationalism is a product of the industrial revolution. Gellner argues that the industrial revolution required a literate and mobile workforce, which could only be created by creating a common national identity.
- Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism argues that nationalism is a product of print capitalism. Anderson argues that the spread of print capitalism created a sense of national community by making it possible for people to imagine themselves as part of a larger group of people who shared a common language and culture.
- John Breuilly's theory of nationalism argues that nationalism is a product of political conflict. Breuilly argues that nationalism is a way for groups to achieve political power and to defend their interests.

The modernist paradigm has been the subject of much debate and criticism. However, it remains the dominant approach to understanding nationalism in contemporary scholarship.

Gellner (1983, 1994) proposed a profoundly sociocultural account in which the associated forces of modernization and urbanization displaced traditional societies by eroding their unique cultural values and requiring a standardized, centralized state system of language and education. Gellner argued that nationalism arose from the need to create a shared culture in order to promote social unity. He believed that this could be achieved by imposing a high culture on society, which would replace the multiplicity of local folk cultures. This homogenizing and assimilative approach would help to prevent ethnic or religious divisions from leading to social conflict. However, Marxist scholars such as Hobsbawm (1990) argued that nationalism is a socioeconomic phenomenon. They believe that it arises in response to uneven development and resource distribution. In other words, nationalism is a way for people to unite in the face of economic inequality.

In contrast to Gellner and Hobsbawm, Breuilly (1982) argued that nationalism is a political phenomenon. He saw it as a spurious historicist solution to the alienation caused by the split between the absolutist state and civil society. In other words, nationalism is a way for people to unite in the face of political conflict. Breuilly argued that nationalism is not based on cultural sentiment, but is instead a manipulation of symbols in order to gain political power.

Kedourie (1960), on the other hand, emphasized the ideological basis of nationalism. He argued that nationalism is an ameliorative desire on the part of nationalist intellectuals to build self-esteem and collective pride through the rediscovery of ethnic history and folklore.

In recent years, Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism (1991) has become one of the most influential explanations of this concept. He defined a nation as an *imagined political community* made possible by the development of print capitalism. Print capitalism is the simultaneous development of printing (e.g., newspapers, poetry, and novels) in vernacular languages together with sufficient marketing skills to distribute the product effectively. Through this access to a shared and printed language, people in a given region can conceive of themselves as a *defined community*, moving through *linear time* and therefore having both a *past* and a *future*.

To support his theory, Anderson stressed the *mechanism* through which nationalist ideas can be developed and propagated, rather than the *impulse* that drives them. Once established as a viable concept, the idea of the nation can be adapted by elites and intellectuals to various historical and social circumstances. Anderson's (1991) theory serves to tie the cultural and ideological aspects together:

This [adoption of European models] is why so often in the "nation policies" of the new states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm and a systematic ... instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the education system, administrative regulations, and so forth. (pp. 113–14)

State-sponsored museums are obviously part of this list, and the modernist perspectives described earlier owe something to the social constructionist approach. This approach argues that reality is determined by a consensual agreement about how things are perceived, rather than by any inherent or objective reality.

However, this perspective has some limitations when it comes to understanding deeply rooted cultural manifestations. First, it fails to adequately distinguish between enduring historical processes and genuinely new constructs. For example, Eric Hobsbawm's theory of "invented traditions" argues that traditions can be created and manipulated by those in power to control the masses. However, this theory ignores the fact that the content, meaning, and power of traditions often depend on long-standing historical and cultural associations, even if the form of the tradition is new (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

In their attempt to avoid projecting modern ideas of nationalism onto premodern societies, modernists and constructionists have become overly focused on the present. They have argued that the needs and preoccupations of the present determine our view of the past, and that this can lead to a "blocking presentism" that prevents us from understanding the past on its own terms.

However, as Wright (1985) argues, tradition and history are still important sources of identity and meaning for many people. Powerful institutions can use these sources to select values from the past and mobilize them in contemporary practices. This process of cultural reproduction can effect shared memory and result in a certain sense of cultural and national identity.

Another criticism of modernist theories of nationalism is that they focus too much on the beliefs and actions of intellectual and political elites, and not enough on the popular allegiances and movements at play within and across local groups. Social constructionism, in particular, requires a "constructor" or some type of intelligentsia to guide and shape the constructions. This makes it less convincing when it comes to explaining long-term sentiments that have arisen spontaneously or without conscious shaping within an ethnic or social group. For example, the rise of nationalism in many parts of the world can be traced to the actions of intellectuals and political leaders who sought to mobilize the masses around a common identity. However, this does not mean that popular support for nationalism was not also important. In many cases, people were drawn to nationalist movements because they resonated with their own experiences and beliefs. Therefore, it is important to consider both the top-down and bottom-up forces that shape nationalism. This is especially true when trying to understand long-term sentiments that have not been consciously shaped by elites.

Modernist theories of nationalism do not adequately account for the emotional attachment that people feel towards their nations. While it is possible to create political entities that resemble nation-states on the basis of economic or territorial rationality, these entities do not automatically generate feelings of loyalty or belonging. As Anderson (1991) acknowledged, "in themselves, market-zones, 'natural'-geographic or politico-administrative, do not create attachments. Who would willingly die for Comecon or the EEC?" (p. 53). Similarly, the European Union, a much more political entity than the old European Economic Community (EEC), is unlikely to attract any "pro patria mori" sentiments (Eagleton, 2000).

Even Anderson, who comes closest to avoiding these criticisms, fails to convincingly explain "how the possibility of imagining the nation turns into the moral imperative of dying for the nation, and why imagined print-communities should become prime candidates for nationhood and mass self-sacrifice" (Smith, 1999, p.8).

In other words, modernist theories do not explain why people are willing to die for their nations, even when those nations are not based on any pre-existing cultural or ethnic ties.

Smith (1999) has developed a new theory of nationalism called "historic ethno-symbolism." This theory combines the insights of modernist theories with the recognition that nations have deep historical roots. Smith defines a nation as "a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (p.11). He defines nationalism as "a doctrine of autonomy, unity and identity for a group whose members conceive it to be an actual or potential nation" (p.139). Smith argues that the power of a nation comes from its ethnic heritage, which includes its myths, symbols, memories, and traditions. He also argues that modern nationalist intelligentsias often rediscover and reinterpret this heritage in order to mobilize people around a national identity.

Smith believes that national identity is constantly changing and evolving, but that it always has an ethno-symbolic core. This core provides a constant source of inspiration, allegiance, and collective identity. Smith also argues that the European Union does not have a strong ethno-symbolic heritage, which is why people are less willing to die for it than for long-established nations such as France or Greece. In simpler terms, Smith believes that nations are more than just political or economic entities. They are also cultural and symbolic entities that are rooted in a shared history and heritage. This heritage provides a source of identity and belonging for people, and it can be used to mobilize them around a common cause.

Smith's theory provides a more nuanced understanding of nationalism than modernist theories. It acknowledges that nations have deep historical roots, and it highlights the importance of culture and symbols in shaping national identity. Although Smith did not explicitly mention museums, they are ideal places for preserving and transmitting the collective symbols, myths, and traditions that he considers characteristic of nations. Therefore, Smith's ethno-symbolist theory is a good theoretical framework for analyzing museum exhibitions.

Smith's theory is based on several key assumptions. First, he believes that nations are not the creations of a particular historical period or the results of a chronologically discrete process. Instead, they emerge from long-term collective pasts and shared memories, which constitute an ethno-history. As this cultural heritage is rediscovered, transmitted, and analyzed, it reinforces and cultivates collective cultural identity, which Smith calls national character and destiny.

The second theme in Smith's theory is the seamless long-term relationship between the national past, present, and future. He discusses this theme under three subtopics: recurrence, continuity, and reappropriation.

*Recurrence* refers to the idea that nations have a long history. Smith (1999) acknowledges that this idea is similar to the perennialist view of nations, but he argues that it is also compatible with a modernist perspective. He believes that modern nations can form around pre-modern precursors, and that they can often trace their origins back to ethnic groups that existed in the past.

*Continuity* deals with the question of how far back in time it is possible to trace the origins of particular nations. Smith argues that there are many cultural components that can persist over time, such as languages, customs, territories, and rituals. These components can eventually merge to form a modern national culture.

*Reappropriation* refers to the idea that nationalists often rediscover elements of their ethnic past and incorporate them into the concept of a modern nation. This can be done in order to recover the "pristine ethos" of the nation or to reconstruct it in the image of the past.

Smith argues that nationalists are not simply "social engineers" or "mere image-makers." Instead, they are "social and political archaeologists" who rediscover and reinterpret the ethnic past in order to regenerate their national community. (Smith, 1999; p. 163)

The third central theme of ethno-symbolism is that nations are based on ethnic communities—human populaces distinguished by both them and by outsiders as having the following characteristics:

1. An identifying name or emblem,
2. A myth of common ancestry,
3. Shared historical memories and traditions,
4. One or more elements of common culture,
5. A link with an historic territory or “homeland”; and
6. A measure of solidarity, at least among the elites. (Adapted from Smith, 1999, p. 13)

Smith's list of attributes is more exhaustive than the usual list used to define ethnic categories. This is because ethnic categories are often defined by outsiders, and they may not meet all of Smith's criteria.

Smith believes that the ethnic community is an important model for and link to the nation. He argues that there is a "more or less powerful link" between modern nations and pre-existing, and often pre-modern, ethnies (p. 13). In other words, Smith believes that nations are often based on pre-existing ethnic groups. This is because ethnic groups share a common history, culture, and identity, which can provide a foundation for national identity.

Smith argues that ethnic communities are defined by their shared culture and symbols, rather than by their demographics or political affiliation. This means that membership in an ethnic community can be more fluid, as people can adopt the cultural practices of an ethnic group even if they do not share the same ancestry. However, Smith also acknowledges that nationalists have often used appeals to "ethnic purity" to exclude people from their nations. This can be done by claiming that only people who share a certain ancestry or cultural heritage are truly members of the nation. Smith also argues that myths of origin and descent are often used to justify exclusionary attitudes. These myths can be used to create a sense of superiority among members of a particular ethnic group, and they can also be used to justify the exclusion of outsiders.

Smith argues that symbols are an important way for nations to express their unique character and destiny. These symbols can include flags, currency, folklore, national heroes, cuisine, costume, and anthems. When these symbols are associated with territory, the land itself can become a symbol of the nation. Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism provides a more nuanced understanding of nationalism than other theories. It acknowledges that nations are not simply political or economic entities, but that



they are also cultural and historical entities. This understanding can be helpful for understanding the role of nationalism in the modern world.

Another major theme of the ethno-symbolist paradigm is ethno-history. Ethno-history refers to the members' memories and interpretations of an ethnic community's past, rather than the dispassionate narration of professional historians.

Smith (1999) attributed three facets to the concept of ethno-history:

- Multi-stranded and contested: Ethno-history is multi-stranded because it is made up of many different stories and perspectives. It is also contested because there is often disagreement about how the past should be interpreted.
- Always subject to change: Ethno-history is always subject to change because it is constantly being reinterpreted and re-told.
- Globally uneven: Ethno-history is globally uneven because different ethnic communities have different experiences and memories of the past.

The first two aspects of ethno-history imply that national identity is always in flux. It is constantly being reinterpreted and re-defined as people learn more about their past and as the world around them changes.

The third aspect of ethno-history, comparative unevenness, means that communities will tend to be receptive to articulations that seem to deepen and enrich their ethnic pasts. This is because they may feel that their own past is less impressive than the past of other communities.

Particularly appealing seems to be the desire to locate and celebrate "golden ages" in an ethnic community's past. This can be a way for communities to feel a sense of pride and belonging, and it can also be a way to motivate them to achieve great things in the present.

Another central concern of ethno-symbolism is the "routes to nationhood," or the ways in which modern nations have been formed. Smith (1999) identified three main routes:

- Lateral: This route is characterized by an educated elite that imposes its culture and symbols on the rest of the population. This elite is often based in a central region, and it uses its power to create a strong central state. The lateral route is often seen in Western Europe, where the aristocracy used its power to create nation-states.
- Vertical: This route is characterized by a bottom-up process of nation formation. It starts with the common people, who develop a sense of shared identity based on their common culture and experiences. This identity can then be used to challenge the power of the elite and to create a new nation-state. The vertical route is often seen in Eastern Europe, where the peasantry played a key role in the formation of nation-states.

- **Fragmentary:** This route is characterized by the coming together of different ethnic groups to form a new nation. This can happen when different groups are forced to live together under the same political authority, or when they come together to achieve a common goal. The fragmentary route is often seen in the Americas, where different ethnic groups were brought together by European colonists.

Smith argues that the lateral route is the most common route to nationhood, but that the vertical and fragmentary routes are also important. He also argues that the route to nationhood can vary depending on the specific circumstances of each country. In contrast to lateral ethnies, vertical ethnies tend to be more compact and have clearly defined boundaries of membership. Their culture penetrates all social classes, and an indigenous intelligentsia identifies and legitimizes aspects and symbols of folk or vernacular culture to mobilize popular support for nationhood. In many cases, the land itself becomes a powerful symbol of the ethnie. For example, anti-colonial struggles often took the form of indigenous elites tapping the power of vernacular culture and historical association with a sacred homeland to generate nationalist sentiment. However, after achieving political power, these same elites often maintained themselves by cynically manipulating or inventing vernacular symbols and traditions as a type of official nationalism.

The third route to the formation of nations is somewhat rare but important. This is the fragmentary ethnie, in which members of a community migrate for social, economic, or religious reasons. Over time, these ethnic fragments may become sufficiently detached from their original ethnic identity to form a new nation, as in the cases of the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

The final theme of ethno-symbolism is the "power and durability of nations and nationalism." (Smith, 1999, p. 18). This means that nations and nationalism are not just passing fads, but are enduring features of human communal existence. Ethno-symbolists argue that this is because nations and nationalism are rooted in the deep cultural and historical traditions of ethnic communities. These traditions provide a sense of identity and belonging that is essential for people's sense of well-being. Even in the face of globalization and other forces that may seem to erode national identities, ethno-symbolists believe that nations and nationalism will continue to be important. This is because the need for identity and belonging is a fundamental human need. By understanding the "inner worlds of ethnicity and nationalism," we can better understand why these concepts are so powerful and enduring (Smith, 2000, p. 77). This can help us to manage the challenges of globalization and to create a more peaceful and harmonious world.

### **Reconstruction of Identity in the Age of Globalization**

As mentioned earlier, museums became popular in the 19th century, a time when nation-states were forming and strengthening in Western Europe. Museums were seen as a way to create a sense of

national identity and to promote unity among the people of a nation. They were also used to collect and display objects that represented the nation's history and culture.

Museums have been described as "powerful identity-defining machines" (Duncan, 1991, p. 101) and "community builders." (Lumley, 1988, p. 2). They can be used to construct national identities by selecting and displaying objects that represent the nation's shared values and heritage. They can also be used to silence or marginalize minority groups by excluding their stories and artifacts from the collection. However, the idea of a fixed and unchanging national identity has been challenged by recent scholarship. Scholars have argued that identities are socially constructed and that they change over time. They have also pointed out that museums often present a biased view of history, which can reinforce negative stereotypes about minority groups.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to decolonize museums and to make them more inclusive. This means challenging the traditional narrative of national history and giving voice to the stories of minority groups. It also means making museums more accessible to all people, regardless of their background.

In today's globalized world, traditional national identities are becoming less relevant. New identities are emerging, shaped by increased mobility and the flow of information. These new identities are constantly changing and reconfiguring in response to changing circumstances. For example, the idea of a single national identity has been challenged by migration and globalization. Instead, people are increasingly identifying with transnational and diasporic communities.

However, even as societies become more culturally fragmented, they are also exposed to the homogenizing effects of global markets. This creates a superficial world of consumer choice and identity options. As a result, some people who feel that their identities are being destabilized may hold on to and reassert their traditional cultures and identities.

In other words, globalization is both creating new identities and challenging existing identities. This can lead to a sense of instability and uncertainty, which can motivate people to cling to traditional identities. Globalization is loosening the old identities that used to constrain us. This opens up new possibilities for more complex and variable identifications.

Hall (1992) argued that we are experiencing the emergence of new postmodern identities that emphasize the multiplicity of identifications. Hall said that we "assume different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self.' Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about" (p. 277). In other words, identity is increasingly seen as a fluid and shifting process of interpretation, rather than a fixed and essential given. This is because we are exposed to a wider range of influences and possibilities in a globalized world. We can choose to identify with different groups and

communities, and our identities can change over time. This can be challenging, but it also offers us more freedom and flexibility to create our own identities.

Museums are important places to study identity formation because they can be seen as both reflecting and shaping our identities. They can also be seen as sites of conflict, as different groups may have different ideas about how their identities should be represented. In recent years, museums have been challenged to rethink their role in representing national identities. This is because traditional, nationalistic narratives of identity are becoming increasingly irrelevant or contested. Museums are now being asked to present more complex and nuanced representations of identity, which reflect the diversity of contemporary societies.

However, there are also challenges to this new approach. For example, museums risk freezing identities in time by presenting them in a static way. They also risk becoming redundant or irrelevant if they fail to keep up with changing understandings of identity (McIntyre & Wehner, 2001).

This paper explored some of the challenges and opportunities facing museums in representing identity in the 21st century. This critical exploration may help us to understand how museums can disrupt conventional forms of display and explore the complexity and ambiguity of identity. It may also help us to ask how museums can promote transcultural identities that encompass a changing society and the migration of people. Museums have a responsibility to value cultural diversity and to use their exhibitions and objects to explore divisive issues in a way that fosters understanding and pluralism. In other words, museums can play a role in helping us to build a more inclusive and tolerant society. If museums are to respond properly to societal changes and stimulate rather than subsume difference, further studies must consider how national identity is constructed and negotiated in museums from both the production and consumption standpoints (Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996).

### **Conflicts of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author.

### **Funding Details**

The author did not receive any funding or financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Credit Author Statement**

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the literature, and manuscript preparation.

### **Ethical Statement**

This study did not involve human participants, so ethical approval was not required.

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