Imagined Communities, Rational Choosers, Invented Ethnies

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Social scientific theories of nations and nationalism are usually divided into two sets of rival camps. The first set opposes constructivism, according to which nations are invented, imagined, or mobilized, that is, humanly constructed, to primordialism, according to which nations are historically given entities. The second set opposes modernism, which claims that nations are only modern, to perennialism, which sees them also as premodern. Because constructivists tend to be modernists, and primordialists tend to be perennialists, the two binary oppositions are usually superimposed on each other. Constructivism and modernism thus appear to be natural allies against the no less naturally allied primordialism and perennialism.

This division is both profoundly misleading and highly illuminating. Although attractive in its simplicity, the rivalry between modernism and perennialism rests on questionable conceptual and theoretical grounds. Despite the intellectual proclivities of individual scholars, constructivism can be just as easily perennialist as modernist, while primordialism can accommodate modernism by engaging in the kind of creative conceptual tinkering practiced by all theories. Expanding the range of constructivism and primordialism to encompass both modernism and perennialism has important implications for theories of nations and nationalism.

The rivalry between constructivism and primordialism is equally misleading because it conceals the diversity of theories clustered under both genera. There are at least three different species, which may be termed extreme, strong, and weak, of both constructivism and primordialism. Each version of constructivism and primordialism
has its scholarly representatives, and despite the three constructivisms’ current ascen-
dance the varieties of primordialism are no worse intrinsically than their counterparts.³
Constructivism looks manifestly superior to primordialism only if the former appears
in its accommodatingly weak form, insisting only that nations are historical constructs,
and the latter appears in its uncompromisingly extreme form, claiming that nations are
natural entities with no history. By the same token, a weak primordialism that modest-
ly countenances only the possibility of historically stable nations easily trumps an
extreme constructivism that recognizes only the reality of words.

The binary opposition between a monolithic category called constructivism and
another called primordialism is also illuminating. Despite the diversity of approach-
es, the extreme and strong species of constructivism and primordialism rest on obvi-
ously incompatible assumptions and as such are irreconcilable. Exceedingly weak
forms of both would be less at odds, but here, too, there are built-in limits, rooted in
the axiomatic foundations—the “hard core” in Imre Lakatos’s terminology—of these
approaches, to convergence.⁴ Constructivism and primordialism are not, and can not
possibly be, the “flip sides of one coin” or the “two faces of Janus.”⁵ Although the
quest for an all-embracing “theory of everything” that would accommodate both
constructivist and primordialist assumptions about reality is understandable, it
results in self-contradiction and thus is a theory of nothing.⁶

Although Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith do not embody either polar
opposite, the former’s work leans toward constructivism, and the latter’s inclines
toward primordialism. Anderson’s Imagined Communities has had an especially
powerful impact on the study of nations and nationalism. While suggesting that both
emerged from a peculiar conjunction of historical forces several hundred years ago,
it implied with the word “imagined” that nations could simply be conjured up by
imaginers and inventors. The book thereby resonated with the emerging postmod-
ernist Zeitgeist and inspired much of the current constructivist literature.⁷ Smith,
meanwhile, after an early flirtation with the idea that nationalism was the product of
crisis-ridden intellectuals interacting with the “scientific state,” eventually came to
argue in The Ethnic Origins of Nations that nations are entities with long historical
roots in, among other things, myths or, as he prefers to call them, mythomoteurs.⁸

David D. Laitin is rather more difficult to pin down. A wide-ranging scholar who has
written about Africa, Spain, and the former Soviet Union, Laitin has progressively
moved from a culturalist perspective to one rooted in rational choice.⁹ These compet-
ing loyalties are evident—indeed, they clash—in the book under review.

Imagined Communities

The essays collected in Anderson’s latest book, The Spectre of Comparisons, may
disappoint readers expecting theoretical breakthroughs. To be sure, such expecta-
tions are unwarranted, as *Imagined Communities* did not really proffer a rigorous, conceptually coherent explanation of a set of phenomena, or a theory. Although the book has been interpreted in this fashion, it claims only that nations emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of various forces—print capitalism, the decline of Latin, a new conception of time—that came together at that time. Such a conjunctural argument may be powerful historically, but it can not be a theory if it fails to suggest, in terms that are not specific to this historical period, what makes these factors converge at this time.

Anderson's main theoretical contribution to the study of nations and nationalism may be the term “imagined community.” The theoretical limitations of the concept, which have been the subject of an excellent essay by Yael Tamir, are obvious. The view that imagining suffices to make nations of communities seems at best a gross overestimation of the power of imagination. That nations, unlike other entities such as classes and electorates, are especially susceptible to imagination, seems wrong. And that nations are, like all socially constructed entities, imagined seems trivial. The term also has severe conceptual limitations. A closer look at Anderson's famous definition of the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” reveals these limitations.

Is the nation, according to this definition, a community, a group of people? Or is it really the image of a community, the image of a group of people? Is *Imagined Communities* thus about the emergence of peculiar sets of people or about the emergence of a peculiar idea about sets of people? The difference between these two positions is enormous, the first aligning Anderson with modernist approaches to the nation, the second with decidedly postmodernist ones. Moreover, is not the term “limited,” used by Anderson to suggest that nations are never coterminous with all of humanity, superfluous, except in the trivial sense that all communities are limited in comparison to all of humanity? Is not the term “sovereign” misplaced as well, especially because it refers, as Anderson points out, to the “sovereign state” and not to the nation? Worse, is not such a definition of the nation merely a restatement of the nationalist view that the nation necessarily conjoins nationality with statehood? All that is left is Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined political community. What, exactly, does he mean by “imagined” in conjunction with “community”?

To charge Anderson with theoretical weakness and conceptual sloppiness is, to some degree, an injustice. An anthropologist and historian, Anderson, especially in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, is mostly interested in telling richly textured stories about texts, people, culture, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The fourth essay of the book, “A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light,” tells the story of Soetomo, a leading Indonesian nationalist, in light of and in relation to his memoirs, *Kenang-Kenangan*. The fifth essay, “Professional Dreams,” dissects two masterpieces of Javanese literature, the *Serat Centhini* and the *Suluk Gatholoco*, and situates both poems in the context of social, cultural, and national developments in emerging
Sometimes Anderson employs such neoessentialist terminology so beloved of postmodernism as seriality, governmentality, hybridity, and universality to make—or to obscure—his point. Most of the time he talks simply, and mercifully, of classes, violence, and elections. Indeed, the most remarkable thing about the book may be how little it reflects, and need reflect, a view of nations as imagined or invented. Such essays as “Gravel in Jakarta’s Shoes,” “Withdrawal Symptoms,” “Murder and Progress in Modern Siam,” and “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines” are fairly conventional, if invariably interesting and elegantly crafted, analyses that deal with a multiplicity of factors such as class, ideology, politics, and imperialism.

Its empirical bent notwithstanding, *The Spectre of Comparisons* does not get off the theoretical hook quite so easily. A closer look reveals that Anderson makes claims that in effect, if not intentionally, amount to a theory. Only the first three essays—out of seventeen—concern nationalism in general and explicitly build on some of the themes enunciated in *Imagined Communities*, particularly the spread of capitalism and print technology and the role of the state in promoting “official nationalism.” The third essay, “Long-Distance Nationalism,” is perhaps most explicit in weaving these strands into a theoretical argument. It argues that, just as the “essential nexus of long-distance transportation and print-capitalist communications” made it possible for colonists to the Americas to identify their “real” homelands as England or Spain, so too the “transnationalization of advanced capitalism and...the steepening economic stratification of the global economy” have resulted in the “ethnicization of political life in the wealthy, postindustrial states” and in “long-distance nationalism.” Assimilation has become more difficult just as the long distance promotion of nationalist projects in putative homelands by individuals resident elsewhere has become more common. Indeed, long distance nationalism is, according to Anderson, a “probably menacing portent for the future.”

These three essays argue in the same conjunctural vein as *Imagined Communities*. They effectively elevate conjuncture from a singular historical occurrence to a theoretical claim. Once Anderson pushes the argument of *Imagined Communities* past the conjuncture of capitalism, printing, and the state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even projects it into the future, then what originally appeared to be a unique concatenation of forces achieves implicit theoretical status. What sort of theory is it?

*Imagined Communities* had suggested that a “strong case can be made for the primacy of capitalism” in explaining why nations became “so popular.” The centrality of capitalism to much of the argument in *The Spectre of Comparisons* suggests that it should figure as the *spiritus movens* of subsequent phases of national development as well. Such an explicitly Marxist turn is both defensible and possible. In its acceptance of the causal power of the economic substructure, however, it runs the risk of
subverting Anderson’s notion of the imagined nation as possessing a superstructural reality all its own. If capitalism is always the culprit, nations may “in the final analysis” somehow be reducible to capitalism. In particular, long distance nationalism, as an artifice of the imagination wholly unconnected to the territory, state, or economy of the homeland, does not sit well with the primacy of economic relations. At worst, therefore, Anderson’s implicit theory of the nation rests on a contradiction. At best, his argument, in being only implicit, may be immune to criticism on theoretical grounds but would then be of marginal relevance to theories of nations and nationalism.

Rational Choosers

Readers expecting to find a tight theoretical argument in Laitin’s *Identity in Formation* will also be disappointed. Laitin’s study of the Russian-speaking populations in Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan is full of stories, anecdotes, personal experiences, historical excursions, thick description, polemics, survey data, and disjointedly organized theoretical claims that appear to have been compiled and not written, and certainly not edited. (The book would have benefited from a radical shortening.) Worse, the data assembled by Laitin signally fail to support his theory, while his ad hoc attempts to salvage it succeed only in contradicting it.

Unlike Anderson, Laitin has been explicitly interested in theory in all his work. His current approach, rooted in rational choice and game theory, centers on the device of the tipping game, a construct that purports to be not just a metaphor, but an actual reflection of what goes on in people’s minds when they make choices regarding language and identity. Laitin depicts such games in diagram form as consisting of two curves, a horizontally positioned S-shaped curve and its mirror image. The x axis represents the percentage of the population engaging in the activity represented by the curve, for example, choosing to speak either Russian or Estonian. The y axis represents the payoffs for speaking either language. At first, the payoff for speaking Russian may exceed that for speaking Estonian. As more people shift to Estonian, however, the payoff for Russian declines and that for Estonian grows. At some point, the tipping point where the two curves intersect, the payoff for Estonian begins to exceed that for Russian, and a “cascade” toward speaking Estonian may be expected. Everyone living in a bilingual environment plays this game, but Laitin’s primary focus is on the twenty-five million Russian speakers (russkoiazychnye) resident in the so-called “near abroad,” the ex-Soviet, non-Russian republics. Formerly dominant, the Russian speakers were transformed into “beached diasporas” after the USSR’s collapse and the sudden emergence of independent non-Russian states with “nationalizing” agendas. Will they become loyal citizens, disgruntled minorities, or
fifth columns on the order of the Sudeten Germans in interwar Czechoslovakia? By focusing on the payoffs involved in either switching to a titular language (Estonian, Latvian, Ukrainian, or Kazakh) or retaining Russian, Laitin hopes to elucidate the prospects of their assimilating into the titular nationality, developing a “conglomerate” identity, or acquiring the identity of a distinct Russian-speaking nationality.

Several failings are immediately worthy of note. The first flows from Laitin’s insistence that tipping games really motivate people. “The dilemma portrayed in this diagram [of a tipping game] reflects practical decisions that real people face.” Do human choices regarding language and identity really involve the conscious application of the tipping game model? Do people truly act primarily, if not exclusively, on the basis of the trade-offs the model implies? Are people even aware of these trade-offs? Or are tipping games a metaphor, a catchy “as if” device, or an algorithm for expressing general trends in aggregate human behavior? These questions can not be brushed aside by asserting, as Laitin effectively does, that the model is plausible, that choices are made, and that the people he and his colleagues interviewed appear to have been motivated by it in making their choices.

A second failing concerns Laitin’s claim that language, while “only one element of a person’s complex social identity,” is the most important. The book argues that language shifts portend “identity in formation.” Laitin’s case for associating language with identity rests, again, on an anecdote. The anecdote concerns Liuba Grigor’ev, who by deciding to study Estonian “lays the foundation for a constructed Estonian identity for her grandchildren,” but makes a larger point, that language change now may make possible or facilitate identity change later. While this point seems indisputable, Laitin is explicitly concerned with the causal impact of choice. How can a conscious choice today to learn Estonian be causally related to a conscious choice two generations later to become Estonian? A choice made at time $t$ may be intended to influence the choice that will have to be made later at time $t + n$, but intent and effect are two different things. The first choice may produce conditions that constrain the second choice, but so do millions of other choices, events, and developments that occur in the interim period. To isolate the casual impact of that first choice from the web of causes produced by everything else is probably an impossible task. And even if some connection could be established, is today’s choice a sufficient, necessary, or facilitating condition of the later choice?

A third failing flows from Laitin’s use of rational choice theory. Even if we grant the appropriateness of the tipping game and the view that language shifts somehow imply identity shifts, Laitin’s scheme founders on rational choice theory’s inability to account for the preferences that underpin it. If rational choice theory assumes that all preferences at all times and at all places are exclusively material, then it is making a false and easily falsifiable claim that introduces contradiction into its theoretical
core and thereby undermines its axiomatic foundations. If, alternatively, rational choice theory admits the possibility of different kinds of preferences based on culture, history, and ideology, then it has no choice but to give theoretical priority to culture, history, or ideology and thereby make itself redundant, especially as culture, history, and ideology also relativize the utility maximization (or risk minimization) strategy underlying the rational choice calculus.

Laitin, to his credit, acknowledges that material benefit is not the only human preference. Languages, thus, can be adopted for reasons that also involve “in-group scorn” and “out-group acceptance.” Although seemingly neutral as terms, “in-group scorn” and “out-group acceptance” are loaded concepts that necessarily imply both a sense of identity that permits individuals to identify an in and an out group and a sense of distinctly national, perhaps even nationalist, identity that permits individuals to prefer the pleasure of acceptance to the pain of scorn. But the whole point of the tipping game exercise is to show how language shifts can help us understand identity shifts. Language shifts are somehow supposed to “cause” identity shifts. But if identity underlies language loyalty in the first place, a point to which most nationalist and primordialists could easily subscribe, then the causal mechanism underlying the tipping game really amounts to a circle, and Laitin’s argument becomes an elaborate exercise in circular reasoning and an implicit endorsement of the givenness of nationhood.

The final failing concerns the very notion of choice in post-Soviet circumstances. Is choice a meaningful notion under conditions of political, economic, and social disarray, on the one hand, and widespread confusion regarding identity, on the other? Laitin provides anecdotal evidence to support his argument, but the issue is rather more serious than he seems to believe. Social chaos implies that the information available to “choosers” is highly imperfect and possibly nonexistent; even if such information exists, people concerned with survival in a social breakdown, as in this case, have little time to acquire and digest it. Surely, there are limits to how bounded rationality may be if it is to remain a useful theoretical device. Similarly, if there is widespread confusion about identity, to what degree is it possible for individuals to be motivated by in-group scorn and out-group acceptance? What is “in” and what is “out” in such circumstances?

These failings are minor in comparison to those that bedevil Laitin’s theory as a whole. The core of his theory attempts to explain the different degree of “openness to assimilation” by Russian speakers in Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Basing his conclusions on a sophisticated analysis of survey results, Laitin concludes that the mean index of openness to assimilation is highest in Latvia and Estonia (.67 and .53), third highest in Ukraine (.49), and lowest in Kazakhstan (.31). This finding is important, if only because it contradicts the conventional wisdom that the Baltic states are least receptive to Russians and that Ukraine, as a kindred Slavic state, is most receptive. With openness to assimilation as his dependent
variable, Laitin then tries to account for the variation in terms of four sets of independent variables—demographic background variables, economic returns for assimilation, status variables, and titular accommodation to Russians. But there are three, as Laitin puts it, “theoretical lacunae” in the model. Most important is its failure to answer “how and with what weight are the three elements of the language-utility function to be combined” and “how are the opportunities and constraints set by the policies of the nationalizing state to be included.” The first lacuna is fatal to the model; it amounts to an admission that the theory is little more than a collection of variables. The second lacuna amounts to the remarkable claim that national identity formation can be meaningfully studied in the absence of the state. Finally, both lacunae are invitations to ad hoc interventions.

Since theoretically the payoff for any tipping game has to involve material benefit, in-group scorn, and out-group acceptance, Laitin’s data should support the theoretical importance of the second and third sets of variables but not the first and fourth. However, the first set of demographic background variables does quite well, thereby suggesting that “a choice model [may not be] useful for studying assimilation.” Laitin counters this problem by arguing that, while “cultural difference and demographics” may have accounted for language choice in Soviet times, conditions are different in the post-Soviet period, “because the language policies of the nationalizing states have raised the expected returns for speaking the titular language.” As a result, “Russian-speakers need to calculate more consciously the potential payoffs for learning the titular language.” In other words, the choice model is useful precisely because—Laitin’s earlier invocation of lacunae notwithstanding—current state policies are relevant while historical and cultural legacies are not.

The second set of variables, economic returns for assimilation, provide no support for the model. Indeed, Laitin admits that, “if the tipping model relied solely on expected economic returns and probabilities for occupational mobility, these data present an insurmountable challenge.” The fourth set of variables, titular accommodation to Russians, also contravenes Laitin’s expectations, with Ukrainians being most accommodating, Latvians second, Kazakhs third, and Estonians fourth. Only the third set of status variables provides some consolation for the model. Those variables regarding in-group status lend it no support, while those regarding out-group status do, albeit indirectly. Do these findings corroborate Laitin’s theory? The first set does, but should not. The second set should, but does not. The fourth does not, but we never learn why it does not matter. The third should, but only “half” does.

Undeterred by such recalcitrant data, Laitin still claims to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Although “Russian-speakers suffered a status loss among titulars for speaking in their titular guise” in all four republics, Laitin believes that assimilation is most likely where “Russians face the lowest status disincentives to assimilate.” A dispassionate reading of all the data collected in Laitin’s four sets of variables would suggest that disincentives are lowest in Ukraine and highest in Latvia and
Estonia. Instead, Laitin chooses to place most emphasis on only two of fifteen variables, those regarding out-group status, which show that Russian speakers attempting to speak titular languages appear to lose most status among titulars in Ukraine and least in Latvia and Estonia. He then justifies this choice culturally and historically. “The relative contempt Ukrainian respondents showed for the Russian-speaker in her Ukrainian guise reflects the hostile face of Ukrainian nationalism....” Laitin reaches this conclusion from a highly selective reading of recent Ukrainian history: insignificant and isolated extremist groupings are interpreted as reflecting Ukrainian nationalism in its entirety. Moreover, his terminology betrays a strangely reified and indeed primordial view of Ukrainians: “The West sees the civic face of Dr. Jekyll; the Russians are beginning to see the enraged one, Mr. Hyde.” In reality, contemporary Ukrainians, at least in their attitudes toward Russian speakers, consist of very many Dr. Jekylls and very few Mr. Hydes.

Invented Ethnies

Like Laitin, Smith is explicitly concerned with theory construction. But unlike many rational choice theorists, Smith finds that each modernist theory, however different from his own, has weaknesses and strengths. All, including postmodernist theories, have made contributions. Indeed, there has even been theoretical progress. Can these competing theoretical approaches ultimately be reconciled? “Theoretical convergence” is possible, but only if, among other things, some variant of perennialism is adopted and the “close links between ethnicity and nations and nationalism” are recognized. However, because the first condition is not as tough as Smith thinks, different theories can accept it and still remain quite different. And because the second condition may rest on a false distinction, acceptance of it merely creates the illusion of convergence.

If genuine nations, however defined, could indisputably be identified perennially, some in ancient times, some in medieval times, and some in modern times, as John Armstrong suggests, would their existence vindicate primordialism? Of course, it would not. The fact that nations existed several thousand years ago does not prove the central claim of primordialism, that the nations of today can be traced back thousands of years. The nations of yesteryear may have been completely different entities from the nations of today. There may be no connection between the Hittites who inhabited ancient Anatolia and the Turks who venerate Ataturk. Whether or not there is such a connection, whether or not continuity can actually be established, are empirical questions that commitment to primordialist or constructivist agendas can not answer a priori. Indeed, a more or less dispassionate inquiry into the question of continuity would in all likelihood have to concede that, although nations may have existed then and do exist now, only very few of them can be connected in any mean-
ingful way across the vast span of history. The Jews, Armenians, and Chinese might qualify and give temporary encouragement to primordialism, but so many other groups appear to be utterly unrelated as to provide little solace to those primordialists who happen not to be Jewish, Armenian, or Chinese.

Would the existence of ancient and medieval nations refute constructivism? Of course, it would not. There is no reason for such nations not to have been constructed, either wilfully and purposefully by self-conscious inventors and imaginers or historically and contingently by concatenations of events. If the case for imagining a nineteenth century nation can be strong, then there is no reason that, a priori, the case for imagining a ninth century nation can not be equally strong. Indeed, if constructivists could show that even such seemingly continuous nations as the Jews were constructed at some time in the distant past—the argument that Moses was an inventor and imaginer of the first order is not unattractive—then their case would stand on especially strong grounds.47

If constructivism can be consistent with both perennialism and modernism, why is the possibility of premodern nations so controversial, especially among constructivists? Why is, as Smith’s book demonstrates, so much scholarly labor expended on the argument that nations can only be modern? If the constructivist reluctance to acknowledge perennialism can not be rooted in its implications for their theoretical project, then there must be nontheoretical reasons for such a stance. Perhaps politics holds the answer. Historically, nationalists tend to be primordialists, and nonnationalists or antinationalists—whether liberal, Marxist, or postmodernist—tend to be constructivist. Acknowledgment of perennialism appears to give credence to nationalist claims of the inevitability of nations and thus to undermine the nonnationalist agenda. But here, too, the political connection is contingent, the result of historical conjunctures, and not theoretically necessary.

If it is possible to be a self-consciously constructivist nationalist, then it should also be possible to be a self-consciously primordialist or perennialist nonnationalist. There are many instances of nation-building elites who are fully aware that they are building and not reviving or awakening nations. Robert Paul Magoosi, for instance, has contributed enormously to the creation of a modern Ruthenian consciousness and is an unabashedly constructivist historian at the University of Toronto.48 By the same token, one may recognize, as most people do, the more or less permanent reality of nations, just as one recognizes the reality of sexes and trees and stars, without necessarily endorsing the nationalist case for self-determination, nation-states, and collective rights or disputing the possibility of gender, landscaped gardens, or astrology. The existence of nations may pose a problem for liberals and Marxists committed to the absolute primacy of the individual or of class. (Of course the ubiquity of nations poses no problem for postmodernists enamored of diversity, decentering, and the ubiquitous Other.49) This impossibility of reconciling the claims of nations with those of individuals and classes hardly makes liberals abandon liberalism or
Marxists abandon Marxism. Both groups may want to temper some of their hopes and expectations and may decide to adopt a tragic pose, but there is no reason to discard either normative project just because nations were here, are here, and may never go away. If nations are perennial, both liberalism and Marxism retain as much attractiveness and power as they would if nations were not perennial. And nationalism, as a project of self-determination and the construction of nation-states, is no less and no more plausible if nations are perennial or merely modern.

Of course, if nations are perennial, then hopes for a nonnational or nonnationalist world could be ephemeral. The opposition to perennialism may, thus, be rooted neither in theory nor even in politics. It may simply reflect a peculiar kind of teleology that embraces a vision of history that—inevitably, ineluctably, and irresistibly—must culminate in the triumph of liberalism or of Marxism. Such a belief, almost religious in its thrust and intensity, necessarily views complicating factors like nations as insurmountable obstacles to the realization of the vision. Nations, in this view, can not be perennial, because perennialism means nothing less than the impossibility of liberalism’s or Marxism’s final and complete triumph. Whether the vision is Francis Fukuyama’s or Karl Marx’s, history can not end as long as nations are around and mess things up.

Ironically, although the theoretical reach of constructivism can easily be extended by perennialism, that of primordialism is threatened by modernism. Because primordialism must insist that nations are modern and premodern, modernism can not, strictly speaking, be reconciled with primordialism. The only way in which this theoretical failing can be remedied is by introducing the concept of the “ethnie” as, simultaneously, a kind of nonnation and protonation. Primordialism can thus acknowledge modernism while finessing its own limitations. Such conceptual massaging is a perfectly legitimate as well as widely practiced means of coping with theoretical difficulties.

Unfortunately, the conceptual differences between ethnies and nations are not obvious to the naked eye. Most scholars, as Smith observes, treat ethnic groups and nations interchangeably, reflective perhaps of semantic sloppiness or semantic proximity. A large part of the problem is that ethnic groups are effectively defined as little more than premodern nations, that is, as nations existing in premodern settings. Smith, for instance, insists that ethnies lack the following features of nations: “a clearly delimited territory or ‘homeland,’ a public culture, economic unity and legal rights and duties for everyone.” Although important in their own right, these features are aspects of modern life and not of imagined or unimagined political communities. Because the defining characteristics of ethnies and nations remain unaffected by the modifiers “modern” and “premodern,” premodern nations are still nations, just as premodern people are still people. Nations thus appear to be thoroughly modern ethnies and ethnies appear to be nothing more than premodern nations. Only the defining characteristics of their contexts are different, but their contexts, although
relevant to the kind of causal propositions that can be made about nations/ethnies, are irrelevant to what nations/ethnies are.

The argument that ethnies can not be nations because they lack states or territories is unpersuasive because the presence or absence of states is a characteristic, not of imagined communities, but of the setting within which they are imagined. The setting may promote such an imaginative undertaking, but it remains conceptually and causally distinct from the resulting community. Therefore, the Scots or Québécois should not be demoted to an ethnie even though they do not possess states. Nor would the Poles or Lithuanians have been demoted to ethnies after they lost their statehood to Nazi Germany. No less important, binding nations to states—as even Anderson does implicitly—accepts the nationalist definition of nations and states, whereby the only real nations are nations with states and the only real states are nation-states. By the same token, insistence that only nations can inhabit delimited territories either lapses, once again, into the language and logic of nationalists (if the territory is tantamount to the state) or makes the mystifying claim that groups of people—ethnies—can really be imagined as living in placeless places. While diaspora peoples can live in many places—the Jews and the Roma and Sinti come to mind—all people, whether the individuals of liberalism, the classes of Marxism, or the nations of nationalism, must live somewhere.

Shifting focus to subjective differences between ethnies and nations is no less problematic. It is not sufficient to insist, as Smith does, that ethnic groups are not nations because “they have little or no collective self-awareness or sense of community and solidarity.”55 As Jan Assmann points out, all groups have some sense of collective self-awareness, if only in the sense of being “from here.”56 Insistence that groups can be nations only if they call themselves by that name confuses the etymology of a term with the defining characteristics of a concept.57 Finally, arguing that ethnies can not be nations because a nation is the “largest community which, when the chips are down, effectively commands men’s loyalty” falls squarely into the nationalist trap.58 Why should anyone agree with a quintessentially nationalist definition? Postmodernists are surely right to argue that multiple identities are theoretically and empirically possible.59 Why, then, can Italian-Americans not be as much Italian as they are American? Except for nationalists, the coexistence of long distance nationalism with “on-the-spot” nationalism can not be excluded a priori.

If, alternatively, objective differences between ethnies and nations are emphasized, a host of formidable conceptual problems is encountered. Perhaps ethnies are significantly smaller. In that case, just how many people must nations encompass? Anderson assumes that nations must be large enough to enable imagination to do its work.60 But how large is large enough? The reality of nations, which range from the tiny to the enormous—obviously suggests that they can span a wide range of numeric values. If, as Mao Zedong fantasized, several hundred Chinese could survive a
nuclear holocaust, would "the" Chinese still not exist? Whatever the cut-off point, the numeric threshold for nationhood can evidently be quite low. The only exit from this cul de sac is semantic. Although it may not be possible to determine when a nation is, nations are not families or kinship groups or tribes, however large or small. But this semantic distinction between nations and other groups is persuasive only because it rests on different combinations of conceptually delineated defining characteristics—A, B, C for nations as opposed to B, D, E for families, D, E, F for kinship groups, and F, G, I for tribes—and not on arbitrarily assigned numeric values.

Do ethnies, unlike nations, lack urban elites? Are ethnies precluded from being nations because they consist only of peasants? This view is modernist, of course, but why should it be accepted? All masses, even the most rudimentary peasantry, are led by someone, and all elites, even the most cohesive, consist also of followers. Moreover, why should peasants not constitute nations before Fanonian intellectuals or narodniki discover them? Peasants are not the inarticulate bumpkins Karl Marx made them out to be. Nor are they, as James Scott tells us, unaware of their interests and indifferent to oppression. Their culture, as anthropologists assure us, is no less vibrant than that of urbanites, while their social systems are hardly as uniform as the binary opposition between tradition and modernity or between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft suggests. Finally, insistence that nations can exist only when modern elites are fused with modern masses under modern conditions is a circular argument that modernity gives rise to nations precisely because they are modern and thus uniquely susceptible to causation by modernity.

Although the conceptual underpinnings of the distinction between ethnies and nations are weak, it does have a theoretical raison d'être. The distinction enables modernist scholars to endorse the spirit of perennialism while rejecting its letter, thereby avoiding what appears to be the slippery slope to primordialism. Whether or not this move is a progressive modification of either constructivism's or primordialism's research program is of course another issue. More important, perhaps, because perennialism can be as incompatible with primordialism as it can be compatible with constructivism, even this flimsy rationale falls away. It may be wiser to consign one of the two terms, perhaps ethnie, to the conceptual ash heap. Otherwise, scholars will have to establish better how ethnies differ from nations and why the differences matter.

Such a task is, in principle, perfectly possible. If nations are defined as a set of people with defining characteristics A, B, and C, where neither A, nor B, nor C is related to such aspects of modernity as the state, nationalism, or the word "nation," then ethnies would have to be a set of people with defining characteristics G, H, I. If nations, as clusters of A, B, and C, can be found in the real world, as can families (B, D, E), kinship groups (D, E, F), and tribes (F, G, H), is it possible also to find the cluster designated as an ethnie (G, H, I), or is it nonidentifiable and therefore nonex-
istent? If the search for an ethnie is successful, then there is every reason to ask Smith’s question concerning the relationship between nations and ethnies, but this time tautology would be avioded. Tautology would also be sidestepped if the existence of ethnies were posited first, before nations were sought.

Primordial Theories?

Smith ends his book with a list of each theory’s strengths and weaknesses. A disinterested observer might conclude that the theories he discusses, like the theories examined in this article, seem ultimately to be equally valid or equally invalid. Progress might be possible if each paradigm became more nuanced over time. But if all the paradigms proceed apace—and there is no reason to suppose that primordialist, constructivist, perennialist, and modernist theories could not—then it will be just as hard to choose among them later as sooner.

Notwithstanding Smith’s hopes, I share John D. Barrow’s doubts about the ability of any one theory to account for all conceptually possible and theoretically relevant ways in which propositional sets may be made or become coherent and complementary. The same conclusion applies by logical extension to every other conceptualization of nations and nationalism. Indeed, it can not even be stated with finality that nations are only constructed or that they only emerge. But why should this conclusion be surprising or distressing? After all, it is no easier to determine whether revolutions are made or come, whether wars are chosen or generated by anarchic systems, or whether agency trumps structure or structure, agency. In all these pairings it is possible to imagine both outcomes theoretically, and both are encountered empirically.

Is there a solution to this dilemma? Two partial solutions come to mind. First, theoretical pluralism could simply be accepted. It would be necessary to recognize that the explanatory power of all theories is limited and that the policy recommendations they generate can never be best, only less worse. Second, a modified theoretical agenda could be pursued. Theoretical pluralism implies, among other things, the impossibility of isolating the sufficient condition of anything. Although it may therefore never be possible to determine “the” cause of nations and nationalism, there is still much for theory to explain. Rather than ask why nations emerge, their reality could be taken as given, and the focus could be changed to determining the condition or conditions that make them possible and more or less likely. Which conditions are necessary to nations and nationalism, and which facilitate them? Here, too, there is no reason not to expect a variety of theoretically legitimate answers. However, if the field of inquiry is shifted from the impossible task of isolating only one sufficient condition to the possible task of identifying a variety of, possibly contradictory, necessary and facilitating conditions, then knowledge about nations and nationalism will, however imperfectly, be enhanced.
How realistic are these solutions in theory and practice? Since manifestly imperfect theories refuse to go away, adopting the first solution requires a small cognitive shift and not a leap of paradigmatic faith, with one significant exception. Rational choice theory will have to accept its own mortality and abandon its pretensions to exclusive scientific status. This adjustment will not come easily. The second suggestion presupposes a willingness to countenance the possibility of perennialism. Although modernist theories can be refashioned to this end, it is hard to imagine that the political obstacles to such a shift will occur quickly, if at all. Like nations, theories may be constructed, but, ironically, attachments to both appear to be primordial.

NOTES

1. This usage of modernism is derived from Anthony D. Smith, Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism (London: Routledge, 1998). It is important to appreciate that, in the sense used in this article, modernism is not antithetical to or does not precede postmodernism, which is simply a special kind of constructivist claim.

2. Alexander J. Motyl, Revolutions, Nations, Empires: Conceptual Limits and Theoretical Possibilities (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 84. Both primordialism and constructivism differ on the cause of nations, the time during which they arise, and their properties: for extreme primordialism, immanent, transcendent, and immutable; for strong primordialism, conjunctural, historical, and permanent; for soft primordialism, indeterminate, recurrent, and conceptual; for extreme constructivism, discursive, ahistorical, and discursive; for strong constructivism, elites, contemporary, and malleable; and for weak constructivism, human activity, modern, and constructable.


13. Ibid., p. 16.
17. Ibid., pp. 131–226.
18. Ibid., p. 67.
19. Ibid., p. 74.
22. Ibid., pp. 32–33, 93–104.
24. Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, p. 27. Similarly, Timur Kuran builds a seemingly powerful theory of revolution on the notion of “preference falsification.” But if private preferences can be falsified and thus be at variance with publicly expressed preferences, then there is no basis whatsoever for thinking that scholars can see into the souls of preference-falsifiers and determine what they really think. See Timur Kuran, “Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989,” *World Politics*, 44 (October 1991), 7–48.
26. Ibid., p. 22n.
27. Ibid., p. 23.
28. I thank two anonymous reviewers for bringing these issues to my attention.
34. Ibid., pp. 202–5.
35. Ibid., pp. 252–53. These sets consist of the following variables: demographic background variables (percentage who speak titular language; religious distance of titulars from Orthodoxy; linguistic difference of titular language from Russian; percent of Russians in capital city; percent of Russians in republic); economic returns for assimilation (job status based on knowing titular language; economic usefulness of learning titular language; mean quality of job for Russian in Russian guise less quality of job for Russian in titular guise; percentage of Russians in unskilled labor and ratio of percent of Russians in unskilled labor to percent of all respondents in survey); status variables (loss of in-group status in friendship for speaking titular language; loss of in-group status in respect for speaking titular language; gain in out-group status in friendship for speaking titular language; gain in out-group status in respect for speaking titular language); titular accommodation to Russians (percent of titular respondents who fully accept international marriage of son/daughter; citizen/job rights for Russian monolinguals).
36. Ibid., p. 250.
37. In an excellent post-Sovietological study, for instance, Yitzhak M. Brudny shows how in the post-Stalin era intellectuals, policymakers, and propagandists promoted Soviet Russian nationalism on the basis of cultural traditions, ideological refinements, and their own interests. "In the postcommunist period Russian nationalist ideas were consistently embraced by those members of the Russian political elite who opposed the policies of Yeltsin’s government. The reason for their embrace of the imperial, anti-Western, antimarket, and authoritarian vision of Russia is rooted in the fact that this vision constituted the only well-articulated ideological alternative to the process of political and economic reform currently underway in Russia." Yitzhak Brudny, Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 22–23.


39. Ibid., p. 254.

40. Ibid., pp. 236, 255.

41. Ibid., p. 252.

42. Ibid., p. 256 (emphasis in the original).

43. Ibid., p. 102.

44. For a nuanced treatment of these issues, see Paul D’Anieri, Robert Kravchuk, and Taras Kuzio, Politics and Society in Ukraine (Boulder: Westview, 1999), pp. 45–89.

45. Smith, Nationalism and Modernism, p. 226.


49. See the essays in Eley and Suny, eds., Becoming National.


53. Smith, Nationalism and Modernism, p. 45. Craig Calhoun, Nationalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 29–50, expends an entire chapter on the supposed differences and fails to resolve the muddle.

54. Smith, Nationalism and Modernism, p. 196.

55. Ibid., p. 45.


57. See Motyl, Revolutions, Nations, Empires, pp. 6–8.


60. Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 15.


66. Barrow, Theories of Everything.


68. See Motyl, Revolutions, Nations, Empires, pp. 15–18.