Boran Berčić

Department of Philosophy

University of Rijeka

NENAD'S 65

Maribor 2016.

ARE NATIONS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS?

NENAD ON NATIONS

At the beggining of his book *Nationalism* (Part II, Chapter 1. “The Concept of Nation”, pp. 17-20.) Nenad tries to offer at least a rough answer to the question What is a nation? In this chapter he contrastes objective and subjective view of nation and opts for the subjective view. According to the objective view, nation is a large group of people who share common origin, blood, language, religion, territory, and perhaps some other objective characteristics. The point of the subjective view is that objective characteristics of a nation are neither necessary nor sufficient for its existence. No matter how detailed the list of the characteristics is, and no matter how important they are, they are by themselves still not sufficient for forming a nation. What is needed is some sort of subjective element: a belief that they form a nation, or a decision to form a nation, or acceptance of a nation, or a will to form a nation. Here one has to mention that Nenad thinks that a difference between the objective and the subjective view is not an either/or matter, but rather a matter of degree. Nenad believes that obviously some sort of the subjective view has to be true. He says:

“Different combinations of different basic characteristics (language, common history, customs, values, common religion, geographical closeness) enable each particular group to claim its right to a nationhood. ... In principle, it is not determined which characteristics can be taken to ground a national(istic) identification, collor of the skin, nutritional or sexual habits, or who knows what might one day play a legitimate role in delineating a group of people who strive to be recognised as a nation.” (p.19)

In this context Nenad quotes a Croatian philosopher Julije Makanec who also argued that existence of nations is not, or at lest primarily not, a matter of objective charactristics:

“And what is the most important is the will of all of its members to be and to stay one, it is their firm decision to stay together in good and bad.”

Moreover, Makanec was a minister in Croatian quisling government during the WWII, a government that passed and enforced racial laws. So, Nenad's rhetorical *ad hominem* point here is obvious: If even such a guy argues that nation is not something objective, then it must really be the case that nation is not something objective!

Generally speaking, there are three options in the ontology of nations:

1) *Realism* Nations exist no matter what we think about them. If *x* belongs to a nation *A* then *x* belongs to a nation *A* no matter what he or anybody else thinks about it.

2) *Antirealism* Nations exist just because we think they exist. If *x* believes that he belongs to a nation *A* then he belongs to a nation *A* just because he believes it.

3) *Eliminativism* We only think that nations exist but they do not really exist. If *x* believes that he belongs to a nation *A*, he is just wrong, his belief is simply false because nation *A*, just like any other nation, simply does not exist.

In this taxonomy Nenad can be characterized as an antirealist about the nations. On the one hand, he believes that nations exist. But on the other hand, he believes that nations do not exist independently of what we think about them, and this is the essential condition of realism on any given subject matter. So, we might say that he is an *antirealist* about the nations. This view is often labeled as *constructivism*. It is the view that given subject matter is not something that exists independently of our beliefs about it, but that it is rather a kind of a *social construction*. This is the sense in which language, money, courts, traffic rules, etc. essentially depend on what we believe about them. For these entities exist only if we believe that they exist. Our belief in their existence is constitutive for their existence. So, we might say that Nenad is a constructivist about the nations. His view is that, in a sense, nations are social constructs. However, surprisingly (or not?) in a discussion held in Rijeka, Nenad was sceptical about the idea that the existence of a nation can be reduced to our beliefs. He claimed that there must be something *factive* about the nations, something that cannot be reduced to any set of beliefs, something that holds no matter what we think about it. Now, the question is whether nations really are social constructs or not. That is, the question is whether the existence of nations can be traced back and reduced to the set of beliefs or not. And this is the question that I will try to answer in the rest of this paper.

The idea that nations are social constructs can be spelled out in the following way:

Individuals *a*, *b*, *c*, ... form a nation *A* iff they believe that they form a nation *A*.

The relevant question here is what does it mean that *they* believe? What is a collective belief? It seems that it is not sufficient that each individual believes that he/she belongs to the nation. One has to believe that others have the same belief as well. So, we may say that individuals *a*, *b*, *c*, ... believe that they form a nation iff: (1) each one of them believes that they form a nation, and (2) each one of them believes that each one of them believes that they form a nation. A further question here is what does it mean that they *believe*? One might say that it is sufficient that they behave *as if* they believe (1) and (2), for in that case we might ascribe corresponding beliefs to them. However, in this case large herds or flocks of animals could satisfy the requirement. So, it seems that one has to demand that they must have some degree of rational reflection about their belonging to a nation. Say, that they must have a disposition to give an affirmative answer if asked whether (1) and (2).

The idea that nations are social constructs can also be spelled out, so to say, from the individual perspective. We can say that:

*x* is an *A* iff he declares himself as an *A*.

Where *x* is an individual, *A* is a nation, and the relation *x* is an *A* stands for individual *x* is of nationality *A*, or individual *x* belongs to a nation *A*, or *x* is an *A*. Still, the question is what comes first here. “Iff” by itself does not express the order of determination. We can ask the Eutyphro's question: Is *x* an *A* because he declares himself as an *A* or *x* declares himself as an *A* because he is an *A*? Of course, the idea here is that *x* is an *A* *because* he declares himself to be an *A*, not that he declares himself to be an *A* because he is an *A*. The act of declaring himself as an *A* is what *makes* him an *A*, the act is supposed to be *constitutive* for his being an A. This definition can be further developed in the following way:

x is an A iff:

(1) x believes he is an A

(2) others believe that x is an A

(3) x believes that others believe that he is an A

I take this to be the social constructivist definition of one's nationality. We can say that this is the *pure* constructivistic definition of nationality because there is no reference to objective facts of any kind, only to beliefs, beliefs of a single individual as well as beliefs of others. One of the relevant questions here is who are the others who have to believe that x is an A. What I have in mind here is a sufficient number of other A's with whom *x* is in the contact, or perhaps a sufficient number of other A's with whom *x* could be in the contact. The point is that *A*'s have to accept *x* as *one of them*. He can hardly be one of them if they do not accept him as one of them.

Social constructivism about nations is interesting, nice and fertile theory. Prima facie it seems that it has several advantages over its realistic - objectivistic rival. For instance, one may claim that:

(1) It is ethically nice theory because it is liberal. People are allowed to be what they think they are, people are allowed to be what they want to be, both on the individual level as well as on the collective level. If Goranis believe that they are Goranis and not Bosniaks or Serbs, then they are Goranis and they are neither Bosniaks nor Serbs. If Kurds believe that they are Kurds and not Turks, then they are Kurds and not Turks. Social constructivism opens space for the element of choice or decision in the case of nationality. Being of this or of that nationality is not something given, something that one has no control over, as it is under the assumption of realism about nations. In principle one can choose to which nation one belongs, of course, if others of that nation accept him. On this picture, belonging to a certain nation is a dynamic process.

(2) Due to this consequence it seems that social constructivism can explain assimilation much better than the realism. In fact, it is questionable whether realism can explain assimilation at all. Assimilation is a fact, it exists, and every theory of nation has to explain it. A theory of nation that cannot explain a phenomenon of assimilation is simply not a good theory. A very common criterion of a nationality is the parental criterion:

*x* is an *A* iff his parents are *A*'s

This criterion is realistic in its nature for it has nothing to do with our beliefs. We are what our parents are no matter what we or anybody else thinks about it. However, this criterion cannot explain the possibility of assimilation. According to this criterion, a fifth generation of Italians in America could still not be Americans. Not a hundredth generation, or a thousandth. They would still be Italians, given that all of their ancestors were Italians according to the parental criterion. However, it seems at least possible that people assimilate in spite of satisfying the parental criterion. And a good theory of nation has to explain how is that possible. It seems that social constructivism stands much better in this respect. People assimilate because during the course of time they just change their beliefs.

(3) Social constructivism rules out some crazy claims that realism at least in principle cannot rule out. Imagine that Romanian nationalist claim that Bulgarians are not Bulgarians but in fact southern Romanians. The question is wow could Bulgarians refute this claim? Is there a conclusive way of refuting this claim? Under the assumption of social constructivism, there is a simple and conclusive answer: They are Bulgarians because they believe that they are Bulgarians! However, under the assumption of realism, there is no conclusive way of proving that they really are Bulgarians. Under the assumption of realism, there is a definite yes or no answer to the question. But no ammount of linguistic, genetical or archeological evidence can ever be sufficient for the conclusive proof that Bulgarians are in fact southern Romanians. For the inevitable consequence of the realism is that although all available evidence points toward *p*, it is still possible that *not-p*. So, under the assumption of realism about the nations, even when all the available evidence would show that Bulgarians are not Romanians, there would still be a theoretical possibility that Bulgarians indeed are Romanians. On the other hand, under the assumption of social constructivism, since Bulgarians believe that they are Bulgarians, there is not even a theoretical possibility that Bulgarians only think that they are Bulgarians but that they are in fact something else. In this way social constructivism rules out for good many crazy and potentially dangerous claims like: all Serbs are in fact Croats, or that all Croats are in fact Serbs, or that all Slavs are in fact Croats, or that Sweds are in fact a lost Norwegian tribe, or that Russians are really French although they don't know it, etc. Assume that geneticists discover that nowadays Greeks are not descendants of the ancient Greeks but rather descendants of the South Slavs who were coming from the north and assimilating into the Greek Society. Should we conclude that Greeks are not Greeks? That they only think that they are Greeks but that in fact they are not Greeks? That they have a false belief about themselves? Obvious and simple way to argue against such claims is that they are Greeks because they believe that they are Greeks.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although social constructivism is a nice and powerful theory, it faces counterexamples that are at last *prima facie* quite strong. These are the cases where one *discovers* his true nationality, that is, cases where *prima facie* *x* is *A* no matter what he or anybody else thinks about it. These counterexamples can be both individual and collective. These counterexamples are cases in which we are inclined to say that one's nationality does not depend on anybody's beliefs. So, the question is whether constructivism can successfully explain away these counterexamples. Let's begin with the individual cases.

(1) *Giovanni* He lives in the mountains of the southern Italy. He is a shepherd and has contact with few people only. He speaks Italian, he looks Italian, he cooks Italian, ... but he does not know that he is an Italian, that the language that he speaks is Italian, he does not know that there exists something like Italy, that there are other countries and other peoples besides Italy and Italians. According to the offered social constructivist's definition of nationality Giovanni could not be an Italian. However, it seems obvious that Giovanni is an Italian although he does not know it and has no beliefs about it.

(2) *Armenians in Turkey* In Turkey a number of people who believed about themselves that they were Turks discovered that they were not Turks but in fact Armenians. Their parents or grandparents all these years pretended that they were Turks. They did that years ago in order to avoid the Armenian genocide and they continued to do so in order to avoid social pressure. Al these years they did not tell their children and grandchildren that they were Armenians. Fethiye Cetin described this in her book *My Grandmother* from 2008. So, although a number of people in a nowadays Turkey sincerely believed that they were Turks, they were not Turks. The constructivist definition of nationality was almost satisfied here: (1) they believed that they were Turks, (2) others did believe that they were Turks, and (3) they believed that others believe that they were Turks. Though, one important category of people did not believe that they were Turks, their parents and grandparents did not believe that. Nevertheless, this case runs against constructivistic intuitions and in favor of realism about nations: they were Armenians no matter what they or anybody else believed. Nationality is acquired through birth, not through belief. If nationality is something we can *discover* then it cannot be a social construct. It must be something that holds or does not hold no matter what we think about it.

(3) *Csanad Szegedi* Similar case we can find in Hungary. Szegedi was one of the leaders of the extreme right nationalistic party and he was known for antisemitism. However, one day he *discovered* that he was a Jew. The relevant point here is that he was a Jew although he did not know it.

The question is whether social constructivism can accommodate these examples. *Prima facie* it cannot. However, one might try to modify a constructivist definition by introducing the idea of *ideal circumstances*. According to this option, one's nationality would not depend upon his actual beliefs but rather upon what he would believe in the ideal circumstances, that is, if he knew all the relevant facts. According to this definition, although Giovanni does not believe that he is and Italian, he is an Italian because he would believe it in the ideal circumstances. Of course, the same holds for Csanad Szegedi, Fethiye Cetin, and others in the similar circumstances. So, this counterfactual constructivistic definition would run as follows: x is an A iff in the ideal circumstances (1) x would believe that he is an A, (2) others would believe that x is an A, and (3) x would believe that others believe that he is an A. Theories are idealizations and it can be a virtue of a theory that it leaves some room between actual and ideal. Nevertheless, it is not clear how one's actual nationality could be determined by one's counterfactual beliefs. Social constructivism about nation is a theory that actual nations are constituted by actual beliefs, not by counterfactual ones. Besides, social constructivism, so construed, could not rule out crazy claims any more. Romanian nationalists could argue that Bulgarians indeed are southern Romanians because under the ideal conditions (if they were fully informed, fully rational, etc.) they would believe that they are southern Romanians. So, this way seems to be closed for the social constructivist.

As we saw, the proposed social constructivist definition of one's nationality is a *pure constructivist* definition because it makes no reference to facts of any kind but only to beliefs. Perhaps this is too much. Perhaps social constructivism should be developed as a *hybrid theory*, a theory that has both components, factual and constructivist. According to such a view, criteria of a nation would be objective facts like language, territory, origin, religion, etc. but the constructivist point would be that they are criteria *only if we take them to be the criteria*. No objective fact is a criterion by itself, it becomes a criterion only if we decide that it is a criterion. According to this hybrid view, Giovanni is an Italian although he does not know it because he objectively satisfies criteria for being an Italian. Though, Italian nation is a social construction in the sense that it is a matter of social construction that exactly these rather than some other criteria are taken to be the criteria for being an Italian. Venetian separatists (Lega Nord), for instance, question these criteria when they argue in favor of Venetian autonomy. Though, they would probably accept that Giovanni is an Italian, they would rather deny that they are Italians.

The point of the hybrid version of the social constructivism about nations would be the following. Suppose that the population of a certain territory speaks two languages L1 and L2, and has two religions R1 and R2.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | R1 | R2 |
| L1 | A | B |
| L2 | C | D |

The question of how many nations do we have here has no objective answer independently of the social convention about the nations here. We can have only one nation (ABCD), we can have two nations (AB, CD), (AC, BD), (AD, CB), (ABC, D), (ABD, E), ... three nations (A, BCD), (B, ACE), ... or four nations (A, B, C, D). This scheme fits well logical space in Iraq: there are Arabs and Kurds, and there are Shia and Sunni Muslims. In fact, since Kurds are mostly Sunni and they stick together as Kurds, there are really three groups. Nevertheless, the question of how many nations there are in Iraq is a matter of social convention. Although according to objective criteria Iraqis can be divided into three or even four nations, time will show whether they will form a single nation. It is up to them!

When Csanad Szegedi discovered that his grandmother went to a synagogue and had a tattooed number on her hand, he discovered an objective fact. However, when he discovered that he was a Jew and not a Hungarian, he “discovered“ a questionable right wing social convention that Hungarian Jews are not Hungarians. Whether Hungarian Jews are Hungarians or not is a matter of social convention and no amount of objective facts can by itself decide the matter. It is ultimately a practical matter that Hungarian Jews and non-Jews have to decide. Also, a parental criterion of nationality that *x* is an *A* iff his parents are *A*'s is not an objective fact, it is also a social construction. Although A's usually, typically, and normally raise their kids as A's, there is an element of decision or choice in assuming that children of A's are themselves A's. This is a criterion only if we take it to be.

It seems that Nenad, when he was talking about subjective and objective construal of nations, did not have in mind a pure social constructivist theory but rather a hybrid theory.

Now, let's pass to the collective examples.

(4) *Illyrian Movement* In the first half of 19th century Croatian national restoration movement called itself Illyrian Movement. One possible explanation of this name choice is that they wrongly believed that they were Illyrians although in fact they were Slavs. Although this explanation is probably historically not accurate, assume for the sake of the argument that it is true. After all, it is at least logically possible. The relevant point here is that they had false belief about themselves. And it seems that this is something that social constructivism cannot deal with. If their belief about themselves was false then it could not have been constitutive, as social constructivists claim.

However, this is not a good counterexample to the social constructivism about nations. We have to distinguish two kinds of *we-beliefs*: *constitutive* and *factive*. Constitutive we-beliefs constitute us as a group, while factive us-beliefs are about us but they do not constitute us as a group. Constitutive we-beliefs cannot be true or false, they can be successful and unsuccessful (in constituting us as a group), while factive we-beliefs can be true or false. Belief about one's origin is not constitutive but factive. This means that it can be true or false about us as a group, but it does not affect existence of us as a group. Albanians can believe that they are descendants of a two-headed eagle. The fact that this belief is false does not affect the existence of Albanians as Albanians. It is simply a false belief about Albanians. The belief that all Slavs are Croats can have a factive component and it is false, but it also has a constitutive component which is unsuccessful.

(5) *Kosovo Cryptocatholics* When Ottomans invaded Kosovo they spreaded Islam to the population. However, some people publicly accepted Islam although they secretly remained Catholics. During the day they visited mosques and prayed like Muslims while at their homes with their families they prayed like Catholics and had altars in their basements. Of course, that was their secret, their neghbours did not know that, nobody knew that. And they did that for 400 years. The relevant question here is what are they, Muslims or Catholics? Of course, there is a difference between confession and nationality, but cases are similar. In both cases we wander whether somebody does or does not belong to a large group of people. After all, confession and nationality sometimes coincide. Wittgenstein wandered whether private language was possible. Here we should wander whether private religion is possible. Religion is social. But the question is whether it is essentially social or only accidentally social. We can sharp up this example and imagine that *all* the inhabitants of Kosovo are Cryptocatholics. The question is what would they be, Muslims or Catholics?

(6a) *Armenians and Turks again* We can generalize the case of Armenians in Turkey and imagine that *all* Turks are of Armenian origin although they are not aware of that. Now the question is what would they be, Armenians or Turks? Would we say that they are Turks who have false belief about their origin? Or we would say that they are Armenians who have false beliefs about their nationality? (6b) We can further modify the example and imagine that they all are aware of their Armenian origin but keep it secret and continue to pretend to be Turks. What would they be, Turks or Armenians?

Cases (2), (3), (5), (6a), and (6b) are not really determined cases. It is true that in these cases people do discover something about themselves, but it does not automatically follow that they discover their true or real nationalities. These cases resemble cases of people who discover that they are adopted children. Some of them will look for their biological parents, some of them will not. It seems that there is a lot of freedom here. It seems that in such situations one can choose his or her *real* parents. It is not determined what should Turk do if he discovers his Armenian origin. He can immediately run to the nearest Orthodox church, baptize himself, change his name, and start learning Armenian. But he can also remain intact in his Turkish national identity. And the fact that that there is a lot of freedom in such cases fits better the constructivist picture than the realist one.

Cases (5), (6a), and (6b) show that beliefs, of oneself as well as of others, do have some weight in one's nationality. Private nationality seems to be problematic just like private language. Therefore cases (5), (6a), and (6b) can be taken to provide some support for social constructivism.

(7) *A Moral Argument against Nationalism* This point differs in kind from previous six points. But it is nevertheless an intuition that counts against social constructivism about nations. It is an old, widespread, and strong argument that nobody should be blamed for his nationality because nationality is not a matter of choice and one cannot be held responsible for something that is not his choice. I take this argument to *prima facie* count against social constructivism about nations because it relies on the realistic assumption about nationality - assumption that nationality is something given by birth.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Although the moral argument against nationalism can be taken as evidence against a pure social constructivism about nations, it seems that it cannot be taken as evidence against a hybrid version of social constructivism. Assume that all those and only those who satisfy criteria C1 ... Cn belong to a nation N. Assume further that one typically has no control over C1 ... Cn. Whether one satisfies C1 ... Cn or not is a perfectly objective matter and we should be realists about it. However, the fact that the criteria C1 ... Cn are the criteria for N is a social convention. It is objectively true, but only because during the course of time many people believed it and acted accordingly. Hence, the intuition that one cannot be blamed for being of a certain nationality cannot be taken as evidence that nations are not social constructs.

1. Though, it can also be argued on the objectivistic grounds that they are Greeks. If they satisfy criteria of Greekhood, then they are Greeks, no matter of their genetic origin. To say that they assimilated into the Greek society just is to say that they are Greeks. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is not clear what is the ground of the well known and intuitively very appealing principle that no one should be discriminated on grounds of race, nation, religion, gender, etc. Is it the intrinsic value of equality? Is it equality as the outcome of some hypothetical bargaining process? Or is it the intuition that nobody should be blamed and be worse off for things that are not under his control? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)