The Rise of Nationalism in Venezuela

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For María Emilia and Gabriela
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individually in the bibliography.) In Venezuela, research was conducted at the Biblioteca Nacional and the Archivo General de la Nación.

All of the translations of Spanish documents, unless otherwise noted, are mine. In general, I have retained antiquated spellings and grammar in the original sources that are quoted, though on some occasions I have standardized or modernized certain things (for example, since the *Gaceta de Caracas* was in its time sometimes written *Gazeta* and on other occasions *Gaceta*, I have used the modern spelling in all cases).

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Introduction

This work seeks to answer two fundamental sets of questions concerning the rise of nationalism in Venezuela and the Spanish and Spanish American world more generally. First, when, where, among whom, and why did nationalism emerge in the region, and what forms did it take? Second, to what extent were the dramatic social transformations of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Latin America, as some recent scholars would have it, best understood as part of a broader revolutionary process in Spain?¹

It differs from many recent studies of nationalism in the region (which fruitfully have tended to focus on highly localized and/or subaltern developments) in several ways.² First, it paints the subject with broad strokes, due to the fact that nationalism is a long-term, macrosociological phenomenon that ultimately must be studied in such terms. Studies that focus on how nationalist thought is reframed or constructed by highly (geographically, temporally, and socially) localized communities are very valuable—both in their own right and also insofar as they have the potential to be building blocks of more macrolevel analyses—but the limitations of such studies can only be remedied by some scholars taking a wider view. This study focuses largely on elite political discourse, based upon the apparent chronological priority of elite nationalism in the region.³ As will become clear in the pages that follow, it is my belief that, contrary to what many recent works might suppose, we have not yet gotten elite history right. That my approach also has its limitations—that it might obscure contested constructions of national identity in the cases dealt with and fail to consider views from the margins—can only be acknowledged. Ideally, elite and subaltern studies should engage in a reciprocal process that mirrors the reciprocal influences their studied populations had on each other.

This study also differs from much recent work on Latin American nationalism in that it seeks to engage critically the theorists who work on nationalism more generally without accepting any of their approaches a priori. All too often, nationalism's grand theorists are ignored entirely or taken as unquestioned authorities, and data are sought only to support their predictions and claims. Thus, Latin American nationalism is taken to be a consequence of the rise of capitalism and industrialization in the region (though it predates these developments), it is taken to be a product of the administrative divisions of the Spanish colonial empire and the gradual recognition on the
part of each colonial unit that it represents an “imagined community,” or, less often, it is taken to have origins in the indigenous ethnic identity of the population conquered by the Spaniards. Much of the best work on Spanish and Latin American nationalism has been done by historians who tend to conflate nationalism with patriotism, eschewing definitional and theoretical questions almost entirely. The greatest example might be the work of David Brading, but this point of view is also seen in the many major contributions of John Elliot, Simon Collier, John Lynch, and the late François-Xavier Guerra. The best-known practitioner of the first, essentially Marxian, approach is Immanuel Wallerstein. As Florencia E. Mallon notes, even today “among many scholars [working on Latin America] . . . the dominant vision of nationalism [is] as an ideology created by the bourgeoisie, along with the internal market, in a society undergoing a successful transition to capitalism.” Yet nationalism certainly predates industrialization, and while, as Weber noted, some capitalist forms of economic organization can be found almost universally present throughout history, modern capitalism emerged subsequent to nationalism in the region. Along similar lines, Manfred Kos-sok has attempted to read the wars of independence as being essentially a failed bourgeois revolution in the Marxist sense. Though from a different point of view, a similar argument is made by John V. Lombardi, who claims that “national economic systems generally require a national identity that provides them with an intellectual, historical, and cultural context,” suggesting, therefore, that developments in the Atlantic economy underlie the emergence of Venezuelan nationalism.

The second of the approaches mentioned above is, of course, that of Benedict Anderson, and I will turn to a detailed consideration of it below. Its influence in Latin American studies can be seen, for instance, in the easy acceptance of Anderson’s account of nationalism in the introduction to Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer’s edited volume, Nation-States and Indians in Latin America. Thomas C. Holt, the former president of the American Historical Association, writes that Anderson’s work constitutes “a necessary point of departure” for writings on nationalism in the Americas, even as he chastises Anderson for his alleged “blindness” to the importance of race and to “the mediating force of gender in shaping” race and nation.

The third set of views—those assuming that Latin American nations are fundamentally rooted in ancient, ethnic pasts—has in many intellectual circles fallen out of fashion. Perhaps the most notable historical examples include those more influenced by, or reacting against, certain strains of nineteenth-century positivism, such as José Vasconcelos, a proponent of the idea
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of the raza cósmica. A prominent example of a primordialist from more recent years is Walker Connor.9

While we have learned much about nationalism in general over the last two decades, our misunderstanding of it has increased as well. Never has so much attention been paid to this subject, and, with little scholarly coordination, research has employed divergent methods, sought different ends, and, most important, directed its attention to very different phenomena. The central point of divergence in studies of nationalism hinges on questions of definition. A widespread failure to adequately define the object of study has led to a multiplicity of (real and imagined) studied objects. Theorists of nationalism are talking past each other. At best we have a series of disconnected schools speaking in incommensurable terms without taking sufficient note of the fact that they are actually studying things having little in common, though called by the same name.

The dominant schools of interpretation can roughly be divided into three camps: the perennialists and/or primordialists, such as Anthony D. Smith, Walker Connor, Steven Grosby, and Pierre Van den Berghe;10 the structuralists, such as Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm; and the constructivists, among whose numbers Benedict Anderson and Liah Greenfeld are usually counted.11

The group of theorists labeled the perennialists or primordialists includes a number of individuals who do not present identical theories or necessarily even fundamentally agree with regard to the nature of nationalism. In general, however, both groups are identified in opposition to the “modernists” (of which the structuralists and the constructivists are two varieties). Members of the primordialist/perennialist school take nations to fundamentally be (or at least to have their origins in) ancient ethnic communities. For some, like Pierre Van den Berghe, these communities are, in fact, biological populations (or, rather, nationalism is to be understood as a genetically encoded collective sentiment that was selected for as a result of its products—social solidarity, reciprocity, altruistic in-group behavior, and the like—having led to the reproductive success of those who felt it),12 while for others, such as Anthony D. Smith, who, in fact, claims not to be a primordialist or perennialist, the situation is a good deal more complicated.13 For most members of this school, national identity is indistinguishable from any particularistic identity: there is little or nothing that is peculiar about the sort of political identity operative in the modern world.

Structuralists such as Gellner and Hobsbawm reproduce the classic Marxist approach to nationalism (indeed, their account of the nation and na-
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tionalism is in some ways fundamentally similar to that of Wallerstein). The phenomenon is understood, like all cultural phenomena, as reflecting more fundamental, structural forces. For some structuralists, nationalism is taken to serve the functional needs of the state. That is, the modern, bureaucratic state (the development of which is either regarded as natural or believed to be a function of the capitalist economy) requires an ideology to assure that the populace participates loyally and actively in its initiatives, respects its authority, and so forth. For others, as mentioned above, nationalism is seen (in circular fashion) as necessary for the development of national markets, themselves explained in functional terms in relation to the “needs” of the capitalist world system. It should be noted, of course, that the structuralist and primordialist positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. That is, it is perfectly possible to claim that ancient ethnic groups are transformed into nations by the very structural processes mentioned above, as Smith does.14 Ethnic solidarities are taken to be preexisting, but under the influence of the powerful pressures of state consolidation, for example, they acquire a new salience in popular discourse. In some versions of this approach, this is due to the fact that state functionaries see the utility inherent in such ethnic identities and deliberately harness them as propaganda.15

The perspective of this work is at odds with both primordialist/perennialist and structuralist theories of nationalism. This is due to the fact that the philosophy of social science upon which it is based is fundamentally Webe-rian, implying that social science properly “concern[s] itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences.”16 As Weber would have it, I am concerned with the understanding of action that is “meaningful”: not in some transcen
dental sense, but in the sense of those aspects of human behavior that are not strictly biological or habitual but, in principle, subject to self-conscious reflection on the part of the actor(s) in question.17 Weber means, in essence, as Clifford Geertz put it, that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and the central objects of social-scientific study ought to be those “webs of significance.”18 In other words, though he doesn’t use this term in this way, the object of social-scientific analysis, for Weber, is culture.

The primordialist view is inconsistent with this perspective because ethnic or racial groups, considered as biological phenomena, are in and of themselves sociologically inert. That is to say, any set of genetic commonalities that a given population might have is not necessarily meaningful. Rather, ethnic or racial categories only take on a sociological existence when they cease to be merely ethnic or racial: when they are granted significance in
the imaginations of relevant social actors. Another way to put this is to say that only when they exist in the meaningful orientations of individuals do they constitute identities at all. As Weber himself (who, it must be admitted, unsatisfactorily defined the phenomenon) noted,

if the concept of “nation” can in any way be defined unambiguously, it certainly cannot be stated in terms of empirical qualities common to those who count as members of the nation. In the sense of those using the term at a given time, the concept undoubtedly means, above all, that one may exact from certain groups of men a specific sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups. Thus, the concept belongs in the sphere of values.\(^{19}\)

There is a certain ambiguity in the last two claims, particularly if one understands by “sentiment” a fundamentally emotional phenomenon, given that the sphere of values, even while it acts upon the emotions, is not made up of them. It is clear that Weber means, in claiming that the nation belongs to the “sphere of values,” that it is an idea, as Hans Kohn also recognized some time later.\(^{20}\)

Human beings have identified themselves in myriad ways, and, indeed, the central form of identity present in any given society is critical to the understanding of the nature of the society in question. One must recognize the tremendous difference between modern, essentially secular identity and the religious identity that preceded it in Europe. This variation in types of identity is additional proof of the fact that it is constructed by human beings. If identity were fundamentally ethnic—if so-called natural groups were real—it would be so in all societies, and one would not find the considerable variation that actually exists. Thus, primordialist conceptions of nationalism are incompatible with the Weberian point of view, and, from this perspective, empirically unsustainable.

Structuralist conceptions are too, because they regard culture as fundamentally reducible to nonmeaningful phenomena: because they regard national identity as ultimately emanating from structural factors. Gellner goes so far as to proclaim that “prophets of nationalism [or nationalists and nationalist ideologues] . . . did not really make much difference. If one of them had fallen, others would have stepped into his place.” “Their precise doctrines are hardly worth analyzing” since “nationalist ideology suffers from pervasive false consciousness,” and “nationalism as a phenomenon, not as a doctrine presented by nationalists, is inherent in a certain set of social conditions; and those conditions, it so happens, are the conditions of our time.”\(^{21}\) In other words, nationalism and nations are, it turns out, just epiphe-
nomenon. If we followed Gellner, we would have to conclude that Andrés Bello, Simón Bolívar, Francisco de Miranda, Juan Germán Roscio, and their contemporaries—all of whom figure prominently in the story told in these pages—had no impact upon the emergence of nationalism in Venezuela. They were, for Gellner, like marionettes, their strings pulled by structural forces.

Hobsbawm’s structuralism is, in fact, a simpler version of Gellner’s. Like Gellner, he is skeptical of our ability to adequately define the nation. But he takes this skepticism to its logical conclusion and therefore makes no real attempt to offer a definition. Objective definitions of the nation, he tells us, are all doomed to fail, for the “obvious” reason that “either cases corresponding to the definition are patently not (or not yet) ‘nations’ or possessed of national aspirations, or undoubted ‘nations’ do not correspond to the criterion or combination of criteria.” Hobsbawm is similarly contemptuous of attempts to provide a “subjective” definition of the nation—what is ordinarily called a constructivist definition—since such definitions are allegedly tautological, and since he regards it as ridiculous that a nation would not have “objective” (material) elements. Hobsbawm seems to believe that he has established this point by reductio ad absurdum when he characterizes the constructivist position as holding that “if enough inhabitants of the Isle of Wight wanted to be a Wightian nation, there would be one.” But is this position so absurd? Why couldn’t there be a Wightian nation, and what additional characteristics besides a collective sense of belonging to that nation would our hypothetical Wightians need to have in order to satisfy Hobsbawm that they were, in fact, a nation? It must be pointed out that Hobsbawm is being very unclear here, and considerable confusion is generated by his use of the terms “objective” and “subjective.” Constructivist definitions do not have to be subjective definitions—they may be definitions that recognize, perhaps, that nationalism, like all cultural phenomena, is seated in the “subjectivities” of those who believe in it. A subjective definition would be one that was based upon the arbitrary opinions of whoever was formulating the definition. Likewise, a definition is not more objective because it mentions things that Marx recognized as objects. As Durkheim memorably demonstrated, externalized ideas—written texts, paintings, music, performative acts—are every bit as factual and objective as are social classes, factories, and capital. These cultural phenomena, no less “objective” for having been constructed, are the stuff of which nations and nationalism are made.

Benedict Anderson is often considered to be the main exponent of the constructivist position, and his definition of nationalism suffers from many of the shortcomings characteristic of the theorists who preceded him. There
are three main problems with Anderson’s approach: (1) his definition of the nation fails as a definition; (2) he is not a constructivist at all, but, like Hobsbawm and Gellner, is ultimately a structuralist; and (3) he claims that nationalism began in the Americas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while it has been empirically demonstrated that nationalism existed in Europe well before then. I will discuss these three problems in order.

Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community” that is “imagined as both limited and sovereign.”24 It is not surprising, given the title of his major work on the subject—Imagined Communities—that most of Anderson’s audience sees his emphasis upon the nation’s being an imagined phenomenon as his major contribution. French thus writes:

Those participating in the crafting of a new cultural history of nineteenth-century Mexico are interested, above all, in “imagining” or, perhaps more accurately, in “imaginings.” That is, they seek to understand how the nation has been imagined, how subjectivity has been imagined and, in some of their most provocative work, how the imaginings and thus construction of nation and subjectivity have been (and are) implicated in each other.25

Anderson’s thesis that nations are imagined is not as novel as it seems. Ernest Renan held similar views more than one hundred years before the publication of Anderson’s book.26 Indeed, as noted above, all identity groups are imagined. Defining the nation as an imagined community is, therefore, tantamount to defining the nation as a group—any relatively large group—which is certainly not what we mean by the word “nation.” In a different context, John Charles Chasteen has also noted this when observing that any insurgent movement also constitutes an “imagined community” in precisely Anderson’s sense.27 Likewise, Guerra noted that “the kingdom, like the modern nation, is perhaps before all an imagined community.”28 Still further, Raymond Craib’s suggestion that an empire is also an imagined community is certainly correct, though his phrasing is somewhat misleading with regard to the status of imagined communities: “an empire is something of a fiction to begin with, an imagined entity much like Benedict Anderson’s famous nation.”29 The fact that nations, empires, and every other sort of human association are imagined—the fact that they exist fundamentally in our minds and not in some material sense—does not make them unreal (if, indeed, this is what Craib means to suggest by calling them fictions), as Anderson himself would quickly point out. A similar misunderstanding perhaps lies behind Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo’s recent assertion that “for the study of the
nationalism of the Americas, including the United States, considerable research remains to be done to make the absurdity of nationalism emerge from the surface.\textsuperscript{30} To be fair, Anderson does attempt to refine his definition, and he acknowledges the above. The nation is not just \textit{any} imagined community, but one that is “limited” and “sovereign.”

There is a still more fundamental problem with Anderson’s approach, however, and it is that, in the final analysis, he is not a constructivist at all. While nations may be “imagined communities,” there appear to be “real” communities that underlie them, homogenous populations with a sense of moving together through time. Moreover, the necessary conditions for this sense of simultaneity is a structural force—and not a set of ideas—in the Americas largely the rise of newspapers and the administrative structure of the colonial system.

I do not want to be too critical on this point. The rise of so-called print capitalism (an idea in many ways anticipated by Karl Deutsch)\textsuperscript{31} or, at least the rise of some form of mass media and literacy may have been a necessary, though in no sense a sufficient, condition for the development of nationalism, as will be detailed below. But it does not help us to explain nationalism. Print capitalism, being a structural phenomenon, is essentially meaningless in the Weberian sense. Its impact is essentially instrumental, and the consequences wrought by any message it transmits are products of the message. Print capitalism could just as well spread nonnational political culture. In other words, studying the rise of new media and of literacy is all well and good, but in order to explain the rise of nationalism in any particular case, we need to penetrate to the level of meaning.

Anderson, however, sees print capitalism as fundamental precisely because he doesn’t grasp the full implications of what it is to recognize that the nation is an imagined community. That is, he takes the nation to be fundamentally a large group of individuals who cannot ever all know each other personally, and yet who recognize themselves as constituting one (limited and sovereign) community. It is an instance of what he has more recently labeled “collective subjectivity” or “collective seriality,” whether “unbound seriality, which has its origins in the print market, especially in newspapers, and in the representations of popular performance . . . exemplified by such open-to-the-world plurals as nationalists, anarchists, bureaucrats, and workers,” or “bound seriality, which has its origins in governability, especially in such institutions as the census and elections.”\textsuperscript{32} Since a nation is, for him, just a group of individuals recognizing themselves as being of a certain type or belonging to a common community, and since this recognition is a product of particular structural arrangements, it is plain to see that