Chapter Two

Framing the Study: The Origin and Meaning of Nationalism

The sociologist, Ernest Gelner, offers useful definitions of the nation, the state, and nationalism in his book *Nations and Nationalism*. Aware that these three terms are often confused, he notes that the definition of nationalism is parasitic in relation to two other terms. Following the German sociologist, Max Weber, Gelner sees the state as that “agency within society that possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence” (3). He goes on to say that this definition applies to modern states very well but offers the caveat that in the medieval period, for example, feudal states did not fit the model since they tolerated violence in wars between competing fief-holders.

Gelner offers two definitions of nation neither of which he finds completely satisfactory. These are as follows:

1. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.
2. Two men are of the same nation if and only if they recognize each other as belonging to the same nation. In other words, *nations maketh* man; nations are the artifacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. (7)

For Gelner *nationalism* “is a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (1).

From this it follows that nationalist *sentiment* “is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment.” A nationalist *movement* “is one activated by a sentiment of this kind (1). So that nationalism “is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries within a given state . . . should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state . . . should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (1).
Gelner says that false consciousness is a negative symptom of nationalist ideology. “Its myths reverse reality: it claims to defend folk culture while in fact is forging high culture; it claims to project an old folk society while . . . helping to build up an anonymous society” (124).

He expresses an even more negative judgment when he says

Nationalism tends to treat itself as a manifest and self-evident principle, . . . and violated only through some perverse blindness, when in fact it owes its plausibility and compelling nature only to a very special set of circumstances, which do indeed obtain now, but which were alien to most of humanity and history. It preaches and defends continuity, but owes everything to a decisive and unutterably profound break in human history. . . . Its self-image and its true nature are inversely related with an ironic neatness seldom equaled even by other successful ideologies. (125)

I turn now to what in my opinion is the most important contribution to our understanding of nationalism: Benedict Anderson’s book, Imagined Communities. The title of his book reflects the central idea that the nation is a construct of human culture and that such entities we call nations are not coterminous with mankind (7). Furthermore, the nation is imagined as sovereign, hence his title, a change that occurred recently in history with the coming of the age of enlightenment and the revolutionary changes it engendered. It was these changes that destroyed the “legitimacy of the divinely-ordained hierarchal realm” (7).

Although, like Gelner, Anderson locates the birth of nationalism in relatively recent history, he offers a direct challenge to Gelner when he says

The drawback to this formulation [the notion that nationalism is a fiction because it is an invention], however, is that Gelner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates “invention” to “fabrication” and “falsity,” rather than to “imagining” and creation. In this way he implies that “true” communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations. In fact all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are not to be distinguished by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (6)

According to Anderson the destruction of the divinely ordained realm is linked to the fall of Latin as the common language in much of