

The Informalization of National Identity

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The phenomenon pejoratively known as the new “ethno-nationalism” conceals a rich array of cultural processes. Having seen how this ideology can be used to manipulate, can we then take the leap down to everyday life to see how people use it in practice? On the basis of Nordic experience, the article discusses how the national is informalized and wrested from the hands of power, how it is appropriated by individuals, groups, and local communities to articulate a cultural identity that does not need to have so much to do with the nation. It is used to convey messages that can be about the relation of periphery to centre, about young people’s relations to adults, the relations of Swedes to immigrants, etc. By giving a temporary cultural identity, the national can be used to highlight *life policy questions* about how we should live in late modernity. In this way, it becomes a channel for remoralizing everyday life. The ease with which people seize national symbols is partly due to informalization: hardly a single birthday, annual festival, sports contest, or other event passes without the flag being used – literally – to decorate the cake. But this is a type of national identity which people can allow themselves to play with, without being exposed to anything deadly serious. The article discusses how national identity can also become a tool in the service of cultural complexity – not of homogenization – and it can contribute to the negotiation of new collective identities and deeper reflexivity.

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Ethnology as the study of cultural identity

One area has come to dominate ethnology more than any other in the 1990s: the study of cultural identity. When future ethnologists come to write the history of twentieth-century research, they will no doubt see how the obsession in the 1970s with local communities gave way in the 1980s to an interest in cultural patterns and historical processes. Towards the end of the century, however, the predominant issues are youth culture, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Today’s Swedish doctoral dissertations examine, for example, the way Yugoslav immigrants show where they belong through dance and music, how Turkish immigrants do the same through narratives, women through the way they dress, young people through their styles, the bourgeoisie through their dinners, Danes through the way they wash up, and so on.¹ Perhaps the future ethnological historian

will be amazed that, in the period of the post-modern breakaway, characterized by the way people have started to follow courses unmarked by fixed beacons, researchers were busy describing what these courses can be. Hegel’s famous image of Minerva’s owls flying at twilight, when contours dissolve, may capture part of the reason for this state of affairs.

It must be said, of course, that the researchers do not emphasize fixity. They do not demonstrate anything essential or genuine, whether in national, local, or ethnic affiliation. The days when an ethnologist could show how a typical Swede, a tinker, or a peasant from the province of Småland really looked and thought passed with the last supporter of the Culture and Personality school. Merely by using the term “cultural identity”, one suggests that it is a temporary phenomenon, typified by changeability. Cultural identity is lifted beyond psychological questions about personality, character, or something that instils the same feeling of

permanence. Instead of something that *is*, researchers describe *when, where, and how* identities are produced and articulated (Marcus 1992:315). Modern society offers so many opportunities for this.

When people enact different identities with their neighbours, friends, relatives, at home, at work, on a charter tour, and in distant places, it results in a growing demand for ethnological expertise about how the body, speech, clothes, and external attributes are used as stylistic devices.

In a society characterized by increased informalization, by individualism and cultural release, we not only witness the dissolution of existing patterns but also the creation of new ones, both in the form of personal reflexivity and the conscious construction of what Anthony Giddens (1991) has called “self-identity”, and in the form of new collective and subcultural identities. This society literally cries out for studies of the way in which people use various cultural props in this construction, how these relate to socio-economic circumstances, to the messages of the media, to tradition, and to individual experiences and conditions.

A problematic research field

When it comes to the study of youth culture, women’s culture, or the culture of ethnic groups, it is easy for researchers to take the informant’s point of view and demonstrate the creative potential. For ethnologists it is virtually axiomatic that one should put oneself on the same level as the informant and try to see the rationality of his or her choices. This is rarely the case when the subject is national identity. The willingness of the research community to *understand* has increasingly tended here to collide with popular practice. The ethnologist now finds it easier to become a critic rather than an analyst of culture. While the general public are eager to hear that there is something typically Swedish – or Danish or Norwegian or whatever – that characterizes the inhabitants of the country, researchers are quick to inform them that the national is constantly changing, that it should be seen in terms of history, as a choice, as something negotiated, as part of a game. This is

certainly true of any cultural identity, but here we see how the researchers show their lack of sympathy. Whereas in the 1980s they were curious and delighted to see a growing interest in people’s national self-reflection, they now adopt a more reserved attitude.

This article does not so much consider the reasons for the about-turn of the research community, but is more interested in the blind spots that have arisen as a result. I am convinced that the growing concern with distinctive national character shows how people handle the complexity of society – not as a defence, but more as a curious reshaping of the established state of things.

Before I turn to that theme, however, let us see what happened at the researcher’s desk and in society during the 1980s. That decade saw the publication of books and articles – perhaps more than ever previously in history – on the subject of Swedish culture and identity, considered from different angles. There was suddenly a demand for ethnologists, anthropologists, and other cultural scholars with an ability to exoticize the familiar native culture. They took part as experts in courses for SAS personnel who needed to know how things that they took to be personal peculiarities were “typically Swedish”. There were scholars who earned a reasonable income by preparing Swedish businessmen for encounters with Arabs, Japanese, Frenchmen, and Spaniards. The recurrent questions were: “What are your own Swedish rituals? How do you think as a Swede? How can you see yourself as a cultural being, not just an individual?” Knowledge of national identity could be converted into hard cash. In Sweden, with its many immigrants, one did not only need to know more about the different cultures that arrived here; one also had to have a firmer grasp of one’s own cultural pattern. Studies of Swedishness were, in the opinion of many, a first step towards a more considered cultural encounter. The famous motto of the Nordic Museum, “Know Thyself”, was seen as the beginning of a deeper knowledge of others. All over Scandinavia, university people began working with identity history, and research projects which were angled from various directions towards national processes in their own countries

were suddenly flooded in money from the research councils.

Many Swedish scholars, however, almost choked on all this research into Swedishness when “neo-nationalism” began to march in the streets. On 30th November, the anniversary of the death of warrior king, Karl XII, inebriated skinheads demonstrated their loyalty to the Swedish flag and to Sweden’s history. The 6th of June was transformed from an unnoticed “Day of the Swedish Flag” into a “National Day”, and the celebrations at Skansen were televised so that the entire nation could see the queen in her national costume and hear a speech by the chairman of the Federation of Local History Associations (see Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993). Nationalist slogans and calls to stop immigration could now be seen sprayed on concrete walls.

The 1990s, then, have seen the transformation of the researchers’ delight into horror, the fear of something alien and threatening in the midst of all that was familiar (Tjønneland 1994). When the new “ethno-nationalism” proclaimed that the Swedes as a people should be different and that their culture was more than just different – it was actually superior – the researchers were appalled. They had not meant that this differentness should be used as a weapon and turned *against* cultural complexity. It appeared that whatever they wrote about typical Swedishness was taken as proof that this actually existed; it was objectivized and wrongly used in this way.

There were scholars who turned their backs on the whole research field in disgust, while others undertook a moral cleansing operation. Historical parallels were once again brought up for their deterrent value. Many wondered if the spirit of the 1930s was sticking its ugly face up once again. Comparisons with events in the former Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union made people think, and they are constantly on the agenda as an implicit commentary on nationalism at home. The alarmed reactions were comprehensible. The game turned serious when the patterns demonstrated by researchers were adopted and applied by the general public, or when research was used as a legitimation; it served as a basis for the politics of identity. The

sorcerer’s apprentice was busy again; dangerous knowledge had left the scholar’s study and was now being used irresponsibly in the outside world.

This development strengthened the tendency towards a critique of ideology that always exists in science. Deconstructing the national, showing that, however active it is, it is a myth, has become a favourite sport among the scholarly community, a sport that is politically correct. Of course, there has always been a highly critical attitude to anything that has to do with exaggerated nationalism, but now it has almost become suspect even to study national culture in the sense of *life-mode*. In both international and Scandinavian research we have consequently seen the development of a schoolmasterly attitude that pillories the nation as a cultural construction (cf. Frykman 1994).

This is intellectually honest and probably a necessary sanitary measure. Unfortunately, however, it can easily block an inquisitive interpretation of the true content of what is carelessly called the new ethno-nationalism. Having shown that one is aware of the dilemma of legitimating a tendency that is socially undesirable, one may return to the field and wonder: How has the national become such a success? What can it offer that is so attractive? Why do people in local communities, in sports arenas, and in youth gangs long so strongly for it? Are we allowed to understand it all as creative culture building – as a forward-looking activity and not merely a nostalgic gaze at bygone times when everything was simple and easy to grasp? Can we see it as a voyage of exploration into a complex society, while simultaneously being a form of resistance to ethnic pluralism and the dissolution of familiar values?

To do this, one must take the customary ethnological leap from the ideological heaven down to everyday life on earth, to try to see how people use existing cultural patterns to express their own opinions and formulate their own dreams. What makes the national such a rewarding medium for articulating one’s identity? It is a pity that this self-evident ethnological angle has become virtually taboo.

From social to individual identity

There are many similarities between national identity in the 1990s and a generation ago, as well as interesting differences. Is it really possible to understand what is happening today by analysing or deconstructing an entity that we call the national? For deconstruction there must be a pattern, an ideology, or a project within which people can really acquire an identity. We are justified in wondering whether there is really such a pattern today.

According to the classical view, the nation does provide such a pattern, a dream come true about the *Imagined Community*, as described so eloquently by Benedict Anderson (1983). It is easily recognizable during the nineteenth century and beyond the first half of the twentieth century. If I were to be so bold as to attempt here to concentrate a lengthy and familiar scientific dialogue in a few lines, it would look like this: The state and capital commissioned the construction of the citizens' identity. Intellectuals produced the necessary designs. The army put up the fence and demanded people of "the right stuff". The educational system instilled the right insights and emotions in children. The police supervised order, and the newspapermen reported on the magnificent progress the country was making.

The efforts of all these people were combined in a relatively coherent discourse and practice laying the foundation for the nation state. The citizens of the state were brought up in the ideology demanded by the nation. There were different control stations for people to pass on the way from the cradle to the grave. National values were proclaimed in the home, in school, in military service, and in sports.

Through these processes people were schooled in national awareness, which must therefore be seen as distinct from a national habitus, different from the patterns and habits that characterize Swedes in their everyday lives. Naturally, the two often merged. But being national in everyday life and being national in symbolic terms must be distinguished. The national paradigm was most convincing if discourse and practice drew inspiration from each other.

An example from the community of Medelby as it was seen by two visiting researchers, Martin Allwood and Inga-Britt Ranemark, in 1942, may illustrate this schooling in a simultaneously national and social identity.² This takes us back fifty years. The two researchers visited a school class. Their description captures how important it was to turn the children into cogs in the great machinery.

"The sun beams in on thirty yellow-varnished desks. A bouquet of yellow marsh marigolds shines on the organ, against a backdrop of newly sprouting birch leaves. Clear children's voices sing 'There is no greater safety than in God's band of children'. The schoolmistress leads the children in prayer, with 'Our Father' being followed by a prayer of the children's own making, 'Good God, help all those who are in war and danger, and protect our beloved native land' " (Allwood & Ranemark 1943:171).

On the Day of the Swedish Flag, 6th June, the children line up outside the red-painted primary school on the stroke of a quarter to nine:

"Then the principal takes off his hat and says, 'We are happy that we live in a free Sweden', and leads the children in four cheers for Sweden, followed by the singing of the national anthem.

Then the children run and stand as usual in four lines outside the school door. The principal stands on the steps with his hat on and commands them to line up properly. The children stretch out their arms towards each other's backs. 'There are some books lying there', says the teacher, pointing to a grassy bank. A boy runs to pick them up. They all march in" (Allwood & Ranemark 1943:174).

The ritual testifies to an affiliation in which authority, religion, and education were in symbiosis with the nation and society, in which everyday patterns were interwoven with the national superstructure. This was so self-evident that Swedes actually looked as if they were exceptions to the rule that all people must have a national identity. For the children sitting here at their desks, it was progress on a rational

basis that was the very core of being Swedish (cf. Arnstberg 1989).

This rhetoric lacked fiery slogans and proud words. Traces of this could be seen in other, younger nations such as Norway, or in the more colourful lands around the Mediterranean.³ The nation and the religion were used to reinforce the pattern of civic duties. This is a clear example of people's cultural identity being derived from a pattern, an ideology, or a project; at least there was something like this that every single pupil was forced to relate to. If they did not *consciously* relate to it, it was because it was so closely interwoven with their everyday practice.

Fifty years later, the national was used in a similar school as a ritual challenge to the existing order. Schoolchildren in Ljungbyholm – a Småland village of the same size as Medelby – demanded to sing the Swedish national anthem on the last day of school. The principal refused this, according to the newspaper reports. He was afraid of xenophobia under the cloak of national rhetoric. The incident was given great publicity in the media. The school principal who prohibited the national anthem even merited an appearance in foreign newspapers.

Naturally, the national anthem – both verses – was sung on the last day of school. And the Swedish flag was hoisted.

With the national anthem as a weapon, the children of Ljungbyholm were able to challenge prevailing hierarchies and values. Virtues such as openness, internationalism, and consensus were proclaimed by official Swedish policy. The Swedishness sung by the children was not about loyalty to the system. On the contrary, it served as a contrast, which made it a useful tool. By singing the national anthem they emphasized an alternative that made them stand out clearly. The choice was deliberate, and the relationship of the national anthem to the everyday activities of the school or of everyday life was ambiguous. (It goes without saying that they were not receptive to any message from the research community or any other authority that could testify to the national as a construction or a myth.)

The difference between Medelby in the 1940s and Ljungbyholm in the 1990s captures three

lines in the cultural process that I prefer to call the informalization of the national:

1. The national is used to formulate new collective identities which do not necessarily have to do with the nation. They are identities which people adopt deliberately, and which differ from their everyday habitus.

2. To formulate this identity, people use rites and special rules that apply within the bounds of a ritual space. One can also say that the identities are enacted or tested instead of being formulated in the customary verbal or discursive language.

3. The vague collection of behaviours that we call “neo-nationalism” also belong to the new communication structures that have grown up in our complex society. When people act on issues of gender, the environment, or other crucial questions, they transmit messages by producing identity. This is a new form of “social movement” used to highlight fundamental contemporary moral issues.⁴

A more festive nationalism

What is the national identity that people encounter today in the course of their lives? As will be obvious, I question the view that national feeling should be seen as a means to train citizens in their civic responsibilities. In fact, it seems to be more a pleasurable than a serious side of existence.

No one who has grown up in late-twentieth-century Sweden, Norway, or the other Nordic countries can have escaped some fairly irresponsible training in the use of national means of expression. Whereas the children in Medelby promptly saluted the Swedish flag and stood stiffly to attention for the national anthem, children today have encountered these symbols at thousands of relaxed occasions, official events, annual festivals and family parties. They have acquired their competence in the use of national symbols for festive purposes, as a natural part of their cultural repertoire, something which they have become accustomed to using and which they can demand to be allowed to use.

Scarcely any major annual festivity has passed without the symbolism being there to

add a gilt edge to the event. Children are trained from pre-school days to identify dishes and festivities that are “typically Swedish”. Hardly any Swedish birthday is celebrated without a flag being hoisted. Midsummer Eve – the most Swedish of all celebrations – must be enjoyed as a romantic experience of genuine Swedish nature, a melancholic echo of forests and flowery meadows.

The book *Svenska vanor och ovanor* (Swedish Habits Good and Bad) describes how behaviour at Midsummer has been gradually nationalized:

“The Midsummer holiday that was once a working celebration in the agricultural year has ... been transformed into a Swedish concern and an international tourist attraction. Department stores adorn their windows not just with flag-decked maypoles but also with blue and yellow serviettes and candles. In the same brief period, a typical Swedish meal has also been composed of stock elements: this is the time of year with the highest sales of pickled matie herring, chives, sour cream, and spiced aquavit. It is the time when thousands of Swedes dress up in the new national costume: the garland of flowers, an attribute that represents the height of Swedishness” (Frykman & Löfgren 1991:27).

It is easy to show how there has been a systematic transformation of most festive traditions in recent decades. It is almost as if national sentiment had taken the place of religion. Christmas Eve now competes with Midsummer Eve to be the most genuine: the food, the drinks, and the customs are becoming more and more national and less religious. The top of the Christmas tree does not carry the star of Bethlehem but a Swedish flag. Lucia on 13th December – one of the few Swedish exports in the field of customs – is celebrated as a touching ceremony with choirs of children in peasant settings. In 1994 the Lucia celebrations were televised from Sundborn, home of the artist Carl Larsson, the most Swedish of all homes in the most national of all the Swedish provinces, Dalarna. Against a backdrop of ancient peasant culture in the national romantic mould of the turn of the century, children’s eyes sparkled as brightly as the gleam-

ing candles. The late summer crayfish party, this bourgeois gourmet tradition, has today become an icon of archetypal Swedishness; the table is laid with flags and genuine Swedish aquavit. The children delightedly join in the drinking ditties sung before each toast is downed.

The same thing has happened to festivals of the life cycle: flags are hoisted for birthday parties, and people get married in folk dress.

Sports events are perhaps the clearest example of the way people have grown accustomed to charging events with national meaning. Spectators undergo a symbolic union with the national team competing in the arena. At the World Ice Hockey Championship in Stockholm in 1995, there was a service department where spectators could have their faces painted in the desired national colours. At the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer in 1994, amazed viewers all over the world could see a national “folk festival” that they could never have imagined in their wildest dreams. For those who were able to compare Lillehammer and its countless flags and folklore performances with the Winter Olympics in Oslo forty years previously, this process was amply clear. Then, in 1952, the Norwegians were dressed in fashionable knickerbockers and winter clothes, not socks knit in Telemark. The flags waved from flagpoles, they were not held in people’s hands. King Olav moved with a certain grandeur among his people, not like King Harald in the most modest of all costumes. In a way the sports event became a splendid backdrop against which to enact a popular national competence which would have been unthinkable in previous years. Sometimes, as the *Dagens Nyheter* critic Leif Nylén wrote, one had the feeling that the audience lining the ski tracks found that the competitors disturbed the picture. They detracted from the impression that was to be conveyed, that of a people paying tribute to itself through the use of national props.

In the course of life people receive rich and varied training in handling national symbols. This is not the same as saying that they are well integrated in different nationally based life-modes. For example, when the Swedish football team were welcomed home as heroes after their

success in the World Cup in the USA in 1994, many were surprised that the people in the streets danced Brazilian sambas and sang American songs alternating with "Victory is Ours", a translation of a Norwegian chant; the willingness to celebrate the nation's heroes, it was thought, did not need to drape itself in any cultural costume than the Swedish flag. But these young rejoicers have been trained to become skilled actors in the cultural arena. Success in sports does not need to be accentuated by learning folk dance, joining the local history association, or voting for a nationalist conservative party. The rejoicing was coloured by the experiences of the rejoicers.

On the other hand, the growing demand for books about Swedishness shows the need to base the national competence on scholarly wisdom. The production of souvenirs and symbols to represent bygone peasant culture or other aspects of the Swedish cultural heritage show the ability of the market to satisfy an already developed need. Individuals in present-day society expect that the national colours will be displayed when something extra happens.

Cultural playpens

If people are trained in national competence, this will find expression. The informalization of Swedishness would be inconceivable if it were only expressed on ceremonial occasions. Let us look at the camps where people train.

It is symptomatic that the less pretentious parts of a culture – the parties or contests – have become the point of entry. Without this the people could not have appropriated something that was once so stilted. Festivity has a tendency to constitute a separate space, a ritually demarcated area with its own rules, an area that allows people to try out new definitions, to play and experiment with higher things.

The fact that sport is one such separate stage is clear from the way the contests are enacted in a hyper-realistic world with times that are exact to a hundredth of a second, distances accurate to the very millimetre, and rules that show that this is not a part of the surrounding society. The language that people use there, as Billy Ehn has shown, is full of atavistic refer-

ences to the country, its people, and its basic characteristics. It is a language that would be punishable outside the bounds of sport (Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993).

Annual holidays and family parties have their rules permitting people to abandon their everyday selves and get disguised in special costumes, both spiritually and physically.

Folk fiddling festivals, local pageants reviving bygone culture, role-plays, historical tableaux, and the like create a special framework giving people easy access to the historical national heritage. At a festival of coastal culture in Skudeneshavn in Norway in 1992, to which people brought traditional boats of various kinds, one rarity after the other sailed past, each with the Norwegian flag at its stern. The crew of newly built Viking ships, of genuine Nordland boats, *osereilver*, and *gaulbåtar*; wore period costume and behaved as if they were acting in a film about real life on the Norwegian coast in the old days: wading boots, home-knit sweaters, homespun trousers, woollen hats, and cutty pipes. For a few days people strolled around the harbour imagining they were reliving the days of yore, and maintaining that true Norwegianness was to be found there, on the coast, and that they were its true stewards. They opposed the dominance of the national claimed by the central government, the agricultural parts of Norway, and the bourgeoisie. They hailed the necklace of coastal communities, especially the region where that year's festival was held. As in a dream, plays about medieval ecclesiastical legends were mixed with seventeenth-century voyages of exploration and the poverty of the nineteenth century. When the festival was over, the performance ended and people returned to their everyday pursuits (Magnussen 1994).

Playpens like this allow people free use of the national. For the schoolchildren in Medelby the national was a lesson. They studied it and were then examined by the teacher, who sorted out true from false. She told them the image they had to take to their hearts. It was a part of tradition, and what is tradition is, as David Lowenthal (1985) has said, also instructive, a selection of the past that is correct. The national past thus became a part of the present and not

a separate country which can be entered and left.

At the festival in Skudeneshavn, the past was a different country, a separate reality; it was so divorced from "real" history that it could be coloured by people's own dreams and fantasies.

Festivals and contests use the type of national identity that happens to suit the user's purpose. It is adjusted, aestheticized, and shaped. By being freely accessible, it is used to open opportunities and to tell a parable for people: select what you want for a functioning collective identity. In this way, the informalization of the national, paradoxically, helps people to liberate themselves from tradition. They can build freely, roughly like the children in Ljungbyholm.

These playpens all have the property of being realities alongside the normal reality, where people can try out interesting ideas, since play is not serious. We are in the realm of signs. The cultural language spoken there is the language of symbols and of more or less sacred relics. Their message is clearly articulated as regards its form, but its content is ambiguous. What makes this situation creative is the diffuse meaning of the symbols.

Because these playpens are so many and so varied – not just occurring as they once did at parades and displays – today's citizens meet them in countless situations. In short, they have become common property. This is a historical process showing how festive customs have been rapidly changed in the direction of informality, and how this in turn has led to increased familiarity with the handling of national rhetoric and symbolism.

Today's many national manifestations can of course be read as signs of a profound ideological change in culture, as a revival of national values. But the performances in the streets, the singing of the national anthem on the last day of school, can also be seen from the perspective of everyday life, in the sense of how it is handled, and from the perspective of festivity, in the sense of the ritual space. In other words, neo-nationalism has a chequered past and is in itself a complex phenomenon.

Wandering letterboxes

It is possible, then, to emphasize the playfulness and competence as background explanations. But is there not also a clearer social context? And if so, does it have to be a new fundamentalism?

In the streets and squares, on the last day of school, at sports events, Midsummer parties and other celebrations we find, not as in former days one specific national identity, but many. We can thus say that its definition is so vague that it suits a society of high cultural complexity. At the same time, it can be an invocation of this complexity.

There is a feature in these separate realities which may make the ideology critique justified. It is a good seed-bed for mythological worlds of the kind that serve as a contrast to today's tangled existence. "Bygone peasant society" or "genuine Norway before the transformation" are often allowed to symbolize this hope that there was once a world where the cock crew, the bell rang, Adam delved, and Eve span.

In the 1970s and 1980s we ethnologists tended to discuss this form of dream production in terms of "revitalization". We saw how people recreated the past as a compensation for the security they had lost in the present. The new essentialism within the framework of nationalism has also been described as an escape from dissolution. Formula 1A for this kind of reasoning might run as follows: With hundreds of thousands of immigrants now coming to the country, people begin to realize what they have had and hasten to recreate it. Now when union with Europe is becoming an everyday reality and the outside world is making itself felt, people pull the symbolic national quilt over themselves. With moral values being threatened with dissolution, with evil and crime rampant, people toy with the idea that there were once clear, fundamental truths. Religious fundamentalism gives support to individuals who feel that they lack a corset. Now when the pulse of modern cities is beating faster and faster, people long for the good old peasant culture and simple country life. In a world of ambiguities we need clear, simple answers. They become ritual resting places and secret rooms where the

present day ceases to exist. The past, including the national, thus provides the medicine to cure the injuries caused by modernity and complexity.

The inescapable weakness of the argument, as Lena Gerholm (1985) has pointed out, is that cultural phenomena are explained on the basis of psychological assumptions of a very general character. Culture becomes a reaction to emotional deprivation. The attack on certain human needs – in this case the loss of security – leads to disorientation, which in turn becomes the driving force behind the production of observed patterns. But this does not tell us why the national should be able to provide the answer. The explanation is so vague that it could be applied to anything. There is hardly anything that could not be derived from people's loss of security. Does this tell us anything more about the societal background to the rise of cultural phenomena?

Alberto Melucci (1992:221ff.), like many others, points out the danger that such dreams can offer escape instead of action. As counterpoints to the controlled and the complicated, they allow the growth of dreams about a more authentic life in a society that has lost all its differences, in other words, the national that existed in the past, or that ought to exist today if only everything had not been so beyond human grasp. Arousing the national can be the start of emotional escapism, a symbolic exile from a confusing reality. This is rightly the target of today's critique of ideology. It creates a seed-bed for fascistoid solutions.

But the national can also offer something else, something forward-looking and constructive, without seeking to prepare a place for a return to simplicity. This can suggest a possibility to exercise a more reflected criticism of locally or personally urgent issues which have been marginalized by modern development. It is then a negotiable road instead of a defence reaction against modernity. It thus becomes one of the many tools used by people to communicate truths rooted in their own everyday experience. The fact that it is the national may not be the main point; it just happens to be the costume that the messenger at the moment benefits from wearing.

The folklorist Marit Hauan has described the royal tour of Northern Norway by King Harald and Queen Sonja in 1992. The royal couple travelled on their ship from harbour to harbour. Wherever they came they were enthusiastically greeted with a variety of events and spectacles; they witnessed local historical pageants, encountered historical figures such as the priest-poet Petter Dass, were showered with seaman's mittens, knitted cardigans with local motifs, fresh fish and fermented trout; they were treated to fish soup, fish that was boiled and fried and prepared in every conceivable way. As Hauan says, the gifts were "largely unusable for the royals, but for the local communities they were symbolic narratives about local history and identity" (Hauan 1995:8).

With the benevolence that goes with their position, the royal couple, as symbolic heads of the nation, had to accept the role of a wandering letterbox for all the messages that the local communities wanted to send to the world and to the corridors of power. It looked as if these communities wanted to incorporate the national (represented by the royal couple) in their local environment instead of being incorporated in the greater national community. "Today's king gained a clear insight into who *we* wanted to be in each place, and saw examples of the way we consciously build our identity through what we perceive as special in our local environment" (Hauan 1995:10).

It was almost excessively clear that these spectacles were based on the local economy. The coastal communities in Northern Norway make their living from primary activities. They depend on fishing quotas, international negotiations, contacts with the European Union. There is a constant effort to make themselves morally present in the consciousness of the central government, so that they will not be left behind, with stagnation and depopulation as a result. The modernization that has blessed other parts of Norway – oil, industrial production, the service sector – does not benefit this remote corner of the country. Highlighting locally gained experience and values was thus a way to fight for self-respect and an expression of hope for the future. This message was communicated with the aid of symbols and rituals, according to

Hauan, because “the ambiguity of symbols makes them powerful and easy to unite around” (1995:13).

We are thus in a different situation from increased nationalism, ethnic essentialism, or fundamentalism. People familiar with handling national symbolism used that skill in the ritual space created by a royal visit to communicate messages about the basic economic and moral issues that concerned them. The language they used to gain a hearing for the message was the articulation of a distinct cultural identity with local, historical, and national ingredients. This could not have been done unless the national had been freed from tradition. It had first been taken into the playpen and tried out, before it was used in new contexts.

The remoralization of culture

The new interest in national identity is used in several of the new social movements, such as the Greens. These develop not so much ideologies as “senscologies”. These movements appeal to feelings of affiliation, to direct action rather than reflection, to style as a form of expression (Melucci 1992). In demonstrations and actions the new social movements focus on the general public whose reactions they depend on. They have to produce an identity at the same time that they convey a message. It may not matter so much *what* they want to say; the important thing is *that* they want to say something. While putting a message across, they simultaneously negotiate about their own “status, position, and identity” (Kapstad 1995). The schoolchildren who demanded the right to sing the Swedish national anthem had their request granted in full. They had made themselves sufficiently clear.

At the same time, one cannot reduce the movements to the simple production of identity. Their message, as in the case of Northern Norway, was profoundly serious. Anthony Giddens (1991) has pointed out that the challenge to the existing patterns in society today is presented by movements which simultaneously produce identity and alternatives. The women’s movement, the ecology movement, and the peace movement are examples of the way people at

once create cultural identity and pursue political issues. What unites people in these new movements is that they practise in their own lives the principles that they want to apply generally in society. Giddens calls these *life policy questions*, issues that modern society has banished to the margins. They may be concrete problems such as the relation of the periphery to the centre, as in the case of Northern Norway. They can be major issues of war and peace, the stewardship of resources, fundamental questions about one’s own way of life and cultural heritage. They are constantly interwoven with profoundly personal questions such as: How should life really be lived? How should people act in relation to each other? How should men and women act? Who should I be myself? The movements “call for a remoralising of social life and they demand a renewed sensitivity to questions that the institutions of modernity systematically dissolve” (Giddens 1991:224).

In the past these concerns were handled by social and political movements championing specific issues or special interests. Such movements still exist, of course, but now we have the extra dimension: that people in very different contexts pursue moral questions of a similar character. They communicate messages figuratively through their way of being or acting, thus making them ambiguous. Dramatized events can be reported by the media and come to the attention of the general public. Instead of simply using verbal arguments, people enact problems. We thus witness a new communication structure in society, where messages from the life-world can be taken up for discussion in broader contexts.

What is concealed behind today’s neo-nationalism can thus be a rich array of phenomena. Some of them have in common that fact that they show the skill of society in reading cultural expressions. The national, however, can take on a distasteful colour because it offers a ready-made cultural form in which to act, an arsenal of highly explosive goods. Events in today’s European arena are horrifying examples of this. Yet the informalization also shows how people have grown accustomed to using the national rhetoric to articulate themselves on festive and everyday occasions. This habit can

be used to communicate fundamental moral messages about how life in postmodern society should really be lived. The interest in distinctive national features is then not so much an ideology or an ism in the classical sense, but instead has more of a neutral character that assumes the colour of the surrounding context. In some contexts this leads to the police being called out into the streets to quash youth brawls and conflicts between immigrants and skinheads; in other contexts it leads to the royal family being appropriated and used as messengers to the people with political power.

On the personal plane, finally, the culturalization of identity leads to the training of people in the art of being different. Just the very occurrence of the many different playpens forces people to make choices, to negotiate, to create, and to creolize. They cannot be content to rely on the self-evident definition that they *are* Norwegians or Swedes; they are forced on every occasion to *produce* Norwegianness or Swedishness. Every production of cultural identity also makes the Other visible. Every kind of otherness offers an opportunity to come closer to it – or to distance oneself from it.

When viewed in this light, the ethnological obsession in the 1990s with cultural identity may also be a study of the way patterns are created and recreated, the way heterogeneity in late modern society at once gives rise to personal reflexivity, new collective patterns and communication structures. Perhaps it will be possible to show how the growing interest in national identity is an integral part of that process – not just atavism or an alternative.

Translated by Alan Crozier

Notes

1. These and other themes have been discussed in recent years in doctoral dissertations from the departments of ethnology in Lund, Stockholm, Umeå, Gothenburg, and Bergen. Cultural identity has become a leitmotif that captures several contemporary tendencies; see, for example, the 1995 issue of *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, which is entirely devoted to this field.
2. Medelby was their code name for Mulsjö, “the most banal and commonplace thing imaginable, namely, an ordinary Swedish station village”. Their

doctoral dissertation was a parallel to the Lynchs’ classic *Middletown* and a pioneer work in Swedish sociology, just drier and duller – and more Swedish. The example is also discussed in the book *Försvenskningen av Sverige* (Ehn, Frykman & Löfgren 1993).

3. There are considerable differences here between the Nordic countries; see Linde-Laursen & Nilsson 1992, Berggreen 1989, Hylland Eriksen 1993.
4. The reasoning here follows Melucci 1992 and Giddens 1991.

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