

## Do national identities exist?

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### Abstract

There is no doubt that an overwhelming majority of people in the world believe that national identities are real and perceptible entities. Although academics disagree over the questions such as whether national identities are modern or primordial, essential or socially constructed they too generally do not doubt their existence. Some scholars might focus on the plural and the multiple character of all identities, including the national ones, but they would seldom question the relevance of this concept and its empirical manifestations. In this paper the attempt is made to challenge such dominant understandings. More specifically it is argued that the contemporary belief in the existence of stable, omnipresent and durable national identities is in itself a contingent historical product of the specific organisational, ideological and the micro-interactional processes that have shaped the world over the last 300 years. In this context the paper emphasises that it is paramount to historicise the origins and the rise of the popular beliefs in the substance and universality of national identities. Building on author's previous research the paper elaborates a theoretical framework for the study of such popular beliefs. In particular the focus is on the role the three long term historical processes have played in the formation of 'national identities' as they are understood today: the cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion, centrifugal ideologisation and the envelopment of micro-solidarity.

**Key words:** ideology, national identity, nationalism, social organisation, theory

### 1. The sense of national identity

Sociology is an academic discipline that is generally not associated with producing scientific formulas and theorems. Nevertheless one of its few theorems, the W.I. Thomas theorem, has largely stood the test of time since its first formulation in 1928. This quite simple, yet rather potent, theorem states that 'if men define situa-

tions as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas, Thomas, 1928: 571). What this means is that the popular perceptions of a specific situation are likely to influence their actions. In other words all social actions are shaped by the individual and collective interpretations of a situation. For example if large number of individuals believe in a particular understanding of social reality then their actions will ultimately contribute towards making this belief into an actual reality. In some respects the W.I. Thomas theorem works as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948). Typical examples include the 1973 toilet paper panic and the so called law of attraction. The toilet paper panic was triggered during the oil crisis following the widely circulated rumour of an imminent shortage of toilet paper caused by the decline in the oil imports (Malcolm 1974). As the rumour spread people stockpiled large quantities of toilet paper thus directly causing the shortage. The law of attraction stipulates that 'like attracts like' suggesting that focus on positive or negative thoughts will bring about positive or negative experiences. Although the law of attraction evades scientific criteria of falsifiability and testability it has substantial appeal for those who subscribe to such a view as one's happiness can always be interpreted in relation to focusing on the positive thoughts.

The W. I. Thomas theorem applies just as well to the contemporary notion of national identity. Judging from the various surveys around the world it seems quite obvious that an overwhelming majority of individuals believe in the existence of national identities (Smith, Kim, 2006; Medrano 2009). Moreover national identities are perceived as tangible, natural and normal states of being that every individual has or ought to possess. Such beliefs also have real consequences in a sense that they help reproduce and maintain a nation-centric and identity-centric views of social reality. While disagreeing on the question of whether national identity is primordial or modern, genuine or constructed, the scholars of nationhood generally do not question the existence of national identities as such (Brubaker 2004; Malešević 2011; 2013). Hence they too operate in line with the W. I. Thomas theorem and their actions and analyses generate real consequences whereby national identities are understood as indisputable social realities.

Nevertheless while the W. I. Thomas theorem does tell a great deal about the impact of collective perceptions of reality on social behaviour it does not help to explain the social and historical origins of such perceptions. Furthermore using this theorem one cannot find out how such social interpretations change through time. For example to most of pre-Socratic predecessors the Earth was unquestionably flat. From the ancient Greece until the classical period to the Bronze and Iron Age societies of the Near East to India until the beginning of the first century to China well into the late 16th century majority of intellectuals were convinced that human beings live on a flat disc floating in the large ocean (Garwood 2007). Such a belief retained its popularity for many more centuries among the ordinary individuals worldwide. Yet today only a small minority of people share such a view. Furthermore the fact that today's people precursors defined their social reality in terms of living on the flat Earth did not make this planet any flatter than it actually is.

I would argue that something similar can be said about the national identities. While today majority of world population perceive themselves through the prism of a specific national identity (i.e. Latvian, Zimbabwean, Angolan, Indonesian etc.) its predecessors did not and could not see the world in such terms. Instead their social realities were much smaller (i.e. village, close kinship and clan networks, neighbourhoods etc.) or much larger (the universe of eschatological religions, empires and the unyielding nature). Even at the onset of modernity it was only small number of people who did think of themselves in national categories. Moreover one could go even further and argue that regardless of how many individuals perceive their immediate social world through the category of national identity this in itself does not make national identities any more real than they were at the dawn of human history. They did not exist then and their contemporary material existence is just as doubtful today.

Perhaps the comparison of the Earth structure and the collective sense of national identity might be farfetched in a sense that an astronomical object is much more stable and durable than human perceptions. However the paper's focus is not on the intrinsic material features of these two very different phenomena but on the changing popular understandings of social reality. In this sense widely shared belief

in the existence of a permanent and stable flat Earth is to be evaluated in a similar way to a widely shared belief in the existence of permanent and stable national identities. Both such sets of beliefs have profound impact on the behaviour of those who share such beliefs. The idea that the Earth is flat had direct implication on the popular perceptions that the human beings constitute the pinnacle of existence. In a similar way the belief in the existence of national identities regularly leads to popular views that a membership in one's nation represents the most important form of collective existence.

To understand the popular impact of such perceptions it is paramount to briefly explore their social and historical origins. Leaving the Flat Earth debate aside and focusing on the national identity alone it is necessary firstly to decouple its two constituents: the 'national' and 'identity'.

As argued previously the notion of identity is an imprecise umbrella term with limited conceptual power (Brubaker 2004; Malešević 2006). This is historically novel idea with very specific and quite narrow origin: Western modernity. Comparative sociologists and anthropologists have demonstrated convincingly that the identitarian concepts such as 'self', 'personality', 'character', and 'self-identity' develop late in human history and have very different meanings in different parts of the world. Outside of Western modernity one often encounters understandings of the individual and the social which are not bounded by either individual or collective agency. In some traditional orders there is also no firm distinction between the nature and human beings. For example as R. Handler (1994: 31) documents for Ojibwa of North America the idea of personhood is not reduced to one's corporal experience or sense of individual belonging but instead in incorporates almost unlimited space which is simultaneously populated by humans, animals, natural objects and supernatural creatures. In this view nobody has fixed material or finite features but all objects can transform into each other and then change again.

Roy Baumeister (1986) and Mervyn F. Bendle (2002) have demonstrated that identity did not have much popular resonance in pre-modern and early modern Europe either. In a traditional, hierarchical, orders individual's position was largely defined by her birth and social strata she inhabited. In such rigidly stratified social

environments there was no possibility nor wish to make individual choices on the basis of one's preferences. It is only with the onset of modernity that the traditional world order was undermined thus on one hand providing new opportunities for social mobility and other hand forcing reluctant individuals to assume new social roles. The questions of identity only become relevant when 'factors that underpinned a sense of continuity (geography, community, employment, class etc.) were destabilised' while at the same time the factors 'that provided a sense of differentiation (ancestry, social rank, gender, moral virtue, religion, etc.) were delegitimised' (Bendle 2002: 16).

The concept of identity has also been challenged on the empirical grounds. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) and Siniša Malešević (2006; 2011) showed how the porous nature of this concept allows for proliferation of rather weak and ambiguous theoretical models and inadequate operationalisation strategies. Krishan Kumar (2003) and David Laitin (2007) have emphasised that identities 'have no obvious empirical referents'. R. Brubaker (2004) and S. Malešević (2006; 2011) have also singled out the reifying and essentialist properties of the identitarian discourses. For example many academic studies of identity tend to attribute human features to such an abstract entity and one can often read how identities are in conflict with each other or 'how people come to assume and inhabit...identities, and how identity then shapes what they do' (Reicher, Hopkins, 2001: 3). Hence despite its enormous popularity identity is far from being a useful analytical concept.

The concept of a nation also exhibits some of the same problems: it lacks clearly recognisable empirical referents, it is prone to essentialisation and reification, it is conceptually ambiguous and it has highly diverse meanings which tend to change in time and space (Eriksen 2002; Brubaker 2004; Malešević 2013). However unlike identity which is so wide that it can incorporate almost any form of individual and social activity the idea of nationhood has much more limited scope: it is something that refers to a particular collective experience associated with a specific historical period and a limited group of people. As Benedict Anderson (1991: 5) emphasised regardless of their size which can range from few hundred thousand (Montenegro, Iceland, Luxembourg, etc.) to over a billion (China, India) nations are always imag-

ined as limited in terms of their population and territory: 'the nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind'. This point is deeply linked with the historical context of nationhood as pre-national forms of social organisation tended to encompass either much larger or much smaller groups of people. Whereas pre-historical predecessors lived in very small, flexible and unstable nomadic bands of foragers the birth of civilisation resulted in the establishment of the large scale, internally highly diverse, imperial polities. Hence neither of these two organisational models were well suited for the establishment of national projects: while the world of hunter-gatherers lacked any firm attachment to a specific territory or codified and written cultural practices the empires were structurally too hierarchical and culturally too diverse to attempt to forge the commonly shared national ideas and practices. So the notion of nationhood develops quite late in human history and the model of the sovereign nation-state becomes dominant only in the last two centuries (Gellner 1983; Malešević 2013).

Finally unlike 'identity' which is so wide that it can incorporate great variety of universalist projects nationhood is first and foremost a form of particularism. In contrast to the religious doctrines and imperial creeds which speak in the language of universalism nations are as a rule conceptualised as communities of specific groups defined by what B. Anderson calls 'deep, horizontal comradeship'. In this sense nation-states differ sharply from empires: whereas the imperial rulers legitimised their existence in reference to the entire world nationalist leaders confine their rhetoric to the members of their nations. For example when Pizarro encountered Incas he described his master as 'a king of Spain and the universal world' (Diamond 2005: 74). In contrast the contemporary Croatian, Irish or American politicians always address their audiences in strictly particularist terms emphasising that their loyalty resides in their membership of a particular nation (the Croatian, the Irish or the American).

Therefore although the concept of nation is also deeply problematic its relatively limited scope allows a bit more precision. While 'identity' is not very useful tool for analytical purposes it is difficult to completely dispense with the idea of na-

tionhood. However to fully understand the social origins of 'national identity' it is paramount to focus the attention on the three historical processes that have made the national identity paradigmatic in the contemporary world. These three processes are: the centrifugal ideologisation, the cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion, and the envelopment of micro-solidarity (Malešević 2010, 2013, 2017).

## 2. Ideological penetration

The almost universally shared perception that every human being has or ought to possess a national identity is historically speaking a very recent development. As historical sociologists show before modern era majority of individuals conceptualised their daily existence in terms of broader, mostly religious worldviews, or much narrower, kinship and residence focused, attachments (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991; Mann 1995). The idea that every individual is primarily a French, Chinese, Polish or Peruvian would make little if any sense to pre-modern ancestors. Since the traditional world was defined by stark hierarchies there was little if any congruence between the state and culture. This was the world inhabited by the ruling aristocracies focused on their inherited social status and the masses of illiterate peasants. In addition to sharp political and economic divisions these two principal strata were also culturally divided. As Ernest Gellner (1983) argues convincingly this was a universe where 'the high culture' of nobility stood in opposition to the ocean of 'low', mostly oral, cultures of peasantry communicating through thousands of distinct vernaculars. Moreover the key legitimising principles of these traditional orders reinforced these cultural divides as the rulers were universally understood to have 'the divine right' to rule. In this type of social environment there was neither need nor capacity to forge a degree of cultural homogeneity that characterises most contemporary nation-states. Simply put national identities could not exist in a world where the primary source of group solidarity were local and kinship based (for majority of peasant population) or transnational and also kinship based (for the aristocracies connected by intermarriage).

For this to change it was paramount that the idea of divine origins of monarchs becomes replaced with the new principle of political legitimacy – the notion of

popular sovereignty. This idea, fully articulated by the Enlightenment thinkers, and for the most part realised in the French and American revolutions replaced social strata with a nation as the epicentre of social and political life. Consequently nationalism became the new dominant ideological force capable of mobilising large numbers of now increasingly literate populations. Well equipped with the egalitarian ethos, emancipatory politics and discourses of solidarity (*liberté, égalité, and fraternité*) the nationalist leaders were able to legitimise new models of rule as well as to galvanise large numbers of people to support these new regimes. In such an environment both the state and the civil society became vehicles of mass scale nationalist socialisation throughout the world: the nation-centric educational systems and mass media, the armed forces moulding new recruits into loyal members of their nation-states, the welfare provisions shaped around principles of membership in specific nation-states, the gradual expansion of citizenship rights linked to the sense of national attachment and so on. All these structural processes contributed substantially towards making nationalism a dominant ideology of the modern age.

Although the contemporary rhetoric is saturated with ideas that nations make states and that national identities generate nationalism the sociological reality shows otherwise: it is the states that make nations and nationalism that forges the popular idea of national identity. All modern social organisations including the nation-states require specific ideological glue to hold their diverse memberships together. In modern contexts this is achieved through the process termed centrifugal ideologisation: a mass scale structural and historical phenomenon through which social organisations project and temporarily forge a degree of ideological unity out of complex diversities that inevitably characterise all such large entities (Malešević 2010, 2013, 2017). While all nation-states are composed of heterogeneous individuals and collectivities that possess different interests and values nationalist ideologies aim to paper over these facets and project a widely believable image of society-wide homogeneity. Ideologisation is a contingent, uneven and contested process which, when successful, manages to integrate and mobilise socially diverse populations around a set of commonly shared principles. This ideological practice is not confined to the marginal movements at the extreme right or left of the political spectrum. Instead it is some-



thing that incorporates most political parties and large scale social movements that in modernity inevitably embrace the nation-centric rhetoric. The fact that nationalism is more ambiguous than most other ideological discourses makes it more protean as it allows that its central principles can be re-articulated by variety of social and political forces throughout the political spectrum. None of this is to say that centrifugal ideologisation is some kind of giant brain washing device that imposes certain beliefs on the unsuspecting public. On the contrary this process entails a great deal of popular consent which is achieved in direct collaboration with the civil society groupings, family networks, residential associations and many other non-state actors (Malešević 2013, 2015). Centrifugal ideologisation is a process that constantly reinforces already held beliefs and practices. Although historically this process was initiated by the cultural and political elites once fully in operation ideologisation proliferates throughout entire societies. With the ever increasing literacy rates, expanding educational systems and the multiplication of the mass media outlets there is a greater ideological penetration. Modern technological advancements facilitate even greater ideological diffusion while the open borders stimulate nation-centric understandings of reality.

In this sense, despite periodic ups and downs, the centrifugal ideologisation has continued to increase over the past three hundred years. It is this broader social context that gave birth to the idea, and also helps maintain the perception, that one's national identity is something stable, tangible, durable and deeply personal. When asked about the meaning of national identity today most 12 year old schoolchildren in the world will reply that they are proud of their nation and that having a particular national identity has a distinctly personal significance for them. If one is to take such statements at face value it would be easy to conclude that national identities not only exist but are highly potent forms of individual and collective identification. However the key point here is that what is ordinarily perceived as an expression of national identity is in fact a historical product of the specific ideological processes. Saying that one feels proud to be Nigerian, Danish or Korean is much more than a personal reflection on one's own state of being. It is something that demonstrates the inner workings of ideological processes that are historically specific and organisa-

tionally mediated. Such statements reflect the impact of ideological power and its society wide penetration. They tell less about the inner feelings of individuals and much more about the strength of nationalist discourses worldwide. For example in 2010 over 94% of European Union citizens described their national identity as the most important form of group attachment (Eurobarometer 2010). However, conducting hypothetically similar survey in 1610 Europe, it is most likely that 94% of individuals interviewed would have no comprehension what national identity is (Mann 1993; Schulze 1996). Hence using such survey results just to say that national identities in EU are very strong today does not really tell much. What matters more is how are such collective understandings of social reality shaped and maintained. Focusing on the process of centrifugal ideologisation allows to assess how much are such collective perceptions dependent on the continuous ideological work – from the banal, everyday, practices that reinforce the nation-centric images of social reality to coercively enforced social actions that exclude, delegitimise or even criminalise the alternative ideological discourses.

### **3. Coercive organisational power**

There is no doubt that nationalism is a potent ideological force. Over the past two hundred years nationalist ideology, in variety of forms, has become a dominant source of political legitimacy and has established itself as the principal operative ideology of modernity (Malešević 2006, 2013). However no ideology, regardless how forceful and popular it might be, can achieve much without the concrete institutional support. Even the powerful monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam attained worldwide impact only after they became official belief systems of the three mighty empires: the Byzantine, the Ottoman and the Safavid respectively. The secular ideologies are no different: the rise of Marxism-Leninism was entirely dependent on the organisational capacity of powerful communist states – from Soviet Union and China to much of Eastern Europe. Similarly Fascism, Francoism and Nazism rose on the back of Italian, Spanish and German polities. The state is not the only social organisation capable of institutionalising ideological doctrines. From big private corporations to powerful Churches to terrorist networks and political movements many

non-state organisations have proved capable of galvanising influential ideological creeds. Nevertheless the modern nation-states possess more, what Michael Mann (1986, 1993, 2012) calls, despotic and infrastructural powers than other entities to enact and diffuse ideological doctrines. Thus with the rise and expansion of nation-states as the dominant form of polity nationalism became the principal ideological discourse of modern era. However to fully comprehend the link between the nation-state and nationalism it is necessary to take a brief look at the historical process that underpins this relationship – the cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion. This is an ongoing structural process that involves constant increase in the organisational capacity for coercion and ability to pacify the social realm under organisation's control. Despite occasional reversible trends and periodic disappearance of specific social organisations the coercive organisational power has for the most part experienced a cumulative trend over the centuries. This is particularly noticeable in the increased territorial scope, infrastructural reach and societal penetration. The cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion has been in existence for the past 12 000 years and has accelerated over the last 250 years (Malešević 2010, 2013, 2017). It is no accident that this acceleration coincides with the emergence and the worldwide proliferation of nation-state as the dominant model of territorial organisation. The rulers of pre-modern empires, patrimonial kingdoms and city-states utilised some organisational powers to maintain a degree of proto-ideological consensus among the aristocratic elites. However modern polities require much more organisational capacity to preserve social order and to maintain legitimate grip on power. To achieve this the leaders of nation states have to rely not only on the ideological concord (nationalism) but also on the coercive tools that they have at their disposal. Hence all effective nation-states monopolise the use of violence on their territory through the control of military and police. This control of force also allows for the further monopolisation of taxation, judiciary and education which in the authoritarian states usually extends to the full control of mass media. Unlike their pre-modern counterparts the nation-states also require and rely on the large administrative apparatuses, extensive and efficient transport and communication networks and many other advanced forms of infrastructure.

In addition nation-states have compact territories, fixed borders, centralised governing structures emanating from the capital cities. They often have substantial impact on economy, culture, politics and welfare of their citizens. All of these are ingredients of organisational and coercive power that makes nation-states infrastructurally much more potent than most of their pre-modern counterparts. As M. Mann (1984: 114) emphasises, nation-states are unique in a sense that they can 'assess and tax our income and wealth at source, without our consent', they 'store and can recall immediately a massive amount of information about all of us'; they can enforce their 'will within a day almost anywhere' in their domains; their impact on the economy is huge and they also provide the subsistence of most of people (in state employment, in pensions, in family allowances, etc.). This enormous organisational and coercive capacity coupled with the greater level of popular legitimacy, attained through nationalism, allows nation-states to enact and maintain a specific interpretation of social reality codified as 'the national identity'. Since nearly all social organisations that compose nation-states are created and maintained with a view of performing a specific task in relation to preservation or enhancement of nation-state their organisational roles (and ideological discourses deployed) are inevitably centred on reproducing the existing nation-state. Thus in modern era all people are born in nation-states, raised in the educational institutions run by and in the name of nation-states, are employed by nation-states and in old age and illness are provided and cared for by the nation-states. Even the private corporations that operate in this world have to follow the rules and regulations of nation-states. Simply put in organisational terms people live in a deeply nation-centric environment and their livelihoods are regularly dependent on a substantial degree of loyalty to respective nation-states. In such an environment the idea of national identity is less of a personal choice or an emotional or cognitive state of one's self being and much more a reflection on the organisational and ideological realities of the world people live in.

As scholars of everyday nationalism emphasise this nation-centric universe is maintained through banal and unnoticeable daily practices, from the nation-centric weather reports and tabloid newspaper headlines, the hanging flags on the government buildings, the everyday use of the national coins and postal stamps to the com-

petitive international sporting events such as Olympics or World Cups (Billig 1995; Brubaker et al. 2006). Nationhood is also enacted, performed, talked about, and entrenched through nation-centric consumption habits (Fox, Miller-Idriss, 2006). However what is crucial here is that all these practices entail presence of specific social organisations – weather reports are produced by the government created and financed meteorological agencies, and the mass production of newspapers, coins, stamps and national flags requires both public and private organisations. The state budgets allocate substantial financial resources for the ritualistic commemorative events, monuments, celebrations and other practices associated with the preservation of nationhood. Moreover open dissent against such commemorative events is regularly policed through ritualistic shaming or direct coercive acts. For example describing the 4th July US military parades or 11th November UK Remembrance day as a celebration of militarism will automatically invoke hostility from both the state officials and civil society groups. The decision to wear a white poppy on Remembrance day, symbolising peace, instead of the conventional red poppy has traditionally generated very negative reactions. Hence in 1930s women that wore white poppies were fired from their jobs, in 1980s government ministers and the prime minister expressed ‘deep distaste’ for such actions and even in 2014 white poppy wreaths placed at the Aberystwyth War Memorial were destroyed and thrown in a bin (Melville-Smith 2014). Hence the very presence and proliferation of ‘national identity’ is heavily dependent on the organisational and ideological scaffolds that prop up its existence.

#### **4. Framing micro-solidarity as national identity**

Anthony D. Smith (1991, 2010) and other neo-Durkheimian theorists of nationhood insist that national identities are real in a sense that they provide intense meanings and emotional attachments to individuals. For A. D. Smith (1991: 16) national identities ‘fulfil more intimate, internal functions for individuals in communities’; they are ‘called upon to provide a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions... members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging’. This rather conventional

view of national identities is built on a wrong premise that nationhood by itself automatically generates affection and meaning. Nevertheless if this was the case there would be no need to invest enormous energy and resources in making and keeping ordinary individuals loyal to their nation-states. If such emotional attachment was straightforward politicians, intellectuals and generals would not have to regularly make appeals for national unity, solidarity and the duty to sacrifice for the nation. Historians and historical sociologists have convincingly demonstrated that transforming disloyal peasants into enthusiastic Frenchmen, Germans, Czechs, Serbs etc. was an extremely difficult and protracted historical process that has never been finalised (Weber 1978; Breuilly 1993; Mann 1993; King 2005; Malešević 2012). Despite two and a half centuries of intense nationalist socialisation nationhood is still not universally accepted as the primary source of one's emotional bond. Even in times of wars and other national calamities most individuals value their family members, friends and local communities more than their nation-states (Malešević 2010). Moreover as R. Collins (2012) rightly argues the intensity of nationalist attachments remains dependent on specific events as nationalist collective effervescence cannot last for long time.

None of this is to say that emotions and meanings do not matter. On the contrary human beings are first and foremost affective creatures in constant search of meaningful action. Although in the short term human actions might be often instrumental, strategic and driven by rational choices in the long term motivation and internal fulfilment regularly stem from the meaningful and emotionally satisfying activities. In contrast to the utilitarian action which is premised on mutually interdependent interests emotional bonds do not necessarily entail reciprocity. Instead affective bonds require prolonged and dedicated, small scale, face to face interaction that one usually experiences within family networks, deep friendships, among committed lovers, close neighbourhoods, peers, clans, gangs and other tightly bound groupings. As micro-sociological and socio psychological studies demonstrate an overwhelming majority of human beings derive their emotional fulfilment, comfort and sense of ontological security from such small scale groups (Dunbar 1998; Malešević 2015).

Hence one of the key issues for all modern social orders is how to reconcile the instrumental demands of the large scale social organisations with the micro-level emotional attachments that mobilise social action. In most respects these two represent the polar opposites: while social organisations such as nation-states or business corporations are bureaucratic, formalised, anonymous, instrumental and emotionally detached the family and friendship related micro-groups are built on the sense of familiarity, intimacy, affective bonds, spontaneity and shared morality. Whereas nation-states are generally huge conglomerates of millions of people who will never meet each other and who constitute an abstract and for the most part cold entity, the micro-world of face-to-face interaction is premised on the emotionally shared warmth where everybody knows everybody else. Therefore to successfully close this enormous gap all social organisations have to devise adequate mechanisms which would project the image of micro-level solidarities onto the screen of the large scale social organisations. Since the nation-states unlike the business corporations can better utilise the rhetoric of kinship they are often much more successful in emulating the affective bonds of the micro world. Hence regardless of whether the particular nation-state adopts the ethnic or the civic discourses of popular legitimacy there is a pronounced tendency to frame the central principles around the myth of common descent. In some cases the ethnic mythologies invoke the sacrifices of 'our shared ancestors' such as in the Israeli and Serbian myths of Masada and Kosovo respectively. In other, more civic, myths the shared common descent is linked to the values espoused and fought for by the 'founding fathers' as is the case with the American and French national projects. In each of these cases common descent is not conceptualised in terms of the literal blood relations as nearly everybody is well aware that such links with the ancestors are not genetic. Instead the focus is on the moral responsibility that the common descent invokes. As S. Mock (2014: 87) emphasises the 'perception of distant familial ties alone does not translate into national community unless it is accompanied with a sense that those common ancestors suffered and sacrificed to maintain the group as a group'. In other words the institutions of nation-state deploy the imagery and rhetoric of micro-level solidarity to continuously legitimise and mobilise social action of individuals under their control. This is occasionally done

through the deliberate acts of political entrepreneurs, nationalist intellectuals or military figures but in most other cases it is almost a habitual practice that all modern nation-states are involved in. In this context, organisationally generated, deep ideological penetration is a precondition for organisational success. The cumulative bureaucratisation of coercion provides the long term built organisational environment but it is the ideology of nationalism that 'translates' genuine micro-solidarities into an attachment to a specific nation-state. What is externally and colloquially perceived as having a strong 'national identity' is in fact reflection of the long term structural development: the capacity of nation-states or social movements (in cases where the ambition is to secede) to ideologically and organisationally penetrate the micro-level universe and to connect the disparate pouches of micro-solidarity into a society-wide macro-level narrative of ideological unity. There is no 'national identity' without ideology, social organisation and micro-solidarity. It is the unique, historically produced, combination of these three processes that make what is perceived as 'national identities' possible. Obviously this is not to say that one's feelings of attachment to nationhood are insincere or a result of indoctrination. On the contrary the discourse of 'national identity' is by far the most dominant *weltanschauung* in the modern era.

## 5. Conclusion

To question the existence of national identities does not imply that individual feelings and cognitions of billions of individuals throughout the world do not matter. Moreover, as repeatedly emphasised, this argument does not support the traditional Marxist premise of nationhood as a form of false consciousness (Malešević 2006, 2010, 2013). On the contrary, in the contemporary world most expressions of national identifications are sincere and genuine and an overwhelming majority of individuals perceive their national identities as real, tangible and meaningful pillars of one's selfhood. There is no question that in the age of modernity, as E. Gellner (1983: 6) put it, 'a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears'. The point of this paper was to historically and analytically probe the structural context of such pervasive beliefs and practices. Rather than taking such statements of belief at face value it is crucial that they are historicised and contextualised. Once this is done



properly then it becomes clear that all claims to collective identities rest on the specific ideological and organisational scaffoldings that frame, integrate and ultimately control human feelings of attachment (to the small scale groups). To understand the significance of national identity in the contemporary world it is paramount to move beyond the conventional present-centric narratives of identification in order to realise that there is no identity without ideology and organisation.

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