Ethno-Symbolism and the Everyday Resonance of Myths, Memories and Symbols of the Nation

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to examine the role, function and significance of the everyday in the “performance” of the nation and the emergence of nationalism. By concentrating on the practice of nation, this paper seeks to determine how the ‘collective’ phenomenon of the nation affects political behaviour by relocating the emphasis of understanding away from powerful social actors, official institutions and mechanisms, important policy decisions, and ‘critical junctures’ to the everyday repetition of national ‘rituals’ typified by, and enshrined in, popularly resonant myths, memories and symbols. It is suggested here, that by unpacking the performance of these everyday ‘repertoires’ of national rituals at the individual level it is easier to understand and potentially anticipate how and why the nation matters. Such repertoires are necessary for the organised expression of contentious politics, and furthermore provide bases for social networks, described by Anderson (1991) as ‘imagined communities’. In this way it builds on McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly’s approaches to social movements by locating the bases of collective political action, identity, agency and urgency in Smith’s ethno-symbolist approach to nations and nationalism to examine the effects and feedback between the everyday practice of nation, political action based on the nation, and experience of this practice. By leaving behind the constraints of elite, structural, and institutional explanations of the emergence of nationalism, the role of popularly accessible and resonant myths, memories and symbols in creating a repertoire of political action and political identity becomes apparent, beyond a simple causal relationship with the state and/or economic development.
Introduction

The power of symbols to determine the course and shape of everyday life and political behaviour is often taken for granted. Symbols, ranging from flags to anthems, from paintings to passports, from saints to martyrs have the ability to set agendas, add legitimacy to elites and institutions, and inspire powerful popular protests against colonial powers. Through mechanisms such as resonance and engagement, everyday symbols, symbols of identity which are common currency in popular culture, can come to have the power to determine entire courses of radical political action. While the existence of these symbols impacts on political behaviour, it is almost impossible to predict the shape, course and strength of this impact. How can an outbreak of radical and/or violent nationalism be predicted on the basis of the existence of a resonant and accessible repertoire of myths, memories and symbols? How can one predict when myths, memories and symbols of the nation matter enough to create the basis for (potentially radical and violent) political action in one situation, and not another? One of the major problems is that no model or equation exists which is systematically able to effectively predict how national identity or the nation leads to the political movement of nationalism. History is littered with cases where it seems quite apparent that a moment of radical nationalism should have occurred and didn’t, and counter examples where preceding events seemed quite insignificant yet subsequently lead to full fledged, bloody, violent and destructive incidents of nationalism.

If prediction is apparently nigh on impossible in these cases, perhaps we might best explain nationalism through the unpacking and explaining of enduring and persistent national myths, memories and symbols. Instead of treating these phenomena as purely causal factors, it might prove most explanatory to consider these as providing popular and resonant bases for prisms of interpretation. These prisms are subsequently used by members of the nation who are well versed in their meaning and significance to make sense of the world at moments of crisis and tension. It will be hypothesised here that the everyday existence and persistence of myths, memories and symbols creates the basis for nationalism, not by acting as slow brewing antecedents of radical political action, but rather as providing what Connor has called ‘non-rational’ but none the less popular bases for interpretation and understanding of contemporary events. (Connor 1994) In this way, this paper will not cover the well argued territory of over when, where, why, or how the nation emerged, but instead engage with ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ questions of nations and nationalisms – how the everyday persistence and endurance of national myths, memories and symbols – no matter the historical veracity, legitimacy or longevity of their origins – over the longue-durée may help to explain and understand how the occurrence, unleashing and inflammation of nationalism.

What is a nation?

For the purposes of this paper, the nation will be defined after Smith, though slightly modified, as ‘a group of human beings, possessing common and distinctive elements of culture … citizenship rights for all members, a sentiment of solidarity arising out of common experiences, and occupying a common territory.’(Smith 1998: 188) The nation encompasses a common culture, history, territory and destiny and a political self-awareness that distinguishes it from other forms of collective political or sociological organisation. Nationalism is the movement for the attainment of a state on behalf of an existing or ‘potential’ nation – a collective movement by the nation, its elites and masses, to gain congruence between the institutions of the state and the
identity of the nation. What is not meant here is nationalism as an ideology – holding that the world is organically divided into nations which should be congruent with the state – though nationalists and their movements may explicitly espouse this. There are a variety of forms of nationalist movements, cultural and political, instrumental and romantic, differing in form and content, aims and means. Nationalism need not demand democratisation, though it is often defined by a belief in the political equality of all members of the nation. Furthermore, over the past two to three centuries of European history, nationalism has been associated with social, economic and political transformation – as a mechanism to aid in this change (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992; Breuilly 1993; Connor 1994), a function of this change (Anderson 1991; Winichakul 1994) or in reaction to this change (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1986; Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1991; Hastings 1997; Smith 1999). Nationalism can also be understood to occur in reaction to the transformations brought about in productive relations and a technology – all of which facilitated the ‘imagined community’ of the nation and as demanded by the structural transformations of the ‘modern era’ or as proposed by political elites. Nations can also reflect pre-modern social and/or political organisation – and underpin their (re)emergence in the modern era. Movements of a nation which seek to gain a congruence between nation and state, and contend that the nation should possess the requisite power and/or legitimacy which nationalists believe to be the nation’s due political, social, cultural and economic recognition constitute a form of social movement. (Tarrow 1998: 108-21; McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001: 77-84; Tilly 2004: 51-71; Tilly 2004; Tilly 2005: 31-51)

Ethno-symbolists suggest that some nations reach back to the myths and memories of a pre-modern era in order to (re)construct, (re)invigorate, or transform this community into the modern phenomenon of the nation. Other nations, competing for legitimacy and prestige with these ‘pre-modern’ nations may seek to demonstrate their claims of political, social, cultural, etc. legitimacy and authenticity through a process that requires extensive processes of (re)discovery, (re)appropriation, (re)affirmation, and (re)imagination in order to complete their transformation into a nation. The repertoire of this shared ethnic past can stem from the ethnic group or ethnie. An ethnie is defined by Smith as ‘a named human population with shared ancestry, myths, histories and culture, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity.’(Smith 1998: 191) In this argument, the core of ethnicity – the ‘myth-symbol complex’ and the mythomoteur –diffuses the myths, memories and symbols of the group contemporarily through the ethnic group and across generations, preserving and maintaining the form of the group, and the content of its identity over the longue-durée – i.e. those myths, symbols, values and memories that make the ethnie distinct and separate. (Barth 1969; Smith 1986: 200-208)

This begs the question: does antiquity vs. modern elite (re)creation have any bearing on the everyday character of the nation’s existence or its subsequent impact on identity and political behaviour? At first glance the variety of deeply felt ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ identities suggests that actual legitimacy of historical pedigree has little to do with the way that nations are ‘performed’ in everyday life, and that such distinctions have little or no impact on their potential as bases for political behaviour. While national myths, memories and symbols may potentially persist, this does not denote an historical or factual continuity in the content of the myths, memories and symbols of the nation. Despite the myriad of explanations of the nation and nationalism, the unifying factor of all explanations of nationalism lies in its popular resonance and what is popularly perceived as the nation’s salience in decoding everyday life. Decoding is not least a function of familiarity. Myths, memories and
symbols of the nation must constitute a resonant and familiar repertoire. Repertoires are the ensemble forms of political action which constitute the means of agitation for a social movement, such as the creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, processions, rallies, demonstrations, pamphleteering, etc. (Tilly 2004: 3-4) Such repertoires ‘convey the idea that participants in public claim-making adopt scripts they have performed, or at least observed before.’ (McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001: 138) The ‘repertoires’ of a nation’s myths, memories and symbols are held, performed and understood to varying degrees by members of the nation. The everyday practice of nation depends on the popular performance of trust and interdependence between co-nationals. (Renan 1882) This is apparent in examples such as the creation of publicly recognised associations, pursuit of friendship, kinship and shared beliefs, the securing of high risk enterprises in these sorts of relationships and associations, seeking and trusting government registration of vital events, and purchasing of government securities with funds otherwise committed to maintain interpersonal ties, etc. all of which require an anchoring of the atomised citizen within the rhetoric of the collective, and these are all found in the social transactions of co-nationals.(Tilly 2005: 137)

The Nation as Sacred Ritual

One way of understanding the basis for this trust is to hypothesis the nation as a sacred communion. (Smith 2003: 32) Religion broadly provides an excellent analogy in several ways for the everyday role of the nation. The nation, is predicated on the belief in common membership of its people, the sacred worth and value of its identity, and in the universal applicability of this identity to its members. (Smith 2003: 32-33) As a social phenomenon, the nation is typified by every day practice and/or performance of rituals. The practice of ritual is crucial for the nation because they are re-enactments of other actions that at their heart are prototypical and rendering the abstract with concrete meaning. (Connerton 1990: 53) Ritual, as the physical, textual, and/or symbolic re-enactment of the master narrative that lies at the heart of the nation, is most apparent in ceremonies which commemorate important events for the nation. Commemorative ceremonies constitute rituals which tap into the meta-narrative of the nation – thus creating and perpetuating the resonance of these myths, memories and symbols of the nation.(Connerton 1990: 70) They provide ‘points of entry’ for individuals thinking of issues at the collective national level – signposting issues of significance and the collective’s orientation to them.(Gamson 1995: 89) They play a crucial role by reinforcing the sentiment that ‘we are fulfilling history, and we will prevail.’(Tilly 2004: 66) They constitute a repertoire which ‘implies the need and desirability [for the individual], of some form of [collective] action.’(Gamson 1995: 89) As historical fact permeates collective memory it becomes a potent symbol with a collective resonant meaning to individual members of the nation – part of its ‘system of ideas’ and is taught in the nation contemporarily and over time. (Halbwachs 1992: 188)

1 The term collective memory is a highly contentious one, but it is being used here to refer to how social groups remember, forget or re-appropriate the past and therefore how the content of the national repertoire of myths, memories and symbols is filled. (Paez, D., N. Basabe, et al. 1997) Collective memories are ‘those memories of a shared past that are retained by members of a group, class or nation … [it] refers to shared memories of societal-level events especially extreme, intense events that have led to important institutional changes.’ (Halbwachs in Paez, D., N. Basabe, et al. 1997: 150) They are based on stories, rumours, gestures or cultural styles, in addition to literature and institutionalised practices, and in this way correlate to the theatrical ensemble character of a repertoire.
The popular accessibility of the repertoire of myths, memories and symbols creates a ‘consistency’ across the collective, through communication and action (ritual) even when messages and meanings may be conflicting, potentially arbitrary but broadly perceived as normal (Bourdieu 1962: 156; Schöpflin 1997) National memory simultaneously offers a ‘normative view of the past’ unifying the nation over time, and setting out and limiting political behaviours on the part of the nation – often using this contemporary form of ‘social identity’ in a retrospective manner. (Igartua and Paez 1997: 81) The potency of collective memory is dependent on popular resonance. A myth, memory or symbol is resonant when it strikes a common chord in the nation, denoting a common or universal significance for members of the nation.(Githens-Mazer 2006: 3) Resonance occurs when personal experience, whether real, vicarious or imagined, corresponds to these myths, memories or symbols in the repertoire of the community, in this case the nation. Popular resonance creates a balance between the individual desires of elites and the needs of the masses and the nation, and underpins the myths, memories and symbols of the nation as bases for a collective identity and the ‘authenticity’ and ‘legitimacy’ of the community. (Hutchinson 2001) Myths, in the context of nations, serve to ‘establish and determine’ a nation’s foundation and system of values, creating a set of beliefs put forward as a narrative about the group itself. (Schöpflin 1997: 27) These are note unique discrete events, but deployed and re-crafted on an everyday basis. A nation’s ‘myth-symbol complex’ serves to unite disparate individuals to the collective phenomenon of the nation through the shared meanings and values attached to the myths, symbols and memories of the nation. (Smith 1986)2 However commonly held myths, memories and symbols create consistency through communication and action (ritual) even when they may be conflicting. (Schöpflin 1997: 20-8) If resonance emanates from the familiarity and potency of a given myth, memory or symbol, then it must be in part on them being accessible to the members of the nation. This accessibility is a function of the nation’s myths, memories and symbols constituting a ‘repertoire.’

National myths, memories and symbols are about more than defining relevant and resonant political avenues for nationalist agitation, serving to anchor the individual experience of the nation and nationalism. The repertoire of myths, memories and symbols for a nation encompass certain ‘types’ of myths to affirm its foundation, and ensure the transference and maintenance of this repertoire. (Smith 1986; Schöpflin 1997; Smith 1998; Smith 1999) There are a myriad of opportunities for enactment of a nation’s repertoire of myths, memories and symbols, in ballads, stories, poetry, art, dance, music, commemoration, jokes, acts of worship, political activism, eating of certain foods, wearing of certain dress, etc. The ritualistic actions of performing the repertoires of the nation – in the maintenance, dissemination and performance of national myths, memories and symbols, whether in everyday popular culture, or on specific ‘national’ holidays express and exemplify cultural values. These values are in turn laws, fundamental sets of rules constituting an accessible and popularly understood prism to explain and engage with the everyday. The performance of the nation makes it powerful, in words and oaths, as well as in set

memory is the social mechanism by which the national repertoire of myths, memories and symbols becomes resonant, relevant and potent.

2 There is a danger of reifying the nation, and national myths, memories and symbols in such a manner as to treat them as a ‘unitary empirical datum.’ (Klandermans 1997: 3) Of course a symbol that exists in the national repertoire is not thought of, interpreted or understood by one single brain, or in one single context alone, and myths, symbols and memories of the nation are individually experienced, yet communally shared.
postures, gestures and movements. (Connerton 1990: 58-9) The everyday performance of national ritual is itself a tangible expression of national myths, memories and symbols, and constitutes a metonymic practice, ‘using one entity to refer to another that is related to it’ and aiding in the social determination what events from the past are important. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 35; Tambiah 1985: 125)

By performing the rituals of the nation, key myths, memories and symbols which underpin identity are reinforced and kept supple and dynamic, in so far as the practice of these rituals consistently ensures a regular maintenance of these concepts, reinforcing what an individual member of the nation inherently believes or knows to be and creating a resonant and accessible set of mnemonic systems for the nation. (Connerton 1990: 59) The dynamic quality of the collective national myths, memories and symbols is crucial – as rituals may lose semantic meanings, and gain indexical meanings. (Tambiah 1985) However, in periods of “revivalism”, ‘or when new cults are forged by charismatic leaders, there is a deliberate attempt to coin new doctrinal concepts and mould new rituals with meaning attached to the contents of the acts per se.’ (Tambiah 1985: 165) At the these times, the expression and practice of ‘older’ rituals has real importance, no matter how indexical the ritual may have become.

The dynamic nature of myths, memories and symbols when practiced as everyday commemoration is particularly important. It underpins popular perceptions of historical continuity and pre-modern antecedents. Commemoration of the nation, as practiced everyday, regularly, annually or occasionally can be separated into two constituent parts – content and symbolic practice. Content denotes the meaning which symbolic practice is intended to convey. It renders practice with the quality of metaphor, a kind of metonymic practice ‘using one entity to refer to another that is related to it.’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:35) This is distinct from symbolic practice – i.e. meaning is divorced from the physical/tangible symbol itself. Art, literature, plays, music are all examples where meanings are attached to performance. This means that productions of Shakespeare’s Pericles, or Henry V or Henry VI may have meanings during the Second World War which are distinct from the meanings of their recent performances in light of the Iraq War. As symbols of ‘Englishness’, ‘Britishness’, or the universal sense of the futility of war, these are still symbolic practices which undergo transformation in content. This occurs at high and low cultural levels, such that popular music, ballads, sport, etc. performed in one context may come to have new meanings in a later period.

Over time, as new social needs emerge to address changes in various cultural, structural and political situations, content and symbolic practice must also adapt to maintain salience and resonance. For the individual, national myths, memories and symbols provide social value because they are ‘founded on living traditions of the people (or segments thereof).’ (Smith 1998: 46; Smith 2003: 32) This may then mean that while symbolic practice changes in light of changes in fashions and norms over the *longue-durée* the content still constitutes a ‘tendency’ in a nation’s myths, memories and symbols. It may equally mean, that while a symbolic practice may appear continuous in the *longue-durée*, its meaning changes dramatically (see especially ceremonies associated with opening of British Parliament.)
Figure 1. Potential Changes in Commemoration over Time and as a Function of Social Need

The figure above depicts potential changes in commemoration as a function of changes in symbolic practice and content. Letters (A, B, C …) represent different forms of symbolic practice where as numbers (1, 2, 3,) denote different forms of content. The figure above is an attempt to track these changes in a pictorial form – to demonstrate how changes in commemoration, despite being transformed in content or symbolic practice are construed by those commemorating as being ‘continuous’ and having links to past experiences and practices in the collective memory. This is not an ‘unlimited’ or infinite process – the transformations are ultimately bounded by the nation, i.e. what is accessible and resonant. Commemoration as cultural expression takes on a symbolic role for society, persisting in time, and a function of salient adaptation. This figure attempts to show how transformation/adaptation can occur in relation to the variables of content and symbolic practice – reflecting shifts in ‘social need’ or everyday fashion. This means that there are a variety of possible outcomes when confronted with social or cultural change. The first is that there is no change at all (A, 1). The second is that there is a change in symbolic practice, but no change in intended meaning (B, 1). The third is that there is no change in symbolic practice, but that it used to convey a new meaning (A, 2). It is hypothesised that these changes
occur more or less constantly – though this dynamic quality especially pertinent for nations undergoing social, cultural, political etc. forms of transformation, gentle, moderate or traumatic. The fourth possible outcome is that both meaning and symbolic practice are discarded, and that this specific form of commemoration is deemed to no longer have salience and/or popular resonance, and entirely new commemoration emerges. Over time, further variations may emerge in symbolic practice and meaning. General ‘tendencies’ may repeat in the repertoire of nation’s myths, memories and symbols – over time and in light of structural, cultural and social transformations. While these tendencies persist, apparently new and unique commemorations will also appear – though they have emerged not as unique and discrete entities, but as functions of preceding commemorations. One other possibility, not depicted here, is that former modes of practice are ‘re-discovered, by national ‘intelligentsia’ or at the grassroots level. These rediscoveries allow past practices to be ‘reconstituted’ in contemporary commemoration to address contemporary needs – so that down the line, when a E, 13 appears, the important practice of A may be ‘re-discovered, and this commemoration reconstituted as an A, 13. (Hutchinson 1987; Hutchinson 2001) This occurs regularly with literature, where stories on subjects such as King Arthur are at regular intervals ‘rediscovered’ and/or re-interpreted in relation to English and/or British national identity. It is also regularly apparent in transformed geographic locations and architecture, where sacred places are retained, though meanings changed – such as Moscow’s Kremlin once having served as burial location for the Tsars (in the Cathedral of the Archangel) and later becoming the site of Lenin’s tomb. What emerges here is that over time, there are a number of possible changes in practice and content of the nation. Yet, in everyday practice, these commemorations appear to those engaged in them to have a significant and tangible continuity, rendering them with palpable senses of historical legitimacy in so far as they are practiced, and yet demonstrating that independently considered as discrete events they appear novel, unique, and possibly ‘constructed.’ The significance here is that repertoires aren’t unique independent moments of performance – forgotten each moment and created ex-nihilo for every performance of the nation.

In this way, myths, memories and symbols are not static, but rather dynamic and constantly being re-cast or re-invoked to maintain contemporary pertinence and meaning and so as to keep their popular resonance. (Gamson 1995) The national repertoire of myths, memories and symbols are recast and invoked either as a project of the nationalist elites, or through grassroots movements, from above and below – in order to address the needs of the collectivity of the nation. However, despite the constant state of flux for a nation’s repertoire of myths, memories and symbols, they translate contemporary meaning of repertoires of action across the longue durée of the nation. (Tarrow 1998: 32 and 93) Rituals and their practice, in times of crisis or revivalism bear new and heavy meanings; new and heavy meanings inevitably tied to popular resonance and perceptions of prior ritualistic and symbolic practice.

The myths, memories and symbols which create the basis of national rituals need not be about glorious foundations, victories or of a golden age. Some of the most potent national myths, memories and symbols are those of disaster, tragedy, massacre and defeat. (Smith 1986; Drumm 1996; Schöpflin 1997: 28-35) The ritualised commemoration of defeats, massacres, etc. whether annual or daily are based on ‘distinctly emotional sources’ within the collective memory of the nation, and these emotional sources emanate from experiences such as repeated periods of suffering, prolonged anxiety about one’s fate and the fate of one’s family, loss of family,
imprisonment under threat of life, and torture. (Frijda 1997: 106) These kinds of myths, memories and symbols, when commemorated through everyday practice can form some of the most potent and inflammable bases for political action. (Githens-Mazer 2006) The effects of these repressive experiences are permanent, creating unsolved problems and incorrigible expectations, permanently undermining a belief in a ‘just’ or ‘safe’ world and potentially aiding in the cultivation of a collectively shared perception of injustice. (Frijda 1997: 123) At times these emotional sources are specifically commemorated and remembered in what can be considered a search for catharsis – and national commemorations of myths, memories and symbols take on the form of a mutually performed (i.e. national) ‘sharing of emotions’. (Mosse 1991; Drumm 1996; Frijda 1997: 123; Nora 1997; Mosse 2001) This process of sharing further bonds co-nationals, to the nation itself, and to the narrative of the nation’s past as set out by the narrative of national memory. (Frijda 1997: 123)

Myths, memories and symbols may also become potent because of internal repressive pressures through the nation’s own sets of institutions and structures, or externally through suppression of repertoires of myths, memories and symbols which are deemed as challenging by external and opposing forces. (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 10) The everyday suppression and repression of popularly resonant national myths, memories and symbols can be subsequently significant in political behaviour, not least of all increasing the likelihood of members of the nation to ‘display aggression and initiate fights with friends and acquaintances.’ (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 11) If the expression of this collective memory takes the form of protest activity (especially peaceful protest) and this activity is suppressed by the movement’s opponents, then it is highly likely that more protest and political violence will result. (White 1989: 1281; Githens-Mazer 2006) Repression can, therefore, affect symbolic practice and content, and thereby dramatically altering the everyday practice of nation in a very brief period of time. It can accelerate the process of adaptation in Figure 1 by directly impacting on how symbolic practice and content is perceived as salient and resonant. It may have a particular effect on the meanings of commemorations, as there is likely to be a popular and elite recasting of the past to make sense of this repression in the present. This is because repression and suppression of a nation’s identity can ‘create an atmosphere of mutual fear and distrust … repression cannot fail to produce the same effect.’ (Bourdieu 1962: 153) Acts of repression by a movement’s opponents reify and focus conceptions of the collective’s grievance, and help to define the available and appropriate actions to rectify this grievance. (White 1989: 1294; Smith 1998: 46) Ultimately, the intensity of repression which accompanies the rejection of a nation’s claims directly influences and impacts on the relevance and potency of the content of the national repertoire of myths, memories and symbols being used to contextualise contemporary events by individual members of the nation.

**How do myths, memories and symbols affect political behaviour?**

The argument so far is that the ritualistic practice of “nation” is an everyday affair, anchored in myths, memories, and symbols whether (re)constructed or (re)imagined, or organic or created. Therefore distinctions based on the modernist-primordialist paradigm are actually immaterial to their everyday usage, their power stemming from perceptions of legitimacy and their regular performance – all of which enhance emotional appeal and create a potential for mobilisation. The sheer presence of resonant repertoire of myths, memories and symbols measured in popular accessibility, resonance or ritualised performance of the sacred nation, however is not
enough to predict the subsequent emergence of nationalism. What then are the political effects of the performance of the nation? The rituals of national identity may be strong in one case, yet not lead to a particular successful or strong nationalist movement, whereas in another case, nationalism may reflect constructive efforts by elites to unify otherwise disparate linguistic, cultural etc. groups and lead to the popular uptake of a ‘constructed’ nationalist banner.

Nations and nationalisms indisputably provide social networks, means and agendas to accomplish either attachment to or severance from the state, fundamentally affecting beliefs and attitudes of trust towards the state and elites. Nations are cause and effect of social interaction, impacting on, and possibly determining how trust networks are organised, the content of such relations, and participation in long-term high-risk enterprises such as the state. (Tilly 2005: 111-112) However, nationalism is more than a variety of repertoire for political action – a ready made strategy for engaging in contentious politics to achieve universal democratic ambitions. Social networks of the nation enable the transference of social memory and ‘make remembering in common possible.’ (Connerton 1990: 39) The mechanisms that underlie an individual’s attachment to the nation, and which explain how, once the collective has formed, this movement is framed, are crucial – after all ‘it is not just in the shape but in the content of what lies within that we need to seek an explanation.’ (Smith 1998: 83) As such, theories of social movements provide us with a mechanism to understand 1) how the repertoire of national myths, memories and symbols can be translated in political action (i.e. nationalism) 2) how repertoires of action can be translated into modern form of contentious politics in the nation 3) how these movements are bounded by popular resonance, and must therefore take place within the confines of repertoires of interpretation and action which are familiar to their participants, 4) potentially provide a way to measure and compare the effects of myths, memories and symbols in the same nation, and between different nations, and 5) potentially provide a way to understand the mechanisms which underlie harnessing, controlling, and even construction of nationalist movements.

Nationalism is a form of contentious politics which occurs where the constraints on political opportunities are under transformation, and where those who participate in nationalism do so in reaction to a variety of incentives. (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 2002; Tilly 2003; Tilly 2004; Tilly 2005) Contentious politics become social movements where social networks facilitate the occurrence and maintenance of these politics over a prolonged period of time. Therefore social movements are a collective struggle with a common purpose and solidarity in order to challenge elites, opposing collectives and authorities. (Klandermans 1997) Participation in a social movement is motivated by three key factors 1) a sense of injustice or ‘moral indignation’ 2) a sense of collective identity must be present for the emergence of a social movement and 3) a factor of agency, that sustained collective action will be able to alter conditions and politics it seeks to address. (Klandermans 1997: 17-19) Tilly labels these program, identity and standing. (Tilly 2004: 2-13) The emergence of shared perceptions of injustice, the reinforcement of collective identity, and the sense of agency occur at different levels of the collective, at different rates and in differing contexts. Injustice can also stem from a group’s mobility to claim the said status, as groups that are more powerful are often co-opted within other political institutional structures. These conditions emerge in response to various contextual factors and may be cultivated by those in the movement trying to persuade potential sympathisers of their take on these three factors (in this case nationalist elites and/or intellectuals).
The bonds that tie the collective together may come from socialisation, but are also likely to result from the institutions of nationalist movements and elite/practitioner efforts to organise and persuade others of the merits of the nationalist cause. The sustained collective action of a social movement can also ‘dramatically’ change an individual’s perspective on the merits of participation. One may be socialised or persuaded into sympathy for a social movement, but the experience of a specific action or event, especially where the everyday ritualistic practice of the nation is repressed by ‘challenged opponents’ of the nation, when interpreted through the prism of resonant myths, memories and symbols of the nation, may cause an individual to cross the threshold from sympathy to participation. (Klandermans 1992)

This also creates a basis for understanding a potential ‘feedback mechanism’, by which experience of political action (especially repression) can impact on what are perceived as resonant/salient repertoires. This illustrates a consequential effect between commemorative practice and political behaviour. By explaining how these repertoires translate into political practice, and how experience feeds back into these repertoires, the dynamic of identity and nationalism becomes apparent. Social movements develop their own ‘cultures’ in response to these organisations, groups, authorities, codes, and institutions with which they are engaged in their nationalist struggle, and are therefore reflexively defined by this struggle. (Swidler 1995: 38) The similarity in the outlook amongst the participants in a social movement is not only a result of a common identity but also part of the collective response to these institutions which the social movement is trying to change, not least as set by the common outcry concerning and interpretations of events. (Swidler 1995: 35-39)

National memory creates the necessary basis for identity and makes the narrative of the repertoire of myths, memories and symbols the *mise en scène* for individual memory, perpetuating the individual’s own identity and memories of past events in the broader context of the community. (Halbwachs 1992: 47; Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 18) Therefore a national movement’s encounters with opposing and especially repressive groups and institutions are crucial. In particular this may effect what myths, memories and symbols may subsequently appear pertinent, potent and salient to the elites/intelligentsia and participants alike in light of the strategies and tactics employed by the movement and in its repression.

Through the ritualistic performance and collective sharing of national myths, memories and symbols, individuals are much more likely to see the factors of not only agency, but especially urgency and injustice as being resonant with and highly relevant to, their own experience and influencing their political behaviour in a specific moment. Collective senses of injustice emerge through everyday rituals which reify perceptions that an ‘opponent’ is holding back the development of an ethnie into nation, nation into state, or blocking the nation from attaining its ultimate fulfilment of destiny – often construed as the restoration of a potent and resonant vision of a national past – nation’s golden age. In such cases, the intelligentsia of an ethnic or nation often seek to turn to a virile political form of nationalism in order to strongly stake out the autonomy of their community in the contemporary inter-state and international order, securing legitimacy and authenticity to the relevant cultural and political project of the nation by defining conceptions of ‘we’ and ‘them’. (Smith 1986; Gamson 1995: 100) Where this is a top down elite led approach, the elites/intelligentsia must accomplish this within the rubric of the delimited and defined repertoire of the nation’s myths, memories and symbols – a repertoire defined and delimited in part by these same elites/intelligentsia, but also bounded by the limits of what is ‘resonant’ in the nation’s collective memory. They can direct the action on
the stage – but once the performance begins it’s the actors on the stage carrying out the actions. Again, even were one to take up a position on nationalism based on theories of blocked upward mobilisation, or resource mobilisation – not the argument as expressed in this paper – it still falls to scholars of nationalism and social movements to understand that what fills these locations for sustained contentious politics is as of the same fundamental importance as the structural factors which may help to account for their occurrence. These ‘superior stories’, accounting for membership in a social movement as a consequence of social relations and ‘non-story processes’, are apparent where stories of past national and or ethnic injustices reinforce contemporary understandings of social injustice, and where contemporary injustice reinforces the popular resonance and contemporary meaning of these stories – where the nation marries past and present – individual and collective. (Tilly 2002: 40) The role of national myths, memories and symbols seems then a natural extension of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly’s project – yet the nation as a unique political ambition, and nationalism as a form of contentious politics outside of the broader narratives of structural transformations has, to date, been too often sidelined to being understood as a structuralist extension of modern state formation.

Conclusions

Myths, memories and symbols, distilled, perpetuated and enshrined in ‘national memory’ can therefore be understood to create bases for nationalist mobilisation through the consolidation and invocation of the factors of agency, injustice and identity. These are bases for a social movement based on the nation. Furthermore, despite the debates being waged over the ancient, pre-modern and/or modern character of nations, they are better understood as being derived from ‘experience’ – with perceptions of their legitimacy, salience and resonance not least a function of perceptions of continuity. Myths, memories and symbols become mobilising factors by providing these points of entry for individuals to engage with issues at a national level and signpost how collective memories, while individually remembered should be oriented in terms of the collective which surrounds them. Collective memory, in so far as it dictates the meaning for past events is a causal factor in interpreting the meaning of, and in deciding appropriate reactions to contemporary events. It tangibly interacts with an individual’s interpretation, understanding and contextualisation of current events in light of the memories of experiences individually and collectively remembered in the past. This means that an individual makes contemporary sense of an event within the rubric of the past in the ‘national memory.’ As a causal factor, national myths, memories and symbols define which repertoires of action which seem worthy, rational and reasonable at the collective and individual levels, thanks to popular resonance for members of the nation, which is defined by collective memory. It also provides a context by which individuals conceive of the potential of contentious political actions in reaction to these events.

Ultimately there is no one conception of the role played by specific myths, memories and symbols which fits every case of nationalist movement. Scholars examining specific cases of nationalism will find a careful examination of their content fruitful and explanatory in understanding why the nation – more specifically the myths, memories and symbols of the nation – form the foundation of this collective form of contentious politics. In each specific case, there can be no doubt as to the importance of the content of myths, memories and symbols – in so far as the organised and prolonged contentious politics of nationalism depends on the framing
and packaging of relevant myths, memories and symbols of the nation, promoting a relevant ideological package emphasising the primacy of the nation, and creating a model by which collective action on behalf of nation is understood as well as carried out.

What remains unexplained here are the same elements which have yet to be fully unpacked in any kind of social politics based on an identity agenda: 1) why the nation? (and potentially why this nation as opposed to other inter- and intra-competing identities, ethnicities, narratives, etc.) and 2) when the nation, i.e. why does the nation matter in some moments, and in some cases but not in others? Other questions follow – who defines the nation, and who remembers national memories? While a mechanism translating repertoires into action has been proposed here, there must be further investigation into how the process of transformation of these repertoires occurs, and also of the feedback loop between myths, memories and symbols, action and experience. Perhaps one way to begin to examine this is by examining moments where the confusion over latent expressions of the nation and national identity are quickly brought into focus – moments of spontaneous, unplanned radical nationalism, whereby the factors that are actually causing the reliance on the nation may, albeit, briefly appear to the scholar searching for these answers. However, it follows as a logical extension of the argument presented here, that the most fruitful form of analyses of nationalism as social movements will, however, rely on the study of specific cases of their occurrence, in order to further and distil our understandings of nationalism as a social movement, rather than attempting to apply social movement theory in order to determine only one type or moment of nationalism.
Bibliography


