The Post-Colonial Studies Reader

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DISSEMINATION

Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation

From ‘Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation’

How does one write the nation’s modernity as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal? The language of national belonging comes laden with atavistic apologies, which has led Benedict Anderson to ask: ‘But why do nations celebrate their hoariness, not their astonishing youth?’ (Anderson ‘Narrating the nation’ The Times Literary Supplement). The nation’s claim to modernity, as an autonomous or sovereign form of political rationality, is particularly questionable if, with Partha Chatterjee, we adopt the post-colonial perspective:

Nationalism . . . seeks to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment and fails to do so. For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal ideal, needs its Other; if it could ever actualise itself in the real world as the truly universal, it would in fact destroy itself.

(Chatterjee 1986: 17)

Such ideological ambivalence nicely supports Gellner’s paradoxical point that the historical necessity of the idea of the nation conflicts with the contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the effective life of the national culture. The nation may exemplify modern social cohesion, but:

Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself . . . The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical inventions. Any old shred would have served as well. But in no way does it follow that the principle of nationalism . . . is itself in the least contingent and accidental.

(Gellner 1983: 56)

The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past. Historians transfixed on the event and origins of the nation never ask, and political theorists possessed of the ‘modern’ totalities
of the nation – ‘Homogeneity, literacy and anonymity are the key traits’ (Gellner 1983: 38) – never pose, the awkward question of the disjunctive representation of the social, in this double-time of the nation. It is indeed only in the disjunctive time of the nation’s modernity – as a knowledge disjunct between political rationality and its impasse, between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of the nationalist pedagogy – that questions of nation as narration come to be posed. How do we plot the narrative of the nation that must mediate between the teleology of progress tipping over into the ‘timeless’ discourse of irrationality? How do we understand that ‘homogeneity’ of modernity – the people – which, if pushed too far, may assume something resembling the archaic body of the despotic or totalitarian mass? In the midst of progress and modernity, the language of ambivalence reveals a politics ‘without duration’, as Althusser once provocatively wrote: ‘Space without places, time without duration’ (Althusser 1972: 78). To write the story of the nation demands that we articulate that archaic ambivalence that informs modernity. We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion – the many as one – shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class, or race as radically ‘expressive’ social totalities.