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EUROPA FORTALEZA: FRONTEIRAS, VALADOS,
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BELONGING: SYMBOLS AND RITUALS OF THE NATION

Montserrat Guibernau Berdún

Departamento de Sociologia, University of Cambridge, UK

In modern societies there is evidence of a clash between the rational and instrumental needs of market capitalism and the aims of one of the most powerful agents of political mobilization, this is the emotional power of belonging to the nation as a *political community of choice*. While the market requires calculative thinking and a restraint or displacement of emotions, modern liberal democracies cannot survive without the legitimacy emanating from the consent of their citizenry. The latter entails the support of a people sharing a sense of common identity and belonging to the same nation. To be effective, a sense of belonging should accomplish two conditions: to be shared by a substantial part of the population and to be capable of instilling loyalty towards the nation, as well as feelings of solidarity towards fellow citizens. I regard these as indispensable attributes to fostering a sense of community among fellow citizens and necessary to construct a cultural basis for the nation-state.

This does not mean that all citizens experience a sense of belonging in a similar manner, or focus their feelings of attachment upon the same elements, or with the same intensity; however, it assumes that a sense of common purpose involving shared fate generates an emotional bond among fellow-citizens. Sharing a sense of belonging does not imply a

homogeneous citizenry since a certain degree of difference remains a constant.

Currently most Western liberal democracies are multinational and/or multiethnic and contain some groups that regard themselves as alien and detached from both the nation and the state because of choice, exclusion, marginalization, economic, social or political reasons. Whenever the proportion of alienated people within a nation-state grows and turns into what I call a '*significant group*', - this is a sizeable number of citizens ready to act as a political actor -, the legitimacy of the nation-state is questioned and its sense of community, social cohesion and ability to build a common future is fundamentally challenged. In such situations a democratic nation-state is expected to react by seeking some kind of accommodation of internal differences through the building of democratic inclusive political institutions and also by engaging in dialogue and responding to the demands of the '*significant group*'. But in some cases, the nation-state may decide to ignore, undermine and even criminalize the '*opposition*' movement. All will depend on the level of popular support obtained by the '*significant group*' and the willingness to negotiate and reach a peaceful agreement on both parts. Of course, geopolitical and strategic reasons connected with the interests of the international community will have to be weighted and are bound to play an important role in the final outcome.

To survive and prove its legitimacy, according to democratic credentials, the nation-state engages in nation building strategies destined to foster a sense of belonging and loyalty among its citizens. The construction of national identity fulfils this particular task through the implementation of a set of strategies, the most important are:

- The creation and dissemination of a certain image of the ‘nation’.
- The manufacture and spread of a set of symbols and rituals charged with the mission of reinforcing a sense of community among citizens.
- The advancement of citizenship, involving a well-defined set of civil and legal rights, political rights and duties, as well as socio-economic rights. By conferring rights upon its members, the nation-state facilitates the rise of sentiments of loyalty towards itself. It also establishes a crucial distinction between those included and those excluded, that is, between those entitled to citizenship rights and those deprived of them within the boundaries of the nation-state.
- The construction of common enemies. For example, the prosecution of war has proven vital to the emergence and consolidation of a sense of community among citizens united against an external threat, be it imminent, potential or invented.
- The progressive consolidation of national education and media systems as key instruments in the dissemination of a particular ‘image of the nation’, with its symbols, rituals, values, principles, traditions common enemies, and more crucially, a definition of a ‘good citizen.’¹

The Politics of Symbolism and Ritual

Belonging to a community or group is effected through symbolism and ritual. Symbols embody entities such as the nation, by providing them

¹ Guibernau, Montserrat (2007) *The Identity of Nations* (Polity Press: Cambridge) p. 25.

with distinct attributes destined to make them unique. In a similar manner, belonging to a faith, is also expressed through symbolism and ritual.

Symbols are necessary to legitimize and strengthen political power; however, symbols are also indispensable in processes aimed to challenge and overthrow a particular political order. In such situations the emerging new elite's success in attaining and consolidating power will depend, up to a considerable degree, upon their ability to either radically challenge and replace old symbols by new ones, or manage to imbue old symbols with a different meaning akin to support the emerging status quo.

Symbols stand up for ideas, values, worldviews, all of them defined as 'things that matter' to such an extent that individuals are often prepared to give up their own lives to preserve them. Symbols are powerful because they are able to prompt strong emotions and emotions stand as a powerful trigger for social action, including political mobilization.

Symbols only have value, meaning and power for those who are able to recognize what they stand for. Among the most potent symbols are those that indicate belonging to a particular group, be it the nation, a faith, or any other group or community. Even so, it is not the same to be aware of the meaning of a symbol than to identify with a symbol. Yet, where a group member regards a particular symbol as a sign of strength, an enactment of old battles, the remembrance of shared injustice, suffering and fear, the non-member sees a material object free from the distinctive character, meaning and value, members attribute to it. Only those who identify with symbols and are aware of their meaning feel offended by acts of disrespect towards them. In a similar manner only them, by

challenging certain symbols, can make a statement of dissidence capable of questioning the status quo.

In multicultural societies a significant number of people are able to identify symbols belonging to various cultures; however, they are only moved and feel emotionally attached to those symbols endowed with what I refer to as a ‘sentimental meaning’, by this I refer to some kind of emotional identification with a symbol beyond cognitive definitions and historical explanations of its origin and intent. Cognition may contribute to understand the meaning of a symbol, but it can never communicate the emotional dimension attached to it and experienced, with different nuances, by different people. The richness and complexity of symbols tolerates a degree of ambiguity in their definition, one that allows for a certain measure of emotional creativity on behalf of individuals while constructing their own sense of belonging.

Respect and reverence for symbols esteems from the content and meaning attributed to them within distinct communities and groups. Sharing certain symbols and being moved by them unites individuals. It also contributes to generate a sense of community and to foster a sense of solidarity among them. In addition, symbols act as organizers of social roles within the community and impose a sense of hierarchy and structure.

While symbols unite group members, they also alienate foreigners unaware, skeptical, curious or indifferent, to the meaning attributed to them. Symbols ring fence communities using a range of ‘*visible and invisible markers*’. Among the former are uniforms, badges, hairstyles, dress codes and salutes. Among the latter are private rituals generally anchored in experiences of past or actual persecution and discrimination;

for instance pogroms endured by Jewish people, genocide in Bosnia, repression of Catholics in Northern Ireland and Catalans in Spain during Franco's dictatorship.

In order to both make sense of a new socio-political environment and to transform or advance a novel worldview, we need either to construct new symbols or to re-create old ones by charging them with 'relevant meaning' for contemporary individuals. Symbols play a critical part in collective life, they offer a distinct interpretation of the world and they also become anchor points in individuals' life by sending specific messages that are routinely modified to fit new social needs. The process of constructing, modifying and identifying with symbols involves a strong emotional investment.

The role of symbols: regime change in a re-united Germany

After World War II, Germany was divided into four military sectors controlled by France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. On May 23, 1949, the sectors controlled by France, the United Kingdom and the USA became the Federal Republic of Germany and stayed in the area of American influence and capitalist economy. On October 7, 1949, the sector controlled by the Soviet Union became the German Democratic Republic and adopted communism. The Cold War divided Germany into two halves and prompted the construction of the Berlin Wall with its checkpoints as the key symbol of the separation between Western and Eastern Europe. On November 9, 1989 Berlin civil society mobilizations called for political reform and the checkpoints between Eastern and Western Germany were opened and people were allowed to travel freely. This date marked the 'fall' of the

Berlin wall. Subsequently the process of German reunification was extremely complex in economic, political and cultural terms. A 'Day of German Unity' was instituted to mark the anniversary of reunification of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Democratic Republic of Germany to create one single, federal Germany on October 3, 1990. This is a public holiday marked by political speeches, cultural events, communal meals, fireworks and other festive activities. Each year a different city hosts the national celebrations.

The Brandenburg Gate, the Berlin Wall and The German Unification Treaty have become key symbols of a re-united Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, many East Germans cut the coat of arms out of their flags, as Hungarians had done in 1956. The widespread act of removing the coat of arms from the East German flag sought to portray the plain black-red-gold tricolour as symbol for a united and democratic Germany.

At present the old black-white-red tricolour of the German Empire is still used by monarchists and those members of German royalty who long for the peaceful reintroduction of a German democratic monarchy. However the use of the old flag has been taken over almost completely by its prevalent use by the far right; since the swastika is illegal in Germany, the far right has been forced to forego any Nazi flags and instead use the old tricolour, which the Nazis themselves banned in 1935. The ban of Nazi symbols in Germany and some other countries is the main reason why many computer games related to World War II do not feature the Nazi flag, sometimes replacing it with the anachronistic flag of pre-1918 Germany, or the modern tricolour. The utilization of the old imperial tricolour by the far right and its attempts to associate the tricolour with its

antidemocratic and xenophobic ideals are strongly objected to by the modern German population.²

The necessary ambiguity of symbols

Symbols embody aspirations and values; they evoke moments of defeat and joy. They stand as the pillars of individuals' identity by helping them to make sense of their own personal life, as well of the life of the community they belong to. In order to fulfill such an ambitious task it is crucial for symbols to retain some ambiguity allowing for a variety of meanings. Symbols and ritual are employed to mark transition points in the individual's life. A wide range of initiation rituals are performed with the aim of imbuing order and predictability into an unknown or challenging transition. Fear of the unknown generates potent feelings that are channeled through ritual and often involve a series of tests on the suitability of the individual to rise into a new status be it as an adult, a leader, or a group member.

The ability to re-define and to construct new symbols is heavily influenced by the distribution of resources; yet powerful and influential individuals, states, churches and corporations, heavily invest in the generation of a symbolic universe making sense of the world. It is through the manipulation of symbols that the powerful reinforce their authority.³ However, not all symbols stick into the mind of individuals and not all symbols fulfill the aims of their creators. There is a measure of unpredictability regarding the level of success achieved by powerful

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Germany#1989_to_today. Accessed 12th July 2012.

³ Kertzer, D. I. (1988) *Ritual, Politics and Power*. Yale University Press: London, NewHaven p. 5.

entities and individuals seeking to create a symbol capable of generating people's loyalty and fervor.

Belonging to the nation is represented through symbolism and ritual. Taking an oath, wearing distinctive clothes, cutting or arranging hair in a certain way, singing a song, adopting a specific salute, wearing a uniform, a badge or a ring; these are all symbols connecting the individual to a specific group or community.

As Kertzer notes, during the French Revolution 'Different costumes came to represent different political positions, and wearing the wrong color, the wrong trouser length, or the wrong hat could lead to a street brawl'.⁴

Lynn Hunt, the French historian, notes that these everyday symbols did not just express the individual's political position but, by 'making a political position manifest, they made adherence, opposition and indifference possible'.⁵

It is through symbolism and ritual that a collectivity defines itself as a named group, for example 'the English', 'the Jews', 'the Masons', 'the Catholics', etc, and establishes its own self-image. Thus, by praising the group they belong to, individuals are praising themselves.

Symbols provide the content of ritual as a powerful instrument not only to preserve tradition but also to innovate and transform whenever felt necessary. As Mary Douglas writes: 'It is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts'.⁶ Symbols are sacralized through ritual.

⁴ Kertzer, D. I. (1988) *Ritual, Politics and Power*. Yale University Press: London, NewHaven p. 158.

⁵ Hunt, Lynn. (1984) *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*. University of California Press, p. 56, 61-68.

⁶ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger*. Praeger: New York, p. 62.