

The Descent of Nations: Social Evolutionary Theory, Modernism and Ethnosymbolism

Abstract: This article explores the use of a revised conception of social evolutionary theory towards an understanding of nationalism. First I review the debate between ethnosymbolism and modernism, through the lens of the Warwick Debate between Gellner and Smith, arguing that both are partly right. Secondly I outline what the revised conception of social evolution is looking first at its traditional conception before outlining a Darwinian view of social evolutionary theory. Finally, I examine how Darwinian social evolutionary theory can help fruitfully bring the ethnosymbolic and modernist perspectives together. This is done by a sustained engagement primarily with the theories of Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner pointing to how Darwinian social evolutionary theory can provide a link between the two theories that makes them mutually supportive rather than opposed.

Introduction

One of the long running debates in nationalism studies is between theorists of a modernist persuasion, who believe that the nation and nationalism is a recent invention (e.g. Gellner, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1992; Breuille, 1993) and those of a perennialist persuasion, who believe that, whilst the nation is mostly modern, there is some evidence of movements similar to nations and nationalism in pre-modern times (Smith, 2001; Hastings, 1997; Hutchinson, 2005). Though these two perspectives are often pitched against one another, in this article I will argue that using a revised conception of social evolutionary theory, along more Darwinian lines, can help demonstrate a continuity between them that suggests that they may be mutually supportive rather than opposed.

For the purposes of this article I am going to be mainly focusing on the work of Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner, though the work of other theorists will be brought in. They were both leading proponents of their respective views and were, in Gellner's (1996: 366) words, often 'pitted against each other' in debates between perennialists and modernists. For this reason, it provides a clear case of two seemingly opposed views that I will argue can nevertheless be reconciled through the use of the social evolutionary theory. Whilst this is not

the first attempt at bringing together ethnosymbolism and modernism, and it is worth noting that Smith (2003: 359) himself saw the two approaches as being complimentary, it is the first sustained attempt through using the meta-theoretical framework of Darwinian social evolution.

I begin by reviewing the debate between the modernist and ethnosymbolic conceptions of the nation through the lens of the Warwick debate between Ernest Gellner (1996) and Anthony Smith (1996a, 1996b). Having done this, and established my own position on whether nations are modern or pre-modern, I outline the revised conception of social evolutionary theory, dubbed Darwinian social evolution, explaining its divergences from the other understandings of what social evolution is. Finally, I use the revised conception of social evolutionary theory to demonstrate how aspects of Smith's and Gellner's theories can be reconciled in a way that strengthens both of their respective arguments, thus also demonstrating the use of Darwinian social evolutionary theory more generally for understanding the development of nations and nationalism. My general view is that social evolutionary theory can help fruitfully explore why certain nationalist projects come to fruition rather than others.

The Warwick Debate

The Warwick Debate between Gellner (1996) and Smith (1996a; 1996b) centred on what Gellner (1996: 336) dubbed the 'clear dividing line', namely whether or not the past of a nation, prior to its existence, was important. For Gellner nations were created around about the eighteenth century as a necessary response to the emergence of industrial society. The need for a shared universal education, in order to train people to work in the more mobile economy, fostered a need for a shared language and a shared identity. The creation of this

high culture subsequently led to the formation of nationalism (Gellner, 2006)ⁱ. Because nations are novel formations, it was not necessary to know about their past in order to understand them: ‘if it tells half the story, that for me is enough, because it means the additional bits in the other half are redundant’ (Gellner, 1996: 367).

This is somewhat true of modernists generally: there is the view that continuities from earlier times are not important, or at least not a major factor, for understanding the modern nation (Hutchinson, 2005: 11-12; Brueilly, 2005), though more recent studies have looked at continuities with the past, in structural, ideological and ethnic terms, and the developmental constraints that this places on modern nation development (e.g. Malešević, 2013, Wimmer, 2004; c.f. Özkirimli, 2017: 143-153). This paper can, therefore, be seen as a contribution to this expanding debate.

Smith (1996a: 359) agrees with Gellner that modernism only tells half the story, however he believes that the other half, the pre-history of the nation, is also important. It is in the other half that the ethnic ties, memories, myths and communities form that can be an important influence on national development (ibid: 361-2). Smith’s argument is that nations arise out of conditions from the past, but these past influences are important in shaping the type of nation that they become. This is what lies behind the concept of an *ethnie*, which for Smith is an ethnic group that has a core of experience that is transmitted through history in the form of myths, memories, values and symbols (Smith, 1988: 15). Nations are not natural, but they are anchored in history and are part of a historical process (Smith, 1981: 85). Smith argues that the *ethnie* is a step along that pathway, and one that needs to be understood in order to understand a nation’s formation.

The essence of the debate boils down to whether or not the pre-history of a particular nation is necessary to understand it and its formation, and, related to that, are nations exclusively modern phenomenon or do they have antecedents in the past?

My own view is that the modernist and the ethnosymbolic perspectives are both right to a degree. I believe, with the modernist perspective, that nations are exclusively modern phenomenon. Nations are, as Walker Connor (1990: 97) says, a mass phenomenon. Consequently they can only really be a modern phenomenon: the necessary communication networks, state penetration and widespread education, for the dissemination of a large group identity, just did not exist prior to that period of time (Breuilly, 2005: Anderson, 2006).

Smith (2015: 404) objects to this definition arguing that it is 'circular': 'the concepts of nations and nationalism are defined in purely modern terms and are accorded exclusively modern features which, by definition, could not have emerged before the onset of modernity'. I have some sympathy with this argument, as well as with Susan Reynolds (2007: 183) argument that what constitutes a nation is subjective and a matter of belief, and consequently the definition changes through time. But I think the argument that modern nations are exclusively modern is largely correct. The definition is tautological to an extent, but only in the same sense that modern warfare is a tautological definition. The technology for modern warfare, with aeroplanes, tanks, missiles etc. did not exist before the modern era, so consequently it could not exist. The same, I believe, is true of nations. Whilst it might be the case that 'pre-modern' nations had some aspects of what we would now recognize as nationalism, such as civic codes connected to religion, or mass festivals (Smith, 2001: 21-22; Smith, 2015: 405), the difference lies in the fact that a modern nation has all of those aspects, and has them disconnected from religion, not just some of them.

This, however, does not mean that the past is unimportant, and that the religious origins of some ideas or beliefs disqualifies them from having an influence on the modern shaping of nations. Modern forms of social and political organization, even if they are radically new, inevitably build in some way out of the structures and ideas of the past. They are ‘articulated and developed gradually along the contours of pre-existing ideas and practices’ (Malešević, 2017: 153). This is as true of nations as it is of any form of social organization; they are located in history and so build on that prior history in their pattern of emergence. Contrary to John Breuilly’s assertion that ‘It is not continuity but discontinuity... that needs emphasis’ (2005: 34) I believe that continuity is just as important as discontinuity is in order to perceive how and why a social formation emerges. It is also important for understanding why certain nationalist projects succeed and others fail, why certain *ethnies* are chosen and others are not.

Reconceptualising Social Evolutionary Theory

To begin with I want to make a clear distinction between social evolutionary theory and sociobiology (Wilson, 1975), or evolutionary psychology (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). The latter two formulations rely on using biology, and human nature, to understand why humans behave the way they do, form social groups, and what constraints exist on our behaviours and social formations (c.f. van den Berghe, 1987 for an application to nationalism; and Gat, 2013, for a more recent version). Whilst human nature and biological constraints may be relevant, social evolutionary theory is not directly concerned with human nature and investigating what biological constraints there may, or may not, be on human actions but with how a set of societies and cultures change and adapt, by applying the ideas of selection and adaptation taken from Darwin’s theory. This approach, therefore, does not

support the contested view that social behaviour can be directly or adequately explained through our genetic inheritanceⁱⁱ. The version of social evolutionary theory that I will outline and defend is applied at the level of institutions, social structures and cultural ideas, between populations of entities at these levels rather than a single entity itself. In effect, it argues that Darwinian conception of evolution by natural selection can be equally applied to the process of social formation and institutional development, as they can be to biological processes.

Before I outline the revised conceptualization it is worth describing the traditional image of how social evolution is understood as a theory so as to have a clearer image of what the revisions are. Social evolution is usually posited as a theory of progress: there is a continual process of progressing towards something, be it truth or goodness, and a constant moving away from backwards societies. To some extent this is held in the word evolution itself. Coming from the root word *evolverer*, it has the meaning ‘to roll’, that it was an unrolling or an unfolding of something already written. The idea linking evolution with progress is thus contained within the word itself (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010: 30; Gould, 1977: 35). This link between the term evolution and progress was the reason that Darwin, opposed to the idea that evolution meant progress, only rarely used the term evolution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and preferred the term ‘descent with modifications’ as a more accurate capture of what his theory meant (Gould, 1977: 36). Despite Darwin’s caution, the link often remained and consequently social evolutionary theories usually posited that it was possible to graph the different types of societies along a progressive line and so say which ones are better than the others, which have progressed more than others (Gellner, 1964: 9-12). As a process this is usually conceived as operating in global, uniform terms, with all societies following the same pattern through a cumulative series of stages (Mann, 1986 36).

There are many potential objections to this version of the theory, from moral objections about how it seems to grade societies in a rank of inferiority and superiority, to

historical objections that it does not seem to fit the record. For this reason, in this paper I want to outline a Darwinian version of evolutionary theory and so draw out the important differences between these older conceptualizations and the revised conceptualization, and stepping away from the unhelpful link to the idea of progress.

The first point of criticism is that the traditional conception is unilinear in character: one social form must progress into another, in the correct sequence. The revised conception understands that this process is multi-linear in character. That is, it is important to understand that when one social formation changes into another one it is not because there is only one choice available. Rather, there are other competing options available that agents can choose among and using a multi-linear framework helps to better understand why one option was chosen, or proved to be successful, over others (Spruyt, 1994a: 5). That is, in order to understand why a particular social formation was adaptive at a particular time it is important that it be understood in the context of the environment, and the population of entities, that surrounded it.

This is how the revised conception of social evolution operates. Social evolution operates on the same three core principles of Darwinian evolution by natural selection: 1) the principle of variation, that through genesis and recombination there is a generation of new varieties; 2) the principle of inheritance, that information can be passed on, replicated, through successive generations; and 3) the principle of selection, that there is an interaction between a set of entities and their environment such that some of them prove to be better adapted than others and so are more likely to pass on their information structure (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006a: 4-5)ⁱⁱⁱ. Consequently some entities will do better than others, though the ‘losing’ entity need not necessarily be destroyed. Competitive selection, where entities struggle against one another, is only one form that selection takes and not necessarily the defining one (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2010: 89-90).

What does it mean to say that something is 'selected' or 'adapted'? These are familiar concepts in biology, however they probably need some expansion in the context of society and culture. This is especially true as there is sometimes a too easy, and uncomfortable, link between 'adapted' and 'better' in a the progressive sense that we are trying to avoid. However, this is again where a reconceptualised version of social evolution departs from the older characterization. Whereas the old conception of social evolution operated on 'general' terms (Mann, 1986: ch 2), as something that was true of all places, the reconceptualised version operates in local terms. This is crucial for understanding what adaptation means.

Evolution requires variability, it requires a range of differences to select among, which have differences in fitness, so that some are 'better' than others in a certain environment, and that these characteristics are in some way heritable (Sober, 2000: 9). It is important to stress this: no one thing is exclusively responsible for either variation or selection. The organisms, institutions or cultural ideas interact with the environment and it is this that produces variation and change, not any one on their own. Sometimes one aspect can be more important than another, but all are necessary. Variation, in biology, occurs as a result of mutation of genes, random drift (changes occur despite offering no adaptive advantage) and recombination (new combinations of genes on the same chromosome) (ibid: 18-20). This process is random, in the sense that it is in principle possible for any variation to be produced, however the selection of variants is not random (ibid: 38). This is crucial when it comes to understanding what the concept of adaptation means. When speaking about things, organisms, institutions, cultural ideas being 'adapted', it is always in reference to an environment that they are adapted or adapting to. Natural selection, in this sense, is a local phenomenon – entities are adapted to their immediate environments. A consequence of this is that it means that there are no adaptations that are, so to speak, universally 'good'. It is always context dependent.

It is important to stress that this does not have a moral implication to it: just because one entity outcompetes another does not mean that is 'better' based on some optimal criteria, or more moral than others. Natural selection, and social selection, is not a perfecting phenomenon. It selects the best available variants in an environment, not the best possible that can be conceived (Sober, 2000: 39). Very often suboptimal adaptations can persist over generations because evolution relies on, and builds on, structures from the past (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010: 220). Or, to use an analogy from Reeve and Sherman (1993: 95) 'selection is a little like a game of poker: The best hand (phenotype) wins (reproduces) regardless of whether it is a pair of twos or four aces'.

How does this apply in social evolutionary terms? By thinking in local terms, i.e. how this specific social formation fits these specific conditions in a particular environment, social evolution can escape from the problems of stages and its moral implications. Using the concept of selection it looks at understanding why a particular cultural idea, or variant (Richerson & Boyd, 2006), is adaptive at a particular point in time. Darwinian social evolution operates as a framework which can help complete explanations of change and development of particular institutions and social formations (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006a: 2), but it is not enough on its own: it requires auxiliary hypotheses, explanations and assumptions in order to explain specific events (ibid: 17). However, because it is not tied to a story of world growth or general, stage-by-stage explanation of development, it can be a general framework that provides an explanation of particular processes (Hearn, 2014: 183). 'It is a metatheoretical framework rather than a complete context-specific theory' (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010: 46).

As David L. Hull (2001: 2) notes, the concepts of biological evolution, genes, organisms and species can be readily redefined as replicators, interactors and lineages. Doing this not only makes these categories more general, and therefore applicable to understanding

social evolution, but it also makes clearer their function in the evolutionary process. Replicators are defined as ‘a entity that passes on its structure largely intact in successive replications’ (Hull, 1988: 408), with a interactor being ‘an entity that interacts as a cohesive whole with its environment in such a way that this interaction *causes* replication to be differential’ (ibid: 408 [emphasis in original]), and a lineage is ‘an entity that persists indefinitely through time either in the same or an altered state as a result of replication’ (ibid: 409). What matters is the function the entity happens to perform at a particular time in a particular process (Hull, 2001: 21)

Boyd & Richerson (1992) provide an outline of how a general framework can explain particular processes. Cultural and social evolution is capable of generating different variants, and consequently different unique historical trajectories, despite it being the result of a universal process (ibid: 287-8). This happens through two means. Social and cultural evolution, like biological evolution, proceeds on the basis of inheritance, variation and selection. Different variations occur in response to different environments, with the 'better' variants being selected as they fit that environment. Societies then inherit that variation from their past. In the social world there is the added element that people can make choices about what to inherit and what not to inherit - so a rule or tradition can be evaluated by people and, if it is no longer beneficial, can be dropped or swapped for another thanks to human agency (ibid: 289-90). So far this might sound similar to the alternate form of social evolution, with stages. However, the key difference is that the Darwinian understanding of social evolution can recognize that at any particular time there can be multiple variants, or possible stages, that societies can go through (Spruyt, 1994a). This is because there is not just one local optimum that a society can reach, but rather many different local optima (as well as sub-optimal maximums, or false optima). The analogy that Boyd and Richerson (1992) draw on is that of a topographical field: there are different hills and peaks, all different in some ways.

A society can go up one, but not the others. Once it has started up a hill, however, it is difficult, if not impossible, for it to get to another hill. For this reason, despite being in a nominally similar environment with similar populations you can still get different societies with different historical trajectories (ibid: 294-8). This conception of social evolutionary theory is not without criticisms. A recent robust engagement with it comes from Michael Mann (2016) building on earlier criticisms he laid out in the first volume of his *Sources of Social Power* (1986). In it he outlines three types of social evolutionary theory: a minimalist theory, a multilineal theory and a general theory of evolution. He argues that the minimalist theory, that people adapt and respond to external pressures, is true but trivial and places too much emphasis on the exogenous without making space for endogenous potential of people, and struggles to avoid the problem of tautology (Mann, 2016: 205). The multilineal view, which argues that different groups have different trajectories, suffers in Mann's view because it sees groups as being too bounded and not as fuzzy around the edges as more likely correct. This also inhibits it from creating a more general evolutionary theory (ibid: 206).

However, a general theory of social evolution is problematic. In order for one to exist there would have to be demonstration of how one part, or one system, flows into the next and the theory would have to be capable of taking in the various different aspects and applying the theory to everything. As Mann points out sociology "is not that simple" (ibid: 234). It is worth pointing out that Mann still appears to be conceiving of the idea that social evolution requires stages and needs to be progressing towards something (greater complexity is the example picked out (ibid: 206-207)). However, this need not be the case.

He points to changes in military power to argue for the case that changes tend to come in a cyclical pattern rather than an evolutionary one. Mann makes the case that empires, such as Rome or China, would often have great military strength, and would be able to range large numbers of infantry to defeat their enemies. However these city-based empires often got

defeated by more nomadic warrior groups who used mobile cavalry units to out-manoeuvre the larger infantry armies. More mobile units were then, in turn, defeated when large infantries became viable with technological advances that created firearms ‘There are... persistent cycles in superiority between offense and defence, elan or discipline, and mobility or solidity, and there are also enduring military verities through the ages. American military cadets are required to read Sun Tzu, a Chinese general of the fifth century BCE. This is not evolution’ (ibid: 221).

This however is not necessarily the case. The evolutionary process does not say that there is always forward momentum, or progress towards something: it merely says that what is successful in a particular environment will be selected for. In the military examples, the driver is the technological change. This alters the environment, with successful military powers being the ones that can adapt to the new surroundings. So the return of infantry with the introduction of fire arms is not a case of a cyclical return to large standing armies, but rather a selection for a particular kind of military tactic in light of the technological changes that have altered the environment. Likewise, the continual use of the writings of Sun Tzu does not speak to a lack of evolution, but rather to the adaptability of the writings themselves. Applicable ideas and insights can still be gleaned from them, so military cadets can still use them. The same could be said of almost any idea or set of writings that survive. But the insights, or the use of the insights, of Sun Tzu in contemporary warfare could well be different from their use or interpretation in 5 B.C.E. China. That is an interaction between the individual and the ideas. But it is not in itself anti-evolutionary. As Hutchinson (2005) has pointed out, many ideas, myths, symbols etc. are revived, or returned to, as people seek inspiration and sometimes these can help. If they can, they get selected. If not they die out and some other idea, either old or new, is adopted.

I would agree with Mann that a general theory of sociology is probably impossible, but I see no reason why this means that a general social evolutionary theory is not possible. As Hodgson and Knudsen (2006a: 15) argue, because Darwinism operates at a high level of generality it needs to be supported, individual and more fine-grained cases, by additional hypothesis, theorizing and evidence. Social evolutionary theory works as a background theory that can be generalized to different cases, but is not sufficient on its own to explain every case (ibid: 16). As they say, ‘The Darwinian framework has a high degree of generality, and it always requires specific auxiliary explanations. The meta-theoretical framework of Darwinism provides a way of inspiring, framing and organizing these explanations’ (ibid: 16). A more minimal theory is possible.

Given this, is Mann correct to say that a more minimal theory, whilst possible, is also trivial and potentially tautological? Again, this is not necessarily the case. It is, perhaps, easier to slip into doing too-easy analysis and connecting things together, falling into the trap of ‘just-so’ stories, where everything appears to be an adaptation that is suited for whatever purpose it later had (Gould & Lewontin, 1979). But neither is this definite. Evolution by natural selection, and Darwinian social evolutionary theory, is not tautological. As Elliot Sober (2000: 72) points out the main hypothesis of Darwinism are historical in character, meaning that they can be verified empirically. Whilst there is something of a tautology to the idea that the fittest traits, or the most advantageous traits, are the ones that survive (and we know this because they survived) (Rosenberg & McShea, 2008: 28), this is not the case when examined more closely. The point of a social evolutionary analysis is to work out why a particular variant was advantageous over another variant at a particular moment in time, not just to announce that the ‘victor’ was more ‘advantageous’. The tools of social evolutionary theory help to understand why one variant is more successful in a particular environment than another.

For the reconceptualised understanding of social evolution there are then no stages and no unilineal pathways. Societies and cultures change over time as a result of changing environmental pressures, leading to certain cultural notions, ideas or institutions being ‘selected’ for over others, on the basis of their particular adaptive efficiency to a particular local environmental condition.

Smith and Gellner: Some Criticisms of Their Approaches

How then does the theory of social evolution link with ethnosymbolism and modernism? And what can it contribute to the study of nationalism?

As alluded to in the introduction, I believe that social evolutionary theory can help to reconcile aspects of Smith’s and Gellner’s theories. In order to demonstrate this, in this section I will evaluate some criticisms of the two theories and then, in the succeeding section, I will use social evolutionary theory, and the respective theories of Smith and Gellner, to resolve them.

First are criticisms of ethnosymbolism, particularly Smith’s version, provided by John Breuilly (2005) and Umut Özkirimli (2003; 2008). Özkirimli attacks ethnosymbolism on a variety of grounds, but the two more interesting ones for this paper are those concerned with history. He argues that ethnosymbolism is terminologically slippery, and moves between *ethnies* and nations, confusing the borders between the two, too easily (2003: 345). Related to this, he makes the case that ethnosymbolists place too many restrictions on nationalists: that nationalists are not as constrained by the pasts in what they select and how they build their nations as Smith makes out (ibid: 347-348). It is the use of the symbols and myths that matters, not what they were or how many (ibid: 347). For this reason he believes that John Hutchinson’s revisions to ethnosymbolism, which accept that there are multiple and rival

traditions, symbols, myths etc. that can be drawn on effectively 'define ethno-symbolism out of existence' (Özkirimli, 2008: 9).

John Breuilly (2005) makes a similar argument in relation to the importance of history and the problems of the ethnosymbolic framework. He presents a thought experiment to outline his thinking (2005: 17-18):

Imagine a knock-out competition involving 128 competitors. Each competitor has a name and a distinctive marking. The competitors are divided into sixty-four pairs which decrease to thirty-two pairs in the second round and so on, until a winner is declared after seven rounds. The nature of the competition varies from round to round. Sometimes it is a contest of chance such as the tossing of a coin. Sometimes skill or strength determines the result. We know in advance that there can only be one winner [...] Once the competition is finished and we look back over the successive rounds the name that will stand out as it figures in every round will be that of the winner. So will the winner's marking.

Breuilly's point is quite simple: as the conditions of the tournament change every round the victory of any particular competitor, at the end of the tournament, is going to be down entirely to luck. The only continuity would be the particular symbol and name of the competitor. But the symbol and name are unimportant for deciding the victor in a particular round: they just happen to be there and could have been any other name or symbol. '[U]nless one can show the same causal mechanism at work in each and every generation, continuity cannot be related to one dominant factor' (Breuilly, 2005: 18).

In both of these conceptions the key theme of the argument is that the past is largely unimportant for understanding the modern nation and nationalism. Whilst there are things to be gleaned from the past, this is incidental next to the use they are put. The particular symbols, myths and so on do not matter to the nationalist project.

With regard to Gellner's theory, the main criticism has been to do with the theory's functionalism (O'Leary, 1998: 51-2). For Gellner industrial society and nationalism go together and the one brings into being the other: in order for industrial society to work, with

its needs of mass education, divisions of labour and the structural arrangements to support this, a high culture needs to be dispersed such that the people come to believe themselves to be part of one collective group and are thus more mobile and able to support the industrial society (Gellner, 2006: 34-7). City-states, or small communities, would not be large enough, or have enough resources, to be able to facilitate such a task and thus the scale of the project is a national one (O'Leary, 1998: 43). 'Ultimately, for Gellner, states took the form and pursued the ends industrial society required' (Hearn, 2006: 74).

In a recent series of critiques Hudson Meadwell (2012; 2014) has taken this further. Specifically he attacks the notion, important to Gellner's theory, that nationalism is necessary for industrial society, and his implicit political conception of nationalism. Meadwell (2012: 566) argues that the strength of the connection that Gellner's theory holds between nationalism and industrial society is not one of function, but rather of necessity. The claim, however, fails as Gellner does not demonstrate either empirically or conceptually that nationalism is in fact necessary for the development of industrial society (ibid: 571-5). The argument for the link between them is therefore a case of 'special pleading' (ibid: 569).

The political conception is then problematic as the definition that Gellner provides, 'Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent' (2006: 1), does not work: the political principle does not contain any legitimation within it, and would require extra-legitimation from other theories (Meadwell, 2014: 19). As well as which, the theory implies that nationalism is only an experience of the politically dominated, who experience resentment at alien rule (ibid: 23), but this is not a specifically nationalist problem, as it is a case of a reaction against despotism (ibid: 24). Gellner's argument from his definition, according to Meadwell, is therefore too limited for nationalist movements (ibid: 24), but also incoherent as it does not allow for the possibility of

assimilation, but only for separation, stemming from his view of nationalism being an experience of the dominated (ibid: 20).

Meadwell (2014: 26-7) makes another noteworthy point: that later in his writings Gellner conceded that there existed strong dynastic states along the Atlantic coast, prior to the advent of nationalism, which could be seen as proto-nations, and play an important part in the formation of industrial society. In this case the logic of the argument is not working as it ‘inverts the putative relationship between nations and industrial society’ (ibid: 27). This can also be seen in the posthumously published *Nationalism* (Gellner, 1997), wherein Gellner advances the idea of ‘time-zones’, whereby different matches of a pre-existing state or high-culture affected the course of nationalisms development in particular regions of the world.

These criticisms of both Smith and Gellner touch on some strong points and expose weaknesses in their arguments. But it is also at this nexus where Darwinian social evolutionary theory can step in and provide a route for joining the two arguments together.

Smith, Gellner and Social Evolution

So how can the version of Darwinian social evolution elaborated here help bring the respective theories of Smith and Gellner together? As mentioned in the introduction, Smith saw ethnosymbolism as being a help to modernism, in helping to provide answers to some questions that other theories missed (Smith, 2003: 359). Smith was not opposed to the idea that there could be pre-modern nations, which distinguishes him from the modernists (Smith, 2001; 2015) but the ethnosymbolic perspective contains no necessary need for there to be pre-modern nations. This is a good entry point into how the two theories can be brought together through social evolutionary theory.

The link begins from a key element of Smith's conceptualization of nation-formation (1989: 342): 'historical nations are ongoing processes, sometimes slow in their formation, at other times faster, often jagged and discontinuous, as some features emerge or are created, while others lag'. Although Smith does not say it, what he is describing here is implicitly a social evolutionary process. According with Smith's description, evolutionary processes have no end point, as variations are constantly being generated, both at micro and macro-levels (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006b: 484-7).). As said, there is an interaction between the variants and the environment so that the better cultural rules, institutions and so on will be selected for that particular environment and, crucially, will get passed on and inherited. This is the foundation for the 'myths, symbols, memories and values that make up distinctive traditions' that Smith (1989: 346) refers to and which persist through time, though not without undergoing transformation over time.

This link, as well, is contained somewhat in the approach of Ernest Gellner. For Gellner, at least in *Nations and Nationalism*, it was necessary that nations came into being in order for industrial society to work. Because industrial society needs to constantly be growing, producing more and consuming more in order to maintain legitimacy through improving living conditions, it has social mobility at its heart. There is a need for a new kind of division of labour that cannot be supported by old divisions of caste, rank or class, one that can accommodate the greater mobility of people (Gellner, 2006: 24). There is also a subsequent need for more generic training, which enables people to perform different tasks within the society (ibid: 26). Nationalism is, in effect, the glue that holds industrial society together (Gellner, 2006).

Meadwell (2012), as we saw, has attacked this angle in Gellner arguing that he fails to prove that nationalism is necessary for industrial society. The arguments Gellner makes in *Nations and Nationalism* does not support the notion and, as Meadwell (2014) also points

out, this formulation is only adopted in *Nations and Nationalism*, having not featured in his earlier discussions in *Thought and Change*. But is this really a fatal flaw for Gellner's theory? Perhaps not, as with a small change in focus and the use of the Darwinian social evolutionary theory, the problem can be resolved.

The solution comes from seeing nation-states not as being *necessary* for industrial society but as the *most adaptable* for industrial society.

What is meant by this? In Gellner's later writing, as discussed above, he moves away from the idea that nations emerged without precedent. As he notes, 'along the Western Atlantic seaboard of Europe it just so happened that there was a series of strong dynastic states...so that nationalism, requiring that polity and culture be co-extensive, had its political shells and cultural fillings pre-fabricated' (Gellner, 1998: 29). But why, in this case, did it 'just so happen'? This is where the concepts of Darwinian social evolution, and Smith's work, come together.

Smith (2015) argued, following Hastings (1997; 1999), that the kernel of ideas that go on to form nations can be found in the Biblical tradition. Though viewing Hastings' formulation as 'rather sweeping' (2015: 406), he does none the less see the origins of the ideas of chosen peoples and the idea of the ethnic model of nations as originating from the concepts drawn from Christianity (ibid: 405). More specifically there are the ideas of covenant, election, exile, closeness and sacred kinship as being important in the 'shaping' of nations (ibid: 406-410). He uses 'shaping' rather than 'making' as he accepts that there were other important factors, in economics, politics and society, at work that came together to make nations (ibid: 410).

This ties in well with Smith's argument about how nations form out of *ethnies*. Smith's (1989) argument is that different types of *ethnie* will tend to produce different types

of nation. He makes a distinction between lateral *ethnies*, defined by being ‘territorially wide’ but ‘lacking social depth’, and vertical *ethnies* which have ‘ragged boundaries and aristocratic culture’ but have ‘communities with much more compact boundaries, a more socially diffused culture and a greater degree of popular mobilization and fervour’ (ibid: 347). These background conditions are important in the nation’s development, as lateral *ethnies* are more likely to develop into civic nations and vertical *ethnies* are more likely to develop into ethnic nations (ibid: 340). This is, to an extent, a social evolutionary argument. The prior historical formations place constraints on what is selected in a particular environment. Consequently the conditions that generate a lateral *ethnie* mean that a civic nation is more likely to be adaptive, as it relies more on incorporating different groups under an expanding bureaucracy that could spread a core ethnic cultural identity (ibid: 352-3) whilst the conditions that create a vertical *ethnie* mean that an ethnic nation is more likely to be adaptive, as the stronger cultural sense and weaker state created the conditions for a more ethnically centred model of the nation (ibid: 353, 355).

What this shows is that there is a continuity between older forms and newer forms of social organization, and that the influences on these formations can come from different places. What Smith terms *ethnies* could just as easily be called ‘proto-nations’ in Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology (1992). But it is not so simple to say that there is a straight line between the older forms and the newer forms. For this reason Smith’s terminology of *ethnie* will be favoured, as it does not imply that what was under formation was a nation-to-be.

Let’s return to the earlier point of this argument: namely the question of how it just so happened that there were strong dynastic states on the Atlantic seaboard in Europe. I said that the problem in Gellner’s theory that Meadwell (2014) identifies can be solved by changing Gellner’s terminology from the necessity of nations to the adaptability of nations. Now I will

elaborate on what this means and how Smith's and Gellner's views, that of the importance of continuity vs discontinuity, can be brought together.

The concepts of importance from Darwinian social evolution are those of inheritance and selection. What selection implies, as discussed above, is selection with regard to a particular environment. As Hendrik Spruyt (1994a; 1994b) has shown there was not a simple and straightforward continuity to the sort of dynastic states that Gellner was talking about from the feudal model. As a result of an increase in long-distance trade, the economic possibilities this generated, and the growth of towns there was a change in the political environment that made feudalism unviable (Spruyt, 1994b: 538-539). In consequence new institutional forms arose these being the sovereign territorial state, city-states and city-leagues, all of which were capable of mobilizing the new resources better than feudalism was (ibid: 539). They were, in other words, better adapted to that environment. The sovereign state won out as it was better able to solve the problems associated with this new form: it had a clearer line of authority, resting in the sovereign, clearing up any potential confusions about whether a commitment or contract was legitimate; it had a better definition of its territorial boundaries, meaning the area of where its authority ended was clearer; and it was more capable of iterative behaviour than were the alternatives; and they were mutually supportive - other territorial states were compatible with one another (ibid: 554-555).

This is an example of the selection process. The changing environment generates new variants (Richerson & Boyd, 2006), in this case the differing modes of political institution. Institutions are systems of rules that crucially allow information to be passed on from one generation to another in the form of a lineage (Hodgson, 2009: 169-170). In this case it is allowing the structure of a sovereign state to be passed on and, consequently, imitated by other political actors. The environmental change has meant that the form is more adaptive than the others, again not necessarily the best that can be conceived but simply the most

efficient in the particular local environment of Europe at that time, and thus it is selected for. There are particular habits, practices and roles within the institution that are being replicated and so inherited and passed on (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010: 137-144; Runciman, 1986; Runciman, 2009: 143-45). The institution of the sovereign state itself is an interactor (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2010: 172), engaging with the environment and proving to be more efficient than its competitors making it more successful

Now we turn to Gellner. What he identifies in *Nations and Nationalism* (2006) is another environmental shift, as a result of the industrial revolution and the rise of industrial society. Kings and Queens are on the way out as locus's of authority and sovereignty and the changes to work patterns and division of labour is opening up the political environment to more changes. Empires are still there, and still going (Kumar, 2010), but a gap is opening up for new variants to come in. One such variant is the nation-state and nationalist ideology. This is what Gellner is identifying, not the necessity of nationalism to the new industrial society, but its adaptability as against other forms, in particular as against empires. While empires share a lot of structural similarity with nation-states they are not the same thing, as the emphasis is different in terms of what the boundaries of identity include and what the focus is (Kumar, 2010).

But why nation-states? As Smith (2015) has pointed out nations have an antecedent in scriptural parts: the ideas of nations, as covenants of people who are chosen and decide their own destiny, are present in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, both of which had enormous influence on Europe. These provided a shaping influence that, in the context of the environmental change, lead to changes in institutional formation.

John Hutchinson's work (2004; 2005: ch 3) is useful at this point. He argues that nations are not, as conventionally understood, culturally homogenous entities. Within them

they have a lot of conflicts over exactly what the particular meaning of a myth, or symbol is. Nations are, in his phrase, 'zones of conflict' (Hutchinson, 2005). Hutchinson (2004: 117) argues that, at times of social crisis, there is an emergence of 'moral innovators' who provide a new directions for the nation. This can occur through the process of 'mythic overlaying' which is 'the creation of fresh myths by the new nationalists embodied in extraordinary contemporary collective sacrifice against a traditional 'enemy' that can be presented as renovation of a national continuum when the old myths have failed' (ibid: 120). In this process the old myths, which are replaced by the renovated ones, are not destroyed, but are instead pushed into the background where they can remain available for revival, should the new myths fail (Hutchinson, 2005: 71).

This is, effectively, a description of the process by which variety at a cultural and social level is generated in social evolutionary terms, but it applies to political and intuitional formations that exist prior to the nation as well. The reason why myths are overlaid on top of others, but not eliminated, occurs due to the selection process. Variants are generated through the process of cultural conflict, but there is also a selection for them: the social and cultural environment, as much as the geopolitical and political one, means that certain sets of myths, structures and so on are going to be better adapted to particular circumstances at particular times. Because people are intentional agents they are capable of making a choice on what to inherit and what not to inherit, so they can evaluate a rule or tradition and if it is no longer beneficial drop it, modify it or swap it for another one (Boyd & Richerson, 1992: 289-90). This is done with reference to the criteria of what is more adaptable to a particular environment: what is going to be better at binding a people together, for instance, or garnering more support.

That is why the concept of *ethnies* is important and why they influence nation formation: because different peoples have different cultural forms, myths, ties and memories,

these place constraints on the way a nation can form and what it can do. The environment is a constraining factor and no one model works for everywhere for that reason. Smith (1981: 65) argues that groups with more striking and well-known myths are more likely to survive, and those with more obscure myths are less likely to survive, that is become nations. This question of a strong myth, or a striking one, I think misses something about the myths themselves. It is not necessarily some internal feature of strength within the myth itself that enables its survival: rather it is perhaps the myths *adaptability* to new environments and scenarios that gives them their strength. This goes some way to addressing what is an acknowledged weakness for ethnosymbolism (Smith, 1992: 439-40); namely the question of why it is that certain symbols are chosen rather than others (Özkirimli, 2008: 6).

But it is a weakness that can only be addressed by including the modernist perspective: namely the environment that the myths, symbols, the replicators, are adapting too - industrial societies with wider group loyalties. The concepts of inheritance and selection provides a theoretical framework for understanding this: the myths and symbols replicate themselves, but they can transform overtime, as a result of differing environmental pressures. The selection process then operates to weed out certain myths and symbols, or alter parts of their character to fit the changed circumstances (Hodgson & Knudsen, 2006a; Richerson & Boyd, 2006). This is where Hull's (1988; 2001) concepts of replicators, interactors and lineages comes in use. In this case the myths and symbols can be understood as replicators, which are embodied in institutional organizations that function as interactors. The entities replicate themselves, but they are also interacting with the environment as this places selective pressures on which myths and symbols are adaptive in the particular environment, but also causes them to change, that is the meanings and emphasis in the myths and symbols alters in order to be more 'successful' in the particular environmental conditions, in this case they are the most adaptable to the particular needs of modern societies.

Nations are thus, per Gellner, new formations that occur with modernity as a result of changing environment brought about by the industrial revolution. It is not however wholly new or free from the constraints of the past: the prior formations, through the sovereign territorial state, the culture, myths and symbols that were in its history, the *ethnie*, place a constraint on the ways it can develop. The nation and nationalism emerges as a result of a selection process, acting on the particular myths and culture of Europe (the religious and cultural heritage) (Smith, 2015), that adapt and are selected for the new environment created by industrial society.

Nation formation is always an ongoing process: there is no finished product to the nation, as changes and variations are always popping up. At times there can be, as happened with modernity, a punctuation event (Gould, 1980), wherein lots of changes that were bubbling beneath the surface suddenly all come together to effect a very rapid change, in historical terms. But there's no definitive end point.

Conclusion

Whilst there are real and identifiable differences between modernist positions on nationalism and ethnosymbolic and perennialist positions, I believe that both sides are getting at an essential truth of the matter. Nations, whilst modern, do not arise out of nothing and it is important to understand their past history, and the constraints this past history places on present, in order to understand how and why they formed in the particular manner that they did.

For this reason, my argument in this paper has been that a reconceptualised version of social evolutionary theory, to bring it more along Darwinian lines, can provide a means to understand this. By looking at the respective theories of Anthony Smith and Ernest Gellner,

as two opposing sides on the perennialist and modernist dispute, I have demonstrated how the theory can help to resolve some issues with understanding nationalism and its formation and, in particular, understand why certain symbols, myths, memories and institutions are passed on and continue to be potent elements shaping nationalism, but cannot create the variant of nationalism and the nation-state until the change of environment brought about by modernity. It also helps provide a means for understanding why particular *ethnies* transform into particular nations, and why certain *ethnies* succeed and others do not.

Nation formation is a process (Smith, 1981: 85), as such it is never definitively finished, nor are nations ever set in stone. Something came before them and something will come after them. I humbly submit that the theory of Darwinian social evolution can provide a means for understanding this process of transformation and change.

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ⁱ This was Gellner's 'pristine' account of nationalisms development, he had a 'secondary' theory of its development that of the parable of Megalomania and Ruritania (Hearn, 2006: 99-100), but that need not concern us here. Meadwell (2012) also provides a cogent critique of the question of 'necessity' for Gellner's theory.

ⁱⁱ With thanks to the reviewer who suggested these lines.

ⁱⁱⁱ This terminology is deliberately 'universal', in the sense that it is not linked to biological terms (i.e. genes, organisms), in order to highlight the fact that the concepts can be applied to more than just biology.