

The Self-reflectiveness of Society
---- Nationalism, Idealism, and Social Constructionism ----

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As N. Luhmann's social system theory and U. Beck's theory of reflective modernization assert, modern society has been gradually becoming more self-reflective. In this presentation, I will claim the following:

- ① The nationalism is a phenomenon emerging from the self-reflectiveness of society.
- ② The social constructivism is one of methods appropriate for understanding the self-reflectiveness of society.
- ③ Despite the weakening of nationalism, the reflectiveness of society will survive and grow stronger.
- ④ Hegel was the first thinker of the self-reflectiveness of society
- ⑤ We should consider the transculturality and the task of "Beyond Border" in relation with the self-reflectiveness of society.

Let's start with nationalism

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- 1 Nationalism
Voluntarism, modernism, and primitivism

Anthony D. Smith classified nationalism into several kinds and made clear the situation of argument on nationalism.

(Anthony D. Smith, The Ethic Origins of Nations).

- ① Voluntarism

Anderson and Gellner claim that nationalism emerges from a collective understanding of shared nationality. Smith refers to such an understanding of nationalism as "voluntarism."

- ② Modernism

Anderson and Gellner believe that nationalism is an artifact of modern society. Smith calls it "**modernism**".

- ③ Primitivism

The traditional understanding of nationalism believes that nationalism is based on “natural” nations or cultures. Smith calls it “primitivism”.

Modernist conceptions oppose primitivist ones, and modernism and primitivism are incompatible. However, voluntarism can be combined also with primitivism.

And I want to put focus on the thinking way of voluntarism.

Every social action has meaning and is performed on account of its meaning. In this sense, all social actions and their consequents are constructed based on their meanings.

This perspective helps us understand a society, and it is appropriate especially for understanding the modern societies, including nationalism. This approach is often referred to as “social constructionism.”

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2 Approach of Social Constructionism

(1) Social Constructionism

The earliest social constructionists, Berger and Luckmann believed that social institutions are constructed because individuals create them through their understanding of them.

However, a recent social constructionist Kenneth J. Gergen argued that even the understanding of individuals is constructed by society.

Gergen claimed that knowledge does not reside in the brain of an individual, but rather is situated in social relations.

So, “Construction” has two meanings in the context of social constructionism:

“A society is constructed by a language.”

“A language is constructed by a society.”

However, these definitions are not separable, just as the definition of a word such as “apple” is not separable from the definition of the object to which that word refers.

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(2) A social constructionist perspective on nationalism

B. Anderson described the social function of reading newspapers in a way that can serve as a social constructionist explanation of nationalism:

“We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that. [...] Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers [...] Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated

simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar.” (p. 35)

By reading newspapers every morning, watching news on the television every day, watching dramas on the television every week, and so on, we come to understand and construct ourselves as a community in which we share a culture.

Anderson’s explanation of nationalism is akin to the social constructionist explanation of social institutions.

According to social constructionism, every utterance and every action is socially constructed. And in contrary every social fact is linguistically constructed. From this perspective, social constructionism turns out to be similar to idealism.

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3 Idealism and Nationalism

(1) Hegel’s Theory of the Nation–state

G. W. F. Hegel claimed

“If a family expands itself to a nation, and a state coincides with the nation, then it will be a great happiness” (*Wenn eine Familie sich zur Nation erweitert und der Staat mit der Nation zusammen fällt, ist dies ein großes Glück*) (Hegel Werke in Zwanzig Bänden, 4, 246)

and he explained the state as a “substantial destination of an ethnic people” (*Staat als substanzialer Zweck eines Volkes*). (HW, 10, 350)

Thus, Hegel was a nationalist in the sense of Gellner’s definition (“Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”).

However, this is not the most important aspect of Hegel’s theory of state. His most important contribution in this regard is his criticism of social contract theory, which assumes that individuals construct the state via a social contract.

In contrast, Hegel believed that an individual comes into existence only in a family, an ethnic group, or a state. According to Hegel, the freedom of individuals is not realized in the freedom of choice, but in the nation–state. His famous expression is “The highest community of human beings is the highest freedom” (*Die höchste Gemeinschaft der Menschen ist aber die höchste Freiheit*) (HW, 2, 82).

But we don’t accept nowadays the notion of ‘objective spirit as a substance.’ The nation-state doesn’t take precedence over individuals in all types of nationalism. However, the nationalism seeks always the identification of individuals with the nation-state. Therefore Hegel’s theory of nation-state would be one extreme type of such identification. We can consider Hegel’s idea of an objective spirit to be an initial conceptualization of the self-reflectiveness of society.

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(2) Social Constructionism as linguistic idealism

Although both idealism and social constructionism assert that everything that exists in a society is constructed by our cognitive processes, they differ substantially in their methods. Whereas idealism adopts an introspective approach to consciousness, constructionism analyzes **speech acts**, under the influence of Wittgenstein's theory of a language game.

If we assert that all our cognitions about the world are linguistically constituted, then it can be called "linguistic idealism", then social constructionism is an application of linguistic idealism to society.

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4 After nationalism

As I mentioned earlier, our society has become more self-reflective in the modern age, and nationalism is a product of this self-reflectiveness. This tendency toward self-reflection seems to persist even when nationalism is weakened as a result of changes in some of the conditions of modern society.

We should also note that **the birth of the humanities and social sciences in the modern age was also a result of the self-reflectiveness of society**. The social sciences are necessary for modern states to develop public policies, and the humanities are necessary for modern states to establish society's goals.

Even if the humanities and social sciences were created to subserve nation-states and even if nation-states were to lose their significance, our society would continue to need the humanities and social sciences, insofar as our society will continue to be self-reflective.

And **the change of the humanities and social sciences** would depend on the change of the self-reflectiveness of our society.

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As to culture, Wolfgang Iser already pointed out that Concepts of culture itself is socially constructed, as follows.

“Conceptions of culture are not just descriptive concepts, but operative concepts. Our understanding of culture is an active factor in our cultural life.

If one tells us (as the old concept of culture did) that culture is to be a homogeneity event, then we practice the required coercions and exclusions. We seek to satisfy the task we are set - and will be successful in so doing.

Whereas, if one tells us or subsequent generations that culture ought to incorporate the foreign and do justice to transcultural components, then we will set about this task, and then corresponding feats of integration will belong to the real structure of our culture. **The `reality' of culture is, in this sense, always a consequence too of our conceptions of culture.**”

(Wolfgang Welsch, ‘Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today,’ in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, London: Sage 1999, 194-213.)

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This means that culture exists not as the constructed thing but in the process of social construction.

And in this process the word “culture” is used not for describing the constructed thing, but the use of the word has operative functions in terms of the self-reflectiveness of society.

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