

Re-imagining Political Community

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Abstract

The nation presents itself as the most viable political community in our time, promising good life to the inhabitants. This essay questions this way of thinking about political community and discusses Aristotle's views on the community and political community. The argument is that the nation fails to secure participation of every citizen by its design, and therefore the idea of political community must be re-imagined.

Keywords: Nation, Community, Political Community, Political Imagination, Aristotle

I

My purpose in this essay is to interrogate the nation as a political community in Aristotelian framework and explore the aspect of imagination in the formation of political communities. I also examine whether the nation can provide the conditions of good life to its citizens.

The essay suggests that a nation cannot fulfil its responsibility as political community since, by its nature, it cannot ensure participation of all citizens. This necessitates a re-imagination of political community, by which good life is accessible to all.

II

The nation is not something that exists naturally, like say forests or rocks. But this has not prevented the nation from becoming one of the most important modes of social and political organization in the modern world, due to which perhaps we assume that they are simply there. The concept of nation should be understood properly if an assessment were to be made how it has functioned in fulfilling people's aspirations.

The origin of nation is western, to be sure. The available literature suggests that it emerged with western capitalism and came as a fundamental component during the phase of industrialization, which was followed by imperialism and colonialism.

What we call 'nation' is primarily an idea. Gellner points out in his book, *Nations and Nationalism*, that nations and nationalisms are the result and a condition of the industrial society both. As an ideology, it has helped create cultural homogeneity in modern

society, without which imagining a collective existence is impossible. The core of Gellner's argument is that nations and nationalisms are arbitrary, not inscribed.

Benedict Anderson defines nation as 'an imagined political community'.¹ He argues that the members of even the smallest nation will never know many of their fellow members, let alone come face to face with them, but each imagine their association with each other. This happens due to what he calls 'print capitalism'. Through the consumption of printed words, it is possible for persons, who may not be knowing each other otherwise, to feel that they live in a homogeneous, greater collective, sharing a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' with many others. The national sentiment is produced, according to Anderson, by modern imagination expressed in cultural forms, creating a national identity for its members.

Central to the conception of nation is a sense of mutual belongingness, which is cultivated by performance of various narratives, rituals, and symbols. Eric Hobsbawm argues that the nation depends upon the invention of national traditions, affirming a 'continuity with the past'.² The invented traditions combine to form a narrative through the repetition of symbols or imageries, which helps maintain a sense of continuity between the nation's present and its past, and by which people get to reflect upon their shared history and common origins.

The problem, however, is that the nation's borders do not happen by accident. They are constructed, defended and also, reclaimed through struggles. But traditions and myths so created by producing national symbols function to unite people (individuals) into a greater collective and forging a mutual sense of community shared by them.

The concept of nation has been called into question in recent times both from within and outside. The political campaigns such as the movements based on identities such as women, race and ethnicity have been constructed on the claims made by these people, on the nation-state. The inability of the state to respond reasonably to these demands exposes the claim of the nation that it accommodates the specifics of race, gender, ethnicity into a master identity called 'nationality'.³ Consequently, the unifying claims of the national imagination are strained.

There is another way by which the idea of nation has been questioned. The

¹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, p. 6.

²Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p.1.

³I refer to the limits of modern citizenship here. Citizenship claimed to moderate other identities, such as gender, religion, race etc. which run counter to the idea of homogeneity of the nation. The divisive passions of these identities were thought to be problematic for national politics based on ideas such as democracy and egalitarianism. Interestingly, the social movements which emerged in the post-war era sought to reclaim these differences as 'objects' of politics.

transnational movements ranging from multinational corporations to ecological issues under the process of globalization by which national economies have got integrated more rapidly than before, have strained the effective capacity of the nation-state to govern. And the large-scale migration of people due to the demand of labour, generated by economic growth in 1950s and 1960s, have also put to test the nation's claims of homogeneity by introducing cultural diversity in the new places of settlement. We can imagine a broadening of this trend, leading us into a world in which borders cease to have political and practical significance.

My concern here however is to explore the theoretical limits of the nation as a political community, for which we should understand how political community is similar to or different from other human communities.

III

Benedict Anderson has remarked that a nation is an imagined political community, and that this imagination is limited by way of sovereignty it enjoys. He argues that all social forms larger than, or including, small villages where face to face contact between its members are possible, are imagined. The way the communities are imagined make them distinct from the other, and for this reason political community is different from other communities.

Aristotle's *Politics* starts with an assertion that every *polis* is some sort of community. But the community's meaning is explored more in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, as Bernard Yack points out.⁴ Aristotle insists that the human is an animal, in communal and political sense, and that by nature, they are disposed to share communal goods and activities, not necessarily related to the political community. As he puts it: 'Men strive to live together even when they have no need of assistance from one another, though it is also the case that the common advantage brings them together' (*Politics* 1278b19). This is because, according to Aristotle, human beings are not meant for a solitary living; they feel happy by regular interaction with each other. They are rational, so can understand the mutual advantage they get from participating in such groups, which means that they are driven to establish and manage communities for their ends.

There are four key features of the community, Yack says, in the sense Aristotle uses the term.⁵

1. A community means a group of individuals, different from each other in some significant way (*Politics* 1261a-b)
2. But these individuals also share something in common: some good, activity, feature of their identity, or in combination of any of these (*Politics* 1252a1; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1156 a-57b)
3. These individuals engage in some interaction, over what they share in common.

⁴Bernard Yack, *The Problem of a Political Animal*, University of California Press, 1993, p.25.

⁵Ibid, p.29.

4. Also, importantly, they are bound by some sense of friendship and some sense of justice(*Nicomachean Ethics* 1159b27)

Aristotle however insists on the priority of the political community for the individual(*Politics* 1253a19), even as he illustrates the necessary role the communities play in developing the natural capacities of humans.

What sort of a community is political community in Aristotelian conception?

Aristotle uses *polis* and *political community* interchangeably: the most authoritative community for him is what is called the *polis* or political community(*Politics* 1253a7). A community is created when heterogeneous individuals come to share things, and the *polis* signifies a political 'sort of community', which is meant for sharing political things, something which the citizens do. Aristotle insists that 'there is in everyone by nature an impulse towards this kind of community' (*Politics* 1253a29). His suggestion is that humans are disposed to form such self-sufficient communities, while following their natural inclinations and using their natural capacities. The political community therefore has both a natural origin, inhuman inclinations and capacities, and a natural end, of the development of the human capacity to lead what he calls the good life. Nature disposes us to participate in political communities, which also completes the human development. And this is possible, according to Aristotle, because of the capacity of reasoned speech and argument, or *logos*, which only humans have.

The ancient *polis* was smaller in size as compared to ours today. In fact Aristotle argues that the best political community should even be smaller than Athens, and this has made many scholars like Moses Finley to assume that the ancient political communities were 'face-to-face' communities, in which people were familiar with each other, and were friendly as citizens. But some disagree with this view and argue that although ancient Greek citizens were known to each other better than modern citizens are, they were still too numerous and scattered to develop the personal bonds of friendship. Robin Osborne suggests that for a *polis* of some forty thousand citizens, populated across hundreds of square miles of farming territory, this seems unlikely. Josiah Ober, therefore, remarks that even Aristotle's *polis* was a kind of 'imagined community', which evolved around ideas of mutual and common advantage, not personal ties and affection which characterise the family or a village.

What can be inferred from the discussion is this: (a) how so ever small the political community, 'imagination' by the citizens is necessary for maintaining the idea of the community, and (b) a political community is essential for realising the good life, which is how the political community is distinct from other communities. Whereas other forms of communities like family and villages are based on personal ties of affection and

familiarity, what brings the individuals together into political communities in their mutual interest in making good of the various goods and skills they possess.

IV

Whereas in our time the nation has come to occupy a centre stage so far as the organisation of collective lives of humans is concerned, it is marked by severe limitations, for realising political justice or the good life. The nation as a political community, though a product of imagination itself, restricts such power of imagination only to some social groups. There are groups who are pushed to its margin, there are fragments who the nation disallows to imagine similarly. How can a political community be accepted which restricts participation only to a few? What would happen to their projects of good life, which everyone aspires? How does the idea of the nation justify itself when it contains the seeds for its replication within itself, a phenomenon marked by the growing voices to create a nation-state of their own?

Moreover, even if the nation is an imagined community, and the imagination is propelled by whatever tools, the boundaries of the nations are not. Very often they are constructed, defended and in many cases have to be reclaimed through violent conflicts, involving tragic loss of human lives. The Indian nation is a case in point, it not only had to walk a tightrope of territorial dismemberment and the loss of lives when it was born, but rather it undertook an ambiguous project of nation building also. The project has thrown many questions, one of which is that it pushed certain sections like the Nagas in the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir in the North to demand a state of their own.

If the political community is essential for the human capacity for a just and virtuous life, as Aristotle says, what makes us limit our imagination to a bounded political community, the nation? That the limits of the imagination have been exposed, is there a need for re-imagining it differently?

To me the answer is in affirmative.

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