

STUDYING NATIONALISM AS AN EVERYDAY IDEOLOGY

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The mass media daily confirm the importance of nationalism. In the twentieth century, the nation is the cause for which groups regularly kill and die. If, as Benedict Anderson (1983) argued, a nation is, above all, an 'imagined community', then it is vital that social scientists understand how the nationalist imagination is embedded in contemporary consciousness. Martha Augoustinos's paper, thus, addresses one of the most fundamental questions of our times.

For too long social psychologists have tended to treat nationalism as a minority phenomenon. Sometimes it has been considered as if it were a personality characteristic, arising from the childhood experiences of those with statistically deviant, authoritarian parents. Sometimes, nationalism is treated as a phenomenon, which characterises social movements, which seek to establish new nations. Augoustinos reminds us that nationalism is a majority phenomenon: it is to be found in a stable, established nation like Australia. Nor should this be surprising. In the contemporary world of nations, it is accepted that everyone will belong to a nation. As Ernest Gellner (1983) has remarked, the modern person considers the possession of a national identity to be as natural as having an arm or leg. However, this naturalness is itself something to be investigated, for it indicates the ideological nature of nationalism as an everyday phenomenon. It is one of the functions of ideology that historical and socially contingent features of the social world are experienced as 'natural' (Ricoeur, 1986; Eagleton, 1991).

As Anderson's phrase indicates, the possession of a national identity is more than a personal matter: it is a matter of collective imagination. Augoustinos raises the important question how the representations and images, which are apt of this collective imagination, are formed and how they circulate. Also, given the nature of ideology, one must ask how they become 'natural', or common-sensical (Billig, 1991). In her paper, Augoustinos does not merely focus on the reactions of individual consumers of a nationalist advertisement. She places the advertisement itself in a political and, indeed economic, context.

This is an unusual practice for a social psychologist. Traditionally, psychologists have concentrated their attention upon the individual responses of subjects. If they ask where the responses come from, they tend to answer in terms of the individual's personal history. It is one of the great strengths of social representation theory that it insists upon the social origins of individual responses (Moscovici, 1983). In this sense, an analysis of national identity should reveal how the responses of individuals in their particular nations are themselves culturally and ideologically constituted. By focussing upon a government-sponsored advertising campaign to foster nationalist feelings, Augoustinos has chosen an excellent topic for observing the nationalist imagination at work.

Nevertheless, it should be recognized that such a project places great strain upon the traditional theoretical and methodological resources of social psychology. In particular, social

psychologists might be confronted by the unfortunate legacy of their discipline's close historical links with individual psychology (and thus the biological sciences) and its comparative isolation from social and cultural studies. Because of this, social psychologists might have to exercise great wariness in adopting concepts from social psychology's own past; also they will gain from paying attention to theoretical developments in other social sciences. Augoustinos's paper illustrates both aspects.

(a) **Limitations of Social Psychological Concepts.** In seeking theoretical terms for her investigations, Augoustinos acknowledges that social psychologists cannot easily adapt terms from more individualistic investigators. In addition to social representation theory, she turns to Ichheiser, for a distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' impressions of advertisements. For all his theoretical unorthodoxy, Ichheiser, nevertheless, retained many of the marks of more orthodox psychological thinking. In this respect, the term 'objective' is problematic, especially if used to describe the analyst's interpretation of an advertisement, for it implies that some meanings are *really* there in the advertisement, as opposed to others which are being read into the advertisement by naive observers. The term 'objective' in this context runs the risk of 'naturalizing' a cultural product. Barthes (1973), in his classic analysis of the nationalist mythology contained in the magazine photograph of a black French soldier, claimed that visual imagery today performs the ideological function of presenting the social world as if it is 'natural' or 'objective'. The analyst might claim it is an 'objective' fact that the nationalist advertisement does not contain "obvious representatives of multi-ethnic Australia". However, the very notions of 'obvious representatives' and, indeed of 'ethnicity' and 'multi-ethnicity', are themselves social categories, whose 'objectivity' cannot be taken for granted (just as the 'subjectivity' of the respondents' responses cannot be taken for granted). These notions are themselves cultural concepts, or shared representations. The question is not whether the respondents' views are really 'subjective', or whether the photograph 'objectively' contains certain features, but whether the distinction between objective and subjective is, in this context, a theoretically productive one. Taking seriously the social creation and circulation of knowledge should lead to a questioning of the psychologists' traditional distinction between the 'subjective' and the 'objective', which itself often rests on an unexamined distinction between belief and knowledge.

(b) **Isolation of Social Psychology.** Social psychologists, who wish to analyse the symbolic meanings of cultural products, should not imagine that they have to create their theoretical and methodological instruments *de novo*. If they look towards individual psychology, it is understandable why they should think that there is little previous work to build upon. However, in the social sciences, there has been a flourishing of work in semiology, social linguistics and cultural studies, which has been fashioned with great theoretical sophistication and which analyses the symbolic products of contemporary society, especially the messages of advertisements (for summaries, see Fiske, 1990; Kress, 1987; Fairclough, 1992). Quite often, these lines of work has been ignored by social psychologists. Whereas orthodox experimentalists tend to read little else than other orthodox experiments, it is unfortunate if critical social psychologists, who urge a genuinely social perspective, isolate themselves intellectually. It is possible to criticise some researchers, working in the area of social representations, for ignoring other strands of thinking within the social sciences, which run parallel to the intellectual aims and problematics of social representation theory (Potter and Billig, 1992).

Particularly useful would be an intellectual rapprochement with cultural studies. Some of the early work in cultural analysis could be criticised because it sought to produce 'decode'

or 'read' cultural products, such as advertisements, whilst ignoring the reactions of the audiences to which the messages are directed. 'Discourses' were identified without examining actual, occasioned utterances. Nevertheless, such studies showed conceptual ingenuity in going beyond distinctions between 'objective' and 'subjective' characteristics, in order to distinguish between dominant and minority - preferred and dispreferred - 'readings' of culture communications. More recently cultural analysts have been explicitly studying the ethnography of audiences, in order to explore the circulation and interpretation of meaning in contemporary society (i.e., Morley, 1986; Livingstone and Lunt, 1990). Wetherell and Potter (1992), in a study directly relevant to Augoustinos's project, investigated New Zealand identity. They recommend a perspective which combines a discursive social psychology with the sort of Gramscian cultural theory, which has been developed by Stuart Hall (i.e. Hall et al 1981 and Hall, 1988). Gramscian social theory provides a framework for asking the question how representations originate. At present, social representation theory lacks a similar theory of social power, which would permit a critical analysis of cultural hegemony. In addition, Wetherell and Potter argue that national identity should be studied by analysing in detail the discourses people use when talking of themselves and their nation. This is a similar tactic adopted by Billig (1992) in his study of the way British people talk of the British Royal Family, and how they imagine themselves and their nation in such talk.

Such studies suggest that analysts, wishing to study national identity from a critical perspective, may have to go beyond the traditional techniques of social psychology - a point emphasised by Moscovici (1983). Augoustinos comments that themes of national identity may not be consistent: respondents may talk about both the unity and the diversity of the nation. Critical social psychologists, studying ideology through the examination of discourses, have emphasised a similar point. According to Billig et al (1988), ideology is 'dilemmatic': speakers have available contrary repertoires of social explanation (Edelman, 1977; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

It is arguable whether the dilemmatic nature of ideology, and its discursive representations, can be most sensitively explored using traditional methods of social psychology. Augoustinos's methodology is at root orthodox. She asks her respondents set-questions; she codes their responses; she then translates qualitative discourse into quantitative categories for statistical analysis. She also mentions that in discussion groups, the respondents criticised the nationalist advertisement but also talked about being stirred by its themes. For the critical social psychologist, such discussions provide prime material for analysing the dilemmatic nature of ideology, including nationalist ideology. Critical social psychologists would predict that the dilemmatic nature of ideology would be more clearly expressed in the free-flowing discussions, rather than in the analysts' coding categories for the set-questions. In order to show this, social psychologists need to use the theoretical and methodological resources for analysing the ideological meanings of everyday discussions.

Above all, analysts need to develop their ears to catch the echoes of meaning within everyday comments. As ordinary people imagine themselves and their nations, so disturbing echoes will be heard. It cannot be otherwise in a century, during which the ideology of nationalism has marched so naturally, so brutally and so far.

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