

1) Introduction

I know of no country where people are more frequently polled about their identity than Taiwan. The repeated asking of the same question, over and over again, reminds one of a nervous lover looking for reassurance. In the U.K., where I have been living as I write this, questions on identity are asked only of ethnic minorities—do they identify with Britain or their home country/culture, the Celtic fringe—to what extent do the Scots and the Welsh want independence from the U.K.; and about Europe—do we see ourselves as “part of Europe,” which is a commonly understood code for seeing value in the European Union and supporting a more federal Europe, or not? These questions are asked in the U.K. because they probe the current fault lines of social cohesion and political consensus. Likewise in Taiwan, the question of identification with China or Taiwan or some combination of the two has important implications for both social cohesion and practical politics. But it is more important than this, in many ways it is an existential question. Ernst Renan said:

To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more ... more valuable by far than common customs posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, a shared program to put into effect.¹

Renan stresses both the importance of a shared past and that of a shared future. Central to the question of identity is the degree to which people on Taiwan believe they share a past. But central to the question of Taiwan's existence in its present form is the degree to which the people of Taiwan believe they share a future, and the nature of the “shared program” they seek to put into effect.

That question of identity have an existential importance in Taiwan explains why they are so frequently asked. But it does not explain why such questions have the importance that they do. In this sense a comparison of Taiwan and U.K. poll questions is

¹ Renan, Ernst, (1882) “Qu'est-ce qu'une nation” translated as “What is a nation?” available at <http://ig.cs.tu-berlin.de/oldstatic/w2001/eu1/dokumente/Basistexte/Renan1882EN-Nation.pdf>, p7.

interesting. UK poll questions are either directed at peripheral groups—non-native ethnic minorities are about 8 percent of the population, the Muslims to whom these polls are more specifically directed, about 3 percent, while the Celts of Scotland and Wales account for 13 percent—or at peripheral issues—turnout at European elections has been as low as 25 percent. But questions on identity are aimed squarely at the entire Taiwanese population, and the number of those respondents without an opinion is low. Identity is not a peripheral issue in Taiwan, but central to major social and political cleavages. And this centrality is a mark of how confused the issue is—just as we do not argue on subjects on which we all agree, vociferous and bitter argument is a sign of agreement's absence. But why is the question of identity so conflicted?

There are standard responses to this that cite Taiwan's history, specifically the cultural confusion caused by the Japanese colonialism and then cultural resentment caused by the colonial-style policies of the Kuomintang administration after retrocession. It is not my contention that these contingencies of historical development are unimportant. But I contend they simply compound a lack of "national consciousness," a lack of, or perhaps I might better say ambivalence over identification with Taiwan that has to do with its status as a settler nation. Basically I will contend that Taiwan, like the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Israel, Argentina and other is a settler state, a state created by the mass migration of people in a comparatively recent historical period. I will then look at theories of national consciousness development and argue that, disparate as they might be, certain elements are common among them. But these elements are sometimes *not* found among settler nations to the degree that they are among non-immigrant based populations. This leads to a lack of identification, an ambivalence over belonging and a confusion of identity. It is not a problem unique to Taiwan as I shall show, with close reference to the development of identity in Australia.

1.1) What is a Settler Nation?

I want to define settler nations as those that have been created by the mass immigration of people from elsewhere in the modern era. I would date the beginning of this era around 1600, subsequent to the invention of movable type, the Reformation in Europe and the improvements in navigation that allowed trans-oceanic voyages.

I am open to argument that this date might be backdated—after all, some 200,000 Spaniards moved to the Americas in the 16th century. But I think it is important to

separate modern-era settlement from pre-modern. Certainly settler societies had been created previously; for example Iceland in the 8th to 10th centuries. My own country England had two great waves of settlement, the Angles—who gave the country their name—and Saxons from North Germany who settled between 550 and 750 AD and the Danes who settled in large parts of northern and eastern England in the 9th and 10th centuries.² But these settlements happened at a time when communication was rudimentary and record keeping in many places almost non-existent. Of the historical facts of settlement, rather than the legends that have grown up around them, very little is known.

I will later show that myth and legend play a hugely important part in identity formation. But for myth to survive, to wield its power on our imaginations, it helps to be rooted in a past obscure enough such that few real facts are known. What distinguishes the modern settler nations, of which Taiwan is an exemplar, from their pre-modern forbears is that their development has taken place entirely in an era for which quite substantial historical records exist. This, as I shall show, complicates the development of the mythmaking which produces social cohesion and, just as importantly the “forgetting” which Renan calls “a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”³

1.2) What is National Consciousness?

For the purposes of this dissertation I want to define national consciousness as an awareness of one’s community as a nation. It is a certain form of identification with a community, an understanding that that community has certain unique characteristics, and at least sympathy with the idea that these characteristics make it a candidate for political autonomy. National consciousness, as I want to talk about it, is not nationalism, but its essential component. Nationalism is the strong belief that the entity about which one feels national consciousness must be politically autonomous, that its ineradicable destiny lies in self—sufficient statehood.

From such a definition, it should be immediately apparent that one might have a developed national consciousness without being a nationalist. In the United Kingdom for

² While any difference between those Englishmen of Danish extraction and those of Saxon vanished into history nine centuries ago, such are the enduring markers of history that place names, the names of town and villages in England to this day, have quite obvious roots in either Anglo-Saxon or Danish.

³ Renan, *op.cit.*, p2.

example, there are a large number of Scots and Welsh⁴ who are very conscious of their cultural difference from the English and believe that both Scotland and Wales are capable of governing themselves, without necessarily supporting a political program designed to bring this about.

In this sense a national consciousness is weaker than nationalism and a necessary but not sufficient component of it. The inhabitants of most of the nations state of modern Europe have highly a highly developed national consciousness, a sharp sense of their separate ethnic and cultural identity and historical experience, but this does not prevent them being, say Euro-federalists, a position which, if pursued, would mean a surrendering of national political autonomy intolerable to the genuine nationalist. The Irish nationalists at the turn of the 20th century, called their organization *Sinn Fein*, meaning, “ourselves alone”⁵ We might say that a developed national consciousness recognizes “ourselves,” as sharers of a language, a culture, perhaps a religion, a historical past a sense of uniqueness and a sense of our right to manage our own affairs, but does not necessarily subscribe, like the nationalist, to “alone.”

Another way to make the same distinction is that national consciousness invokes a “cultural nationalism” different from political nationalism. The difference may be more apparent if we look at Miroslav Hroch’s analysis of the “golden age” of nationalist movements, the period, 1815-1914 in Europe.

This period saw nationalist struggles in Greece and Italy which electrified Europe’s intellectual elite, nationalist revolts in Poland and Hungary which were instantly romanticized in the rest of Europe in ways that captured the collective imagination, and a host of smaller struggles in Eastern Europe and the Balkans which were part of the rollback of Ottoman power. In the Eastern European cases with which Hroch is specifically concerned

⁴ Since few outside the U.K understand its political complexity, and since I will refer to these differences at various points in this dissertation, it might be useful to point out that what many know as Britain, and many others simply as England, and what is usually termed in news reports “the U.K” is Officially the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Whilst it is a single state, governed from London, it actually consists of three separate nations, England, Scotland and Wales, and half of another—Ireland. These nations have different histories, and, in the case of Scotland and Wales, their own languages, and members of these nations with a strong national consciousness get extremely upset when foreigners take them for English.

⁵ Actually the English translation of the party’s name.

An “exogenous” ruling class dominated ethnic groups which occupied a compact territory but lacked “their own” nobility, political unit or continuous literary tradition.⁶

In this situation, Hroch says, (self-)selected groups within the non-dominant ethnic community started to discuss their own ethnicity and to conceive of it as a potential nation-to-be. These groups had three demands:

(1) the development of a national culture based on the local language, and its normal use in education, administration and economic life; (2) the achievement of civil rights and political self-administration, initially in the form of autonomy and ultimately (usually quite late, as an express demand) of independence; (3) the creation of a complete social structure from out of the ethnic group, including educated elites, an officialdom and an entrepreneurial class, but also—where necessary—free peasants and organized workers.⁷

Hroch goes on to define three stages in a nationalist movement’s satisfaction of these demands. Phase A consists of a flurry of social enquiry on the part of activists into the linguistic, social and historical heritage of the non-dominant group. Phase B sees a new range of activists try to awaken national consciousness within the ethnic group concerned and win over support for a nation-creating project. Phase C sees the formation of a mass movement and support for nation-building spread throughout the full social structure, with the eventual split of the mass movement into different political/social/economic wings with differing agendas.

Hroch’s paper contains an interesting section on “antecedents to nationalism,” i.e., elements important to the development of nationalist consciousness, already, as it were, in place. These include the memory of some former period of political autonomy or statehood, which could be used to stimulate historical consciousness and ethnic solidarity. The second important element was the survival of an ancient language, which could be used to develop “the norm of a modern language with its own literature.”

⁶ Hroch, Miroslav (1993) “From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation; The Nation-building Process in Europe,” *New Left Review*, 198, p5-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

What is clear in all cases, however, is that the modern nation-building process started with the collection of information about the history, language and customs of the non-dominant ethnic group, which became the critical ingredient in the first phase of patriotic agitation.⁸

As a description of the process seen in Europe, Hroch's statement presents an easily accessible picture of what is involved—the study of what might have been thought of as a regional or even folk culture by a scholarly elite belonging to that culture, their eclectic use of cultural artifacts and narratives to create a sense of exceptionalism often grounded in newly forged national icons⁹ (frequently claimed to be rediscoveries, of course), and the transformation of this cultural exceptionalism into a political claim—often starting off as seeking to get the subaltern culture a raised status in the existing state arrangement—getting the state school system to recognize and allow teaching in the subaltern language, for example, eventually moving on, although not in all cases, to a claim for political autonomy and eventually independence.

For our immediate purposes it also show the path along which national consciousness or cultural nationalism differs from its political counterpart, how one evolves into the other and how it might be possible to journey part of the way along this route without staying on until the end.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For a number of examples of this see: Hobsbawm, Eric, & Ranger, Terrence (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press