



Review

Critical junctures? Complexity and the post-colonial nation-state



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 August 2014

Accepted 25 August 2014

Keywords:

Critical junctures
Colonialism
Indigeneity
Cultural nationalism
Turkey
Indonesia
New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a theoretical framework inspired by complexity theory to assess trajectories of the post-colonial nation-state. Drawing on notions like singularities and critical junctures, initial conditions, and system parameters relevant to the meanings, constituencies, and technologies that determine nation-building trajectories, it shows that in the cases of Turkey, Indonesia/Yogyakarta, and New Zealand – new forms of cultural nationalism are emerging. In keeping with Mill's logic of difference, this convergent outcome despite the otherwise great divergence across the cases is suggestive of similar process afoot in the (re)imagination of the nation-state across the post-colonial and globalizing world more broadly. These emergent articulations, we show, are more inclusive of certain aspects of “indigenous” experience relevant to certain group identities, than earlier post-colonial nationalisms, while threatening to others.

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1. Introduction

As Western power wanes and new centers of gravity rise, leaders across the formerly colonized world are claiming ownership of world historical processes. Sultan Hamengku Buwono X of Yogyakarta exuded this confidence as he accepted an honorary doctorate from a newly founded private university in Turkey's thriving Anatolian heartland.¹ "Turkey and Indonesia", he declared, are working hand-in-hand to build a more refined and glorious world civilization. . . the 19th century may have been Europe's era, the 20th America's, but the 21st will be that of Asia."²

Yet, even as the narrative of Asia's rise gains traction, memories of Western dominion remain palpable. The persistence of Western power in shaping post-colonial national imaginaries was attested to by the commemoration in Turkey, just two weeks after the Sultan's visit, of the Battle of Gallipoli. Redolent of an earlier world historical moment shared by otherwise disparate peoples, participants in the ceremony paid tribute to a battle in which the far-flung incipient nations of Turkey and New Zealand emerged from the ashes, joined by their antagonism or allegiance to the then world hegemon, the British.

Both ceremonies – the Sultan's speech, and the Gallipoli commemorations with their multiple keys and audiences – speak, as does this paper, to the ways that apparently unrelated peoples and places may be linked by their common participation in world historic events (Liu et al., 2009; Bobowik et al., 2014). This furnishes grounds for comparison, the specificity of each case notwithstanding (Byren & Ragin, 2009). For national projects across the post-colonial world emerged vis-à-vis a singular and momentous if by no means predetermined or irreversible development in world affairs: the eclipse of empire in general, and the western European colonial enterprise in particular. To be sure, the transition took many forms given variations in colonialism across place and time. There was at least as great diversity in the forms of nation-building by which empire was displaced. Nonetheless, the transition, from empire to nation-state as the primary mode of organizing political and economic affairs was near-universal.

On the receiving end of Western colonialism was a wide array of societies which shared, if nothing else, a firepower deficit in the face of Western military might. This meant they were subject to coercive practices ranging from genocide to the (Sisyphean) exhortation of missionaries and colonial administrators to remake themselves in the image of the West. This compelled "native" agents to recalibrate their political, economic, and social institutions.³ But if indigenous roles in this process all too often are erased from Eurocentric narratives of world history, engagement and resistance of Western colonialism entailed what Gaonkar (1999) calls "creative adaptation" and the reinvention of indigenous logics and substance.

Coloniality, indigeneity, and their complex interplay were the threads in the tapestry of a world of empires, as constitutive of the colonial metropolises as of colonized peripheries.⁴ Their relationship was fundamentally transformed by the collapse of western imperialism in the wake of the World Wars (leaving representational residues that inform contemporary political decisions, like willingness to fight for your country, see Bobowik et al., 2014). Movements for self-determination capitalized on its ruin,⁵ (re)claiming indigenous identities while also (re)inscribing western modes of organizing states and societies through nation-building projects that borrowed many of their features from Western models. The upshot was new sovereign arrangements which empowered some groups and disempowered others within each national community. This, in turn, engendered revisionism as those excluded from the initial post-colonial settlement sought to (re)gain ownership of national projects. In recent decades, such mobilizations have been bolstered by economic transformation in many parts of the post-colonial world including access to new communications technology. They are resulting, we contend, in emergent visions of national belonging which reconfigure the (post-)colonial/indigenous nexus.

To begin to understand this process, we develop a theoretical framework inspired by the tools of complexity theory. These include notions like critical junctures, initial conditions, and system parameters relevant to nation-building trajectories. We show that across three disparate "post-colonial" cases⁶ – Turkey, Indonesia/Yogyakarta, and New Zealand – revisionist forms of cultural nationalism have emerged. In keeping with Mill's logic of difference, this convergent outcome despite the otherwise great divergence across the cases suggests that similar processes may be present in the (re)imagination of

¹ The Sultan's complete title is: *Sultan Hamengkubuwana Senopati Ing Nagala Abdurrahman Sayidin Panatagama Kalifatullah* (The Sultan who hold the world in his lap, Supreme Military Commander, Servant of the Merciful, Descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Regulator of Religion, Caliph of Allah. The title is a central part of Yogyakarta symbology.

² "Endonezyalı Sultan: Dünya uygarlığın inşasında Türkiye Endonezya el ele" [Indonesian Sultan: Turkey and Indonesia hand-in-hand in the construction of world civilization]. Source <http://www.haber3.com/endonezyali-sultan-dunya-uygarliginin-insasinda-turkiye-endonezya-el-ele-haberi-1895522h.htm#ixzz2SgNhMuDQ> Accessed 25.04.13.

³ There is a voluminous literature on and contesting the categories of "colonial" and "native" or "indigenous." We recognize that the terms (like "West," and "East") are reifications that are complicit, moreover, in power relations between their respective referents. Given space constraints, however, in this paper we use them as shorthand for the bundle of structures and agents whose complex interactions were empowering to and/or subjected by western European capitalist imperialism from the 17th to the early 20th century.

⁴ See, for example, Hobson's (2004) contribution to a growing body of interdisciplinary work that challenges the "virgin birth" (Fisher Onar and Nicolaidis, 2013) narrative of European expansion and empowerment.

⁵ In the pre-war period, pan-nationalist movements such as pan-Islamism and pan-Asianism were prominent vehicles of anti-colonial mobilization. However, as Aydin (2007) traces in a seminal work comparing the two currents, the Wilsonian moment paved the way for the ascendance of the national over pan-national liberation paradigms.

⁶ All three cases may be viewed as post-colonial insofar as Indonesia was directly colonized by the Dutch who in Yogyakarta implemented a system of indirect rule based on unequal treaties and subsidiary alliances leaving the Sultanate in control of "custom and religion" but little else. Turkey, albeit to a lesser extent, was likewise heir to an entity that had been subject to a Capitulations regime on the part of European powers for almost a century culminating in Ottoman collapse and Allied occupation. New Zealand, meanwhile, was a site of the Anglo-Saxon model of settlement/replacement colonization.

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