

Dis-Imagined Communities – The Politics of Break of Shared National Identity
Hadas Aron

Abstract

The emergence of modern nationalism was linked to vast technological, social, and political transformations that facilitated the creation of solidarity groups out of large and diverse groups. The state, ruling elites, and the media played key roles in nation-building. The state fostered a homogenous national identity through various institutions, including the military, the education system, the promotion of a national language and holidays, citizenship laws, and state-sponsored art and cultural institutions (Darden 2011; Brubaker 2011). This was further reinforced by a national economy, incentivizing individuals to adopt a uniform culture and language (Laitin 1998; Weber 1976; Gellner and Breuilly 2008). Materially incentivized elites actively shaped national identity and mobilized on it (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012; Breuilly 1993; Gellner and Breuilly 2008). The media was of particular importance – It generated shared geographic space, language, and values for a nation of readers (Anderson 2006). When successful, these projects of nation-building resulted in large political solidarity groups.

However, in recent decades, increased globalization and technological change have transformed the landscape of state-building to varying degrees, leading to national fracture. State power has waned, and economies no longer neatly align with the national community, creating new incentives shaping individual identity; The entry of new groups into the labor market and the political arena, and the backlash they encounter, challenge the hegemony of traditional elites; The media has gone through a radical transformation. If print capitalism facilitated the creation of discrete and internally unified spaces of shared imagination, social media both cuts through national affiliation, and expands beyond national borders. Even more crucial for national solidarity, while social media brings visibility to once-silenced groups, it also accentuates deep differences between groups (Bail 2022), making the imagination of a homogenous community nearly impossible. Consequently, the state, the elite, and the media have become arenas of fragmentation and contestation of national identity. In a sense, the struggle for self-determination is now being fought inside the nation.

Building on my dissertation research, the book explores processes of breakdown of shared national imagination in three case studies: The United States, Israel, and Hungary. For each case, I explore transformations in the state, ruling elites, and the media to explain the fragmentation and contestation of national identity. In the US, the focus is on the upcoming 2026 American Jubilee, where in contrast to previous landmark celebrations, competing organizations advocate for more and less inclusive identity. In Israel, conflicts over the inclusion of the Arab citizen community underscore how the breakdown of the Jewish consensus influences debates on social and political integration. In Hungary, the examination centers on the competition over the memory of WWII and its significance for the nation, shedding light on the instrumental use of identity contestation by an emerging ruling elite.