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Rhys Jones

Introduction

Common-sense understandings of geographic scale tend to view places and nations as geographical entities that operate at two distinct scales. Places tend to be considered as geographical entities that exist at the local scale. Some academic conceptualisations of place reinforce such a perception. John Agnew’s (1987) three-fold definition of place tends, at least implicitly, to convey an understanding of place that is local in character. After all, how can one meaningfully describe a place’s location (in terms of its latitude and longitude) and its locale (its material basis for human existence) at scales other than the local? Similarly, our common-sense understandings of nations tend to draw our attention to a distinct spatial scale; the national scale. A key aspect of any nation, of course, is said to be its strong association with a particular territory (Wiebe, 2002: 5). Such an emphasis reinforces the notion that discourses of nationalism are ultimately concerned with one particular kind of spatial imagination; one centred on the national territory and scale.

My main aim in this chapter is to challenge these geographical imaginations by demonstrating the inter-connectedness of place and nation. I do so in two ways. I begin by showing how the discourse of nationalism portrays nations and national territories as places that should have some meaning for members of the nation; a degree of meaning that leads to a situation in which members of the nation should be willing to die for it, if the need arises. The second kind of inter-connectedness I discuss relates to how nations come to inhabit ‘local’ places in various ways. Nations take on meaning and are reproduced in different places and a detailed examination of this process provides us with an insight into the character of national discourses in general.

I have been a little guilty up until this point of taking some things for granted; things of which the reader might not be aware or with which they might not agree. Let me clarify two issues. First, I consider nations to be primarily the contingent product of discourses produced and performances undertaken by a range of actors. Nations do not possess agency as such but, rather, must be reproduced through a ‘group-making project’ (Brubaker, 2004). Second, national discourses are inherently geographical in their character. While much attention has been directed traditionally towards understanding the histories and times of nations and nationalism, for several years geographers and others have attempted to shine a light on the geographical themes that are folded into nationalist discourses and performances (Gruffudd, 1994). The current chapter is part of this recent tradition in that it seeks to demonstrate the many ways in which the notion of place is implicated in the reproduction of the nation.
The chapter proceeds as follows. In section 2, I discuss how successful nationalist ‘group-making projects’ promote an ideal that the national territory is a place with which members of the nation can positively identify. I then proceed to discuss various ways in which nations and nationalist discourses inhabit more localised places. In section 3, I elaborate on how such places take on a key role in allowing nations to be represented through various media and reproduced through a range of practices. In section 4, I consider the attempts that have been made to study places as geographical venues within which nations and nationalist discourses can take on material form and elicit affective responses. In section 5, I change tack somewhat by examining the way in which places can allow one to understand the conflict that lies at the heart of all nationalist discourses. I also provide a more upbeat discussion of how places can act as fora within which nationalist reconciliation can emerge. The examples I discuss are largely based on the specific case study of Wales, a region and nation located on the western seaboard of the UK, although I also refer to other locations and nations where appropriate.

National territory as place

The first way in which we can consider the close interrelationship between place and nation is in relation to the attempts made within nationalist discourses to view national territories as places. At heart, nationalist discourses are predicated on the need to protect and enhance national territories or homelands; some argue that therein lies a large part of their discursive power (Paasi, 1996). The ultimate goal of nationalist discourses, when viewed from a geographical perspective, is to inculcate a sense of belonging amongst the members of a nation towards the nation itself and, by extension, towards the national territory. Likewise, the existence of a national territory becomes one key way of promoting a sense of national distinctiveness. Nations are differentiated from others through the promotion of a discourse of difference, while also being simultaneously subject to a discourse of integration, which highlights their internal homogeneity (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). The national territory becomes one key vehicle for enabling this process to occur, with one national place – characterised by an alleged internal homogeneity and eliciting a group sense of belonging – being contrasted with other national places.

The border, boundary or frontier between different national territories becomes a key site where one can witness this place-making process operating at the national scale. Anssi Paasi (1996) examines the significance of the border region of Karelia for the construction of a Finnish national territory. State agents and individuals in civil society are involved in the production and performance of a Finnish national identity, especially pertinent in a border region like Karelia, given its disputed political status vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and, latterly, the Russian Federation. Place-making in this region, therefore, takes on a broader national and geopolitical significance. A similar connection between national territories and identity and belonging comes to the fore in Wales. As part of a research project on the campaign for bilingual road signs in Wales – road signs that contained place names and instructions for road users in the Welsh and English languages – some individuals interviewed described the significance of these road signs as markers of a Welsh national territory and, by extension, of Wales as a distinctive place. One individual (original emphasis) said as follows:

I feel a certain exhilaration as I cross the Severn Bridge near to Cas-Gwent [Chepstow], and it’s ‘Cas-gwent’ that the signs say. And ‘Casnewydd’ [Newport] and ‘Dim Parcio’ [No Parking] and so on. From the very boundary [of Wales]. To compare that with what existed fifty years ago, it’s nigh-on miraculous.
We witness here the distinctiveness of bilingual road signs as markers of a Welsh national territory (Jones and Merriman, 2012). The feeling of exhilaration described by the interviewee was linked to a feeling of pride and a sense that these road signs were helping to create a more bilingual place with which this individual could identify and feel a sense of belonging (see Figure 3.1).

The above quote highlights how the border or boundary acts as a particularly powerful location within which national territories take on the status of place. References to road signs, however, also draw our attention to the way in which the existence of national territories – viewed as national places – extend well beyond the border into the ‘heartlands’ of the nation. It is instructive to return to the campaign in favour of bilingual road signs in Wales. During the 1960s and 1970s, many politicians described campaigners as vandals because of their tendency to either deface or destroy monolingual English road signs. For many Welsh nationalist campaigners, the English road signs themselves, rather than the defaced signs, were deemed ‘eyesores’ and acts of cultural vandalism:

If our road-signs fulfil the demands of aesthetic standards, they also destroy completely the standards of Welshness. In the eyes of the Welshman [sic], they are ugly, unbearably ugly. And the only way … to convince everyone of this, is by offending other standards, the standards of superficial aesthetics, i.e. by painting English road-signs and leaving them – for all to see – untidy and illegible.

(Iwan, 1968: no page)

Figure 3.1 An example of a bilingual road sign.
Members of the Welsh nationalist movement possessed a totally different set of understandings of the meaning of monolingual road signs (Jones and Merriman, 2009), which were viewed as materials and objects that undermined the ability of Welsh speakers to belong to Wales as a national territory. The act of defacing road signs was necessary, therefore, as a way of drawing attention to the linguistic and cultural defilement that was associated with their presence within the Welsh national territory. Bilingual road signs were viewed differently. They played an important material role in creating a Welsh national territory with which Welsh speakers could identify. In all this, we witness how national territories can take on a significance that extends well beyond being a spatial container for nationalist discourses. If nationalist discourses are to be effective, national territories – at both the border and within the ‘heartland’ – take on a particular significance as sources of cultural meaning for members of the nation.

The process of place-making can also exist in more practised and performative contexts. Tim Edensor (2004: 109) shows how the performance of driving within different nations, ‘in which we unreflexively carry out quotidian manoeuvres and modes of dwelling as habituated body subjects’, helps to reinforce a ‘national habitus’ (2002: 89–93) or a shared identity that acts as a common frame of reference for members of the nation. Similarly, the communal practices of members of a nation on a national day of remembrance or celebration can help to mark out the national territory in performative terms (Edensor, 2002: 69–70). In a very real sense, therefore, a national territory ‘becomes materialized through … sets of social practices’ (Kingsbury, 2008: 53). And in both these cases – driving and acts of commemoration – national territories become places through shared practices. I develop this theme in more detail in the following section.

**Place and nation 1: representation and reproduction**

As I noted earlier, one can also study the inter-connectedness of place and nation by examining the way in which national discourses land or make use of certain local places. One key set of associations exists in relation to the way in which nationalist discourses are: 1) represented through certain places; 2) reproduced within particular places.

Certain places play a key role in representing nations. These places are often highly localised and yet contribute to the representation of nations in far-reaching ways. A number of theoretical and empirical contributions in Geography and beyond have sought to explore the key role played by specific places in our comprehension of given nations. Johnson (1995) examines the importance of key places within the Dublin cityscape as coming to symbolise the national struggle within Ireland. She explains how understandings of Irish nationalism were played out in the context of the statuary that was erected in the city, so that in many ways, the statues themselves came to reflect the wider currents affecting the Irish nation and its struggle for political independence. Appleton (2002), too, examines how geographical scales other than the national scale are implicated in the representation of nations. Drawing on an in-depth study of the *Saturday Evening Post*, the long-running and immensely popular weekly gazetteer published in the United States during much of the twentieth century, she argues that the magazine represented American nationalist discourse in different ways, using various spatial scales. An important set of scalar narratives centred on the scale of the home and the local scale. Certain places were seen as representing American ideals and their use in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post* helped the magazine’s readers to make sense of what American identity was supposed to mean.
And yet, localities and places possess a significance that extends well beyond merely representing the nation. We also need to consider the way in which localities and places are key sites for the reproduction of nationalist discourse in various ways. First, the places where individuals live, work and socialise are key sites within which they make sense of their relationship with the nation (MacLaughlin, 2001). Indeed, one can question whether individuals can ever make sense of their own position within the nation without considering how those understandings are conditioned by local circumstances. In this sense, nationalist discourse is always amended and contested within particular places, even when it is ostensibly generated elsewhere. In these everyday acts within different places, one witnesses how nationalist discourse is reproduced in small-scale ways. For example, Fevre et al. (1999) demonstrate how understandings of nationalism are re-worked within Welsh local settings. They discuss the way in which many people in north Wales use the processes that operate within the local housing market, in which Welsh-speakers cannot afford to compete with English newcomers, to help them reaffirm their sense of Welsh nationalism. A lack of housing in rural areas, therefore, is recast as a national issue (see also Thomson and Day 1999).

Second, it is evident that nationalist discourse is always generated within certain places and, as such, local politics and cultures always have the potential to play an important role in influencing the character of that discourse. Much sociological and historical literature focusses on the role of the intellectual and intelligentsia in producing and transmitting nationalist discourse (Kornprobst, 2005: 403). Focussing our attention on the role of such agents also behoves us to examine the material and spatial contexts within which these individuals operate. There is a need to examine, therefore, the embedded and place-based relations of these individuals and how these come to inflect the generation of nationalist discourses.

Aberystwyth is one such place that has played a key role in the generation of Welsh nationalist discourse. Political activities in Aberystwyth were instrumental in the

![Map 3.1 Aberystwyth’s key locations for nationalist debate.](image-url)
development of a broader Welsh linguistic nationalism during the 1960s. Certain locations within Aberystwyth acted as a pivotal location in the early stages of the development of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, the campaign group formed in 1962 to promote greater legal status for the Welsh language. Almost all of the formative meetings and protests took place in various locations within the town; university halls of residence, cafés and rooms in a of private houses and public houses, such as the Coopers Arms and the Black Lion (see Map 3.1). In addition, these political activities were centred on a fairly small group of core individuals comprising Aberystwyth’s Welsh nationalist movement.

**Aberystwyth’s key locations for nationalist debate**

It is significant, too, that Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg’s first major protest occurred on Trefechan Bridge, on the main approach into the town from the south. The events that took place on 2 February 1963 focus our attention, first, on Aberystwyth as a key place within the nationalist politics of the time and, second, on locations within Aberystwyth that served as loci for these seminal moments in the evolution of Welsh nationalism: the upstairs room of the Home Café, which became an informal headquarters for the protest, the Post Office, which was the original target of the student protests, and Trefechan Bridge, which witnessed a sit-in and some violence instigated by disgruntled local residents. This one day of protest, furthermore, cemented the importance of Aberystwyth as a focal point for future Welsh language campaigning and as a key place in the production of Welsh nationalism. The words of EG Millward, one of the leaders of the protest, emphasised this point: ‘we are making Aberystwyth a focal point for this campaign’ (The Times, 1963). We witness, here, how particular places become identified as key locations for the generation of nationalist discourse, becoming nodes of nationalist debate for intellectuals and intelligentsia.

**Place and nation 2: materiality and affect**

The discussion in the previous section points to the need to understand the materiality of place (Hetherington, 1998) and the impact that this has on the representation and reproduction of nations and nationalist discourse. We witnessed the key role played by statues and monuments of different kinds and how nationalist practices became entwined with the materiality of certain places. But to understand the impact of the materiality of place on the representation and reproduction of the nation, we also need to pay heed to how these material markers of the nation elicit particular kinds of responses among the members of the nation. What kinds of emotions do members of a nation feel when they view a national monument? What affective responses are engendered when an actor encounters an object imbued with certain nationalist significance? Is it a feeling of joy, pride, indifference or, as in Figure 3.2, anger?

Recent work in Geography and beyond has begun to examine these affective experiences of material and place-based nations. Materials, according to this literature, are ‘lively, elemental, excessive, forceful, interrogative, distributed, more-than-solid, more-than-earthy, emergent, and in process’ (Merriman and Jones, 2017: 602) and, as such, play a constitutive, varied and unpredictable role in shaping affective nationalisms. Each of the materials we might associate with nationalism – documents, signs, monuments, indeed all kinds of objects that are enrolled into our everyday experience of nationalism – generate affective forces. Some affective responses may be intended and anticipated while others may be unforeseen. Such sentiments echo Brubaker’s (2004) comments about the contingent character of the group-making project associated with
nationalism. Some objects and materials may well generate the kind of affective response designed by intellectuals and the intelligentsia, while others may fail miserably. Other objects, which might be considered to be ostensibly apolitical, lying beyond the realm of nationalist discourse and practice, can, under particular circumstances, be reframed as a result of the unintended emotions that they elicit. The political protests concerning road signs in Wales in the 1960s and 1970s provides an excellent illustration of this point. Seemingly mundane and apolitical issues, such as the colour and font of place names, took on distinctly political and affective qualities as a result of the unintended ways in which they were perceived by nationalist actors (Jones and Merriman, 2009).

Angharad Closs Stephens (2016: 181) describes this embodied, affective and material aspect as akin to national atmospheres; ones which ‘congeal around particular objects and bodies and echo as part of an assemblage’. She uses the example of the London Olympics of 2012 to illustrate the significance of these national atmospheres, as a particular place – London in this case – was transformed into a generator of object/body/emotion relations. The Olympic Stadium, in particular, became a significant node in the generation of emotion. Viewers’ experiences of being in an enclosed stadium and watching inspiring sporting endeavours played a key role in generating positive emotions, such as happiness, pride and togetherness. But, of course, there is no guarantee that the materiality of the place will always have the desired effect. The booing that accompanied George Osborne’s (the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time) presentation of medals for the Men’s 400 metres T38 Paralympic event testifies to the unpredictability of affective responses to staged nationalist celebrations. In Closs Stephen’s (2016: 186) words, in this specific instance ‘something unpredictable … disrupted the otherwise carefully choreographed atmospheres’.

Figure 3.2 Affective nationalism: destroying monolingual road signs.
A focus on place and affect can also help us approach another key material aspect of
nations and nationalism, namely their reliance on infrastructures of different kinds. Williams
and Smith (1983: 511) describe how the process of nation-building involves the
transformation of a territory ‘by new cities, by a network of roads and railways, by dams and
power stations, by making deserts bloom and tundra yield their riches, by multiplying
factories and plants’. It is as a result of such infrastructures that a territory is transformed into
a national territory. Yet, Williams and Smith do not consider the important affective
qualities of these national infrastructures. What are the emotions and identities that are
elicited when one enters a large railway station in any state and sees various destinations –
dotted throughout the national territory – being listed on the departure boards? For those
living in the UK, does entering a hospital or GP surgery elicit a more embodied feeling of
pride in the National Health Service than does merely thinking about that organisation in
the abstract?

Recent work by Merriman and Jones (2017) examines such issues. They focus on the
affective qualities associated with road infrastructures in Wales. The case of the A470 trunk
road is particularly instructive in this respect. Ever since it was designated as a new trunk
road in 1972, it has played a significant role in, first, enabling embodied and mobile
connections between North and South Wales and, second, instilling a series of emotional
responses among its many travellers, including excitement and anticipation as individuals
travel to see friends and relatives in other parts of Wales, and boredom and frustration as
a result of the tediousness associated with travelling along its whole length. Third, it also
becomes a linear place in its own right, as a result of the many public proclamations and
private reflections on its importance as a physical infrastructure with which individuals feel
a sense of belonging. In short, it has become ‘a road that … provide[s] an affective and
relational glue ’ for the Welsh nation (Ibid: 611). It has, moreover, become an accepted part
of Welsh popular culture. Musician Cerys Matthews, for instance, travelled along the A470
in 2014 to ‘find out what it can tell me about Welsh identity and the essence of Welshness’
(BBC, 2014).

Such themes illustrate the need for any study of the significance of the concept of place
for nationalism – and of nationalism for place – to examine the links between materiality
and affect. Even if they are sometimes fleeting, ‘intermittent’ and ‘flickering’ (Merriman and
Jones, 2017: 600), these associations are important and help to practically demonstrate how
‘national feelings touch us, take hold and become infectious’ (Closs Stephens, 2016: 183).

Place and nation 3: conflict and reconciliation

One undercurrent in the preceding discussion is the way in which places can become sites
of nationalist conflict. Inevitably, nationalist conflicts occur in certain locations and can play
a constitutive role within place-making processes. At the same time, some argue that it is
possible to view places as sites and scales that provide an opportunity for national
reconciliation. I now discuss these more conflictual and peaceable associations between place
and nation.

Nationalist conflict within place can arise for many reasons but one key area of enquiry
has been in relation to place names. Place and street names represent key ways in which
nationalism becomes embedded within particular places. Azaryahu and Kook (2002: 199)
maintain that part of the significance of place and street names is that they ‘introduce
historical memory into a sphere of human activity that seems to be separated from the realm
of ideology’. They are significant, therefore, because of their banal qualities but can also be
contested features of place that may well reflect and further more extreme versions of nationalism. Street names in Israel represent one example of the contested process of naming places. Azarayahu and Kook’s (Ibid: 206) research shows how the naming of street names in the town of Umm el Fahm during the 1990s ‘confounded urban planning and ideological self-assertion’. The re-naming of streets by the leaders of a municipal council, controlled by an Islamic movement since 1988, shows how hot forms of nationalism may be reflected in, and contribute to, banal landscape features. Other work shows that it is not solely the histories commemorated within such names that are at stake but also the language used. Research by Gade (2003) examines the divisive politics of the language associated with road signs in Québec and Catalonia (see also Raento, 1997).

Another notable example of the way in which place and street names can generate nationalist conflict within place arises in the work of Nash (1999). She studies the link between language, political conflict and place names in Northern Ireland and shows how the act of naming places has been a long-standing colonial practice. These practices have been witnessed most clearly in the replacing of indigenous place names with those associated with a metropolitan English or British culture. This practice has elicited a strong response from Irish nationalists, with calls for allegedly ‘inauthentic’ English place names to be replaced by original and indigenous Irish names. Place – and the place names inscribed in the landscape – become key issues of nationalist struggle and contestation.

One of the most striking aspects of Nash’s (1999) work is the attempt that has been made to view place names as cultural resources that can help to reconcile Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics. Far from being a source of discord and conflict, place names have been viewed as one way of enabling all groups in Northern Ireland to celebrate cultural diversity. Nash describes how the Ulster Federation of Local Studies, for instance, received money from the Cultural Traditions Programme, whose aim has been to promote an appreciation of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. Similarly, place names featured in school projects that attempted to emphasise the varied origins of place names (Ibid: 471). Nash’s work importantly points the way towards viewing places not as sites within which nationalist conflict is played out but as locations that can allow for some form of co-habitation and reconciliation to emerge.

A similar emphasis on the positive potentiality of place can be found in some of the fundamental principles that underpin the education system in Wales. In broad terms, it has long been recognised as a fundamental tenet of Welsh politics that there are many, equally valid, ways of being Welsh and, significantly, that these can be practised differently in many different parts of Wales (Cloke et al., 1998). And certainly, this kind of approach has been adopted within the education system. A Welsh Curriculum guidance document, published in 2003, for instance, states that ‘[b]ecause Welsh society is very diverse, there can be no single view of what it is to be Welsh’ and that ‘[b]ecause of the variety and diversity within Wales, the Curriculum Cymreig will take different forms in different schools’ (ACCAC, 2003: 5; see also Welsh Government, 2015: 14).

While such statements might be viewed as signifying a desire to devolve understandings of Welshness to the local scale – for practical and political reasons – they also reveal attempts to promote an understanding of Welsh nationalism that is actively negotiated within schools and particular places (Erickson, 1995). This can be further displayed in the ways in which these ideals are implemented by teachers and received by pupils. A teacher based in a large institution located near the border in north-east Wales referred to how teachers who taught Welsh as a subject – along with those who taught other subjects through the medium of Welsh – had to become ‘diplomats’ and ‘negotiators’ within the classroom (cf. Benwell, 2014). Teachers had to
become skilled at working out how the Welsh language and culture could be introduced to audiences that possessed mixed identities. We see here how the place of the school became a zone of contact between different individuals and groups, and one in which an open and accommodating form of Welshness could be – indeed had to be – developed. Place thus acted as a site within which different individuals and groups could be reconciled with each other.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the interconnectedness of place and nation in conceptual and empirical contexts. These two spatial and scalar categories are intimately entwined. National territories – if they are to have any meaningful connection with the members of the nation – take on a status as places in their own right. Conversely, nations and national discourses become embedded in particular places. I outlined different ways of approaching this second kind of interconnection, focussing on ideas of representation and reproduction, materiality and affect, and conflict and reconciliation. This threefold division is an heuristic device since there are clear overlaps between these different themes. There is a need to examine the manifold connections between these different ways of embedding nations within places; connections that were, perhaps, underplayed as a result of the structure used here.

One of the most significant themes discussed is that it is possible for place to act as a source of national reconciliation. Without overstating the significance of such themes, it seems to me that a focus on the local manifestations of, and variations in, nations and nationalist discourse can potentially act to counter some of the exclusionary and essentialist versions of nationalism being peddled at present across the world. If this is so, then a study of the connections between place and nation becomes something of more than academic significance. It should be of interest to active and concerned citizens, along with all progressive politicians and policy-makers.

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