8   Nation-building: Identity and identification, process and content

The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) in 2007 published the report 'Identification with the Netherlands'.[1] At the public presentation of the report, (then) princess Máxima, as a non-native Dutch woman, reflected on the issue of identity and stated: 'But, "the" Dutch identity? No, I haven't found it'; and: '"The Dutchman" doesn't exist'.[2] These statements were fully in line with the report's conclusions that in today's globalizing world, it is not very productive to speak about *the* Dutch identity. The council preferred to speak about 'processes of identification' (functional, normative, emotional) as open processes with different meanings and different outcomes for different parts of the Dutch population, based on the reality of the diverse Dutch society. Máxima's speech triggered strong reactions. Nationalist-leaning individuals and organizations fiercely criticized her for doing away with the Netherlands: Who we are, our common history and what has made us proud to be Dutch. On the other hand, she was wholeheartedly embraced by the cosmopolitans for acknowledging the new reality of the global world and discarding in the dustbin of history old concepts of identity that hold us hostage in tradition. And there were also lukewarm 'Yes..., but...' reactions from those who did not want to touch on this sensitive subject to either spare the princess or those who felt offended. The WRR report, the speech by princess Máxima and the ensuing debate show the problem of the national identity discourse: Is it about process, about content, or about both – and if so, in what relationship?

The dangerous romanticism of homogeneous nation-states

In the previous chapter the exclusionary nature of national identity was identified as the Scylla in all discourse about nation, nation-building, nationhood and nationalism. As was briefly pointed at in chapter 5, most of the discourse about nation-building and national identity builds on the notion of homogeneity: Nation-states emerged as the result of a process of

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1   WRR 2007(only in Dutch).
2   http://www.koninklijkhuis.nl/nieuws/toespraken/2007/september/toespraak-van-prinses-maxima-24-september-2007/ (accessed 25 March 2015), translation by the author

homogenization in terms of language and culture. Homogeneity here is understood as adopting a shared mainstream identity while leaving a particular identity behind. That is what happened in most European countries, where existing regional, ethnic and linguistic identities were crowded out in a zero-sum game by dominant identities that were proclaimed as being national identities and therefore the standard for all those living within the territory of the nation-state.

Many studies about the nation-building processes in Europe highlight the process of homogenization as it occurred in, for example, Italy or France. The seminal study by Weber about the transformation of the peasants living in the French countryside into French citizens[3] and the statement 'we have created Italy, now we have to create Italians', point in the same direction: Nation-building is the process by which people converge to a common identity in language, culture, social and political systems, celebrate the same heroes, visit the same historic places and where a dominant religion is considered an important marker of the nation. It seems to me that a poor understanding of nation-building and biased research frameworks are due to the conventional study of nation-building processes in Europe. The more recent host of articles and books about the repercussions for national identity in Europe as a result of large-scale immigration confirm this, as they focus on how to maintain that homogeneous, shared identity in the face of the ever-increasing diversity. Homogeneity is the standard and diversity is a deviation that has to be resolved by assimilating or integrating migrants into the mainstream identity. This approach treats social and cultural diversity in the same way that religious diversity is tackled in European nation-states: People are allowed to practice their identity in the private sphere, but in the public sphere the national identity should be maintained and seen by all as the standard. A short flirtation with multiculturalism to accommodate migration and the subsequent diversity during the 1990s was quickly rejected in the first decade of the new millennium. Muslim extremism created feelings of fear, which were answered by postulating a strong national identity. What happened with the notion of *Leitkultur* is a telling example in this respect. First introduced by Tibi to describe a European core culture, based on values of modernity (democracy, secularism, the Enlightenment, human rights and civil society[4]), the political and public discourse transformed the meaning of *Leitkultur* into a notion that refers to traditional national (German, Dutch) culture as that which

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3   Weber 1976.
4   Tibi 1998, p. 154.

everyone who wants to be a German/Dutch citizen must adhere to.[5] Instead of providing basic values that can accommodate a diversity of cultures and religions, *Leitkultur* came to be used as an instrument in a cultural war about national identity.

Homogeneity as the end result of nation-building today is an unrealistic and even dangerous aspiration.[6] Homogeneity is the Scylla of exclusionary politics of a dominant identity. The European process of nation-building should not be used as the template for nation-building in fragile states. The European process was a child of the 19th-century historical context. History does not repeat itself and there is no reason to expect that nation-building in fragile states today will follow similar patterns and generate similar outcomes. The homogeneity that is currently so much under stress in Europe, should certainly not be the reference for nation-building in fragile states. However, homogeneity continues to be a (perhaps hidden) reference for policymakers in development cooperation and especially in fragile states. The reason may be that research shows a relationship between (ethnic) homogeneity and economic progress, or negatively stated, ethnic diversity slows down growth and makes it more difficult to reach consensus on growth-enhancing public goods policies.[7] Especially in fragile states the rent-seeking behavior of identity groups at the cost of others is squeezing the economy beyond its limits and therefore reduces the overall positive results at nation-state level. The challenge for fragile states today is to foster a sense of belonging and togetherness that is strong enough to build a stable and secure society, but that avoids the goal of homogenization as a zero-sum game in the competition between different groups on the identity battleground. How this can be achieved will be discussed in chapter 10.

From identity to identification

The language of 'identification' is rather recent in the discourse on national identity and responds to the problematic nature of the identity discourse. Brubaker & Cooper[8] argue that even though the social sciences have

5   http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article540438/Einwanderung-und-Identitaet.html (accessed 24 June 2015)
6   http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/the-idea-of-a-homogeneous-nation-state-is-problematic-hamid-ansari-719346 (accessed 24 June 2015)
7   Easterly& Levine 1997, p. 1207. See also for more theoretical background Alesina, Baqir & Easterly 1999, p. 1243-1284. The latter article refers to ethnic divisions in the US.
8   Brubaker & Cooper 2000, p. 1-47.

adopted a constructivist approach to identity, the use of identity in social and political practice continues to be rather essentialist. Especially politicians refer to identity as something real and tangible, a definable essential quality that should be maintained, protected, defended. In the political discourse, (national) identity is seen as trumping all other identities (sex, race, gender, profession, language, religion) and becomes a 'thick'-loaded issue. The conflation of the use of identity as a practical category (with an essential meaning) in the public and political discourse with its use as an analytical category (with a constructivist perspective) in scientific discourse has rendered the term problematic. Influenced by psychology and sociology the term became hard and soft at the same time: Hard as referring to something essential and substantial, something important and basic in the life of individuals and groups; soft as referring to something that is fluid, influenced by social and societal developments.

To solve this problem, Brubaker & Cooper propose a couple of terms to break down the notion of identity into different parts, referring to different aspects of identities, which bring about a different practice:

– *Identification and categorization.* Identification is a willful, internal act by people to identify oneself with a certain quality or aspect: I identify myself as a medical doctor, a woman, a Muslim, a Hispanic person. But identification is also an external act in that others attribute certain identities or categories to people: I am identified by others as … The state is a powerful force in this identification process. It formulates categories for people – based on sex, race, gender, religion, criminal status, property/tax status – in order to be able to govern them, to relate to them and to control them.[9]

– *Self-understanding, social location.* This term refers to the agency of people to define who they are in their own terms and within their own context. Whereas identification and categorization refer to categories used in society, self-identification creates space for people to define the content themselves. As an auto-referential term self-identification has its limitations in the social reality. Self-identification offers people the opportunity to redefine themselves, to escape identification conferred upon them by others and imposed identities (understood as realities).

– *Commonality, connectedness, groupness.* These terms bring in the issue of collectivity as they are about sharing a common attribute, about relational ties that link people to one another and about the sense of belonging to a distinctive group. In this way there is also the reference

9   Kertzer & Ariel 2002, p. 2.

to the felt difference from outsiders and the possibility to make social distinctions.

Brubaker & Cooper's contribution to the identity discourse is useful as it helps to do away with the thick identity discourse and creates a discourse that much better reflects the constructivist approach to identity. Identification, unlike identity, refers to a process, to something-in-the-making. The term therefore avoids the danger of reification that is inherent to identity understood as a separately existing object. As a process, identification is something that can be influenced, it is contextual and situational. With this framework the authors address the external and internal, the individual and collective aspects of the process of identity formation. However, I do not think that bringing in the term 'identification' will prove to be the magic wand that solves the identity problem. Especially when referring to identification conferred by the state, their approach does not escape the problem of predefined categories that are attributed to citizens. During apartheid in South Africa, the racial identification (white, black, colored) was crucial for a person's position in society, her/his rights and entitlements. In Romania and Slovakia still today the identification of belonging to Hungarian ethnicity is important for one's cultural and social position. Censuses have shown all sorts of classifications (racial, ethnic, religious) by the state to categorize people.[10] By attributing categories like asylum seeker, migrant, catholic, or lesbian, the state put labels on its citizens that can serve as the basis for policies and regulations. Even if there is a form of self-identification by which people can choose to identify themselves, the state uses the results of censuses and registration to identify issues for which policies and regulations are developed.

Identification and fragility

Even though the language of identification is not the magic wand for the discourse on national identity, the identification concept offers valuable contribution for the process of building nationhood in fragile states: There is not yet a national identity, there is not yet an understanding of a common sense of belonging and it has to be built in the reality of multiple

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10   http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/interactives/multiracial-timeline/ (accessed 09 September 2015) This website contains a dataset which offers a historic perspective on the categories used in the censuses of the US.

self-understandings, differences and commonalities. It is a construction and design process. Nationhood in fragile states is often perceived as either a void or it is defined by usurpation by the dominant and most powerful ethnic group. In the latter case the national identity is a copy of the ethnic identity of a dominant (most of the time ethnic) group that tries to impose its identity onto all people living in the territory of the state and/or uses the national identity as a pretext to exclude minorities from equal participation in society.

Fragile states are faced with the problem of dysfunctional institutions and systems, which implies the need for state-building, and with a lack of social cohesion, which necessitates nation-building. As we established earlier, nation-building in today's fragile states cannot follow the organic path of gradual development over decades or even centuries. In order to make the state stable, there has to be some conscious design and construction process. Just leaving it to the vicissitudes of life means accepting the processes of usurpation and imposition of the most powerful identities. Nation-building in the current world has to be a more or less organized process of discovering, building and appropriating nationhood: The sense of belonging to a nation-state. It should provide an answer to the question: What makes Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tadjieks consider themselves Afghans, what makes Nuer and Dinka into South Sudanese, what makes Toeareg, Peul and Bambara into Malinese without the need to discard their ethnic or tribal identity ?

It is true that processes of usurpation and imposition played an important part in the process of building nationhood in the European countries. That explains why the Basks in France, the Catalans in Spain and the Scottish people in Great Britain continue to contest the nationhood, which fails to reflect the diversity of the country, and wish to claim autonomy. However, over time, minority groups in European countries have been able to establish influence on the national identity. In the Netherlands, following the insurrection against the Spanish in the second half of the 16th century, Catholics became a minority. It took nearly three centuries (1850) until the Catholic Church was allowed to restore its hierarchic structure. Since then this minority was able to regain its position in society and the Catholic culture has had an unmistakable influence on Dutch society. In Belgium, the dominance of the French-speaking Walloons was redressed by the Flemish after World War II, and in Germany the Bavarians managed to position themselves as a powerful counterinfluence against Berlin and the Rhineland. All examples underline that national identity is flexible, contextual and malleable.

Nation-building in fragile states in the 21st century cannot accept in advance the dominance of nationhood by the majority group: Ideas about the self-rule of people and respect for diversity that have taken root in the

international community make a zero-sum power play no longer acceptable. And if it is not political ideology or international law, it is the power of minority groups to destabilize a country that adds ineffectiveness to the illegitimacy of nation-building that is based on the dominance of the majority group. One illustration is the state-building and nation-building efforts of the United States in Iraq. Due to the political choice of the US to rely on the Shiites as the dominant group, these efforts have derailed since 2003. As Saddam Hussein had built his power on the support of the Sunnis, the US marginalized this minority group and built their strategy for a new Iraq on the Shia population. While the Americans hoped that building on this dominant group (60% of the population) would create stability and a center of gravity, this strategy instead led to a deep-felt resentment among the Sunnis and the Kurds, which resulted in the fragmentation of Iraq.

Building a sense of belonging will have to start from the reality that a collective and shared nationhood is not yet defined and that a process of identification is necessary. Defining the nationhood will have to be a collective process engaging all ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and regional groups, whether they are small or large, dominant or marginal.

Heterogeneity in fragile states

Fragile states are marked by heterogeneity, which makes homogeneity all the more unlikely as the outcome of a process of nation-building. This heterogeneity is manifest at both the national and subnational level. All fragile states, seen from a national perspective, contain a rich variety of cultures, languages, religions and ethnicities. This diversity repeats itself in the different regions and provinces of most fragile states. Plagued by civil war, most of these countries have experienced large-scale migration of people inside the country, to neighboring countries and overseas. Forty years of civil war and external interventions in Afghanistan have permanently changed the social and demographic pattern of the country. Internal displacement has forever altered the previously homogeneous regions of Uzbeks, Pashtun, Hazara, Tadjieks. The bigger cities have become melting pots of ethnic groups, none of which has the power to dominate the culture and way of life and who are therefore forced to live together side by side. Refugees from Afghanistan who fled to neighboring countries or to the West (North America, Europe) influence their families and clans in their home country with new ideas and new opportunities. The presence of the international community, providing security (ISAF) and aid, has shaped

new realities, attracting some and repelling others. This Afghanistan, where ethnic groups and tribes each had their own home area where they maintained their traditions and culture, is no longer there. And it will not return, neither by force nor by voluntary social and political processes.

A similar dynamic happened as a result of the decades-long civil war in Sudan. Communities broke apart and were dispersed within and outside Sudan. Social structures were turned upside down. I remember a visit to a small village in the southern state of Bahr El Gazal two years after the Naivasha agreements of 2005, when people started to return to their places of origin. In that village a sensitive dispute broke out between those who had stayed on their ancestral land during the war, those who had fled to Khartoum and built their own communities in the outskirts of the capital, and some of the younger generation who had fled to the refugee camps in Kenya and had been given the opportunity to study at university. Each of these three groups made their own claims for leadership. Those who had stayed and suffered the hardship of the war felt marginalized by the 'newcomers', who brought with them new ideas that challenged their traditions. All people in that village originated from the same place, but they experienced the impact of migration and the reality of new connections to the outside world very differently.

The same story can be told about the Democratic Republic of Congo, about the Central African Republic, Timor-Leste, Colombia, Guatemala. As a consequence of war and displacement, whatever homogeneity existed in those states is no longer there. The traditional stability of homogenous communities living side-by-side, respecting each other and with agreed ways of dealing with 'trans-border' issues, is gone. The new reality means that a process of nation-building can only hope to be successful if it takes into account the diversity and heterogeneity of fragile states. There is no identity that can function as 'center of gravity'. There is no identity that can serve as the basic national identity to which new elements can be added. Any such claims, which have for instance been made by the Pashtun in Afghanistan or the Dinka in South Sudan, immediately stir up protest and conflict by those who feel marginalized and fear to become second-class citizens.

Nationhood and minorities

If restoring previous regional homogeneity is no longer an option in fragile states, if we will not accept nationhood as being imposed by the dominant group, if we cannot wait until the organic process of history has produced a broadly shared sense of belonging, and if we do not believe in redrawing

borders (see chapter 2), then there is only one option: Nation-building will have to be an open and inclusive design and construction process that takes heterogeneity in its stride, and starts from the reality of the current territory of the state.

Nation-building is a process led by a collection of minority groups that together will have to create a common understanding of who they are and that need to develop a sense of belonging (in the emotional sense) that allows for and creates a culture of sharing. Although in most fragile states, there are groups that claim a dominant position and want to impose their culture on others, in reality they are all minorities. The Shia in Iraq, the Pashtun in Afghanistan, the Dinka in South Sudan all claim a dominant position but in fact they are (albeit large) minorities. Here one sees a clear distinction with the national identity debate in the Western world: The debate in Great Britain with the Scottish, in Spain with the Catalans and in Canada with the Quebecois is about an (assumed) majority identity that is challenged by the (regional, linguistic, cultural) minority. In fragile states, there is no established national (majority) identity or national sense of belonging. The challenge in fragile states is to build an overarching national identity out of a range of minority identities.

True, even most fragile states have national symbols, a flag, an anthem and national holidays, but that is not enough to build nationhood in terms of a sense of belonging. The challenge of nation-building is to create deeper roots for this sense of belonging in order to make it more resilient and robust for the challenges these countries are faced with. Three basic attitudes are important to make this process successful:

1   The actual process of nation-building (see chapter 10) should not be seen as a zero-sum game, neither between rivaling minority identities nor between a national identity and a minority identity. The issue of nationhood is not the next battlefield for groups that have been compet-ing for power. Building a national identity does not mean elevating one group's identity to become the national one. Neither does the national identity replace the group identities. The approach to nation-building should be based on the capacity of people to handle multiple identities that are not necessarily contradictory but reflect the complexity of the contexts that they live in. It is not even always necessary that national identities trump other identities. There is no preordered hierarchy in the multiple identities we live with. Tribal, family or religious identities can remain important and dominant in one's day-to-day life, if at the same time people are identifying with and emotionally investing in the nation as their overarching, shared identity and, based on their

national identification, are accountable when it comes to obeying the
law, paying taxes, or solving conflicts.

2   There can be no 'winner-takes-it-all' outcome of the process. If we look
    at nation-building as a process in which only minorities are involved,
    the outcome can never be that a dominant group imposes its identity,
    changing the 'we-are-all-minorities' reality into a 'dominant-minority'
    one. All groups will have to accept at the beginning of the process
    that the outcome will not be a copy of their minority identity. The
    outcome will be a mix of replacing and copying. Therefore, creating a
    national identity will always happen at some cost, or, creating coherence
    and a sense of belonging will never be realized if the premise is that
    everything about the minorities' own identity needs to be preserved in
    a national identity (see also the next paragraph on nation-destroying).
    Language is a clear example. A national sense of belonging will be
    difficult if there is no common language. Communication requires a
    language that is shared by the population of a nation-state. Political
    deliberations about the common interests and the sharing of resources
    will not have a level playing field if there is no common language.
    Without a common language, language power will be an important
    factor in political decision-making. It is in the interest of all minorities
    to have a shared language in order to create that level playing field. That
    should not rule out the possibility of more than one official language.
    But a nation needs clarity on what the common language(s) is (are)
    in order to create the basis for communication and decision-making.
    Using the language of the former colonial power, which is foreign to all
    minority groups, as the shared language has been the default option. In
    many former colonies (the whole of Latin America, large parts of Africa
    and Asia) the colonial language has survived as a common language
    for the official state communication, even if only a small percentage
    of the population can speak and write in this colonial language. In
    many countries, a vernacular has been chosen as the leading national
    language parallel to the former colonial language: Kiswahili in Kenya,
    Hindi in India, Bambara in Mali. In reality, in many African and Asian
    countries people are true polyglots. Many people in the DRC speak
    French (the official state language), one of the four national languages
    (Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba, Swahili) and one or more of the more
    than 200 tribal languages. A limited number of official languages is
    indispensable to communicate in the government, at the market or
    in the hospital or the school system. This polyglot reality offers op-
    portunities to solve the problem of language, but it is unavoidable that a

layered system will be the result of such a process: A limited number of official national languages and many dialects. Groups that will not see their group-language elevated to become an official national language, should see other elements of their identity integrated into a common national identity.

3   The acceptance of difference. Processes of nation-building by minorities are processes of groups that are fundamentally equal, but practically different. Each group can contribute and can put demands on the table, but it is unavoidable that in the decision-making process practical considerations will often be decisive. Languages with a large constituency of speakers are more likely to become national languages than 'small languages'. Historic places that become important in the national identity – either as seats of government or in more symbolic ways – will be located within the territories of some communities and not others. Nevertheless, to avoid a 'winner-takes-it-all' outcome, groups need to deliberately include symbols, festivals, heroes and cultures from small minorities in order to make sure that all groups are part of the nation-building process.

Nation-building as nation-destroying

Political scientist Walker Connor famously defined nation-building as nation-destroying[11]: By accepting the nation-state as the framework for international relations, we are in fact accepting that the rich diversity of identities is destroyed and that people are deprived of who they are. There is no doubt that nation-building changes identities and one could classify that change as destruction. Problematic in this approach to the nation-building issue is that it tends to see identity in an essentialist, primordial sense, as something that should be preserved and safeguarded against interventions from outside. But identities are never fixed and stable and there is no culture or identity that is immune to outside interventions. So the more relevant question is: Which kinds of outside interventions or interactions are legitimate and is nation-building an acceptable intervention in the identities of groups?

Earlier in this book I posited the intertwined reality of nation and state, rejecting the usefulness of a concept of nation separate from the state. That is not meant to deny the importance that people and communities attribute

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11   Connor 1972, p. 319-355.

to identities that do not coincide with the state. Over the years the reality of diversity in identities has led political scientists to develop a theory of the nation separate from the state. The Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka has done extensive work on the position of Quebec within the Canadian federal state. He argues that there is a distinct national identity in Quebec and that this national identity deserves to be recognized. The Quebecois should be given the power to organize their community based on their sociopolitical ideas and policies. In other words, nations on substate level should have the possibility to decide on, for instance, the use and exploitation of resources found on their territories or immigration policies in order to be able to preserve and defend their nationhood. Kymlicka defends the national identity of communities within the nation-state and therefore delinks the nation and the state. Or does he? By granting power to these nations within the nation-state to decide about resources, territory and immigration, he de facto allows for the creation of a nation-state within the nation-state. But where will this process of granting executive and legislative power of these nations-within-the-nation-state end? Theoretically, there is no limit to this process of devolution and therefore it can effectively lead to the creation of nation-states within nation-states. These nation-states can decide to organize some functions of the state collectively (e.g. defense, currency) but that will be based on agreements, it is not an intrinsic necessity of the concept.

A clear example is the peace process in the Philippines between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) (see the case study on pp. 148-151). The peace agreement that both parties signed and which provides for an autonomous government for the Bangsamoro has so many devolved powers (lawmaking, taxation, police, natural resource management) that it almost resembles an independent state. For the MILF an independent state has long been the objective of their struggle. Because of the unwillingness of the Philippines government to negotiate independence, MILF accepted autonomy as the next-best option and tried to maximize this autonomy to get as close to independence as possible.

Accepting the substate nation as a viable option will only fuel the ambition of these nations to govern themselves. Inevitably this will lead to new nation-states. It is like a matryoshka doll: Any group that wishes to declare itself a nation of its own with its own identity, has the right to do so, and subsequently to demand for autonomy in issues that they regard critical for their identity. And there is no conceptual definition or objective benchmark to decide when a nation-state is viable, neither in terms of geographical size nor in numbers of inhabitants. The republic of San Marino has a surface of 61

km2 and 31.000 inhabitants; Liechtenstein 160 km2 and 37.000 inhabitants. In the globalizing interconnected world small states are viable entities.

Fragmentation of nation-states into smaller entities to allow minority groups to exert the self-governance is always possible and history has shown the viability, but it is never a solution: even the smallest political entity has to solve the problem of diversity and has to build a sense of belonging, bridging identity-differences.

There is space for many identities to exist side by side within a nation-state. However, defining these identities as national will make it unavoidable in our world of nation-states that these nations will aspire to become a nation-state on and of its own. The challenge for nation-building is to accept diversity of identities and create space to live these identities, within one nation-state. By making the distinction between identities of communities (ethnic, religious, linguistic) and the national identity as identities on different levels and as identities with different institutions, there is space for both to exist alongside each other and there is the possibility of creating the sense of belonging and emotional commitment that is necessary to make fragile nation-states viable.

National identity as moving target

National identity is never fixed, instead it is a 'moving target'. Processes of reification of national identity are the projects of romantics who are looking for something with deep historical roots, something not susceptible to shocks and changes. Or they are the projects of dangerous nationalists who want to use national identity as a yardstick to make distinctions between the genuine, reliable nationals and the foreign, unreliable outsiders. Reification, fixation of national identity serves as the way to make national identity inaccessible to outsiders and at the same time maintain that it is threatened by them.[12]

The most important step to take is to abandon this reified idea of national identity, to abandon the romanticism of identity as a historic precious artifact that needs to be protected against contamination and fragmentation. National identity is an ongoing process of change and adaptation. As a social construct it is the expression of how and with which features citizens identify themselves and how the interaction between national citizens and

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12   Žižek, http://newleftreview.org/static/assets/archive/pdf/NLR17903.pdf (accessed 9 September 2015)

outsiders takes place. Changes in the population as a result of migration will have an influence on the national identity and so will new social and political ideas.

What is at stake is the question who has the legitimate right to influence and change the national identity. Is this right exclusively granted to those who have relations of ancestry, or do we accept that the entire national community in all its diversity may contribute to that social construct we call national identity?

Saint Augustine said it already: The times they are changing, but we are the times. If national identity is ever changing, this is because we, the citizens of the nation-states, are ever changing. The question is: How inclusive or exclusive do we define the 'we' of Saint Augustine?

Vignette

Imagination of reality in Gaza

I have been to Gaza on numerous occasions. The last time was in April 2015, eight months after the Gaza war of the summer of 2014, during which more than 2,000 civilians were killed. The first time I visited Gaza was in 2004, with the occupation and the settlements still there and the area cut into compartments. I believe I have never visited such a desolate place as Gaza in 2004. In 2006, I visited the strip after the dismantling of the settlements and after the Palestinian elections, won by Hamas. And again in 2009, and 2011, during the blockade of Gaza.

Every time I visited the Gaza strip, I paid a visit to Theatre Day Productions, a theater NGO that gives a cultural expression to life in that area. In April 2015, I attended a new series of plays that TDP had prepared in the aftermath of the war that had uprooted so many people and which had had a deep impact on the mental and emotional well-being of children. Schoolchildren and professional actors together expressed the reality and the way they built their resilience. Touring the schools of Gaza, TDP gave children the possibility to look in the mirror, to recognize themselves in the stories and performances on stage. During the summer holidays of 2015, TDP organized a tour for the UNWRA-Unicef facilities in schools and refugee camps.

By providing a theater school in annex to the theater company, TDP offers young men and women the opportunity to develop themselves into actors and directors who are able to reinterpret and transform reality and to offer their fellow Gazans a liberating perspective on their harsh day-to-day reality.

Theater for TDP is not a moment to forget the reality of war, oppression and blockade. TDP transforms these realities into a different level of personal reflection, social relationship and spiritual interpretation. The reality remains horrible and unjust but it is not the disempowering reality of powers far away that put people in dependency. TDP invites children to express their *agency*, to be empowered as agents who are part of the reality, not bystanders. TDP makes the case that reality is always multidimensional, even in conflict and war. Life is unbearable if it is just war, violence and conflict. Only if we are able to develop a layered perspective on reality, through which we can see new perspectives, we are able to escape the depressing reality. It is one of the examples that have shown me that the reality of conflict and fragility has more dimensions than just political, economic or military and that in these dimensions ordinary people are able to act in a meaningful and transformative way.