

The Children of Israel: nationalism, sociolinguistics, and the Zionist experience

Os Filhos de Israel: nacionalismo, sociolinguística e a experiência sionista

Marcelo dos Santos Netto¹

Abstract

The present paper investigates Israel's nationalistic building as a "imaginary community" by performing a discourse analysis on Theodor Herzl's pamphlet "The Jewish State", based on sociolinguistic methodology and some nationalistic concepts from Benedict Anderson's and Claudio Lomnitz's theories.

Keywords: Zionism, discourse analysis, nationalism

Resumo

O presente artigo investiga a edificação nacionalista de Israel como uma "comunidade imaginária", realizando para isso uma análise de discurso sobre o panfleto "O Estado Judeu" de Theodor Herzl. Baseia-se para isso em metodologia sociolinguística e alguns conceitos nacionalistas das teorias de Benedict Anderson e de Claudio Lomnitz.

Palavras-chave: Sionismo, análise de discurso, nacionalismo

1 Mestre em Relações Internacionais pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, em Belo Horizonte/MG, Brasil, e Bacharel em Jornalismo pela Faculdade Espírito-Santanaense de Administração. E-mail: msanetto@gmail.com.

1. Introduction

Israel is perhaps one of the most interesting cases of nationalist construction. It entangles matters of security, traditional constructions, and claims about land possession, all of this strongly based on a collective myth about the “return to the promised land”. The invention of Israel intriguingly combines historical tradition, religious statements, strong appeals for identity, and geopolitical beliefs: a myriad of ideas embroiled together in a recent example of nationalism. So the possibilities of speeches like the one Ariel Sharon delivered in the United Nations in 2005 (readers may decide by themselves if it is touchy or effusive): “The Land of Israel is precious... to us, the Jewish people... Every inch of land... is saturated with Jewish history... The continuity of Jewish presence in the Land of Israel never ceased. Even those of us who were exiled... remained connected to their homeland ...” (SHARON, 2012).

The possibility of imagining Israel allows internationalists to check out how nationalism is still a driving factor in international relations. The end of nations may be somehow figured out from European Union’s integration efforts; and from some worldwide organizations’ growing prestige and strength, for instance. However, there are a number of occasions when typical nationalist impulses seem to be still in their strongest boiling point. Nationalist claims can be found in boundary disputes of Latin America; in the recent proliferation of micronations; in African separatist movements; in economic claims from developing countries; in the emancipation struggles of some Russian territories; in intense academic debate; in Israel’s unique national characteristics; and in some other events that should not be ignored by internationalists.

So, the present paper proposes a sociolinguistic approach to nationalism in international relations. The approach is going to be done through a Discourse Analysis over an English translation of “The Jewish State” pamphlet. This choice is justified by the fact that its author, Theodor Herzl, is considered one of the main thinkers of Zionism, a worldwide movement whose main objective was to create a national state to shelter all Jews around the world. Focus is given to

the construction of the nationality of the Jew people, or “the children of Israel”, as they are called in the Exodus book (EXODUS, 2, 25). Some considerations about possibly further investigations are delivered in the conclusion.

2. The end of nationalism?

Nationalism has been considered extinct or anachronistic since the last decade of the XX century: a common mistake that allows internationalists to experience a rare occasion of wide academic consensus. Nowadays, scientists like Alexander Wendt (2003) seem to be convinced that nationalism have been torn down by globalization, internationalization, world economy, or something else Justin Rosenberg (2007) would ironically call a “higher bullshit” [*sic*]. The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union have been celebrated as a turning point for that moment, called by United States’ former president George Bush as “the new world order” As expected, such expression became fashionable among internationalists since then.

Many theories are optimistic about this new order. Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” (1989) has been mentioned as a typical example. Some others are more skeptical and denouncing. Linda Bishai’s “liberal empire” hypothesis (2004) could be listed among these ones. Not importing if cheerful or critic, these theories are based in a somehow futuristic exercise about the impeding extinction of the nation-state. According to this exercise, nations and nationalism are damned to fade away, because states are going to be destroyed or at least neutralized by some kind of “higher bullshit”, like new technologies of communication, cheap and fast transport, universalization of democratic or human values, and so forth.

These theories commit two basic flaws. First one is the way they oppose individuals and nations, in a schema like *states-nationalistic-bad / individual-humanistic-good*. The point is: why should one consider that nationalism does not come from individuals, or receives support from them? Second and most important one is the strong roots these theories dig on some kind of utopian or dystopian revolution, driven

by supposed inescapable historical forces whose necessary objective is to blow nationalism away. Why, based on Karl Popper's main ideas (1971), one could wonder if international society is "closed" enough for such eschatology. By judging how sovereignty is still relevant in most of United Nation's debate; and by considering that sovereignty is an important element of nationalism, one could easily suspect that nationalism seems to be far from being banished from international relations; and maybe international society's strongest virtue and main possibility of existence reside precisely in its openness.

Moreover, in a dialectical, sociolinguistic perspective, probably things are going to be like this *ad aeternum*: how could someone imagine a "higher bullshit" without something opposed to it – let's say, a consistent enough "lower bullshit" like nationalism? That's why, instead of a historicist walk towards the end of nation-states, internationalists may profit much more from a model where both tendencies – nationalism and internationalism – coexist by contrasting and complementing each other in an interminable fray. The benefits of this model would come especially for discourse analysts, considering the way they accept and handle contradictions and dialectics with ease.

3. Imagining Nations

Why, one of the most celebrated theories concerning nationalism is Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (1991). According to Anderson, nations are "fictions" about absolutely self-referent collectiveness. They are *imagined* because even the members of the smallest nation are unlikely to know each other personally, although the idea of collectiveness is present in the mind of all of them. They are also *limited* because even the largest nation is restricted by boundaries, beyond which remain what is considered *xeno*, stranger – even barbaric. They are *sovereign* because Enlightenment and French Revolution dethroned kings by stealing their sovereignty and giving it to the people, collectively represented by nations. Finally, they are *communities*, because, regardless a number of asymmetries among their individuals, nations are always conceived as a unity of deep, horizontal comradeship (ANDERSON, 1991, pp.6-7).

Where should internationalists look for nations? By availing Anderson's theory, it can be figured out that nations are present and perpetrated in written discourse – more precisely, in everyday journalism and artistic literature. Anderson's theory allows presuming that some stylistic constructions – “our rivers”, “our mountains”, “our lands” – perform a profound feeling of differentiation among communities. Written language also helped to establish the idea of a vernacular language, or a language that characterizes a state, a region, a people. Texts and literature also gave the feeling of “different timing” among imagined collectiveness. As a result, national communities were imaginarily disposed in an “empty time” of “secular competition”, where nations are perceived in an eternally competitive context.

Anderson's imagined communities have found critics. The most mentioned one is Claudio Lomnitz (2001), whose ideas have been also widely mentioned in debates about nationalism. According to Lomnitz, the concept of imagined communities stumbles upon some mistakes due to Anderson's main intention: to theorize about the nationalist uprisings in many Soviet Union ex-territories. Because of this, Anderson tended to be too focused on the idea of horizontality and comradeship of nations, as if nationalism by itself were capable to unleash an almost suicidal impulse for a cause (LOMNTIZ, 2001, p.6). In other words, Anderson was so worried about what makes a nation emotionally plausible, that he forgot to wonder about what makes it politically possible. Thus, he ignored two main, synergetic, discursive processes that give nations meaning and existence: *deepness* and *silence*.

According to Lomnitz, imagined communities try to deepen their emotional equality and proximity by silencing some traits that make them politically possible, like hierarchy, asymmetries and mandatory obligations (LOMNITZ, 2001, p.xv). Nations also try to silence their heterogeneity by suggesting that nationals are genuinely native and self-referent. Nevertheless, remarks Lomnitz, the making of nations must be researched in the context of transnational movements, where tensions between tradition and modernity brings conflicts into economic and cultural spheres, with repulse and occasional “demonization”

of everything considered foreign (LOMNITZ, 2008, pp.130-132). In sum, nationalism is an imagined community built over the deepened impression of comradeship, equality and homogeneity: an impression obtained by silencing the mandatory obligations, the hierarchy, and the heterogeneity that ironically are indispensable to make nations possible.

4. Linguistics and Discourses

Considering the above exposed, the present paper suggests a socio-linguistic model to describe and comprehend the “transnational” relations where nationalism is constructed. Based on Samuel Berger and Peter Luckmann (2008), international reality is understood here in *constructionist* terms. It means that everything internationally considered rational, logic or even real is like this because of social consensuses. There are absolutely no natural or biological facts in human organizations: order and its derivatives come uniquely from human activity (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2008, p.76).

In other words, a nation is but a wide consensus about the factual existence of a community, beyond which remains what is considered foreign, stranger, *xeno*. Why, language plays important roles in the construction of this reality. It allows *communication*, here considered the most important mechanism to build, re-build and un-build social reality. Some of its main functions include the construction of historical traditions, the linkage between different everyday spheres, and the possibilities of obtaining different meanings by crossing over different linguistic experiences (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 2008, pp.59-60). It works just like the role literature plays in Anderson’s theory. Language also determines how knowledge of things is going to be *structured* in human mind: an important function whose comprehension demands to understand the logic of *linguistics*. This is going to be understood here through Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories (1995).

According to Saussure’s course of linguistics, every language shares a common structure above grammatical and vocabulary particularities. This structure is named sign, and it is composed by something percei-

ved in reality – the *signified*; and something used to make references to the signified – the *signifier*. Signs shares common characteristics. They are built on *arbitrariness*: linkages between the signified and the signifier are not natural or logic, but collectively consensual. They are also *immutable*: once conceived, signs are preserved by the collectiveness who built it, so that sociability remains possible. Signs are *mutable* too: in order to preserve their signs, collectiveness must adapt them along historical changes. Finally, signs are based in *value*. They exist in the format of *dyads*, where the meaning of one is obtained when contrasted with other; and where one is considered superior to the other.

Signs determine the format of *discourses*, here described according to Michel Foucault's (1962, 2005) main ideas. In Foucaultian terms, discourses are *heterogeneous* at first. They are built over a myriad of other discourses, or socially available ideas about what is rational, fair, logic, natural, normal, or simply factual. It is worth to explain heterogeneity in the terms suggested by Norman Fairclough (1996), for whom discourses are composed by texts explicitly quoted by the discourse – *intertextuality*; and discourses subtly mentioned by it – interdiscursivity. Not importing if intertextual or interdiscursive, heterogeneity leads discourses to be *contradictory*. When entangled together, so many claims end up building paradoxical assortments that must not be considered merely accidental, but the very essence of the discourse (FOUCAULT, 1969, p.197). Nevertheless, as put by Lomnitz, discourses try to deepen their apparent coherence by silencing their contradictions.

So it happens to nations. Being an arbitrary construction, preserved by the collectiveness that built it, nations exist and make sense when compared to something considered external – and presumably inferior, barbarian, *xeno*. In order to be *emotionally plausible*, nations strive to deep their supposed homogeneity and comradeship by silencing the heterogeneity and mandatory hierarchy that make them *politically possible*.

5. Triphasic Analysis

Having in mind the above remarks about nationalism and discourse, the present paper is going to perform a *triphase analysis* over Theodor Herzl's "The Jewish State" pamphlet (1998). As suggested by Norman Fairclough (2004), the analysis is going to combine efforts of explaining what the discourse means; *interpreting* what it could say in direct and indirect possibilities; *evaluating* social implications of the discourse; and *judging* its coherence with what is socially available; if it could obtain social reception; and possibly its ethic implications.

First phase is named *social repertory*. It includes researches about what social consensuses, interdiscursivity, and intertextuality the studied discourse seems to make use in order to be convincing, consistent and socially understandable. Second phase is a study about *discursive strategies*. Research is going to be focused on associations, metaphors, combinations, deepness, silences and some other tools the discourse uses in order to build its coherence. Third phase is named *explanatory evaluation*. It means to reveal discursive contradictions, and eventually make efforts of evaluation and judgment about them. Research focus is going to be restricted to the suggested identity of Israel's national – or, more precisely, what is a Jew; what turns possible to imagine them as a worldwide community; what efforts of deepness and silence are done in order to obtain this suggested homogeneity; and so forth. Herzl's pamphlet is divided between justifying a Jew state, and explaining how it could be built. Here the focus is fixed on the second part, where main arguments for a Jewish nation are concentrated.

5.1 First phase: social repertory

Interestingly, first phrase of the pamphlet affirms that the idea developed by the author is an old one: "the *restoration* of the Jewish state" (HERZL, 1988, p.69, our emphasis). So, "I [the author] have discovered neither the historic condition of the Jews nor the means to improve it. In fact, every man will see for himself that the materials of the structure I am designing are not only in existence, but actually already in hand" (HERZL, 1988, p.69). With these assertions, Herzl declares his strong interdiscursivity with Zionism movement's main

guidelines: the need of a Jewish state to protect Jews from worldwide Anti-Semitism; references to the Jewish state that once existed during the Roman Empire; the expulsion of Jews from their original homeland; the return to Zion, or the Promised Land, according to the Exodus' biblical myth and geographical indications; and so forth, as it can be checked in some literature about the subject (NEUBERGER, 2010; SHIMONI, 1995; SHAPIRA, 1998).

Some other hints may be useful. Still in the preface, the author makes clear he is not sketching a "Utopia", in a clear reference to Thomas Morus' main work. By contrasting "utopian fantasies" and "factual realities", Herzl let it clear he is not "dreaming", but thinking about "real matters", just like in the way Michel Foucault (2005) affirms that discourses tries to build their power by claiming he is truth and real. Herzl also makes some references to Darwinism by making effusive use of the expressions "race" and "chromatic function". The last expression is a way of describing the Jew "association" efforts to be part of non-Jew nations.

5.2 Second phase: discursive strategies

In order to imagine Israel's nationals, Herzl's main strategy is to build deepness towards the idea of a homogeneous Jewish people. This is done at first by silencing every possibility of heterogeneity among Jews. According to Herzl, Jews are unlikely to be welcomed and nurtured by other nations: "In vain are we loyal patriots...; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow-citizens; in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce" (HERZL, 1988, p.76). Still working on this silence, Herzl affirms that the only chance Jews could have to be left in peace in a non-Jew country would be through economic success; but even so, Jews would be found in the middle classes, where Anti-Semitism is mainly concentrated, what means that wealthy is not a way of convincing someone to give up of Anti-Semitism (HERZL, 1988, p.78).

So the urgent need of a Jewish state. Herzl is very optimist about this

solution. He believes that yes, Jews can build a nation by themselves. Warranties for this include Jew's own labor capacity, together with what Herzl calls "modernity", or the way machines have amplified men's industrious possibilities. According to the author, modernity must be used to address the Jewish question, since modernity's aim is to solve "some of the dark problems of humanity". The Jewish question is one of these problems: to solve it means not only to solve a Jew difficulty, but also a worldwide burden (HERZL, 1988, p.75).

Herzl believes he knows the essence of the "Jewish question", or the worldwide Anti-semitism's main cause. Before addressing the subject, the author states he is not doing this with hate or resentment; and asserts that all "civilized nations" should address the problem together, considering that all of them seem to be uneasy with Jewish presence. Having said that, Herzl explains that "the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one... It is a *national* question (HERZL, 1988, p.51 – our emphasis)." In other words, "we [Jews] are a people – one people" (HERZL, 1988, p.51); so the worldwide hate against them: all Jews are "correctly" considered strangers, foreigners, *xenos*, when not in a Jewish country. Jews are a people without land that needs a land without people, to put it in Zionist terms.

5.3 Third phase: explanatory evaluation

Of course Herzl's discursive constructions are not free of contradictions. In fact, his Zionist discourse would not be possible without them, considering Foucault's main idea that contradiction is the essence of discourse. Herzl's main paradox is the way he is divided between an endogenous and an exogenous explanation about the origin of the Jewish people. By the way, such contradictory heterogeneity is explainable through Anderson's and Lomnitz's idea that nationalism is made of contradictory claims.

At first, the author seems to be convinced that Jews are a self-referent people; so the impossibility of any effort to assimilate Jews in other nations: "[o]ur national character is too historically famous..." (HERZL, 1988, p.91). This historically endogenous building is supposedly

allowed by religious traditions: “[o]ur community of race is peculiar and unique, for we are bound together only by the faith of our fathers” (HERZL, 1988, p.146). As told by Zionism’s main guidelines, religious practices and beliefs – including language and territoriality – are what distinguish Jews among other nations in Herzl’s discourse.

Paradoxically, the author inverts his main argument by stating that Jew people are but a pure invention of Anti-Semitism. It can be figured out from sentences like “[w]e are one people – our enemies have made us one without our consent... Distress bind us together, and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength” (HERZL, 1988, p.92). Using a typically “modern” metaphor, Herzl states that the hate against Jews is the “fuel” that feeds the “steam” of the Jewish people’s “engine”. Intolerance only makes them stronger: the more Jews are hated, the more they become one people; and the more Jews become one people, the more urgent a Jewish state is. By the way, one could even figure out here some interdiscursivity with the Exodus book, where it is said that the more the Pharaoh afflicted the Jew people, the more the Jew people grew stronger (EXODUS, 1, 10:12).

To make the matter even more confusing, Herzl makes some references about the well being of Jews who are already “assimilated” in other countries. Suddenly he assumes that there are Jews doing well in non-Jew countries like France; and admits that the Jewish state could mean a menace to these Jews, since it could boost Anti-Semitic feelings. However, the author believes these fears are mistaken: the “assimilated” Jews would profit very much from a Jewish state. They would no longer be disturbed in their process of assimilation (the “chromatic function”), since refusing to “return” to a Jewish country could be understood as a proof of their loyalty to the nation where they struggle to be assimilated (HERZL, 1980, p.80).

In sum, these are the statements of Herzl about the existence of a Jew people: 1.1) Jews are a self-referent people with common history and rituals; 1.2) Jews are a people whose identity was developed by nothing but the worldwide hate against them; 2.1) Jews cannot be assimilated in other nations, and that’s why they need a nation; 2.2) Jews can be

assimilated in other nations, and a Jew nation would benefit these Jews in their proof of loyalty. Such contradictions are akin with Anderson's and Lomnitz's theories about the role of contradictions in the making of nations and nationalism.

6. Conclusion

The present paper performed a Discourse Analysis on Theodor Herzl's "The Jewish State". The main objective was to explain Israeli nationalism through Zionism's claims. Explanatory nationalistic theories included Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities", and Claudio Lomnitz's deepness and silence. Discourse was sociolinguistically defined with Michel Foucault's, Berger and Luckmann's, and Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas. Methodology privileged textual langue, and included what was called a "triphasic analysis".

Nationalistic theories were useful to analyze Herzl's discourse. The triphasic analysis also did well in the work of explanation, interpretation and judgment. However, further researches could be done about other zones of contact, like economical claims of possession, and cultural self-assurance. It could demand more attention to the Zionism's interdiscursivity, with special regard to the Exodus' book. By the way, other types of silence could be analyzed. For instance, many investigators would like to investigate the way Israeli nationalism deals with Arabic pan-national definitions. Triphasic analysis could do well in these matters.

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