

Opinion – The ‘Pizza Effect’ on Nations and Nationalism

Written by Curtis Large

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/10/26/opinion-the-pizza-effect-on-nations-and-nationalism/>

CURTIS LARGE, OCT 26 2024

The Day of the Dead in Mexico City – crowds, floats and masses of ornate dancers fill the streets to the sound of blaring drums and horns. Amid this spectacle of skulls, one wonders if anything could be more evocative of the Mexican nation. But we find an issue; Mexico City only hosted its first parade in 2016, borrowing from a scene in the *James Bond* film released the previous year (Agren 2019). Mexico’s antique celebration had been transplanted to the West, conveniently modified and reunited with its homeland in a different form as if it never left. In 1970, anthropologist Aghananda Bharati (1970, 273) playfully coined this phenomenon the ‘pizza effect’. As Sedgwick (2007, 4) surmises:

Original Italian pizza was a simple dish, consisting of bread with a tomato topping. Taken to America by Italian emigrants, the pizza was developed there into its present more complex form, which after the Second World War spread to Europe—including Italy. The contemporary pizza is now taken to be purely Italian, but it is not.

How do we interpret our social imaginary once the narratives behind our national customs, myths and markers are compromised? Since the 1980s, many theories mapping the modernity of nations and nationalism have been tabled, despite their ostensible primordialism. Perhaps most relevant to the pizza effect is that of invented traditions, introduced by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Hobsbawm (1983, 6, 2) explains that these ‘are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past’, adding that ‘new traditions could be readily grafted on old ones ... borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation.’ We might, then, consider the pizza effect to be one of many explanations behind the invention of traditions. The two examples offered so far show the possible benignity of Bharati’s theory, which, in our modern era of global communications and easy travel, likely accounts for innumerable cross-cultural instances the world over.

However, the possibility of pizza effect-ed materials being gathered to foster national consciousness—with the capacity to evolve into hot nationalism—cannot be ignored. As Hobsbawm (1983, 7) argues, the unprecedented theme of nationalism prior to the late 18th-century meant ‘that even historic continuity had to be invented’. In our case, this feasibly gives culturally transplanted phenomena a superficial antiquity, and the loyalty this entails, through a process akin to forgery. Connectedly, one might draw on Miroslav Hroch’s (1985, 23) phases of nationalism, the first being the scholarly research of attributes attached to a cultural group in order to promote awareness, identity and collectivisation. In recognising these concepts, not only can we understand why the pizza effect is conducive to the invention of tradition and the ethnic entrepreneurs that encourage it, but also how re-enculturation might eventually contribute towards building more active and developed nationalist movements.

The Khmu are an ethnic minority located primarily in Laos. According to Proschan (2001, 1025), the collection and proliferation of folktales by external collectors amounts to a pizza effect that strongly shapes their imaginary. These legends take the form of contest tales which see the minority lose out to other regional populations. For some, this evidences an inferiority complex that the Khmu have interiorised through the re-enculturation of fictional stories spread by outsiders. One story passed to Chinese scholar Li Daoyong (1984, 15) is typical:

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The legend goes that they were brothers: the Kammu [alternate spelling] was the elder brother and the Khbit the younger brother. One day Brother Kammu caught an elephant and gave a portion of the meat to Younger Brother Khbit. Younger Brother Khbit later caught a porcupine and gave a portion of the meat to Brother Kammu. Brother Kammu found that the hair of the porcupine was thicker than that of the elephant, and thought that the porcupine must be bigger than the elephant. But since he got such a small amount of meat from Younger Brother Khbit he alleged that the Younger Brother had been unfaithful. Finally he said to the Younger Brother, “Let’s break up the family and live apart!”.

This example is interesting since the pizza effect is not called upon to promote ethnic splendour. Nevertheless, a collective ‘self-deprecatory acceptance of pejorative stereotypes’ fertilises national identity insofar as the Khmu are better able to conceptualise ‘their own place in local ethnically-determined socioeconomic hierarchies’ (Proschan 2001, 1025). Modified feedback of native folklore has allowed this group to appreciate its unique and binding disadvantage.

Whereas here re-enculturation has failed to engage an energetic pursuit of self-determination, it did and continues to do so among India’s Hindu nationalists. In 1785, Charles Wilkins produced the first English translation of the Bhagavad Gita, the most widely embraced of the Hindu scriptures. He considered its original Sanskrit similar to Latin and Greek, ripe for comparison with European philosophies. As Britain’s colonial grip tightened throughout the following century, the Gita was subjected to more interpretations, their influence on Indian thought guaranteed by a milieu of imperial socio-economic forces. Most influential in this Hindu Renaissance, however re-encultured, was Edwin Arnold’s poetic rendering of the Gita, *The Song Celestial* (1885) (Larson 1975, 664–65). A student in London around this time, Mahatma Gandhi (1959, 12) described his first reading the text:

I devoured the contents from cover to cover and was entranced by it. The last nineteen verses of the second chapter have since been inscribed on the tablet of my heart. They contain for me all knowledge.

Gandhi’s study of the work partly inspired his devotion to the tenets of truth and non-violence, combining with the influence of British liberalism to formulate a self-rule movement with a religious flavour. As Larson (1975, 665) opines, ‘the Gita ... is a kind of nationalist tract, as well as a symbol of universal spirituality’. This Orientalist pizza effect, that which ‘had been grist for the mill for nationalism’, did not disappear post-independence (Jouhki 2006, 75). As late as 2001, influential nationalists maintained their observance of re-enculturation when the Indian Space Research Organization referenced the Vedas—a large body of ancient Hindu texts—to justify its scientific acknowledgment of astrology, as these writings had been historically valued by Western intellectuals (Nanda 2003, 107).

Up to this point, we have seen how the pizza effect is able to invent traditions and engender vigorous nationalism, and, where it has not, can at least emphasise ethnic particularities. But what about supra- or post-nationalism? In 2015, the EU Pizza Effect project saw the collaboration of organisations from seven member states to host cookery workshops showcasing their national dishes. Attempting to illustrate the ‘blind acceptance of all things new and foreign’ among its constituent nations, the European Union heralded this sponsorship as unlocking ‘active social integration into the European community’ (Berlak & Poljanšek 2015, 7). Clearly such a commitment will require more than sharing Hungarian stuffed peppers, even if one overlooks the bloc’s interpretation of the pizza effect as diverging from Bharati’s. Conversely, re-enculturation’s transnational capability cannot be dismissed. Existing scholarship on the phenomenon, though rare, has catalogued its profound impact on spiritual movements without delineated territory or national culture, from Buddhism to Wahhabism to New Age Mayanism (Borup 2004; Sedgwick 2007; Sitler 2012). Though my piece has attempted to redress this imbalance, the EU might simultaneously learn more from the pizza effect’s borderless potential.

Concluding his book on the topic, Hobsbawm (1992, 192) predicted the imminent demise of nations and nationalism: ‘the owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk’. Implying that our increased understanding foreshadows their end, Hobsbawm’s failure to acknowledge the processes behind his own theory of invented traditions paints the remark as somewhat complacent. Complex matrices of imperialism and continuing globalisation have revealed the pizza effect to be just one of probably many phenomena sustaining this process. As re-

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enculturation retains its ability to shape collective imaginaries in this way, so also it offers itself to the durability of nations and nationalism.

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