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# The Gellnerian modality revisited: towards a ‘genealogy’ of cultural homogenization and nation-state congruency

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This paper re-evaluates Ernest Gellner’s theory of nations and nationalism and particularly his conceptions of cultural homogenization and congruency. The paper shows how Gellner’s historical and epistemological stance naturalizes homogenization processes and rationalizes modern history as an inevitable trajectory of congruency making of states and nations. The paper proposes, nonetheless, to deploy a critical framework and read Gellner’s notions of congruency and cultural homogenization as a ‘social imaginary’/ ‘fantasy’. That is, understanding congruency as a sociopolitical project that idealizes a certain imaginary as positive, necessary and inevitable – a ‘fantasy’ that sets to secure and stabilize discursively the contingency of social relations. It is suggested, moreover, to deploy a Foucauldian genealogical technique in an attempt to de-naturalize congruency and homogenization practices and expose the conditions of their emergence in modern history.

**Keywords:** Ernest Gellner; congruency; cultural homogenization; genealogy; fantasy; nation state

## Introduction

Ernest Gellner’s ([1983] 2006, 1) seminal work *Nations and Nationalism* asserts that ‘Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national should be congruent.’ To Gellner ([1983] 2006, 44), this process of congruency making is inevitable and necessary as part of modern-industrial societies for they require ‘a mobile, literate, culturally standardised, interchangeable population’. Congruency is, thus, the convergence of culture and state, or the ‘cultural homogenisation’ of the masses as Conversi (2007, 372; see also Conversi 2008) recently conceptualized:

homogenisation is an elite-driven attempt to impose sociocultural changes leading to, or aiming at, cultural uniformity. The concept is well rendered by the French term “massification” and the verb “massifier” (literally, to “massify”, to render homogeneous by stamping out cultural specificities).

The scholarship on Ernest Gellner’s work is vast (e.g. Hall and Jarvie 1996; Hall 1998; Hann 2001; van den Bossche 2003; Conversi 2007), although three major groups that have engaged critically with Gellner’s theory of nations and nationalism stand out (however, they are not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive). The first group rejects Gellner’s philosophical-theoretical approach, that is: (1) his functionalist stance; (2) the lack of agency in his ideal-typical account of nations (Laitin 1998; Mouzelis 1998, 160–164); and/or (3) his ‘Olympian distance’ (Minogue 1996, 125; Brubaker 1998, 272). The second group objects Gellner’s empirical or historical perspective, that is: (1) arguing that congruency is not so prevalent (O’Leary 1998); (2) that it cannot be determined that when homogenization had been applied did it necessarily have much to do with industrialism; or (3) that industrialism necessarily requires cultural homogenization (Minogue 1996, 119–121; Stargardt 1996, 175; Nairn 1998; Breuilly 2006, xxxv–xxxvi). The third group objects Gellner’s apolitical approach and advocates instead to ‘bring politics back in’ (Beissinger 1998; Mouzelis 1998, 160; O’Leary 1998, 63–71; see also Tilly 1985; Breuilly 1993; Mann 1993, 1996; Conversi 2007).

Lacking in the literature, nonetheless, is a critical analysis of congruency and cultural homogenization, and the ways in which they are practised in modernity (exceptions include e.g. Arendt 1962, 267–302; Bauman 1988; Rae 2002). That is to say that despite the rich scholarship on nationalism and specifically on Ernest Gellner (Hall and Jarvie 1996; Hall 1998; Smith 1998; Hann 2001; van den Bossche 2003; Conversi 2007), the concept of congruency is rarely unpacked and examined as a socially constructed project of modernity. Instead, the existing literature addresses Gellner’s theory as a theoretical hypothesis to be corroborated or refuted, or as a theoretical framework that can be revised and fine-tuned so as to include agency or the political (Beissinger 1998; Laitin 1998; O’Leary 1998).

This paper wishes to contribute to a growing interdisciplinary interest in nation-state congruency and mechanism of cultural homogenization (e.g. Conversi 2012, 13–34; Rae 2002), as I engage with Gellner’s theory of nationalism. Rather than investigating Gellner’s theory from a positivist-empiricist stance, however – for example, whether industrialism requires nationalism or whether nationalism is indeed a modern phenomenon (O’Leary 1998; Smith 1998; Conversi 2007) – this paper stems from a critical stance (Cox 1981, 126–155) as I make the case for a ‘genealogy’ of homogenization and congruency in modern thought and practice

(Foucault 1977, 139–164; Roth 1981; Shiner 1982, 386–192). I thus recommend reading congruency and cultural homogenization as a ‘social imaginary’ (Taylor 2004) and as a ‘fantasy’ (Žižek 2001; Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147), that is, an ideal of unity among people and a convergence between people and their space and authority, broadly understood. This thus means to address congruency not as a *fait accompli* phenomenon to be explained, but rather as an ideological and normative set of ideas and practices that are always in the process of becoming. These ideas and practices are neither fixed with precise and enduring meaning, nor are they fully achieved for, like any political ideology, closure is never possible – ‘it is like writing in water’ (Laclau, cited in Andersen 2003, 55–56; see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

The purpose of this paper is not to offer a new model designed to explain modern nationalism, nor do I critique present-day research in the field of nations and nationalism for adhering to Gellner’s maxim of one nation per one state. Rather, my main objective here is to show how Gellner’s notions of congruency and cultural homogenization are still quite relevant to understanding modernity, albeit I suggest employing these notions through a critical and discourse-analytical lens. This means that I engage critically with Gellner’s work on nations and nationalism not because he is still an authority in the field, but because he was indeed the first to have analysed and theorized congruency and cultural homogenization (already in 1964, although fully developed in his 1983 *Nations and Nationalism*). This paper, therefore, starts from Gellner’s point – the linkages between modernity and congruency – while attempting to move beyond Gellner and thus to expose the ways in which the congruency ‘fantasy’ came to be rendered intelligible in modernity.

This paper has two parts. The first demonstrates how Gellner’s theory naturalizes congruency and rationalizes history and thus legitimates an imaginary, almost ideal, world view of congruent ‘nation states’. The second part explains this paper’s critical stance as I re-appropriate Gellner’s notions of congruency and homogenization as ‘social imaginaries’ and ‘fantasies’. I then explain the need to inquire ‘genealogically’ into the ‘conditions of emergence’ of homogenization technologies and congruency and therefore the ways by which a world view of homogenous polities came to be rendered intelligible.

## **I: Ernest Gellner and the naturalization of homogeneity and the ‘nationstate’ system**

### ***Totalising history and the ‘presentist fallacy’***

Ernest Gellner’s reading of history is totalizing as he endorses a macro-historical approach, observing human society from a bird’s eye perspective (Minogue 1996, 115–116, 125; Brubaker 1998, 272). As such, Gellner

differentiates between three stages of human association: the hunter-gatherer society, the agro-literate society and later modern society. In the first two forms of association, Gellner argues, nationalism could not emerge since the hunter-gatherer structure was too small and the agrarian society too large and complex (Gellner [1983] 2006, 8–18; Smith 1996, 131).

Modern-industrial society, however, is altogether different since it entails a highly mobile and literate corpus of individuals who cross the previously separated economic, social and class barriers, including geographical ones. Hence, argues Gellner, nationalism is not an evolution of ethnicity or past human associations but a complete and different new form of social structure (Breuilly 2006, xx–xxi). Nationalism is then not an ideology, or an idea created and disseminated by the intelligentsia (Kedourie [1961] 1993); rather, it is the structural properties of modernity that require nationalism, which then ‘invents nations where they do not exist’ (Gellner 1964, 169). Moreover, industrialism is highly different from any other human condition, for embedded in it is a constant need for growth and progress (Gellner [1983] 2006, 22).

This illustrates Gellner’s totalization of history and specifically the ways in which he rationalizes historical progress almost in a teleological way (Stargardt 1996, 186; but see Gellner 1996, 627–628). This is quite clear when one reads Gellner’s analysis of industrialism, economic development and the role of nationalism as a process shifting towards an end result. The history of states and nations, nonetheless, is much more complex and contingent and as Stargardt (1996, 184) puts it: ‘The exact relationship of state, civil society, economy and culture has had to be repeatedly renegotiated. It is not a once and for all business.’

This form of historical analysis suggested by Gellner is problematic not only because it offers a macro-historical details-free overview, but specifically because it observes history by using present terms. This is the ‘presentist fallacy’ (Bartelson 1995: 54–58; Veyne 1988), which means to take:

...an institution or an idea from the present together with the cotemporary role, function or purpose presently used to justify that institution or idea, and then describes its historical development *as if* this purpose or role had governed its emergence and transformation right from its origin onwards. (Bartelson 1995, 57, original emphasis)

Indeed, Gellner’s history of human association and specifically his focus on the lack of homogeneity in agrarian society and its emergence in modernity reads history as a pre-designed trajectory directed towards an end product. Gellner reads the history of industrialism as a teleological move, a ‘tidal wave’, towards his own present that is characterized by

'nation states'. The international system of supposedly congruent 'nation states' of Gellner's present is then the *ultima ratio* of modern history.

### **One nation per one state: functionalism, determinism and the naturalization of the 'nation-state' system**

Modernity, according to Gellner, entails processes of urbanization, scientific and technological innovation coupled with the pursuit of growth and progress, which require a mobile social structure. Individuals then must be able to communicate with a great number of people in a standard agreed-upon way that will make sense and power the growing modern society. The urban-industrial society, therefore, 'requires effective and widespread context-free communication through a common medium, a "high culture"' (O'Leary 1998, 47). Indeed, the notion of 'high culture' – for example, high literacy rates, pervasive educational systems and standardization – in Gellner's ([1983] 2006, 34) thesis is key to understanding his functionalist theory of nations:

Let us recapitulate the general and central features of industrial society. Universal literacy and a high level of numerical, technical and general sophistication are among its functional prerequisites. Its members are and must be mobile, and ready to shift from one activity to another.

Producing this standardized linguistic medium is an all-encompassing task that requires a great deal of investment, as well as the capability to penetrate into society and culturally engineer it, as it were. This is where the role of the state emerges and why, to Gellner, the convergence of state and nation is inevitable and is functional to modern-industrial society. This is because only the state has the organizational capacity to devise and impose such a complex and comprehensive programme of cultural homogenization through a state-led education scheme. This then results in and aims to achieve a high vernacular culture that entails high literacy rates, a standardized medium of communication and congruence between nations and states (Gellner [1983] 2006, 38, 105; Conversi 2007, 372).

To Gellner ([1983] 2006, 44), homogeneity is not an ideology or a primordial collective sentiment being awoken to 'fulfil its duties', but an objective need for the benefit of progress and growth. It is only through homogeneity that a society can become modern and advanced. 'It is not the case as Elie Kedourie claims, that nationalism imposes homogeneity; it is rather that a homogeneity imposed by objective, inescapable imperative eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism' (Gellner [1983] 2006, 38).

This further shows not only the 'presentist' approach that Gellner takes, but also his deterministic and functionalist stance as he considers congruency to be necessary and inevitable. By asserting that cultural

homogeneity is unavoidable and one of the main traits of modernity, Gellner naturalizes homogenization processes and renders them legitimate: ‘So the economy needs both the new type of central culture and the central state; the culture needs the state; and the state probably needs the homogeneous cultural branding of its flock’ (Gellner, cited in Minogue 1996, 119). While Gellner is not making a value-laden argument and this paper in no way argues against Gellner on moral grounds, by deploying a functionalist stance he treats congruency almost as a natural-law whose rationality is embedded in modernity. Simply consider Gellner’s use of words when he explains that congruency is essential to modernity: ‘The imperative of exosocialisation is the main clue to why state and culture *must* now be linked, whereas in the past their connection was thin, fortuitous, varied, loose and often minimal. Now it is unavoidable’ (Gellner [1983] 2006, 37, original emphasis).

Gellner’s stance stems from a rather rigid structuralist-functionalist framework (Skorupski 1996, 468–469; Hann 2001; although see Wettersten 1996, 500–503) and from Gellner’s Weberian ideal-typical abstraction of nations and nationalism (see also Gellner 1992; Mouzelis 1998, 163–164). Consequently, Gellner analyses modern history from a supposedly external and objective point as if history has reached its pinnacle and merely requires a material almost mechanical explanation. While Gellner is perhaps not exemplary of the logical positivism school (Hempel 1942) as he construes his own *sui generis* positivist take (Jarvie 1996, 523), he does reduce and trivialize historical processes to regularities of events from which he infers general laws. This is in great part due to Gellner’s historical materialist perspective (Minogue 1996, 116) influenced by Marx and Weber, in that Gellner theorizes social conditions in a highly abstract way. As such, ‘Gellner, like Marx, speaks as one having direct access to reality’ (Minogue 1996, 124).

The maxim of modernity, to Gellner, thus entails the criterion of ‘one nation, one state’ (Gellner [1983] 2006, 128), whereas the lack thereof ought to be ‘corrected’ by the forces of history:

The obstacles lying in the way of its correction are obvious and powerful. If a given nation is blessed with *n* states, it follows rigorously that the glorious unification of the nation will mean the diminution of the number of its prime ministers, chiefs of staff ... (Gellner [1983] 2006, 129)

Once again, we can see how the complexity of the history of nations is reduced to regularities of events as if these are natural laws. The ‘arithmetical non-correspondence between nation and state’ (Gellner [1983] 2006, 128) are therefore an obstacle for modernity that will be corrected by the forces of history. Not only does Gellner’s theory in this sense lack a substantive theory of nations and nationalism (Mouzelis 1998, 163–164); it also trivializes and essentializes congruency processes and

mechanisms. Hence, if the operations of homogenization are necessary and functional to modernity, then questioning homogenization and critically engaging with its political ramifications becomes impossible, indeed illegitimate. Conceptualizing homogenization as inevitable and scientifically ‘true’ and ‘right’ pertains to a scientific vocabulary that renders any political and ethical debate about homogenization futile. Not only is agency within the operations of nation building made redundant; the ability to challenge and resist cultural homogenization and its implications are structured as impossible and anti-modern.

### **The shortcomings in Gellner’s thought: making the case for a ‘genealogy’ of congruency and homogenization practices**

What are the major gaps in Gellner’s thought concerning nation-state congruency and thus how can a ‘genealogy’ address these shortcomings? First, Gellner’s essentialist approach to the emergence of nations in modernity construes modern history as a one-dimensional epoch. This is an epoch, to Gellner, that requires congruent polities for the sake of modernity, progress and growth. The Gellnerian ‘fantasy’ of congruency is thus a general law, an inevitable requisite of modernity. This means that Gellner is unable to see alternative modalities to sociopolitical life in modern (and pre-modern) thought. A ‘genealogical’ exploration, therefore, will deal with the various knowledge systems in pre-modern and modern thought in an attempt to engage with the alternatives, indeed with the silenced voices. This also entails an analysis of the myriad discursive relationship between nation and state, people and authority, broadly defined. Utilizing the ‘genealogy’ technique would then expose other structures of sociopolitical organization than the Gellnerian deterministic account of nation-state congruency.

Second, while Gellner’s focus on congruency and cultural homogenization is pertinent to understanding modern nationalism, he nonetheless takes congruency of nation and state as material inevitability, an *ultima ratio* imposed on the individual and society by the ‘external’ forces of modernity and industrialism. A ‘genealogy’ of congruency begins, like Gellner, with the present in which the idea(l) of congruency is cardinal, but unlike Gellner a ‘genealogy’ does not take modernity and history as given. By deploying a ‘genealogy’, I could expose the ways in which congruency is not part of a natural and objective given modernity, but rather how congruency came to be construed as a constitutive element of modernity. A ‘genealogy’ will thus overcome Gellner’s ‘presentist’ (Bartelson 1995: 54–58) bias by not trying to impose the present on the past as if the latter is a teleological progression towards a known end result; rather, a ‘genealogy’ will inquire into the ways by which the ‘fantasy’ of congruency and cultural homogenization came to be rendered natural,



legitimate and necessary. Moreover, a 'genealogy' will explore the various values attributed to the idea(l) of congruency, which render homogenization mechanisms rational and inevitable. As I exemplify below, such attributes include the linking of congruency with democracy and liberty, or the imaginary of security understood as the result of homogenous polities, be their nation states or other forms of polities (Mandelbaum 2012a, 1–25).

## **II: Critique, 'social imaginaries' and a 'genealogy' of cultural Homogeneity**

The Gellnerian modality of congruency and homogenization can, nonetheless, still be deployed, albeit from a critical stance. This means taking homogenization technologies and congruency not as functional and essential properties of our world, but rather as 'social imaginaries' and 'fantasies', indeed discursive ideals that make the world possible and intelligible through the fixing of societies along political and national boundaries. In this part I explicate the concepts of 'social imaginaries' and 'fantasies' and how a 'genealogy' can be employed. I also exemplify how a 'genealogy' of congruency can be done by interrogating various discursive formations from early modernity to modern thought.

### ***Critique and social imaginaries***

I take 'critical theory' to mean an attempt at unpacking existing dominant knowledge systems and analyse their conditions of emergence, thus pointing to the possibility of change (Cox 1981, 129). A critical approach, moreover, is designed to 'de-ontologize' (Luhmann 2003, 439) existing practices and discourses as it allows one to understand 'what can appear in society and how' (Andersen 2003, 65). To de-ontologize, like de-construction, entails 'the delimiting of ontology' (Derrida 1988, 4). An historical analysis of existing discourses and practices thus does not aim at explaining the emergence of an institution through a causal relationship, a teleological move or an historical shift guided by rationality. Rather, a critical analysis would aspire to show the contingency of phenomena in an attempt 'to establish a theoretically specific domain of investigation for the history of knowledge: namely, the investigation of discursive formations or practices' (Minson 1985, 114). Such an approach, therefore, draws on post-structuralism (e.g. Foucault 1972; Derrida 1976; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) with the understanding that meaning, identity and subjectivity are a product of social construction rather than of a natural, necessary or objective factor.

Therefore, I suggest reading Gellner's cultural homogeneity and congruency as a 'social imaginary' that entails 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on

between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor, cited in Dobbernack 2010, 151).

'Social imaginaries', nonetheless, also set standards for future actions, institutions and norms. They subscribe a certain ideal and then justify the means to achieve it within the specificities of a given space and time. As such, 'social imaginaries' attempt to account for the unpredictability, indeed, the contingent nature of social life by providing an ideal and reassuring blueprint for a fixed and structured world – a 'fantasy'. 'Fantasy is the ultimate support of reality: "reality" stabilizes itself when some fantasy-frame of a "symbolic bliss" forecloses the view into the abyss of the Real' (Žižek 2001, 17). We could, therefore, read 'social imaginary' as 'fantasy' and 'myth', that is, as a socially constructed project that envisions a certain ideal, which entails a sense of fullness or security.

'Fantasy operates so as to conceal or close off the radical contingency of social relations. It does this through a fantasmatic narrative or logic that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome – or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable' (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147).

Reading cultural homogenization as a 'social imaginary' and a 'fantasy' thus entails great attention to specific historical circumstances and the forms by which congruency came to be rendered intelligible and legitimate. This also means to inquire into the different symbols, meaning and concepts that had been attached to homogenization and in doing so rationalized and objectified it. Thus, for instance, nation-building mechanisms often involve the invocation of concepts such as 'security', 'order' and 'economic viability' as mechanisms of legitimation for homogenization techniques (Mandelbaum 2012a, 1–25). This could also explain the continuous efforts at maintaining and reconstructing social identities around the notions of state, nation, the fatherland and so forth, and hence why it is better not to view such phenomena as natural/objective social kinds (Brubaker 1996, 15).

### *A 'genealogy' of cultural homogeneity and congruency practices*

The genealogical approach advocated here rejects any reductionist analyses or definitional exercises at what a nation or a state is. This, then, means to problematize current understandings, conceptions and practices of nations, nationalism, the state or homogenization technologies. Like the 'presentist' approach, it also starts from the present, but it refuses to impose it on the past, and suggests instead inquiring 'genealogically' into the emergence and manifestation of congruency and cultural homogenization (Foucault 1977; Minson 1985; Nietzsche [1887] 1988).

A genealogical approach is not normative in the sense of offering a different model or idea to replace those being critiqued. Rather, I read genealogy as a technique (some might call it a methodology) that aims to challenge existing and dominant discursive practices and thus open up the space for inclusion and potential change.

What is the 'genealogical' technique and how can it be deployed vis-à-vis homogenization and congruency? A 'genealogical' approach entails first, an 'archaeological' technique that seeks to reconstruct the archive of a given discourse – a discursive formation. By using the 'archaeological' technique, one looks for the 'rules' of a given discourse, the rules by which statements are produced and indeed can be constructed within a specific 'regime of truth'. 'Archaeology', hence, allows one to locate the regularity/dispersion of statements (Bartelson 1995, 71–72) and thus expose the power relations and techniques of control that dominate a given discourse. The attempt here is not to reveal underlying meanings or explanations; rather, the analytical guideline is to understand discourse as it is, as 'pure description of discursive facts' (Foucault, cited in Andersen 2003, 10).

By utilizing the 'archaeological' method, one could grasp the ways in which the discursive practices of converging national borders with political demarcation were construed within the discourse of the 'nation state' and the international political system. 'Archaeology', hence, would allow one to analyse statements within the nation-state congruency discourse – the ways they are produced and legitimated, and the ways by which concepts, objects and modes of subjectivity are produced, such as, for instance, the legitimating of homogenization practices and the production of concepts like the 'people', 'Volk' or 'national self-determination'. Overall, 'archaeology' offers an historical 'slice' of the social and the political, of the ways in which possibilities are conditioned. 'Archaeology', however, focuses on a specific discourse, at a specific time frame and indeed characterized as a structuralist approach (Kendall and Wickham 1999, 28). It cannot, therefore, interrogate the power-knowledge matrix and engage with the productivity of power structures (Shiner 1982). To overcome this weakness or limitation, I take 'archaeology' as part of a broader Foucauldian technique, that of 'genealogy'.

'Genealogy' was first introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche ([1887] 1988) as he traced the emergence of morality and the introduction of concepts like 'good' and 'evil'. Nietzsche asks: 'Under what conditions did man invent those value judgments good and evil? And what value do they themselves have' (Nietzsche, cited in Andersen 2003, 17). Thus, 'genealogy', according to Nietzsche, traces the conditions of emergence of a given discourse, mode of thought, and as such it is also a critique. 'Genealogy' is a process by which one offers a history of knowledge that is not based on rationality, 'modern' values (e.g. liberalism, freedom, enlightenment's spirit), a teleological *Geist*, or morality. 'Genealogy' is

precisely to show how histories are contingent, a result of power relations and techniques of control (Minson 1985, 18).

‘Genealogy’, accordingly, is also a ‘history of the present’, which ‘refuses the underlying basis of continuity offered by a history of institutions’ (Minson 1985, 20). Using ‘genealogy’, then, allows one to trace the ruptures, discontinuities and contingency of a given system of thought as it exposes its power-knowledge matrix (Shiner 1982, 386–392). It also introduces a sense of discomfort and unease by forcing us to reconsider discursive formations and practices (Roth 1981).

Finally and closely related to the critical trait of ‘genealogy’, is the issue of alternatives. ‘Genealogy’ provides a platform for, and engages with, the alternative and silenced voices. This consists of exposing power relations and the ‘subjugated knowledges’. That is to say that ‘alternative accounts are not just pointed out but are explored in some depth, showing that they are enabled by a discourse that does not overlap substantially with a dominating discourse’ (Milliken 1999, 243).

Employing the technique of ‘genealogy’ entails a variety of discourse-analytical notions and tools. These include, for instance, exposing how certain subjects and subjectivities are constructed through myriad discursive practices and the ways in which certain world views/ideologies are made intelligible and legitimate. Other tools include, for instance, ‘articulation’, that is, ‘a process that constructs relations amongst elements (e.g., subjects, objects, symbols) by which meaning structures (e.g., identity) are formed’ (Mandelbaum 2012b, 452; see also Weldes 1996, 284); and ‘predication’, that is, the ways in which subjects are endowed with certain values and properties (Doty 1993, 297–320).

To exemplify this, a ‘genealogy’ of congruency and homogenization technologies may begin with early modern thought as a pre-history, as it were, and interrogate the ways in which the ‘fantasy’ of congruency and homogenization was practised in a pre-modern nationalism era. It may begin with Giovanni Botero and the rise of the notion of *Della Ragion di Stato* (*Reason of State*) and continue with, for instance, an analysis of Thomas Hobbes, Hugo Grotius, Samuel Pufendorf and Jean Jacques Rousseau. One major theme of congruency that is characteristic of early-modern thought is the focus on, and employment of, the ‘state’ concept and the ways in which the state is permeated with fullness, unity and indeed homogeneity. With Thomas Hobbes, for instance, the ideal of congruency is not the Gellnerian analysis of modern society in which people and state, individuals and authority are converged through various state mechanisms, nor is Hobbes discussing the modern notions of popular sovereignty and nationalism. It is also not, as is often expressed, merely the union of many designed to achieve the *commonwealth* (*civitas*) within the framework of a ‘social contract’. In Hobbes *De Cive* (*On The Citizen*), therefore, the ideal of congruency is achieved through the homogenization of authority, indeed through the convergence of ‘people’ and ‘state’,

literally. This is what Hobbes refers to as the ‘person of the state’, that is, the need to reconcile individuals’ potentially clashing wills through a construction of one will, one authority, that speaks and acts on behalf of all. This is also why Hobbes distinguishes between the ‘people’, understood as the ‘sovereign’, and the ‘crowd’/‘multitude’ (see Skinner 1999, 4–5, 18–26):

*A people is a single entity, with a single will; you can attribute an act to it. None of this can be said of a crowd. In every commonwealth the People Reigns; for even in Monarchies the People exercises power [imperat]; for the people wills through the will of one man. But the citizens, i.e. the subjects, are a crowd.* (Hobbes [1642] 1998, Chap. XII: Section 8, 137, original emphasis)

The ‘fantasy’ of congruency changes in late eighteenth-century thought as the old early-modern focus on the state is challenged and revisited. We can therefore see how the Abbé Sieyès ([1789] 2003, 94), for instance, construes congruency and homogenization mechanisms around the notion of the ‘Third Estate’ as ‘a complete nation’. It is not the process of homogenization led by the state elite, that is, a nation constructed by and through the state. Rather, to Sieyès the nation as such already exists by virtue of being an association of individual wills that work together for the benefit of all and thus already share the daily burdens of society. Sieyès offers, as Hont (1994, 193) puts it ‘a theory of the *complete* nation as an embodiment of utilitarian or commercial sociability operating through the reciprocities of the division of labour.’ The state, therefore, is ‘*government by proxy*’ (Sieyès [1789] 2003, 134), that is, a representative body that will be entrusted with the necessary power so as to execute the common will (Hont 1994, 192–193). Congruency is thus not so much between state and nation as in the Gellnerian world view, but rather a unity of and within an existing nation, which is why to Sieyès the state and its various branches of governance are a manifestation of the people’s will, the common will. The notion of a ‘social contract’ is one that is premised on a common bond among people, and not between the people and their sovereign/state:

There is no other way to conceive of the social contract. It binds the associates to one another. To assume that there is a contract between a people and its government is a false and dangerous idea. A nation does not make a contract with those it mandates; it *entrusts* the exercise of its powers. (Sieyès [1789] 2003, 120, ft. 19)

The ‘fantasy’ of congruency appears also in Johann Gottfried von Herder’s ([1793–1797] 2002) work, albeit here the subjectivity of congruency is the *Volk*, which does not require a ‘social contract’ to achieve the ‘common good’ or a state for that matter. As Herder’s romantic construction of the world shows us, the *Volk* is a unified and homogeneous being that is

moulded through language, customs and the environment. The state as Herder saw in European history is, however, an artificial machinery, lacking strength and internally weak. The state, moreover, only destroys the *Volk's* cultural heritage in its coercive practices of expansion, violence and war (von Herder [1793–1797] 2002, 380–381, 394, 404–405). Moreover, since Herder considers the *Volk* as an authentic and organic form of life, drawing on and growing out of the family, the notion of the state as an administration of various *Volks* and races is un-natural and unsustainable:

For a nation is as natural a plant as a family, only with more branches. Nothing, therefore, is more manifestly contrary to the purpose of political government than the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixing of various races and nationalities under one sceptre. (Herder [1772] 1969, 324)

Another theme within the homogenization discourses that arise in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe entails the equation of congruency with equality, egalitarianism, liberty and democracy. Mechanisms of cultural homogenization are rendered intelligible and legitimate for they produce and indeed are necessary for the production of equal, free and democratic societies. Consider Rousseau's *Du contrat Social* in which the ideal polity is not a 'nation state' *per se*, but rather a city state (similarly to Rousseau's hometown of Geneva) where cultural homogeneity is presupposed and assumed as a requisite to the success of democratic rule and the operation of the *general will* (Rousseau [1762] 1968). As Rousseau mentions in the *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*:

I should have wished to be born in a country where the Sovereign and the people could have had only one and the same interest, so that all the motions of the machine might always tend only to the common happiness; since this is impossible unless the People and the Sovereign are the same person, it follows that I should have wished to be born under a democratic government wisely tempered. (Rousseau [1755] 1997, 114–15)

Alexis de Tocqueville's ([1835] 1988) *Democracy in America*, and specifically his account of the township system in New England, reveals how homogeneity is celebrated as an organic association and how it entails an authentic egalitarian society where democracy takes root. Tocqueville interprets the puritan colonization of New England, while also referring to the writings of Nathaniel Morton, as he produces discursive connotations between the homogeneity of puritan settlers and the success of their democratic political system.

The population of new-England grew fast, and while in their homeland men were still despotically divided by class hierarchies, the colony came more

and more to present the novel phenomenon of a society homogeneous in all its parts. Democracy more perfect than any of which antiquity had dared to dream sprang fullgrown and fully armed from the midst of the old feudal society (Tocqueville [1835] 1988, 39)

Other examples include the liberal-utilitarian vocabulary of, for instance, James Mill ([1820/1823] 1992) and specifically John S. Mill ([1861] 1946), in which congruency and homogeneity are invoked as the basis for representative democracy. As Mill ([1861] 1946, 292) expresses it: ‘Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities’, or that ‘[i]t is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with those of nationalities’ (Mill [1861] 1946, 294).

A ‘genealogy’, nonetheless, does not end here as it further investigates the materialization of the congruency ‘fantasy’ and the emergence of the ‘nation-state system’ during the nineteenth and twentieth century. This, to only exemplify here, will reveal the manifold connotation produced between congruency-related practices (e.g. nation building, standardization of language, citizenships laws and more) and other discursive constructions such as egalitarianism, democracy, liberalism and security. As I show elsewhere (Mandelbaum 2012a, 1–25), the vast contemporary scholarship in political science/thought and international relations that deal with the ‘nation-state’ system often naturalizes homogeneity or even advocates it as prerequisite for liberal democracy (e.g. Rustow 1970, 351; Linz and Stepan 1996, 16–37; Cooper 2003, 14) and/or a vital ingredient of the Weberian model of the modern and strong state (Migdal 1988; Tilly 1990; Buzan 1991; Mann 1993, 58–61). Security in particular is discursively entwined with the ‘fantasy’ of homogenous polities and societies so much so that it is often advocated nowadays in war-torn regions and in developing and post-conflict societies (e.g. Mearsheimer and Pape 1993; van Evera 1994; Linz and Stepan 1996, 16–37; Miller 2007).

To reiterate, a ‘genealogy’ of homogenization will problematize contemporary knowledge systems that tacitly or explicitly rationalize and naturalize the production of homogenous/congruent ‘nation states’ by articulating homogeneity as concomitant to modernity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper offered a critique of Gellner’s theory of nations and nationalism and particularly his conception of cultural homogeneity and nation-state congruency. It showed how Gellner’s ‘presentist’ stance (Bartelson 1995, 55) leads him to rationalize modern history and trivialize the multifaceted manifestations of homogenization processes. As such, this critique differs from previous examinations of Gellner’s theory (e.g. Nairn 1988; Brubaker 1998; Smith 1998; Conversi 2007, 2008) as I do not take an empiricist/



positivist approach, but rather focus on Gellner's epistemology and approach to history.

Nonetheless, this paper also argued that Gellner's conception of homogenization can still be used, albeit from a critical/post-structuralist stance. In this, I have shown how by drawing on post-structuralist scholarship and the tools of critical theory, congruency can be reappropriated not as an essentialist and unproblematic phenomenon, but rather as a 'social imaginary' and a 'fantasy'. That is, an imagination of a utopian future or a 'fantasy' that entails a set of ideas, norms and ideals to be achieved (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Žižek 2001, 17; Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147). As such, I suggested deploying a 'genealogical' technique that would inquire into the discourses and practices of congruency and in doing so denaturalize the 'nation-state' system and homogenization practices by exhibiting their contingent nature, rather than presenting them as causal, necessary and rational trajectories.

Such an approach thus goes beyond the constructivist approach to nations and nationalism, which sees nations as 'imagined' entities (Anderson 1991). Through a 'genealogical' methodology, I suggest to problematize current discourses and practices of the international political system, broadly defined, and the ways by which homogeneity is either ignored and taken for granted, or rationalized and advocated as necessary for ordered, viable and progress-orientated modern societies (see Agnew 1994; Wimmer and Schiller 2002, 301–334; Mandelbaum 2012a, 1–25).

The focus of this paper has been the concept of cultural homogenization and congruency as I suggest reading it as a fantasy, a constructed project of modernity. This has several implications for our study of nations and nationalism and can potentially offer some avenues for future research. First, by showing genealogically how congruency came to be imbued with modern values such as progress and growth, security and liberal democracy, it can be argued that cultural homogenization and modernity are discursively intertwined, rather than being causally related, or as Conversi (2012, 27) argues '[n]ationalism therefore needs to be considered, not merely as an aspect of modernism, but its inseparable companion and constituent part'. Second, employing the concept of cultural homogenization and congruency may offer us analytical tools to explore critically contemporary modalities that wish to break free from the old vocabulary of cultural homogenization – for example, multiculturalism, communitarianism, consociationalism – but that might none-the-less reinvolve the ideal of congruency even if (national) unity is to be achieved through diversity (Mandelbaum 2012a, 13–14). Third, reading congruency as 'fantasy' offers us a new framework for analysing nations and nationalism, as we can focus on the ways in which 'national fantasies' are 'successful' in hailing people to their homogenization projects due to the *emotive* power of fantasies and the sense of future 'fullness-to-come' that they offer (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147).



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