

Internet Galaxy Meets Postnational Constellation: Prospects for Political Solidarity After the Internet

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Might online social relations play a role in the rise of political solidarities sufficient to support a democratic postnationalist project? As things currently stand, it does not appear that the Internet supports either the commitment or cohesiveness needed to underpin a demanding new mode of social and political relations. Looking at factors such as conceptions of community and social interaction, systems of meaning, political engagement, and social inclusivity can help us assess the question. The exercise suggests that while the Internet may be a factor in change, it may not yield the kind of change many are anticipating. This finding raises doubts concerning the postnationalist hope that new social and political bonds will help ground transnational projects such as the European Union.

Keywords democracy, Internet, nationalism, postnationalism, social relations, solidarity

In his landmark study of the origins of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggested that the rise of this new mode of political legitimacy and social solidarity had its roots in a confluence of historical factors whose “crossing” made it possible to imagine the nation (1991, p. 4). These factors included the spread of capitalism, the decline of sacred languages, changes in the exercise of political authority, and changing conceptions of time. They also included the introduction of a new communications technology. The spread of print cannot be isolated as a causal factor from any of the other items Anderson addresses, but it did provide a critical vehicle for many of these forces in the form of the newspaper and the novel. Its incorporation into social and political prac-

tices reflected the developing shape of the new national consciousness.

More recently, political theorists have begun speculating about the prospects for transcending nationality through a postnational order that would assume the political and democratic responsibilities hitherto associated with the nation-state. Like Anderson, they point to a confluence of political, economic, and social factors, among them new digital communications practices like the Internet. While the Internet is no more likely to be a sole catalyst for postnational solidarity than print was for the national kind, if its role is in any way comparable, it may have a significant place in both advancing and imagining a new social and political mode.

Beginning with a review of the expectations associated with postnationalism, this discussion identifies four factors that were associated with the rise of the national consciousness and that would need to be present for any postnationalist evolution to take hold. Even a brief reflection on the state of affairs in these four areas suggests that the potential for postnationalist solidarity is far from proven at this stage. It also suggests that change, if and when it does take place, may arise more from the failures and exclusions of the digital world than from its achievements.

POSTNATIONALISM

Although he is among the leading exponents of the postnationalist perspective, Jurgen Habermas maintains that the “reformist project” of a “just” or “well-ordered” society (2001, p. 60) can only be fully achieved under a postnationalist order brought about by the pressures of globalization. Globalization, he stresses, is not a single monolithic force. Rather, he calls it a “constellation” of factors, and he specifically cites digitized communications and network logic as key factors in this process (2001, p. 66).

The difficulty is, as Habermas recognizes, that the democratic process “must always be embedded in a common political culture” (2001, p. 73). Indeed, the singular achievement of the nation-state in his eyes is that it

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provided a context for the development of a critical “cultural substrate of civil solidarity” (2001, p. 71). Maintaining this solidarity, however, proves ever more challenging as the globalization process accelerates. Increasingly heterogeneous populations struggle with political fragmentation (Habermas, 2001, p. 72), leading populations either to turn inward in an attempt to recapture homogeneity, or to develop new political and social resources that work beyond the bounds of particular cultural and national identities.

For postnationalism to be a democratic development, then, it must respond to the increased pluralization of societies “by generating a common political culture” (Habermas, 2001, p. 74). The new political culture sits above particularistic attachments and is characterized by a commitment to “discursively structured processes of opinion- and will-formation” that work even between strangers (Habermas, 2001, p. 73). Under this alternative, then, which Habermas calls “constitutional patriotism” (2001, p. 74), postnationalism involves new patterns of social and political relations that can assume the work previously done by the idea of the nation or national identity.

Yet where might this new basis for solidarity come from? If digital communications is indeed among the catalysts for the postnationalist development, might this development also foreshadow the new social and political patterns Habermas anticipates? The Internet seems perfectly positioned to model a new mode of solidarity, in which case the social and political patterns associated with it would take on special significance. An examination of these patterns might therefore offer some insight as to the prospects for postnational solidarity.

Moreover, there are important parallels between the setting that Anderson describes as giving rise to the national consciousness, and the one that Habermas hopes will give rise to postnationalism. In both cases, a powerful new medium arrived into an environment already experiencing shifting political, economic, and social ideals, and was adopted at an unprecedented rate. Anderson saw print as fostering a new sense of attachment, in this case among those who read the same newspapers, or imagined the same fictional communities through novels. What he called the “fatality of human linguistic diversity” (1991, p. 43) set the boundaries to this experience and in doing so foreshadowed the boundaries of the coming nation-state. The question, therefore, arising from Anderson’s reading of the significance of print is whether there are distinct qualities to the Internet and the social relations we associate with it, qualities that may be shaping a new social and political form associated with a postnational order.

FOUR FACTORS IN THE RISE OF A NEW SOLIDARITY

The Internet’s potential role in the postnational process, of course, poses an enormous and highly speculative ques-

tion, one that the present discussion can only touch upon in the most general terms. I would defend such an exercise, however, on the grounds that if we are to make responsible decisions today, we need to think about what might lie ahead. Moreover, it is possible to approach the question in a way that focuses on the here and now, even as we contemplate the various potentialities associated with our situation. We can do so by focusing on four important factors. These factors are significant not only because they are recognizable elements of Internet social relations, but also because they echo those that Anderson associated with development of national consciousness.

First, Anderson explained that the cultural roots of nationalism included shifts in ideas of time and social attachments that made it possible for people to feel they shared a community with others they had never met but that they recognized as facing the same contingencies in life. This pinpoints the significance of conceptions of community to the rise of new solidarities, and leads us to ask what happens to these relations in an online environment. Second, Anderson went on to explain that the power of the national idea arose not just in awareness of others, but through imbuing that community with meaning. The power of the national consciousness owed much to its capacity to “give certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence” (Anderson, 1991, p. 36). To have ontological authority then, nationality had to help people make sense of their experiences in life. So the second factor focuses on whether the Internet aligns with or promotes particular ways of making sense of the world.

Third, Anderson says that the idea of nationality arose out of a previous order organized not around populations, but around high centers of dynastic and religious authority (Anderson, 1991, p. 19). In other words, the arrival of print coincided with and reinforced a widespread shift in political legitimacy and political engagement. So a third factor for consideration is whether the Internet serves to reinforce a new mode of political engagement. Fourth and finally, Anderson had the benefit of hindsight when it came to identifying the new solidarities arising from the crossed historical forces that made national imaginings possible. We may not have the same advantage when it comes to evaluating the role of the Internet in a similar process, but it’s still worth asking whether we can identify new modes of inclusion and exclusion that might result from its spread and use. These new patterns represent a fourth factor, rounding out the exercise.

Conceptions of Community

Despite the initial excitement over virtual communities, the current tendencies of social interaction online present significant obstacles to the development of robust solidarities. Take, for example, the preference for online anonymity. Communities exist in a symbiotic tension with

identities (whether self-defined or ascriptive). Without one, it is difficult to develop the other, because there is no reference point for differentiation or affiliation. Temporary identities that can be created or canceled at will therefore provide a poor basis for solidarity building. While there may be some investment in an online identity that could support allegiance to the groups where this identity is established, the barriers to online exit generally remain low (Galston, 2002), and where the costs of exit are low, attachments are likely to remain thin and conditional (Hirschman, 1970).

In fact, anonymity not only makes the growth of new communities less likely, it can act to dismantle existing social bonds. A British study found that a majority of randomly selected web users were prepared to access illegal content links. The study explains these findings in terms of a “deindividuation effect,” whereby “inner restraints are lost” under conditions of anonymity. Under the current conditions of Internet anonymity, they conclude, “Deviant behavior is not simply common, it actually becomes the norm” (Demetriou & Silke, 2003, pp. 214–220).

The anonymity and disposability of many forms of online identity thus present a barrier to the development of committed social connections. But commitment and mutual obligation are necessary if social relations are to become politically significant. Contrast the Internet experience with the powerful bonds that can be generated by the idea of co-nationality. As theorists of nationalism such as Miller (1995) argue, the reason that co-nationality can create communities of shared obligation is that it provides a basis for mutual trust. The Internet, in contrast, is a site of great social flux and uncertainty. As long as this continues to be the case, it seems unlikely to yield the kind of trust that builds strong solidarities.

Systems of Meaning

It is not only shared commitment and social trust that make national communities significant units of political solidarity. They also serve an important ontological purpose, according to Anderson. With the rise of rationalist secularism and the end of communities built around religious attachment, individuals were faced with a problem. Religion had served to make sense of what Anderson calls the “contingency of life” (1991, p. 10). In other words, it equipped us with an answer to why we find ourselves in certain situations, especially ones that are tragic or unfortunate, that we did not choose, and that we can little control. Disease and death are examples of these “fatalities,” but so are accidents of birth such as citizenship or mother tongue. The nation, because it invested these features with value, served to transform “fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (Anderson, 1991, p. 11). While it is not inconceivable that the Internet could play a part in estab-

lishing new social connections that would support this kind of process, there is little evidence that this has happened thus far.

There may be good reason for this. For a shared political life to have meaning, it may require the existence of boundaries. According to Hannah Arendt, in order for political action to be realized, there must be a setting within which it can take place, be collectively interpreted and ultimately remembered. The two conditions of this setting are, first, that there be a basis for mutual understanding, since “the sharing of words and deeds” (Arendt, 1958, p. 198) is what gives birth to politics; second, there must be some kind of boundaries or “stabilizing protection” to hold this shared experience together (Arendt, 1958, p. 198). Here again, the Internet does not seem to supply such structure (Barney, 2004).

Those who look at the Internet’s impact on collective life echo similar concerns for the role of shared meaning. Galston looks for “shared norms” (2002, p. 47–8) and Manuel Castells for “protocols of meaning” (2001, p. 204) to ground social and political relationships. Both authors are concerned that what the Internet currently offers in these regards is insufficient. We know that limited membership settings, defined by shared experience and shared meaning, are the kinds of settings that breed politically significant connections. Remove these conditions and the result may be liberating, but it may also lack political coherence. “Without boundaries,” as an early work on Internet democracy explained, “the political atrophies and becomes quietly obsolescent” (Thu Nguyen & Alexander, 1996, p. 118).

Nonetheless, the Internet can be a vehicle for social or collective projects, and in this way can provide a basis for shared norms and meanings in those instances. However, the increasing trend toward commercialization online may simply be too strong for such projects to resist (Lessig, 2000). It is not clear, therefore, how any new political or social solidarity associated with the Internet would manage to resolve the problem of meaning. As long as this element is missing, any process of change will be stalled. Nonetheless, should it develop, the transformation could be rapid and widespread.

Political Engagement

So as a source of new communal attachments, the Internet is handicapped by its current practices of anonymity, by low commitment and ease of exit, by its demanding conditions for social trust, and by its apparent agnosticism in the face of human fatalities. Given that social solidarity faces such obstacles online, we then have to question how the Internet fares as a source of democratic engagement. Despite initial optimism about its potential, there is growing concern among political theorists that the Internet does not

create promising conditions for democratic life (Galston, 2002). Still others maintain that the Internet has the virtue of openness and accessibility, and that in theory, at least, more people can more fully participate in democratic life when democracy is Internet-enabled (Nye, 2002; Etzioni, 2004).

What matters in democracies, however, is not just the volume of participation, but its quality (Mill, 1972; Thompson, 1976, 2002). As more than one study of online democracy has found, more discussion does not necessarily mean a *more democratic* discussion (Wilhelm, 1998). To constitute a new “public sphere,” a medium needs to have certain qualities; chief among them is true accessibility (Papacharissi, 2002). Easily accessible for some, the Internet remains beyond the reach of many others. As such, it fails the requirement for inclusivity in democratic life. Next is a requirement for participant equality. The Internet, however, is not necessarily more equal in its treatment of participants than you would find in an offline setting. Instead, because offline speech issues and learned linguistic practices can advantage or disadvantage the online speaker, we have no reason to view the Internet as a space with especially egalitarian communication characteristics (Crawford, 2002).

In sum, the Internet’s potential as a basis for renewed democratic engagement is far from evident. Yet perhaps its role as a catalyst for a more liberated or democratized community is not a function of online activities. Perhaps its role is instead to free the individual from the restrictions of ascribed identity and communal attachments that arise in the nonvirtual world, and to replace them with more voluntary associations. The difficulty is, however, that loose constituencies of shared interest cannot lay the groundwork for the demanding tasks of political life. A sound democracy requires deliberation and compromise, both of which place significant demands on the individual. As Galston explains, “Because they are brought together and held together by converging individual interests,” Internet-based groups “neither foster mutual obligation nor lay the basis for sacrifice” (2002, p. 54).

This is not to say that the Internet cannot serve as a powerful tool of democratization, social engagement and moral reform. Merely that to do so would take sustained effort and commitment, and so far there is limited evidence that either governments or the majority of users are interested in making such an intervention.

Social Inclusivity

While it makes possible new modes of social and political relations, the Internet favors loosely bounded communities characterized by loosely democratic or nondemocratic social relations. The chief problem facing any new social order, therefore, is that of cohesion. For this reason, it ap-

pears unlikely that the Internet, as it currently operates, would serve as a particularly powerful factor in the rise of a new collective consciousness. However, this assumes that solidarities would arise out of the innovations and integrations that these new communications practices make possible. There is, however, another way for solidarities to arise, and it may exert an even more powerful force than that of integration. If the impact of new communication and social practices is to extend and deepen the experience of exclusion and disadvantage for certain groups, or even just the awareness of existing disadvantages, this experience may itself become the source of new solidarities.

Anderson explains that such a sense of exclusion was an influential factor in the birth of the national consciousness. Because of their origins, colonial-born elites who journeyed to the Imperial metropolis faced obstacles to their social and political progress. The accident of birth that made them Creoles instead of full children of the motherland meant that they could only aspire so far in Imperial society. They were, Anderson explains, confronted with a social boundary they could not surmount. So instead they embraced it, turning it from a twist of fate into a potent source of social and political meaning (1991, p. 57). The tension between the Creole’s access to the administrative and political structures of power and his or her inability to be fully at home within them yielded a new orientation and identity. To the degree that the Internet highlights similar insurmountable contingencies, it may be making its most significant contribution to the arrival of a new mode of social and political consciousness.

In terms of exclusion, there remains a boundary between those who have easy and efficient Internet access and those who do not, a boundary that runs between countries based on their infrastructure resources, but also runs between demographic groups within any given country. While the digital divide is not what it used to be, and is rapidly evolving in form, the need for expensive computing resources and telecommunications infrastructure to support the medium means that it will inevitably favor developed and affluent populations over others. Even online there is a divide between the dominant U.S. user group and everyone else. And with an estimated 87% of global web sites in English (Castells, 2001, p. 253), we should not forget that the language barrier, which played such a large part in the birth of nations, is still as significant as ever. To the extent that the Internet is merely the leading edge of a broader social transformation, then, Castells’s “Internet galaxy” promises to be a lopsided place.

CONCLUSION

Meaningful social and political solidarity requires a special set of conditions to succeed. At this point, it is not clear that the Internet or the practices it supports offer a

strong alternative in this regard. Hampered by anonymity and complex, low-commitment communities, the Internet seems ill-equipped to generate the kind of boundaries and shared meaning that are required for a new system of social and political solidarity. Yet it is always possible that these features are merely taking longer to show themselves than expected.

Indeed, we might expect that anonymity will not much longer be the rule for a medium that embraces geolocation and other sophisticated surveillance methods (Bennett, 2001). A nonanonymous online population would in turn make bounded and limited membership communities more common, without requiring the territorial or citizenship privileges associated with a nationally based order. Yet while there may be a certain appeal to a system of solidarity organized around flexible coalitions or transcendent political cultures, we need to ensure that these new entities have sufficient weight to support the kinds of mutual commitments or democratic compromises that a full political life requires. Absent this capacity, the result might be morally and socially loose associations with only marginally democratic practices.

Given these prospects, and given the difficulty that any new political structures would face in terms of furnishing a basis for meaning in a world of latent contingency, we should not anticipate the arrival of a fully fledged postnational solidarity anytime soon (Kymlicka, 2004). Yet we know that when things change in a digital age, they change fast. The future for political solidarity is not a simple thing to discern, but it will undoubtedly be an outcome of the practices and experiences we are now developing.

The difficulty in assessing the prospects for postnationalism in the wake of the Internet, then, is not that new political forms or social ideals are unlikely to arise. The problem is that we may be looking for change in the wrong places and with the wrong expectations. If we were to draw one final insight from the experience with nations as Anderson explains it, it is that we should look for innovation to take root outside the English-speaking world, the very world that has so immersed itself in the online experience and globalism in general. National consciousness, according to Anderson, was born not out of metropolitan success, but out of the Creoles' experience of exclusion from a world to which they had anticipated access. In other words, it may not be the people with the most extensive access or highest profile online who will champion deep social and political change, if such is to come about. Instead, it is the groups with limited access, just enough to see what they are missing out on, who may have the most to gain from pioneering new modes of social relations, meaning, and engagement. Nor is it straightforward to suppose that such innovations will revolve around the Internet itself or other global structures. The innovations may well take

contrasting forms, even as they take full advantage of the new capabilities and possibilities that the Internet introduces. Ironically, then, it may be the Internet's capacity to heighten the experience of exclusion, to promote awareness of a population's marginal and disenfranchised status, that represents its greatest potential for change.

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