

Does "The Land of the Long White Cloud" need an unique, or any, identity? Does a country or a nation necessarily need a constructed identity? If yes, what should this identity represent?

Nationality, as a socio-cultural concept, is part of everyone's existence in the modern world. The individual's claim for a nationality is protected by Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which means that no one can be denied the rights associated with his or her being of a certain nationality. As everybody has his homecountry's or parents-country's (or both) nationality by birth, the concept of a nationality is tied to the modern concept of the nation-state. Thus, everyone belongs to something, his nation-state, and feels part of an incomprehensible unit within historically often-arbitrary borders. By being inhabited by humans, by being shaped by natural processes and history, by being ruled by certain systems, every country inevitably has a unique identity.

Regarding the "self", the outcome of "belonging-to" is the recognition of nationalistic feelings, which might be negative, positive, strong, weak or anything else. The imagined political community, perceived as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (among unknowns), of a nation-state is imagined, as it is unnatural, invented, and limited.

Without an organized outside input, besides a very general awareness of the concept of one's nation, the images and feelings associated with one's nation would be dominated by personal experiences, one's region, tales, myths and a good dose of chance. New Zealand would be a very different New Zealand, depending on whether you are Soong Chu-yu, living and working in an all-Chinese-quarter of Auckland, Richard Cook, raising sheep on a third-generation farm in Masterton, Ngai Tamanuhiri, one of the many unemployed Maori of the East Cape or Ben Sims, studying at Victoria University in Wellington.

Of course, New Zealand is a very different New Zealand for all four fictive characters, and all aforementioned factors still come into play, but due to the constant top-down construction and rendition of New Zealand's identity, all four might share enough tales, myths and experiences in order to form a society and make the increasingly multi-cultured nation-state governable. In the end, all four are asked to cast their vote at the upcoming elections, and campaigns would be much harder without a sense of unity and common interests among the franchise. The "belonging-to" of its people legitimizes a country and its rulers, prevents separatism, civil wars and public disorder. The public is coerced by nationalism, and a favourable image is not only valuable for public order, but also for economic prosperity, thus public order.

*New Zealand is 100% pure. New Zealanders are outdoor-people. New Zealand is a country of untouched natural beauty. New Zealand is progressive. New Zealanders do not know how to insulate buildings. New Zealanders are Rugby-addicts.* Interestingly, I would have listed almost all these identity-features prior to my departure to New Zealand. I still do today, which proves how persuasive created identities are, even though I cycled many kilometres between small specs of untouched natural beauty, have met dozens of Rugby atheists and met many who have seen less of New Zealand than I have, which contradicts the outdoor-myth. I had all the identity-features neatly lined up in my head before ever talking to a single New Zealander, and even though I have met many Rugby-crazed outdoor-fanatics in New Zealand, it appears as if my previous image of New Zealand was based more on cohesive marketing-efforts and hearsay than actual fist-hand experience.

Probably, many New Zealanders see themselves along the same lines and are more Rugby-addicted than people of other nationalities. This, of course, is not genetic or associated to ozone depletion, but rather the result of education (the impression of primary-school kids playing cricket and rugby on the school grounds has burned itself into my brain, as I kicked a football around the school-yard at the same age), the mass media and other influential sources. It is not natural for New Zealanders to "Stand in Black", but it helps Adidas when a squad of mediocre rugby-players from the British Isles "invades" and is followed by an affluent "army" of 25.000 thirsty souls, travelling in red. Under such circumstances, identity is simultaneously created, massively enhanced and systematically abused by corporate interests, but it would be unfair to criticise it too harshly, as hundreds of thousands of people in New Zealand, Great Britain, the Adidas headquarters and many places else had a good time.

History is full of examples of exaggerated top-down nationalism, which serves as a promising cornerstone for wars and genocide. On the other hand, unmanaged bottom-up nationalism, born out of exaggerated community experiences during times of distress, can lead to problems such as, among many others, surges in neonazi violence, as Germany illustrated in the 90s. The interesting question arising from this observation is what a constructed identity ought to entail.

Can growing numbers of New Zealanders, mostly Asian immigrants offsetting a brain drain of emigrants of European descent, identify with the current identity construction? Are they clinging to their chopsticks and separating from 100% pure New Zealand? Do they want to "Stand in Black", or are they marginalized by an alien, constructed identity? Are commercial interests dominating if slogans such as "100% pure" lure an ever-growing number of tourists? Which episodes of New Zealand's history ought to be represented in the school's curricula? Should New Zealand aspire towards a new identity with looser ties to its past as a British colony, or should these ties be strengthened? Has the time for a new flag come, or ought history prevail? Does New Zealand represent a relatively harmonic coexistence of indigenous and colonial culture? Can the two, and further migrant cultures, be incorporated into an identity transcending their intrinsic differences? Nowadays, even the All Blacks perform the Haka, but the Treaty of Waitangi still causes frictions. If it is all imagined and commercially exploited, should anybody really give a damn?

All these questions deserve to be answered, but I will conclude with the observation that New Zealand's identity is in constant flux. It cannot be constructed and regarded as a fait accompli. Certain messages, such as human rights, have to be constantly conveyed and surveyed, but the assurance of the self's freedom and emancipation from society has to be countered by the constant construction of artificial unity. The continuous flux of identity can and ought to be actively managed, just as a cohesive identity can theoretically be constructed out of anything; no matter how New Zealand's demographic future turns out. A consciously constructed identity seems preferable to bottom-up experiments in exaggerated, regional sub-identity-creation, even though this is a compulsory feature of collective individuation. It has to be kept in constant check by an overarching top-down construction of an identity-framework, albeit imagined and artificial, which serves a nation's needs better than a laissez-faire approach. Education is the key. Inclusion and exclusion of minorities such as Maori or Asian communities, marginalized objectives or special interests pose a challenge to those actively engaged in the constant creation and recreation of identity and unity. Even though identity can be actively managed, no single institution faces this task in a liberal, western society, such as New Zealand. The end result is constant flux, with many national and international actors, ranging from Adidas, Al Qaeda, national education-ministers or pure chance, leading to an ever-evolving and sometimes unpredictable identity.