



ORIGINAL PAPER

Symbols of National Identity

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Abstract:

This article explores national identity as a symbolic construct shaped by myths, collective representations, and the social imaginary. Rather than reducing the nation to political, territorial, or linguistic criteria, the study approaches it as a symbolic community sustained through shared meanings and cultural narratives. National identity is thus understood as the product of a complex network of symbols that generate cohesion, belonging, and differentiation.

The analysis focuses on four key national symbols: the flag, the anthem, the national day, and the currency. The flag and anthem are examined as highly visible and emotionally charged symbols, capable of mobilizing collective attachment and reinforcing unity, while also containing the potential for exclusion and conflict. The national day is analyzed as a temporal and commemorative symbol that activates historical memory and reinforces collective identity, despite its relative instability and dependence on political and historical contexts. In contrast, the national currency operates as a more subtle and everyday form of symbolism, contributing to identity formation through routine use and what can be described as “banal nationalism.”

I will argue that the strength of national symbols lies not only in their institutional recognition, but in their capacity to engage deeper layers of the collective imaginary and to reactivate underlying mythological structures. At the same time, these symbols reveal an inherent ambivalence: they foster solidarity and continuity, yet also generate alterity and tension. Ultimately, national identity emerges as a dynamic and ongoing process, in which symbolic forms play a central role in shaping both internal cohesion and external differentiation.

Keywords: *Symbol, National Identity, Flag, Anthem, National day, Currency*

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Introduction

The study of national identity has aroused constant interest in the social sciences and humanities, being approached from various perspectives that highlight both its political and institutional dimensions, as well as its cultural and symbolic ones. Beyond defining the nation through criteria such as territory, language, or state organization, an important direction of analysis emphasizes the role of the collective imaginary, myths, and symbols in the constitution and consolidation of national communities. Starting from these theoretical premises, I will analyze the role of essential symbols of national identity – the flag, the anthem, the national day and the currency – highlighting both their explicit functions and their profound dimensions, linked to the collective imaginary and the mythological background. The analysis follows how these symbols, although partly conventional and institutionalized, acquire strength and legitimacy through their ability to activate archetypal representations, generate affective attachments, and mediate the relationship between the individual and the national community. At the same time, the tensions and ambivalences inherent in these symbols are explored, which can function both as factors of cohesion and as sources of conflict and identity delimitation.

The nation as a symbolic community

Usually when we discuss the nation we refer to it as a political and cultural entity defined by a state, population and territory delimited by borders (Tartler, 2006, p.67) but also as a culture, with common symbols and values, which are cultivated and consolidated by the nation-state without which it would not exist (Guibernau, 1996).

In his attempts to define the nation, Anthony D. Smith identifies, in addition to territory, language and culture, essential dimensions related to myths and symbols (Smith, 1992: 60; Smith, 2001). National symbols include, among others, the flag, the anthem, the currency, and the various ceremonies (Smith, 1991: 77).

Benedict Anderson uses the concept of imagined community to refer to the nation, since its members do not know each other directly, building a common image of belonging (Anderson, 2000: 11-12). In this sense, national identity is constituted on the basis of these representations. It can be argued that myths, symbols and ceremonies, and the way in which the past is known and imagined, play a role in concretizing and consolidating this image. The nation is thus constituted at the level of the collective imaginary (Boia, 2005, Ghenea, 2015b).

These symbols and ceremonies create unity, identity, but also allow for relating to other nations in terms of otherness. We can thus define the nation as a symbolic, imaginary construction, without ignoring the other aspects that define it. The statement that nations are imaginary constructs does not imply their fictional character, but, on the contrary, emphasizes the fact that their reality is supported by mythical roots. This perspective explains the strong attachments they generate, as well as their resistance to change. The explanation is to be found in their connection with the mythological background; it is the myth of unity that gives strength to nations. Otherwise, nations could not have been built, only through the efforts of elites. The myth acted both on the masses who rallied to the national ideal, but also underpinned the decisions and actions of the cultural and political elites who laid the foundations of the nation. The imaginary gives strength to the nation, and creates identity. National identity is, among other things, the product of a complex network of myths and symbols. These are both original and reinterpreted or later constructed to give legitimacy to the nation. Political symbols, officially recognized and promoted by the state, although constructed or specifically

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chosen to strengthen national identity, are not necessarily arbitrary, as they contain archetypal images and symbols that are not reducible to their political significance and utility. In this sense, the nation can be understood as a symbolic construction, in which common representations and ritual practices contribute to the formation of a sense of belonging and solidarity (Ghenea, 2014a; Ghenea, 2014b). I will further analyse the meaning of several national symbols (the flag, the anthem, the national day and the currency).

National flag

The national flag represents one of the most visible symbols of national identity and a central element in its construction (Turner, 1967; Ortner, 1973; Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007; Ghenea, 2015).

At the beginning of his controversial book on the “clash of civilizations”, Samuel Huntington offers a series of illustrative examples of the use of national flags. A relevant example is that of an academic meeting held in Moscow in 1992, where the national flag was flown upside down, interpreted as a symbol of an identity in transition. (Huntington, 1996). Huntington interprets this gesture as signifying a transitional stage, as an expression of the need for Russians, who not many years ago had been Soviets, to reinvent themselves. At the same time, he notes that more and more flags were raised, suggesting a return of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism (Huntington, 1996; Kolstø, 2006). The importance of flags as national symbols is also suggested by Huntington in other situations, such as the one in which the inhabitants of Sarajevo, in 1994 when the city was under siege, waved the flags of Saudi Arabia and Turkey instead of the Western European ones, thus identifying themselves with their Muslim brothers (Huntington, 1996: 19). Alternatively, this gesture can be interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with the West, rather than a cultural identification. The argument would be that most of the inhabitants, who were forced by the war to leave the city, emigrated to Western European countries, not Muslim ones (Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007: 1).

Th. Eriksen and R. Jenkins appreciate that, although Huntington's theory of an imminent clash of civilizations is considered superficial, it has the merit of highlighting the importance of community symbols and the continuity of national or regional attachments of an ethnic, cultural and religious nature. It is also suggestive that he begins his work with a reflection on the role of the flag (Eriksen & Jenkins, R., 2007: 1).

In the opinion of some anthropologists and philosophers of the imaginary (Durand, 1999), the flag would represent a sign, having an arbitrary character, it would be a simple emblem. Although it is chosen conventionally, like the others (the anthem, the national day, the currency), it contains in its composition or refers to universal symbols. The flag itself is, according to Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, a symbol of protection granted or implored. There is a certain symbolic connection between the bearer of the flag and certain cosmic realities, it represents the unity between heaven and earth, referring to representations of ascension (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994: 264).

These examples suggest that the flag functions not only as a sign of recognition, but also as a symbol loaded with multiple meanings. From a symbolic perspective, the flag is not just a conventional sign, but integrates universal symbols. From this perspective, it acquires a profound symbolic dimension, associated with ideas of protection and unity (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994: 264). The banner is seen as a sign of war, a sign of command, of rallying. It is the emblem of the warrior commander who gathers his men under his sign for battle. It is at the same time a sign of victory (Chevalier

& Gheerbrant, 1994: 266). This meaning is also used in national symbolism, in armed conflicts, in military parades, on the occasion of commemorative moments, honoring the heroes of the homeland, etc. The national flag has taken from all these meanings and adapted them to the national message and feelings. It should also be emphasized its capacity to generate belonging and collective identification.

Lucien Sfez highlights the passionate dimension of attachment to the flag, which can degenerate into irrational behaviors (Sfez, 2000: 75). Sfez reminds us that not so long ago, attempting to destroy the national flag would have sent you to prison. In their function as emblems, as “means for reunification”, flags are instruments of violence (Sfez, 2000: 75). Attachments to the flag can lead to forms of fetishization and even symbolic or physical violence. These dimensions highlight the ambivalence of the symbol, capable of both cohesion and conflict. Like any symbol, the flag is characterized by ambivalence (pure-impure, evil-beneficial, sacred-profane); it is a creative factor of identity, but it can contribute to the exacerbation of otherness.

Th. Eriksen and R. Jenkins note that in Medieval Europe, flags had an instrumental role, making it possible to distinguish between friends and enemies on the battlefield, and were also associated with common origin, place of birth, membership in a particular clan, etc. Aristocratic families carried heraldic flags to show their noble lineage. In the era of nation-states, flags fulfil a role (at a more abstract and comprehensive level) similar to that of the totems of primitive communities (Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007: 3). However, now it is about belonging to the nation and not to other groups. We do not discuss this aspect, but we note the double meaning of the flag, both instrumental and symbolic.

National anthem

The purpose of the anthem is that of a ceremonial composition intended for collective performance. Therefore, it is designed to be easy to remember and perform, favoring collective identification. This is why anthems are usually made to determine emotional reactions, collective identity through voice and sound (Fornäs, 2012: 150). However, the question arises whether anthems can generate collective identity to the same extent as visual symbols. We have seen that the flag has an extraordinary unifying force (especially due to the visual symbols it contains), but the anthem does not benefit from these. Even if the predominance of the visual is asserted, Derrida emphasizes the original character of the voice (Derrida, 1976). In this perspective, Fornäs argues that musical sound is not semantically inferior to images. In turn, visual symbols are integrated into different contexts, both solemn and ordinary. Flags and logos can be displayed all the time, on different supports, but anthems are only listened to on special, festive occasions. They are less banal than other symbols, and this special character gives them a greater capacity to attract attention, also fulfilling a community-building function (Fornäs, 2012: 152).

Peter J. Martin appreciates the increased demand for folk songs today in light of their capacity to form communities. They offer individuals the opportunity to identify themselves with “certain symbolic entities.” While folk songs contribute to a broader identification, a hymn has a more official and formal character, being supported by certain institutions or organizations, nations or states (Martin, 1995: 275). Malcolm Boyd, after analyzing a large number of hymns from around the world, identified five categories, of which the first two are the most common: 1) solemn hymns (such as the British and European ones); 2) marches (“La Marseillaise”); 3) opera tunes (specific to Latin

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American countries); 4 popular melodies (usually used in Asia) and fanfares without lyrics (specific to Middle Eastern countries) (Fornäs, 2012: 153).

This analysis highlights the connection between the simplicity of the hymns and their symbolic efficiency. Political symbolism, although under the sign of the arbitrary and conventional, nevertheless refers to the archetypal background, conveying myths and symbols still active in the collective imagination.

National Day

The national day represents a significant element in the consolidation of collective identity. Similar to the anthem, it involves commemorative rituals and practices. The national day is linked to a certain rhythm of social life, but also determines this rhythm in a way, being a part of the life of the community. Through their gestures, the participants in the manifestations on the occasion of the national day activate representations of the national past, they are carriers of meanings that refer to the future of national unity. At the same time, they communicate these values and meanings to the whole world. Not only is national consciousness involved, but also the way the nation is perceived externally. These representations serve to remind us of the importance of a particular nation, of the role it has played and continues to play in history. We can also see these symbolic days as a way of communication between nations, through which they make their national identity known. Some national days are celebrated in countries other than their original ones, sometimes reaching a global scale. Probably the best-known national day is that of the United States of America, which is celebrated on July 4, the date on which the Declaration of Independence was signed.

The main argument of the volume edited by David McCrone and Gayle McPherson (2009) is that “national days are commemorative devices in time and place for reinforcing national identity” (McCrone & McPherson, 2009: 2). Do national days really matter? Michael E. Geisler notes that Anthony D. Smith’s (1991) “generous and comprehensive” study of national identity completely omits the national day (Geisler, 2009: 10). Which would mean that national days are less relevant than those related to architecture, folklore, the legal system, etc. Is this an omission on Smith's part, or are national days redundant with regard to national identity? McCrone and McPherson consider that, although Smith's omission could be explained (by the fact that he is English, and England's national day, April 23, St. George's Day, being honored rather than respected), national days are not redundant: "The very fact that there are plural national days, that there are competitors for the status, or perhaps that they mark different events, experiences, people, is what makes them interesting" (McCrone & McPherson, 2009: 2).

Using the examples of Russia, Australia, Germany and Japan, Geisler argues that national days are often “relatively weak and extremely unstable signifiers of national identity” (Geisler, 2009:14). This becomes evident if we compare them with other national symbols. As an argument, the case of Germany is brought up, which despite its problematic history has managed to fix its national symbols. The flag, the capital, the anthem, although they have been controversial, moved or readjust many times, have finally imposed themselves. In comparison with these, the national day (in general, not only in the case of Germany) has a greater instability (Geisler, 2009:15).

Geisler argues that national symbols function by overdetermination, in the sense that they work together to establish a network of meanings. Unlike the flag, anthem, and currency, the national day is not omnipresent, as it occurs only once a year. However, it cannot go unnoticed: you can only escape it by leaving the country or locking yourself in

your house. Furthermore, the national day is less susceptible to secularization, being much more closely tied to its religious roots.

Geisler makes three arguments in favor of the thesis that national days do not function in the same way as other national symbols:

"1. National days are not ubiquitous: we encounter them but once on a calendar year; therefore, 'over-determination' does not work for national days.

2. They do not go unnoticed.

3. In the national day, the historical 'overwriting' of religious traditions with the secular ideology of nationalism shows the latter to be a historically incomplete project and forces national day to compete for meaning with the religious segmentation of the calendar year." (Geisler, 2009:15).

Geisler's arguments can be nuanced. Even if we accept the overdetermination theory, which is also open to criticism, the fact that national days only occur once a year does not remove them from the network of national symbols and does not diminish their significance. On the one hand, the reduced frequency does not diminish the symbolic significance. The instability of some national days, chosen as examples by the cited author, is due to socio-political and historical contexts, which have replaced national days depending on the ideology promoted. If the event to which the national day refers is related to independence (the myth of the savior, the myth of unity), the imaginary gives strength and stability to the commemorated event. Then the richer the symbolism of the day and refers to values of a universal nature, the more durable its maintenance will be. On the other hand, rarity can intensify symbolic impact. Religious holidays are perennial and rich in meaning, although they are once in a while. Moreover, competition with religious symbolism does not indicate a deficit, but a symbolic continuity, highlighting the religious filiation of national symbols. They are secularized symbols, they originate in religious symbolism and appear in its continuation.

However, there are many differences in the way national days are perceived and experienced. Each country has its own national specifics, but also a certain history of choosing a national day. Some states do not have a national day, others celebrate it little or not at all. In others there are days competing to become national, they commemorate political or cultural events, which have a problematic character (McCrone and McPherson, 2009: 1). Sometimes they are associated with past political regimes, towards which there is some resentment. Not infrequently, with the change of political regime the national day was also changed. In this respect, the case of Romania is exemplary. During the period 1866-1947 the national day of Romania was May 10, the day on which Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen took the oath before the representative Assembly of the United Romanian Principalities. The significance of the day was strengthened by the proclamation of Romania's state independence in 1877. Later, in 1881, after the parliament voted to transform the country into a kingdom, to mark the event, the national day was celebrated with great pomp on May 10. Most likely, the day was not chosen at random, but on the principle that two different but significant events can increase the symbolic and commemorative charge of the day. This created a mythological connection between the monarch, as savior, and the independence of the Romanian state from Ottoman rule, which had lasted for so many centuries. Between 1948 and 1989, during the communist regime, the national day was established on August 23, marking the turning of arms against Nazi Germany and the beginning of the popular revolution in Romania. We could say that the change of day also marks a turning point from monarchy to an authoritarian communist regime. On this date, Romania not only turned against Nazi Germany, but also turned

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towards communist Russia. Another turn, this time against communism, resulted in another change in the date for the national day. Although the option of December 22 as the national day, a significant day for the liberation from the communist regime, was also proposed, it was ultimately not accepted. I am not discussing the political reasons here, but I cannot ignore the fact that the imaginary also played a role. The day that decisively marked the fate of the 1989 revolution was too bloody, recent and uncertain, but at the same time it did not access a sufficiently strong mythological/archetypal background. A return to May 10 was also proposed, which would have meant a re-actualization of the monarchical past. In the end, it was agreed upon to celebrate December 1, 1918, the day of the Great Union. It was also a return to the monarchical past, but it did not commemorate the monarchy, nor state independence, now an event far too distant and with a consolidated significance, but national unity. We can see how the myth of unity operates here. The most significant day for the nation is the day of its unification, after in the past it was the day of its liberation from foreign domination. Both the commemorated events and their meanings play an important role in the imaginary: independence paved the way for unity, the myth of the savior and that of unity are intertwined. The myth of unity worked so powerfully and decisively that it ignored the fact that December 1, 1918, also marked a political loss for Hungary, and could be interpreted as an affront to the Hungarian community in Transylvania. Once again, the imaginary ignores differences and reinforces otherness. Another aspect is related to the representativeness of the national day. It may be representative of the dominant majority or the conquering nation, but for other parts of the population it may mark an event with a contrary significance, such as the loss of sovereignty. In Australia, the national day, celebrated on 26 January, commemorates the landing of the first British fleet at Botany Bay in 1788 to establish the first penal colony. The strongest opposition has come from Aboriginal people, who see the day as a celebration of one of the harshest British colonization, and refer to it as "Invasion Day" or "Survival Day," rather than a national day (Geisler, 2009: 11). In some cases, national days have been banned and vilified, commemorated in secret, with participants risking imprisonment or worse (McCrone and McPherson, 2009: 1).

In some cases national days had to be "detoxified" because they were associated with past political regimes or events, now seen in a negative light, others were reinvested with new meanings, to fit current representations. We can deduct from this that the imaginary, can be shaped and re-signified, but it will always resist, and when its force is greater than that of change, the original meanings remain active.

National currency

According to Matthias Kaelberer (2004), the relationship between currency and identity is not predominantly affective, but based on institutional trust. With modernity, the relationship of trust has become rather abstract and institutionalized. Consequently, to support trust, identity does not have to be based on a sense of belonging. A diffuse identity, based on factors of a utilitarian or contractual nature, is sufficient, which is part of hybrid identities (Kaelberer, 2004).

Although it functions primarily as an economic instrument, currency also contributes to the consolidation of identity. The strength of currency can have effects on national pride, because the way a country is perceived externally, through it, contributes to increasing its status and, implicitly, that of its citizens. Currency therefore also plays the role of a nation's calling card. In fact, the relationship between currency and national identity is reciprocal: the former contributes to the consolidation of the latter, but is also an effect of it. As a rule, currency is chosen to represent the nation. Moreover, it is a

support for representations of national identity, such as cultural figures, founding heroes, spiritual patrons or key historical figures, who had an important role to play in gaining independence, in achieving unity or who expanded and increased the power of the state that the currency represents. However, like any national symbol, the currency is a conventional symbol, it is the result of the choice of decision-makers or political and cultural elites. It thus plays the role of a political instrument in the construction of identity. Under these conditions, does the currency still have a symbolic function? Of course it does, but the way it works differs from that of other national symbols.

To summarize, we could say that (among others), the national currency fulfills the following functions:

- 1) Economic – means of payment and exchange, standard of value, etc.
- 2) Political – represents the image of the state in the world (economic strength usually translates into political strength); contributes to the construction of national identity;
- 3) Social – establishes social ties, status relationships, etc.
- 4) Cultural – makes known and promotes historical figures and cultural elites, fixing them in the public consciousness;
- 5) Symbolic – regulates certain representations at the level of the imaginary, constitutes a factor in consolidating identity.

Even though it performs symbolic functions, the currency differs from other national symbols. First of all, the flag, the anthem and the national day, as we have seen, have an affective charge, they appeal to feelings, they are based on the awakening of strong emotions and attachments. The currency does not have an emotional charge or at least does not lead to such strong feelings as the flag and the anthem. Second, the behaviors associated with the first category of symbols are directly related to the strong feelings they arouse: a soldier can give his life to protect the flag on the battlefield or to conquer that of the enemy, the national anthem can cheer spirits or antagonize crowds against each other, the national day involves a series of commemorative gestures. None of this happens with currency. Individuals are unlikely to exhibit extreme behaviors in relation to currency, unlike other symbols. Third, while the first symbols are directly and explicitly associated with the nation, currency has only a secondary function, the consolidation of identity. In collective representations, while the first symbols represent the nation, currency is only a medium of exchange, with symbolic connotations, but remains a medium of exchange. Fourth, currency operates in the register of a “banal nationalism” (Billing, 1995: 42), characterized by everyday presence and diffuse impact. We are often unaware of which personality is represented on a particular banknote or we simply do not care. This does not mean that the banknote does not fulfill a symbolic function, but this is achieved at a more subtle level, without involving the solemnity of other national symbols. Although the term “banal nationalism” is used by Billing to distinguish between virulent nationalism in some states and the subtle display of national symbols in states with a stabilized national identity, we can also use the term to distinguish between different national symbols: some are still charged with affectivity, solemnity or are ritualized, such as the flag, the anthem and the national day, while others are trivialized, brought into everyday life, such as currency. We could say that currency has been from the beginning, through its dual commercial and identity function, a symbol arising from banality, from everyday life.

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Conclusions

The analysis of the symbols of national identity highlights the fact that they cannot be reduced to simple institutional conventions, but must be understood as constitutive elements of a complex network of meanings, anchored in the collective imaginary. The flag, the anthem, the national day and the currency, although different in form, frequency of use and affective impact, participate together in the construction and consolidation of national identity, functioning through a process of symbolic "over-determination".

Among these, the flag and the anthem stand out for their capacity to generate intense emotional reactions and mobilize collectivities, while the national day structures collective memory and provides a ritual framework for reaffirming belonging. The currency, although apparently less emotionally charged, acts on an everyday and diffuse level, contributing to the consolidation of identity through familiarity and constant circulation. Together, these symbols articulate both the visible and latent dimensions of the nation.

At the same time, the study reveals the ambivalence of these symbols: they can create solidarity and cohesion, but also differentiation, opposition and even conflict. Their strength derives precisely from the connection with the founding myths and archetypal structures of the imaginary, which gives them a remarkable resistance to change, but also a capacity for re-signification depending on historical and political contexts. Therefore, national identity appears as a dynamic process, in which symbols not only reflect social reality, but also actively contribute to shaping it.

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