

Anthropological Perspectives on the Creation of New National Identities: The South African and Czech Experience

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Despite the large geographical distance and diverse historical trajectories, there are significant parallels in the modern history of South Africa and former Czechoslovakia. In both countries majority of people had to live under oppressive regimes. Both regimes led their countries into a deep international isolation. Finally, both collapsed and stepped out for democracy.

At present, both countries are struggling to forge a sense of nationhood that would overcome former legacies, communist and apartheid. As social scientists claim adopting a shared sense of nationhood is commonly viewed as a prerequisite for the democratic and successful functioning of the state. A strong sense of nationhood also prevents „divided societies“ from being torn apart by conflicts and secession.

The aim of the paper is to look at the roles diverse nationalist discourses play in the political transformation of two above-mentioned societies. For a newly-democratised state such as South Africa, „national legitimacy“ is crucial for the establishment of effective democratic governance and civil stability. Yet, the contemporary efforts in nation-building are confronted with many particularistic tendencies. The awareness of belonging to one South Africa is particularly salient with Afrikaners. There is a reemergence of nationalistic moods which tend to reactivate old grievances, while evoking a sense of exclusivism for the Afrikaner *volk*.

Czech discourse on national identity in the era of the post-communist transformation of society focuses predominantly on the relationship between nation and state. As national identity is always constructed in the opposition to “the other”, Czech identity is built in contrast with three main factors: the Roma who serve as Czech significant Other, the Slovak, and the EU.

The paper will draw on the data gained from my anthropological fieldwork in South Africa, and from anthropological literature on and personal observations of Czech national identity in the making. Though each country has specific, historically moulded conditions, I believe that there can be some parallels drawn that will contribute to better understanding of the nation-building processes during transformation.