

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “BUILDING A NATION”

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On-screen text:**Building a Nation
a discussion with Érika Pani****On-screen text:****Érika Pani****Professor, Centro de Estudios Históricos (CEH), Colegio de México**

Érika Pani: So what is a nation? What is it that makes one American or Mexican or French or Chinese? One of the things we have to realize is that this [which] seems to be part of our nature. To imagine someone with no nation is a little bit tragic—the people after the First World War who had no passport, refugees who have no nation—this seems to us to be a tremendous tragedy. And I think that one of the things we should think about is that nations have been invented, I use the term a little, it’s a little bit exaggerated, but quite recently, you know, in the last 200 years, the idea—the word has existed for a very long time—but the idea that national identity defines you as a person is relatively recent, and what it means to be a nation has changed in time.

Also, we have the idea that the nation is a community. Benedict Anderson has described it as an “imagined community.” The fact that a Mexican farmer in Oaxaca belongs to the same community as a hotel worker in Cancún takes a lot, you know, takes some imagination. But the idea that they share language, that they share sometimes ethnic features, that they share a past together, I think that that is some of the things that we have come to imagine as a nation.

But for instance, in the early 19th century when the Spanish-American nations became independent from the Spanish empire, the nation was a seat of sovereignty. And the borders were undefined and they all spoke Spanish, you know, Guatemalans spoke Spanish and Mexicans spoke Spanish and Argentineans spoke Spanish and they were all Catholic. So what made one different from the other? And at that moment, the nation was a seat of sovereignty. So, what made one belong to the nation was belonging to this community which held sovereignty, and it didn’t matter if you spoke Quechua or Spanish or Nahuatl or, and, Spanish. So there’s this idea, I think, that what makes a nation is the will of these people who are very different, who are divided many times by ethnicity, by language, by class, but they think of each other as belonging to one nation and to be different from others.

What is the relationship between shared memories, history, and nation-building? Since the 19th century, there has been this conviction, especially on the part of those who are at the head of the state, that nations need to be built, that a sense of community needs to be created, and that you need to establish these horizontal bonds between citizens of the same nation. So, the bonds of language, the bonds of education, and also the bonds of history, of a shared, of coming from the same place and going somewhere together. Ernest Renan who is a French academic who has this wonderful conference which he delivered in 1882 said, you know, a nation first of all is a daily plebiscite—this idea that we are a nation because we want to be a community—but also it’s a people that has memory of having done great things and wanting to do more great things together.

The problem is history is a lot more complicated than that. And the actors of history are not necessarily these predetermined communities that we have called nations. And that constructing

states and constructing economic systems takes division and takes conflict. And usually, some are treated unfairly, some benefit more greatly than others. And it is difficult to take this history of conflict, which is inevitable, and turn it into something that should be the basis of the members of the nation identifying with each other and wanting to move forward.

So what happens with history in such cases is that, usually, the past that we deliver is a past that has to be tweaked with, where conflicts have to be downplayed, where civil wars that devastated a nation are turned into something else, like a war of independence or a revolution, in order to make it more palatable as a common endeavor, which in reality was a struggle to define the direction where the community was going and where some won and others lost.

In the case of Mexico, what role does history play in nation-building? Since the late 19th century, there is this idea that history is a teacher, that students need to know history in order to live better. But the history that was taught in schools was mostly ancient history, what we now call “universal history,” so world history. And in the end of the 19th century, there starts to be this idea that, no, that we need to know the history of the nation. We need to know where we have been, so that we can have a better idea of where we are going. And this is called, and it becomes a mandatory topic to be taught in school, *historia patria*: “Patriotic History,” the history that built the nation.

And in the case of Mexico, there is this rewriting of history in order to take a very complex, a very conflicted trajectory, and turning it, turning it into this kind of progressive tale of things getting better as the years go by, through the struggles, the common struggles of the people, but the idea is that we started at a place which wasn't that good, and we ended up in a place which is much better. So there is this, I would say glorification, mythification of the pre-Hispanic past as a moment of harmony, which is pretty much mythical because these were very violent warring societies, where science and art were very, had a central place and were very, very sophisticated and important. And then colonial, the colonial period, 300 years long, as 300 years of oppression, again, kind of painting over the very complex negotiations that took place during this time. And then independence, which was a conflict that confronted basically Americans: all the Americans who wanted to stay in the empire against the Americans who wanted to leave the empire—so basically, a civil war—into a war of liberation, which confronted Mexicans against Spaniards, who did not belong to the nation, people who did not belong to the same community. The wars between liberals and conservatives at the, in the middle of the 19th century, are again depicted as a revolution of those who wanted to go forward and those who wanted to remain in the past.

And, I guess the best example is probably the Revolution. Now, the Revolution which was made up of very different social movements, which had very different visions for the country's future, which were kind of papered over as this single movement where these factions which often fought against each other, revolutionary leaders who plotted to assassinate each other, are all put into this one unifying vision of the Revolution as a movement to liberate Mexico—to turn a backwards, poor society into a prosperous modern one.