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Article

Marxism and the Evolution of National Identity: A Comparative Study of National Communities in Modern Societies

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Abstract: National identity has not faded quietly with modernization; if anything, it tends to resurface precisely when societies undergo rapid economic and social reorganization. This article revisits that puzzle through a Marxist—more precisely, a historical-materialist—analytical stance. Rather than viewing national belonging as an inherited cultural "substance," the study treats it as a durable yet revisable form of social imagination that takes shape where material change, stratification, and institutional narration intersect. Using a comparative historical design, the article examines three deliberately anonymized contexts: Case A, where a capable state coordinates integrative identity narratives during long-term market expansion; Case B, where a prior overarching identity weakens and a renewed national frame grows amid abrupt systemic transition; and Case C, where a supranational integration project advances economically yet struggles to cultivate deep everyday attachment. Across the three cases, national identity is shown to be neither purely cultural nor mechanically economic. It is better understood as a negotiated settlement—often unstable—between shifting life chances, evolving class positions, and the institutions that translate these shifts into shared stories. The analysis suggests that historical materialism remains useful for explaining why identity projects gain traction at certain moments, while also underscoring the contingent, path-dependent ways in which identity is narrated, contested, and normalized.

Keywords: Marxism; National Identity; National Community; Comparative Historical Analysis; Historical Materialism; Ideology

1. Introduction

Predictions that globalization would steadily dilute national identity have turned out to be overly linear. In different regions and historical moments, a sense of national "we" returns not only as a cultural label, but as a practical language for interpreting uncertainty: who belongs, who benefits, and what counts as a fair social contract. I have found, when reading cross-context literature on nationalism, that many disputes arise because "nation" is treated either as an ancient heritage or as a purely symbolic invention. Both views capture something, but neither explains well why national identity becomes especially persuasive in periods of economic restructuring and intensified social differentiation.

A Marxist approach offers a disciplined way to connect identity to the organization of social life. It does not require assuming that national identity is false or merely instrumental; instead, it asks how identity becomes credible, repeatable, and institutionally supported under particular historical conditions. In this sense, national identity can be analyzed as an ideological form that links everyday experience to broader structures—markets, labor arrangements, and governance routines—without reducing it to any single factor. While the Marxist tradition has a long conversation on the "national question," comparative work that tracks identity trajectories across differing political-economic configurations remains less developed than it could be.

To contribute to that gap, this article adopts a comparative historical strategy. It selects three contrasting but comparable contexts (A–C) and uses them to clarify mechanisms rather than to rank cases. The central argument is straightforward: national identity is continually produced and adjusted through the interplay of capitalist transformation, changes in social stratification, and institutionally organized narratives that render those changes meaningful.

2. Theoretical Foundations: A Marxist Analytical Lens

This section outlines a Marxist analytical lens designed to avoid two common pitfalls: cultural essentialism (treating nation as timeless) and narrow institutionalism (treating identity as only a policy output). The lens is built around three connected ideas: historical materialism, class and social differentiation, and state-ideological mediation. Together they help answer a practical question: under what conditions does national identity become a widely shared "common sense," and when does it fragment into competing versions?

2.1 The Nation as a Historical Formation

From a historical-materialist standpoint, the nation is best approached as a modern formation rather than a transhistorical community. Pre-modern societies certainly had kinship, region, religion, and other solidarities, but these did not necessarily produce a standardized, territorial, and administratively integrated national community. Modern nationhood becomes plausible when social life is reorganized through market integration, expanded mobility, and institutional systems that standardize rules across a shared territory.

What matters here is not a single "economic cause," but a set of enabling conditions. When large populations are connected through common circuits—labor markets, education credentials, media languages, legal categories—they can more easily imagine themselves as part of a collective unit. Yet material change only creates the space in which nationhood can be articulated; it does not dictate the content of the nation. The particular meanings attached to national identity depend on historical pathways, alliances, and the struggles through which different groups seek recognition and security.

2.2 Class Dynamics and the Production of Identity

A key Marxist insight is that national identity develops within societies that are internally unequal. This is where identity becomes more than symbolism. In materially differentiated settings, elites and governing coalitions often narrate a shared national story that presents social order as a collective enterprise, thereby smoothing over conflict and organizing consent (Marx & Engels, 2002). National identity, in this view, can function as a unifying vocabulary that makes distributional arrangements appear natural or inevitable.

At the same time, the relationship between class and nation is not one-directional. The national idiom can also be reworked from below. Groups facing exclusion or declining security may invoke national belonging as a claim to dignity, social rights, or fair access to public goods. This is one reason national identity often

intensifies during restructuring: when prior promises—steady work, predictable mobility, stable welfare—become uncertain, the national frame can reappear as a moral language through which people interpret loss and demand repair. In short, national identity is not merely a mask over inequality; it is also a contested terrain where inequality is argued about (Lenin, 2010).

2.3 State, Ideology, and Cultural Hegemony

In Marxist theory, the state is not simply a neutral container holding a nation; it is a central organizer of national subjectivity. National identity is reproduced through administrative practices (classification, territorial management, legal standardization) and through cultural routines that create shared references (school curricula, public ceremonies, media repertoires, and everyday symbols). Identity becomes durable when it is repeated often enough that it feels self-evident.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony helps explain how such narratives settle into "common sense," while work on ideological apparatuses clarifies how institutions can address individuals as national subjects in ordinary life (Gramsci, 1971). Importantly, identity projects cannot rely on rhetoric alone. They typically gain traction when they resonate with lived experience — employment prospects, mobility, status security, and perceived fairness. When those material feelings change, identity narratives are often revised, repackaged, or challenged, which is why national identity can look stable for long periods and then suddenly become contentious.

3. Comparative Analysis of National Identity Evolution

Building on the theoretical lens above, this section uses three anonymized cases to illustrate how national identity evolves under different configurations of economic change and institutional mediation. The goal is not to provide exhaustive histories, but to make visible the mechanisms through which identity is organized, weakened, or reactivated.

3.1 Case A: State-Led Integrative Community-Building

Case A represents a context where a relatively capable state actively curates integrative narratives during a prolonged period of development and market expansion. In an earlier phase, identity is often framed through broad developmental ideals, stressing unity across internal diversity and directing attention toward shared futures. Over time, as markets deepen and stratification grows more complex, the integrative story typically requires adjustment: inequality becomes more visible, mobility expectations diversify, and groups experience modernization unevenly.

In this case, identity strengthening is less a cultural "return" than an institutional response to differentiation. Education, public communication, and symbolic heritage are mobilized to maintain a sense of common membership and to reduce the interpretive gap between fast and slow lanes of development. What is striking in Case A is the proactive character of narrative work: rather than waiting for fragmentation and then repairing it, institutions attempt to pre-empt disintegration by continuously updating the meaning of belonging (Fei, 2015). The effect is not guaranteed, but the mechanism is clear: identity coherence is treated as a governance task that accompanies economic change.

3.2 Case B: Identity Rupture After Systemic Transformation

Case B points to a different trajectory in which an earlier overarching identity framework loses credibility over time, followed by a rapid systemic transition that reorganizes social hierarchy with unusual speed. Under such conditions, everyday reference points—status, employment, and institutional trust—can become unstable. When that happens, social actors often search for a language that can "explain the break" and offer a renewed sense of continuity (Tishkov, 2022).

Here, national identity re-emerges less as a planned project than as an available cultural-institutional resource. Historical symbols and narratives are reorganized into a new framework that can anchor collective meaning: who "we" are, what "we" have experienced, and what "we" should expect. From a Marxist angle, the mechanism is not mysterious. When shared narratives aligned with prior social arrangements weaken, identity becomes a substitute integrator—useful for building cohesion amid uncertainty, and also useful for

legitimizing new arrangements (Smith, 2010). The process is rarely smooth: multiple versions of the nation compete, and the most persuasive version often aligns best with institutional power and ordinary anxieties around security and recognition.

3.3 Case C: Supranational Integration and Persistent National Attachments

Case C concerns an integration project that seeks to build supranational belonging alongside deepening economic interdependence. Functionally, such projects promise efficiency: reduced barriers, standardized regulation, and a larger arena for exchange. These features fit well with transregional economic logics, and they can generate tangible benefits for certain sectors and regions.

Yet the identity outcome often remains uneven, especially when lived experience does not match the promised universality of integration. Technocratic governance may be effective at coordination, but it can be less effective at cultivating everyday attachment. Moreover, periodic crises—particularly those perceived as distributionally unfair—can reactivate nation-centered solidarity as a protective idiom. In Marxist terms, Case C highlights a structural tension: integration may advance at the level of markets and institutions faster than it advances at the level of social equality and shared moral imagination (Habermas, 2001; Brubaker, 2017). Where people feel exposed rather than protected, national frames remain attractive because they offer a more familiar scale on which claims of responsibility and reciprocity can be made.

4. Discussion: Comparative Implications

4.1 Shared Patterns and Divergent Mechanisms

Across Cases A–C, one shared pattern stands out: national identity intensifies, shifts, or fractures when material conditions and social expectations are reorganized. In each case, economic change alters everyday life—employment security, mobility regimes, distributional perceptions. Those changes reshape social groupings, which in turn reshape the narratives people find plausible.

A simplified mechanism chain can be stated as follows:

a. Economic reorganization changes lived experience (work, mobility, inequality, security);

b. Social differentiation sharpens or rearranges (new winners/losers, new coalitions);

c. Competing narratives attempt to interpret and stabilize meaning;

d. National identity often becomes a favored framework because it combines moral language with institutional repetition.

Where the cases differ is the dominant pathway. Case A illustrates proactive institutional narration that tries to keep cohesion aligned with market-driven differentiation. Case B reflects reactive narrative reconstruction after a rupture of credibility and coordination. Case C reveals a contested pathway: supranational belonging is promoted through institutional design, but it is constrained by unequal outcomes that keep national solidarities emotionally and practically influential.

These differences matter because they caution against treating national identity as a simple “more/less” variable. Instead, identity looks more like a moving formation that rises, settles, and reconfigures depending on how economic change is felt and how persuasion is institutionally organized. (Zhurzhenko, 2014).

4.2 Reconsidering Marxist Insights

The comparison proposes two refinements for a contemporary Marxist discussion of national identity.

First, the relationship between class and nation is better described as articulatory than substitutive. National identity can serve hegemonic consolidation, but it can also serve as a vocabulary of contestation. Groups positioned differently in the distribution of risks and rewards may struggle over what the nation means and what obligations membership implies. This is why national identity can be simultaneously integrative and conflictual: it is a shared language with disputed contents.

Second, the cases underline the relative autonomy of ideological work. Historical materialism usefully points to the structural conditions under which national imaginaries become salient, but it does not follow that economic structures mechanically generate a single identity outcome. Institutions — schools, media, legal

forms, public rituals—do real work in shaping how people process change. Some identity projects gain resonance because they align with daily experience; others fail because they sound detached, unfair, or repetitive in the wrong way.

A workable Marxist framework for the present topic therefore needs a multi-level sensitivity: it should track (a) structural pressures, (b) shifting social differentiation, and (c) the concrete institutional routines through which belonging is narrated and learned. This combination helps explain not only the persistence of national identity, but also its variability across contexts.

5. Conclusion

This article has offered a comparative historical re-reading of national identity through a Marxist, historical-materialist lens. The main claim is not that national identity is timeless, nor that it is simply fabricated at will. Instead, it is best treated as a historically produced form of collective imagination that becomes persuasive when it helps people interpret material change, stratification, and uncertainty—and when institutions repeatedly stabilize that interpretation in everyday life.

By examining three anonymized contexts, the analysis has shown three distinct identity pathways: proactive integrative narration in Case A, reactive reconstruction after systemic rupture in Case B, and a contested supranational attempt in Case C. The broader implication is that identity projects are responsive to economic reorganization, but not reducible to it; they are mediated by institutions and shaped by struggles over meaning and distribution.

Future research could deepen this approach by tracing micro-mechanisms—classroom routines, media genres, and local commemorations through which national belonging is practically learned and emotionally anchored. Adding more comparative settings would also help test where historical-materialist explanations are strongest and where they require supplementation by other perspectives on culture, emotion, and everyday life.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tianjie Yang: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; review and editing.

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