



## **Iceland: Diverging Worlds, Emerging Identity**

*Brandon Boileau*

**Abstract:**

The geological divergence of the North American and Eurasian plates creates a geological border known as the mid-Atlantic ridge. The continual diverging forces and intense volcanic activity of the sub-oceanic ridge have given birth to the landmass we know as Iceland. Symbolically, the geographical emergence of Iceland is a direct result of the distancing of both the old and new worlds. Iceland and its people rest at the crossroads of two very different societies, making it hard to share a sense of belonging with either continent, despite the unifying forces of globalization. Iceland's unique history and geographical isolation have resulted in a weak sense of belonging with either the historically rich European or progressive North American continents, thus fostering a strong ethnic and nationalistic identity. In lieu, Iceland has formed and maintained its own unique identity with help of both continents, becoming a geographic and cultural halfway intersection between both. This strong cultural identity can be best observed at Pingvellir, a lieu de mémoire representing the history, struggle, and relentlessness of Iceland's thirst for an identity of its own. The ensuing discussion outlines this thirst and how it paved the micronation's development of a strong national identity resistant of global cultural hybridization.

**Résumé :**

La divergence géologique des plaques de l'Amérique de Nord et de l'Eurasie crée une frontière géologique nommée dorsale médio-atlantique. Les forces qui divergent continuellement et l'activité volcanique intense de la crête sous-atlantique ont donné naissance à la masse continentale qui nous connaissons sous nom de l'Islande. Symboliquement, l'émergence géographique de l'Islande est le résultat direct de la distanciation à la fois de l'ancien et nouveau monde. L'Islande et son peuple reste au carrefour de deux sociétés très différentes, ce qui rend difficile un sentiment d'appartenance avec l'un ou l'autre continent, malgré les forces unificatrices de la mondialisation. L'histoire unique de l'Islande et son isolation géographique ont créé un sentiment d'appartenance faible avec le continent européen, historiquement riche, ainsi qu'avec le continent nord américain, ce qui favorise une identité ethnique et nationaliste forte. En lieu et place, l'Islande a créé et maintenu son identité unique avec l'aide des deux continents, devenant un carrefour géographique et culturel à mi-chemin entre les deux. Cette identité culturelle forte est mieux observée à Pingvellir, un lieu de mémoire représentant l'histoire et la lutte sans relâche de la soif de l'Islande pour une identité propre à elle-même. La discussion suivante esquisse cette soif et comment elle a posé les jalons pour le développement d'une identité nationale forte qui résiste à l'hybridation globale culturelle de cette micronation.

## Introduction

The geological divergence of the North American and Eurasian plates creates a geological border known as the mid-Atlantic ridge. The continual diverging force and intense volcanic activity of the sub-oceanic ridge has given birth to the landmass we know as Iceland. Symbolically, the geographical emergence of Iceland is a direct result of the distancing of both the old and new worlds. Iceland and its people rest at the crossroads of two very different societies, making it hard to share a sense of belonging with either continent, despite the unifying forces of globalization. Iceland's unique history and geographical isolation has resulted in a weak sense of belonging with either the European or North American communities, thus fostering a strong ethnic and nationalistic identity. To support this claim, I will be introducing the notion of identity and in more detail, national and ethnic identities by employing the works of Bernd Simon and Michael Billig. The ensuing discussion will explain the construction of the Icelandic identity, the elements that bring people together to form the Icelandic community such a lieu de memoire and a native language. The following section will explain what makes Icelanders different from Europeans and North Americans and why certain similarities are not strong enough to create a shared transatlantic identity. This final section will also conclude that the Icelandic national identity is very much alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and illustrate how the identity of this micro-nation refuses to be overlooked or undermined in the context of global cultural hybridization.

### Who am I? Who are we?

The notion of identity manifests itself through two subjects, the individual and society. Self-identity is how we choose to distinguish ourselves from others based “purely on the individual properties of the self.”<sup>1</sup> Self-identity is important because it is constructed and shaped from our self-consciousness and enables us to express who we are as individuals. It is also crucial on a collective level because living our individual identity allows for the construction of healthy relationships by actively participating in and contributing to society. On the other hand, collective identity is achieved by the unification of individual identities based on a sense of belonging to a particular sense of identity. Collective identity is equally as important because it enables this sharing of belonging with others, which effectively moulds the structures of society into broader categories of “us” and “them.” The unification of individuals into “us” and “them” is in turn decisive because it allows us to know what differentiates us *vis-à-vis* others, what destiny we might have and what ends we are willing to use to satisfy these goals. The individual associating him or herself with a shared identity is also fundamental because without a shared sense of belonging, the individual would never be able to validate their internal self. Collective identities are, like many sociologists suggest, the cornerstone in the creation of modern society.

In the pursuit of grasping a better understanding of collective identities, Bernd Simon, professor of social psychology at the University of Kiel, maps out five characteristics of identity. He asserts that “Identities are relational, socially constructed, socially structured, people typically harbour multiple identities and identities have social consequences.”<sup>2</sup> His analysis demonstrates the malleability of identity, how it can be renegotiated according to context and the importance that is drawn to “them” depending on

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernd Simon, *Identity in modern society, a social psychological perspective* (Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2004), xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

differentiation with other people sharing different identities. This is where his scale of saliency comes to play, wherein according to the specific role each identity plays, some may be more noticeable and important than others. If a specific role underlying a certain identity becomes unappealing to someone, it is possible that they become unmotivated to continue fulfilling that role thus abandoning that identity altogether. There exists a multitude of positions to be had within the organization of society and it all rests on the individual or the collective to fulfill those positions.

One type of collective identity is nationalism. Anthony D. Smith, emeritus professor of ethnicity and nationalism at the London School of Economics, has given the most convincing and concrete definition of nation, which will be used for the purpose of this essay. To Smith, a nation is “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”<sup>3</sup> This definition of nation coincides very well with the construction of collective identities, as discussed earlier in this section. The nation brings people together over common themes, thus fostering a sense of belonging while creating a sense of uniqueness by the differentiation of “us” and “them.”

Although the essence of a national identity can be contested today by evidence of a globalizing world, Michael Billig, social sciences professor at Loughborough University, reminds us that the most important point of reference continues to be our nationality. This claim is easily supported as all individuals live within a society that is governed by a state, making nationality an identity marker that can change, but that cannot be erased according to the structure of modern society. It is important to note, that foundation of the modern state (structures of national governance), is different than a nation (a mutual feeling of

---

<sup>3</sup> Umut Özkirimli, *Theories of nationalism: a critical introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 149.

belonging to a national history, culture and people). Nationality is an important form of identity used to shape the processes and the structures of our modern day international system.

Because of economic and cultural globalization, many academics believe that nationalism has become less important and to a certain extent, imagined in Western countries. Billig disagrees that nationalism is but a mood in the West, seldom manifested by western countries such as Britain and France, and reproduced when convenient. I would argue that Billig and Smith are in agreement with Anderson when he says, “nations are limited by finite boundaries, they are imagined as sovereign and imagined as a community conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>4,5</sup> Anderson argues that in many cases, national identity rests upon an ethnic identity, which is true in the case of many nations that have seceded from higher political authorities. Nations that have come into existence in this fashion should be studied through Anderson’s ethnic nationalism perspective. Anderson believes that we must study the modern nation from an ethno-historic perspective, which questions how, why, and from where the nation emerged. He employs the noun “*ethnie* to designate ethnic groups, defining them as named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.”<sup>6</sup>

The definition of *ethnie*, grounded within the categorization of ethnic nationalism, will help us analyze the construction of an Icelandic identity from the discovery of the island to the post 2008 financial crisis era. This thorough analysis of Iceland will

---

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson believes the nation is *imagined* because you will never meet all individuals living within a country, but a sense of belonging will still exist.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Sutherland, *Nationalism in the twenty-first century: challenges and responses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 53.

demonstrate how the territorial traits of the land and the cultural identity of the people make it an interesting case for identity studies. It will be argued that the Icelandic identity emerged and is constructed in a way that makes it impossible to find a commonality that would create a shared sense of belonging with the broader European and North American identity.

### **Nordic identity shuffle**

From a historical point of view, Vikings and their slaves, originating from Norway and the British Isles, settled in Iceland near the end of the ninth century. In search of farmlands and an escape from conflict, many Norwegians opted for Iceland as a promised land, where they eventually settled on a permanent basis. A governance system was established by the first quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Alþingi. Subsequently, the commonwealth of Iceland was instated from the creation of the Alþingi until the Old Covenant, which effectively united Iceland and Norway. Effectively Sweden, Norway and Denmark were united under the Kalmar Union, which effectively integrated Iceland within the Nordic States. Upon the dissolution of the union in the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Iceland became a real Danish territory until 1944. The relationship with Denmark that spanned numerous centuries was a real catalyst that led to Iceland becoming a kingdom in 1918 and an independent republic on June 17, 1944.

The come and go relationships with foreign rule, particularly with Denmark, imposed many economic monopolies, delayed relief from natural disasters and mismanaged poverty, resulting in a decline of the population in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Sutherland, “Foreign rule was the cause of the slow deterioration of the Icelandic economy and culture from the fourteenth

century until the beginning of the national revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”<sup>7</sup> Iceland, under foreign rule, did not fare so well. The Icelanders’ interests and survival were not prioritized and often not recognized.

On the subject of national Identity, Benedict Anderson discusses in his book, *Imagined Communities*:

Nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.<sup>8</sup>

The essence that inspired the Icelandic identity was felt long before its independence, but not formalized until 1944, when it became fully sovereign from Danish rule. The sense of belonging to a self-governing and independent republic was essential to the transformation of Iceland from a colonial state to a proud and independent nation.<sup>9</sup> The transformation was not unilaterally rooted in economic motives; rather it was anchored in emotion linking history, literature and hardship to the modern Icelandic.

There exists a *lieu de mémoire* in Iceland, one that commemorates this struggle for independence, a place “where the heart of the Icelandic nation beats, a place utilized to celebrate what the nation deems it has in common, while at the same time demarcating Icelanders different from other groups.”<sup>10</sup> This symbolic place is Pingvellir, a *lieu de mémoire* that lies at the meeting place of both the North American and Eurasian plates, rendering it symbolic to Icelanders and their national identity. The symbolism tied to this

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 4.

<sup>9</sup> “Nation” is used because it speaks to a certain essence in the ideology and abstractness of identity. State is, on the other hand, a legal concept, much more concrete and easily definable than “nation”.

<sup>10</sup> Gudmundur Halfdarnason, “Pingvellir,” *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past 12* (2000): 1.

*lieu de mémoire* is the ultimate starting point in examining the construction and manifestation of a national identity shared by Icelanders, old and young.

Pingvellir is an emblematic *lieu de mémoire*. The symbolism tied to it is what defines the nation and the *ethnie*, according to Anderson. Pingvellir represents the fight, undertaken by Icelanders, against foreign rule, and a fight to freely express their identity in the form of full sovereignty. Gudmundur Halfdarnason's article, *Pingvellir*, enlightens us on the cultural significance of such places:

In the heart of an Icelander, all of its nature is interwoven with an eventful history, and the mind wanders to encounter the people who once inhabited the country, struggling century after century towards an uncertain future. This people never gave up, never forgot their language, their stories, their memories.<sup>11</sup>

Taking this into account, I believe that the area, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and protected under Icelandic law, is the ultimate expression of the Icelandic identity. Gudmundur Halfdanarson, cultural studies professor at the University of Iceland, agrees that this site, which has united a significant percentage of the Icelandic population on multiple occasions, is the single most important expression of the Icelandic nation today. Pingvellir, and all the meanings and memories that lie there, represents what it means to be Icelandic.

What it means to be Icelandic can be represented, like Anderson has us believe through the many cultural artefacts that define the common nation, things like a shared language and a rich literature. Less than 400,000 people worldwide speak Icelandic, rendering it a susceptible language by international standards but appropriate for the actual number of Icelandic people. The Icelandic language closely resembled that of the Norwegian language up until the 14<sup>th</sup> century where they became increasingly different. The Norwegian language underwent many changes whereas Icelandic resisted major changes,

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.

keeping the purity of the language intact. This intact purity, I believe, aided in the preservation of the cultural identity by keeping a linguistic continuity throughout its history. The Icelandic language still remains the same today, keeping its purity by creating new Icelandic words for modern words, instead of borrowing from other languages. The most impressive use of the Icelandic language can be found in the Sagas of Icelanders. The Sagas of Icelanders were narratives describing the foundations of modern Iceland during the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. This artefact of Icelandic literature grounds the *ethnie*, giving profound legitimacy to the Icelandic people and their beginnings. The sagas are sometimes regarded as the most important European books ever published.<sup>12</sup> The sagas themselves describe the beginning of the Icelandic identity by narrating the important events that shaped its settlers into citizens. This literature is a historical road map for the modern Icelandic.

Another important factor that has shaped the Icelandic identity is the geographic landscape and seclusion of Iceland. As evident by looking at any world map, Iceland is isolated in the North Atlantic, in proximity to Greenland, Northern Europe, North America and the Arctic. The extreme separation and landscape of the island has had a deep impact on the Icelandic people. Western thought has “imagined wilderness as a place of isolation and of opposition to the home.”<sup>13</sup> This is not the case in Iceland, argues Karen Oslund, Scandinavian studies professor at Towson University, as Icelanders have always embraced nature and have lived in an environment with no distinct line between home and nature. This holds true because the landscape of Iceland is very dangerous, extreme yet intriguingly romantic. Others have described Iceland’s wilderness as exotic or even unusual, creating a

---

<sup>12</sup> Statement based on Ben Myers argument that the Sagas have shaped story telling and has historical significance for northern European history, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/oct/03/1>.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Oslund, “Imagining Iceland: Narratives of Nature and History in the North Atlantic,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35.3 (2002): 314.

sense of difference between Icelanders and established Europeans. It is clear that disasters like Móduhardindi<sup>14</sup> have tested the resilience of the Icelandic people and have pushed them to the limits, almost to the point of no survival.

Again, Þingvellir is relevant; the *lieu de mémoire* “commands such profound emotional legitimacy” because it represents what it means to be Icelandic. It represents the rich cultural artefacts (language, nature and literature) that give Icelanders the legitimate foundations of the *ethnie* and the construction of the nation. It represents the survival of the Icelandic people in an arduous and isolated environment that is empowering and more often than not unpredictable. It represents the overall character of the Icelandic attitude that has been shaped by foreign rule and the overwhelming power of nature, which has resulted in a proud, cautious and resilient people. It also represents the fight for Icelandic independence that was earned from a millennium of survival, cultural growth and the creation of a common identity in a country dominated by contrasts. Most importantly it represents the strong unity of the Icelandic people.

### **Sharing: mission impossible**

As I have mentioned before, Iceland is geographically unique because it was formed in the middle of the North Atlantic by two diverging plates, the North American and Eurasian plates. Iceland is isolated from both continents making it difficult, even with the uniting effects of globalization, to share a sense of belonging with either continent.<sup>15</sup> On one hand Iceland does share a history with Europe and North America, but like Anderson and Bilig suggest, a similar history is not sufficient enough to create a shared sense of community,

---

<sup>14</sup> In 1783 a volcanic eruption near Reykjavik resulted in the death of 70% of the livestock, a famine and the death of 38,000 people.

<sup>15</sup> For the sake of my argument, I will assume that both a North American and a European (EU) identity exist. After much research I am skeptical that supranational identities can exist. I am also skeptical that national identities can exist in larger countries.

effectively eliminating identity similarity. For reasons that will be explained in this section, Iceland is a stand-alone state, harbouring a strong national identity.

The European identity was created and strengthened by the creation of the European Union in 1993.<sup>16</sup> The idea of this supranational institution is quite impressive as the benefits of an institution of this sort were able to sway the judgment of people of many different countries in joining. The foundations of the European Union are a binding currency, a larger and unified economic area and the free movement of people within member states. The binding effects of the EU make it easier for cross-cultural consumption and travel, which effectively has hybridized the borders of each individual country. These countries have willingly come together to form a singular power, partly acting on their behalf. In theory, the EU is a project of shared identity, but in practice, the recent economic crisis and the mismanagement of EU institutions have given way to regionalism and right-wing political parties. The faith in this shared identity has recently been questioned by euro-skeptics and put in jeopardy with Brexit, giving us a reason to believe that the European project is not sufficient in creating a singular *imagined community*.

The supranational institution has had binding effects, but it has also undermined national identities in a way where they are all EU citizens. The many initiatives of the EU to create a common cultural identity has been a mechanism to try and create a shared identity through shared values. I believe that the strongest bond Iceland has to Europe is through the Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. However, I do not think Iceland fits in this model because Iceland is a colonial construction of these countries and there is currently no path of unity amongst the Nordic countries. Some have opted for EU membership although Norway has not and is not anywhere nearing application. Within the

---

<sup>16</sup> I am choosing the European Union as evidence of a shared European identity because it is the strongest claim to a unified European identity.

EU there is no clear path to unity because some countries have recently questioned the power of this institution and do not believe their interests are best served under such a model, this is especially the case with microstates. It seems that many EU member states are trying to, at the best of their abilities, maintain the essence of a European identity, whereas Iceland cannot know what it means to be European because it is essentially only a European product.

It has been hinted that Iceland cannot share a sense of belonging to the European identity. On the other hand, because Iceland is in proximity to North America, there might be enough similarities to create a sense of belonging with the new world. Unlike with the European Union, North America does not have a supranational institution with binding effects. A unified North America is a very superfluous idea, usually omitting the Caribbean and oftentimes Mexico from the equation. The boundaries of North America are usually limited to Canada and the United States. Regardless, all of these North American countries are characterized by a sense of newness, all being old colonies of the European empires. There was a fight for independence from every one of these countries, whether it was peaceful or revolutionary, and all countries share a similar coming-into-history experience. They were all tied to Europe by a colonial diaspora, Iceland being no exception. At one point in both Iceland and North American countries, people ceased to be European colonialists and began being citizens of their respective countries.

I believe that Iceland shares a more similar consciousness with North Americans than with Europeans. Anderson tells us that to understand the nation we must understand the ways in which it came into historical being, something Iceland shares with North American nations. Although sharing a similar consciousness, North American countries do not share the same destiny, making it difficult to unify people under a shared identity.

Sharing an identity does not seem to be as important of a goal to North Americans as it is to their European counterparts. The diaspora remains totally different; Iceland simply does not share a sense of belonging with either European or North American communities.

### **Icelandic identity today**

Icelandic identity today is founded on what Anderson calls the *ethnie* and the manifestation of nationalism. It is easier for Iceland to maintain racial purity and the sense of *nation-ness* because of its distance from Europe and North America. I believe that the extreme isolation of the country has been significant in shaping the national identity because it played the role of a barrier, a shield protecting the values, the history and the language of the Icelandic people. Its coastline, the rough landscape and the temperamental nature have shaped the attitude of the modern day Icelander. The construction of this attitude was key in transforming the consciousness of the settlers into a nation of dwellers. Iceland's microstate status has also helped in bringing the small population together to form a community.<sup>17</sup> This community is characterized by a racial purity that has helped in the construction of a shared identity and a common destiny for all Icelanders.

The Icelandic identity has manifested itself the most during 1944 when it fought for independence, between 1950-1970 during the Cod Wars, and in 2008 during and after the financial crisis. The Cod Wars were an important feat against Great Britain, where they defended their fishing rights and fishing zones to secure a valuable staple of Iceland's economy, livelihood and identity. These three distinct events put the resilience and the capabilities of the Icelandic state and nation into play. Iceland was able to prove themselves able in every threat to their national identity, from its official statehood up until today. It

---

<sup>17</sup> Although Anderson says communities are imagined because not everyone will meet everyone else within the nation, I believe Iceland is as close as it can get to a real community.

came as no surprise to me that after the financial crisis, Iceland applied for membership, which they rejected in 2015. The application felt like a last resort in the face of a large crisis but I believe that withdrawal from the membership was a smart decision. It was smart because Iceland would have been very underrepresented in the European parliament and I would argue that the essence of the Icelandic nation would have been lost. As Karen Oslund tells us, “Iceland doesn’t share the elements of European nature and culture, Iceland was never in the frontiers of Europe and that being a part of the European identity isn’t the natural order for Iceland.”<sup>18</sup> Many things have shaped Iceland into a nation, from the unification of similarities into “us” to the identity differences that demark us from “them.”

According to Biligs, “nationalism does not disappear when the nation acquires a political roof; instead, it becomes absorbed into the environment of the established homeland.”<sup>19</sup> Icelandic nationalism was constructed much before the independence movement in 1944. When independence was finally granted, the Icelandic nation had the political capacity to express what it means to be an Icelander and to create policies to protect this Icelandic essence. It should be of no surprise that Pingvellir, the *lieu de mémoire* referenced throughout this essay, was protected under national law. By protecting it, Icelanders are protecting the creation of the nation and the quintessence of what makes the modern Icelander similar to each other and different from everyone else.

The most important thing to remember is that Iceland is a new nation, it is less than 80 years old and it is entitled to find and forge its place in the world. The comparison with Europe and North America demonstrated the uniqueness of Iceland, and a shared identity with either remains to this day unforeseeable despite some similarities. The distance of

---

<sup>18</sup> Karen Oslund, “Imagining Iceland: Narratives of Nature and History in the North Atlantic,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35.3 (2002): 316, 324.

<sup>19</sup> Umut Özkirimli, *Theories of nationalism: a critical introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 171.

Iceland to both continents, its colonial past of Iceland and the geographic landscape of Iceland played a major role in the construction of an Icelandic identity. From a historical perspective, Iceland does share some historical roots with Europe and as well as a similar consciousness and experience with North American countries. The symbolism tied to Iceland being created by the divergence of both plates is quite uncanny because instead of being conformed to either identity, the geological intersection gave birth to the Icelandic nation and identity. Iceland's sobriquet is the land of Fire and Ice for good reason: the language, the culture and the history of the Icelandic people is frozen in time and the strength of the Icelandic nation is and has always harboured a fiery character. It will be interesting to see the role that Iceland occupies in the development of the Arctic and what implications this will have on Icelandic identity and perhaps the possibility of an arctic identity inclusive of Iceland.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Guibernau, Montserrat. "Prospects for a European Identity." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 24 (2011): 31-43.
- Halfdarnason, Gudmundur. "Þingvellir." *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past* 12 (2000): 1-5.
- Oslund, Karen. "Imagining Iceland: Narratives of Nature and History in the North Atlantic." *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35.3 (2002): 313-344.
- Özkirimli, Umut. *Theories of nationalism: a critical introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Resnick, Philip. *The labyrinth of North American identities*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.
- Simon, Bernd. *Identity in modern society, a social psychological perspective*. Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2004.
- Sutherland, Claire. *Nationalism in the twenty-first century: challenges and responses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.