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# Nation

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## NATION: A DUAL CONCEPT

Almost every scholar who has dealt with national issues has started by acknowledging that a basic problem is to find an adequate definition of the key concept of nation, and sometimes also the related concept of nationalism. Indeed, to use Ernest Renan's very well-known question raised in 1882, what is a nation? Despite the huge amount of theoretical literature that has been devoted to answering this question, there still is no clear-cut answer, and this will remain so because the term "nation" is polysemic. Finding empirical characteristics in order to get an *a priori* definition of the nation can only prove disappointing. Indeed, it is impossible to draw up a general checklist of what constitutes a nation because nations are social formations that can be made up of different contents (language, religion, common history, sense of belonging, political bonds, etc.). The eagerness to find a generic definition of the nation discloses a "substantialist belief that a nation is a real entity of some kind" (Brubaker 1996: 14) while a nation is in fact a political and cultural form resulting from specific social processes and historical circumstances. Rather than trying hopelessly to isolate the constitutive elements of nations, a good starting point is to trace the evolution of the concept.

Originally, nation meant "community of origin" (from the Latin verb *nasci*—to be born) and was used, rather loosely, in medieval times to refer to a group of people

coming from the same geographical/linguistic area. Progressively, the meaning changed and ended up obtaining its modern sense, in which the whole population of a country is the ultimate bearer of political sovereignty (Greenfeld 1992: 3–9). This qualitative transformation has been located at various points in history, some saying it occurred in early sixteenth-century England, others that it came about in the second half of the eighteenth century with the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and, even more, the French Revolution (1789). Whatever the turning point, the decisive thing is that, by linking the people in a given territory with the idea of sovereignty, "nation" gained a clearly political meaning. However, the previous meaning, that of a distinctive community of origin, did not disappear, a fact that contributed to the development of a dichotomy between two conceptions of the nation that remains popular, despite its shortcomings. In the first conception, the nation is seen as the concretization of a historical community, the expression of an identity feeling, the reflection of a natural order; in the second conception, it is presented as the result of the free association of citizens and as a rational and voluntary construction. The cultural, ascriptive, ethnic nation is thus contrasted with the political, contractual, civic nation. The first model has to do with group identity, the second with citizenship within a state.

This typology—which has obvious limits, as in practice nationhood is almost always a combination of political and cultural elements (Dieckhoff 2005)—helps us nevertheless to highlight a pervasive dividing line between two sets of theories of the nation: the ethnicist ones and the modernist ones.

Despite the variety of approaches within each paradigm, this *summa divisio* remains helpful as it helps to sort out theoreticians who insist on the antiquity of the nation and their contenders who stress the modernity of nations (Smith 1998).

#### THE ETHNICIST APPROACH OF THE NATION

Under the ethnicist paradigm we lump together approaches that, despite their different emphasis, share some common ground. First, primordial ties based on assumed blood ties, race, language, religion, custom, regional attachment, and so on are seen as powerful links among people that can encourage either separatism (breaking an existing state in the name of a contesting nation) or irredentism (merging with a neighboring kin-state). Second, the continuity between ethnic groups and nations is in many ways stressed. Some go as far as to erase any difference between ethnic groups and nations, the latter being simply a modern extension of ethnic identity. Others acknowledge that ethnicity is a prerequisite for creating a national bond but has to be supplemented by self-consciousness: the ethnic group has to think of itself as a nation and act accordingly—for instance, by claiming a state of its own. Finally, myths of common origin and symbols (hymns, emblems, sacred places, festivals, etc.) nurture the sense of ethnic community that is a structural basis for many nations.

Contrary to what is claimed by some critics, very few ethnicists are genuine primordialists who see nations as entities unchanged since time immemorial. They are sensitive to the work of history but they end up favoring continuity over change and consider the nation chiefly as an ethnic legacy. By stressing the elements of permanence they give, involuntarily, credit to the traditional vision of nationalists themselves. Indeed, nationalist

actors frequently defend, when they mobilize “their people” in a strategy of exit from the state in which the people are included, an organic conception of the nation. In order to justify secession and the building of a new political unit, it is more efficient to assert that the people that claims the right to self-determination has a fixed character, culturally intangible features, and a long history. This kind of rhetoric helps to stress the irreducible difference of a given people and to legitimate its claim to independence that will be channeled through nationalism. Here we get to a paradox: while political entrepreneurs claim that their nation is a perennial entity, in practice they have to make people believe it and act in the defense of the nation. In other words, nations cannot be disconnected from nationalism understood both as an ideology and as a political movement that puts the nation center stage (at the domestic and international levels) and that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in western Europe and America. Thus, nations cannot be understood but as modern constructions: this is the bottom line of the modernist paradigm.

#### THE MODERNIST APPROACH OF THE NATION

Beyond the differences among theorists who have subscribed to the modernist paradigm, two basic elements stand out. The first is that nations emerged as social formations at a turning point in history, the transition from traditional/agricultural to modern/industrial societies. It is the advent of modernity that produced a new organization of society, in a national frame. The “nation-building” school has emphasized that the technological revolution had deep social outcomes: spread of urbanization, development of education and the press, and so on. The intensification of social communication has connected

more and more people, thus fostering political integration and cultural assimilation. This large group of people linked by communication networks, within a territory delimited by borders, is the nation (Deutsch 1969).

Ernest Gellner's (1983) approach is in many ways a deepening of the cybernetic model, with an emphasis on the economic dimension. Indeed, in traditional societies the main division runs between a small literate and governing elite and a mass of illiterate farmers. The transition to industrial societies required a complete change of social organization: a homogeneous culture, shared by all, is now a necessity because everyone has to be mobile in order to fill the various positions within the new economic order. Industrial societies have thus to be national societies, under the aegis of the state. Nationhood, the fact of belonging to a nation, is not something "natural": it came about under specific "conditions of production." It is also maintained by the state, for instance through a standardized system of mass education.

The second element put forward by the modernist paradigm is that the sense of belonging to a nation has to be acquired. It has to become a fact of consciousness, and this was not possible until a certain point in time. National communities only progressively became imaginable with the advent of "print capitalism" in the sixteenth century (Anderson 1991). Indeed, in premodern times, three intertwined cultural features prevailed: a sacred liturgical language, dynastic monarchical legitimacy, and a nonhistorical conception of time. This anthropological basis was gradually weakened during the Renaissance with the development of printing, sustained by nascent capitalism. The spread of newspapers and books, published in vernacular languages, gave a decisive impetus to the

emergence of a new imagined community, the nation. Why imagined? Because, to use Benedict Anderson's image, a hundred thousand people who are reading the same newspaper will never know each other but, by sharing the same news, printed in the same language, they will have the feeling of being members of the same national community.

By stressing the break with the past that came with the advent of the nation, modernists are clearly challenging the static vision cherished by nationalists of an immemorial nation. They give credit to the assumption that nations came to light at certain historical moments (which implies that they may also disappear) and that these bounded communities cannot be properly understood disconnected from the state. The state sets the territorial boundaries of the nation and together they form "nation-states," a conjunction that became, and remains, a universal rallying reference.

SEE ALSO: Anderson, Benedict (1936–); Character, National; Citizenship and Nationality; Civic and Ethnic Nationalism; Deutsch, Karl Wolfgang (1912–92); Myths of Ethnic Descent; Nations before Nationalism; Nation-State; Perennialism; Primordialism; Renan, Ernest (1823–92); Self-Determination

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