

Ethnicity and modern nations

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Abstract

This article presents a view of nations as dynamic, long term historical collectivities that structure the forms of modernity. It rejects dominant modernist models of nation-formation because they tend to conflate nation with nation-state, to regard nations as homogeneous societies, and to depict nation-formation in linear terms as an outgrowth of modernization. Nation-formation in the modern world has an episodic character. By examining the ethnic character of modern nations in *la longue durée*, we can identify more convincing recurring causes of national revivals, the role of persisting cultural differences within nations, and the fluctuating salience of national identities with respect to other social allegiances. This analysis throws light on the vexed questions of relationships between national identity and globalization.

Keywords: Ethnicity; nations; state; cultural wars; modernization; globalization.

The dominant modernist models of nation-formation are seriously flawed. They tend to conflate nation with nation-state, to regard nations as homogeneous societies, and to explain them as the outgrowth of a linear process of rationalization. Instead, nations are dynamic, long-term historical collectivities that structure the forms of modernity. Building on the insights of John Armstrong and Anthony Smith, this article emphasizes the ethnic characteristics of the modern nation, argues that nations are constituted by recurring cultural conflicts which provide repertoires to negotiate social change, and suggests that national identities have varied considerably in their social and political salience. It thereby seeks to overcome weaknesses in modernist theories of nationalism and throw light on the vexed questions of relationships between national identity and globalization.

The modernist paradigm and its defects

As many analysts have pointed out, nations are janus-faced: on the one hand, oriented to an ancient (often imaginary) ethnic past; on the other, futuristic in mobilizing populations for collective autonomy and progress

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(Nairn 1975). Most of the established interpretations, however, reject as mythical, nationalist claims to continuity with ancient (ethnic) communities (Kedourie 1960; Gellner 1964, 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Breuilly 1996). Nations are, they claim, radically distinct from ethnic groups which are quasi-kinship groups, maintained by myths of common descent, a sense of shared history, and distinctive culture. Nations are, above all, 'rational' political organizations, and though they may employ selectively ethnic symbols, this is for decorative rather than substantive purposes (cf. Hutchinson 1994, ch. 1).

From the modernist perspective, nations are outgrowths of modernization or rationalization as exemplified in the rise of the bureaucratic state, industrial economy, and secular concepts of human autonomy. The premodern world of heterogeneous political formations (of empire, city-state, theocratic territories) legitimated by dynastic and religious principles, marked by linguistic and cultural diversity, fluid or disaggregated territorial boundaries, and enduring social and regional stratifications, putatively disappears in favour of a world of nation-states. Such interpretations emphasize four major aspects of these formations. Nations are:

- secular political units, infused with ideas of popular sovereignty which seek realization in the achievement of an independent state, integrated through universalistic citizenship rights (Gellner 1964, 1983; Breuilly 1982; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990);
- consolidated territories, the boundaries of which are supervised by a central state which exercises a monopoly of coercion over the contained population (Gellner 1964; Hobsbawm 1990);
- culturally homogeneous, compared to earlier social formations, and this culture, usually based on a standard vernacular language and print culture, provides the necessary basis of a mobile, extensive, and socially differentiated industrial society of strangers (Gellner 1964, 1983; Anderson 1983; Calhoun 1994);
- products of a linear process (though sequences will differ) through which regions and social strata are steadily incorporated in the course of the nineteenth century into unified societies by state and market (Gellner 1964, 1983; Hroch 1985; Hobsbawm 1990).

The national model arises, according to the modernist argument, out of Western European particularities, as an unintended byproduct of the interaction between state policies, commercial development and the fatalities of linguistic diversity from the late medieval or early modern period. It bursts from its dynastic chrysalis with the American and French political and the British industrial revolutions to become the ideological framework of modern political communities. Although Gellner argues its diffusion globally results from universal processes of modernization, others maintain this diffusion is a Western European

imposition, by imperialist conquest or the threat of it (Tilly 1975; McNeill 1986).

Such interpretations generally are allied to globalization perspectives which perceive the nation as a transitional unit between traditional localism and planetary interdependence. From this perspective ethnicity is dismissed as a characteristic of 'simpler' 'pre-political' societies, or of marginal groups destined to assimilate into existing states. Hobsbawm (1990, ch. 6), for example, acknowledges the reality of current ethnic revivals but he characterizes them as temporary irrational reactions to disruptive social change with no capacity to negotiate the future. With the further rise in scale of political, military, economic, and cultural integration and mass international migrations, national sovereignty has become a thing of the past, and the future lies with regional and global institutions, such as the European Union and the United Nations (Tilly 1975; McNeill 1986; Hobsbawm 1990).

These interpretations cannot lightly be dismissed. Post-eighteenth-century nations, when compared with their predecessors, undoubtedly do have distinctive social, economic and political features. Centralizing states do play a decisive role in their formation and persistence; and the interstate system as it has developed globally is constitutive, at once constraining minority populations and driving them to find a protective state roof of their own. But the stress on the novelty of nations and their emergence as an outgrowth of 'modern' organizational forms, leads to several weaknesses that together suggest a systemic failure of explanation.

Firstly, the emphasis on the statist character of the nation fails to explain the power of ethnic movements at times of state breakdown, often in the aftermath of defeat in war, to restructure the modern political community, redefining its territorial extent, cultural character and conceptions of citizenship. Since these movements may arise within dominant (for example, Russian) as well as minority (for example, Basque and Catalan) nationalities, ethnicity cannot be dismissed as a residual or reactive principle. It is an important regulatory principle of contemporary politics, concerned with questions of the moral content and boundaries of a collectivity over which power is exercised, rather than of power, *per se*. A modernist politics, too, is concerned with identity, but one conceived in the enlightenment norms of universal equality, self-emancipation of the individual through the 'rational' institutions and abstract freedoms of a 'scientific state'.

Central to ethnicity is the question of origins, the recovery of memory, and of a 'usable past' by which to negotiate the problems of the present. The effect of nationalist movements is often to re-inforce premodern institutions and values, particularly religious, which redefine the modern state and conceptions of citizenship. The Gaelic revival in early twentieth-century Ireland served to institutionalize a conservative rural Catholic ethos in the independent nation-state, giving Ireland for long a

distinctive character in social policy, effectively prohibiting divorce, contraception, and abortion (Hutchinson 1987, ch. 9).

As part of their project ethnic revivals invoke earlier premodern national movements and the crises they addressed. Instead of dismissing such parallels and resemblances, the object of scholars should be to determine whether there are recurring factors in history cutting across the premodern-modern divide that generate ethnic resurgences. Medieval historians have pointed to the Scottish assertion in the face of constant English attacks of their separate historical origins and political independence in the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320 (Reynolds 1997, pp. 273–75).

Secondly, although modernists are aware of regional and other diversities, because of their focus on cultural homogeneity, they fail to highlight that most nations are riven by embedded cultural differences that generate rival symbolic and political projects. Well known are the rival campaigns of Slavophiles and Westerners in Russia from the early nineteenth century, of Republicans and clerico-legitimists in France since the French revolution, and of *Landsmal* and *Riksmal* in Norway from the nineteenth century. These differences often erupt into recurring conflicts that seek to redefine the heritages, dominant regions, languages, social systems, and foreign policies of the modern nation. In Russia Slavophiles rejected the state bureaucratic legacy of Peter the Great and his capital St Petersburg, idealizing the peasant commune, the institution of Tsardom and Orthodox Church, whereas their opponents, despairing of the indigenous resources of their country, sought to replace native institutions with those of advanced Western industrial middle-class societies (Thaden 1964).

Thirdly, modernists' view of nation-formation as culminating in a sovereign, unified, and homogeneous society is problematic. It fails to address variations between 'mature' nation-states in the range of social spheres explicitly governed by national norms [cf. English (and British) adherence to liberal economics and the Listian hue of Germany in the late nineteenth century]. It overlooks the oscillations between national and imperial, class, regional, and religious identities throughout the modern period (Connor 1990). Eugene Weber's analysis (1976) of the strength of regionalism in the 1870s implies the decline of a pervasive French nationalism since the period of the revolutionary wars. Finally, it ignores vicissitudes in the power of individual nation-states with respect to international alliances and economic markets during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For much of the nineteenth century Britain remained a world power, in part because of its skill in mustering coalitions of states against the dominant great power on the European sub-continent.

Because of these weaknesses, these interpretations cannot satisfactorily explain the current national revival sweeping much of the globe.

Moreover, since this national differentiation is occurring in a period of an allegedly global homogenization of peoples, we need a more nuanced account of the possible forms of accommodation between national and transnational organizations than one that assumes the supersession of the former.

For these reasons we should consider an alternative model of nation-formation, one that conceives of the nation as a quasi-kinship group, only contingently related to the state, and that recognizes the power of states to regulate populations is limited and fluctuating. This model should explicitly address the episodic character of nationalism and its capacity to evoke passionate identifications either for or against the state, based on a sense of shared historical identity that will enable populations to overcome fate. By focusing also on the ethnic basis of nations we may apply Fredrik Barth's insight (1969) that internal diversity is compatible with stable ethnic identities, and also explore the persistence and functions of cultural conflicts. Finally, we can understand the compatibility of ethnonational loyalties with other allegiances.

Recurring revivals

From the modernist perspective nationalism is really a movement associated with 'modernity', and with the bringing into being of political societies characterized by an adherence to universalistic scientific norms, conceptions of popular sovereignty and citizenship, and ideals of economic progress. The fascination of cultural nationalists with golden ages and with the preservation of continuities with earlier generations seems backward-looking and merely sentimental. As Ernest Gellner (1996) would put it, nations need have no 'navels' in the ancient world.

But questions of collective identity do matter. Cultural nationalist intellectuals – historical scholars, artists, philologists, educationalists, journalists, religious and social reformers – have 'recreated' and diffused a national identity to Germans, Irish, Poles, Finns, Czechs, Jews, and many others despite the assimilating pressures of hostile states. Their primary theme is of defining the unique character of the nation in space and time, and engaging in moral and social *regeneration*. They challenge established social and political élites, who have 'failed' the nation. Although often few in numbers, they provide maps of collective identity at times of crises which can mobilize larger social constituencies (Hutchinson 1987).

All too often scholars of nationalism have grossly overestimated the givenness of states and their capacity to provide meaning for and to exercise dominance over their populations. One of the faults of these interpretations is of an over coherent model of what is called modernization process. According to this, populations are increasingly mobilized in support of a nation-state (either existing or as a project), and, once

formed, a nation-state operates as a unitary society, directing development from a centre. As Michael Mann (1986, ch. 1) argues, we have to reject such unified models of society: throughout history populations inhabit overlapping and competing networks of power: political, military, economic and ideological, each with different boundaries and institutions, and developing in uneven and unpredictable ways.

Throughout the modern period, states, whether they were long established empires or, indeed, avowedly nation-states, have periodically been shaken or even destroyed by unforeseen events such as warfare, economic crises, migrations and demographic shifts, ecological changes and ideological challenges. Under such circumstances the motifs of cultural nationalism of communal self-help and of the recreation of social and political institutions from below have resonated, particularly among the educated young who often become the shock troops of a new order.

Outbreaks of wars, hot and cold, have resulted in the overthrow and rise of states, the shifting of states into new geopolitical spaces, the turning of dominant groups into national minorities and vice versa, and large-scale movements of population. This geographical, demographic, and status mobility has required a continuous redefinition of political communities with respect to each other. After World War I Poland, when 'restored' as a territorial state after its disappearance in the eighteenth century, had shifted westwards by over 150 miles on its eastern frontiers and by about 70 in the west, losing former cultural centres of Lwow and Wilno to Lithuania and the Ukraine, but acquiring German minorities (Pfaff 1993, p. 22). The resentments of once dominant minorities – Germans in new states such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, and Hungarians, one third of whom found themselves outside their national state in Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Ukraine – had fateful consequences twenty years later.

Waves of transnational economic revolutions have also transformed the status of regions and classes within 'nation-states' and the power of national populations *vis à vis* each other. The economic depressions of the 1870s, the threat to the traditional European landed order from an emerging world agrarian market, together with the growth in rapidly expanding cities of a large and politicized unskilled working class attracted to militant socialist parties, and large migrations of Jews radicalized European politics. The rise of a conservative racial nationalism, attempting to ward off democratization and socialism through imperial expansion, in Germany, France, Britain and Russia laid the basis for the outbreak of World War I.

Great ideological movements arising from the heritage of the Enlightenment and religious counter challenges have swept across state boundaries. Transmitted through transnational institutions such as churches, revolutionary internationals, diaspora groups, and print and later satellite media channels, these new visions have engendered

cultural conflicts within populations and between neighbouring states. The outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution and its potential impact on the large number of troops being demobilized on to the labour markets at the end of World War I created a conservative nationalist panic over much of Western and Central Europe. Likewise, the current Islamic revival against Western secularism, highlighted in the Iranian Revolution, has not only reshaped the politics of states with a Muslim majority (Juergensmeyer 1993), but also fanned a widely based ethnocentric reaction in European nation-states against Muslim immigrants, including France where politicians of the left and right have expressed fears of the erosion of secular republican traditions by militant Islam.

Finally, unexpected natural changes – diseases, famines, ecological disturbances, shifts in fertility patterns – have had a disruptive impact on the relations between populations. The inability of the British government to avoid the great famine in mid-nineteenth century Ireland permanently alienated the Roman Catholic Irish from the union with Britain, and the flight of many thousands of diseased emigrants to the cities of the USA and Britain stoked a nativist reaction. Similarly the devastating earthquake in Armenia of 1988 heightened the disillusion of Armenians with the Soviet state. Changes in birth rates relative to ‘significant others’ have created anxieties about the future of the nation and heightened tensions between rival states (between France and Germany) and between ethnic populations within states (as between Russians and the Central Asian peoples in the former USSR). Climatic changes, including those from the greenhouse effect, are likely to increase tensions between states already locked in conflict over such natural resources as water, a major issue between Israel and Jordan and between India and Bangladesh.

The juddering shocks of the modern period have periodically both undermined the authority of national identities with respect to others, and triggered nationalist movements to restore autonomy and a stable and distinctive collective identity. The recurring historical revivals are driven by need to overcome radical uncertainty, by finding concrete models to redefine collective goals and myths of destiny by which to unify and energize populations in the task of regeneration.

Nationality, particularly when yoked to a distinctive communal religion, partakes of the sacred, in characterizing the community as ‘primordial’, immortal and life-giving, manifest in images of fatherland and motherland, and of celebrations of its fertile soil (Grosby 1995). Membership of a nation holds out the promise to individuals that their fleeting lives are given meaning by participation in the story of an ‘eternal’ nation. Nationality, in the perception of its adherents, is prior to the state (a mere human artifact). It is due the primary allegiance of individuals and cannot be extinguished by the loss of the state. Moreover, since the focus of national revivalists is on the nation in the long historical

view, which included eras of crises, defeat and enslavement, nationalism emphasizes the capacity of communities to overcome external disaster by mobilizing an inner world of spiritual energies. After the national calamity befalling the Danish state in 1864 when Prussia seized the southern provinces of Holstein and Schleswig, the Danes, adopting as a slogan ‘What is lost outwardly shall be won inwardly’, inaugurated a popular cultural revival and set about reclaiming their wastelands and marshes (Yahil 1992, pp. 100–101). History tells us, the nationalist claims, that no nation will ever die if it remains true to its traditions. Such convictions act to preserve a national community in spite of all the odds, with Poles under the Soviet yoke remembering the survival and resurrection of their nation despite two centuries of division and occupation by mighty empires.

Nothing has provided such a striking illustration of the latent power of cultural nationalism as the recent breakup of the USSR, the world’s second superpower, into separate nation- or would-be nation-states, whose programmes were developed among small groups of underground nationalist intellectuals working with little expectation of success in their lifetime. A combination of increasing military pressures from competition with the USA, economic decline, moral disillusion with the legacy of Communism, and the resurgence of religious sentiments often tied to a sense of ethnic election, provided the seedbed of national revolt. But the heroic energies and capacity for self-sacrifice were provided by the myths, symbols, and memories so jealously guarded by the nationalist ‘priesthood’ itself. In the modern world a sense of nationality supplies through its evocation of ancient memories a sense of rootedness that provides anchors against unpredictability. It fulfils a range of important different functions which populations require and cannot satisfy by the secular doctrines of the Enlightenment, with its basis in ‘cold’ reason, universal norms and utility.

Of course, these triggers of ethnonational revivals – warfare, immigration, religious and cultural competition, and sudden economic disruptions – are not confined to the modern period but rather can be found throughout history. Perhaps no group more exemplifies the importance of this ‘inner’ or moral dimension to communal existence than the Jews. After the final destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE and the dispersal into exile, the rabbis reconstructed a Judaic identity based on the Hebrew language, and a religio-literary ‘revival’ centred on the *Midrash* and *Mishna* (and later the *Talmud*). Moshe and David Aberbach (2000) analyse how the rabbis in the face of disaster, assumed the leadership of a stricken people, making sense of the trauma in religious terms, and elaborating forms of moral regulation and ritual observance that sustained a Jewish diaspora for two millennia in spite of persecutions.

A particularly valuable aspect of this study of the Jewish revolt of 66–70 CE and its aftermath is that it identifies and explores in depth a

case of cultural nationalism in the ancient world, and exemplifies many of the factors already discussed. In this case the authors identify as central the drive of the Roman state to impose common customs (Emperor worship) as part of an attempt to unify a diverse Empire, and Roman suspicion of resistant groups, particularly those in strategically sensitive areas close to its Persian rival. Related to this is an ideological war between cosmopolitan Hellenes and Jews over the 'soul' of the Empire, heightened by demographic pressures, that had as its outcomes the rise of a tradition of anti-Semitism and the crystallization and elaboration of rabbinical Judaism (Aberbach and Aberbach 2000, Part One, chs 3 and 4).

The study emphasizes the innovative and radical qualities of this early cultural nationalism, including the articulation of an alternative vision of the community as part of a critique of the powers that be; the rise of a new rabbinical religious and communal leadership; and the development of novel cultural forms and strategies to disseminate the national ideal (Ibid., Part 2, chs 3 and 4). In charting the formation of this vision, the class and status divisions between the Jews, and, in particular, splits between a Hellenizing and collaborationist upper clergy and a more radical 'lower' priesthood are analysed (Ibid., Part One, ch. 3). Faced with the collapse of the traditional monarchical institutions of Judah and the discrediting of the Temple's high priests, the rabbis in common with the Biblical prophets, had to reconcile for a traumatized community the discrepancy between their sense of chosenness and the disasters that had befallen them. The study illustrates the sense of bewilderment in the paradoxical and at times enigmatic *aggadah*; the radical implications of writing down what was previously oral knowledge; the attempts to stabilize and preserve the community by the elaboration and codification of religious law; and the establishment of an extended educational training aimed at all classes, perhaps, the first in recorded history (Ibid., Part 2, chs 4, 5, 8).

Here again, there are parallels to be drawn with many modern nationalist revivals, where lower clergy, close to the people, play an important intellectual and mobilizing part, in antagonism to ecclesiastical superiors tarnished by a complacency or even accommodation with 'foreign' authority. In modern Greece this religious stratum, in opposition to the more ecumenical ethos of the Orthodox Patriarchate, supported the war of independence against the Ottoman Turk. In late nineteenth-century Ireland, Irish Catholic priests were active at the national and local level in the Gaelic revival, one of whose targets was the complicity of the Church in the anglicization of Irish society. These are but two of many instances that include the *Bernacina* movement of lower clergy in late eighteenth-century Slovak territories, the Grundtvig 'meeting movement' of Lutheran pastors in nineteenth-century Denmark, and the *Arya Samaj* in nineteenth-century India (Hutchinson

1999). All these movements were dedicated to both religious and national reform; their leaders were highly educated individuals, imbued with a meritocratic achievement ethos, impatient with the obscurantism and careerism of their official leaders; and they aimed to create an educated self-reliant and literate lay community. But let us note, well before the era of modern print culture which Benedict Anderson (1983) argues was a precondition for making possible the imagining of the nation, the Jews of antiquity had developed an intellectual aristocracy, a culture of the book, and an elaborate educational system deeply democratic in its reach into the community. They achieved a recreation of a Jewish identity that survived for two millennia, even as an often separate and persecuted diaspora community, in exile from its ancestral homeland.

This detailed study of the Jewish revolt against Rome should alert us to the possibility that post-eighteenth-century nationalism is a modern manifestation of a much older cycle of ethnic resurgence and decline in world history. John Armstrong (1982) and Anthony Smith (1986) in two profound studies have pioneered an ethnosymbolic model that understands nations and nationalism in *la longue durée*. Contrary to the modernists, they focus on the mythic, symbolic and cultural aspects as the core of ethnicity and nationality. Ethnic and national movements have as their primary concern the creation and reproduction of meaning and purpose, and the myth-symbol complexes they form are central to ensuring the persistence of ethnic communities down the centuries.

The factors they identify cut across the premodern-modern divide. Interstate wars intensified a sense of difference in communities *vis à vis* significant 'others'. The founding of capital cities, as part of state centralization, established symbolic centres that define and diffuse through their architecture enduring collective meanings. The crystallization of distinctive religions within populations has generated a sense of ethnic election as a chosen people, and the formation of distinctive literary vernaculars helped institutionalize collective memories. Colonizations, or indeed, large-scale dispersals from the homeland into exile engendered ethnonational geneses and ethnic revivals, inspired by a beloved homeland.

Of course, one cannot discount the differences between premodern and modern revivals. In the modern world nationalism is undoubtedly secular: its major proponents are humanist intellectuals; its *Weltanschauung* is imbued with a romantic historicism, which infuses the conceptions and goals even of religious reformers; its core constituency and leading cadres are drawn from a professional intelligentsia; and its concerns are this worldly. Powerful religious forces shaped the character of Zionist nationalism, but the cultural nationalism of an Ahad Ha'am or a Bialik, though it built upon the past, was of a very different character than that of ancient times. Modern Zionists had to break with an earlier religious conception of the Jewish community, associated with the

European ghettos. Nationalists must turn to statist politics to generalize ethnic sentiments, to institutionalize it in the salient sectors of everyday existence, and to provide a protective shell against external competitors.

Nevertheless, this analysis suggests that in spite of significant differences between premodern and modern societies, long established cultural repertoires (myths, symbols and memories) are 'carried' into the modern era by powerful institutions (states, churches, armies), and are revived and redeveloped because populations are periodically faced with similar challenges to their physical and symbolic survival. Recurring periods of warfare with neighbouring powers, particularly for 'frontier' populations (Germans, Poles) settled across major trade routes or in 'shatter zones' between contesting empires, create languages of sacrifice to inspire successive generations of combatants. Irish, Russian and Greek nationalists have appropriated the religious symbols, sacred centres, and sense of collective mission generated by long-term religious competition with adjacent populations as part of their drive to prove the cultural uniqueness of their people. Contemporary English nationalists, in resisting incorporation within the European Community, employ the language of Anglo-Saxon liberties embodied in common law traditions, just as did lawyers in Stuart England, when defending indigenous parliamentary traditions against European absolutist models.

Many questions are yet to be systematically explored. How important is the content of such myths as distinct from their boundary marking function for defining the character of the group (cf. Connor 1992)? How are core national identities constructed and over what span? To what extent are they impositions of the conceptions of dominant regions? How far do such core identities shape the modern policies of nations and nation-states, even when based on the values of now vanished groups? Given the discontinuities (economic, ideological, political, territorial) between the modern nation and earlier communities, we require a calibrated discussion of how and to what extent modern states and societies can and must be 'ethnicized'. What are the limits of ethnic as opposed to civic values?

Zones of conflict

But if ethnicity invokes ancient origins, within every ethnic community there are competing conceptions of descent, authentic history, culture and the territorial domain. These disputes are not the transitional problems of relatively new national projects, for even many 'established' nations are riven by embedded cultural differences that generate rival symbolic and political projects. Recurring 'external' struggles over territories, cultural symbols and economic resources as well as 'internal' contestations are a constituent feature of nation-formation. For nations are geographically mobile (cf. the Poles) and the balances between regions,

secular and religious institutions and between classes and status groups are continually being upset. But the assumption that there is a trend towards homogenization means that the centrality of cultural struggles in nation-formation has been neglected.

In many countries we find the emergence and elaboration of rival visions of the nation (see, Smith 1984; Hosking and Schöpflin 1997). In Russia competition between Slavophile and Westerners, the first defenders of Russia's distinctive Orthodox traditions and the second looking to Western European models originated in the early nineteenth century and continued into the present. In France the struggle between Republicans, and clerico-legitimists in France since the French revolution recurs in various forms, most visibly in the campaigns of Le Pen's *Front National* against the Fifth Republic. In Norway the linguistic antagonism of the rural 'West' espousing *Landsmal* Norwegian against the East, dominated by Oslo, promoting *Riksmal* Norwegian has persisted from the mid nineteenth century into the contemporary period.

This raises many important questions. How does one explain such deep seated long running conflicts, and over what questions do societies polarize? What have been their effects of such conflicts: do they enhance options for society or restrict them by polarizing groups? And what prevents them leading to social breakdown and civil wars?

One can try to account for cultural differences reductively by relating the formulation of new symbolic repertoire to the hegemonic strategies of new classes in their drive for power (Hobsbawm 1983). But cultural divisions often predate the modern period and often become a matrix for a variety of class constituencies. French republican neoclassical ideals invoked older conceptions of the Gallo-Roman people enslaved by a Frankish aristocracy, and republicanism inspired liberal, socialist and communist projects. Slavophile and Westerner debates in Russia had their precursors in much earlier divisions. Although the nineteenth century debates originated among the gentry, each position diversified to appeal to a variety of class constituencies. Indeed, they provided the matrices for rival visions of socialism, one (Marxian) focused on the models of Western Europe urban industrialism, while others (Revolutionary Populist) emphasized the possibility of a unique Russian pathway based on the institutions of the rural commune.

Rival positions espouse radically different views of the structure of politics, the status of social groups, relations between regions, the countryside and the city, economic and social policies and foreign policy. Often as in Greece, China and the Ukraine these divisions reflect a deep attachment to the heritage of a region and its vision of the world. In the Ukraine there are cultural schisms between a Western region, promoting the Ukrainian language, a European orientation and a radical dichotomization with Russia, and an Eastern part, conscious of a common Eurasian Orthodox heritage with Russia (Smith *et al.* 1998, ch.

2). In China a Mandarin speaking northern concept of the nation, dominated by a rural xenophobic peasant and autarchic vision is being contested by a Southern decentralized liberal-democratic ideal. This latter vision, centred on coastal trading provinces and their distinctive languages and cultures, is oriented to the wider Chinese ecumene of the diaspora and a global economy (Friedman 1995). Early Greek nationalism, secular and republican, looked to Athens as the capital of a revived Hellas, and was strongest in a mercantile diaspora, influenced by Western European philhellenism. The peasantry, clergy and the notables of the Aegean, however, were gripped by dreams of Orthodoxy: the regaining of Constantinople from the Ottoman Empire and the reconstitution of the Byzantine empire (Herzfeld 1982, ch. 1).

But competing visions are not just regionally-based: they reflect the diverse heritages of populations whose geo-political setting continues to expose them to unpredictable changes from several directions. Modern Russia has been shaped by interaction with Western and Central Europe, Byzantium, and the Asian steppes, and both Westerners and Slavophiles have recognized the validity of the other. The Westerner Alexander Herzen, uneasy at wholesale importation of European ideas, especially after the failure of 1848, declared that Westerners would be cut off from the people as long as they ignored the questions posed by the Slavophiles (Neumann 1996, p. 170). Similarly, Dostoyevsky, advocate of Russia's Orthodox mission and its Eastern destiny, reveals the ambivalence of neo-Slavophiles, and how they had internalized assumptions of the Westerners: 'In Europe we were Asiatics, whereas in Asia we too are Europeans . . . We shall go to Asia as masters' (Neumann 1996, p. 64). These visions have alternated in power both at the level of state and of 'educated society', with groups, at times switching positions, in part affected by the sense of place and security of the national territory.

What of the consequences of such divisions? Obviously, violence and civil war are a possibility, as Kedourie (1960, ch. 6) has emphasized. To what extent do such conflicts produce not cultural pluralism but rather pathological hostilities that permanently weaken the national community? McDaniel (1996) has argued that a combination of Russian messianism and a cult of state-driven modernization has produced a solipsistic extremism, which has prevented Russia developing a distinctive and viable 'modern' society. In the case of France, it is also arguable the intensity of the schism between supporters of the one and indivisible republic and those of clerico-legitimist reaction which espoused support for regions has resulted in an unbalanced development of French society, with a top heavy Paris and weak local government (see Gildea 1994, ch. 4). The hatreds have weakened French solidarity against the German enemy, notably in World War II.

But is extremist conflict in these two countries the responsibility of nationalism, rather than older social and political traditions? Traditions

of state despotism in Russia that prevented a proper testing of social alternatives encouraged a utopian dimension to social thinking, and the exposure of France to invasions produced an over-centralized state, reluctant to cede autonomies, particularly to border regions, traditionally antagonistic to the overweening claims of Paris. Cultural conflicts inspire competing investigations to map the national territories, histories and cultural practices, and populations (Argyle 1976). Out of these debates a national identity is defined, internalized and elaborated. In spite of intense divisions, individuals and movements have selected from both camps and shifted from one to the other, at times of crises, recognizing the plural character of the nation's heritage. In their struggles they frequently battle over the ownership of historical figures and events, for example, Joan of Arc in France. This implies a recognition that they are products of a common ethnic heritage, but one for which there can be no single definition.

At times societies do disintegrate into ethnic civil wars or, indeed, result in ethnic schism, though perhaps less often than one might think. The Irish civil war (1922–23) erupted in a context in which the success of the revolutionary rising of Easter 1916 had discredited constitutional politics, militarized élites from 1918 had engaged in a guerrilla war of independence, beyond popular control or accountability, and in which there was no institutionalized nation-state. None the less, we need to further explore what prevents cultural conflicts leading to social breakdown and civil wars, what the long-term effects of such wars are, and the role of common symbols for restoring unity.

The variability of national identities

Modernist models (see Hroch 1985) that depict the nation as a mass homogeneous loyalty, formed from a successive incorporation of social classes and allegiances, have received increasing criticisms for their teleological assumptions. In arguing for a disaggregated approach, post-modernists have pointed to the persistence of many other forms of allegiance of kin, religion, class, gender, and region (Chatterjee 1993). Indeed, the contemporary revival of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East suggests that nations are reversible processes, subject to challenge by alternative allegiances. All the same, it is implausible to interpret (with some exceptions) nations as contingent formations in the manner of Brubaker (1996) or as allegiances of last resort when other collective loyalties fail. It may be that a Palestinian nation is an accidental and temporary outcome of the collapse of Ottomanism, British rule over a Palestine territory, and intensifying Zionist pressures (Gershoni and Jankowski 1997, Introduction). The same can hardly be said of the Irish or Poles, who sustained a distinctive identity over centuries. Hastings argues that once populations acquire a written vernacular with a

differentiated literary culture, they reach a certain threshold for survival (Hastings 1997, p. 11).

It is clear, however, that the salience of nationalism varies between countries, and that nationalism within countries fluctuates in strength over time. There has been little attempt to explain this mutability in a satisfactory manner. An ethnic model can more readily combine an understanding of the persistence and power of national loyalties with their varying penetration of social strata and institutions. We can learn from the anthropological studies of ethnic groups by Fredrik Barth (1969) and Michael Banton (1994) who observe that they vary considerably in the social niches they wish to regulate and that ethnic identities fluctuate in their potency for individuals. But these studies have certain weaknesses.

Barth himself suggests their limited applicability to the study of nations. Whereas the relative immobility of premodern societies allowed the interdependent specialization of ethnic groups into distinctive niches, the very mobility of the modern world undermines this. Nations, he considers, must be societies that seek to regulate all sectors of life. In fact, nationalizing states have varied throughout the modern period in their willingness to pool sovereignty through military alliances, in their support for liberal internationalist as opposed to avowedly economic nationalist (that is, protectionist) strategies, and in their support for regionalism. At the level of individuals, an intellectual in early twentieth-century Cairo might switch between Egyptian, Pan Arab, and Muslim loyalties. This says nothing about the potency of national identities *per se*. Banton (1994) reasons that a switch, say, from avowedly national to international class loyalties (for example, industrial action against a co-national employer in support of foreign workers) may not indicate changes in the values attributed to national affiliations, but rather a changing conception of what relationships should be governed by national norms. An adherence to the nation may not fluctuate much despite apparent changes in behaviour.

It is, none the less, obvious that oscillations in nationalist *vis à vis* class, religion and regional loyalties have occurred in two centuries marked by periods of liberal and communist revolution, Islamic resurgences, and huge mass emigrations. Clearly there are two issues that must not be conflated: why national groups make strategic choices over the range of roles they wish to regulate, and why there are fluctuations in the salience of national loyalties. Differentiating between the two may be complex, but such major shifts are usually accompanied by explicit justifications and controversy. We should look to structural factors to account for such shifts.

Some of these have already been mentioned. The role of natural disaster can undermine for a time a sense of 'primordial' attachment to a homeland and encourage either emigration and an inner religious retreat. In mid nineteenth-century Ireland, reeling under the famine, the

very land seemed 'cursed', causing despair and a hysterical exodus, though later perceptions of the famine as a British conspiracy rather than a providential disaster powerfully reinforced Irish nationalism (Beckett 1966, p. 344). Warfare typically enhances a national commitment, but 'illegitimate' wars (notably those involving genocide or war crimes) have not, particularly for countries such as Germany whose national identity was forged in military triumph. It might be argued that shame led merely to a displacement of national energies in post-war Germany and Japan from the political and military into the economic spheres. But there is no doubt it has led to German attempts to seek a wider 'European' identity, even if this is qualified by a reluctance until recently to reform the ethnic basis of its citizenship. Economic depression or traumatic failure has incited a search for revolutionary (racial and communist) alternatives to the nation-state. In the contemporary Middle East a combination of failure of economic modernization and the defeat of Arab states by Israel in the Six Day War provoked an Islamic revival against secular nationalism. National identities have rebounded with the class, racial, and religious alternatives seeking to accommodate themselves to ethnic sentiments, but the extent to which the nation appears to be captured can lead to an alienation of those regions or groups who feel excluded.

Conclusions

What, then, of the future of the sovereign nation-state and of ethnicity in general? Postmodern prophecies about the fading of nations are generally predicated on a mythic contrast: between a past of sovereign and unitary nation-states and a present of unprecedented global interdependence. Both assumptions are doubtful, and show a lack of historical perspective. As I have argued, the authority of nations (and nation-states) has always been qualified domestically and externally, while in the present there is no diminution in the drive of nations to establish sovereignty over those areas, conceived to be of vital interest, despite the growth of regional institutions. Turkey has resisted the pressure of its NATO allies (European and American) in quelling Kurdish secessionism within and outside its territories, and German aspirations to be good Europeans did not interfere with the impetus to national re-unification in 1990, in spite of statements of alarm from European Community leaders.

Likewise, world historians from very different perspectives belie claims about the novelty of globalization. Janet Abu-Lughod (1989) and W. H. McNeill (1990) argue for the recurring formation of a cultural and economic world-system from the time of the Roman and Han Empires, whereas Adshead, (1993), understands the development of a global society as an interlocking of eight institutions and circuits (informational,

microbial, military, religious, financial, and so forth), the first of which emerges in the thirteenth century with the Mongols. Controversial though they might be, they demonstrate that globalization, itself, however defined, should be considered in *la longue durée* and as preceding the period of nationalism. Indeed, were we to accept Adshead's interpretation, we should speak not just of the ethnic origins of nations (Smith 1986), but of the ethnic origins of globalization!

We need not take things this far. What we may claim is that nations from their very beginnings have operated in conjunction with transnational entities and networks. A systematic analysis of the various ways and reasons that national and transnational institutions (imperial, religious, secular-ideological, markets) have interacted in the past is needed to indicate possibilities for the future. As Mann (1993) maintains, although financial capitalism has gone global, most production remains geared to national markets. Nations and nation-states may be diversifying in their functions, but if they are conceding some of these functions to local and to transnational actors, they are also strengthening in others (see Smith 1995). The global military reach of the USA, made possible by technology, is welcomed by many states, both in Europe and Asia. It provides an important counterbalance against powerful regional neighbours (for example, Russia and China) which provide a more immediate threat to their autonomy. Developments in satellite technology and in other media may be eroding the cultural controls of nation-states. If so, they are also enhancing the resilience of ethnic diasporas, which are increasingly visible as international actors (Sheffer 1986). This indicates how problematic are the prophecies about the supersession of nations as cultural or political units. Indeed, the weight of arguments presented here support instead the continued vitality of the nation as a mobilizing point against the uncertainties of the future.

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