

# Notes on the Idea of a Nation

*Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh*

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## 1

A quotation to start with:

Ordinary people began to recognise and emphasise the differences in dialects, customs, religion, culture among the states. [...] Pride in local distinction and loyalty became more pronounced. [...] Princes could (then) more easily organise peasant militias and armies to fight their wars for them. In turn, peasants and townsmen believed they were fighting not just as a duty to a feudal lord but for the independence and honour of their own state (Holsti 1992).

Does this passage describe a phase in European history?

No.

It describes an aspect of the hegemonic dynamic of the Warring States period in the history of China (fourth to second century BC). During that period the Ch'in state subdued all its competitors. That was the beginning of the Chinese empire, surviving through the centuries to this day. It did contract a few times, and then expanded once more. The outcome is quite different from that of the many independent states in Europe. If the Ch'in state had not become the hegemon, a plurality of states might have developed instead of what is now still a single entity, an imperial state. In Europe, attempts to achieve hegemony – such as by Napoleon's France or Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union – failed. A European imperial state produced by hegemonic rivalry between great power contests did not stand a chance.

China is the only surviving empire with a contiguous territory. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire did not survive the First World War, while the Soviet empire collapsed more recently. There are also some former colonial empires – Britain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Japan – as well as continental great powers such as Germany or Russia. The United States also developed into a great power with an imperial global reach, though it proved reluctant to fully accept the consequences, refusing membership of the League of Nations or more recently limiting fighting against ISIS. The fact tends to be obscured that practically all states have resulted from war, conquest and – in the dynastic past – calculated marriages. There are no states with just 'natural' borders.

States have become more similar than different in their organisation. But states do not automatically possess a specific identity. That, however, all states need because they see themselves as distinct from other states. The addition of the idea of a nation to a state supports this. All states are now seen as 'nation states', whether their degree of development justifies this or not. Their particular idea of a nation serves to legitimise established states. But ideas of a nation are sometimes contested instead of stable. The idea of a nation within a state or empire may also provide a claim to separate and independent statehood for minority or oppressed

peoples. Examples could be Scotland or Catalonia, both having been in the past part of dynastic precursors of the states to which they at present belong. A different situation is that of the Kurds, preserving a strong idea of their nation, though divided by and living in other states. All political regimes, not just democracies, develop and use particular ideas of their own nation. Ideas of a nation also serve to separate a nation from other nations, making use of symbols derived from their history and society.

## 2

Why speak of the ‘idea of a nation’ and not simply of nations as given entities? Nations cannot be defined by objective criteria. It is not possible to declare that this is a nation and that is not. Objective criteria, however, can be used to a political purpose. Stalin, for example, gave as the objective criterion for the existence of a nation the possession of a contiguous territory. This implied that Jews living in diaspora could not claim to be a nation. That is what Stalin wanted to prove. A prolonged academic debate remains to be solved between those who see nations as primordial entities, based on a long history and ethnic character and those who consider nations to be modern inventions or ‘imagined communities’. [1][#N1] The latter point of view seems most plausible – but, if nations have been invented, they lead a static existence and do not develop further.

‘Nations’ are usually perceived as entities in the same way as states. The two are even combined as ‘nation states’. To search, however, for an objective definition of ‘nation’ is a blind alley. Hugh Seton-Watson had to come to this conclusion while writing his otherwise admirable study *Nations and States*. He discovered when working on that book that an objective (‘scientific’) definition of the nation was impossible, in contradiction to what he had believed before. He then had to fall back on asserting that ‘nations as a phenomenon have existed and still exist’. But he gave up the objectivist perspective. That trick made it possible for Seton-Watson to preserve and publish his book. He avoided any identification with diverging perspectives on nations and nationalist ideologies. Precisely because no nation can be objectively established, the adherents of different and competing ideas of a nation – or nationalist ideologies – can become passionately involved in their beliefs. The road to an objective definition of ‘nations’ ends in ideologies or in self-delusion. The alternative is simple: ‘an idea of the nation’ does justice to the great variety of forms and to the similarities and differences between them.

The particular idea of a nation as the legitimate foundation of states developed slowly but surely. ‘Nation’ was at first used in opposition to the exclusive nature of rule by dynastic-aristocratic regimes. Louis XIV gave the absolutist reply to his own question: ‘The State? I am the State’. He meant that only the King had authority. At the time political philosophers were beginning to consider the state as a political community, to whom kings were in some respects responsible. Limiting the powers of a king later took the form of constitutional monarchy. Dynastic regimes saw the state as their own possession, which could not have a public character. During the French Revolution, the idea of a nation took form in the Third Estate, then became a necessary substitute to monarchy. [2][#N2] When the idea of a nation became more popular, nationalism began to replace patriotism as the valued identification with dynastic regimes (see Viroli 1995).

Dynastic states still had a plural population. Migration was taken for granted. Ethnicity did not play the political role it did later. Dynastic rulers were not interested in the nature and composition of the people they ruled. They saw them as subjects, valued as food producers, as taxpayers and as a reservoir of soldiers. Aristocrats did not see their servants as people like themselves. They were not ashamed to bathe or undress in their company. Dynastic regimes were not interested in the languages spoken in their regions, towns or villages. They were oblivious to ‘folk’ music, dance, festivities or diet. These were later made part of a national pantheon and a source of inspiration for artists, composers, historians and linguists.

### 3

The Industrial Revolution undermined the exclusive power of dynastic regimes and aristocracies. [3],[#N3]. The idea of a nation arose and became popular. It provided orientation in the increasingly complex class structure of the state. First the entrepreneurial and financial-economic class became more powerful, and then an organised working class developed. The latter in particular was seen as a threat by the ruling regime. That can explain Bismarck's innovative introduction of social welfare provisions in Germany. Nevertheless, members of the aristocracy kept their hold on state institutions for a long time. The idea of particular nations became established in the competition between states, *a fortiori* in the First World War.

At the end of an essay on processes of state formation and nation building, Norbert Elias formulated a most helpful process criterion for nation formation:

Societies assume the characteristics of nations if the functional interdependence between their regions and their social strata as well as their hierarchic levels of authority and subordination becomes sufficiently reciprocal for none of them to be able to disregard completely what the others think, feel or wish (2008: 117).

Elias sees nations as a phase in state formation. Though he could not precisely foresee the nature of the next phase, he did envisage 'that nation-building processes may be followed by integrations on a higher post-national level, of which one can see a beginning.' Will the present phase in the future be succeeded by a more federal one? The European Union was intended to be complimentary to the member states, as having functions its member states were no longer able to satisfy. At present the European Union is having a hard time politically, but it preserves the results and its *sui generis* character. Many of its functions for member states are thus still important. If it were to collapse, it might well return later – perhaps in a different form, but with similar basic characteristics.

Elias's process criterion can be applied both to established states and to regions claiming a state of their own. The idea of a nation can legitimise both. Nationalism in all its various forms is in fact dependent on specific ideas of a nation. Such ideas must be distinguished from the process criterion proposed by Elias. It does make clear why the idea of a nation had increasing political relevance. But the concept of 'nation' – and of nationalism – are used in a loose manner. All states are now called nation states. The concept of 'national interest' is used by most political leaders and political parties as a convenient tool to defend their own position. The 'United Nations' was introduced in 1945, with the intention of it being a global organisation of states. The use of 'United Nations' was probably necessary, because a 'United States' already existed. All member states of the UN therefore had to be seen as nations – and nation states. All states harbour minorities, in some cases well organised and able to preserve their own language, such as the Tibetans or the Irish, but more often gradually integrated by the states in which they live, slowly forgetting and thereby losing their former identity. That process made Han Chinese into the majority of the inhabitants of China. Most, if not all, states had minorities, often with their own language, within their borders. It is very difficult for minorities to assert their own idea of a nation and stop being discriminated against by the powers that be. The histories of its examples show the desperation of representatives of minorities and the use of violence as a last resort. Few minority ideas of a nation successfully resist the policies of established states.

The idea of a nation developed in Europe. As remarked before, nationalism replaced 'patriotism' as active loyalty to a monarch and his dynastic regime. [4],[#N4]. The need of state governments to legitimise their rule can explain why the idea of a nation became universally propagated. The idea of a nation in established states

justifies taxation, conscription and all other state activities. When the idea of a nation developed in advance of nation formation in Elias's sense, the gap could be filled by myth-making, by presenting their own idea of their nation as given by historical necessity or by God. In that way, the idea developed that nations are the natural and sovereign units of humankind.

An example of the weak becoming the strong is the process of decolonisation. But though weak and conquered, their inhabitants were not minorities but clearly majorities, in a sense waiting to be organised. The idea of a nation provided independence movements in colonies with a demand for independence. These movements could use the same legitimisation as used by the colonial powers. Sukarno, for example, successfully claimed independence for a new idea of an Indonesian nation, inspired by the territorial comprehension of the colonial government.

## 4

The idea of a nation can be a weapon in the power struggle between and within states. Identification with a particular nation – in political propaganda often called 'fatherland', 'motherland' or 'homeland' – has mobilised people in many ways. Most important was that young men were prepared, or ordered, to give their life for the idea of their nation. In the First World War identification with a nation created innumerable victims. War became waged by conscripts instead of professional hirelings, mostly from regions with widespread unemployment such as Switzerland and Scotland. During the First World War ideas of a nation prevented uprisings in all participating armies – except that of Tsarist (dynastic) Russia. The clearest example of the strength of the idea of a nation was the vote in Parliament by the German Social Democratic opposition in 1914 in favour of war credits demanded by the Government. After the Second World War, the process criterion provided by Elias – no longer able 'to completely disregard what (people) think, feel or wish' – led in Western Europe to developing 'welfare states'. European consensus about its principles made the development of the European communities possible and subdued explicit national identities. Its success led further to a 'European Union' and to its increase – through the membership of Eastern European states – to 28 members. The European idea was seen to triumph and to lead to an 'ever closer union', though not (yet) to a federation. And at the same time opposition, at first 'sceptical', but gradually 'nationalist', based on orientation to an idea of the nation state instead of a European Union. The situation is now complicated by the simultaneous development of the idea of established nation states and xenophobic nationalist resistance to European policies of migration and to Islam. This demonstrates the complexities of ideas of the nation in Europe, and the loss of the orientation function of the idea of a nation state. The role of the European idea has become smaller. To plead for a federal structure, with the power to overrule member states on a number of issues, is seen as foolish. For both similar and different reasons, the 'American dream' has lost much of its meaning (See Mennell 2007, especially chapters 2 & 8).

As remarked before, all states are now supposed to be nation states. That states differ in a developmental sense is recognised only by the concept of 'failed states', a concept introduced by former Secretary of the United Nations Boutros-Ghali that became part of the language of international relations. Though there is no agreement about the specific attributes of failed states, two of its properties are generally recognised: lack of consensus about an idea of their nation and armed movements fighting each other in the absence of a monopoly of violence of the state.

In conclusion, 'idea of a nation' is a more adequate analytical concept than 'nationalism'. It is less ideological and more open to describe all variants in a state. To glorify the nation state, hardly taking into account the growth of inter-state and transnational interdependencies, cannot be durable. The nation state cannot be the

final stage of development, though the established idea of the nation, including the European Union, is still taken for granted by the majority of populations in Europe.

## Endnotes

1. For the primordial perspective see Anthony D. Smith (for example *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*) and for the modern or invented perspective Benedict Anderson, especially *Imagined Communities*. [↗\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. ‘What is the Nation? The Third Estate’ as the Abbé Sieyès asked and answered during the French Revolution. [↗\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. For Ernest Gellner’s influential perspective on *Nations and Nationalism* ‘industrial society’ was the clue to their development. [↗\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. The novel *Radetskymarsch* by Joseph Roth, first published in 1932, is full of insights on the meaning and development of patriotism (English edition: *The Radetsky March*, Granta 2013). [↗\[#N4-pt1\]](#)

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## Biography

Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh is former Professor of International Relations, Erasmus University, Rotterdam and Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, former Chairman Netherlands Association for International Affairs and member Advisory Council of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

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