NATIONS AND NATIONALISM

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Many of the controversies surrounding nationalism can be traced back to rival views about what constitutes a nation. So widely accepted is the idea of the nation that its distinctive features are seldom examined or questioned; the nation is simply taken for granted. Nevertheless, confusion abounds. The term 'nation' tends to be employed with little precision, often being used interchangeably with terms such as 'state', 'country', 'ethnic group' or 'race'. National identity, moreover, is often the subject of fierce dispute and disagreement. This is evident in the struggle, for instance, of the Tibetans in China, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Kurds in Turkey, and the Basques in Spain to establish themselves as full-fledged nations. Such matters, of course, are not of linguistic interest only; they are highly charged political issues. To claim the status of a nation is to make powerful political demands, notably about the right to self-government and, ultimately, sovereign independence.

The features of the nation

How can nations be defined? Nations are complex entities and there are at least three dimensions to national identity:

- First, and most basically, nations are c*ultural* entities – a nation is a group of people who share a common language, religion, history and traditions.
- Second, nations are *political* entities – a nation is a group of people who regard themselves as a natural political community, expressed, most clearly, in the desire to establish or maintain statehood.
- Third, nations are *psychological* entities – a nation is a group of people bound together by shared loyalties or allegiances, often expressed in the form of patriotism (although national identity and patriotism do not necessarily coincide).

This, nevertheless, leaves scope for different concepts of nationhood. In other words, the nation, like so many political concepts, is 'essentially contested' in the sense that it has no settled or agreed definition. In

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particular, there are major divisions between those who view nations as primarily cultural communities and those who view them as primarily political communities.

Nations as cultural communities

The idea of the nation as an essentially ethnic or cultural entity can be traced back to late eighteenth century Germany and the writings of figures such as Herder (1744-1803) and Fichte (1762-1814). For Herder, the innate character of each national group was ultimately determined by its natural environment, climate and physical geography shaping the lifestyle, working habits, attitudes and creative propensities of a people. Above all, he emphasised the importance of language, believed to be the embodiment of a people's distinctive traditions and historical memories. Each nation thus possesses a *Volksgeist* (literally, the 'spirit of the nation'), which reveals itself in songs, myths and legends, and provides a nation with its source of creativity. Herder's nationalism therefore amounted to a form of culturalism, emphasising an awareness and appreciation of national traditions and collective memories instead of an overtly political quest for statehood.

The implication of Herder's culturalism is that nations are 'natural' or organic entities, that can be traced back to ancient times and will, by the same token, continue to exist so long as human society survives. A similar view has been advanced by modern social psychologists, who point to the tendency of people to form groups in order to gain a sense of security, identity and belonging. From this perspective, the division of humankind into nations reflects nothing more than the natural human propensity to draw close to people who share a similar culture, background and lifestyle to oneself. Such psychological insights, however, do not explain nationalism as a historical phenomenon, that is, one that arose at a particular time and place, specifically early nineteenth-century Europe.

Ernest Gellner (1983) emphasised the degree to which nationalism is linked to modernisation and, in particular, to the process of industrialisation. Gellner stressed that while pre-modern or 'agro-literate' societies were structured by a network of feudal bonds and loyalties, emerging industrial societies promoted social mobility, self-striving and competition, and so required a new source of cultural cohesion. This was provided by nationalism. Nationalism therefore developed to meet the needs of particular social

conditions and circumstances. Gellner's theory nevertheless also implies that nationalism is now ineradicable, since a return to pre-modern loyalties and identities is unthinkable. However, Anthony Smith (1986) challenged the idea of a link between nationalism and modernisation by highlighting the continuity between modern nations and pre-modern ethnic communities, called 'ethnies'. In this view, the nation is historically embedded: it is rooted in a common cultural heritage and language that may long pre-date the achievement of statehood or even the quest for national independence. Smith nevertheless acknowledged that, although ethnicity is the precursor of nationalism, modern nations only came into existence when established ethnies were linked to the emerging doctrine of political sovereignty. This conjunction occurred in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in Asia and Africa in the twentieth century.

The cultural or ethnic dimension of national identity is most clearly expressed in so-called cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism commonly takes the form of national self-affirmation; it is a means through which a people can acquire a clearer sense of its own identity by heightening national pride and self-respect. This can be seen in the case of Welsh nationalism, which focuses much more on attempts to preserve the Welsh language and Welsh culture in general, than on the search for political independence. Friedrich Meinecke (1970), went one step further and distinguished between 'cultural nations' and 'political nations'. 'Cultural' nations are characterised by high level of ethnic homogeneity; in effect, national and ethnic identities overlap. Meinecke identified the Germans, the Russians, the English and the Irish as cultural nations. Such nations can be regarded as 'organic', in that they have been fashioned by natural or historical forces, rather than by political ones. Cultural nations nevertheless tend to view themselves as *exclusive* groups. Membership of the nation derives not from a political allegiance, voluntarily undertaken, but from an ethnic identity that has somehow been inherited. Cultural nations view themselves as extended kinship groups, distinguished by common descent. In this sense, it is not possible to 'become' German, Russian or English simply by adopting the language and beliefs of such peoples. Such exclusivity, however, has tended to breed insular and regressive forms of nationalism and to weaken the distinction between nation and race.

Nations as political communities

The view of the nation as an essentially political entity reflects an emphasis on civic loyalty and political allegiance rather than on cultural identity. The nation, then, is a group of people bound together primarily by their shared citizenship, regardless of their cultural, ethnic and other loyalties. This view of the nation is often traced back to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau ((1712-78), sometimes seen as the 'father' of modern nationalism. Although Rousseau did not specifically address the question of the nation or discuss the phenomenon of nationalism, his stress on popular sovereignty, expressed in the idea of the 'general will' (in effect, the common good of society), provided the seed from which nationalist doctrines sprang during the French Revolution of 1789. In proclaiming that government should be based upon the 'general will', Rousseau developed a powerful critique of monarchical power and aristocratic privilege. During the French Revolution, this principle of radical democracy was reflected in the assertion that the French people were 'citizens' possessed of inalienable rights and liberties, no longer merely 'subjects' of the throne. Sovereign power therefore resided with the 'French nation'.

The idea that nations are political, not ethnic, communities has been supported by a number of theories of nationalism. Eric Hobsbawm (1983), for instance, highlighted the degree to which nations are 'invented traditions'. Rather than accepting that modern nations have developed out of long-established ethnic communities, Hobsbawm argued that a belief in historical continuity and cultural purity was invariably a myth and, what is more, a myth created by nationalism itself. In this view, nationalism creates nations, not the other way round. A widespread consciousness of nationhood - sometimes called popular nationalism - did not, for example, develop until the late nineteenth century, fashioned by the invention of national anthems and national flags, and the extention of primary education. Certainly, the idea of a 'mother-tongue', passed down from generation to generation and embodying a national culture, is highly questionable. In reality, languages live and grow as each generation adapts its language to its distinctive needs and circumstances.

Benedict Anderson (1991) also portrayed the modern nation as an artefact, in his case as an 'imagined community'. Anderson pointed out that nations exist more as mental images than as genuine communities, which require a level of face-to-face interaction to sustain the notion of a common identity. Within nations, by contrast, individuals only ever meet a tiny proportion of those with whom they supposedly share a national identity. If nations exist, they exist as imagined artifices, constructed for us

by education, the mass media and by a process of political socialisation. Whereas in Rousseau's view the nation is animated by the ideas of democracy and political freedom, the notion that nations are 'invented' or 'imagined' communities has more in common with the Marxist belief that nationalism is a form of bourgeois ideology. From the perspective of orthodox Marxism, nationalism is a device through which the ruling class counters the threat of social revolution by ensuring that national loyalty is stronger that class solidarity.

Whether nations spring out of a desire for liberty and democracy or are merely cunning inventions of political elites or a ruling class, certain nations have an unmistakably political character. Following Meinecke, these nations can be classified as 'political nations'. A 'political' nation is one in which citizenship has greater political significance than ethnic identity; not uncommonly political nations contain a number of ethnic groups and so are marked by culturally heterogeneity. The UK and the USA have been seen as classic examples of 'political nations'. The UK is a union of what, in effect, are four 'cultural' nations: the English, the Scottish, the Welsh and the Northern Irish (though the latter may comprise two nations, the Protestant Unionists and the Catholic Republicans). Insofar as there is a distinctively British national identity, this is constructed out of political factors such as a common allegiance to the Crown, respect for the Westminster Parliament and a belief in the historic rights and liberties of the British people. As a 'land of immigrants, the United States has a distinctively multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character, making it impossible to construct a national identity on the basis of shared cultural and historical ties. Instead, a sense of American nationhood has been generated by cultivating respect for the values outlined in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.

What such nations have in common is that, in theory, they have been founded upon a voluntary acceptance of a common set of principles or goals, as opposed to an already-existing cultural identity. It is sometimes argued that the style of nationalism which develops in such societies is typically tolerant and democratic. If the nation is primarily a political entity, it is an *inclusive* group, in that membership of not restricted to those who fulfil particular language, religious, ethnic and other criteria. Classic examples of this are the USA, with its image as a 'melting pot' nation, and the 'new' South Africa, seen as a 'rainbow society'. On the other hand, political nations may at times fail to generate the organic unity and sense of historical rootedness that is found in cultural nations. This may, for instance, account for the relative

weakness of specifically British nationalism in the UK, by comparison with Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and the insular form of English nationalism that is sometimes portrayed as 'little Englander' nationalism.

References and further reading

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