



**Bruno Schoch**

## A sense of community

*Or, in defence of the citizens' nation*

A critical analysis of nations and nationalism is as crucial now as it ever was, argues Bruno Schoch. But so long as it protects civil liberties and cultivates a constitutional patriotism, then a nation of free and equal citizens remains an ideal worth striving toward.

For the concepts of nation and nationalism, the year 1983 was an *annus mirabilis*. Since the age of nationalism in the nineteenth century and all the way up to our present time, both basic terms have given birth to a broad field of research and generated enough literature on associated issues to fill several libraries. But it was in 1983 that three path-breaking books by Perry Anderson, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, and Ernest Gellner were published simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> Their impact on political and public debates may have been minimal, but in the social sciences and other disciplines too, these books broke the mould of what seemed like an endless discussion. This caesura marked the beginning of a new, critical analysis of nations and nationalism.

### Imagined political communities

Formerly, studies of nations and nationalism tended to be entangled with a quest to discover the origin of the nation and to pinpoint the moment at which a positive concept of national emancipation turns into a nationalism with negative, aggressive or repressive connotations. Having its theoretical basis in a new historical constructivism, the new approach dissipated the received essentialist ontology of the nation as a historical phenomenon, thus allowing the nation to be conceived of as a product of the human intellect. Contrary to long-standing assumptions, nations are not natural or objective entities, substantive elements or essences in the history of human development. And contrary to most narratives of nationalism with a preference for situating the nations' origins as near to the dawn of history as possible, the nation is not in fact an old, but a modern category.

Moreover, Max Weber had already conceived of the nation as an intellectually constructed order (*gedachte Ordnung*), a social artefact that owes its commonness and objectivity to the beliefs of human beings (*geglaubte Gemeinsamkeit*),<sup>2</sup> not to nature or to an objective collective spirit (the famous *Volksgeist* from Herder to Hegel). Thus it is not the aspirations of nations that engender nationalism but vice versa: nationalism gives rise to nations. But it was Benedict Anderson who supplied the successful formulation of the "imagined political community, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" — the starting point for a new understanding and critical analysis

of nations and nationalism.

## Two different traditions: The citizens' nation and the ethno–nation

The nation has proven to be one of the most influential concepts in modern Europe, and nationalism has been a mobilizing *idée force* throughout the last two centuries. Nations and nationalisms have emerged in all sorts of forms and shown their constituent parts to be extremely adaptable. That is why they were often compared to the Greek god Proteus or to a chameleon. Be this as it may, I would like to emphasize one significant distinction that has been and remains of enormous political relevance. There are two fundamentally different traditions when it comes to the concept of nation, two ideal types to be kept apart, even if in historical and political reality they overlap: the *civic model of the nation* and the *ethnic conception of the nation*.

Whatever the category of nation may have designated in the late Middle Ages and in the beginning of the modern era, in late eighteenth century, it obtained a radical new significance, which is to say, its modern and current connotation. With the American and French Revolutions, in which the people claimed their sovereignty and constituted a political nation of free and equal persons, the nation became the crucial principle of political legitimacy: "*Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation. Nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer de l'autorité qui n'en émane expressément*" — as postulated in the famous *Déclaration de l'homme et du citoyen*, which the revolutionary Assemblée nationale created on 26 August 1789. Here we have the ideal type of one of the two decisive concepts of the nation. Here, "nation" means the sovereign *ensemble* of free and equal persons (men, to be precise) in the state, in accordance with the Enlightenment's understanding of modern individualism and human rights. More precise and less misleading would be the category *citizens' nation* or *Staatsbürgernation*.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, there is the *ethno–national tradition*. It conceives of the nation as a pre–political descent community, organized according to kinship or common language. This concept emerged with Johann Gottfried Herder's assertion that "cultural peoples" (*Kulturvölker*) supposedly constituted natural, organic communities with their own spirit or *Volksgeist*. Herder took the presence of a common language as the main basis for his assertion, and the key criterion for distinguishing one such people from another. The resulting ethnic nation was a cultural, and totally unpolitical, category. Later on though, the ethnic nation was politicized. In the literature of romanticism and in reaction to the Napoleonic Wars and ensuing occupations, the ethnic nation became a kind of counterpart and alternative to the citizens' nation: the nation as an organic community, based on common affiliation defined in ethnic and genealogical terms. The main features of *nationalism intégral* did not first emerge only at the end of the nineteenth century. In Germany, early revolutionary liberal nationalism was already a kind of an integrationist ideology. The great historian of ideas Heinz Gollwitzer summed up the difference thus: "To a nationalism rooted in the sovereignty of the people that emerged from France, Germany opposed a nationalism rooted in the people's integrity."<sup>4</sup>

This difference between the two main traditions reoccurs in the literature on the subject: there is the political or "subjective" nation on one hand and the ethnic or "objective" nation on the other, or the western versus the German or central European model. The same dualism is inherent to the closely linked, in many ways synonymous category of the *people*, also one of the most complicated categories in modern political thinking.<sup>5</sup> In its constitutional

meaning as the basis for political self-rule and the only legitimate sovereign, the people is the *demos*; in terms of its distinction from other peoples and its cultural or linguistic peculiarity, it is the *ethnos*. In short, these dichotomies supply the dazzling and politically ambivalent kaleidoscope of modern nationalism with all of its various hues.

The difference between these two traditions is still important in many respects. I would like to concentrate here only on the aspect of political inclusion. If all citizens are politically equal regardless of their religion or their ethnic origin, the category of the nation-state is of paramount constitutional significance: it denotes a kind of state, where all legitimate power emanates exclusively from the sovereign nation, whose individualistic basis has an inclusive dimension. In contrast to this understanding, following the ethno-national tradition, the nation-state denotes the state of a particular nation. Those who do not belong to the same nationality as the titular nation are not *eo ipso* included — they are national minorities. And the prioritizing of collective ethnic belonging over rationalistic individualism has had an excluding effect not only in the *nationalism intégral* of the late nineteenth century, but from the very beginning: against cosmopolitanism and internationalism, against Jews and foreigners.

As mentioned already, the difference between the two concepts is an ideal-typical one. The so-called objective or ethno-nations are actually the result of manifold cultural, ideological and political efforts to shape them. Even the supposedly objective criterion of language normally involves turning a blind eye to many standardizing measures taken by states or cultural institutions.<sup>6</sup> Most of Europe's so-called civic or citizens' nations have not preserved their linguistic, cultural or religious differences but rather made every effort to homogenize their population's nationhood. That's why Rogers Brubakers chose to refer to the *nationalizing state* rather than the nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Even a classic liberal thinker such as John Stuart Mill was convinced that "free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist".<sup>8</sup>

## Freedom, civil rights, nations

All too often we continue to define and understand nations as ethnically homogenous communities, not only in politics and journalism, but also in political science. This is due to the dominance of the ideal of homogenous nations in European history, especially since the late nineteenth century. But in spite of all the nationalist fantasies about organic ethno-nations and every state's effort to nationalize their citizens, in the real world there are in fact many multinational states. The Confederation of Switzerland, or the United States of America or the Federation of Russia are no exceptions. Rather they are the norm because, contrary to widespread opinion, there are in fact only very few really homogenous nation-states, Japan for instance, or Poland since 1945.

Why does all this matter? I would like to come back to a remark of Ingo Schulze's: "When you ask someone in what kind of society he would like to live, hardly anybody would answer: 'In a German society' or 'In a French society'. The answer is more likely to be: 'In a free society, where I have freedom, individual rights and where I am protected by the rule of law.' That is why we should shift the emphasis in our discussions onto the kind of society we want to live in and away from ideas of nation, nationalism and language." I

like this statement. Indeed, all too often, debates on nations, nationalism and national mobilization conjure away the differences between open democratic societies and authoritarian regimes. Maybe nationalism's capacity for *escamotage* is one of the reasons why it has been so terribly successful.

For a long time, by the way, the answer to Ingo Schulze's question would have been, at least for members of religious or ethnic minorities in Europe: America. The New World embodied the utopia of a society where individual freedom had priority over ethno-national origins. Thus the United States was the "first new nation", because it was not rooted in an ethnically defined people, but founded upon an idea, namely the idea that all individuals, regardless of their religion or ethnic origin, have the same human rights.

Whether we like it or not, unlike in the USA, there is in the old European world quite a complicated nexus between *demos* and *ethnos*, between freedom, rights and nation-states. That's why it seems to me impossible to confine ourselves to the kind of society we want to live in and to exclude the issue of the nation completely. In Europe the *demos* cannot be abstracted from the *ethnos*. Dolf Sternberger and Jürgen Habermas have conceptualized the idea of a constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) in order to overcome Germany's ethno-national tradition and to bind the Federal Republic's democratic identity to the republican and individualistic values of western tradition.<sup>9</sup> But if this concept has been understood as a *post-national* idea, then it has already become too abstract, as Ralf Dahrendorf has pointed out,<sup>10</sup> because in Europe, civil liberties have their institutional and legal basis in the relevant nation-state. That's why Dahrendorf expressed his preference for the nation-state, which he did not identify at all with ethnic homogeneity: "The heterogeneous nation-state is one of the great achievements of civilization. So far, no other framework has been forged for formulating and guaranteeing citizens' rights. The nation-state's monopoly on the use of force is the precondition for valid civil rights, i.e. rights that can be claimed and enforced. Thus the heterogeneous nation-state is prerequisite for the safeguarding of freedom and a good which liberals must defend."<sup>11</sup>

There is an astonishing paradox in nationalism: one of the reasons why all major social theories in the nineteenth century have neglected nationalism's importance, is its theoretical weakness<sup>12</sup> — and yet in practice, this theoretical weakness seems to be its strength. This is true especially for ethno-nationalism: because it pretends to have existed forever, because the nation is repeatedly projected onto an ancient prehistory of which it then appears to be a permanent fixture, the nation seems to enjoy a pre-social, natural status. And in times of radical social change, when every individual perceives everything he was once familiar with to be thrown into disarray, he can always fall back upon nature, or what is presumed to be natural, which in terms of prestige will always outstrip the triumph of modern sciences.

In stark contrast to the citizens' nation, the ethno-nation has no need of political revolution. Rather, it pretends that the nation is a pre-political community. The poet Heinrich Heine, who was a committed champion of the young German national movement, saw with keen political insight how the emotional pathos surrounding the national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) tended to exceed any enthusiasm for freedom and civil rights. Commenting on the Hambach Festival, the mass meeting of the revolutionary German movement in 1832, he wrote: "In the army of German revolutionary men there were plenty of those formerly possessed by Germanomania [*Deutschtümler*], who parroted modern slogans with sour lips and even sang the *Marseillaise*."

[...] Indeed, those regenerated sufferers of Germanomania were still in the minority, but their fanaticism, which is more of a religious nature, easily surpassed a fanaticism bred by reason; and furthermore they have at their disposal those powerful formulae that can conjure the rough mob: the words 'fatherland', 'Germany', 'the faith of the fathers', etc. still electrify the muddled masses much more than do the words 'humanity', 'cosmopolitanism', 'reason of the sons', 'truth!'!"<sup>13</sup>

I like this analysis, but why should such formulas come to the fore, over and above the second set of values that Heine lists? It seems to me that this is what defines the secret of nationalism's success. Its success need not be permanent though. This rather depends on specific social and historical relations. But, particularly in times of crisis, we cannot underestimate the extent of the longing and desire for such a sense of community. Therefore we have to take care and remain involved, if the nation–state is to remain an "achievement of civilization". This applies particularly to all established minorities, but also to newly arrived immigrants. Both have to be included in the citizens' nation — in this sense, constitutional patriotism is an excellent concept. The terrible success story of nationalism in the last century has shown that individual freedom, civil rights and the rule of law can all too easily be eclipsed by ethno–national ideologies and hate against "others" and strangers.

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- <sup>1</sup> Perry Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983; Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983; for a more comprehensive analysis, see my "Nationalismus: Überlegungen zur widersprüchlichen Erfolgsgeschichte einer Idee", in: Jens Siegelberg and Klaus Schlichte (eds.), *Strukturwandel internationaler Beziehungen*, Wiesbaden 2000, 167–93.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Emerich Francis: *Ethnos und Demos. Soziologische Beiträge zur Volkstheorie*, Berlin 1965; Max Weber: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss einer verstehenden Soziologie*, Neu Isenburg 2005, 674 ff
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Rainer Lepsius, "Nation und Nationalismus in Deutschland", in: *ibid.*, *Interessen, Ideen, Institutionen*, Opladen 1990, 232–46.
- <sup>4</sup> Heinz Gollwitzer, *Europabild und Europagedanke: Beiträge zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed., Munich 1964, 173 [author's translation].
- <sup>5</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that in the magistral encyclopedia *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon der politisch–sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, "Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse" is by far the most extensive article, covering nearly 300 pages, see vol. 7, Stuttgart 1992, 141–431.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the Modern State*, Manchester 1993; Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton 1975; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Cambridge 1990
- <sup>7</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996
- <sup>8</sup> John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government", 1861; Chapter XVI in *ibid.*, *Three Essays*, Oxford 1975, 382
- <sup>9</sup> Jürgen Habermas: "Inklusion — Einbeziehen oder Einschliessen? Zum Verhältnis von Nation, Rechtsstaat und Demokratie", in: *ibid.*, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, 154–84
- <sup>10</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, "Die Zukunft des Nationalstaats", in: *Merkur* 546/547 (1994): 757
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 751 [author's translation]
- <sup>12</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Nationalism: Past neglect and present power", *Partisan Review* 46 (1979)
- <sup>13</sup> Heinrich Heine, "Ludwig Börne: Eine Denkschrift", in: *ibid.*: *Sämtliche Schriften in 12 Bänden*, edited by Klaus Briegleb, vol. 7, Frankfurt–Berlin–Wien 1981, 90 f. [author's translation].

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