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HOW TO DEFINE A NATION? NATIONS AND NATIONALISM AS A SUBJECT OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

This paper represents a short review of the most important works on the subject of nations and nationalism. It tries to establish some basic characteristics of a nation according to the given definitions, and also to point to the key issues and theoretical approaches regarding this subject.

Keywords: nation, nationalism, theories of nationalism

Is it possible to imagine a world without the concept of a "nation"? Is it conceivable to live in a world without borders of nation-states? Can people be defined without their nationality? What would life be like without passports, i.e. without citizenship of any state? Whatever the answers to these questions may be, they point to the complexity of issues which are connected to "nations" and "nationalism".

The concepts of *nation*, *national identity*, *nation state*, *nationalism* are all components of an idea which has been defining the way the whole world is organized since the beginning of the nineteenth century. As an idea, but also as a historical reality, the nation and its corresponding ideology, nationalism, are today matters of great political and social importance, and represent a subject of research of different scientific disciplines.

This paper represents a short review of the most important works on the subject of nations and nationalism. Although it does not profess to be all-inclusive, it tries to determine some basic characteristics of a nation according to the given definitions, and to point to the key issues and theoretical approaches regarding this subject.

In Search of a Definition

When the works of the currently most important theoreticians of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner, were published in the early 1980s, it seemed that the so-called primordialist school of thought was finally overcome in the dispute over the *what, how, when* and *why of NATIONS*¹.

Until the beginning of the 1980s, nations and nationalism were considered to be a natural and therefore ideal way of social organization. The attempts to relate the concept of a nation to society, which is perceived as a system based on communication (Karl Deutsch) and on the principle of solidarity (Max Weber) within that system represent important definitions of a nation.

These early definitions of a nation all claim that nations exist, and that there is no other way for a society to exist but as a nation. In addition, people have to believe that they are members of that nation (Hugh Seton-Weston). A nation seen as a solidary

¹ Unlike in the case of the Anglo-Saxon terminology, the term NATIONS here does not refer to *states*. It refers here to the essence and *goal* of the ideology which tries to define a certain group of people according to some common characteristics of that group. This group can, but does not need to perceive itself as an *ethnic* group, i.e. as a group which is characterized by "ethnic" traits like a common language, kinship and common descent, Culture, customs, etc.

community which is conscious of its *common past*, but is primarily oriented to the present has to be *desired* (Ernest Renan). At the end of the eighteenth century most people or members of a "nation" in Europe were not "conscious" that they are members of their nation. This perhaps led to creating the picture of a "sleeping beauty", waiting for somebody to awaken her. In this context, nationalism is perceived as an idea which leads to "awakening" of a people or society, i.e. to establishing the natural state of a nation. Nations have always existed, and after successful "awakening" they will last forever. In this way, nationalism would represent an "alarm clock".

The idea of the "*awakening*" (*of class consciousness*) which had been realized by the French Revolution and the creation of the French nation influenced the awakening of other "nations" in Europe. Although this awakening was not fundamentally conceived of as "national", its result was the simple concept that "a nation is a state", i.e. a territory. The problem was that what can be called political nationalism occurred even in those "nations" which did not "have" a specific territory "of their own". Consequently, nationalism as an idea evolved into an idea of freedom, i.e. of liberation from the "occupation" and "manacles" of the rule of "others". It was the rule of "others" since it was not "our own", although every type of rule prior to the introduction of modern democracy could be considered a kind of "occupation". The territorial aspirations of certain nationalisms of so-called "small people" (Hroch) constituted a problem with great conflict potential. Two centuries later, "free territory" is still an issue, even though it is well-known that "only people can be free, not territories" (Sundhaussen, 2007). This conflict potential was later used as an argument for the division of nationalisms into progressive and reactionary (Hans Kohn). Progressive nationalisms are those of so-called "state-nations", i.e. of nations which already have a state occupying a certain territory, while reactionary nationalisms occur in so-called "culture-nations" (Friedrich Meinecke). Whether accidentally or not, this division has also been associated by some authors to the progressiveness of the "West" in comparison to the "East", at least in the case of Europe. The development of nationalism (progressive or not) into a political ideology eventually led to World War II crimes. Additionally, it resulted in the fact that a significant number of European "nations" have based their national tradition on expulsion of people considered not to be members of that nation from their territory.

A Nation as a Construct?

In the 1980s, nations and nationalism began to be studied as a phenomenon. The works of Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Ernest Gellner marked a turning point in the way nations were seen - as a "living organism" and the ultimate goal of the history of humankind. These authors all believe that a nation as a *made-up concept* or a *construct*, and that it did not exist as such until the nineteenth century. The explanations differ as to why nations were *consciously created* and who the *participants* in this process were.

Anderson, for instance, claims that the press and so-called "printing press capitalism" enable a larger group of people to "imagine" a community, and thus they imagine their own community. In this way, they begin to identify themselves with that community and feel they are its members. Geographically distant individuals are able to communicate on "people's" language, which is also due to the fact that they share a common language. The abandonment of the so-called sacred language of the church,

which was reserved for a privileged few, and the development of the print media market have allowed a faster exchange of information and communication flow between members of a society. Gellner, on the other hand, associates nationalism with the problem of the state and society. He argues that national culture (or a national idea) was a prerequisite for the functioning of the state during the age of industrialization. Namely, in this period, national mobilization of the society through a unique culture, communication and education system represented the most efficient means of protecting the state.

The development of nationalism as an idea which has been articulated by certain elites since the end of the eighteenth century is perhaps best described by Eric Hobsbawm. He does not completely negate that a certain "proto-form" of nations (which he calls *proto-nationalism*) existed before modern nations. A basis for the creation of a nation in the contemporary sense of the term can be a sense of belonging to a community. However, according to Hobsbawm, this sense of belonging is not primarily based on a common language and culture, but on a sense of belonging to one political whole.

The way the so-called elites of a group of people can influence the creation of a nation is probably best described by Hroch's model of the nation-building process in the nineteenth century. Hroch identifies three phases in the creation of a nation: (A) nationalism of "educated people", (B) national movements, and (C) mass acceptance of the nation. In the first phase (A) certain young educated people come across the idea of a nation during their studies, and they start to research the national vernacular, literature, customs, etc. Upon their return² to their own country, they continue to write and publish works on "national" subjects, and gradually form small circles of so-called "patriots". Within the second phase (B), the so-called "agitation phase", groups of these patriots organize themselves into parties or associations. They publish magazines, pamphlets and start formulating clear political goals, the primary goal being to have "their own" state. The third phase is the phase of mass support for the national idea. During this (C) phase, the majority in the society accepts the national goals, and thus gives these "patriots" legitimacy. In the given historical circumstances, this phase leads to the creation of a "free" nation-state. Although incomplete in its explanations (as every individual theory), this model, originally applied to "small peoples", i.e. "oppressed" peoples who become nations in an imperialist context (in this case, Austria-Hungary), has had a significant influence on some more recent works on nationalism, too (see Bieber's study of nationalism in Serbia after 1945³).

The significance of this group of authors who belong to so-called constructivists lies in the fact that they managed to irrevocably refute the primordialist "truth about the

² In the majority of cases, these studies were conducted in a "foreign" language. Students of Slavonic origin in Austria often chose to study in Vienna or other universities in countries where German is spoken.

³ Florian Bieber: *Nationalismus in Serbien vom Tode Titos bis zum Ende der Ära Milošević. (Nacionalizam u Srbiji od smrti Tita do kraja ere Milošević)*. Beč 2005, 33-34.

Natural" concerning nations, although constructivism itself has been subject to criticism. One of the most important critics is Anthony D. Smith, who refuses the idea that a nation is a *construct* of the nineteenth century, and that a nation can be *created*, without there being a corresponding *ethnie* beforehand. Turning to arguments related to identifying oneself with the community, which is difficult to determine empirically, Smith goes so far as to claim that the ancient Greeks were conscious of "their own, Greek" ethnic group. Considering the fact that all "foreigners" who did not belong to that group or common culture were considered and called barbarians, maybe this thesis should not be dismissed out of hand.

The Theory of Nationalism?

Smith's critique of constructivism has led to a debate between constructivists and "ethnosymbolists", to which, beside Smith, George Moss also belongs. Like Smith, Moss is also interested in the role symbols and myths have in the acceptance of national ideas among large number of people. After more than twenty years, this debate has not been clearly settled in favor of either side, because each author has been dealing with various issues, only mentioning certain aspects that they criticize. The fact that different theorists organize their research in different ways and that they never have the same combination of problems they deal with disables a "metatheoretical debate"(Tambini, 1998). The study of nationalism does not pose clear questions, but revolves around several central problem groups:

1. The problem of the epoch of nations
2. The problem of the discourse content of nationalism
3. The problem of nationalism and political immobilization
4. The problem of nationalizing "the crowds"

The first problem includes the question: when does the concept of nation occur and why at that specific point in time. Possible explanations are functionalistic and refer to industrialization, modernization, better mobility and communication, processes that only in the 19th century create conditions for the development of nations. Yet, they do not explain the occurrence of nationalism in the regions where modernization preceded national ideas.

The second problem tries to explain the content of national ideas, that is the birth of a national doctrine. The key questions in this context are: (1) whether in the event of fabricating/ giving birth to/ awakening the nation, rationally chosen symbols are used, or whether there are clear, previously determined cultural features and (2) what the nationalistic discourse consists of. When it comes to the birth of nations and nationalism, the answers vary, from contextual explanations that the reason for the birth of modern nations is industrialization, to explanations that German philosophers from the 19th century served as role models in creating nationalism in other countries.

The third problem tries to explain *the elites' motifs to immobilize ever larger number of people with national ideas*. A possible answer is that it is the matter of rational choice, i.e. the matter of clear political interests of certain participants. This, on the other hand, is not the answer to the fourth problem, which is: why "the crowds" agree to be immobilized. Why does a large number of people accept such an idea and identify with it, and in what way? Possible explanations are related to the sense of belonging to a community, and the very sense of belonging can be developed or strengthened by education. Certain teachings about nations are included in education that is conceptualized by the state. There are, of course, opinions that *collective consciousness* of ethnies exists apart from education, so it can lead to so-called *collective action*. The sense of belonging to an ethnie can, therefore, lead to political nationalism. Another explanation would be that increased mobility and social communication in modern industrial societies lead to "developing the sense of belonging" to a certain nation, i.e. to so-called *cultural homogenization* (Deutsch).

The majority of the above-mentioned authors, although trying to answer most of these questions, remains consistent with emphasizing some aspects, that maybe only in combination with personal and collective identity, personal interests and other elements of "national identification" can answer the question why the concept of nation has the ability to immobilize such a large number of people, i.e. *why there are so many people ready to sacrifice themselves or even die for their country even today*. Maybe we should question certain values that people consider significant, such as honour, bravery, social acknowledgement etc. The number of works in which these processes are dealt with is too large for this work, but some authors, such as Sheff (1994), Greenfeld (1992) and Calhoun (1993, 1997), should be mentioned. Theoretical works on nationalism today are, generally, very critical of different theoretical positions. Apart from that, the works that deal with nationalism from different perspectives (Calhoun, 1993; Avineri, 1991; Yuval, 2003), as well as the works that deal with nationalism in theory, from the 20th and this century (Fenton, 2004; Kelly/Kaplan, 2001; Wilson, 2001) are interesting. Furthermore, the works that revise concepts of nation (Whitmeyer, 2002), ethnie, ethnicity (King, 2002; Eriksen, 1991), national identity (Smith, 2000; Van der Boshe, 2003) or the works that deal with relations between nationalism and religion (Rieffer, 2003), between nationalism and art (Terzić, 2007; Aberbach, 2003) or even between nationalism and communication on the Internet (Chan, 2005) are also interesting.

What is a Nation?

The question that has, after all the debates, remained without a clear answer is: *what exactly is a nation?* If we add the definitions by Hobsbawm, Anderson and Gellner to the definitions mentioned above, we will see that these definitions differ. According to Hobsbawm, a nation is every society that is large enough and whose members see themselves as members of one nation. For him, a nation is not a primordial and

changeless social unit, but it belongs to a definite, modern historical epoch. It can exist only in relation to the concept of nation-state. Gellner defines a nation in the following way: (1) people belong to the same nation if they share the same culture (meaning the same system of thinking, signs, associations, behaviour and communication). By belonging to that culture, a person belongs to that nation; (2) people belong to the same nation if they recognize and accept one another as members of the same nation. This acceptance implicates recognition of mutual rights and obligations. Finally, Anderson speaks of a nation as of an imaginary political community at the same time bordered and sovereign. This means that nations have their borders, i.e. only certain people are members of that nation, it is sovereign in relation to other nations, and it is a united community, with all the inequalities that exist within that nation.

Although there is not a single, universal definition of a nation, major characteristics of a nation, that various authors agree on, can be pointed out. For the concept of nation, these characteristics are important:

1. COMMUNITY: A nation is an *imaginary, united community* of people with *the sense of belonging* to that nation.
2. EXCLUSION: As a rule, only a definite number of people belong to a certain nation. Others do not belong to that nation.
3. THE TIME OF CREATION: A nation represents a modern phenomenon that exists from the end of the 18th, or the beginning of the 19th century.
4. STATE: The phenomenon of nation is related to a state. A nation tends towards its "own" (nation-) *state*. According to what nationalism meant in the 19th century, members of a certain nation can be free only if they have their "own" nation-state.

The characteristics on which not all authors agree are:

1. CULTURE: A nation represents its "own" culture. That culture may consist of: a *language, common past* and the recollection of it, symbols and a certain system of values.
2. IDENTITY: A nation, in a modern sense of that word, is preceded by a form of *awareness of belonging* to an ethnic or an ethnic group. Only when this "ethnic identity" does exist, can a nation be founded. National identity can be preceded by some type of political identity, i.e. awareness of the individuals that they belong to a political community or a state, that is, that they are loyal to their leader.

If we take into consideration that none of the definitions can be "true" or "false", but only *useful* or not, we can see that this group of certain characteristics of a nation is too large to be a theoretical basis for concrete research on the phenomenon of nation. That is why, using these characteristics of a nation, concrete questions can and have to be formulated. The basic questions are these:

- Are there objective characteristics of a nation and, if there are, which would those be?
- Is there a nation outside of people's *minds*?
- What are the roles of *culture* and a *state*, in regard to a nation?
- How long do nations exist? *When is a nation?*
- In which constellations are nations founded? What is the role of modernization in the birth of a nation?
- What is the relation between a nation and nationalism?

Besides these general questions, there is a large number of various questions about nations and nationalism, on both theoretical and practical level. Innumerable works about nationalism and nations are evidence for this claim.

Although some authors from the end of the 20th century claimed that nationalism is dead and that a nation, in a form that existed in the 19th century, has no future, nationalism in Europe is widespread, if not dominant, ideology in the 21st century. Despite the idea of supranational European Union as a cultural frame (not just economical), it looks like nation-states are still *repositories of freedom* for the majority of citizens. This confirms an increasing number of conservative governments in various European countries, that should protect "national interests" from globalization. Why is a nation so important even today? This question remains unanswered and maybe becomes even more significant.

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