

Introduction

Some conceptual remarks concerning nations and nationalism

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Since the middle of the 1980s, the study of nations and nationalism has been on the rise, as is attested by the boom in periodicals such as *Nations and Nationalism* and *National Identities*, the proliferation of congresses devoted to the most varied aspects of the phenomenon and the establishment of specialised research institutions and research schools.

In broad outline, the theoretical debates in the field of nations and nationalism revolve around five questions:

- 1) Is (the core of) a nation based on objective or subjective elements? Objectivists consider 'realia' as language, religion, physiognomy, custom, common history, etc., as the leitmotiv in nation formation. Subjectivists and voluntarists respectively give priority to feeling or will: when people (want to) believe that they are a nation, that nation exists. In its most extreme form subjectivism becomes a deconstructive, post-modernist notion: the nation is a mere linguistic construction without any foundation in reality and national identity is a false awareness.¹
- 2) Are nations 'given' or are they construed? Essentialists assume that they form a 'natural' division of the world population, while according to primordialists they are not 'given' as such, but have become a dominant form of human coexistence through centuries-long evolution. In contrast, for constructivists nations arise from the human mind and from discursive practices. In their eyes, nations are an order that people impose on their social environment and not vice versa.
- 3) Are nations ages old or modern phenomena? Did nations as we now know them only develop in the course of the 18th century, as modernists argue, or were they already there in the Middle Ages or even in Antiquity, as perennialists maintain? Ethno-symbolists such as Anthony D. Smith take up an intermediate position. They do not believe that modern nations signify a breach with earlier forms of coexistence because symbols and myths of pre-modern ethnies are the building blocks of modern nations.

¹ On "objectivist and subjectivist approaches to nationalism" see Goswami (2002).

4) Are nations a matter of elites or of the masses? Are *top-down* or *bottom-up* processes involved? Should we only speak of a nation when the majority of a 'people' is aware of its national identity? Or does a convinced elite suffice? Do nationalist vanguard movements spread the feeling of national solidarity and do they thus create nations or are those movements nothing but the emanation of a people?

5) Are nations a positive or a destructive organisational principle? This question is linked with the distinction between *civic versus ethnic* and *inclusive versus exclusive nations/nationalisms*.²

In theoretical disputes, two explicit types of researchers are often juxtaposed. On the one hand, constructivists, who believe in the modern and subjective nature of nations created by elites. On the other hand, primordialists who assume nations to be objective and pre-modern phenomena that have 'naturally' developed from within the people. However, in practice this dichotomy is far less absolute. The American political scientist Alexander Motyl rightly remarked:

"Only as monoliths must primordialism involve undifferentiated notions of immutability, objectiveness, timelessness, and naturalness, and constructivism, its polar opposite, must involve similarly undifferentiated notions of mutability, subjectiveness, temporal boundedness, and artificiality" (Motyl, 1999, 83).

It would take me too far to go further into these conceptual issues. Let me confine myself to the core terms nation, ethnic and nationalism. The authors of the great synthesis works and the editors of authoritative readers agree that subjectivism and constructivism predominate in the international literature at the moment (e.g. Eley & Suny, 1996, 24; Ozkirimli, 2000; Smith, 1998). The study of nations and nationalism follows the general evolution of the "cultural" or subjectivist turn" (Goswami, 2002, 772).³ One of the most influential authors of this trend is undoubtedly Benedict Anderson with his classic anthropological definition of the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1994).

As Anderson assigns little concrete content to 'his' nation, we can turn to Anthony D. Smith's concept of ethnic. An ethnic is a group of people who have an affective bond with an ancestral territory, a collective name, a com-

2. The strict distinction between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism has been highly criticised in the last decade. See Brown (1999), Dieckhoff (1996), Kuzio (2002), Nielsen (1999), Shulman (2002), Yack (1999).

3. Motyl relativises the dominance of the constructivist paradigm. Primordialism, he writes, is "an academically unacceptable term", but according to him the concept is still widely used in research practice (Motyl, 1999, 96).

mon myth of descent, a (perceived) shared history and culture (Smith, 1994, 22-30, 58, 144). In my opinion, there are hardly any differences between ethnics as Smith understands them and nations like Anderson describes them, but Smith himself does make a distinction:

"It is exactly those features of nations that *ethnics* lack – a clearly delimited territory or 'homeland', a public culture, economic unity and legal rights and duties for everyone – that make nations ultimately quite different from *ethnics*, despite the fact that both possess such features as an identifying name, myths of common origins and shared historical memories" (Smith, 1998, 196).

In other words, Smith's decisive criterion is the presence of a modern state. Thus he makes a distinction between peoples without a state (*ethnics*) and established nation-states (*nations*).

Traditionally, following Gellner, nationalism is defined as a 'political movement pursuing the unity of nation and state'. This implies that nationalism disappears as soon as the nation-state is formed because the objective – congruence of nation and state – has been achieved. Therefore, the term is mainly applied to separatist and sub-state movements and it consequently gets a negative connotation. This state of affairs was the reason for Michael Billig to write his study *Banal nationalism*. In the popular and scientific vocabulary, he argues, nationalism generally refers to extremes. Everyday language "always seems to locate nationalism on the periphery" (Billig, 1995, 5). In the United States and Great Britain, for example, nationalism is viewed as a feature of the Other. Serbian war gangs are nationalist, not the British during the Falkland war, they were 'patriots'. People in established nation-states have the tendency to situate (the negatively sounding) nationalism outside their own community. This does not mean that they themselves are free of it. In established nation-states, Billig argues, nationalism embeds itself in the state structures and in the public discourse in such a way that it becomes almost invisible. Since there is a difference between the fierce "hot nationalism" of Serbian ethnic cleansers and the nationalist omnipresence of the American flag in the US, Billig introduces the term 'banal nationalism'. Banal nationalism is the mechanism that guarantees the reproduction and legitimisation of the nation-state in everyday life. In other words, it is "the ideology that creates and maintains nation-states" (*Ibid.*, 19) which ensures that the existence of nation-states is accepted as self-evident.

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