

What is a nation? – a lecture held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul on October 7 2008

The heart of ethnic nationalism is *völkisch*, a German concept which is difficult to translate. It is based on German romanticism and the German cultural and spiritual reactions to the Enlightenment and the idea of universality derived from the French revolution. *The Blut und Boden (blood and soil)* concept, and the idea that some races were historically bound to certain definite areas, contrasted with this.

The nation is thus seen as a birthmark. People are born as Germans, Swedes, Frenchmen or Turks. People with foreign origins are considered a threat to national unity and purity and to a national culture which defines itself vis-a-vis “the other”. The common ancestry is the end of history and has to be protected against everything foreign.

Every people is not only entitled to its own sovereign state but it also owns a historical predetermined area once and for all time for its own exclusive use. Areas once inhabited by a national group should rightfully be returned to them, by force if necessary, and with the expulsion of the present inhabitants as the outcome. Anyone leaving this mythical fellowship is stamped forever with the mark of Cain. To this kind of nationalist, it is inconceivable that people with different national backgrounds could live together. Minorities are tolerated at best, but they are and remain second class citizens.

The nation – an idea searching for a reality

With few exceptions – Iceland for example – governments and peoples can not demonstrate a long, unbroken, historical continuity and ethnic homogeneity. The cradle of nations does not lie in a mythological obscurity, on the historical battlefields of Troy, Kosovo Polje or Ergenekon but between the covers of history books. In many cases, nations were created by romantic nationalistic historians. They began looking for common denominators for a nation to be. Thus, history, language, national soul, “Volkgeist”, culture and race came to play their part.

The written language played an important role in creating a nation. Language did not therefore precede the nation. Instead the emerging national state created its national language in order to legitimize itself. According to a classic definition, the difference between a language and a dialect is that a language has a government and an army.

National conscription, compulsory education and the development of mass media with supra-regional distribution were the channels used by the architects of nations in the 19th century in order to create contact between the centre and the periphery, and borders that appeared natural on the basis of geography, language, ethnicity or religion. In particular, the emergence of national education systems and the mass media contributed to communicating a sense of affinity to a national collective, to extending the cultural horizons and getting away from provincial narrow-mindedness. The creation of national symbols and myths and

re-writing of history were also part of the process of nation-building.

A nation can thus be described as an idea searching for a reality which a minority often violently forced upon a majority with standardization as a goal and with an iron glove as an instrument to eradicate previous diversity. Nations were thus constructed and invented. People felt that they primarily belonged to a province, a town or an empire rather than a national state, and they seldom protested when they were transferred from one kingdom to another. Eric Hobsbawm spoke of a mass production of nations in the 19th century, when cultural hallmarks were created for later presentation as authentic and ancient. The “real” aspects needed the “fake” and “foreign” in order to define themselves. The weakness and lack of credibility of the national identities which were proclaimed, meant that they needed polarization in order to take root.

The order of precedence of the factors that characterise a nation has always been subject to discussion – ranging from mutual traditions and collective political awareness, common antecedents, affiliation to a tribe or people, joint territory, customs and language, culture and religion. Objections can be made to all these factors. The inhabitants of the USA are a nation notwithstanding their widely differing origins. The Swiss are undoubtedly a nation despite their different languages, religions and cultures, while not all those who speak the German language are members of the German nation.

Any attempt to give a content to the concept of the nation must therefore automatically imply a distortion of reality. Karl Popper, the philosopher, stated at the end of the Second World War that:

“It has been said that a race is a collection of people who are united, not by their origin but by a common misconception about their antecedents. Similarly, we can say that a nation is a collection of people united by a common misconception about their history”.

The shaping of a nation can be both a progressive and a regressive process. It can come to a definite end, pause but return with renewed strength, as we have seen in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet empire. In the early 14th century Dante wrote about “Slavs, Hungarians, Germans, Saxons, the English and other nations”, describing his own nationality as “Florentine”. Nowadays, only the Hungarian, German and English nations remain. The Saxons were absorbed by the last two, for various historical reasons. However, the German nation did not come to include the equally Germanic Friesian, Dutch, Flemish and Luxembourg nations and Dante’s Slavs divided into some ten different peoples each of which now considers itself a separate nation.

The supposedly original population of France, the Franks, were only a small proportion of the mixed groups of Romans, Gauls, Celts, Bretons, Normans, Burgundians, etc., who gradually spread outwards from the Ile de France to become present-day France. In the Seine basin alone they probably only represented some ten per cent of the population in the 6th and 7th centuries.

Thus France does not consist of ethnic Franks. Instead, a number of ruling families with a Frankish element, succeeded in forming other immigrant groups into a unit, a group that, until the French revolution, only consisted of the upper echelons of society. Even after the Revolution, the lower strata of the population remained as they were, farmers, peasants, soldiers and craftsmen from Normandy, Provence, Aquitaine, Gascony or Brittany, speaking many languages. During the French Revolution, the inhabitants of Marseilles did not understand the language in which the Marseillaise was sung. The state came first and the national collective was established later within its territorial framework as a result of a gradual cultural standardization. Peasants in France could not be described as Frenchmen until the Third Republic at the end of the 19-th century and the Basque, Breton, Corsican and Catalonian areas of France still do not feel fully integrated into the French state and nation.

In present-day France, the third of the country situated in the north east is ethnically more Germanic than southern Germany. The north of Bavaria is still today called Franconia, and Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, represents a central chapter in the history of both France and Germany. Frenchmen thus become Germans and Germans French. If we continue even further back in time, the picture changes again.

Ernest Renan, the French historian, wrote just over a hundred years ago: "There is no doubt that Lorraine once belonged to the German nation, but almost everywhere where inflamed German patriots invoke ancient German rights we can substantiate the existence of even older Celts, and before them the Allophylian people, the Finns and the Laplanders lived there, and before that there were cave people and orangutans before them. There is only one right in such a historical philosophy, and that is that of the orangutans who were unjustly driven out by an evil civilisation."

According to ecclesiastical law, the German nation originally included the peoples of Scandinavia, Poland and Bohemia. Frederick the Great of Prussia normally conversed in French, and spoke only broken German. The King of Prussia's appeal to his people during the Napoleonic War of 1812 was also made in Sorbian and Polish. When Prussia became the nucleus of a united Germany in 1871, it had more Polish than German inhabitants. The British are not a homogenous nation, either. The Celtic Britons who had not been driven into the western fringes of the country in the 5th century by the Germanic Angles and Saxons were later absorbed by the invaders. A further ethnic mix occurred after the Danish invasion in the 9th century and the Norman Conquest in the 11th century.

The mother tongue of Cavour, the founder of the Italian nation, was French. He had primarily dreamt of an Italy based on a Turin-Milan axis. One of the leaders of the Italian "Risorgimento", Massimo d'Azeglio, said in 1860: "Having created Italy, we must now create Italians." 150 years later, there is still reason to

question how deeply rooted the Italian identity is. Many Italians regard present-day Italy as a foreign invention and consider themselves to be primarily Florentines, Venetians, Neapolitans, Bolognese etc. The antagonism between north and south is expressed in the political party Lega Nord which would like to free the industrial and modern north from what it considers to be the poor “African” south.

The Polish and Hungarian nations in the 17th century consisted of nobles who, together with the king, lived off the labour of the peasants and craftsmen. Still in the 19th century, the peasant population living to the north-east of Warsaw spoke a language called Mazowiane, and described themselves as Mazovians. At the beginning of the 19th century, only 40 per cent of the population in Hungary were Hungarians. Their numbers doubled during the next 125 years, while other ethnic groups increased by only 70 per cent. This was not due to their higher nativity but to the fact that the Slovaks, Serbs, Germans and Jews who moved into the cities from the countryside were transformed into a Hungarian middle class and proletariat. Two of the most common Hungarian family names are Horvat and Toth which in Hungarian means Croat and Slovak.

The wars in former Yugoslavia were not caused by a nationalism with medieval roots but originated from the nationalist ideas that arrived in South-Eastern Europe from the West in the 19th century. Both real and alleged political events from the 14th century onward were cited as justification for cruelty. The conflict between the Serbs and Croats had its origins in the 20th century and began, in military terms, with the establishment of the Croatian Ustashi state in 1941.

The Serbian minority in the Habsburg Empire cooperated politically with the Croats until the breakdown of the double monarchy. The idea of a southern Slav state was first put forward by a Croat, the Catholic Bishop Strossmayer, who, as his name reveals, had Germanic forbears.

An artificially constructed ethnic definition of citizenship allowed the individual no choice. The Serbian war for the creation of a Greater Serbia was an extension of this principle. As long as all Serbs were not gathered in one state, the existence of the Serbian nation was considered to be under threat, and in the same way all Croats had to be incorporated into a new Greater Croatia, according to the Croatian nationalists.

Myths about Race, National Unity and Purity

The Serbian and Croatian argument against the Muslims was that “we have always been here while you have been here only since the 15th century”. This is not only incorrect but also elicits the next question as to why the 15th century should be selected as the point of departure for territorial claims. Following this method of reasoning, we might ask why the Slavs who arrived in the Balkans in the 6th and 7th centuries should not be sent back to the parts of north-eastern Europe where they came from, and why all Orthodox Christians should not be returned to Byzantine/Istanbul? According to Serbian and Croatian logic, the former Yugoslavia should be emptied of all people except the Albanians, whose presence can be proved farthest back in time.

Tension in the Balkans rose further with the Greek claimed the sole rights to the name

Macedonia. The conflict between Athens and Skopje is another example of how preposterous a nationalism based on historical myths becomes when subject to close inspection. On the Greek side, a straight line is drawn from 2,300 years ago, from Alexander the Great to the present. In the early years of the 6th century Greece was exposed to such a massive Slav immigration that the area in the Middle Ages often was called "Slavinia". In the early 19th century, for example, 24 per cent of the Athenian population were Albanians, 32 per cent Turks and only 44 per cent Greeks. Nor was the Greek war of liberation from the Turks in the 1820's an out-and-out Greek war. The Suliote heroes, about which Lord Byron wrote, were Albanians.

Eric Hobsbawm writes about the Greeks who took part in the Greek war of liberation: "The real Greeks who fought for what would be the founding of a new independent national state did not speak classical Greek any more than Italians speak Latin. The glories of Pericles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Sparta and Athens meant nothing to them, and to the extent that they were aware of the history they found it irrelevant. Paradoxically, they were closer to Rome than to Greece (Romaica), i.e., they saw themselves as the heirs of Byzantium. They fought as Christians against the unbelieving Muslims, as Romans against the Turkish dogs."

Macedonia, whose name is the reason for the current dispute, was a divided area at the turn of the century, with different languages, religions, ethnic groups and identities. Hobsbawm gives the following description of the area in about 1870:

"The inhabitants of Macedonia had been distinguished by their religion, or else claims to this or that part of it had been based on history ranging from the medieval to the ancient, or else an ethnographic arguments about common customs and ritual practices. Macedonia did not become a battlefield for Slav philologists until the twentieth century, when the Greeks, who could not compete on this terrain, compensated by stressing an imaginary ethnicity... The Greeks later described the inhabitants in the parts of Macedonia that they annexed as "slavophone Greeks". In other words, a linguistic monopoly masked as a non-linguistic definition of the nation".

Thessaloniki, where the surge of Greek nationalism was at its peak with the slogan "Macedonia is forever Greek", had a population in the early part of the 20th century which was almost 60 per cent Jewish, while the Greek and Turkish populations each amounted to 18 per cent. Among these Turks was the young man who would become Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Northern Egypt with its quarter of a million Greeks concentrated in Alexandria and large parts of Turkish Asia Minor were substantially more Greek than the part of Macedonia which now belongs to Greece. It was only after the exchange of population with Turkey after the First World War, agreed by treaty and carried out by force, that there was a Greek majority in the area.

The Bulgarians are a mirror image of the Greek case. The Bulgarians were originally a Turkic people who migrated to Eastern Europe in the 7th century, encountering and conquering Slav tribes who had come into the area in the previous century. But while Slavs who migrated to Greece were assimilated, the Bulgarians became Slavs to such an extent that only their name reminds of their origins. There is not a single word in modern Bulgarian which can be traced to the people who gave the language its name.

The Romanian identity provides yet another demonstration that myths are stronger than facts. According to the national Romanian myth, the Romanians are the result of a merging of the Dacians, a Thracian people, and Latin Romans. The Dacian-Romans disappeared from history when the Roman legions departed in the 3rd century AD, but according to Romanian accounts, they settled in inaccessible mountain regions where they survived invasions by the Teutons, the Slavs, the Magyars and the Tartars, reappearing in the 11th century as the Vlachs, a Latin-speaking nation.

It has been historically proved that these Vlachs, small numbers of whom are now spread all over the Balkans in the form of splinter groups, were assimilated by the Slavs and the Tartars. This Slavic element was particularly emphasized in the early years of the communist era in Romania, and the history books even went so far as to claim that the Dacians were a Slav people. Subsequently, when Ceaucescu began to develop policies which were independent of Moscow, the Slav connection was denied, and the Dacian-Roman theory was emphasized, to the detriment of the substantial Hungarian and German minorities.

The Nation – a Daily Referendum

Thus, nations are not eternally defined entities, but they are in fact created. They are “imagined communities”, in the words of the American anthropologist, Benedict Anderson. Nationalism is a two-faced, Janus-like creature. It is synonymous with self-determination for those who have the good fortune to live in a society which has its own history, language, culture and religion, but it can also be xenophobic, intolerant, aggressive, hegemonic and authoritarian, lacking the will and ability to allow others what the nation claims for itself.

The kind of nationalism which we see today, promising a brilliant future on the basis of an illustrious past (often artificially constructed and mysterious) is not a disease which can be cured with quick, radical cures or wished away on common-sense grounds. We must be able to find an antidote to the fear, hatred and insistence on homogeneity on which xenophobia and racism thrive, making it clear that these feelings have nothing to do with nationalism or nationality. If we want to ensure that the nationalists do not monopolize discussion about the “nation”, we must apply and employ an open the concept of the nation.

Adherence to a nation must be an act of choice, and not a birthmark. Instead of “ethnos”, in which a sense of affinity is based on mythical racial ties of blood, our perception of the national must be a question of “demos” – an open, universalist concept of the nation which focuses on the individual level, in which the nation is based on acceptance by citizens and their belief in a political order which protects their freedoms and rights. The individual can choose to join, but he can also leave the nation. The nation may be ethnically homogenous, but it can also consist of several different peoples, as in the case of Switzerland. National culture is not static or laid down by history, instead it is a dynamic creation based on free and independent citizens.

As a result, the starting point in the fight against racism and xenophobia must be the concept of nationality which was defined by Ernest Renan, the French religious historian, mentioned, in his classic address at the Sorbonne on 11 March 1882, entitled “What is a nation?”

As far as Renan was concerned, national affinity was not a question of race, religion or place of birth, but was instead a matter of “a daily referendum”.

“A nation’s being is based on all individuals having something in common, but also an ability to forget many things. No Frenchman knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alani or a Visigoth. There are hardly ten families in France who can prove their Frankish origins, and even if they could, evidence of this kind would be incomplete due to the many unknown instances of crossbreeding which put all genealogical systems into such disorder... A nation is a spiritual principle, with its origins in the deep complexity of history, an intellectual family, but not a specific group shaped by the earth... A nation is a grand solidarity constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again. It supposes a past, it renews itself especially in the present by a tangible deed: the approval, the desire, clearly expressed, to continue the communal life. The existence of a nation is a daily referendum...”

However, nations are not something eternal. They have begun, they will end. They will be replaced, in all probability, by a European confederation. But such is not the law of the century in which we live. At the present time the existence of nations happens to be good, even necessary. Their existence is a guarantee of liberty, which would be lost if the world had only one law and only one master.”

Renan’s words are still relevant 126 years later. National identities and their daily confirmation in the form of national frontiers and national symbols still set clear limits to a sense of European community. The national state is still democracy’s principal arena and platform for a political debate in which everyone has common points of reference, plays by the same rules, accepts opponents and is able to achieve compromises, and live with them.

Towards a European nation?

At the same time, Europe is moving towards the confederation which Renan referred to. National frontiers have not only become more open; they are being steadily eaten away and diversity within them is increasing. As was the case in the process in which European national states developed, the European Union will continue to be an elite phenomenon. The lack of interest which can still be seen in elections to the European Parliament shows that there is a long way to go. There is lukewarm media interest, the candidates are often unknown and the poll figures are low. What drives people to the ballot box is more dissatisfaction with domestic politics than a sense of participation in a European political process.

Hence Europe is neither a “communication-community” nor an “experience-community”, if we try to anglicize two German concepts. Nevertheless both these factors are essential for the development of a collective political identity. An identity of this nature is built up on the basis of shared experience, myths and memories – often in opposition to similar elements in other collective identities.

Furthermore, this effect is reinforced when faced with something which is markedly different. Josef Stalin should also be counted among the fathers of European integration, along with

Schumann, de Gasperi, Monnet and Adenauer. In the Cold War a sense of West European identity could be mobilized, but what counterforce is there today which can give Europeans a common identity?

Unfortunately many leading European politicians with the French president Nicola Sarkozy in the forefront now seem tempted to choose to define Europe vis-à-vis its Muslim neighbourhood with Turkey and the Mediterranean as a moat to protect the European fort. There is an obvious risk that the construction of a pan-European identity will go hand in hand with a mechanism of cultural exclusion – a policy which could lead Europe into a cul-de-sac, at the same time as the ethnic diversity of Europe is increasing. A European identity must therefore be both distinct and inclusive, differentiating and assimilating at the same time.

Supranationality will not be accepted until there is a situation in which national, regional and supraregional identities are no longer set in a hierarchical order. Everyone must feel that all these identities are self-evident and part of their daily lives. As a result, a policy based on preserving diversity will be a prerequisite for creating European identity which neither should nor can replace a national identity, but which is able to support and strengthen political institutions which are neither national nor the framework for a European superstate.

Questions which involve cultural policy, education and historically based social welfare systems and values must therefore continue to be the concern of the national state. This involves rendering unto the national state what is the national state's, and to the EU what is the EU's, that is to say a security and foreign policy structure, the single market, and a common refugee and immigration policy. The relationship between a European identity and national identities might then take the form of a foreign and security policy, in a broad sense, which lays the foundations for a common European political identity. This means a "nation" in Renan's sense, in which the individual can feel a political affinity irrespective of his ethnic or geographical origins, without therefore needing to feel part of a European "Volk" or of a European "national civilization".

This will loosen up the historical links between the state and the nation. In this perspective, European integration does not mean the emergence of a new European superstate, but instead a dispersion of power. Cultural identity will continue to be based on the national level, but it will also be disseminated downwards to increasingly clearly defined regional identities. We will neither have a new European superstate nor sovereign national states. Nations will not disappear. Instead, we will have nations with fewer state features, and national cultures with softer shells.

At the national level, the German national concept would be retained, but in its original Herdian form, in which a nation does not necessarily have to be expressed in the form of a state. Johan Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) was both a nationalist and an internationalist, who stressed the concept of cultural patriotism. No people was superior to any other. Resting on secure and solid cultural foundations, each nation could contribute its special characteristics and cultural achievements to an international community of nations.

If we are to achieve this, a narrow nationalism must be replaced by a healthy patriotism characterized by five patriotic commandments which Michael Mertes, Chancellor Kohl's

close assistant formulated in an article in Frankfurter Allgemeine almost 20 years ago:

* You shall respect the patriotism of other nations as much as you wish your own patriotism to be respected by them.

* You shall be a loyal citizen of the country to which you belong by birth or by free choice.

* You shall accept and respect your neighbour as a compatriot irrespective of his ethnic, cultural and religious background, if he is prepared to be a loyal citizen of the country to which both of you belong.

* Your love for your country must never be divided from your love for liberty. You shall therefore defend your religious freedom of religion and freedom of thought, and that of your neighbours, and resist all attempts to force you or your neighbour into a conflict of loyalties between your civic and human duties.

* You shall not make an idol of your own country, for there are universal values above all nations, including yours.

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