

PEOPLE NATION & STATE

THE MEANING OF
ETHNICITY & NATIONALISM



Edited by
Edward Mortimer
with Robert Fine

I. B. Tauris

People, Nation and State

In memory of two great polymaths
and brilliant teachers,
Robert Birley and Ernest Gellner

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The Meaning of
Ethnicity and
Nationalism

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I.B. TAURIS

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INTRODUCTION

Edward Mortimer¹

‘What’s the strongest political force in Europe today?’ The Headmaster’s eye glinted. His spectacles swung triumphantly in the air. No-one answered. ‘No. Not Marxism. No... It’s still nationalism.’

It was certainly a privilege, as a teenager around 1960, to be taught by the late Robert Birley. Not many high school history teachers in any Western country can even have been asking that question at that time, let alone giving that answer. In the 1990s, Birley’s observation has become a commonplace. The Soviet Union – whose power, as we can now see, was the main thing that made Marxism seem so important in the middle years of this century – lies in ruins. The relative importance of the part nationalism played in its downfall, as compared to other forces (liberalism, market forces, information technology, etc), will long be debated. What cannot be disputed is the vigour with which nationalism has rushed in to fill the vacuum left by the demise of class-based ideology.

I almost wrote, ‘the demise of conflicts based on class and ideology’. But of course, nationalism is also an ideology. It may not recognise itself as such, but then what philosophy does? Remember that, for Marx, ideology meant ‘false consciousness’.

What has happened is not the demise of ideology as such, but rather the retreat of universalising ideologies and the triumph of particularising ones.

Samuel Huntington drew attention to this phenomenon in his famous article and subsequent book of the same title, *The Clash of Civilisations?*² In the article, he predicted the eventual triumph of Western civilisation, 'or something like it', over all others. In other words, he was still claiming that his own ideas and values were ultimately universalisable. But in the book he retreats into relativism, calling for mutual recognition between different civilisations, which are assimilated to geopolitical blocs, as the best way to avoid conflict. The contradictions in which Huntington has embroiled himself, in his attempt to distil a 'world order' from a thoroughly disorderly world, do not in themselves invalidate his premise. He correctly perceived that, in the aftermath of the Cold War, divisions based on group identity – cultural, ethnic, religious, national – have assumed new importance. It is hard to fill a meeting-hall anywhere these days, let alone a public square, with the cry 'Workers of the world unite!' But in many parts of the world people are being successfully mobilised to defend themselves against real or perceived threats from other groups, whose culture they are encouraged to view as irredeemably alien to their own.

It is true that these conflicts are sometimes between adherents of rival religious orthodoxies, each of which in theory claims universal validity for itself. Yet active proselytising beyond the group already identified with the orthodoxy in question has become exceptional. The emphasis is seldom on the importance of converting 'them' to 'our' point of view. What is stressed is the urgency of defending and strengthening 'our' community or way of life against 'their' aggression or interference or excessive influence. The exponents of such rhetoric seem implicitly to share Huntington's view that humanity is quasi-permanently divided into separate cultural communities.³

From Bosnia to Burundi, from California to Kazakhstan, the difficulty of defining and reconciling group identities, and of relating them to state structures, has become one of the central problems of our time. I found it cropping up again and again in my work as a commentator on international affairs for the *Financial Times* from 1987 onwards. It seemed more or less to select itself as the topic I should focus on when, in 1993, I became an honorary professor at the University of Warwick, attached to the Department of Politics and International Studies.

The subject, I knew, was one that had already attracted considerable scholarly attention. For once, indeed, scholarship seems to have been ahead of events. Or, at least, scholars were ahead

of journalists and policy-makers in sensing the direction of events. From the early 1980s a series of scholarly works on nationalism had been appearing which, in the words of the author of the most influential among them, 'made largely obsolete the traditional literature on the subject'.⁴ I had no pretension to contribute to, or even to summarise, this rich and fascinating body of work, produced by scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Anthony Smith. Instead, I conceived the idea of identifying what seemed to me a number of crucial questions, under the general heading of 'ethnicity, nationalism and statehood', and inviting recognised scholars from different fields to debate the answers. This book presents the results of my enquiry.

One of the attractive things about the topic, I found, was that it aroused interest among scholars working in a variety of disciplines – political science, obviously, but also sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology and law. What proved more difficult than I had expected, however, was to find serious scholars who held clearly opposed views on many of the questions I had selected. Perhaps the field of 'serious scholars' I could tap into was too narrow, or my criteria of seriousness too rigid. More likely, I think, some of the questions which seemed contentious to me, as a layman, are really much less so for people who have studied the subject in depth.

Take the first question, for example: are ethnic identities 'primordial' or are they socially constructed? Outside the academic world, it is a fair bet that 'primordialists' are in the majority. Most people assume, without thinking about it much, that the human race is naturally divided into different races or tribes or nations. They assume that each of these groups is bound together by a common genetic heritage, reinforced by a shared culture, and that such units have existed more or less 'from time immemorial'. These views do not seem to be shared by anyone who has made it their business to study the subject objectively and with academic rigour. But in his contribution to this book, Robin Cohen gamely undertakes a 'modest defence' of a position which is not really his. This has the merit of obliging Terence Ranger to think out and carefully re-state his reasons for rejecting primordialism, and also (as he handsomely acknowledges in the text) to re-think his picture of a 'pre-ethnic Africa'. Contradiction, in other words, proves fruitful, even when somewhat artificial.

My second question was closely related to the first, but transposed the issue from ethnicity to nationhood. Again, there is an almost universally held 'popular' view which holds that nations, even if not literally eternal, do have a long and continuous history

reaching well back into the pre-modern era. At least, most Europeans hold that view about their own nations, and usually about neighbouring ones as well. American ideas on the subject are necessarily rather different. The 'founding myth' of American nationalism relates to events in the 18th century, rather than the Dark Ages. Perhaps for that reason, American discourse about other parts of the world often includes the concept of 'nation-building', a term which seems pretentious to the European ear. When one turns to the scholarly literature about nations and nationalism, however, one finds a remarkably solid consensus which holds that these phenomena in their present form are distinctively modern – creatures, roughly, of the last 200 years, and closely related to other new phenomena of that era: mass production, mass education, mass culture. These have transformed the state and rendered necessary a form of identification between it and the mass of its citizens which earlier societies did not know. The 'nations' that we read about in the Bible, or which had their separate colleges in the medieval University of Paris, are therefore quite different from the nation as we conceive or 'imagine' it today.

So far the consensus holds. But there is one quite serious point on which scholars do genuinely disagree. Almost all nationalists trace the origins of their own national identity far back into the pre-modern era.⁵ The question is, are they right to do so? Can modern nations be constructed *ex nihilo*, or does there have to be some pre-modern ethnic identity on which to build? On this point, Ernest Gellner took what one might call the radical sceptic view. The issue is, I admit, mis-stated in the title of his contribution here, since Gellner never disputed the reality of nations, still less of nationalism: to deny the reality of a phenomenon which has mobilised millions of people would be either meaningless or absurd.⁶ Nor did Gellner deny the importance, as an ingredient in nationalism, of beliefs about the historical continuity of the nation in question. What Gellner thought, and argued with characteristic verve in his speech at Warwick reprinted here (sadly one of the last public appearances of his life), was that the actual veracity or otherwise of these national myths is quite inconsequential. And this is the point on which his former pupil Anthony Smith clearly parts company with him. 'Modern political nationalisms,' Smith argues here, 'cannot be understood without reference to ... earlier ethnic ties and memories, and, in some cases, to pre-modern ethnic identities and communities'. I will not attempt to arbitrate the issue. I simply draw the reader's attention to the fact that there is a real question here, to which each of us must give our own answer.

I thought that there might also be a real question to be debated about gender and nationalism. Confronted with the nationalist phenomenon, the women's movement – it seemed to me – has a choice to make. Either it can repudiate nationalism as a typically phallogocratic ideology, or it can seek to reclaim it by documenting the essential but often unsung part that women play in every nationalist movement. (That is one theme that emerges in Linda Colley's classic *Britons: The Making of a Nation*.) Again, however, I reckoned without the sophistication of a serious scholar such as Catherine Hall, whose chapter in this book subsumes and goes beyond both those rather crude (typically male?) perspectives.

My remaining questions all relate in one way or another to the issue of nationalism and democracy. It has long struck me that the connection between these two ideas is closer than most internationalist democrats (a category in which I should like to count myself) feel comfortable with. Not that all nationalists are democrats or all nation-states are democratically governed. Obviously not. But the essential premises of nationalism and democracy are closely related: the notion that the people precedes the state and that the state belongs to it. In much of the literature, especially in the seminal period of the French Revolution, the words 'people' and 'nation' are used interchangeably. And the connection does not stop there. Democracy, by giving power to the majority of citizens, gives questions of culture and community an urgency which they do not have so long as power is legitimised by dynastic or religious arguments. If decisions that may affect my most vital interests are to be taken by a majority of my fellow-citizens, I need to feel a great deal of confidence in them. I may not mind being on the losing side in an election once in a while, or even every time, so long as the issues on which elections are fought do not threaten my existence or call my identity into question; so long, in other words, as I feel confident that majority and minority together form a single community with shared perceptions and interests. But democracy has little to offer me if I feel that I and people like me are permanently and structurally in a minority. In that case, I may feel obliged to choose between assimilation – effectively, changing my identity in order to identify with the majority – and secession, which means declaring (first to myself, then to fellow members of my own minority community, and finally, most dangerously, to the world at large) that I do not belong to this electorate because the majority is composed of people whose identity I do not share and who therefore cannot legitimately claim to represent me.

Three pairs of chapters in this book look at this problem from different angles, and at possible solutions. In the first pair, the

question posed is: what degree of common culture or shared values is needed for people to live together in a democratically-governed state? Mischievously, I posed this question under the heading 'multiculturalism versus laïcité', and invited a French specialist on Islam, Olivier Roy, to debate it with a noted British expert on community relations, Bhikhu Parekh. Once again, the two positions turn out to be less straightforwardly antithetical than one might suppose, but the difference of perspective, derived from different national experience, produces a rich dialogue which is certainly enlightening to the reader, and I think was also to the protagonists.

Parekh is not an extreme or stereotypical multiculturalist. He does not deny the need for certain common values, or even a common culture, to underpin democratic practice. But he argues that a distinction must be made between the common political culture, required for the stability and cohesion of any democratic state, and the different 'ways of life' which can and must coexist in a multicultural society. The biggest danger, as he sees it, arises from attempts by a dominant ethnic group, arguing from its majority status or from its historical association with the state and territory in question, to claim ownership of the political culture and to identify it with aspects of its own way of life, which then become 'loyalty tests' imposed on other communities, often with the effect of excluding them, or making them feel excluded, from the democratic polity. Norman Tebbit's famous complaint about minorities in the UK applauding the 'wrong' cricket team would be an extreme example – perhaps a *reductio ad absurdum* – of this danger.

Similarly Olivier Roy is not a caricature apologist for French Jacobinism, seeking to impose a uniform civic culture or to confine all expressions of communal or religious identity to the purely private sphere. But – rightly, in my view – he does point out the threat to individual freedom which can arise from attempts to institutionalise multiculturalism. The law, he argues 'should not define any category which a citizen is supposed to belong to, by nature, birth, culture or by a tentative choice which would be difficult to rescind'.⁷

If we accept that some minimum degree of community is necessary to make democracy feasible, a further question inevitably arises sooner or later, namely what are the criteria for deciding, and who has the right to decide, whether a given group of people possesses that degree of community or not? This, of course, is the classic issue of national self-determination. It more commonly arises in negative form: who decides whether a given group of people has such a specific separate communal identity that its members cannot be considered free

so long as they have to coexist in the same polity as a larger group?

This was the question I posed to the next pair of contributors: an outstanding theorist and practitioner of international law, and a leading academic authority on international relations. The former, Danilo Türk, played an important role in a specific act of national self-determination, when his country, Slovenia, declared itself independent in June 1991, thereby initiating the formal dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation. (Appropriately enough, he now represents Slovenia at the United Nations.) In his contribution here he examines the current state of international law on self-determination, and particularly on the recognition of new states by the international community. He looks at three types of objective criteria which have been suggested.

The first of these is the liberal, which essentially give 'a people' the right to opt out of a state where it no longer feels at home. This doctrine is generally faulted on two grounds. First, it begs the question it is meant to solve, namely what constitutes a people. Secondly, the interests of the seceding 'people' are not the only ones affected. Others should be allowed a say in the matter. Türk concedes this, but suggests that the argument should cut both ways: if no people has an absolute right to secede, nor should any people have an absolute right to hold another indefinitely in a union to which it does not consent. (A similarly balanced conclusion was reached by the Supreme Court of Canada, in its recent decision on the right of Quebec to secede.)

The second is the criterion of 'self-preservation', which allows a people to claim independent statehood when threatened with annihilation.

The last is those involving a more 'comprehensive political calculation', which takes into account such factors as the legitimacy of the claim that 'the people' is constituted as such, the representative character of the government claiming statehood in the name of 'the people', and the degree of destabilisation the claim entails.

Türk finds none of these approaches entirely satisfactory. He concludes that 'a certain level of subjective political judgement will continue to be necessary'. That suggests that, in practice, might will continue to be the better part of right, and the price of statehood will continue, in most cases, to be conflict and bloodshed.

Such a conclusion fits well with Adam Roberts's careful and sceptical, not to say magisterial, dissection of the whole concept of national self-determination. Roberts rightly warns against any attempt to be too tidy or systematic in organising the relationship between nations and states. He suggests that

'self-determination should be stripped of the word "national" and become a more open-ended concept'; that 'views of the character and function of the state need to change'; and that 'there should be more open acceptance of the possibility of variations, ambiguities and anomalies in the status of many territories'. Thus Roberts implicitly declares my question 'who has the right to decide?' unanswerable, and instead answers my next question, 'Do you need a state?' in the negative. He warns against making the leap from communal to national identity (because the latter in most contexts entails an implicit if not explicit demand for statehood), and urges that ways of expressing communal identity other than through separate statehood be explored.

This is precisely the theme which Gidon Gottlieb develops in the following chapter, summarising the argument of his book *Nation Against State*.⁸ He calls for 'fresh thinking about functional territorial arrangements in disputed lands', as well as 'new sets of concepts in regard to borders, national homes, citizenship, nationality and forms of association between peoples'.

Gottlieb denounces the two 'pernicious doctrines' that 'national sovereignty must be absolute' and that 'in every state there must be one nation'. The time has come, he argues, 'to come up with new constitutional and doctrinal frameworks to conciliate between the notion of absolute sovereignty and state unity and between national rights and claims for separation which threaten states whose integrity is a pillar of international peace'. Thus some 'national rights' could cut across state borders, without breaking up existing states. The Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland, negotiated since Gottlieb's chapter was written, provides an example of the kind of arrangements he had in mind.

To debate with Gottlieb I invited Neil MacCormick, who besides being Regius Professor of Law at Edinburgh is a leading light in the Scottish National Party. That party advocates the dissolution of the United Kingdom in order to re-establish the Scottish national state which was merged with England in 1707. I therefore hoped MacCormick would insist on the right of every nation to its own state, but in this I was disappointed. MacCormick does indeed favour 'independence in Europe' for Scotland (the SNP's slogan), but only because he thinks the European Union offers a less problematic way of 'continuing union among the parts of the British Isles' than the awkward not-quite-federal form of Scottish autonomy which is now in the process of being implemented. He is not prepared to make this the basis of a general disagreement with Gottlieb's approach – arguing, on the contrary, that it is compatible with the spirit of that approach. On the general point, MacCormick agrees with

Gottlieb in preferring 'liberal nationalism' to 'sovereign-state nationalism'. He is a classic liberal in that he gives priority to the autonomy of the individual, but argues that 'a sense of national identity and belonging does for a very large part of the present population of the world play an important part in individuals' self-understanding'. Individuals see themselves as members of a nation, and as such are 'in principle entitled to effective organs of political self-government within the world order of sovereign or post-sovereign states'.

But, he goes on, this principle has to be implemented in ways that do not conflict with other 'equally important, or more important, values and principles'. It is also subject to 'constraints of time, place and circumstance'. Therefore, while each nation is entitled to organs of self-government, 'these need not provide for self-government in the form of a sovereign state'.

Looking back over my questions, then, it will be seen that: there is no real disagreement on the socially constructed (as opposed to 'primordial') nature of ethnicity; there is no disagreement on either the 'reality' or the specifically modern character of nations and nationalism as we know them today, but there is a vigorous and entertaining debate on the narrower issue of whether modern nations do or do not need any real continuity with pre-modern ethnic groups; there is no real debate about the relationship between nationalism and gender, although mainstream scholarship puts less emphasis on this relationship than does a feminist writer like Catherine Hall.

There is, if not exactly a debate, at any rate a clear difference of emphasis on the degree of common culture and values needed to sustain a democratic polity, and on the wisdom of giving official recognition to communal or cultural categories within such a polity. There is no real dispute about the difficulty and danger of basing claims to statehood on the 'right of national self-determination' but, again, a difference of emphasis. Türk places more emphasis than Roberts on the opposite danger of meeting such claims with a blank refusal. There is no argument for an absolute correlation between self-perceived national identity and sovereign statehood, but a consensus on the need for pragmatism and imagination in finding other ways for such identities to express themselves when sovereign statehood seems likely to entail infringement of the rights of other groups, or a threat to civil or international peace.

It was my final question – is there such a thing as benign nationalism? – which provoked the most genuine debate. I was on fairly safe ground here, because one of the protagonists had already taken issue with the other, in print, before I solicited their views. In an article in *Democratization* (Autumn 1994),

Robert Fine had criticised Michael Ignatieff, along with Julia Kristeva and Jürgen Habermas, for making too neat a distinction between 'civic nationalism' (good) and 'ethnic nationalism' (bad).

The contributions of Fine and Ignatieff in this book do reveal a certain amount of common ground, but their positions remain clearly distinct and opposed to each other. Ignatieff concedes that 'civic' doesn't necessarily mean 'benign', and that "'civic" language can be turned against dissidents and minorities just as "ethnic" language can'. He remains convinced, however, both that nationalism can be benign, and that it can only become so if it 'becomes truly civic'. He rejects 'cosmopolitanism' as being 'the privilege of those who can take their own membership in secure nation-states for granted', although a very similar observation about 'patriotism' is apparently not sufficient grounds for rejecting it.

While Ignatieff believes that civic nationalism cannot afford to maintain national cohesion by tapping ethnically-based emotions ('common tradition, national story, shared ethnicity, food, culture') because most modern democracies now contain ethnic minorities whom such references will serve to exclude rather than include, Fine carries the argument a stage further. He fears that relying on any form of nationalism to make social cohesion or civility more persuasive runs the risk of elevating prejudice and enthusiasm at the expense of reason, and may be a dangerous substitute for addressing the social concerns of the less privileged members of society. Fine questions the over-hasty pathologising of 'ethnic nationalism' from the civic nationalist perspective, and turns the gaze around to explore how 'civic nationalism' looks from the ethnic perspective. He stresses the family resemblance between the 'civic' and 'ethnic' forms of nationalism, and looks instead to the nurturing of social solidarities across national as well as ethnic boundaries: to cultures of 'national civility informing everyday social relations between individuals... rather than to cultures which focus on flags, anthems and parades'. However, he also cautions against the absolute devaluation of nationalism or the elevation of cosmopolitanism as its unequivocal antidote. This latter project may be no more unrealistic than Ignatieff's aspiration to draw the fangs of nationalism and render it benign, but Fine leaves the reader with the uneasy fear that both projects may be ill-fated.

The relationship between ethnicity, national identity and state sovereignty continues to provoke passionate debate almost everywhere, from multiculturalism in the US to self-determination in East Timor. This book does not pretend to resolve such issues, but I hope it does something to clarify them.

NOTES ON INTRODUCTION

- 1 My thanks are due to all at the University of Warwick who helped plan and organise the debates from which this book is derived, and especially to Barbara Allen Roberson, whose idea it was to invite me to Warwick in the first place, and to Robert Fine, who undertook the work of editing and preparing the text for publication.
- 2 Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilisations?', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
- 3 Indeed Huntington resembles them in his anxiety that the United States may destroy itself by renouncing its Western identity and becoming multicultural: Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, *op. cit.*, pp 305–6.]]
- 4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, Verso, 1991), p xii. The comment refers to the work of other scholars, but certainly applies to Anderson's own.
- 5 The Americans, as already noted, are the most conspicuous exception. But traditional American historiography largely appropriates English history before the eighteenth century as a kind of pre-history of the American nation. The desire of 'multiculturalists' to dilute this with parallel pre-histories for other ethnic components of present-day America must partly explain why Huntington and his ilk see multiculturalism as a threat to their national identity.
- 6 Nor did Anderson, with his brilliant title *Imagined Communities*, ever mean to suggest that modern nations are imaginary!
- 7 A similar point is made fictionally by Steven Lukes in the chapter on 'Communitaria' in his delightful satirical novel *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat*.
- 8 Gidon Gottlieb, *Nation Against State* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1993).

