

Nationalism

Michel Seymour
Department of Philosophy
Université de Montréal

The first definition of nationalism that could be offered comes from Ernest Gellner (1983). It is expressed in the nationalist principle according to which each nation should have its own state. It is the claim that the borders of the nation and those of the state should always coincide. This radical definition must be contrasted with the thesis that each nation has the right to have its own state, for this latter definition is compatible with the suggestion that, in many circumstances, the best solution is rather to accommodate a nation in some kind of multinational arrangement. In other words, the kind of nationalism involved in this latter approach is less radical, because it is not always a good thing to exercise the right to have its own state, for it is sometimes better for the nation to remain stateless if it is able to get some kind of recognition within a multinational state.

Cultural and political nationalisms

Some will thus be tempted to distinguish between cultural nationalism and political nationalism. The former would be a kind of nationalism that seeks cultural recognition without trying to achieve full political sovereignty, while the other kind of nationalism would always be looking for political sovereignty on a particular territory. The distinction is however not very well founded, because there is perhaps always something political going on in cultural nationalism and always something cultural going on in political nationalism. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two kinds of nationalism can be captured by two different senses in which the right to self-determination can be exercised.

Internal and external self-determination

We should distinguish between the right to internal self-determination and the right to external self-determination. The former right is the right for a people to develop economically, socially and culturally and the right to determine its political status within a sovereign state, while the right to external self-determination is the right to have its own sovereign state. When the distinction between cultural and political nationalism is understood in accordance with these two sorts of self-determination, it is easier to understand why the distinction between them is not so neat. If the cultural nationalist asks for internal self-determination, he usually asks at the same time for some kind of political arrangement that will allow for political autonomy within the state. And if the political nationalist is in the process of trying to have her own sovereign state, it is often because the attempt to achieve some kind of cultural recognition within the state has failed. The distinction between internal and external self-determination is thus a very useful one, especially since it reveals the connection between the two kinds of nationalism.

There are many different ways of interpreting internal self-determination. In the weakest sense, it is a right of political representation within the state. If the stateless people is able to elect its own political representatives, if these representatives come from the people and if they play an important role in the political institutions of the encompassing state, this is a first kind of internal self-determination. In the canonical sense, internal self-determination amounts to some kind of self-government. In the more robust sense, it is the right to have a special constitutional status like, for example, a constitutionalized asymmetrical arrangement within a multinational federation. Similarly, there are many different ways of exercising the right to external self-determination. It can mean the right to own a state for a population that already has a state. It can mean secession, which implies the creation of a brand new state for the stateless people. Finally, it can mean the right that a people would have to violate the territorial integrity of an existing state in order to associate with the already existing state of another people.

Primary right and just cause theories of external self-determination

There are also many different theories concerning the way to exercise the right to external self-determination. The main opposition is between those who believe that a people should have a right to external self-determination without having to comply with certain moral principles. This would entail for instance that a sovereign people would have no obligation to meet concerning its own national minorities in order to have the right to keep its own sovereign state. It could also entail that a stateless people could have the right to secede even in the absence of injustice. These two examples illustrate the primary right to external self-determination. The opposing view is the just cause theory of external self-determination. (Buchanan 2004) According to this view, a sovereign people must respect the collective rights of its own internal national minorities in order to have the right to own its own sovereign state. Conversely, for a stateless people, secession would be justified only on the basis of a past injustice. Buchanan thinks that the most important injustices are the violation of basic human rights (Kurds in Iraq), annexation of territory (Baltic states) and the systematic violation of intra-state autonomy agreements (Kosovo). But the most obvious injustice would be the failure on the part of the state to recognize the right to internal self-determination of the stateless people (through colonisation, oppression or domination). (Seymour 2007)

The just cause theory of external self-determination illustrates the existence of a continuum between cultural and political nationalism. It shows that a cultural nationalist population that wishes to exercise its internal self-determination may be led to become more and more political when the state refuses to grant internal self-determination. Conversely, it shows that very often, a political form of nationalism may be explained by the failure to meet the expectations of cultural nationalism.

Nation-state building and state-nation building

This problem raises the question concerning the origins of nations and nationalism. Where do nations and nationalism come from? The first issue concerns the relationship between the two

concepts. Some will argue that nations exist prior to nationalism while others will argue that nations are created by nationalism. The debate leads to two different ways of conceptualizing nationalism itself. The classic distinction between nation-state building policies and state-nation building policies illustrates the debate. The former is associated with ethnic nationalism, while the latter illustrates civic nationalism. The advantage of arguing for the primacy of nationalism is that nations are then conceived as constructions and not as given, fixed, objective kind of entities. The disadvantage is that nationalism becomes *sui generis*, that is, a phenomenon that cannot be explained by the failure to get recognition for its own nation.

The origin of nations

The debate also has consequences concerning the origin of nations. The debate opposes Modernists and Pre-Modernists. One of the most famous modernists is Benedict Anderson (1965) who explained the origin of nations by the capacity to imagine the existence of a population far beyond the local community, a capacity that was induced by print capitalism. Ernest Gellner (1983) explained the origin of the nation by the influence of the state who forced a single education system with a single language on populations speaking diverse languages, turning peasants into full blown citizens. Liah Greenfeld (1992) explains the origin of the nation as being the result of the influence in England of an aristocratic power over a whole population. Anthony D. Smith (1991) is perhaps the most articulate Pre-Modernist. In numerous works, he shows that there existed '*ethnies*' long before the presence of the modern nation. Another famous proponent of Pre-Modernism is Clifford Geertz (1973) who defends a perennial variant in which certain primordial traits are described as constitutive of nations and have been there since the dawn of humanity.

A Pluralist Conception

Trying to define the concept of nation is no easy task. Actually, for most philosophers, political scientists, sociologists and historians, it is an impossible task. But the reason may be that there are many different sorts of nations. The ethnic nation is thus composed of a population representing itself as sharing the same ancestral origin (some indigenous peoples). The cultural nation gathers a multi-ethnic community sharing the same language, culture and history but no political institutions (Roms, Acadians). The sociopolitical nation is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and sometimes also multinational group sharing the same common public identity and organized into a non sovereign political government (Scotland, Wales, Catalonia, Basque Country, Quebec). The civic nation is a mononational sovereign country (Portugal, Iceland, Korea). The multisocietal nation is also organized into a sovereign country, but it contains many different peoples (Spain, Belgium, Great Britain and Canada). The multiterritorial nation is located on a continuous territory overlapping the official boundaries of many different countries, with no absolute majority located on either of those countries (Kurdistan, Akwasasne). The diasporic nation is dispersed on many discontinuous territories, with no absolute majority on either of those territories and forming minorities on all those territories (the Old Jewish diaspora before the creation of Israel).

This account dissolves or resolves most of the traditional debates. Concerning the debate between Modernists and Pre-Modernists, it will be observed that some nations were there long before the modernity (ethnic, cultural, multiterritorial, diasporic) while some of them were created with the modern state (civic, multisocietal, sociopolitical). So the debate is somewhat dissolved. A pluralist conception can also explain why some nations seemed to be created by the state (French nationalism) while some were created before the state (German nationalism). In addition, the account serves to explain where nationalism comes from. It is explained by the failure to implement reciprocal recognition among nations.

References

Anderson, B. (1965), *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.

Buchanan, A. (2004) *Justice, Legitimacy, and Self-determination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, C. (1973) "The Integrative Revolution : Promordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States", in *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York, basic Books,

Gellner, E. (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Greenfeld, L. (1992) *Nationalism : Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Seymour, M. (2007) "Secession as a Remedial Right", *Inquiry*, Vol. 50, no 4, 395-423.

Smith, A. D. (1991) *National Identity*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Further reading :

Couture, J., K. Nielsen and M. Seymour (eds.) (1998) *Rethinking Nationalism*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplemental Volume 22. The book contains seventeen essays and an extensive Introduction and Afterword by the editors. It contains some of the most innovative samples of present reflection on this contentious subject. Moreover, contributions are from a variety of disciplines, from different parts of the world, often reflecting very different ways of thinking about nationalism and sometimes reflecting very different methodologies, substantive beliefs, and underlying interests.

Hutchinson, J. & Smith A. D. (1995) *Nationalism (Oxford Readers)* Oxford : Oxford University Press. This book provides a concise, accessible introduction to the concept of nationalism. It is an excellent collection of articles with good historical coverage and a useful bibliography.

McKim, R. and McMahan, J. (eds) (1997) *The Morality of Nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University

Press. An excellent anthology of high-quality philosophical papers on the morality of nationalism.

Miscevic, N. (2010) "Nationalism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/nationalism/>.

A great and authoritative presentation of the concepts of nation and nationalism. It is the best available introduction to the topic.